

REFLECTION

The Way Through

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Though I have not encountered the type of disasters that cause catastrophic damage or loss of life, I have learned profoundly from my own brushes with disaster. In January of 1977, my husband and I were traveling from St. Louis to Chicago after a funeral.

The winter had been brutal with snow and bitter cold. As we drove through Springfield, the sun came out, raising the temperature above freezing. Mounds of snow on the shoulder began to melt, running onto the highway. As we continued north, the wind picked up and the temperature dropped, creating a whiteout and turning the road to a sheet of ice. Visibility was poor, but we could still see blue sky above the blowing snow. First one car slid off the road into a snowbank, and several others followed. It was not long before a semi-truck slipped to the shoulder. Its trailer tilted, sending its contents into the wind. Posters meant for grocery store windows wrapped around highway signs and covered windshields. Shortly after that, we too went off the road. While grateful not to be hurt, we were stunned to be stopped so quickly.

With temperatures in the single digits, we knew we couldn't remain there. David climbed out to survey the damage. After moving to the front of the car, he was soon thigh-deep in snow. By the time he returned inside, his breath had frozen and covered his beard with ice. Tying a handkerchief on the driver's door handle, we waited.

Young and inexperienced, we had none of the provisions recommended for winter car trips. We took the basics of warmth, food, water and safety for granted. We were stuck. As we sat, we prayed the prayers learned in childhood, a comfort when one's thoughts are being hijacked by fear. "Train the young in the way they should go; even when old, they will not swerve from it." (Proverbs 22:6)

We could do little to help ourselves, dependent on the grace of others.

Eventually a highway patrolman came to inform us the highway was closed. He drove us to the National Guard Armory where the Red Cross and Salvation Army provided cots, blankets and food. Others there were just as dazed as we after being rudely plucked from our journeys. The gratitude I felt was immense, knowing that strangers had come together to make us sandwiches and offer us safety. While in no way comparable to the tragic disasters of floods, fires, hurricanes, and even more frightening, violent situations, this experience taught me some profound truths.

Unable to help ourselves, we must rely on the generosity of others. Humbled by our vulnerability and others' compassion, we feel gratitude.

The wisdom of religious tradition knows what is desirable in the face of disaster. Whether caused by natural forces, a catastrophic event, illness or accident, one feels a tremendous sense of loss and fear of the unknown. Unable to help ourselves, we must rely on the generosity of others. Humbled by our vulnerability and others' compassion, we feel gratitude. At the same time, those who minister to people in need open themselves to a spirit of joy that arises from the act of giving.

Not all people are moved to humility quickly, however. I recently heard a reformed white supremacist describe his behavior during the



height of his activism. After nights of performing at rallies, he would go to work hungover and underfed. The next day his black coworkers offered to share their lunch with him. The impact of their unconditional love moved him more than anything else. The wisdom of Christianity heals the suffering of others. “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous ... it is not rude, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ... Love never fails.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

In the Buddhist tradition the “tonglen” refers to the practice of taking in the suffering of others and giving back joy, grounded in humility, acceptance and compassion. Desmond Tutu in *The Book of Joy* acknowledges that all cultures “admire those who are other regarding.”

The gifts that have been bestowed on us, our time, treasure or talents, are not meant only for our gratification. Catholic tradition says we are meant to share them, giving glory to God and witnessing his love. Through this, our own lives are renewed, since “whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” (Proverbs 11:25)

Jonathan Cahn, the messianic rabbi, author and pastor, describes in the *Book of Mysteries* (Day 42) “How to Multiply Bread.” Referring to Jesus, he says, “He looked up to heaven and gave thanks. He gave thanks and the miracle happened. That’s the secret. That’s the key to miracles....You don’t look at how little you have or how big your problem is or how impossible the situation is. You don’t panic, you don’t complain, and you don’t get discouraged over not having enough. You take the little you have, whatever good there is, no matter how small or inadequate it is, and you do what Messiah did. You lift it up to the Lord and you give thanks for it. And the blessings you have will multiply, if not in the world, then in your heart.

The more you give thanks, the less you will hunger, and the more full and blessed you will be ... Give thanks even for what is not enough, and it will multiply to become what is enough.”

In the midst of disaster, we are all tested, just

as the Israelites were tested at Meribah in the desert (Exodus 17: 7). They saw their difficult circumstances as a sign that the Lord had neglected them. Forgetting about the manna, they homed in on immediate circumstances. The challenge for all of us is to see beyond the suffering and pain, to give thanks so we can find and offer hope.

Since that whiteout, I have served as a responder to disasters for the American Red Cross. The people I met were challenged and humbled, stressed

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by their losses and, though sometimes angry, usually grateful for survival and the kindness of strangers. The lesson I have learned about how to get through these experiences is to be present to those in need. Even in the midst of my own losses, the opportunity is to remember that the blue sky exists above the blowing snow and “to raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.” (Psalm 116:13)

Isaiah calls us to a different kind of “fasting,” to share our bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and homeless, and not turn our backs on our own. If we do this, the “light shall rise in the darkness”..and give plenty, even on the parched land. He will renew our strength and we “shall be like a watered garden, like a flowing spring whose waters never fail.” (Isaiah 58:10-11)

My prayer is that all of us would more frequently be at our best in embodying that message, providing hope and encouragement for each other to find the “way through.”

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