

The *Grace* of Perfect Strangers

“SO RAISE YOUR HAND AND RAISE YOUR VOICE. TAKE A STAND AND MAKE YOUR CHOICE. WITH MY HEART ON MY SLEEVE AND MY FLAG UNFURLED, I BELIEVE THERE IS HOPE IN THIS WORLD.”

—singer-songwriter Dan Pelletier

Recently Colleen Barrett received the one call she had hoped she would never receive. It was a call she and her organization were prepared for but never wanted to hear. As president of Southwest Airlines she was notified there had been an accident at Chicago’s Midway Airport. A plane had slid off the runway in snowy, icy weather, had struck a car and a six-year-old boy had died. This was the first fatality in Southwest’s 35-year history, a record that every employee was proud of.

It was here, not only a test for the emergency plan, but also a test for one of the most studied and admired cultures in corporate America. As both a student and an architect of organizational culture, it was my chance to see if the high value I place on this dynamic company would stand up to actual practice.

The emergency plan worked like a Swiss clock. Emergency GO Teams were in the air and headed to the scene within an hour of the accident. Their response had been rehearsed hundreds of times and each person knew his or her role. But another aspect of the accident response was in play, an internal response to the crisis. Southwest has a very personal culture in which the employee is number one. The first order of business at Southwest was to communicate the facts to the entire corporate family. But even before that happened, their plan included a unique contingency: everyone associated with the accident was to call his or her family first and let them know they were alright. This gesture prevents phone lines from being clogged by Southwest staff and family members wanting to be sure a loved one was safe.

Consistent with what they preach, they talk the talk and walk the walk. They believe.

The culture responded in amazing fashion. Within two hours of the accident, six separate Southwest employees from around the country had set up funds for the child who had died. This happens through the “Grace of Perfect Strangers.”

Not only did the employees rise to meet this disaster, but so did the exiting passengers on the scene. Confusion and panic could have dominated a growing mob mentality among the passengers, yet after exiting the plane via emergency slides and amidst the smell of leaking jet fuel, all stopped at the bottom of the slide to be sure the next passenger was alright. People on the street stopped their cars to help the vehicle trapped under the nose of the plane. “The Grace of Perfect Strangers.”

We live in a world where we are led to believe corporate America is governed by selfish intent and greed, a world where all executives behave like Enron’s Kenneth Lay. This is a world portrayed by the media’s need to feed the negative machine of public demand. But if you look a little harder, the world of business and leadership will surprise you.



“In a world portrayed as selfish and self-driven we see hope. In the ‘me first’ generation we see me put aside and you taking its place.”

- In 2004 Americans gave over \$250 billion to charity and to help disaster victims, a U.S. record. 2005 will shatter that number with the help that went to tsunamis, earthquakes and hurricane victims. “*The Grace of Perfect Strangers.*”
- Individual giving is by far the largest portion of that number, equaling \$187.92 billion, or 75 percent. “*The Grace of Perfect Strangers.*”
- The Hilton Foundation sent a check for \$500,000 to the earthquake victims in Iran within 1 hour of the disaster! “*The Grace of Perfect Strangers.*”
- The Gates Foundation set up and operated by Bill and Melinda Gates of Microsoft gave \$60 million to save newborn lives. “*The Grace of Perfect Strangers.*”
- Patagonia, the wonderful outdoor clothing and equipment company gives 10 percent of pre-tax profits to help not-for-profit organizations. “*The Grace of Perfect Strangers.*” *continued on page 12*

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- The selfish, thug-like image of NBA players is shattered when you discover that below the surface within 30 hours after Hurricane Katrina hit, a charity game was set up with the 29 biggest superstars of the sport raising more than \$1 million. Some players, Kevin Garnett and Stephon Marbury, individually gave between \$500,000 and \$1 million to relief efforts and to build new homes. "The Grace of Perfect Strangers."

In a world portrayed as selfish and self-driven we see hope. In the "me first" generation we see me put aside and you taking its place.

From individuals who quietly help to the massive juggernauts of corporate America we see people and organizations rising to the occasion and finding themselves part of the real world, part of something bigger.

Do we as individuals have a responsibility beyond profit, beyond shareholder return, beyond our next new thing? You can make a difference.

I recently taught a Sunday school class of teenagers and gave them a test to identify among the world's population, what percentage of people on our small planet go to sleep hungry, cannot worship the faith of their choice, do not have a roof over their heads and so on. They were shocked that the majority of those on our planet are in need of help.

As success graces us, we become the chosen ones, and as such, the individuals that CAN make a difference.

While researching this article I became inspired and have developed a list of charities that will receive something from Creative Ventures each month. It won't be what Bill Gates can send, but it will be something.

The challenge is to DO SOMETHING!



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