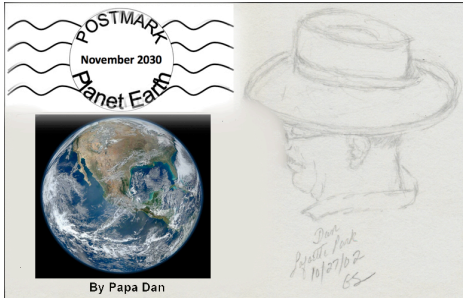


# Let Me Help

By Dan Sapone



**“Don’t discount the power of fiction  
to change the world;  
it has happened often  
throughout our history.”**

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## City On the Edge of Forever

The television series “Star Trek” was a collection of 79 time- and space-travel stories that appeared from 1966 to 1969. As a teenager, it was my favorite TV show. The episodes were set in the future — some time in the 2200s. In the episode titled “The City on the Edge of Forever,” written by Harlan Ellison, the Starship Enterprise is flung back in time from the 23rd century to the planet Earth in the year 1930. Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy find themselves in New York City, which is suffering in the depths of the Depression. They meet Edith Keeler (played by Joan Collins) who is in charge of a soup kitchen set up to feed the (many) hungry. Captain Kirk, of course, falls in love with her. She senses that Captain Kirk and his two companions are distressed about something. She, of course, has no clue that they are stuck three hundred years into their own past, not sure how they are going to get back to their own time. They have this conversation:

<p><i>Edith Keeler:</i> Why does Spock call you “Captain?” Were you in the war together? <i>James T. Kirk:</i> We served together. <i>Edith Keeler:</i> And you don't want to talk about it? Why? Did you do something wrong? Are you afraid of something? Whatever it is, Let Me Help. <i>James T. Kirk:</i> Let Me Help . . . A hundred years or so from now, I believe, a famous novelist will write a classic using that theme. He will recommend those three words even over “I Love You.” <i>Edith Keeler:</i> A century from now? Who is he? Where does he come from? Where <b>will</b> he come from? <i>James T. Kirk:</i> Want to hear a silly answer? <i>Edith Keeler:</i> Yes. <i>James T. Kirk (points to the sky):</i> A planet, circling that far left star in Orion's belt, see? — <i>City on the Edge of Forever</i>, Earth, 1930 (aired on TV April 6, 1967)</p>
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Kirk tells her that this novel “changed everything.” From our perspective here in the 21st century, we realize that, if this novelist published his story *about 100 years* from that day in 1930, it would appear some time in the next few years here in our own twenty-first century. More on that later.

The plot of this Start Trek episode itself focused on the dilemma facing the time travelers in light of “The Prime Directive,” also known as “Starfleet General Order #1.” The “noninterference directive” prohibited Starfleet crews from doing anything that interfered with the internal and natural development of alien civilizations.

While trying to figure out how to get back to their own time, Spock uses his tricorder to recreate the “actual” history of the time they are visiting and discovers that Edith Keeler was supposed to die that year in a traffic accident. Examining an altered timeline accounting for their interference, Spock learns that, if her life was spared, Keeler would go on to found a pacifist movement, causing the United States to delay its entrance into World War II and allowing Nazi Germany time to develop nuclear weapons, with which they will conquer the world. Kirk admits his love for Keeler, and Spock answers that Keeler must die in order to prevent millions of deaths.

Kirk is faced with a harsh reality: Edith Keeler must die in a traffic accident — which they could easily prevent — in order for history to proceed the way it must. So, at the climax of the episode, we see Captain Kirk restraining Dr. McCoy, preventing him from saving her life, to save the future of the human race — that is, to save us. Dr. McCoy, of course, doesn’t understand and shouts, “*Do you know what you just did?!*” Spock answers, “He knows, Doctor, he knows.” After that scene, a heartbroken Captain Kirk and his crew return to the Starship Enterprise, and he orders them to “get the hell out of here” — back to their own time.

### **Well, What About the Novel? Is this Story About Us?**

Fifty years ago, in addition to the time-travel and space-travel aspects of this story, the tragic love story of Edith Keeler and Captain Kirk appealed to me. For those of us who live in this time of gathering turmoil here in 2019, a novel “expected” to appear about a century after 1930, titled “Let Me Help” — a novel that we are told “changed everything” in *OUR* time — might pique our interest even more. We might wonder, as the Edith Keeler character asks about this novelist, “Who is he? Where does he come from?” And, most important to us, what necessary changes would such a novel inspire? Looking ahead to *OUR* next few years leading up to 2030, presumably the aftermath of the current struggle, we can imagine what changes will be needed and how the novel, and its title, might inspire those changes.

### **Looking Ahead: A Novelist Writes in the Year 2030 — What might he say?**

In the year 2030, an increasing number of people are likely to realize that a lot of very serious problems can be traced to some societal changes that began around 2016. A fictional novelist takes up his pen and writes a story — a piece of fiction — about the beginning of a small movement called “Let Me Help.” In the novel, a small group of friends, about a dozen or so, start meeting in a bistro in the Mission District of San Francisco, initially to whine about how bad things had gotten and how ineffective the government had become in addressing a series of growing problems — local and national. One afternoon, this group gathered around a table in a bistro and made a list of their observations:

- While the unemployment *rate* has reached a new low, the number of people *under-employed* (i.e., working full time at one or more jobs but not earning enough to afford a decent American life) is increasing. Why? With the diminishing influence of labor unions in many parts of the country, large numbers of workers cannot afford basic health care, childcare, or home ownership.
- Many of our kids, even in otherwise middle-class communities, go to school hungry. Some communities have programs that provide healthy school lunch, but those programs are few and far between. In spite of the strength of some parts of the economy, the homeless population, noticeably in San Francisco, has dramatically increased.

- More and more employed Americans are forced to live farther from their workplace, lengthening the work day, clogging freeways, and adding to air pollution.
- Increased use of fossil fuels continued its indisputable harm to the economy and health.
- In many parts of the country, financial support for public schools, which used to be an international source of pride for America, has diminished. As a result, test scores, especially in science and math, have declined and fallen behind those of other developed nations. Ignorance of American institutions is increasing. Basic job skills are in decline.
- In many parts of the country, a rash of natural disasters — hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and wildfires — have destroyed communities near and far, leaving large numbers of families without the means to rebuild their lives. In some cases, the need is temporary. In some cases, the need is ongoing.

At the end of the second chapter of the novel, the group reviewed their list, shaking their heads at how far everything had fallen from the hopes they had all grown up with. One member of the group decided to post their list on a couple of social media platforms, along with some local examples of ways that San Franciscans were being harmed by these issues. His post ended with a public invitation to join a small group planning to organize efforts to help locals who are affected by the lack of effective government attention to these and other local issues. The group gave themselves a name “Let Me Help” and scheduled their next meeting on a Saturday afternoon in two weeks. They hoped to acquire a handful of new members from their social-media invitation and figured that they could organize themselves to help out at some local soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Maybe they could organize tutoring to increase job skills and help people apply for jobs. Pleased with themselves, they ordered a round of drinks and turned their attention to a ballgame on the big screens.

### **‘Let Me Help’ Becomes a ‘Thing’**

Two Saturdays later, the dozen or so people who had met to whine and make their list came back together to plan some next steps in their little project. One by one, as they approached their favorite bistro, they were stopped in their tracks in amazement. Traffic on the nearby streets was clogged. Once they were able to walk up to the bistro, they found a crowd of several hundred people had filled the sidewalks on both sides of Van Ness Avenue and bulged out into the street blocking traffic. People wanted to know where “Let Me Help” was meeting and they wanted to sign up to join the effort. Some were a bit annoyed that there seemed to be a noticeable lack of organization for such an important project.

### **What To Do?**

This little group had not expected anything like this. After stumbling round awhile, they were able to herd the crowd over to the public square next to the BART station and one of them stood on a bench and spoke. It didn’t take long to discover that these people who responded to the online invitation were attracted to the idea that something could be done to mitigate the inadequacy of government to address the problems that had emerged in recent years, and they were hungry for an opportunity to help. After some discussion, a sign-up list was created with contact information and promises were made to set a new meeting date (at a larger venue) and organize some specific committees to address some of these issues at the local level.

To make a long story short ...

- Committees were formed over the next month.
- Groups collected food donations and delivered them to several homeless shelters and soup kitchens in The City. Some went to a City Council meeting and petitioned the City to have the “Let Me Help” group registered as an official local charity. Arrangements were made for the group to meet with City officials about some long-term proposals to combat hunger and homelessness in San Francisco.
- Two local grocery stores pledged to start an ongoing program of excess food deliveries. A local hotel owner pledged a sizable donation; and a small facility was identified in one of his buildings to store supplies and eventually, serve members of the public.
- Using social media, “Let Me Help” groups were formed throughout the Bay Area with similar results in six cities.
- Stories appeared in the local newspapers and reported on a local TV station. The local story was picked up in the New York Times, and later CNN, describing the organizational model initiated by the small SF group.
- Within five months, copy-cat “Let Me Help” groups were formed in 25 cities in ten states. Local newspapers spread the word, initiating some competition among cities — rising to the level of a twelve state capitals — you know “Our state knows how to do this better than ... “ and so it went, until ...
- A low-level State Department official in Washington D.C. brought the story to the attention of the Secretary of State, who ...
- At a meeting in Vienna of the newly-constituted Group of Seven Plus (G7+3) Alliance, the U.S. took the lead on a project to partner with ten national government agencies and make “Let Me Help” an international agency for supplying food, temporary housing, and employment support for citizens of all participating countries.
- The United Nations met in New York to discuss making “Let Me Help” a UN-sponsored, internationally recognized entity for standardizing border-crossing protocols and immigration support for all UN member nations. An interesting by-product of this effort was that attention was drawn to large numbers of people — both citizens and immigrants — in member nations who are living without basic necessities. The program expanded and many lives were improved.

### **The “Let Me Help” Novel Tops the ‘NYT Best Seller List’ for the Ninth Week**

Let’s not forget that all of this takes place on the pages of a novel. A very good novel ... just a work of fiction ... OK, a novel that hasn’t yet been published .... But, in the novel, with such an uplifting and optimistic work of fiction discussed on talk shows and in literary magazines around the world, something interesting happened. A well-known former U.S. First Lady made the book the topic of her first speech to the world in her capacity as the newly-elected Secretary General of the United Nations. She asked, “Is it possible that this story could become OUR story? You know — you and me, all of us? Do we have what it takes to *become* the change we all have longed for since, well ... you know ... since we seem to have *paused* our world-wide commitment to ... uh ... you know, doing the right thing?” Do we have the humanity? If your answer is yes. Let Me Help. Here is how I’d like to help ... “ She made a list of suggestions of programs that government can initiate and a list of existing programs to which individuals around the world can support.



And so it was ...

And, of course, it was fiction — just a story in a novel ... a novel to be written in our time — as foretold in a Star Trek episode that takes place in our future ... and in our past ... that we saw on television fifty years ago.

Just as Captain James T. Kirk said in a New York soup kitchen back in 1930 ... and ... well, *will say* in a couple of hundred years as captain of the Starship Enterprise, the novel “changed everything.”

Everything.

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### **So, what about us?**

I bet we could generate a list of existing programs that will accept our small donations that can make a difference for lots of people who need help. Here are just a few:

- World famous Chef Jose Andres has an organization called the World Central Kitchen. He brings his “kitchen staff” around the world to places devastated by earthquakes and hurricanes and set up kitchens where he has fed thousands of people who had lost their homes. His motto is: “Wherever there is a fight so that hungry people may eat, we will be there.” Anyone can visit his website (<https://wck.org/>) and make a donation.
- Grace Cathedral in San Francisco (we go there for their Christmas music) co-sponsors The Winter Interfaith Shelter in collaboration with the San Francisco Interfaith Council and run by Episcopal Community Services. The Interfaith Shelter provides dinner, breakfast and a dry place to sleep for 60-100 homeless men during the coldest and wettest time of the year.  
<https://gracecathedral.org/winter-interfaith-shelter/>
- We have a neighbor who invites us to donate needed items to the local SPCA, especially to temporarily take care of animals who have been orphaned by the wildfires in northern California. Almost every town has one and they accept things like bedding (any used sheets, blankets, towels), newspapers, kitty litter, pet food, and more. My old friend Lew (OK, don't tell him I said he's old) actually volunteers at his SPCA in Monterey.
- The Alameda County Food Bank provides food for 116,000 people who turn to them each month (more at Thanksgiving). Take a look at [www.accfb.org](http://www.accfb.org). A \$25 donation will help to provide \$175 worth of food.

→ I bet you have a favorite charity to recommend that makes life better for those who need help. If you do, send me your “Let Me Help” suggestions and I'll spread them around to our *ConVivio* readers. I bet we can help.

→ Which of us will step up and write this novel and change everything?  
You have ten years — plenty of time, right?