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Coping with Charley

by Rushworth M. Kidder

If you want to test the ethics of a society, see how it operates under stress. To watch South Florida and a sympathetic nation cope with Hurricane Charley is to be reminded of a deep moral culture that surfaces when crunch points come.

As Charley tore its way from Fort Myers to Daytona, it left behind an estimated $15 billion in damage. That figure, if confirmed, would make it the third most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history, behind the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the devastation from Hurricane Andrew in 1992. So it's worth asking, How well did we survive?

The tales of families losing everything and the tolls of dead and missing remind us that we could have done better. But don't overlook how well we did. Whatever devastation Charley wrought would have been massively greater in nations -- and there are many -- without settled moral commitments to strongly enforced building codes, careful emergency planning, and continuous rapid-response training.

In quiet times, those processes and policies may seem expensive, even annoying. What's more, there's nothing dazzling about them. Changes in flood-plain calculations don't make the national news, but they're essential to a culture that cares about the security and well-being of its members. Doing them well requires a long-standing public-service work ethic of commitment. It requires a civic tradition of respect for law and order that only arises when private citizens trust their government. And it only happens when those responsible are generally honest and free from corruption -- unwilling, for instance, to use either the zoning process to line their own pockets, or law enforcement as a cover for further looting.

Consider how much got organized -- by government, private, and nonprofit entities -- within a day of the destruction:

- Some 1,500 National Guard troops were on the scene, with 5,000 more scheduled to arrive to help thinly stretched local police, fire, and emergency forces.
- The Federal Emergency Management Agency began airlifting in equipment and supplies, covering much of the cost of emergency personnel, and providing long-term recovery funding for homeowners and businesses.
- The federal government dispatched a 25-person mortuary team to the hard-hit Port Charlotte area to help identify and process bodies.
- Already-established plans for curfews were put into place -- including, in some places, a strictly enforced prohibition against alcohol sales after 8:00 P.M. -- to help police control looting.
- The state's attorney general created a taskforce to discourage price gouging from suppliers trying to take financial advantage of the situation.
- In addition to regular trash-collection services, a special "horticulture pickup" was organized on Sunday for limbs, logs, and other plant debris left behind by the storm.
- The Red Cross set up feeding stations to provide meals to all who asked for them.
- A staging area was established in Sarasota, just north of the most heavily damaged counties, to process and assign volunteers pouring into the state and offering to help.

- With the power out, drivers were asked to take responsibility for treating intersections where traffic lights were inoperable as four-way stops.
- Newspaper Web sites were posting lists of stores open for business and publishing information on how to purify water for drinking and when to expect the return of electrical service, which employees needed to clean up and reopen closed schools.

These may sound like simple things. But behind each lies a backlog of collective moral obligation and concern. These days, in the welter of news about scandals and ethical challenges, it's easy to overlook the long-standing, quiet traditions of honesty, responsibility, and compassion that regularly cause ordinary good people to do ordinary good things. Without that culture, Charley's devastation could have been orders of magnitude greater.