

Your Personal Coach

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In a departure from the normal Q&A format of this column, I wanted to offer some observations as a relative newcomer to Roanoke Island and the Outer Banks. As I write this, Hurricane Isabel is bearing down on us, with a high probability of making landfall here. By the time you read this, Isabel will have either skirted us, or we will be cleaning up from her brief but breathtaking visit. This is not a 'breaking news' column, and my reflections are not about the storm itself, but rather, about what I've seen during these days of preparation, as we chart Isabel's slow march toward us on the news.

It's said that adversity does not *create* character, but rather, *reveals* character. This, I believe is true. I have seen character, compassion, helpfulness, and a real sense of community these past few days. Consider this scene: the hardware store is jammed beyond belief with folks scrambling for batteries, flashlights, plywood, and duct tape. In spite of the anxious anticipation of a Category 4 hurricane (or 5, depending on when you tuned into The Weather Channel), strangers in the checkout line smiled and told each other to "be safe." My email-box was brimming, and my phone was ringing off the hook with calls from friends, acquaintances, and neighbors asking if I needed any help as Isabel nears.

Everywhere I went – and when you're assembling a Hurricane Preparedness Kit that's just about everywhere – there was a splendid esprit de corps, a feeling that we are all in this together. Here we are living on this fragile spit of land, surrounded by water and at the mercy of nature. Perhaps that's why we appreciate more than some others just how important it is to pull together, to deeply know that we are better together than alone.

My new book – *Living a Connected Life: Creating and Maintaining Relationships That Last* – includes an analysis of the ways in which people have become terribly disconnected. Reams of social science data suggest that many Americans have lost their safe harbor of personal connections, and have become increasingly isolated, cynical, and alone. There is no longer a strong sense of civic responsibility, community, or neighborliness, the critics cry. And, unfortunately, the evidence bears them out.

But this is not how it was here last week, when all kinds of people came together to help each other, to lend a hand in holding up plywood, or offering words of support and comfort. And regardless of the damage that Isabel may have thrust upon us, I expect I'll see that same camaraderie as we fix broken windows and bail out our businesses.

A story from India tells about a young apprentice who was always complaining about the difficulties of life. Early one morning, his ancient Hindu master sent the young man to town to buy a bag of salt. When he returned, the master put a handful of the salt in a glass of water and asked the apprentice to drink it.

"How does it taste?" asked the master.

"It's bitter," said the apprentice, as he spit the salty water onto the ground.

The master smiled and walked toward a nearby lake. When they arrived at the edge of the water, the master asked the apprentice to take another handful of salt and throw it into the lake. .

"Now drink from this water," the master said.

As the young man drank, the master asked, "How does it taste?"

“Fresh and sweet,” the young man replied.

“Do you taste the salt?”

“No.”

The master sat beside the young man and offered his teaching. “The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain in life remains the same, exactly the same. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is enlarge your sense of things. Stop being a glass. Become a lake.”

In spite of our proximity to the ocean and the sounds, we are a lake. Thank you for welcoming me to this community. I am honored to be here. I feel surrounded (not just by water, but) by a warm sense of community. And I’m imagining how the world could be so different if everyone lived on an island.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.