Here, Let Me Help

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

"Help!" can be a frantic call from a capsizing canoe, or "Help!" can be the command of a mom attacking the chaos of a teenager's room. You may help yourself to the mashed potatoes, or engage in a self-help program to wean yourself from the mashed potatoes. It is a fundament of life.

Help may come in the form of an offer, as in "how can I," or as a solicitation, as in "help wanted." You likely were once mommy's little helper, and you probably have helped little old ladies cross the street.

Help is not exclusively a human-to-human thing. Dolphins often come to the aid of people, rescuing us from drowning, protecting us from sharks, providing guide services to navigators, and pointing fishermen to big hauls. Canaries once sacrificed themselves to warn us of impending danger in coal mines.

Animals help us out in common ways, too, from barking at strangers to warn us of would-be intruders, to lending vision as seeing-eye dogs for the blind. Service dogs partner with and watch over the health of people with balance disorders, seizures, diabetes, and psychiatric disabilities. Even dogs and cats, not trained as service animals, help us by providing therapy for the soul and mind, sometimes with a meow or a woof, sometimes taking us for a walk, or just by sharing and warming our living spaces.

Helping is politics. Our social infrastructures of government, ranging from local water and sanitation districts to city, state, and federal levels, are essentially just cooperatives small and large to help us help each other to be secure, educated, and healthy. That is, until selfishness gets in the way of fair distribution, and avarice gets in the way of paying for it. That concept of help is on what sociologists would call the macro level. For the most part, we are helpers at the micro level.

Helping is family, helping is friendship. Helping is to give of ourselves, and it is characteristic of us to want to help in return. Help offered is much more likely to be accepted if the receiver senses the opportunity to reciprocate in kind, a positive sociological trait that makes us more inclined to want to help.

We help for the help of it. Collecting a scrap of litter and disposing of it properly is to help with no obvious beneficiary. We help by driving courteously, pausing to allow a driver to merge, or by yielding with a smile to a pedestrian. We help by opening a door for a stranger who seems capable of negotiating his own doors. Neither the merging driver nor the fellow coming through the opened door is likely ever to have an opportunity to reciprocate, but may be more inclined to do it for the next guy.

Helping is simply what we do when we see a cantaloupe rolling across the parking lot and a distressed lady with a broken grocery bag. Here, let me help.