

A Matter of Perspective

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
November 2017

If you want to feel better, try feeling thankful



gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others. -- Cicero

Drama, stress, and strife surround us. With storms, mass shootings, White House saber rattling, Charlottesville and the re-emergence of white nationalism, the decline of civil discourse, a toxic political climate, a wrecked Puerto Rico, jammed traffic, road rage, oppressive heat in October, the prospect of Florida's flooded future, and on and on -- yes, I begin to reach for the liquor cabinet.

For Floridians, our stress, combined as it has been with a healthy mix of fear, seemed to peak with Hurricane Irma. The storm walloped Miami Shores (as a mere Category 1, thank God), buzz-sawing our tree canopy and knocking out power to most of us for more than a week. And during the height of the storm, we had thieving dirtbags come out of the woodwork to ransack some residences, taking advantage of the police department's limited ability to immediately respond. Afterward, the Village was a debris-strewn, powerless wasteland.

But in the week of adversity, a wonderful dynamic emerged. Neighbors helped neighbors, lending chainsaws to clear downed branches, sharing propane tanks to fire grills, and relaxing with long conversations while we waited for power to be restored.

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Irma created the space for great old-time neighborliness. When power came back and I could again enjoy the air-conditioned relief from Miami's mugginess, I found myself slightly sad, knowing that the communal connections made in the face of relative hardship would inevitably fade.

As of this writing, Irma is now about 30 days removed and there's nary a trace that a hurricane passed through Miami Shores. Power is back on, debris largely removed, and the routine of life has returned. Miami Shores stands well above neighboring communities in our resilience and recovery. As of this writing, unincorporated Dade is still a disheveled mess, and Biscayne Park now has the makings of a small mountain of debris towering some 80 feet high next to the log cabin.

The stress, anxiety, unease, and unrelenting anger that peaked during Irma and its aftermath still scar us. Is there anything we can do? Well, this being the month of Thanksgiving, maybe start by giving thanks. Gratitude may be the elixir to the stresses of today's world.

A relatively new field in psychology called positive psychology finds that people who take a grateful, kind, even Zen attitude toward life, who count blessings rather than grievances, tend to be healthier, happier, and more able to cope after tragedy and trauma.

The book *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, by psychologist Robert Emmons, cites a study of parents who survived Hurricane Andrew; one of the main factors in reinforcing resilience "was an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what they had *not* lost during the hurricane."

Most of us lost power for a week. But put that in the context of about 20 percent of the world's population, or 1.3 billion people, who have no access, or severely limited access, to electricity. Now consider clean water, adequate shelter, and income stability, and you get the picture. The few years I served in the Peace Corps, witness to the grinding poverty of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, deeply imprinted how monumentally fortunate are we Americans.

Had we lived 100 years ago, before weather satellites that could warn us of approaching hurricanes and their intensity, hundreds if not thousands would have lost their lives to a

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hurricane like Irma, and likely spent many months trying to rebuild.

When we take a historical perspective, it's hard not to be grateful for the times in which we live. Greg Easterbrook's *The Progress Paradox* imagines what people from four generations ago would think if they could visit the modern world. "Unlimited food at affordable prices, never the slightest worry about shortage, unlimited variety -- strawberries in March! -- so much to eat that in the Western nations, overindulgence plagues not only the well-off but the poor, the poor being more prone to obesity than the population as a whole." He goes on to write, "Every one of our great-great-grandparents would have known someone who died of a disease that today is shrugged at."

With all this in mind, I offer a multitude of small thanks to those who serve us in our tiny village. Many staff members worked extensive hours, often postponing their own personal recovery, to serve us residents so we'd recover more quickly.

I'm grateful to the public works employees who, excuse the language, worked their asses off, clearing downed branches and trees. Even in normal times, I'm impressed with how reliable our garbage pickup occurs, even on holidays.

Likewise the Shores police, who put in long hours during the hurricane, working up to eight days straight, to maintain order. Place a call to the police, and within minutes a patrol car is present. Relative safety, security, and order prevail. There's not a neighboring police department I'd swap for Miami Shores PD. They are 24/7, even in times of crisis.

But I was flat-out amazed to find the Shores Brockway Library reopened a mere two days after the hurricane. With no air conditioning and only sunlight illuminating the interior, librarians manually checked out a few books for me (the Dewey Decimal system makes a comeback). Listening to how one librarian had to boil drinking water and find care for her children to report to work, I felt a pang of Catholic guilt well up as they helped me.

The recreation department meanwhile scrambled to provide meals for Village employees, National Guardsmen, and FP&L linesmen. And in normal times, I challenge anyone to find a recreation program with such an extensive and varied array of programming. With over 60 individual programs and classes, an Olympic pool, a water park, great athletic fields, and now a

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dog park, the Shores is the gold standard for recreational programming in north Dade. Nobody even comes close.

Throw in Green Day, Unity Day, the Marshmallow Drop, the 4th of July fireworks show, WinterFest, the country club, a new farmers market, the Miami Theater Center, a growing downtown, a developing greenway with a bike share, the Unity Ball, a solar co-op, quality public and private schools -- and consider how fortunate we are.

Shores residents, while continuing to seek improvements, should take a moment to appreciate just how good we have it. To live in modern times, in a rich country, and, dare I say, in greater Miami Shores means we may have won life's lottery. As George Orwell once wrote, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

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