



THE PLAIN DEALER

Why we give..

...Sometimes

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Plain Dealer Reporters

The milk of human kindness flows unevenly across the land.

Helicopters, Navy ships and three American presidents mobilize to help the victims of the December tsunami. More than 120,000 volunteers hit the streets of Warsaw, Poland, to buttonhole passers-by for money to rebuild a hospital in Sri Lanka. The children of Agnon school in Beachwood organize an impromptu swimathon to raise tsunami aid.

As world compassion crests, children in Darfur, Sudan, stay caught in the maw of civil war, genocide and starvation. They continue to die by the thousands. Closer to home, local broadcasters aired a telethon Wednesday raising \$1.2 million for the distressed people rimming the Indian Ocean. But no one scrambles to stage an emergency fund-raiser for vulnerable children attending Cleveland schools.

What accounts for our capriciousness?

Ethicists like Stephen Post at Case Western Reserve University say the impulse to help is a universal one, but it's selectively triggered.

Disasters that are sudden, dramatic and biblical in proportion attract more sympathy than intractable, systemic and complicated tragedies.

Floods beat civil wars. And earthquakes beat famines, 10 to 1, according to the research of Peter Walker at Tufts University in Boston.

Giving to an innocent flood victim is simple, moral work compared with sorting out contesting parties in a civil war or facing the poverty on one's own street corner, said Lynn Underwood, a professor at Western Michigan University.

Meanwhile, plenty of worthy causes compete for attention.

"The environment is very competitive," said Phil Mason of the Greater Cleveland Salvation Army. The 2004 kettle campaign went well here, exceeding its goal of \$630,000, but raising money in general is tougher in the post-9/11 world.

Now, tsunami aid is poised to break all the records.

"When people see a big wave break in the back door, they are jolted, lifted right out of their ordinary routines," said Post, who directs a research institute that studies altruism. "Sudden

disasters bring on significant anxiety. Behaving generously is, in part, a way to cope."

Seeing the devastation is a critical component, said Stacy Palmer, editor of the Chronicle of Philanthropy. People give to causes they know about, and wall-to-wall media coverage of the tsunami fuels the desire to help.

Even when the media pay attention, most catastrophes are captured in their aftermath. This time, amateur video of an approaching three-story wave put the viewer smack in the victim's place.

"A lot of people have been to beaches and can put themselves in the shoes of somebody who was there," Palmer said from her offices in Washington. "That alone increases the response."

Sharon Csoltko, a 57-year-old widow from Parma, responded. She wrote two checks for tsunami relief. She cut out and saved a newspaper photograph of a boy in Thailand who was hospitalized with a broken arm and scratches on his face. It sits on her kitchen table.

"I have a grandson that's 4," Csoltko said. "It reminds me of Nathan, him laying there. It breaks my heart to see him. If I could, I would send \$10 or \$15 a week to help him."

Csoltko, who works as a custodian, asked The Associated Press to try to obtain an address for the boy and his family.

When someone like Csoltko acts altruistically, she undergoes physical changes, Post said. Her pulse slows, the hormones that mediate stress kick in, and the centers of her brain associated with compassion - the anterior cingulate and the caudate nucleus - show more activity. These sections of the cerebral cortex are closely aligned with joy.

"We call this the helper's high," Post said. "We are wired to respond to suffering, and we feel better when we do."

There were neurological reasons old Scrooge cut a caper Christmas morning when he acted on the first generous impulse of his adult life, Post said.

Christmas itself may have played a role in the tsunami outpouring, Palmer observed.

"It occurred during a holiday time when people were gathered with their families, thinking about giving and thinking about their own blessings," Palmer said.

"It came at a moment when people were outside their normal routines.

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