

We could sustain this generosity of spirit

BY THE REV. DR.
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Spirit of Life

In the hours, days and weeks since the worst mass shooting in Maine's history, there has also been a palpable generosity of spirit in our community. Have you noticed? This goes well beyond the outpouring of financial donations in support of survivors. It's about people stretching their (broken) hearts to make room for others, especially those we know are hurting.

I saw a lot of it in those first few hours of people reaching out to check in on one another. I've seen it in very long lines at the grocery store, as those who might have been huffy or rude seemed to have made the concerted effort not to. Instead of expressing their exhaustion, frustration or disappointment, I've watched dignified elders making funny faces at infants and bending over without complaint to pick up the odd item discarded on the floor. Children have delivered homemade cards and cookies to first responders, and the "helpers" that Fred Rogers wisely suggested we look to in any tragedy have been easily identifiable — from the support dogs to the medical professionals to those organizing vigils to prevent further gun violence. If we need a snapshot of what our community looks like at its best, this is definitely a time to take one.

These examples of generosity are not entirely surprising, of course. Ironically, tragedies do seem to bring out the best in humanity. When the state of the world reminds us that we are lucky to be alive (and it could easily have been otherwise), we seem to be more inclined towards kindness. We care. We share. We help one another. We allow grace.

But why does it take

a tragedy to inspire such generosity of spirit? Couldn't we simply choose to live this way all the time? (Yes, in fact, we could.)

If we need a reason, we might do well to remember that it is always a tragedy for

someone. As the saying often attributed to Philo of Alexandria goes: "Be kind, for every-

one you know

is fighting a great battle." Always, there are

hidden worlds taking place inside the peo-

ple around us — people harbor self-doubts

we never know about (even those we think

of as self-confident),

someone has just received an unwanted

health diagnosis, lost a beloved, felt terri-

fied by the state of the world and been over-

whelmed by needs they don't know how to meet.

People have also fallen in love, brought new life

to birth, found a meaningful vocation and dis-

covered new sources of beauty. When we

are attuned to the bigger picture of life for

those around us, we can be more "response-

able" to see, honor and engage with our

neighbors as we work together for the com-

mon good.

Clearly, when our hearts are open to the

suffering of our neighbors, we're nicer peo-

ple. We're more likely to edit ourselves before

we let loose a litany of selfish complaints. We

might be more willing to give someone else

the benefit of the doubt or consider the possibil-

ity that their perspective may have value

even when it's different from our own.

We could sustain this current generosity of

spirit if we wanted. We need it, our families

need it, our community needs it and the world

needs it. Let's make the intentional choice to do

so — not only in this tender time but always.

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