Coming together in Fargo

by Stewart W Herman

NEVER SINCE European settlement had so much water overflowed the Red River, a usually nondescript stream that separates North Dakota from Minnesota as it makes its sluggish way north to Canada. A record ten feet of snow deposited by half a dozen major winter storms was capped by a furious storm on April 6 that added another few inches to the rising waters, while snapping thousands of power poles in rural North Dakota. The river first inundated the small city of Breckenridge. Days later it almost topped the dikes in Fargo and Moorhead. It spread over hundreds of square miles, ravaging Grand Forks and East Grand Forks some 80 miles downstream to the north. Then it was diverted around Winnipeg and disappeared into the vast reaches of Lake Winnipeg.

During these weeks another flood rose, crested and now has all but disappeared: that of local volunteers. For observers who worry about the vibrancy of public life, this was an inspiring event. For six extraordinary weeks during March and April, the residents of Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota, gathered by the tens of thousands to fill sandbags by the millions and to lay dikes by the mile.

The thousands of volunteers appear to have drawn from a large and replenishable stock of civic goodwill.

The flood revealed, in effect, that these two communities possess a considerable amount of social capital for coping with such natural disasters. More mysteriously, it demonstrated how in times of crisis the ordinary reciprocities of social life yield temporarily to an economy of gift-giving which blossoms with awesome but evanescent beauty in its own short season.

Simpler explanations may not suffice. Of course, it is likely that the violent vagaries of the weather, the flatness of the valley and the relative homogeneity of its population made it easy for volunteers to share a sense of threat and to identify with homeowners in harm's way. "It was just the thing to do," shrugged one resident. Rising floodwaters generate a powerful urge to do something, and heaving sandbags onto a dike is a powerfully symbolic action. Sandbagging pits formed earth against formless water, firmness against flow, order against chaos. Yet never before was there such an outpouring of civic-minded labor in these two cities. More than 800 houses were diked in Fargo alone. This work involved more than 10,000 registered individuals, including group efforts by more than 100 churches, companies and associations. Another 10,000 filled sandbags, while uncounted thousands more chipped in without bothering to register. Busloads of high school and university students, church youth and others poured in from towns and cities all over the region.

There is no guarantee that a community will prove so responsive when some of its members are threatened. The startling fact is that the number of volunteers in Fargo and Moorhead far exceeded the number of citizens directly at risk. Many helped family and friends, but the tangents of helping extended beyond the bonds of kinship, friendship, neighborhood and collegiality. While the full number of volunteers will never be known, some 17,000 showed up at the local arena in May to be feted and receive official expressions of gratitude. Yet it is unlikely that the 800 fortunate Fargo homeowners will ever know the names of those who showed up when so desperately needed, and surely will never know those who bagged and transported the sand they used.

How can this vast outpouring of anonymous and unrequited labor be explained? For one thing, the thousands of volunteers appear to have drawn from a large and replenishable stock of civic goodwill. The volunteers I observed seemed to be used to working with others. They set about their tasks with a cheerful tolerance of the inevitable delays and mistakes. There was a spirit of cooperation, endurance and resilience in the face of setbacks. It seemed as if these volunteers already had amassed considerable experience in other networks of cooperation—what Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam calls "social capital." Social capital is the compounding of individual experiences of social cooperation; it is a resource that accumulates through the myriad contacts of individuals with one another through associations and organizations both public and private. For Putnam, it is measured by levels of participation in such voluntary groups.

TWO YEARS AGO, Putnam drew upon nationwide survey data to argue that the kind of civic engagement that generates social capital has declined precipitously during the past several decades. He cited suggestive statistics about dwindling participation in churches, politics, PTAs, Boy Scouts, civic and fraternal organizations and the like. Most whimsically, he noted that bowling in organized leagues has "plummeted," as individ-

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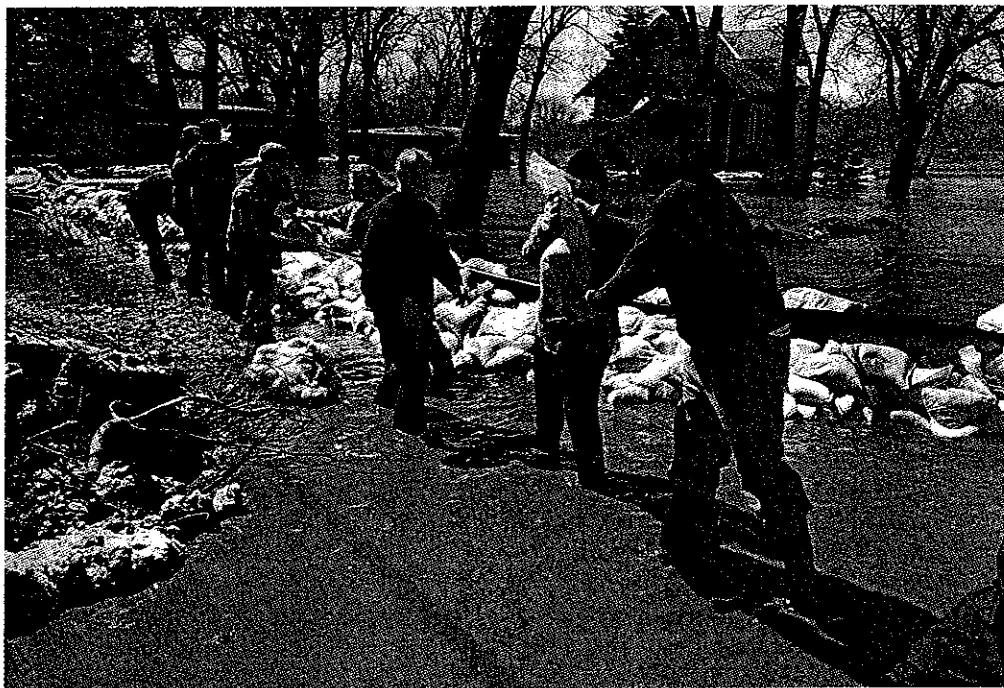
uals have developed a taste for bowling alone.

My own informal soundings of local experts and organizational spokespeople suggest that Fargo and Moorhead appear to be holding their own in generating social capital. Participation in political caucuses and other apparatus of party politics has remained constant for the past 30 years. The percentage of residents who are communing members of churches stands at 65 percent, having dropped at most ten percentage points since 1971. Fraternal organizations such as the Eagles and Elks indeed have declined, but service organizations such as Rotary, Kiwanis and the Lions are robust, with more than 30 chapters in the two cities. More than 20 local Boy Scout troops have no trouble recruiting leaders, and the level of activism within PTAs has held its own over the past decade. City-sponsored sports programs are thriving. Finally, bowling leagues still account for 65-75 percent of the business of local alleys, and the remaining bowlers are far more likely to bring their friends or family than to bowl alone. When I explained Putnam's thesis to one alley manager, she responded with the kind of earnest if misplaced sympathy that derails rational argument, "I'm really sorry he feels that way." Like the pregnant sheriff in the movie *Fargo*, these two cities move at their own deliberate pace to sustain their civic life.



PETER FRANK, CONCORDIA COLLEGE

VOLUNTEERS AT WORK: Students from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, sandbag homes in a neighborhood of south Moorhead along the Red River of the North.

Most of the groupings Putnam surveyed do not appear to have organized their members to fight the flood. Nevertheless, the reservoir of cooperation generated through such voluntary associations becomes particularly helpful in times of crisis. As the river reached its crest, for example, city officials announced that a sheet of water some 50 miles square and a foot deep was flowing toward the southernmost suburbs. The city decided to build a dike of last resort. Triage engineering dictated that some 600 houses had to be left outside. Following the announcement, scuffles broke out over sandbags and the sand to fill them. Residents then spent the night making herculean efforts to dike their houses individually—a wasteful and possibly futile endeavor. The next morning, under the harsh sun of an early Dakota spring, common sense returned. The city directed residents to build single dikes to encompass whole subdivisions. Volunteers began to pour in, presenting a thousand points of color against the violently churned clay of the city dikes. Vast numbers of white sandbags sprouted like stemless tulips on the winter-weary lawns, to be passed via long chains of human hands onto new dikes meandering through backyards. "It looks like Fargo is really coming together," remarked several sandbaggers with a keen satisfaction.

WHILE THE TERM "social capital," with its implications of investment and return, enables us to account for civic engagement and voluntarism in normal times, it seems inadequate to elucidate the extraordinary flow of volunteer effort in Fargo and Moorhead. During those six intense weeks in March and April, many Fargo and Moorhead residents appear to have done more than invest in their community. They also set aside the normal economy of reciprocity and exchange for an economy based upon giving according to ability and receiving according to need.

This gift economy, as essayist Lewis Hyde terms it (*The Gift*, 1983), was most visible as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army disbursed supplies of all kinds to flood victims, mainly in Grand Forks. It reached into the community as local Catholic schools admitted 150 refugee students from Grand Forks at no cost in tuition. Local and regional businesses made their own grand gestures. One local AM station tossed out all programming, and even advertising for 12-hour stretches, to become an impromptu nerve center and sounding board for flood relief efforts. A Fargo software company offered its suddenly homeless Grand Forks–based competitor space, equipment and even labor, in a bid to keep it from folding.

Most important, spontaneous, unorganized gestures

multiplied It became normal to give without expectation of return People freely offered the use of their trucks. The operators of a West Fargo motel fed, at their own expense, 200 stranded guests A chiropractor and a masseur made their skills available gratis to sandbaggers There were stories of desperate homeowners who looked out their back windows to see vanfuls of volunteers pulling up and piling out "I don't even know who to return it to," wondered one homeowner who found a pile of flood-fighting supplies left on his porch People routinely returned from their jobs to put in four or five hours of volunteering before collapsing exhausted into bed University students bagged and delivered sand, built dikes and watched pumps night after night A Moorhead middle-school girl organized a dozen neighborhood kids to put in hours after school for weeks on end. Senior citizens made sandwiches or baked cookies.

The currency of gift-giving replaced that of reciprocity in public discourse, and gift-giving itself blossomed into public life.

Of course, the circulation of labor as gift is hardly unknown to the residents of Fargo and Moorhead In normal times, the voluntary associations of these two cities lean heavily on labor offered outside the market of economic exchange The civic life of Fargo and Moorhead would be immeasurably poorer if all the enriching institutions of social life—churches, bowling leagues, opera companies—operated on the basis of market exchange and other forms of strict reciprocity For example, it takes some 400 volunteers to sustain the many programs of just one large downtown ELCA congregation, and a similar number to sustain the local symphony, community theater, opera, arts fairs and other programs in the arts

Yet something special happened when the flood arrived; the currency of gift-giving replaced that of reciprocity in public discourse, and gift-giving itself blossomed into public life It became normal, for example, to forego shopping and consumption in favor of helping out My students recognized this transformation more quickly than I As the river surged past its 1897 record and some key dikes were softening to the point of collapse, I nervously commanded all 50 of them (by e-mail) to report for duty as volunteers on pain of being marked absent from class While many complied, they did so unhappily—for they viewed their labor as a gift to be offered freely in response to need, not an asset to be exchanged for a higher grade The transformation was not total, of course The radio station which turned to round-the-clock coverage of the flood was suddenly besieged by merchants seeking advertising slots as increasing numbers of city residents tuned in And some homeowners cavalierly refused to enter into the spirit of the gift, as they sat in their living rooms calmly watching the strangers who were busily sandbagging their houses, or just as calmly denying them access to bathrooms

However primal and powerful the emotions that fueled it, this gift economy should not be considered simply an exercise in expressive gratification It had a solid social function. The suddenly rising waters of the flood demanded a more intense response than could be obtained through simple market exchange I heard one sandbagger shrewdly observe that beleaguered homeowners would have made much less headway had they solicited help in the normal way, by offering the low wages to which hard-working North Dakotans are accustomed.

At the same time, the gift of protection from the flood was truly a gift in that it was consumed virtually in the giving It could not be hoarded for re-use, or even preserved. Once the floodwaters receded, the boon became a burden Homeowners faced the problem of how to remove the dikes, now stained with the odorous brown juices of a polluted river. Within days after the crest had passed, the tide of emergency voluntarism ebbed, or more exactly was redirected to Grand Forks, leaving the homeowners stuck for help. Those anxious to restore their lawns and gardens

Between

It was a good garden, but I wanted it
moved from its plot uphill to the pond's edge

so I could work by the water—which was so
beautiful: green glaze shimmering away toward some distant

willows—and near the house a marsh
bridged the shift from dry to wet, erasing

seams, the ground going softer, then spongy, then
sunken but still visible through a crest of reeds

where cattle shambled hip-deep and ducks
churned—all the swimming and flying and walking things

met, it seemed to me, in that marsh,
grazing and gulping.

And I wanted to transplant my garden into that turgid soil
against all sense; burying rootlets of kale, leeks,
squash among the muscular grasses, the wild seeds—

and so I stood awhile like that, passing my hands
through the shallows, imagining the joy of whole days

kneeling between those solid and fluid worlds; all day
dipping and lifting

Donna Henderson

did not wait for volunteers; they turned to their networks of family, friends and colleagues—and to the marketplace. Signs appeared in hardware stores, offering 25 cents per bag removed. At $10-12 an hour, a princely laborer's wage in North Dakota, virtually all the sandbags were removed within a month, and with them, the need for the gift economy.

THE IDEA of the gift economy is an abstraction, of course. The practice of giving gifts is energized by particular feelings derived from particular beliefs—which leads us to a third level in explaining the outpouring of voluntarism in Fargo and Moorhead, and finally to an assessment of its value for the public life of these communities. To what extent the volunteers during those critical six weeks were consciously motivated by religious convictions is impossible to tell. However, there is an affinity between the economy of gifts and a kind of pietism that has deeply influenced the religious life of the region: the faith imported by Scandinavian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This pietism's theological anchor is a gift of impenetrable depth and inexhaustible mystery, the redemptive death of Jesus. It asserts that a new community is created by Christ, a community in which all human persons have equal and infinite value. "In the very midst of all the earthen structures that enclose this city the shepherd is present to watch over you this day and even to call you by name," preached one Lutheran pastor as the river crested. This pietism points to God as incarnate in the spirit that binds the community together. "God is in the hearts and minds of people who work together to defend and sustain each other," said a UCC pastor. The simplicity and immediacy of this relationship between God and the community provides a powerful rationale for focusing upon the needs of neighbors.

This pietism also generates social capital. Against the individualistic ethos of consumer satisfaction, which is no less alluring in the Red River Valley than in other regions, it counterpoises an equally simple and powerful ethic: a confident, sometimes cloying endorsement of the warmth, happiness and fulfillment to be found within the circles of family, friendship, church and community. This pietism not only provides an especially sturdy bulwark against the uncontrollable vagaries of prairie weather; it takes its particular hue in no small measure from the endless struggle against that weather.

The conviction that Jesus works to sustain whole communities provides a sturdy substrate for volunteering in whatever activities, secular or religious, aim at the good of the whole. But the chief emphasis is upon helping. I could see such faith in the exhaustion of my students who felt obliged by Jesus' love to respond to every call for help that awoke them at two in the morning. For them, the Christian community is one body in Christ, and becomes wounded when members of that community encounter misfortune. Indeed, most of the area clergy that I polled viewed the flood as a means through which God's gift of community could be strengthened.

This pietism did not pause to speculate whether God was using the flood to chastise or warn the community or to accomplish purposes independently of or in contradiction to human purposes. "God could but would not will such disasters," insisted one Catholic priest. In a terrain where the Red River and its tributaries provide the only natural squiggles on a strictly rectilinear grid imposed by commodity agriculture, this anthropocentric focus is not surprising, however irritating it might be to more theocentric, biocentric or ecocentric forms of piety. Yet in its own way, it does open a door to a transcendent, even disturbing glimpse into the nature of God's governance—the terrible beauty of a divine economy operating upon nothing but sheer gift, and our inability to sustain such an economy on earth. And this glimpse gives us critical leverage for assessing the place of voluntarism in the governance of human communities.

This divine economy is characterized by a spiraling

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logic of needs which impel response, and responses defined by need—a logic which is alluring but relentless and even consuming During the first few days of volunteering, for example, I experienced how seductive was the call to set aside the tight network of ordinary obligations and lose myself in a steady series of imperative tasks There was no end to the work I could do But it soon became evident that such volunteering too easily upset the precarious balances between family, work and other commitments that I could not simply walk away from. An impossible stretch was required between two distinct worlds: the normal world of carefully crafted obligations and reciprocities, and a scary new world of losses and disruption, of giving and receiving

Strategy, oversight or anything connected with the long term cannot be entrusted to the volatile energies of gift-giving.

WHEN the flood temporarily swept aside the economy of social exchange, it unveiled the bottomless demands that need can make Dangers lurk in the gift economy For the recipient to live on gifts invites the erosion of self-respect For the donor to live so attuned to human need is to invite exhaustion and burn-out, not only because need always exceeds the gifts available, but because an economy of needs and gifts resists the ordinary structures of predictability that make the dense interconnectedness of social life bearable The gift economy, in short, may demand more than complex interdependent human communities can sustain except for short bursts of unrestrained generosity in times of emergency As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, gestures of agape are needed to reinvigorate the bonds of social mutuality, but a life lived out of God's agape is not an historical possibility

It has been almost a decade since George Bush and other conservatives started arguing that volunteering citizens might deliver the services we could no longer afford from governmental bureaucracies If the Fargo and Moorhead flood offers inspirational evidence for the latent power of gift-giving to strangers, it also offers resounding support for the indispensable role of government The defense against the flood had to be planned and strategically coordinated weeks before it engaged the emotions of volunteers Homeowners needed engineering measurements and advice on how to build dikes, and volunteers needed direction in their work City officials demonstrated a shrewd foresight and cool-headed oversight, as well as a steady resolve to weather the roller-coasting emotions of city residents There is a continuing need for such resilient planning, to strengthen city defenses against the next flood

The government is needed as a kind of flywheel for the wildly accelerating and decelerating needs and voluntaristic impulses that impinge upon the life of the community Strategy, oversight or anything connected with the long term cannot be entrusted to the volatile energies of gift-giving Three weeks after the crest, for example, the city of Moorhead organized a drive to remove tens of thousands of sodden sandbags Two thousand volunteers were hoped for; 150 signed up and perhaps 400 people joined the effort The chosen Saturday was not only a lovely spring day, but it happened to be the first day of the fishing season The small turnout demonstrates how impoverished and chaotic the city would become if donated labor were the only resource available

The city of Fargo is proposing to allocate bonuses on a sliding scale of merit among the engineers and other employees who worked so hard to keep out the flood; Moorhead may follow suit Thus what might have remained a gift, in Hyde's strict sense, would be reciprocated rather than passed on It seems that communities re-energize themselves by retrenching in the calculated, predictable patterns of exchange There is certainly less strain in doing business with wants which are negotiable and can be satisfied through exchange, rather than facing up to needs which are not, and can be answered only through gifts.

The gift economy is like flowering plants tucked away in the desert. Like them, it lies dormant, dessicated by the exacting winds of normal reciprocity, but kept alive by a steady flow of voluntarism and other public manifestations of gift-giving. Then a flood brings it to life, and it puts forth a prodigal abundance of blossoms, for a short and glorious moment The gift economy cannot last because it puts an inordinate strain upon a community, even one that is as richly endowed with social capital as are Fargo and Moorhead Privileged, then, are those of us who witnessed this dramatic transformation in social relations Its passing is both a relief and a cause for mourning ■

Bagged

Cerebral palsy came today to take
our daughter's clothes Two years it took to call
then go below alone last night to rouse
the condemned cartons, heavy each a soul,
and bid them join the prostrate bags my wife

had filled by day I helped the driver load
the sprawling sacks into the bursting back-
side of the seething August truck Before
I knew I threw one unencumbered by
whose flesh in flight then smothered my contempt

Saul Bennett