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A MESSAGE FROM KATRINA

The following column was published in the Arizona Daily Star on 9-11. It still is pertinent enough to share with my Newsletter subscribers.

Today is the fourth anniversary of 9-11. I still get choked up when I think of what happened in New York City that day. Here we are in another September watching horrific images of a destructive hurricane and flood.

The catastrophe in New Orleans showed clearly that we have neglected a big chunk of human capital-- those living in poverty-- just as we have neglected our roads, levees, and emergency management.

Usually I advise parents to keep their children away from TV after a disaster. This time I think it's a good idea to let your school-age children watch enough TV so that they comprehend what it means to be poor in America. Let them see with their own eyes the difference between families with cars and money that made it out and those that didn't.

My granddaughter, age 9, covered her ears and said, "I don't want to hear about the hurricane and the flood anymore, it's too sad!" as the family was talking about the misery witnessed on TV and discussing how much money they should give to disaster relief.

Sorry, Hannah, uncover your ears and listen up. Your generation has to do three things better than we have. You have to learn how to THINK critically. You have to figure out how to VOTE intelligently. And you have to learn how to POSTPONE GRATIFICATION. That means developing the ability to think about the future rather than getting stuck in the present. And the ability to think about what others need not just what you want for yourself today.

September 11 should be remembered for what happened that day so we can honor the memory of those who lost their lives. How about making the anniversary of the day Katrina hit New Orleans a national Let's Stop and Think

Day. Since Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast.

I have already thought my way to three conclusions.

1) We live in an incredibly complex world and we are all interconnected, black, white, rich, poor.

2) We cannot live in isolation or indifference in this complex world nor can we enjoy the fantasy that we can take care of ourselves. We can't. No individual can rebuild a broken levee. We need each other and we need to have access to speedy, compassionate, and appropriate aid from the government when disaster strikes.

3) We have to help those less fortunate than ourselves every day not just when disaster strikes. I am proud to see fellow Americans rush to donate money, volunteer time, and open their hearts, cities and even their homes to alleviate the misery of those people who were not able to evacuate before Katrina struck. But we also have to pay taxes so that aid arrives quickly for the afflicted, broken levees can be fixed, and poor people can be helped out of poverty.

What does all this have to do with parenting? Hannah and her generation are too young to figure out how to become critical thinkers all by themselves. They need the help of their parents and teachers. They also need to learn about the importance of voting. And, in my opinion, they need to vote for leaders who believe everybody deserves a chance at the American dream.

And they must be taught how to postpone gratification.

An important study done at Stanford gave 4-year-old children a marshmallow and had each child sit alone in a room for 15 minutes with the promise that if the child resisted the temptation to eat the marshmallow, a second marshmallow would be the reward. Some kids could resist temptation, others couldn't. Ten years later those children who could wait for the second marshmallow were found to be doing better at school, have better relationships with peers, and manage stress better than the kids who gobbled down the marshmallow before the 15 minutes were up.

So watch the pictures of New Orleans and the evacuees with your children, talk to them about the implications of being poor, ask them to imagine what it would be like to lose everything they owned. And help your kids learn how to postpone gratification. The next time they want another game for their video player, explain they will have to wait because the family has better things to do with its money right now, helping those with greater needs. Your kids will not only learn about helping others but may even do better in school!