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Glenn C. Altschuler Ph.D. This Is America

The Good Do-Gooders Do

A sophisticated celebration of altruists and their never-ending commitments.
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In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” an essay written in the aftermath of a cyclone and genocidal violence in already impoverished regions of East Pakistan in 1971, Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher and animal rights advocate, proclaimed that spending money on middle- or upper-class lifestyles instead of helping starving and sick individuals was an act of depravity. Since most people would muddy their clothes to save a child from drowning in a shallow pond, Singer argued, they should be willing as well to bring food and medicine to those in need, whether these human beings lived nearby or far away. Anyone who refused to help was, in some sense, a murderer.

Singer’s utilitarian ethic was, of course, radical not only in what it demanded – but how much. Critics wondered whether this philosophy justified killing a person and harvesting his or her organs to save three or four lives. They emphasized that it also violated a core belief that may well be grounded in evolutionary biology: human beings have a higher duty to self and family than to strangers. When Singer’s mother developed Alzheimer’s, they noted, he paid a lot of money for nursing care.

For some people, however, Singer’s “shallow pond” logic was irrefutable: it laid out a clear path of action, albeit one that demanded asceticism and a commitment that never ends.

In Strangers Drowning, Larissa MacFarquhar, a staff writer at The New Yorker, tells the stories of a handful of individuals who have been their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers – and reflects on the implications of the lives they have chosen to live. Along the way, she examines changing attitudes toward altruism since the eighteenth century; the absence of “do-gooders” in fiction; adoption and kidney donation; Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon; a leprosy colony in India.
and a death workshop for suicidal people in Japan; the organization “Giving What We Can” and the World Equity Budget (which requires adherents to divide the world’s total income by the number of people and subsist on their fair share).

MacFarquhar does not ignore the flaws and failures of her subjects. And she avoids easy answers about the “rightness” of the choices they have made. Elegant, engaging, empathetic, and profoundly humane, her book is based on the premise that “only actual lives convey fully and in a visceral way the beauty and the cost” of a drive for extraordinary goodness that sometimes sets altruists apart from “ordinary” people.

*Strangers Drowning* is full of insights, inspiring and unsettling. Although in most traditions a good life is defined as a moral life, MacFarquhar reminds us that most of the time the urge to indulge yourself, give to your family, work for your own purposes, be spontaneous, or do nothing at all trumps a duty or desire to assist other people.

During wars, she indicates, a commitment to one’s country and one’s comrades in arms seems more natural. These days, however, wars do not demand sacrifices from everyone – and there is resistance in the United States and elsewhere to a peacetime “moral equivalent of war” in the form of a universal service requirement for all citizens.

MacFarquhar reminds us as well that every person who has an extreme sense of duty to others is not a masochist or a depressive who feels unworthy of experiencing pleasure. Some do-gooders are happy; some are not. What distinguishes them from their fellow citizens, MacFarquhar suggests, is their lack of innocence: they “have forced themselves to know, and keep on knowing, that everything they do affects other people” and that at times “their joy is purchased with other people’s joy.” Although, with few exceptions, they know they must accept limits to remain effective, survive, and stay sane – one of MacFarquhar’s couples decided not to adopt a twenty-third child – they are never comfortable with the choice they feel forced to make. It takes a strong stomach, MacFarquar writes, “to see the world’s misery, feel a sense of duty to do something about it,” and then admit you are doing as much as you can.

MacFarquhar would no doubt agree that some of her subjects are foolish or fanatical. And many readers of *Strangers Drowning* may well recoil at or ridicule dumpster-diving for food to meet a $62 a month World Equity Budget. That said, MacFarquhar is convinced that in a world without the “extravagant example” set by these “strange, hopeful, tough, idealistic, demanding, life-threatening and relentless” radicals, “fewer would try.” And the world, alas, would be all-too similar to our world, “but worse.”

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