

Did Hurricane Irma loosen your screws? Maybe it's time for change

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Therapist Connie Ingram says disasters force people to ponder such issues as “what kind of person do I want to be?”

“You can’t run away from trouble. There ain’t no place that far.”

— Uncle Remus, “Song of the South,” 1946

Trouble will always find us.

Sometimes, trouble can even be good for us — because disasters, natural or man-made, strip us down to our basic needs and strip away our veneer of crap.

Trouble reveals the core of who we are, experts say.

Therapist Connie Ingram, who practices in Royal Palm Beach, and self-help authors helped us come up with this list of five positive things we can learn from disasters like Hurricane Irma.

Trouble helps define: What kind of person do I want to be?

“What kind of people do we want to be in the world?” Ingram asks. “Kind, helpful, selfless, aware, community minded ... we make such a decision, but the real test comes in the wake of events such as Hurricane Irma. For example, if we have chosen to be nice and gracious people, will that be true even in a disaster, or does the fear or stress associated with such events change that decision?”

Ingram shares an example: She went to Costco for gas, and the line was down the street. There was a break in traffic, and she could have turned into the Costco driveway and put herself at the front of the line. She watched several people do just that.

“That behavior was against my value system and the person I choose to be, so I traveled on, did a U-turn and joined the line to wait my turn,” she says.

As she watched more people cut in line, she felt herself getting irritated at their behavior.

“Then I realized, that I don’t want to be an irritable person, so I decided not to allow the behavior of others to irritate me. That interaction made me aware that though I had chosen to be a particular kind of person, external events cause me to fight for it, because it sometimes does not come naturally.”

She chose to not be irritated and to forgive the line cutters, figuring their anxiety must have been high, and not that they were just jerks.

Trouble illuminates what’s already wrong in your life — and can force you to move forward.

There’s nothing like moving the patio furniture inside the house and scrambling to find the D batteries, to make you say to yourself: “I need to get this place together. I need to get my act together.”

Any problem you have in your life, any painful decision you have to make — these are all magnified when a crisis hits.

“I heard several people report that they needed to clean up their homes and get rid of things that they’ve been putting off disposing of,” Ingram says. “The time and energy it takes to evaluate what to put away and what to take a chance on can also cause anxiety and dis-ease.”

Forget to get that palm tree trimmed? Hurricanes are nature’s most ferocious landscapers.

Forget to fill up with gas or fix your car? Spend your last \$20 on beer? Have no friends nearby? Then you don’t have options to evacuate in a storm.

Your own behaviors have limited your options — and that’s usually not a fun place to be.

Trouble illuminates what’s already right in your life — and can fill you with gratitude.

A Facebook friend of mine posted this last week: “I have so much to be grateful for. I look back to this time last week and how dire it looked for all of us. It changes you. You realize what is worth holding onto and what you should let fall away.”

Trouble reveals how little we have control over.

Our greatest enemy is our need for certainty, says Allison Carmen, author of “The Gift of Maybe.”

Hurricanes remind us that we’re not in control. Think about it. Didn’t you feel as much stress *before* the storm as you did during the storm? That’s because you didn’t know where Irma would go and what would happen.

“At any given time, much of our suffering comes not from the moment we are in, but instead from our projection of what will happen in the future,” Carmen told Psychology Today. “In reality, we have no idea what will happen next. We never have and never will.”

Trying to find comfort in certainty is a waste of time. Try to “live in the open space of not knowing,” Carmen suggests.

“Negative projections about the future just make us sick. Projections of our fear and worry make it possible that we will not find the strength and resilience needed” when they’re really needed.

Trouble clarifies our relationships and how happy we are in them.

“Events such as Irma cause some people to evaluate or reevaluate their place in relationships and make new choices about the need for forgiveness, patience, charity and acceptance,” Ingram says. “In my practice, I have seen that the things that break up relationships are typically a host of the menial. If the house catches on fire, people pull together — but if someone squeezes the toothpaste in the middle or leaves the toilet seat up, war is inevitable.”

When a disaster like Irma threatens, we consider — consciously or unconsciously — our place in our relationships and to whom we are connected. If we can help others, it helps our own self-esteem, Ingram says.

“Irma and other disasters draw people together and force us to evaluate our view of the things — or people — in which we put our faith. We are prompted to look at who we are in relationships, and the kind of person we want to be in the world.”