

The Way We'll Get By

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Times are tough. All the more reason for each of us to dig a little deeper into our hearts and our pockets.

By now, most Mainers have heard about the Bangor troop greeters, the remarkably dedicated, mostly senior residents of the area who welcome American troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan when their transport aircraft touch down at the Bangor International Airport.

Day or night, the soldiers are greeted with handshakes, hugs, cookies, coffee, free phone calls to family, and the gentle embrace of a community that understands sacrifice and has found a meaningful way to express its gratitude.

Retired, somewhat infirm, and, in one case, living on the margins, three such greeters were featured in the extraordinary 2009 documentary *The Way We Get By*.

At once heartwarming and heartbreaking, the film is really about what it means to love and be loved; to care and be cared for; to realize that in one's twilight years many of our dreams and wishes may go unfulfilled, and that our lives, in

the end, are about those whom we touch and whom we allow into our own hearts.

If you haven't seen the film, do yourself a favor. Go out and buy or rent a copy today.

I've watched the movie several times now, and I'm struck, of course, by the dedication of the greeters to their mission. Rising in the wee hours, trekking to the airport to wish the troops well in the teeth of a Maine winter, the greeters demonstrate to the soldiers that they are appreciated and that their sacrifice means something.

But much of the film deals with the challenges the aging greeters themselves face. Growing old, dealing with illness, losing loved ones, even losing the ability to fend for yourself—these are things that many of us will confront, and if we cannot count on each other for a hand up, for a shoulder to lean on, or just a sympathetic ear, life's challenges can overwhelm the best of us.

It's no secret that many in Maine today are facing daunting challenges. The nation's economy is

only slowly coming back to life, and nowhere is money flowing freely. Federal and state tax revenues are inadequate to support many of the social services upon which Maine's most vulnerable citizens depend. Thousands of Mainers who have never been out of work are now among the long-term unemployed. The institutions and organizations in our state to which many would otherwise turn for food, heat, or a place to sleep are themselves on life support.

These are the toughest times since the Great Depression, and, not surprisingly, charitable giving has suffered as well.

In its 2011 update, *Giving in Maine*, the Maine Philanthropy Center noted that total individual charitable giving in Maine declined markedly in 2008, the most recent year for which figures are available, as the economy began its precipitous decline from 2007 levels. Moreover, fewer Mainers claimed charitable tax deductions on their income tax returns.

All told, in 2008, some 147,000 Mainers contributed more than \$402 million individually to charitable causes, a decline of 16% in contributions from the previous year.

Yet as unemployment retains its stubborn grip on the economy, the needs of our neighbors are likely to grow ever more urgent. What to do?

These are questions that keep presidents and governors awake at night, and there's no quick fix. But it's clear to me that what will pull all Mainers through these times are the same values and priorities that bring the troop greeters back to the Bangor International Airport, day after day, night after night, come hell or high water.

When all is said and done, it's our continuing compassion, concern, and outstretched hands that will keep our neediest from suffering further as winter steals upon us. It is what humane communities have done long before Great

Societies and complex social safety nets were developed. Those of us blessed with relative abundance must turn to our neighbors and realize that not only do they need us now, but we, as a community, need them.

For compassion and generosity do not merely help those in dire straits; they strengthen the bonds of community among those who are moved to care.

With any luck, the economy will soon improve and more of us will be working. With revenues rising, the social safety net will be stronger and the future more secure.

Until then, however, we need to care a little more for each other and give a little more to each other. We need to dig a little deeper into our pockets and our hearts. We'll all be the better for it.

Ask the folks greeting the troops. I'm pretty sure they'll tell you, in this life, that's the way you get by.

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