

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can nature's challenges bring us together?



Douglas Kindschi
Director of the Kaufman
Interfaith Institute

The past few weeks have given us a new perspective on the American spirit at its best. Unfortunately, it took a couple of hurricanes to remind us that what often dominates the news is not characteristic of who we are as a people.

As Steve Hartman reported in his weekly CBS News television segment on Labor Day weekend, "This week we saw what a trillion gallons of water can cover. But more importantly, we saw what it can uncover — our potential as a nation. I know it seems like eons ago, but remember what was in the news before this? Remember when nothing was more important to America than the fate of a Confederate statue? We were literally at each other's throats over race, religion, immigration and, of course, politics. And then Harvey came and pounded us with perspective."

Following Harvey in Texas, we saw the devastation that Irma brought to Florida. It is at times like these we gain a new appreciation of what is important to us as individuals and as community. We hear people interviewed who have just lost their homes and all of their possessions, but are so thankful to be alive. We see rescuers risking their own lives to bring to safety people who are caught in a sinking car. or are standing

on the roof of their home. And in the process, no one is turning away help because of their race or religion. As Hartman puts it: "No one passes judgment because a hero's boat is too big, or his means are too meager. No one says, "Thanks for the rope, but I'd rather wait for someone more like me." (Watch his report at: bit.ly/hartman-bestAmerica)

The outpouring of support in terms of action at the scene as well as funds raised by individuals, companies, and organizations was impressive. Government bodies such as FEMA, the Coast Guard, as well as local police and fire department responders are clearly present in disaster situations. Organizations such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army are also soon on the scene.

SIMPLE WAYS TO HELP STRANGERS

A recent development in responding to crisis has been the opportunity to give money to individuals who present their need via sites like GoFundMe or YouCaring. Within days following Hurricane Harvey, these internet sites brought in millions of dollars from strangers for specific needs. An article in the current Time magazine, "The Kindness of Strangers," describes the growing success of this new feature in the charity industry. Since its launch in 2010, GoFundMe has raised over \$4 billion from more than 40 million individual donors. The article also reported on the largest You-

Caring campaign ever, when Texas NFL player JJ Watt raised over \$32 million from more than 200,000 donors for Harvey victim relief.

The Time article, while highlighting this fairly new development in charitable giving, also notes the billions raised each year by traditional charities and religious organizations. Historically the amount of charitable work initiated by religious organizations has been phenomenal. From hospitals and schools to disaster relief as well as local support for those in need, religious organizations have been leaders in responding to need.

This should not be surprising given the key teachings of nearly all religious traditions. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the essence of the law is reviewed and describes God as one "who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing." It then goes on to command, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10:18-19) In rabbinic teachings, the concept of repairing the world, or "tikkun olam," is a significant responsibility for all Jews.

Christians cite the words of Jesus, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35) as a basis for responding to those in need.

In Islam one of the five pillars is the

"zakat," or the giving of alms to the poor and those in need. It is considered a most important requirement, second only to the obligation to pray.

Likewise, in the Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i and other religious traditions you will find this same theme of caring for others and giving to those in need.

It is not surprising, then, that in response to the challenges of the recent hurricanes we see churches, synagogues and mosques opening their doors where possible to also be shelters. While it is a special responsibility from the religious traditions, it is also characteristic of all responsible Americans. It is, or should be, what it means to be human.

Steve Hartman ends his video by showing and describing a human chain of people reaching out to save someone from a sinking car.

"I don't know who the folks are, but I do know this: If you took out a Christian, took out a Democrat, an immigrant, a Republican, Muslim or Jew, remove any link in this brave chain of Americans, the whole group is adrift and a piece of humanity is lost. In this case, the chain held. When Mother Nature is at its worst, human nature is at its best. The challenge will be, as the flood waters recede, will we still be able to love at these same record levels?"

interfaith@gvsu.edu