

Shelter From the Storm

The future begs the question, can we survive without each other? The short answer is no. It *does* take a village—even if the villagers are miles apart and quite diverse. The longer answer is more complicated, as Blau discovered when she became part of an ad hoc hurricane relief group in November of 2005. She and the two women she’d traveled with from Massachusetts stood in the parking lot of the New Zion Baptist Church in Eunice, Louisiana. Clipboard in hand and surrounded by a group of Katrina survivors, Blau asked each of them, “What else do you need? Clothes? Cleaning supplies? Diapers?”

Mary Washington*, an outgoing, heavy-set woman in flip flops and capri pants had already gone through the cartons of donations. “Curtains,” she offered as Blau looked in her direction. “I need curtains. You got any?”^{xxxvii}

Blau looked at her. “Curtains? You’re kidding, right? Not sneakers or a mattress or something for your kids?”

“Nah, just curtains.”

Blau and her companions were puzzled. Having talked with Washington as church volunteers were unloading the truck, they knew her story. She had been working in a New Orleans nursing home when the owners of the facility herded her and several other aides onto a bus filled with residents. Before the bus finally ran out of gas in Eunice, one of the residents had died in Washington’s arms. So, how could someone so traumatized, who had lost *everything* now joke about needing curtains? But every time Washington saw the volunteers, she’d ask, “Did you get my curtains?”

They never did. So many needed so much, and curtain just didn’t feel like a priority *to them*. But days later, the relief team had occasion to visit the run-down housing development where Washington and other evacuees were then living. The one-story houses were crowded together; many windows were broken. Finally, the three could grasp why Washington considered curtains a basic need. If people couldn’t see in, maybe they wouldn’t break in.

The three women were changed by their experiences in Louisiana. When they left, their organization continue to send money, supplies, and Christmas gifts. Blau stayed in touch by

phone with Washington's younger and very shy sister, Violet Simmons*, mother of eight. But most of Simmons' problems in the year after Katrina couldn't be solved by donations. The kids were doing poorly in school; her blood pressure was high; and everyone wanted out of Eunice—it just wasn't "home." Blau listened, asked questions, made calls on Simmons' behalf, and occasionally offered what felt like trivial advice ("Take a walk. It might clear your head"). Between Simmons' reticence and their different dialects—fast-talking New York meets Deep South drawl—it was impossible to know whether those phone calls meant anything to Simmons, no less made a difference in her life. Three years later, Blau finally mustered the nerve to ask.

"It was the best thing that happened to us," thirty-nine-year-old Simmons answered without hesitation. "You are the first person I know from out of state. It is nice to have a friend from out of town all these years, to know someone else other than family. I get a lot out of it, because I have someone to talk to."*

If the very differences that make consequential strangers so valuable to us can also be a barrier to relationships, the solution, it would seem, is to invite a variety of people into our lives. If we can't get past our differences, we might at least come to feel more comfortable in them and understand what our own limited experiences can't possibly teach us. Our survival might depend on trying.

"People in relationships can reach goals that would have been far beyond the grasp of individuals," Robert Putnam wrote in *Better Together*, a hopeful sequel to *Bowling Alone*. With the exception of the Millennials' growing civic mindedness, though, Putnam stands by what he wrote in 2003: "We do not yet see evidence of a general resurgence of social connection or involvement in the public life of a community." But he also acknowledges that "hidden within that broad statistical truth of the erosion of social ties is a tremendous variety of particular experiences."**

* "Mary Washington," pseudonym for a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, discussion with Blau and two other volunteers from the Louisiana Local Aid Project of Western Massachusetts, November 12, 2005.

** Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohn, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

