

Giving When Storms Hit

Stephen G. Post

For a lot of New Yorkers and New Jerseyans, these are the worst of times. Nature's superstorm Sandy has shown us who's boss, and we are living with the consequences that are nothing short of devastating. Then along comes Wednesday's nor'easter to dump snow, freeze unheated flooded homes, and interfere with desperately needed gas deliveries and grid repairs. The losses of life and property are staggering and can shake the foundations of faith and hope in everyday living. Communities on Long Island like Babylon, Lindenhurst, and Sayville are still really struggling, and the trauma is exacerbated by the same sense of abandonment felt in neighborhoods like Rockaways, Staten Island, Red Hook in Brooklyn and the Jersey Shore. Basic needs are not being met, and there is a case to be made that the institutions of state and national government have lacked foresight.

The shadowy side of human nature comes out under such conditions. There is anarchy here and there, looters abound, and sporadic episodes of violence arise at the gas stations as police stand guard. Tempers can get short, and arguments erupt. But for the most part, people are just crying out for help in their desperation, and they are frustrated and scared for their loved ones and for themselves. The hardest hit may hear that things will get back to normal, but not for them for a long while, and their very survival remains a question.

Our region has a challenge as great as 9-11. It comes from nature rather than arrogant fanaticism. In addition to the loss of lives, businesses, jobs, homes, cars, and everything else that is familiar and basic in everyday living, there is a nagging sense of loss of control. The huge waves that crashed through the back porch are followed some days later by driving snow

and icy winds. Will this ever end? During such times we realize how fragile and illusory our day-to-day lives are, and tend to look upwards or inwards to whatever it is in the universe that might have more control than we do.

For those who are in a position to be able to help, this is your best buffer against helplessness, and an affirmation of self-efficacy.

The numbers of volunteers who are continuing to help so many imperiled victims are impressive. Compassion is an emotional force in human nature rightly developed, but it is more than that – it is an activity to alleviate suffering in practical ways. There is a lot of good going on, despite nearly two weeks since Sandy unleashed her ruinous blow, and we see that side of New Yorkers and New Jerseyans coming out that is a far cry from the superficial “I don’t do nuthin’ for nuthin’” attitude that we sometimes profess, but in hard times ignore. If possible, go out and do something that draws on your talents and strengths in order to feel effective. Pay it forward, no need to pay it back, and hope to inspire others to go and do likewise. Have confidence that you are the right person, in the right place, at the right time, with the right gifts, to help the person who is greatly in need. This is even more needed as we get further away from Sandy’s initial impact.

As a by-product, you might just find a deeper meaning in life than day-to-day routines bring to light. Indeed, the 2010 *Do Good Live Well Survey*, released by United Healthcare and VolunteerMatch, surveyed 4,500 American adults and found that, among other impressive and optimistic numbers, 68% percent of those who volunteered in the last year reported that it made them feel physically healthier; 96% said that volunteering “made me happier”; 89% reported that volunteering improved their sense of well-being”; and 92% agreed that volunteering enriched their sense of purpose in life. Now and in the weeks ahead, this is a chance to renew our own commitment to community. This may take the form of quietly affirming and encouraging a neighbor, of

helping them in ways small and large, of attentive listening undistracted and unhurried, of compassion in responding wisely and actively to suffering when we see it, of loyalty in sticking with others through the peaks and valleys of their lives so they know that they can count on you, and of creativity in using your gifts to rebuild your neighborhood.

Yes, these are astonishingly hard times and there is no way around that. For many this is the disaster of a lifetime. Even still, it is not so much what lies behind us or ahead that matters, but what lies within.

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