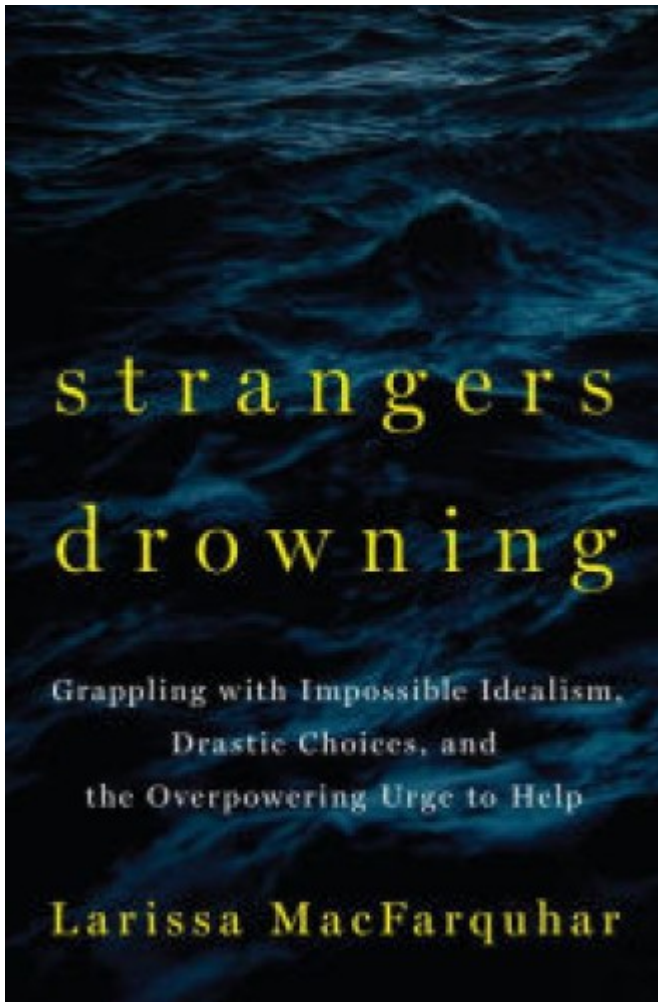


Too good for this world

by [Douglas J. Schuurman](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Strangers Drowning

By Larissa MacFarquhar

Penguin Press

If three people are drowning, your mother in one location and two strangers in another, should you save your mother or the two strangers? Most people believe you should follow your natural inclination and save your mother. But some follow the

argument of influential utilitarian Peter Singer, who claimed that your moral duty is to save the two strangers and thus double the good your action causes.

Larissa MacFarquhar, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, explores extreme altruism with elegance and empathy. She uses interview-based stories to set forth detailed descriptions of people she calls “do-gooders”—those who are willing to sacrifice family, friends, wealth, and their own well-being to meet the needs of strangers. Interspersed with these engaging stories, she raises psychological and ethical questions, explores the motives and mental health of do-gooders, and examines how others respond to extreme altruism.

One of MacFarquhar’s most compelling stories is about Dorothy Granada, a Mexican-Filipino woman who grew up in central Los Angeles. She was neglected by her mother and abused by her father. During a church service in 1978, Dorothy was overwhelmed by Jesus’ call to resist violence and stand with the poor. She joined a group opposing war, the death penalty, and nuclear power. After being arrested and jailed several times, she met fellow activist Charles Gray.

When they met, Charles had given away nearly all his money but still craved more sacrifice. He and his first wife had given away half their capital and turned their house into a commune. Still feeling guilty about having so much when so many had so much less, he had begun living on what he called the World Equity Budget, which he calculated to be about \$1,200 a year. His wife refused to join him in living on the WEB. Charles chose extreme poverty, divorcing his wife of 30 years.

Dorothy fell in love with Charles, quit her job, sold her house, gave everything away except two boxes of books and a bicycle, and began living on the WEB with Charles. He taught her how to Dumpster dive for food. After living for a while in one room in a shared house, they decided they should live on the street so that they could give away their rent money to people who desperately needed it.

Dorothy and Charles moved to Nicaragua in 1985. There they protected members of the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo, composed mostly of wives and mothers of men who had been disappeared. Later Dorothy worked in a clinic, where for over 20 years she provided free medical services to the needy, often at great risk to her own life and health. At age 84 she declared that there was still much she wanted to do.

The extremism of Dorothy and Charles’s lifestyle is not unique. Another couple profiled in the book adopted 20 distressed or special needs children (after having

two children of their own). Another couple founded a leprosy colony in rural India. Their dogs were eaten by panthers, but their two small children survived. One woman offered to donate her kidney to a complete stranger, leading her to wonder what other body parts might save the lives of strangers. Another woman believed that if she spent money on herself rather than donating it to buy life-saving medicine, then she was responsible for the deaths that resulted. Some of these do-gooders are Christians, but many are adherents of other faiths or agnostics.

MacFarquhar explores the conflicts that arise between do-gooders and their friends, spouses, and children about issues of safety and well-being. Many people who are close to do-gooders criticize them, question their psychological health, and feel hypocritical and guilty about themselves not doing more for strangers.

Readers of this book cannot help but ask themselves, “Am I doing enough?” It is natural to care for friends, parents, children, and spouses. But to what extent should we also care for strangers?

These questions are not new. Martin Luther’s understanding of vocation stresses the priority of special relations, in contrast to the medieval Roman Catholic Church, which celebrated those who forsook family obligations for pilgrimages or the monastic life. In his *Church Postil* Luther stresses how demanding the tasks and duties of our callings are: “Yes, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work.”

John Calvin says in the *Institutes* that the more closely a person is “linked to us, the more intimate obligations we have to assist him.” God’s providence leads us into these obligations. Yet, Calvin adds, “we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love” so that there is no distinction between worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, “since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.”

People must grapple with how to allocate their finite resources, including money, care, creative energy, and time. There are two potential dangers: neglecting strangers because we give so much of ourselves to those nearby, and neglecting those nearby because we give so much to needy strangers. Most of us probably give too little to strangers. MacFarquhar reminds us that there are people who fall into the opposite category.

Susan Wolf's landmark essay "Moral Saints" provides a foil for MacFarquhar's thinking. Wolf argues that moral perfectionism and personal well-being are incompatible. Because "morality itself doesn't seem to be a suitable object of passion," moral saints must either lack or repress the amoral desires that give people their humanity.

MacFarquhar's primary aim is to explore moral exemplars whose lives challenge and disturb us. But in the end she sides with Wolf. "If there is a struggle between morality and life, life will win. . . . Not always, not in every case, but life will win in the end." In most cases "the urge to live, to give to your family, to seek beauty, to work for your own purposes, to act spontaneously, to act without any purpose at all . . . is too strong to be overridden." It is the exceptional cases that fill the pages of this intriguing book.