



DOING BETTER GOOD:

HOW TO BE A HELPER IN HEAVY TIMES

Scott M. Curran

It's hard not to feel overwhelmed today.

The headlines keep coming—crisis after crisis, outrage after outrage. Civil unrest, wars, and humanitarian crises dominate our feeds. Climate disasters—floods, fires, tornados, and hurricanes—are accelerating with devastating consequences. Institutions that once seemed steady are wobbling, and trust in government, media, business, and even philanthropy is being tested like never before.

In the U.S. and around the world, agencies and institutions built to serve the public good are under strain or scrutiny, or being attacked outright. Nonprofits and universities are being drawn into culture wars they never asked for. The private sector is caught in the crossfire—rewarded one day for taking a stand as a good corporate citizen, punished the next for the same act of conscience. On social media people argue bitterly about whose cause is just. It's a confusing time to care.

Sometimes it feels like the whole world is on fire, and we're standing there with a garden hose. You care. You want to help. But where do you even begin? Maybe you've asked yourself:

Am I doing enough?

Does anything I do actually matter?

Is it even possible to make a real difference anymore—especially without burning out or selling out?

If you've had these thoughts, you're not alone. And you're not wrong to feel this way. The ground is shifting beneath all of us and we feel unsteady. The systems that were designed to serve the common good are being reshaped in real time. But buried inside that disruption is an opening—an opportunity for each of us, and the organizations we belong to, to rethink what doing good really means and how we can do it better.

Here's what I've learned from decades of working alongside the world's leading doers, givers, bridge-builders, and changemakers—some household names, others invisible heroes: *There's a way forward. And it's hiding in plain sight.*

Doing good today isn't about being a saint or a savior. It's not about being rich or famous. It's about learning to spot the patterns—the hidden framework that successful do-gooders follow, whether they realize it or not—and using it to leave the world better than we found it.

We have to find new and better ways to do Better Good.

THERE'S AN INFINITE (AND GROWING) DEMAND FOR GOOD

It's easy to get despondent when thinking about the size, scope, and stubbornness of the world's problems. Though I'm upbeat and optimistic by nature, I won't sugarcoat reality. Despite decades and record levels of do-gooding, the world's most pressing problems endure, and in some cases are worsening . . . rapidly.

Longtime challenges like hunger, homelessness, illiteracy, preventable illnesses, and poverty persist despite decades of focused efforts to eradicate them. And compounding challenges of climate change, geopolitical conflict, and growing income inequality sometimes make it feel like we're moving backward. Organizations dedicated to these issues (large and small, old and new, from the Red Cross and Greenpeace to José Andrés's World Central Kitchen) haven't yet "worked themselves out of a job"—which is ultimately the goal of each one. Anyone who follows the news knows that the demand for doing good is infinite and always growing.

But this seemingly endless need is no reason to give up on any of those challenges. In fact, it's quite the opposite—we need to rethink how we confront them. We have to find new and better ways to do Better Good. Fortunately, there are examples of success and models we can both learn from and apply to our own lives, work, and the organizations we serve and lead. And if we are individually, collectively, and organizationally committed to doing Better Good using shared frameworks, we just might move old needles in new ways and actually solve some of these long-term challenges.

Part of this opportunity lies in the supply side of the equation. What's the total supply of good in the world, and how much of that supply is still untapped? Hint: a *lot* is untapped.

Of course, we all know certain institutions and professions that are always doing good, such as schools, hospitals, religious groups, and philanthropic endeavors. But those represent just a fraction of the potential supply of good. By far the most overlooked, underappreciated, and undermanaged source of good is *our individual lives*.

THE SURPRISING GOOD NEWS

Every tick of the clock of every day we are alive is full of the potential to make an impact. An extraordinary, even mind-boggling amount of collective time and corresponding opportunity is available to each of us, and it refreshes with each day we're fortunate to awake into. And each of us is more equipped and empowered than ever before to make an impact. We're more instantly and infinitely connected, with access to information, resources, and opportunity to deploy our assets and resources for good.

When it comes to doing Better Good, here are three powerful, wonderful, yet little known truths:

- Doing good is easier than most people realize.
- Opportunities to do good are widely available to each of us in our lives and work, every day—no matter who we are, where we live, or what we do. (And you're probably already doing more than you think you are.)
- There's an established, proven, and universally applicable pattern that humanity has followed to make a positive impact time and again, hiding in plain sight. Once you learn it, you can start putting it to work right away and see immediate results.

You may be wondering, in a world where we increasingly associate doing good with the biggest billionaires, big organizations, big brands with deep pockets, and big brains with world-changing ideas, does this apply to you?

YES! Doing good is not reserved to a few, it's available to literally every single one of us. It doesn't matter if you are . . .

- A student who feels you have no spare time or resources to dedicate to doing good.
- A stay-at-home-parent with a craving to do more in and for your community.
- A professional who'd love to use your skills or network to do Better Good but doesn't know how or where to begin.
- A volunteer for one or more organizations that already do good (locally, nationally, or globally) but could be doing more, and/or doing the good you do better.
- A retiree finally enjoying enough free time to "give back."
- A millionaire or billionaire who wants to emulate the likes of Melinda Gates, Oprah, MacKenzie Scott, or Dolly Parton in leaving a powerful legacy of impact.

If *any* of these descriptions apply to you, you are in the right place to start doing Better Good today.

Every tick of the clock of every day we are alive is full of the potential to make an impact.

The world's problems never fully go away, but I'm writing this in particularly difficult times. It's almost too much to process: civic unrest on previously peaceful city streets; wars and conflicts displacing millions; climate disasters arriving faster and fiercer than predicted; economies teetering; institutions tested and transformed; truth itself contested. Division, polarization, fear and fatigue cut across our neighborhoods and around the world. In the U.S., the institutions of government, nonprofits, and businesses that provide the pillars of civil society are strained like never before.

It can feel relentless and paralyzing.

And yet, if history shows us anything, it's that the darkest moments are also when the need for light is greatest. It's in times like these that we most need to remember where to place our attention, and what to do with our individual and collective capacity for being good neighbors to one another, both in our local communities and in pursuit of leaving our world better than we found it.

THE LIGHTS IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

The morning of September 11, 2001, began like any other—and then, within a couple of hours, nothing was the same. Terror. Confusion. And the sense that the world we knew had permanently shifted. For weeks and then months, we lived in shock and disbelief, unsure what to feel or do. Most of us were scared, overwhelmed, and searching for a sign that things could someday make sense again.

People shared various reassuring quotes (mostly via email in those days before social media), and one that spread widely was by Fred Rogers, the iconic and recently retired host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. For three decades, Mr. Rogers's calm demeanor and simple decency had been a fixture in our homes, teaching millions of children how to name their feelings, face their fears, and simply be kind. To me and so many other kids, his presence had always been as comforting as a warm blanket.

Now, as adults, we were once more—when we needed it most—reassured by his simple words:

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.

In that dark season—and in this one—those words comfort and guide us. They remind us to shift our focus from horror to humanity, from the haze of chaos to the hands reaching through it. They tell us that light always exists, even when it is hard to see.

That simple instruction—to *look for the helpers*—is good advice for frightened kids. It's also wisdom for all of us any time when the world feels uncertain and overwhelming. It invites us to notice the ordinary people who step forward when things feel like they are falling apart. It reminds us that courage is the map out of despair, and that doing good, doing more good, and doing it better can empower us when the world feels broken. It teaches us where to focus our attention, and how to begin again when everything feels impossible.

In a time as noisy and chaotic as this one, voices like his—rooted in quiet, unwavering decency—risk being drowned out by louder, sharper ones. That’s why it matters to keep surfacing them, to pass them forward, to keep them alive as part of our storytelling, our culture, and our shared work for Better Good.

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In the fall of 2001, when Mr. Rogers and that quote resurfaced to reassure us, I was twenty-four years old, in my first year as a corporate lawyer, trying to find my footing as an adult. The time I got that message from Mr. Rogers was about the same time I got one of my earliest invitations to step into doing good in a new way. I received an email from the head of an animal rescue and adoption organization I am a member of asking for legal advice. Helping resolve the situation was a small act that would turn out to be a formative one on a journey still unfolding. That lesson—about the power of taking a small step toward Better Good during a particularly difficult time in the world—has never left me. It’s guided how I’ve tried to serve: as a counselor, strategist, and companion to people and organizations striving to do Better Good in heavy times. The wisdom Mr. Rogers offered then still feels like the right guidance now. For those who remember it, as reassurance; and for those who haven’t heard it before, as a compass that might guide us all.

When we look for the helpers, we can't just look outward. We must also look inward. Into the mirror. Into our own neighborhoods. Into our own circles of influence, however wide or narrow they may feel.

Because the truth remains: the helpers we're looking for aren't only "out there."

They're us. 🌱

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott M. Curran is a social impact lawyer, adviser, and educator who has spent more than twenty-five years helping leaders and institutions turn good intentions into scalable, lasting impact. He is the founder and CEO of Beyond Advisers and a former general counsel of the Clinton Foundation, where he advised a global nonprofit operating in more than forty countries. He works across the nonprofit, corporate, and legal sectors, advising boards, executives, and organizations on governance, strategy, and systems to do good well at scale. His work spans major foundations, companies, and cross-sector initiatives tackling some of the world's most complex challenges. He teaches social impact law—recognized by *Crain's Chicago Business* as “one of the coolest courses for law students”—and hosts the podcast, *Better Good with Scott M. Curran*. He lives in Chicago with his wife, Amy, their family, and their rescue dogs.



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