

“Emergency! Can Faithers and Freethinkers Respond Together?”

Part One

No doubt we doubters and disbelievers are as overwhelmed by the incessant calamities and catastrophes as many in the faith community. Faced with this ceaseless stream of real or imagined crises, it may be an appropriate time to take a deep breath and open our eyes and minds wide to consider how an emergency can be addressed in a reasonable, cooperative manner on a local level.

While completing a book on my emergence from faith (*Life After Faith*)—never an actual crisis for me—and compiling stories from my years as a chaplain in *My Address is a River*, I was asked to become the director of an emergency winter shelter. This would be the first “rotating shelter” in the county, moving from place to place, sanctuary to sanctuary each week.

This was a whole new way of community involvement for me. After nearly twenty-five years as an interfaith chaplain with the last ten years as leader of a street chaplaincy, I was used to walking straight into personal crises while addressing the Big Picture issues of mental health, criminal justice and homelessness/housing. My work brought me in touch with people who were in *daily emergency*, women and men I never imagined I’d get to know and care about so much. From prisoners in maximum security to survivors camped high on wooded hillsides, from hospitals to shelters and streets, my staff and I were on the front lines of “the war on the poor,” as some say.

I helped to build our chaplaincy boards with business leaders, clergy, social workers, congregants and concerned citizens. Some represented specific religious groups and some were simply compassionate people. We didn’t always know what board-members, volunteers or supporters believed. It simply didn’t matter.

Close working relationships grew between us—Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Muslims, Buddhists and Bahai’s, Wiccans and New Agers and a whole lot of ... Others. I was regularly taking a walk, talking on the phone or drinking a tea or a beer with a priest or rabbi, minister or witch, preacher or humanist.

We were focused on helping others—period. Debates and disagreements over personal beliefs or non-beliefs were distractions.

Our annual interfaith service the night before Thanksgiving was inclusive of many faiths and those without. Yes, we would have prayers, poems, scriptures and hymns but the highlight of the evening was always the presence and participation of the street community. Their words, stories, songs made it real and deeply meaningful. Held in a church sanctuary, the actual sanctuary became the people, with homes and without. With beliefs and without.

The dozens of memorial circles and processions we held were also radically inclusive, modeling the way true “community” could be more than defended tribes, where people matter more than philosophies or politics.

I became convinced, because I saw it every day for nearly thirty years, that people from vastly different backgrounds and beliefs, diverse ethnicities, economics or orientations not only *could* get along and work side by side, but they *actually did*, usually quite effectively. Not to say it was ever easy, that it wasn’t often a little chaotic and messy. Walking into the tensions of our communities is no walk in the park—though we walked, sat and held gatherings in parks all the time!

Having left my ordination in 2001, I continued with the chaplaincy for another four years before moving to a small cabin on an island in the Northwest where I did trail and farm work, wrote a few books and decompressed from a personal and vocational life packed with emergencies. Little did I know that upon returning to California I would stumble right back into “it”—the perpetual earthquakes of personal emergencies.

As the director of the shelter I was employed by the county detox program and a Catholic social service agency, overseeing a mobile shelter supported by the county, a community foundation and a coalition of religious congregations yet to be organized.

With my colleagues at the detox center and St. Vincent dePaul, I began to coordinate over a dozen congregations, several non-profits, County Health and Human Services and literally hundreds of volunteers. We hired a great staff of women and men who were either unhoused or had “been there” and knew the precarious life outside.

The central purpose was simple, in a complex kind of way: there is an immediate emergency (people are dying outside in the cold) that demands an immediate response.

The irony was, of course, that a secular humanist (me) was the director!

It was amusing to me even while musing over one evident truth:

An emergency can offer new ways of merging as well as emerging.

I got to work constructing a website to help us communicate and collaborate. I wrote:

“Where is home for me, for you, for us? If I say, “The County is my home” then whatever I dwell in from a castle to a car to a sheet of stained cardboard, is a home or a housing or just a homing—a homing in on something that grounds me and centers me. I am my own address.

We can say, I’ve passed through open doors and been met with kindness. I’ve tasted the deliciousness of life from strangers who did not treat me like a stranger. Will we be strangers again? Will they?”

Each afternoon the staff and I had to “play god” by selecting the 30 men and 20 women a sanctuary could accommodate that night. Almost every day I told the crowd in the free dining room downtown that I hated my job. Not the part about getting to know them and directing the shelter. Just the part of having to select who was IN and who was OUT. I said I felt like the captain of a ship deciding who could get in the lifeboat with limited space. Later I wrote:

“A small, temporary lifeboat. . .where everyone does their part searching for dry, safe, stable land. . .Where hospitality brings us all closer to home.”

In my view, there are many emergencies that wouldn’t be so if people of faith and people without faith were willing to put their bickering beliefs aside and work together. It’s not really so difficult, as this shelter story shows.

Part Two

A gaytheist (gay atheist) wrote to say he was deeply frustrated by so many anti-gay Christians intent on legislating “biblical laws.” Agreeing with him that we need to take a firm stand against all bigotry, I also reminded him that many Christians and other religious people are already taking that stand beside us—or inviting our participation (e.g., Americans United).

“I’m right and you’re wrong!” seems rather insignificant when there are human rights emergencies right in front of our faithful or unfaithful faces.

After watching kids serve a meal at the shelter one evening, I wrote:

“Two little boys from Kol Shofar (synagogue). . .serve a meal for 30 guests at Westminster Presbyterian (church). . .Homelessness ends with relationships.”

Grizzly guys from the street mingling with children and stereotypical “church ladies.” It got to where it wasn’t easy to tell who was who—are those Bahai’s cleaning the synagogue kitchen?; Is that a Buddhist serving food cooked by Quakers at the Catholic church?; Was that a Pagan sweeping the floor of the Evangelical social hall?

It may be confusing sometimes, but the wildness can be delightfully energizing.

By the way, our model was not simply to “serve” food but to share the meal. Volunteers, staff, clergy and I sat and ate with our “guests.” There was never an “Us and Them” environment. We listened, learned and were left with a lot to chew on.

I could go on with the Shelter Story with all the countless stories that made it work, but I suppose the most important thing to say here—specifically here among non-theists—is to speak to those who may think there is nothing “redeemable” in religion, no one worth “saving” from the sinking ship of Religion. I’ve been on a new kind of ship, a boat that doesn’t sail under the flag of faith OR faithlessness. It’s a barque beyond belief.

That small and temporary county shelter has since evolved into the R.E.S.T. program (Rotating Emergency Shelter Team). It was an amazingly wonderful thing to float, with some pretty incredible people, “insiders” and “outsiders” who, in one way or another all became passengers and crew consisting of:

Conservative Jews; Reform Jews; Baptists; Evangelicals; Buddhists; Catholics; Lutherans; Episcopalians; Presbyterians; Methodists; Congregationalists; Pentecostals; Quakers; Atheists; New Agers; Humanists; Unaffiliated; Who Knows?; Who Cares?

Those last two are included in all seriousness. Many people who came to provide shelter, or who came to find shelter, didn’t tell us what—if any—beliefs they held. And it mattered not in the least. When the bottom line is active compassion, the main

question is: Do you care; will you show up? If you do show up, who cares what you believe or don't believe?

I know; I can hear the naysayers. They'll be heads shaking, eyes rolling and a chorus of voices assuring me this is an "isolated story," an "exceptional situation" and some will scoff: "Yeah, that's California." Others will say "Oh, that's just a bunch of Liberals and Progressives." Except, it wasn't and isn't.

If you don't know it, you should. Doing the good and right thing is no respecter of persons. Forget the ones who don't show up, or care. Leave those who are "baiting for a debate" to their online battles and wars. There are many social and educational programs and even church-based services across the land doing lots of good things, and many of them don't care what our beliefs are. Here in North Carolina we have the organizers of the Poor People's Campaign (Rev. William Barber), the North Carolina Council of Churches (I spoke with the director about the "church" name and she gets it, but they include everyone in their work), Carolina Jews for Justice (includes secular Jews and others) as well as activist groups like Democracy North Carolina. I'm in touch with Race and Justice groups and I'm a contributing member of our local interfaith circle on Facebook.

And I—the secular guy—write a weekly column for the Religion page of a regional paper—in the South! I regularly interview local faith and faithless representatives and write about our conversations. Great things are happening and people should know it.

Regular readers of Friendly Atheist, Americans United, Godless in Dixie, my own blogs and columns, or those who check in with The Interfaith Observer or Interfaith Youth Core and other sources won't be surprised to hear about a radically cooperative shelter program. This isn't an idealistic dream.

And yes, I support Non-Belief Relief and help secular causes when I can.

There are plenty of emergencies that call for rational, realistic, relational responses. Don't you think the more diverse the collaborative coalitions are the healthier and more effective they will be? We don't have to wonder any longer or ask, *What would happen if atheists and theists organized to address local or national emergencies? What if they would form active groups, prepare and share meals together, strategize and work for the common good?*

The “What If’s” are now. It’s happening, but not enough. We spend too much time arguing and debating over theologies or anti-theologies. Why waste valuable time among the closed-minded or closed-hearted in either camp?

How is any of this relevant on the national level? We hear many religious leaders speaking out to address the “emergency” on the southern border as a humanitarian crisis. There are many diverse groups of peacemakers and community organizers. Whole denominations, including many Catholics, support full access to healthcare for women. Even the recent vote in the United Methodist Church over LGBTQ acceptance was a split vote, with a large segment of the church pledging to defy the bigotry. Do enough people of faith stand up and speak out? Obviously not. Yet, when secular people look in the mirror, can we honestly say we’re doing any more, any better?

In a recent issue of “Church and State” (Americans United) we read that a coalition of over 40 organizations—over half religiously affiliated—signed on to a public statement opposing “Project Blitz,” the Religious Right’s “scheme to Christianize U.S. law.” In part, the statement asserts that “religious freedom ... is a shield that protects everyone—the religious and non-religious alike ... each person has the right to choose whether to practice a religion or be nonreligious without pressure from the government.” These organizations are taking a public stand against the mean-spirited blitz that seeks “to transform religious freedom into a sword ... to harm others” and threatening civil rights protections “for women, LGBTQ people, those of minority faiths, and the nonreligious.”

The invitation is open to those on both sides of the fence of faith to take pragmatic action, to at least try to construct community, to build sensible sanctuaries—places for mutual learning and listening—to form shelters, open homes and save lives, including our own.

I think we have an exciting challenge and opportunity. Doesn’t this seem to be the reasonable way forward, the most rational and pragmatic way to respond to many of our local, national and global emergencies?

Maybe now is the best time to “emerge and merge,” for Goodness’ sake.

I’d be interested to hear what collaborative actions non-theists are taking to better their communities. Where are you involved in cooperative action? If you’re not, what’s keeping you? Maybe you’ll start one in your area?

Chris Highland, 2019

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