

COOKING UP A NEW WORLD

In the immediacy of great tragedy, a window of opportunity opens

THE DAY AFTER the tsunami hit, I started cooking. First, I piled a plate high with *idlees*, the steamed rice and lentil cakes South Indians eat for breakfast every day. Then I pulled out my grandmother's sixty-year-old cast iron skillet

especially made for cooking *dosas*—thin crepes stuffed with a spicy potato mixture, another South Indian favorite.

We ate *idlees* and *dosas* in a state of shock, the spice in the *sambar* curry I had made burning a path down our throats.

That morning, as the Seattle rain pounded the windows, time seemed suspended. I cooked that whole week, all South Indian food: fish fried the way the fishermen do on the beaches of Kerala, straight from the sea; curries rich with fresh coconut and coconut milk; lentils topped with mustard seeds and bay leaves that have been quickly fried to bring out their aroma.

How we cope with disasters is personal, our reactions sometimes as awkward as the motions of a child learning to walk. My cooking spree was my first response, an unconscious attempt to somehow integrate a disaster into everyday life by claiming my connection to the countries affected, three of which I had lived in for long periods of time. My second response, like that of many others, was to want to do something. Thousands of people felt compelled to act, writing checks, getting on planes, holding relief benefits in their neighborhoods, even offering to adopt a child.

The outpouring of financial and emotional assistance was heartfelt, genuine, and hopeful, a far more natural state of being than the isolated, fearful modes in which we too often operate. It was a tribute to the fundamental goodness of human beings: empathy overriding fear, commonality trumping political isolation.

But to allow this enormous swelling of generosity and human connectedness to end there would be letting an opportunity slip through our fingers. We can move to a



third stage of response, in which we take a hard look at the questions that are honed by any disaster, questions about the magnitude of the disparity between haves and have-nots—a disparity sharply illuminated by images of people with so little losing everything. Or questions about why we respond so generously when hundreds of thousands of lives are lost in a disaster, but not when a million people die each year from malaria—knowing that half of those malaria deaths are preventable if we simply invest in mundane solutions like bed nets. Or questions about how we can generate as much sympathy and action on behalf of the 14.6 million children orphaned each year by AIDS as we do for those orphaned by the tsunami. Questioning the limits to our empathy doesn't minimize our generosity in response to the catalyzing event. It does recognize that we rarely make national decisions from a place of empathy, and helps us seize the opportunity to think comprehensively about the everyday disasters we face while we still feel connected and generous.

I fear we will forget—as we have already forgotten about Rwanda, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and so many other countries. I fear that we will revert and move on. I fear that we will forget how real it feels to be together in times of tragedy, or how honest and human it is to imagine the child washed into the sea as your own, the arms that had to choose to let go of one child and not the other as your own, the woman in the middle of rubble as you. I fear that we will forget how powerful human connectedness is and how much we can accomplish for the good of everyone when we work from inclusiveness rather than fear.

Moving to the third stage of response requires that Americans be uncomfortable for a bit longer, asking questions that test our values as individuals and as the world's richest nation. It's not easy—there's a natural instinct to contribute

what we can and then move on, back to our pre-disaster world. There we have control; we can more easily attribute disparity between haves and have-nots to hard work rather than to power, greed, or the capriciousness of good luck. This quintessentially American concept lies at the core of welfare reform; of “No Child Left Behind”; and of the drastic slashing of social programs benefiting the poor.

We want to help and then return to our pre-disaster world, where we think we have control.

The admirable sense of individual power that drives much innovation in America also carries with it a tragic inability to perceive the physical and moral limits of that power. This lack of humility and the drive to get ahead prevent us from asking the real questions—maybe because we're afraid that if we got the answers, we'd have to change how we live.

Someone once asked me why it is that India has produced so many *mahatmas*, great souls who spend their lives asking the unanswerable questions of life, experimenting with truth in order to understand better what truth really is. Perhaps the answer is partly that in India it is simply impossible to look at the poverty, despair, and injustice laid out in front of you and not be forced to question what you see.

After 9/11, human empathy quickly gave way to fear, driven by the divisive question: What must we do to make “us” safe from “them”? It was uncomfortable—even unpatriotic—to see the disaster as an opportunity to question whether America's approach to the world played any role in precipitating the terrorist attacks, or to reexamine our power and how we use it. Instead, we let politicians appropriate that moment of great possibility and lead us backward rather than forward. Our nation became one gov-

erned by fear, and so we are confronted with false choices between protecting core human rights—justice, equality, due process—and protecting national security.

This latest disaster is no less of an opportunity for self-reflection and transformation, for elevating our individual caring response to a national level. The effect of the tsunami on human beings around the world was powerful both

because it seemed so close, something that could happen to any of us, and so enormous in the toll it took on the wide arc of its impact. It would be a great loss if we allowed the sense of community it inspired to stop here. Imagine if we responded to everyday disasters with the same compassion with which we responded to the tsunami. Imagine this same fundamental sense of human generosity guiding our national priorities and policies. There's real power in seizing what is so genuine, so unsullied by politics and blame, and holding on to it.

Natural disasters provide a politics-free arena in which to question our assumptions. There is no one to blame, no “us” and “them,” no bad-guy terrorists and no war we can launch in response. Instead of talking tough, we are obliged to acknowledge our helplessness, to be inclusive rather than exclusive in our fear. In not knowing what to do, we come closer to natural human responses, closer to any real truths.

I could have gone on cooking—it's a human coping mechanism. But if we're willing, there's more that's useful and good to be had out of this, and every, disaster. ✎

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