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Small Law: Surviving Tragedy with the Help of Others

Law Department Management



This year, a [winter storm](#) with record-setting freezing temperatures hit the state of Texas just after Valentine's Day. Residents across the state, including myself, experienced power outages for hours, or even weeks. Loss of electricity led to frozen or burst pipes in tens of thousands of homes. Although many people had backup gas generators, they were meant for use in case of hurricane, not freezing temperatures. For many families, a gas or wood fireplace doubled as a heater and cooktop for food.

My husband and I filled our bathroom tubs with water to be able to flush our toilets, turned our gas fireplace on, and slept under five blankets to get through the worst of it. Eventually, we decided it was better to relocate to a close relative's house, but on the way there, she called and said, "My ceiling pipes just burst, you may need to find another place."

Stymied, we pulled into a vacant parking lot listing the names of friends who may be able to put us up for a couple of nights. At this point, we still had no concept what effects the storm would wreak on practically everyone in our lives. We found a family unaffected by the storm generous enough to take us in for what we thought would be a few nights.

A few nights turned into almost two months while we played the "hurry-up-and wait" game with the plumber and the insurance company. Standing in line at the driver's license office is child's play compared to being one of thousands waiting for the plumber and insurance company to call back during a weather disaster.

Many of my friends have dealt with catastrophic events affecting their homes. Until now, I didn't fully appreciate the emotional toll they suffered. It's similar to losing a loved one in that until you experience it first-hand, you simply cannot grasp the effects.

Having lived through loss, I have learned that every trial provides an opportunity to grow. It can be all too easy to simply wallow in the mire of self-pity and sit in the dung-heap of "woe is me." But that's the funny thing about dung: It may stink to high heaven, but ask any farmer or gardener about how it creates an environment where food crops, plants, and flowers can thrive. Tragedy is the fertilizer of life.

Generous friends provided us with water and sun. We were emotionally hydrated by the family who so generously gave us not only a place to sleep but delicious meals, shoulders to cry on, and sympathetic ears. Another family helped us pack up half our home in preparation for repairs to come. Sunshine came as unexpected restaurant gift cards from coworkers wanting to give us "a nice night out."

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Tragedy is the training ground for empathy. During our temporary relocation, the couple who hosted us tutored us in valuable life lessons. Long retired from work but not service, they set an example of love and kindness that we aspire to reflect.

From the moment we arrived, we were made to feel like family. K, the wife, immediately set out to make us a big lasagna dinner (It was delicious!). Her husband, B, helped us unload our truck.

We arrived at their home while freezing temperatures still abounded. People continued to experience bursting pipes. B's phone rang constantly with people asking for help and advice about their water pipes. B is not a plumber, he's not even a handyman. He is a retired oil executive with the heart of a servant.

He's a product of my father's generation who were the original "do-it-yourself-ers" before "DIY" became trendy. Conversing amicably and easily about his faith in God, he's not a pastor but he does plenty of preaching with his hands as he willingly helps whoever calls. He keeps a stock of supplies in his workshop just in case: a plastic pipe fitting, a spare outlet, some spare nails or screws. He neither asks for nor expects payment. He is simply a joyful giver. Sure, on occasion, some people may take advantage of his generosity, but neither he nor his wife view relationships as balance sheets.

During our stay, we observed their largesse again and again in the most novel ways. K answers every spam phone call: insurance offers, free trip offers, you name it, she answered it. With a bright and cheery "Hello!" she would engage, asking questions about the caller's life. K doesn't do this because she's lonely; she does it because she cares. To K, everyone matters. I listened once to hear an exasperated caller become more personable and friendly as K kept speaking and showed sympathy for the caller's task.

Blessed to share life with B and K up close reminded me that everyone matters. If you haven't yet been subjected to tragedy or loss, just wait, you will. None of us escapes the dung, but without its fertilization, we can neither grow nor bloom.

Maybe, just maybe, we will be blessed — like our dear friends — to be the water and sun to someone else who gets fertilized.

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