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October 21, 1984

Very, very early on Thursday morning there were two explosions and a fire in the apartment building where one of our members lives.

I visited this scene only much later in the day, well after the crisis had passed. Yet the devastation I saw was astonishing—the windows of buildings across the street and down the block had been blown in by the impact, and there was a large, gaping, charred wound in the side of the apartment building itself.

Residents of the building were standing in a group nearby, waiting to be escorted one-by-one by the police back to their apartments to collect whatever necessities would allow their living on an emergency basis elsewhere. There were many tales of narrow escapes among these people. But there was also something else that was unmistakable—a feeling of community and togetherness. New Yorkers are notorious for their indifference to their neighbors, even their immediate neighbors. Yet here was a situation where there was a real sense of caring. In addition to the tales of narrow escapes, there were other stories of people who had delayed their departure from the burning building to knock on doors to rouse their neighbors, of people from neighboring buildings who left keys to their apartments with strangers or casual acquaintances before going to work so that those who needed it could find shelter, and of other nearby residents who brought items from their own wardrobes for those who had had to flee with insufficient clothing. These helping acts were not extended along lines of personal favoritism, blood relationship, or political sympathy, but were acts of unpremeditated solidarity rooted only in an awareness of our common humanity.

Just as we New Yorkers have a reputation for indifference to each other in daily life, so also do we have a reputation for rallying to each other in a crisis. This ability to care in an emergency is probably not true of New Yorkers only, but of all people. It is as if a blackout or a transportation strike strips away the illusion that we are separate and independent beings. An emergency seems to make apparent to everyone what is known only to saints, prophets, and sages in ordinary times. We come to know that we are dependent upon each other, and that in choosing the way of love we choose life over death, we choose what is clearly true over what is plainly false.

Our task and our destiny in this nuclear age is very simple, yet very profound. It is to make the great truths of faith operable before the explosion, rather than after it. Even five minutes after the explosion will be too late. We must leave off our divisions over preferences and politics, and act as if humanity is but one family; we must take the long view, and the generous, uncalculating response of love.

We are often tempted to despair about humankind's capacity to achieve this liberation. Yet we can take heart, because through history it has always been in the darkest times that people begin truly to see.

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