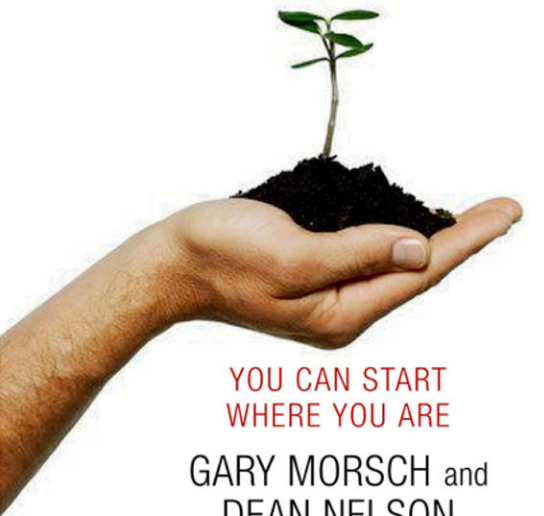
THE POWER OF SERVING OTHERS



YOU CAN START WHERE YOU ARE

GARY MORSCH and DEAN NELSON

an excerpt from

The Power of Serving Others:
You Can Start Where You Are

by Gary Morsch and Dean Nelson
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Preface

Look again at the book's cover. The hand is holding something that is going to grow. Even though it is small right now, its roots will go deep and its branches will spread. It will provide strength or shade or beauty to its surroundings. It could grow in a yard or a forest, but it will grow because that is what it is meant to do. And, as it grows, it will change the world around it.

This book is about changing our world. It's not about a revolution, but it *is* revolutionary.

It's about serving others—looking at others as people who could use a hand. It's about looking at our hands and realizing that they already contain what others need.

This book starts with some assumptions—mainly that people really do want to help one another and make the world better, but they often don't know how to do it. It also assumes that people are looking for meaning and significance in their lives, but they don't know how to find them. They've tried accumulating wealth, tried increasing excitement, tried exercising authority, but those attempts left them empty. The book assumes that people are asking, What am I here for? It assumes we're searching for something and don't know where to look.

This book shows that the answers to life's important questions are simple, but not easy.

This is a book that claims something extraordinary: That

the true source of power in our lives, the power to change the world, is available when we serve others. I have seen this firsthand through the impact of Gary Morsch's life and Heart to Heart International, the humanitarian relief agency he started.

Our paths crossed a few times in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was not until 1991 that Gary and I had our first deep conversation. He was in New York for a board meeting for the Lamb's Club, an arts, community service, and ministry center just off Times Square. I was in New York, working on a project with *The New York Times*. I had rented an apartment at the Lamb's Club, just a block or two from the Times building.

One night some of the Lamb's board members were going to see *The Grapes of Wrath* at a Broadway theater and they invited me to join them. I had always been moved by the story of the Joads, leaving one desperate situation after another as they moved from Oklahoma to California during the Dust Bowl. I was particularly struck by the ending where, just as it looked as if no one had anything left, they found a way to help someone even more desperate than themselves.

When the show was over, most of our group headed for the subway, but Gary and I walked back to the Lamb's together. We got to talking about what we wanted to do with our lives. I told Gary I wanted to write about things that mattered. He told me he wanted to figure out a way to help suffering people. He thought there must be a way to take excess resources and match them with people who need them. We ended up walking through late-night New York for hours.

"I think that, deep down inside, people truly want to help others," he said. "They just don't know how. Wouldn't it be something to match the desires of those people with the needs of the world?"

It was too big a concept for me to get my brain around, but I remember thinking "If you could figure that out, I'd love to write about it."

Since then, Gary started Heart To Heart International, a humanitarian relief organization, and linked thousands of volunteers who have the desire to serve others with people who

desperately need assistance. The organization has earned the respec of governments and corporations around the world. Operating at 2 percent overhead (many agencies work closer to 40 and 50 percent), it is one of the most efficient agencies in the world.

Volunteers are the key—people wanting to help others. What I have observed about the people who volunteer is that their eyes open to the needs in their own neighborhoods and communities, even in their own homes, and serving others becomes part of their lifestyle. They see the power available to change the way they view the world, others, and themselves.

One of the biggest transformations I observed was that, when people began to serve others, they saw how easy it was to start wherever they were, regardless of their circumstances and resources.

We don't have to go to different parts of the world to serve. We can serve the person we encounter next.

That's the conclusion I hope you reach when you read this book.

This book articulates the personal philosophies of both Gary and me. Most experiences narrated being specifically Gary's, we made the decision to write the book entirely in his voice. There are two authors, but one editorial voice. It's like two musicians, singing in unison.

Look at the book's cover again. As you read this book you'll see how that plant can grow and sense your own purpose growing right along with it.

Dean Nelson
San Diego, California

Ask the Question

The ultimate aim of the quest must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and the power to serve others.

Joseph Campbell[1]

In Leo Tolstoy's short story "What Men Live By," an impoverished shoemaker encounters a naked man freezing to death on a Russian winter night. It turns out that the naked man is an angel who disobeyed God. He had been ordered by God to take the soul of a dying woman, but his action would have left two orphaned children; the angel did not want to carry out his instruction. The woman died anyway, and the angel was banished from heaven until he could find answers to three questions on earth: What is given to men? What is not given to men? What do men live by?

Through the compassion of the shoemaker and his wife, the angel learned the answer to the first question: What is given to men? *Love is given to all people, and dwells in their hearts.*

Through a boastful and demanding rich man, the angel learned the answer to the second question: What is not given to men? The man had ordered fancy boots, but died the same day and never wore them. *People are not given the knowledge of their own needs.*

The third question is the one most intriguing to me, because it is at the heart of everything we do. It is *the* question central to every human being: What do people live by?

What brings us meaning? What makes us live a life that matters, instead of one like the demanding rich man in Tolstoy's

story, who dies without knowing? The angel discovers the answer.

"I learned that man does not live by care for himself, but by love for others," the angel says, just before he is given his wings back. "When I came to earth as a man, I lived not by care for myself, but by the love that was in the heart of a passerby, and his wife, and because they were kind and merciful to me." Referring to the children left behind by the dying mother whose soul he refused to take, the angel said:

"The orphans lived not by any care they had for themselves; they lived through the love that was in the heart of a stranger. . . . And all men live, not by reason of any care they have for themselves, but by the love for them that is in other people. . . . It is by love for others that they really live."[2]

In Tolstoy's story, love for others is seen in how people serve others. Love for others is what we are to live by.

Growing up in a religious tradition, I was taught this principle and found it was true for me personally. As an adult who has been in every corner of the world, I have seen that love for others is universal to people of all faiths, as well as those who subscribe to no particular faith. We saw evidence in this in the aftermath of the tsunami that devastated Sri Lanka and Indonesia, as well as in the response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the United States.

As a relief worker and a physician, in some of the worst conditions imaginable, I see people helping others who are in need. Usually they are strangers to one another; often they are from different tribes, races, economic or social classes. What draws them together is that someone is in need and someone else is able to provide help.

With that experience in mind, I have come to the following conclusions:

1. Everyone has something to give.
2. Most people are willing to give when they see the need and have the opportunity.
3. Everyone can do something for someone right now.

University scientists who study the brain are discovering that serving others is as much a part of our genetic code as self-interest is. As a medical doctor, I have seen this firsthand. Kristen Monroe, a professor of political psychology at the University of California–Irvine, says that people act with altruism, a devotion to the welfare of others, when they see their common humanity. I have seen that to be true in the aftermath of hurricanes and wars and epidemics. When we see others as human beings, their needs become real to us, and we respond.

"The dominant mode in social science, evolutionary biology, psychology, and a lot of other fields is to assume that everybody is self-interested," Professor Monroe said. "But that's bad science. Altruism shows you that that isn't true."[3]

Researchers C. Daniel Batson and Nancy Eisenberg of Arizona State University have demonstrated that humans have a tendency toward altruistic behavior.[4] Sociologist Linda Wilson suggests that altruism may be a basic survival instinct. Wilson studied more than a hundred natural disasters and found that victims helping other victims aided each other's recovery. Victims who helped each other tended to avoid some of the psychological problems that would have otherwise been present, Wilson said.[5]

"The tendency to closely bond with others, acting for the welfare of others as well as oneself, may be deeply rooted in human nature, forged in the remote past as those who bonded together and became part of a group had an increased chance of survival," said Howard Cutler in his book with the Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*. Cutler, a medical doctor, said that studies find people most focused on themselves are more likely to have coronary heart disease, even when other behaviors are controlled.[6] As a physician, I have seen this in my own practice.

After his family was killed in the Holocaust, Samuel Oliner, a sociologist at Humboldt State University, devoted his life to studying why people commit acts of violence and why people do good. His interest in why people do good was piqued as he studied rescuers of Jews from the Holocaust, Medal of Honor recipients, hospice volunteers, and rescuers from the 9/11 attacks.

"Without caring, compassion, and love, it is very tough to imagine that the world can come together," he said. "Altruism may be the most potent antidote to a divided world."[7]

Serving others has even been cited as a social necessity. Historian Daniel Boorstin said that colonial and frontier Americans formed groups to do for each other what they couldn't do alone, out of a need for survival. Pilgrims pledged in the Mayflower Compact "to all care of each others good and of the whole by everyone and so mutually."[8] Serving others is written into our country's history. More than two hundred years later, then–Vice President Al Gore said, at a conference on America's future, "Volunteerism is good for the soul, and it's good for the country." Psychiatrist Alfred Adler said that melancholy could be cured in fourteen days if "you try to think every day how you can please someone." [9]

While the scientific evidence shows we are wired toward altruism, there is still a choice involved. The beauty of the choice is that, when we choose to serve others, something wonderful happens.

When I first became a doctor, I knew that I wanted to spend part of each year with people who could not afford proper medical care. This desire came from observing my father. People who had been drinking too much would show up at our house, and my dad would make them something to eat. When he encountered a poor person he always gave them something, usually food or money.

I decided in medical school that I would devote time out of each year to practice medicine where people didn't have adequate medical care. Each year I would pack duffel bags with medicine samples and head to a Third World country. I went for a few weeks to Chernobyl, China, India, and elsewhere by myself.

The seed of service was planted in me by watching my dad. He probably got it from watching his parents. Then it grew while I was in medical school, much like the small plant on the cover of this book.

The seed began to produce an oak tree when I made some

off-the-cuff comments at Rotary Club several years ago. The remarks resonated with the audience in a way I could not have anticipated, and the response resulted in my leaving full-time medical practice and starting a global humanitarian agency.

The comments to Rotarians came after I had spent a few weeks in a Cambodian refugee camp, treating as many people as time and supplies allowed. As I sat at a table with local business people, our leader announced that the day's speaker had cancelled at the last minute. "Perhaps Dr. Morsch could tell us about his work in Cambodia."

Walking to the microphone, I had no idea what I was going to say—but I never turn down an opportunity to speak in public about a topic that means so much to me. That day I told the group about the refugees and their horrible conditions. The people in the audience were able to think about the refugees as human beings, not statistics or news stories. I then tossed out a challenge. I didn't know I was going to do it. I wasn't preaching, I was just dreaming out loud.

"Why don't we, who are more prosperous than 98 percent of the rest of the world, find a group or a place or a project to commit to, and do something to help relieve someone's suffering?"

I went back to my table.

"Just tell me when to show up and what I need to bring" was the immediate and overwhelming response.

Within a few weeks we identified a YMCA building in Belize that had been damaged in a hurricane and remained uninhabitable. It had been used as a community center, an educational building, and a public health clinic. Our Rotary chapter took up a collection, and a group of us flew to Belize and repaired the building. It became a place of community service again.

The people there were delighted and grateful. Some of the business people on that trip—men and women who led or had built very successful companies—told me this was the most significant thing they had ever done in their lives. They felt their lives *meant something* while they were doing something for

someone else. They had helped someone in a concrete way, and it made them feel alive. They didn't say it made them feel good. Lots of things can do that. This brought them to *life*.

It reminded me of the scene in the movie *City of Joy,* where Patrick Swayze plays the part of a successful surgeon who walks away from money and prestige at a Houston medical center to be a doctor in Calcutta. "I have never felt as *alive* as I feel right now," he declared. This is the human quest.

Philosopher Joseph Campbell said "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."[10]

A year after our Belize trip, a group of us flew to Russia to take supplies to a hospital that was running low on nearly everything: needles, gauze, antibiotics, gloves. We could have sent the supplies, but we knew that taking them in person would be better. The response we got from the doctors, nurses, and patients confirmed that. It was one thing to be able to restock the shelves with painkillers and bandages. It was even more significant to the Russians that we cared enough to visit. This face-to-face service made the difference *in them and in us*. We felt that we had made friends for life with these folks who at one time were considered to be the "enemy."

Trips like this motivated me in 1992 to start Heart to Heart International, an organization that seeks out people in need, using mostly volunteers to help meet that need. The global response is always the same. People *want* to help others. They don't always know how. But they know that, given the opportunity, this is what gives life meaning. It's what we live by.

Pharmaceutical companies now overproduce certain products so that they can donate them to us when we do medical airlifts to regions of natural and economic disaster. Transportation companies factor our airlifts into their routes. The U.S. State Department gives us access to their jumbo cargo

planes so we can reach large groups of needy people around the world. Television stations call to ask if they can get the word out. Volunteers line up at the drop of a hat, willing, *wanting* to serve others. Because Heart to Heart uses so many volunteers, we keep overhead costs at 2 percent or less.

I didn't intend to start a humanitarian agency. I was asking the same question as the character in the Tolstoy story: What do we live by? What are we here to do? I discovered what he discovered, that love for others is what we live by, and I wanted to give others the opportunity to do the same.

My dad did small things for people. He showed me that service isn't limited to big dramatic acts. I never saw him rescue someone from a burning building, but I saw him do little things—offer rides, food, money, and time to people—every day. Serving was his lifestyle. It became mine. Who knew that my dad's lifestyle of service would grow into an international agency that gives people the chance to live as he did, only on a global scale?

I still work as a physician, but to accommodate my time with Heart to Heart, I work just a few days a month in small-town emergency rooms. The rest of my time is spent bringing medical products and volunteers together to meet needs throughout the world. I have worked with people who have suffered unfathomable atrocities and been in horrifying places that most folks work hard to avoid. I have seen people serve others in these situations, and witnessed how the action transformed both the person serving and the person being served.

At the end of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, after one of the brothers is convicted of killing his father, another brother burns with fever, and another brother commits suicide. Human corruption, betrayal, and violence become more severe with every page—Alyosha, the youngest brother, meets a group of children who are sad because one of their schoolmates died. Just as it appears that there will be no end to the boys' grief, and no end to the human suffering, and that they are all destined to a life of despair, Alyosha reminds the boys that they showed kindness to the boy who died, and that they should never forget

how that felt. He told them to remember: "Yes, there was a moment when I was good and kind and brave."

"You needn't be afraid of life," he continues. "Life is so good when you do something that is good and just."[11]

The philosopher Huston Smith, one of the clearest thinkers I have ever read, said that the greatest power we can have in life is "the power to decide what we want to do with our lives, what we want to give them to."[12]

In this book you will read about the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC; about an unspeakable act and a loving response in Kosovo; about the quiet revolution within a Black Panther revolutionary; and about a number of other encounters that reveal the good and just nature that is within each of us. They are stories that come from my experience and observations and that bear witness to the angel's experience in Tolstoy's story: We live by loving and serving others.

The stories in this book point to larger lessons and show people of all ages, income levels, and expertise how to find meaning and significance in their lives, wherever they are. The stories show that serving others is easier and more accessible than you might think. You'll see examples of the way small seedlings sometimes become giant trees.

Through these stories I hope people will be able to see that the world—no matter how small, large, mundane, or terrifying it may appear—needs each of us to participate in it by serving others *with whatever we have at this moment*. Our service doesn't have to change the world. But everyone's world will change as we discover what Tolstoy's angel discovered. We live by loving others. We love others by serving them.

I hope everyone can see the possibility of living this way. Writer Mitch Albom saw it when he began visiting his dying professor, Morrie, and recorded his experiences in the beautiful *Tuesdays with Morrie*. A sports writer, Albom was covering the Wimbledon tennis tournament, surrounded by other self-absorbed media people and athletes, when he remembered something Morrie told him.

"So many people walk around with a meaningless life," Morrie had said. "They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."

Albom considered this amid the crush of the obsessed people at Wimbledon and said, "I knew he was right. Not that I did anything about it."[13]

Why is this such a difficult concept to grasp? Why do some people, like Mitch Albom at that time, recognize that the concept is right, and yet do nothing? Why don't most of us *naturally* live this way of serving others? What are the obstacles to living at a level that is so easily attainable?

Perhaps the primary obstacle is fear of the unknown. We don't know what we might get ourselves into. Things tend to be messier and more complicated than they first appear. We fear that serving others might take us where we lack the emotional energy to go.

Maybe the hesitation comes from an introverted personality. Some people are simply shy, and reaching out to others is extremely uncomfortable and seemingly intrusive. Mother Teresa did it, but she was an extrovert!

Perhaps people don't serve others because they think they lack the time and money. Who has time to look to others' needs when we're running on empty ourselves? And, in a tightening economy, it seems there is little money left over once our obligations are met.

Maybe some don't live in service because they simply don't know what the needs of others are or what they could do—a lack of information.

Perhaps it is a lack of opportunity.

Maybe there is a perceived risk. With Mitch Albom, the risk of getting involved in Morrie's life was that he knew he would be confronted with how self-absorbed and empty his life was.

Perhaps people don't serve others because they may have

impure motives—suspecting they are hoping to get something out of it instead of coming from a pure desire to help others.

I think our motives are always going to be mixed.

Robert Coles, a Harvard professor, told Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement that he had misgivings about his motives for serving others. She said "If we were going to forbid hypocrites to work here with us, there'd be no one to do the work, and no one to do the forbidding!"[14]

But there's at least one other reason why people don't serve others, in my opinion, and I hope this book can change this perception:

People simply don't know how easy this is!

In my years as a physician I have visited thousands of hospital and nursing home rooms. Not once have I seen a patient's room decorated with a trophy, a plaque, a contract, or a bank statement that belonged to the patient. I have never seen a picture of a patient's home or office in one of these rooms. But in almost every room I have seen cards sent by loved ones, pictures drawn by children and grandchildren, expressions of love and hope from the people who matter to them.

We don't have to wait until we are in a hospital room to find out what's really important to us. We can start paying attention now, caring for those around us, and providing hope.

This book does not contain seven steps or seven habits. It isn't a soup for your soul. But it does have lessons—some counterintuitive—to make us seriously consider what we live by. The answers will vary for each of us, but the question is the same.

What do we live by? I trust you will discover some answers for yourself in the following pages. I believe you will see that you can start with something small, something that is in your hands right now. I hope this book will instruct, inspire, and encourage everyone to serve others. That will lead us to something we have been searching for all along.

Get in the Boat

Be compassionate. And take responsibility for each other. If we only learned those lessons, this world would be so much better a place.

Morrie Schwartz[1]

I saw the same images you did: rooftops barely exposed above water, bodies floating in rivers, the Superdome overrun with people and trash, the crush of humanity trying to escape the floods and the shelters. Looters, soldiers, politicians, residents, and journalists reaching their boiling points, often on television.

When I got to New Orleans a few days after Hurricane Katrina blew through in September 2005, telephone poles looked like mangled fingers from an underground monster. Tops of trees were shorn off. Steel beams from unfinished structures bent as if they were still resisting the wind.

I was in an RV with some relief workers, trying to find out where shipments of medicine and mobile medical clinics needed to go. The few other vehicles on the road were either emergency or military, all heavily armed. The only real traffic was in the sky. Hundreds of helicopters ratcheted overhead. There was no electricity. There were no inhabitants. It felt like the end of the world.

On the way to the West Jefferson hospital—one of the three in the Parish that was open—we got lost. Maps were useless because roads were gone. Checkpoint guards made us turn around. As we came over a hill on Veterans Boulevard, we encountered police officers with automatic weapons who waved us down.

We got out, not believing what we saw through the windshield. There was no road ahead. The entire community was under water. Rescue boats were ferrying people from their homes to dry land. The rescuers knew there were still survivors in that water. They would worry about the bodies later, they said.

An elderly woman approached the uniformed men.

"Are you taking people from this neighborhood to see their homes?" she asked.

"No. Maybe in a few weeks. Right now we're trying to get them out, not in."

She turned to me.

"Can you take me to see my house? I want to see what's still there before I leave forever."

Waist-deep in the water was a wiry, unbathed, unshaven Al Pacino–looking man, a cigarette in his mouth and one behind each ear. He was dislodging his fishing boat from a tree branch.

"Can you take this lady to see her house?" I shouted to him.

He squinted at her.

"What's your address?"

She told him.

"We're neighbors. Get in the boat."

She looked at the water. It was a color not found in nature, fouled with floating animals, waste, and debris. Putrid. Toxic. Diseased.

"Wait there," he told her. He slogged out of the water and, like a drenched fireman, carried her to the boat, gently settling her in it. He came back for her 60-year-old niece and plopped her next to her aunt. He looked me over.

"I'm not carrying you. If you want to go, get in."

I waded in, trying to remember the last time I had taken medicine for the hundreds of diseases now soaking through my blue jeans.

What this man was doing was serving his neighbor, as so many others did during this catastrophe. A woman needed a ride. He had a boat.

We motored past (and above!) this lady's church, the

school her children attended, and the neighborhood convenience store, which our driver circled for a few minutes, using his landing net to scoop up cartons of cigarettes floating at the rooftop.

"I guess now I'm a looter," he confessed.

He cut the engine a few houses from our destination, and quiet momentum carried us the rest of the way. The bow of the boat gently bumped against the useless gutters of the house. Our companion had lived in this house for seventy-nine years.

"The oak tree looks good," she said, looking at the top third, all that was visible. Who knows what childhood memories that tree held? She gazed at the house for several minutes, the way we visit headstones at cemeteries. No one made a sound.

"The roof's gone," she said, finally.

"Is there something you wish you could get?" I asked her.

"I've got my life," she said. "There's nothing in there that I can't replace."

"We don't want to get stranded here after dark," the driver announced, starting the motor.

On the return trip the propeller stalled briefly after hitting a submerged vehicle.

Walking back up the street, the lady bone dry and I soaking wet, I asked her if she had cried yet.

"None of that has come out," she said. Then she turned to look me right in the eye. "I feel like I died and woke up. That's my old life, out in that water. It's over. Now I have to move on."

The three hurricanes that hit the United States and Central America in 2005—Katrina, Rita, and Wilma—exposed some serious flaws in the way we respond to disaster. I flew into a military base in New Orleans and was hit immediately by the concerns of the local firefighters. They couldn't communicate with other emergency services. They didn't know where the greatest needs were.

I also talked with the directors of emergency operations centers. They told me they could not get through to local, state, or national governments to tell them what they needed. I was approached by a Red Cross worker with a pickup truck loaded with hundreds of boxes of food.

"I have all this food, but I don't know where to take it," he said, frustration rising in his voice. "I don't know who needs it."

He gave me dozens of cartons of ready-to-eat meals to give away if I saw anyone who looked hungry. Within a few miles I found an apartment building where people had been stranded since the storm, with no food, water, electricity, or ice. The food was gone in minutes.

The hurricanes exposed flaws in government services, communication systems, levee systems, and in leadership.

But they exposed something else as well.

When people around the world saw the needs of those who were stranded and abandoned, they dropped everything and rushed in. Volunteers were on the scene days before government agencies were deployed. The people who saw the need and showed up were not *organized*. They just showed up.

Caravans of rental trucks loaded with food, water, tents, generators, and other supplies began arriving from states thousands of miles away, paid for by private citizens. Individuals chartered planes to fly people out of the New Orleans Superdome at their own expense and put them in safe lodging. Doctors and nurses arrived, not waiting until they had licensing paperwork approved by the state. Students boarded their college buses and vans and headed south. Neighborhood schools and individuals started fundraisers around the country. Churches and businesses in the affected communities left their doors unlocked to provide shelter for both victims and relief workers.

Some bad things happened there, too. I wish they hadn't. They are a part of human nature that we see more than we care to: shootings, looting, people taking advantage of those who can't defend themselves.

But the other side of human nature, represented by people wanting to help, people having something to give (their time, their resources, their expertise), people acting immediately, showed me that serving others comes as naturally as any of our other behaviors. What I saw in the hurricane aftermath underscored what I said in the Introduction:

- Everyone has something to give.
- Everyone can do something now.
- Many people are willing to give if they are presented the opportunity.

It also revealed something that we don't talk about in our culture very much. There simply are not enough government programs in the world to take care of everyone's needs. There aren't even enough agencies in the United States, the richest country in the world. There aren't enough FEMAs (Federal Emergency Management Administration), there aren't enough National Guards, there aren't enough fire departments or other emergency services, there aren't enough corporations, there aren't enough tax dollars.

There are, however, enough *people.*

We learned from the hurricanes that if we wait for the government—*any* government—we will be waiting too long. Government and Big Business cannot meet every need. They cannot move quickly enough or efficiently enough. In 2005 we saw tens of thousands of people who didn't want to wait. Waiting meant death and suffering for too many people. So they responded and served others. The levees of compassion, love, and service held strong.

Individuals, neighborhoods, and churches responded as if they were made for these kinds of situations, *which is exactly my point!*

When news of hurricane Katrina became known, our offices at Heart to Heart were overwhelmed with calls from individuals. Our staff worked late into the nights and on weekends just to answer the phone calls from people offering to help.

"I'm an EMT [emergency medical technician] and I can help," one caller said. "I have a job interview tomorrow, but forget that. I can change jobs later."

"I can drive supply trucks if you need me," said another. Volunteer drivers showed up in our offices from as far away as San Francisco, just wanting to help. One Californian who showed up had recently returned from the war in Iraq.

One man, who was converting a semi truck into a mobile medical clinic with plans to ship it to a village in Bolivia, called and said he could make it available in New Orleans before sending it to South America.

Costco called. FedEx called. Kmart called. Pharmaceutical companies called. They had something to give. They were willing to serve because they saw the need. They could do something right then; they didn't want to wait.

Institutions can't and won't save us when we need help. And let's admit it: We all need help sometimes. The corollary is that we all need to help sometimes. That's what gives our lives meaning and significance.

We might not all have the opportunity to go to a disaster area. In fact, if too many people come to a disaster area to help, the result can be confusion that compounds the problem. But those who did go can encourage and inspire us to look around our own neighborhoods and become aware of the needs of others. The hurricanes exposed problems that had been invisible or ignored for years. Likewise, there are people within your reach whose needs are not obvious. It doesn't have to take a big event for us to see them. Look around. We can start serving others right where we are.

The test is not what you can do in the aftermath of a hurricane. It's what you can do for the widow next door or the single parent on your street. Does he or she need help running errands? Does your neighbor need someone to read to her? It's not about waiting for disasters to hit. It's about *not* waiting, and serving *now*. It involves an awareness and lifestyle shift that occurs when you simply look at what is within your reach and start where you are.

I am certain that there is someone nearby who you can serve. You and the person in need are neighbors, just like "Al Pacino" and the elderly woman at the edge of their submerged community in New Orleans.

You're looking at the same boat, and the water is rising.

It's time to get in.

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