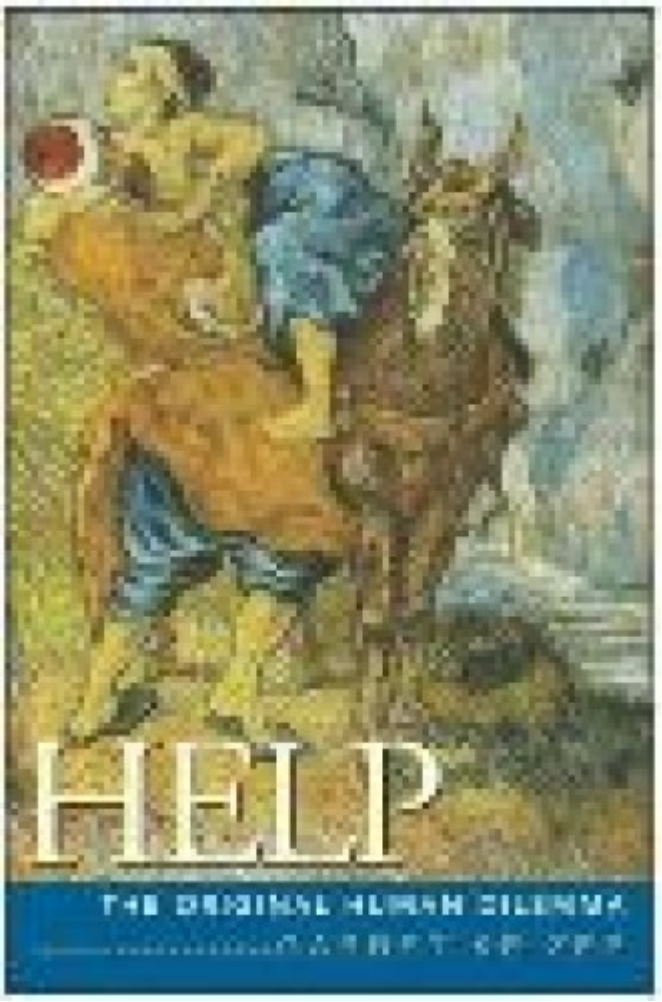
Help wanted

By Kathleen Norris in the November 16, 2004 issue

In Review



Help: The Original Human Dilemma

Garret Keizer
HarperSanFrancisco

A mere two years after publishing an absorbing study of anger, Garret Keizer has produced a probing work on an even thornier subject. Is help, as Keizer asserts, the

original human dilemma? Was Eve only trying to help Adam when she offered him that piece of fruit? Pardon me if I have been infected by Keizeritis, for the spirit of this book—much in keeping with my own proclivity—is to offer flip remarks along with insights. For example, Keizer casts a wary eye on our offers of hypocritical help, as when we attempt to “empower” others. “As a precedent,” he writes, “we have the serpent who ‘empowered’ Eve. ‘Empowerment’ as it’s often practiced is nothing more than fleecing sheep with the help of a motivational speaker.”

Help is replete with such bracing remarks. The reader may take offense or respond with a belly laugh—either may prove instructive. At a time when writers are asked to give answers, since answers sell, Keizer grants his audience a welcome freedom. From the book’s first pages, in which he wonders if pure altruism, were it possible, would be a good thing, he writes an essay, in the traditional sense of the word. He makes an attempt, takes a stab at his subject, and welcomes us to come along; to agree or disagree with him; to say, ‘he’s gone too far” or “not far enough.” It’s an exhilarating ride.

A former English teacher and an Episcopal priest in an impoverished rural area, Keizer is well equipped for the journey. Not only the array of authors Keizer cites—Dante, Freud, Kierkegaard, Rilke, Camus, Albert Schweitzer, Emerson, Thoreau—but the way he has assimilated his reading gives the book range and depth. Keizer not only offers fresh reflection on Zen koans, the Book of Job and the parable of the Good Samaritan, but makes vital connections between traditional literature, contemporary novels such as Nick Hornsby’s *How to Be Good*, and the daily newspaper. “Whenever people speak of market forces or the global economy as if those things were acts of God instead of human constructions . . . , then we know that robbers are not far away. We know that it will not be long before we find a person, a country, or a landscape stripped, beaten and left for dead.”

A large portion of the book concerns the story of the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, who conspired to save some 5,000 Jews, many of them children, from the Holocaust. Keizer notes that the Chambonnais were the descendants of a persecuted Protestant minority in France. “Instead of construing their history as a grievance—in which case their most notable achievement might have been a tradition of virulent anti-Catholicism—they identified their sufferings with those of other oppressed people,” he writes. “One cannot overestimate the significance of that difference.” Keizer’s response to one rescuer’s comment that “if we had been an organization, it could not have worked,” and also to Albert Camus’s connection

with the village, is instructive.

Especially valuable is Keizer's probing of the function of help in the presence and persistence of poverty. "'The poor you have with you always.' We take that as a prophetic statement on the intransigent nature of poverty," he writes, "not . . . as a reflection on ourselves. On our intransigent smugness." Keizer constantly challenges us to "cross-examine our benevolence," and to examine the ways that humane gestures so often dehumanize those on the receiving end. "The primary moral advantage of the privileged," he writes, "is that for them 'help' is a verb." When you are poor, however, "help" is a noun, and you are "a direct object . . . basically a noun on welfare." To truly love one's neighbor as oneself is to truly share moral agency, Keizer insists.

Keizer observes that the Jesus of the Gospels rarely does anything we consider helpful, such as giving money, specific advice or uncritical support. The chasm between Lazarus and the rich man is one we all know, for if we come "within inches of love, yet . . . fail to close that small gap, it amounts to an infinity of separation. The distance between heaven and hell."

And bless Keizer for insisting, at a time when even pastors who should know better disdain any talk of sin, that "everyone believes in sin, the people who charge their peers with political incorrectness and the people who regard political correctness as the bogey of a little mind. What everyone does not believe in," he adds, seems to be forgiveness.

Keizer is well aware that he lives in "the most prosperous nation ever to have thrived on the face of the earth and in a world of unprecedented suffering, much of it the price of my prosperity." His book is timely. "The worst thing we inherited from the Enlightenment," he quips, "is the notion that we are enlightened. It tends to paralyze us every time we discover how truly benighted we are." For Keizer, even hope is a mixed blessing; it may light our way, but it also reveals the darkness of our surroundings. But this is much too energetic and challenging a book to be depressing.

Because Keizer sometimes writes like a man with a sore tooth who is using words to excise the pain, his insistent probing can become exasperating. But when I wanted to say, "Give it a break," his vivid, personal stories always brought me back, making me view in a new light people who have fallen between the cracks in America, those in the "helping professions" who do what they can in the face of incomprehensible

violence and abuse, and the majority of us who willfully refuse to see the problems at all. Had I read the last chapter first, I would also have been heartened by Keizer's admission that the "sin" of his book is that it invites "readers to think too much about actions that . . . are best not thought about at all." What Keizer asks of his reader is companionship. If we accept his invitation, we will find ourselves in the company of a compassionate if argumentative traveler, often maddening but also very funny, who makes us think—and sometimes wince—as we laugh and weep together. I, for one, am glad to have made the journey.