

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

On March 13, 1964, a young woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death at the door to her New York City apartment and in front of thirty-eight witnesses. According to reports, one neighbor yelled, "Let that girl alone!" but no one else did a single thing to help her. No one even called the police. The details of this gruesome murder made sensational headlines around the world as pundits explained the reaction (or lack thereof) of neighbors as demonstrating extreme callousness and apathy to another's plight. But when the neighbors were interviewed about why they didn't intervene by calling the police, almost all of them said, "I thought somebody else had done it." Academic psychologists began studying this "Let George Do It" phenomenon and called it the bystander effect or the Genovese Syndrome. What their research showed is that people are less likely to help in an emergency situation when others are present than when they are alone.

Flash forward to last week -- May 24, 2006 -- not to a New York City apartment complex, but to the highest place on Earth: Mount Everest. British climber David Sharp was dying of oxygen deprivation 1000 feet beneath the summit. It is sad enough that this 34-year-old adventurer lost his life. Sadder still is that more than forty climbers passed by him on their way to the roof of the world that morning and only one party stopped briefly to help.

New Zealander and double-amputee Mark Inglis was on his way to the incredible goal of defeating Everest despite his disability and on two prosthetic legs. Notwithstanding his training as a former professional search and rescue mountaineer, Inglis stopped by David Sharp for only a few seconds and observed that he was virtually frozen solid, could not speak, and the only signs of life that could be detected were movements in his eyes. Then Inglis continued his climb and later defended his failure to intervene with this dying man to reporters by saying, "I walked past David but only because there were far more experienced and effective people than myself to help him."

Inglis' comments did not impress Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to conquer Mount Everest in 1953 with his Sherpa guide Tenzing Norgay. Hillary condemned him and the other climbers stating that he would have abandoned his own pioneering climb if a man's life had been at stake. "It was wrong if there was a man suffering altitude problems and was huddled under a rock, just to lift your hat, say 'good morning' and pass on by. I think it was the responsibility of every human being. Human life is far more important than just getting to the top of a mountain. My expedition would, never for a moment, have left one of the members or a group of members just lie there and die while they plugged on toward the summit."

On that foreboding minus 100 degree morning in the most remote place on the planet, forty people walked past a dying man. He was alone when he died. Perhaps, there was no way to save his life, but he might have died in the company of another mountaineer offering warmth and compassion.

This tragic story about the death of David Sharp illuminates a lot about modern life. Will we respond to another's plight with an attitude of letting someone else help or

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will we, instead, offer some form of civic courage and do what we can? We may not live in New York City or ever find ourselves at the summit of Mount Everest, but opportunities abound to help each other, to respond to another's suffering with courage and compassion. In our everyday lives, there are fellow travelers with flat tires at the side of the road. Without having to put ourselves in danger, will we call for help from our cell phones? Think of all the non-emergency ways to express our love and humanity. There are old people in our neighborhoods and nursing homes who yearn for a visit or a warm touch. There are children who need the love and attention of caring adults. Do we make time to volunteer? What choices will we make when given an opportunity to help another who is suffering? Will we stop and do what we can or continue our climb to the top? Will we "Let George Do It?" Or will we decide that, perhaps, we are George?

A Hebrew saying from Rabbi Hillel in the first century and popularized by Bobby Kennedy asks important questions about our responsibility to one another as human beings: If not me, who? If not now, when? Good questions to ponder.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.