

This is not a new story.

Are all people our brothers and sisters? And are we our brother's and sister's keeper in word and deed? Do we really do unto others as we would have them do unto us? Or, is that a thing we tell our children in the living room, and then when just the adults are in the kitchen drinking wine, we chuckle at the naivete and admit that is a nice thought, but just not realistic.

In short, do we practice our spirituality, but not use it in the game?

I'd like to reflect on our living up to our aspirations during emergencies in particular, and part of that is how we define emergencies.

The pandemic is clearly an emergency. It led to a lot of public spouting that "we are all in this together", a common refrain in emergencies, and a very spiritual thing to say. But what did people mean by **we** and **are** and **all** and **in this** and **together**? Were those joyous words of communion or begrudging words of necessity?

We.

Does 'we' mean all Americans, or all people? Does it mean those of my race or party or state? I think folks meant it to mean what I call the 'Big We', everyone. But then a whole lot of people did not behave like that.

Are

'Are' implies presently. It is not conditional and vague. It is not 'about to be' or 'were'. It can also be transitory, as in we are all watching this service, or more permanent, we are all human. For some, I think it was a reaffirmation that we are always in this together, whereas for others it was meant to signify a temporary truce, so we could all be in it together right now, but after the emergency that wouldn't stick.

In this.

Was 'this' the pandemic? 'This' obviously didn't mean the same financial or health risks, since some of us had insurance and wealth and a hospital stay would not wreck our lives. Some of us enjoyed having our groceries delivered and some of us had to do all that delivering. Like 'are' it is very direct, and can be seen as temporary or permanent. I like to think 'in this' means, or at least should mean, the 'Big This' – the human condition on this planet. Like when a baby looks around the room, and then out the window, and at the sun or bird or leaf, and then back at you, and you can see in their eyes the wonder and discovery that we are all in this bog ole goofy world together.

Together.

Together could just mean that we all are living through a pandemic at the same time but should individually figure how to do it on our own. But that would be a miserly statement.

Maybe it was supposed to imply that I stood with the meatpackers on their cramped line, and you stood with the nurses being told to wear handkerchiefs, and he wore a mask because his father had cancer, and she didn't worry about staying home from work and losing her job, and they didn't care about your political party. Because 'together' can be stuck in an elevator or bound by love.

I work in the emergency field at times, and think about what we are in this together means in that context. I am glad that there are emergency systems in place. If your car crashes or your house catches on fire, trained people you don't know will drive fast and arrive in very expensive vehicles and help out. As a society we have decided we want to pay for this system we hope to never use, and that responders are our professional keepers. But they leave, mainly staying only until danger is past, not until you are whole in body and spirit.

The fire department arrives when something is burning, not when you are burnt out. Police show up when the car crashes, not when it won't start. EMTs will restart your heart, but not mend it.

That is not their job.

Why not? And if not theirs, then whose?

Before the responders arrive with flashing lights, it is common for a bystander to be the first person providing aid. Someone will pound on a stranger's door if smoke is coming out the windows. A few will even go in that building and rescue a person. But we don't even knock on the door to see how our neighbors are doing, let alone the door of a stranger. People are generally very altruistic in sudden emergencies, and much less so in the humdrum moments that make up most of our lives. They go to church, but they don't *live* in church. Some of us are occasionally together in certain emergencies for a little bit.

Society is the same. We are in agreement that the public should provide aid in large emergencies, like the pandemic. When Ida swept into the Gulf and then up through New York last month there was no discussion about whether FEMA would be on its way. When fires burned through towns out west, government forces tried to beat them back, and when they were unable to, more government arrived.

We are hugely compassionate at being together in this particular disaster right now for a bit, and then we as a state mostly leave you in the ashes. We don't stay in in the Big This together. We could.

Some of that would entail stopping being surprised at emergencies happening that people like me predict and plan for. We will have another Irene, a big earthquake will shatter California or Memphis, a heat wave will kill the elderly in Atlanta, but until that moment we are lacking in compassion for ourselves. We fail to be IN THIS, and instead are in that, and that and that.

We are also not good with the slow unfolding of smaller crises. At the person losing their job, or their home. At old age and disability. At poverty and shame. Most of us will be there in such times for our close friends, but not for those we don't know. We are mostly apart, and only sporadically together.

Why?

I think it is fear. If I really gave a stranger my coat in the cold, I would run out of coats. Then I would be cold, and I'm afraid that nobody is just going to give me a jacket.

And we are a little ashamed of ourselves for feeling this paucity of spirit, because we know (due to the hazy kindergarten teacher in our collective memory) that such behavior is a small failure. But we don't like feeling that. So, instead of realizing we are a forgivable work in progress and trying to do better, we squirm and get out. We do a quick mental three-step, psychic ejection seat.

First, we push the problem into a hole for someone else to solve – 'I am sure somebody else will help them, maybe the Red Cross? Look, I am running late already.' We stop being in this together.

Then we cover up the hole with some cement made from indignant bluster that externalizes our failing by making any acknowledgment of it as a surprise attack on us. It all becomes you and I and them.

And attacks need to be dealt with, so we finish off the process by making the attackers (including any nagging conscience of ours, but preferably some other person or group) the cause of our trouble.

We yell, wide-eyed, "The problem isn't the lack of a coat, it is all you people making up stories about people with no coats!"

Our fear stems from lack of spirit and faith, and is understandable, but that does not make it righteous. To really be in this together with you, I'll have to believe that if I give up my last coat, well, I'll find another. Or some nice person will give me one. If I pay for your health care or sick days, you'll pay for mine. If either of us fall, the other will carry us.

Writ large, such generosity of spirit might look like us treating emergencies large and small as the same. It would also be good practice. A society that gets good at **fully** dealing with one house fire - the trauma and loss and rebuilding, or health crisis - the fear and costs and therapy, or one case of poverty – the shame and hunger and cold and isolation, could then try doing a few at a time, saying with determination "we are all in this together".

And then we could try dealing with more and more, all of the emergencies large and small, ALL of the time, each time saying to ourselves, or to any that ask why, because "we are all in this together." Until we really mean it.

