
A Time of Gifts

In a time of horror, we have a responsibility to remember how people respond with innumerable acts of kindness and generosity.

BY STEPHEN JAY GOULD

The patterns of human history mix decency and depravity in equal measure. We often assume, therefore, that such a fine balance of results must emerge from societies made of decent and depraved people in equal numbers. But we need to expose and celebrate the fallacy of this conclusion so that, in this moment of crisis, we may reaffirm an essential truth too easily forgotten, and regain some crucial comfort too readily forgone. Good and kind people outnumber all others by thousands to one.

The tragedy of human history lies in the enormous potential for destruction in rare acts of evil, not in the high frequency of evil people. Complex systems can only be built step by step, whereas destruction requires but an instant. Thus, in what I like to call the Great Asymmetry, every spectacular incident of evil will be balanced by 10,000 acts of kindness, too often unnoted and invisible as the “ordinary” efforts of a vast majority.

We have a duty, almost a holy responsibility, to record and honor the victorious weight of these innumerable little kindnesses, when an unprecedented act of evil so threatens to distort our perception of ordinary human behavior.

I have stood at ground zero, stunned by the twisted ruins of the largest human structure ever destroyed in a catastrophic moment. (I will discount the claims of a few biblical literalists for the Tower of Babel.) And I have contemplated a single day of carnage that our nation has not suffered since battles that still evoke passions and tears, nearly 150 years later: Antietam, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor. The scene is insufferably sad, but not at all depressing. Rather, ground zero can only be described, in the lost meaning of a grand old word, as “sublime,” in the sense

of awe inspired by solemnity.

In human terms, ground zero is the focal point for a vast web of bustling goodness, channeling uncountable deeds of kindness from an entire planet — the acts that must be recorded to reaffirm the overwhelming weight of human decency. The rubble of ground zero stands mute, while a beehive of human activity churns within, and radiates outward, as everyone makes a selfless contribution, big or tiny according to means and skills, but each of equal worth. My wife and stepdaughter established a depot on Spring Street to collect and ferry needed items in short supply, including facemasks and shoe inserts, to the workers at ground zero. Word spreads like a fire of goodness, and people stream in, bringing gifts from a pocketful of batteries to a \$10,000 purchase of hard hats, made on the spot at a local supply house, and delivered right to us.

I will cite but one tiny story, among so many, to add to the count that will overwhelm the power of any terrorist’s act. And by such tales, multiplied many millionfold, let those few depraved people finally understand why their vision of inspired fear cannot prevail over ordinary decency. As we left a local restaurant to make a delivery to ground zero late one evening, the cook gave us a shopping bag and said: “Here’s a dozen apple brown bettys, our best dessert, still warm. Please give them to the rescue workers.” How lovely, I thought, but how meaningless, except as an act of solidarity, connecting the cook to the cleanup. Still, we promised that we would make the distribution, and we put the bag of 12 apple brown bettys atop several thousand facemasks and shoe pads.

Twelve apple brown bettys into the breach. Twelve apple brown bettys for

thousands of workers. And then I learned something important that I should never have forgotten — and the joke turned on me. Those 12 apple brown bettys went like literal hot cakes. These trivial symbols in my initial judgment turned into little drops of gold within a rainstorm of similar offerings for the stomach and soul, from children’s postcards to cheers by the roadside. We gave the last one to a firefighter, an older man in a young crowd, sitting alone in utter exhaustion as he inserted one of our shoe pads. And he said, with a twinkle and a smile restored to his face: “Thank you. This is the most lovely thing I’ve seen in four days — and still warm!” ■

*Stephen Jay Gould, a professor of zoology at Harvard, is the author of **Questioning the Millennium**. The above article originally appeared in the Sept. 26 New York Times. Reprinted with permission.*

Teaching Ideas

Stephen Gould says that the carnage of Sept. 11 is insufferably sad but not depressing. What’s the difference? How can he make this claim?

The period since Sept. 11 has been filled with acts of violence and horror — but Gould also suggests there has been a “web of bustling goodness.” Since Sept. 11th, what are some of the parts of this web that you have seen? Make a drawing that illustrates this “web.”

Gould’s story about the 12 apple brown bettys reminds us of the human capacity for goodness and to make a difference in others’ lives. Brainstorm similar stories that you are aware of from your own life. Choose one of these and write about it.

Page 1 of 1