

Carol J. Loftur-Thun

The Holistic View

When the plane hit the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the explosion could be heard at the Child Development Center in the nearby town of Alexandria, Virginia, where Carol Loftur-Thun worked. History will remember that day as an iconic tragedy and a symbolic turning point for American consciousness, but for Alexandria and other communities like it, the reverberations of the event were tangible and immediate.

Many of the town's residents worked in connection with the airport, hotel, and cab companies in the area, but with the airport shut down for an extended period of time, families that were just getting by found themselves unable to make ends meet. Carol, who was employed by Alexandrians Involved Ecumenically (ALIVE!), was deeply struck by the hardship that struck her community. And worst of all, a woman who had mentored for ALIVE! had been among the passengers who lost their lives in the crash.

In a stroke of grace, however, the husband of that woman used his allotment from the 9/11 Fund to launch the Alexandria Community Trust Fund. "The fund announced that its first round of awards would be no more than \$50,000 each, but we knew we needed \$100,000 to provide emergency assistance to the economic victims of the disaster in our area," Carol remembers. "So we made the case for it, and we got it."

The Presbyterian Church in the area also committed to funding ALIVE!'s efforts in several installments, and by the end of a three-year period, ALIVE! had become the country's largest private emergency financial assistance program for 9/11 economic victims, providing \$480,000 to several thousand people. Through those efforts, Carol and her team were also able to connect those people to the social services they wouldn't have known about otherwise. They developed a strong

relationship with the local community resilience workers employed by FEMA, who were able to speak multiple languages to reach micro-communities and cultures.

"Through partnering with the Salvation Army and the Department of Human Services, we were able to leverage a wide range of resources to get connected to people who needed help," Carol explains. "If a child was showing signs of developmental issues, we connected those parents with local programs that did free child assessments. If a diabetic person was taking half-doses of medicine because he couldn't afford it, we showed him that he was eligible for subsidized housing and ongoing assistance. In a city that didn't really have resources for how to find resources, I started to see how connecting people to the services they needed made a huge difference in their lives and couldn't ultimately save money and hardship in the future. In effect, I became the information referral for Alexandria."

Connecting people to opportunity has been the constant theme threading the diverse experiences of Carol's life into a view of humanity that is perceptively holistic, allowing her to address society's greatest challenges with uncommon potency. Indeed, her countless opportunities to explore the many facets of the human condition began from the earliest days of life. Born in the foothills of the Andes Mountains in Quito, Ecuador, Carol was the only child of two impassioned Quaker missionaries who each heralded from a rich tradition of such work. Her great great grandparents were missionaries to the Cherokee Indians. Her grandfather, an otherwise practical man, would tell her stories so spiritual that they bordered the supernatural, recounting an experience in war-torn China where he, unarmed, was charged with protecting a house full of girls from an enemy army. A man appeared at his side as the army approached, and the pair was



successful in convincing the army to leave, but when Carol's grandfather turned to thank his companion, he had disappeared.

"These kinds of stories were a part of my childhood, and they're cornerstones of my worldview today," Carol affirms. "I'm practical and rational to a fault, but I do get the feeling that I'm led through life with some kind of divine protection and purpose. I've never had any kind of grand plan, but I get the sense that I come to the right places at the right times and with the right gifts to share."

Carol's family moved to a compound in a port town soon after her birth, where her father taught Bible School. She learned Spanish before she learned English, and "Why?" was her constant refrain. When she was five, the family moved to the U.S. so she could start school, and her father enrolled at the Princeton Theological Seminary for his doctorate.

Growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s in a small urban development off a county road, Carol would roam the woods and fields nearby or play elaborate imagination games with her friends until her interests shifted to academics. She was a voracious reader, taking a break from books long enough to secure a paper route in her father's name, as girls weren't allowed to do such work at that time. She would deliver papers on her bike after school and on weekends, saving up money that her father helped her invest in stocks. Through their work, her parents frequently escorted mission trips to other countries, and with her earnings, Carol was able to pay her own way and join them in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Chile. She earned the money to fund a trip to Lebanon to visit her cousins one summer, and a trip to Spain later on.

Beyond the global experiences of travel, Carol was deeply inspired by the work her parents did in their local community. They taught in prisons in Trenton, and at community colleges, where their students often came from troubling backgrounds. "They were both natural teachers, and I have always been moved by the strong tradition of mission and service in my family," Carol affirms. "Growing up in the research triangle, I became passionate about anthropology and the sciences, and because of my roots in helping others, I dreamed of becoming a doctor when I grew up."

By the time Carol enrolled at Davidson

College in North Carolina as a premed student, she was accustomed to the kind of deep thought higher education aims to inspire. Through challenging high school teachers who spurred her intellectual development, and through watching her own parents struggle with questions of faith and spirituality, she started her college career with a seasoned penchant for philosophy that many of her peers were just beginning to discover. After becoming disillusioned by a particularly disengaged biology professor during her sophomore year, she dismissed her dreams of practicing medicine and instead opted to design her own major in Anthropology and the Economics of Third World Development.

Through the Fulbright Program, Carol participated in the college's first semester abroad program in India, where she had the opportunity to meet the President of the country and work with top scholars, archaeologists, and professors. As one of only 23 Americans in Madras, a city of 3 million people, Carol was struck by the intense contrast between privilege and poverty. "India is a very spiritual place, but it's also incredibly depraved," she remembers. "It's a compelling window into the competing forces of need and want. That trip changed the trajectory of our lives."

Carol traveled in Europe for six months during her junior year, living in Florence and then with the family of her boyfriend in England. Upon graduating from college, she had visions of joining the Peace Corps, but decided to postpone that dream to fulfill another. She and her boyfriend took a bus from Alabama to Mississippi and then hitchhiked to Seattle and Alaska over the span of several weeks. "It's something you could never do in this day and age, but it was one of the most incredible experiences I've ever been through," she recalls. "If we needed our faith in the Americana persona restored, that was the way to do it. People invited us into their homes, fed us dinner, and gave us their beds. Everyone had a story, and every one was wonderful."

In Alaska, Carol worked at a salmon plant on the Kenai Peninsula, where she met young people from California, immigrants from Israel and Australia, mountain climbers from Norway, and Robert, the man who would become her husband. Once they had gotten their fill of Alaska, they made their way down to Washington, where Carol earned money picking apples and eventually

bought herself a car. In that car, she drove across the country and finally arrived home in New Jersey. By that time, Robert was living in DC, and after a period of courtship, Carol moved down to the nation's capital.

Carol and Robert got engaged with their sights set on joining the Peace Corps, just as she had dreamed about in college. But life had different plans in store for them, and while the Peace Corps ambition faded away, their marriage became the foundation of everything Carol would accomplish through her professional life. As Robert earned his CPA degree and engaged her in deep conversations about entrepreneurship, she grew intrigued by the business mindset and enrolled in MBA courses at George Washington University. Robert took the helm of Windows Catering Company, steering it from \$2 million in annual sales to \$5 million within three years, and Carol's love of business and marketing drove her to join the team as well. As the Director of Marketing, she helped put on events for the National Gallery of Art, Exxon Mobil, the Corcoran Gallery, Maria Shriver, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, among others. "It was a wonderful experience to be in a company as it transformed from a heavily debt-financed restaurant into a highly-successful catering company," she remembers.

When Robert and Carol moved on, he decided to launch his own business, while she decided to take a job in retail. It was a way to pay the bills and pass the time, but Carol found herself yearning for the mission and service that had meant so much to her growing up. With that, she began to get involved with ALIVE! through her daughter's preschool at the Child Development Center in Alexandria. Realizing a passion for early childhood education, she became the organization's Chair of Early Childhood Programs and found herself writing grants with her daughter asleep in her lap. "We were operating out of a church basement, and with our image as a charitable organization for low-income families, there came a scarcity mindset," Carol recalls. "We didn't have a lot of money, so there was a feeling that we simply had to sustain, rather than grow. But I felt that wasn't good enough. The building was falling apart, and even construction paper was beyond our means. Those kids deserved better, and I knew the money was out there, so we needed to go out and find it."

Thanks to Carol's perseverance and innovative approach to the nonprofit mindset, that's exactly what they did. With the funds they raised, they renovated the center, hired a new director, increased teacher salaries, and made sure they had the materials they needed. They brought in donated computers, provided mentorship opportunities for teachers, and passed their reaccreditation with flying colors. "I was surrounded by incredibly good people who gave generously of their time," she remarks. "Six of our eight major programs were run entirely by volunteers like me, and with 39 member congregations, ALIVE! was the largest private safety net in the city. I absolutely loved what I was doing."

A year after Carol had her second daughter, ALIVE! offered her a part-time job as the assistant to the president, a legend in Alexandria's nonprofit scene. Together, they orchestrated a massive fundraising event at the Torpedo Factory, raising over \$40,000 with the help of the 900 attendees. "We had never seen that kind of money," she muses. A month later, ALIVE! offered Carol a full-time position. In that capacity, she spent several more years working to transform the city of Alexandria by focusing on basic human needs like food, shelter, and emergency financial assistance. She then accepted a position at CrisisLink, a nonprofit dedicated to addressing the mental health troubles that people otherwise suffer in silence, and later The Women's Center, a nonprofit whose mission is to significantly improve the psychological, career, financial and legal well-being of women, men and their families.

Through Carol's intuitive pursuit of her life's purpose, her work has always been inspired by others, and focused on others. "When I remind myself that my work is about others and not me, I'm able to forget my insecurities and ego and the other things that might otherwise trip me up," she says. "My work is about my board, my staff, my clients, my community, and my constituents. It's also very important to me to look at each person as an individual, and not a type of person, need, or issue."

After experiencing humanity from so many vantage points and in some many guises, through both her personal experiences as a young woman and her professional pursuits later on, Carol's ability to view people and situations with a holistic view has become the defining philosophy

in her approach to business and life. “What I’ve loved most about my career is the fact that I’ve had experience in such a wide range of services, from childhood development programs, to homeless shelters, to domestic violence programs, to suicide prevention,” she recounts. “Being a generalist has allowed me to examine the human experience across the life cycle, and across generations. I’ve worked with newborn children, grandparents, and everything in between.”

Just as a holistic perspective is invaluable in addressing social issues, Carol incorporates it into her leadership philosophy by pushing her team to think in 360 degrees. “It’s not enough to just think outside the box,” she emphasizes. “We have to think all the way around a problem, seeing it from an array of perspectives to drive innovation and come up with better ways of accomplishing our goals.”

With this mindset, Carol envisions a new future for the nonprofit sector—one where the intense fragmentation, dire undercapitalization, and maligned leadership practices plaguing the industry are replaced by a new model that embraces sustainability through earned income streams and other entrepreneurial principles. “We need to encourage sustainability as the motivator for both businesses and nonprofits, highlighting the opportunities for each to learn from the other in aspiring toward a new vision of a triple bottom line for people, planet, and profit,” Carol avows. “If we can pursue hybrids of business principles and socially-minded goals, we can create a more efficient system to alleviate injustice and stabilize society.”

In advising young people entering the

business and nonprofit worlds today, Carol stresses the importance of abandoning antiquated ideas of charity that encourage a compartmentalized lifestyle. “Instead, be thinking about how you can push the changes you want to see in the world through whatever you’re doing,” she says. “Think more broadly than putting in an allotted number of charity hours each month. Think about what you do everyday, every minute, and how it can be part of building a more sustainable or just world. I would invite everyone to become part of this conversation about how we can innovate in this way. Indeed, the progress America so dearly needs right now will be accomplished only by seeing holistically and acting collectively.”

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