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The Call for Volunteers

The people who help others of their own free will in their own free time perform a vital service to society. As Volunteer Week approaches, they deserve our praise. Their services are needed now more than ever. May their numbers continue to grow . . .

☐ An article published in an American news magazine not long ago described how women were using volunteer work as a foot in the door to the employment market. It said that the feminist movement had accelerated this trend by urging women "to seek work that is 'real' — in other words, paid." The co-ordinator of volunteers in a large institution was quoted as saying that women were doing unpaid work to improve their skills and hence their career prospects. Also quoted was a former volunteer who had moved on to a full-time position: "I guess finally I was interested in being paid for a job. Money is the way society shows that it values what you are doing."

If that is so, it makes a disturbing commentary on current social values. For surely much of the work that is done for money is worthless to anyone but those who profit by it. Voluntary service, on the other hand, is so valuable to its beneficiaries as to be literally priceless. Who could ever count what it is worth to a crippled child to be taught how to swim, or to an elderly shut-in to have someone do the shopping and drop in for a chat once or twice a week?

The attitude that only paid work matters is lamentably common. You will look in vain in books on economics for so much as a mention of the contribution which voluntary service makes to the national wellbeing. In fact, voluntary activities account for an estimated 3.3 per cent of Canada's gross national product. One in every seven adult Canadians is engaged in some sort of volunteer activity. Organized volunteer work in Canada amounts to some 374 million man-hours a year.

But the economic statistics are the least of it. Though great numbers of Canadian volunteers are active in the fields of sports, the arts, consumerism and civil rights, 31.5 per cent of them work in the social welfare and health fields. Another 25 per cent donate their time to religious groups, which are also partially involved in health, welfare and education. In other words, these people are directly concerned with helping others. And in helping others, they are helping the whole society.

One of the mainstays of society, after all, is the common understanding that the stronger must share their strength with the weaker. There could be no social order if the community interest did not come before purely selfish pursuits. The religions which did so much to establish that social order in the first place have always stressed that the individual has an obligation to his fellow human beings. The concept of mutual support is implicit in every major religious belief.

For instance, it is a maxim of Hinduism that "he does not live in vain who employs his wealth, his thought, his speech to advance the good of others." "The way to heaven is to benefit others," the Taoist philosophy says. According to the Prophet Mohammed, "A man's true wealth is hereafter the good he does in this world to his fellow man."

In the Old Testament we find the example of Job: "I was eyes to the blind, and feet I was to the lame. I was father to the poor and the cause which I knew

not I sought out." In the New Testament is the Parable of the Good Samaritan: "Go and do likewise," Jesus enjoined.

John Ruskin made an acute observation of scriptural teachings when he wrote: "It is written, not 'blessed is he that feedeth the poor,' but 'blessed is he that considereth the poor.' A little thought and a little kindness are often worth more than a great deal of money."

Neither public nor voluntary agencies can meet all the need

Money for good causes is needed and welcome, but under the simpler social systems of earlier times, the giving of alms was considered no more than a natural duty. That is because there is such a thing as cold charity — charity without compassion.

"To feel much for others and little for ourselves; to restrain our selfish, and exercise our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature," wrote Adam Smith. As the father of classical economics, Smith was an upholder of *laissez-faire,* the doctrine that the public good is best served when governments intervene least in people's lives.

Laissez-faire dominated the social policies of western countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Governments shied away from dealing with social problems. It was left mainly to individuals, churches and other charitable organizations to attend to the public welfare. Though it was a full-time job for many of them, the people who worked in charitable institutions were essentially volunteers.

The present century brought the birth of universal tax-supported programs in health, welfare and education. The political thrust for more government involvement came from early socialists who believed that undeserved privileges were perpetuated by *laissez-faire*. They regarded the old system of charity as not much more than self-serving paternalism, a scattering of crumbs from rich men's tables. They insisted that the needs of society could never be met by private benevolence alone.

It is true that the old system was spread too thinly and was too selective. The churches understandably looked after their own adherents first. Among non-sectarian charities, some causes were more popular than others. The less-popular ones did not receive the attention they deserved.

As time went on, the place of religion in society diminished. Governments took over much of the work that was formerly performed by religious communities. The nature of the family also changed. In an age when the family unit embraced grandparents, aunts and uncles as well as parents and children, the handicapped, sick and aged were often taken care of in the home rather than in public institutions. The fragmentation of the immediate family, with more young people leaving home earlier and more marriage break-ups, has given rise to a host of new problems which must be dealt with by society as a whole.

Today, even right-wing political parties agree that governments should provide some basic measure of social service and security for people who really need it. At the same time, even left-wing parties (in the western world, at least) agree that governments cannot do all that has to be done. Public services lack the human touch that people in distress need so badly. Volunteers can either supplement the services provided, or take care of special problems which government programs tend to overlook.

Does the spirit of volunteerism still live in a self-centred age?

In Great Britain, where a socialist government introduced a comprehensive welfare state after World War II, the functions of the public and voluntary sectors have long since been reconciled. As an official British government publication puts it, "State and voluntary services are now complementary and co-operative. Both central and local authorities make grants to voluntary social services. Public authorities plan and carry out their duties taking account of the voluntary help available." Much the same could be said of the situation in Canada today.

After many years of governments taking on more and more of the social responsibilities once borne by private citizens, the pendulum is now swinging back to the voluntary sector. Governments everywhere are deeply in debt, and they are

finding that there is a limit to how heavily they can tax people without damaging the economy and their own political appeal. As a result, they have been cutting back on publicly-funded services.

In one country where drastic economy measures have been imposed, the United States, President Ronald Reagan is trying to rekindle what he calls "the spirit of volunteerism." "The truth is, we've let government take away many of the things we once considered were ours to do voluntarily, out of the goodness of our hearts and a sense of neighbourliness. I believe many of you want to do those things again," he said in a recent speech.

The question is whether goodness of heart and neighbourliness still can grow amidst the negativism and hedonism of what Tom Wolfe has called "the me generation." As recently as 1979 a team of American futurists composed the following scenario as a projection of prevailing behavioural trends: "There will be a fantastic expansion of self-realization activities aimed at helping the individual to realize maximum personal happiness and self-expression. The solidarity of groups — families, neighbourhoods, communities, associations, etc. — will decline. The individual will be supreme; the group will be tolerated only as a means to helping individuals to realize their private goals. Charity will decline."

That hardly seems like an atmosphere conducive to voluntary service. Fortunately, though, the reasoning behind the scenario is flawed. The writers fallaciously conclude that self-realization can be achieved through arrant selfishness. The wisdom of the ages proclaims just the reverse.

The ancient Roman philospher Seneca wrote: "He that does good to another, does good also to himself, not only in the consequences, but in the very act; for the consciousness of well-doing is, in itself, ample reward." For a more recent authority, take Sir Wilfred Grenfell, who spent a lifetime helping the people of Labrador: "Real joy comes not from ease or riches or the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile."

When volunteers are asked the reasons why they volunteer, they usually cite the satisfaction they derive from helping others. A typical reaction came from an ex-champion figure skater who teaches skating to blind children. "Don't get me wrong. I don't teach these classes as charity. I'm basically a very selfish person. I teach them because I get tremendous gratification," she said.

The Report of the National Advisory Council on Volunteer Action to the Government of Canada in 1977 noted a "new and healthy realization that the volunteer himself does and should benefit from voluntary activity." It said: "Today, many volunteers tend to place less emphasis on a charitable motivation and frankly admit that their involvement in voluntary activity arises from their need for self-expression, self-development and self-protection. Given that large numbers of Canadians are heavily engaged in voluntary activity, many are seeking to fulfil their personal needs."

People enjoy doing something for nothing on their own terms

The report raised the question of whether volunteers should be paid in view of the fact that they incur expenses for baby-sitting, transportation, etc. A subsequent study of the question in Ottawa showed that the altruistic instinct is still strong. A control group of hospital volunteers was paid for its work while another received only verbal acknowledgment. Within a short time the performance of the paid group deteriorated.

The results confirm that people enjoy doing something for nothing. The poet Edward Arlington Robinson put his finger on this facet of altruism long ago when he wrote: "There are two kinds of gratitude — the sudden kind we feel for what we take, the larger kind we feel for what we give." At least some volunteers would not do the work they do if a price were put on it. Said a hospital auxiliary worker with a hard and occasionally unpleasant job: "I wouldn't do this for any amount of money. I do it because I want to. I feel I owe something to this community. This community has been very good to me."

The idea of giving something back to the community of your own free will seems to be undergoing a revival among the people who were least expected

to be interested in voluntary service — the members of the "me generation." Community affairs offices in Canadian high schools have been mobilizing students to help the disabled, entertain children, drive people to and from hospitals, tutor slow learners, baby-sit for working mothers and the like. Added to the continuing good work being done by organizations like 4-H, the Boy Scouts and the Junior Red Cross, this makes it look as if the grossly selfish "me generation" was a swiftly-passing phenomenon. Perhaps it never really existed at all.

The fact that more married women are now in the labour force has changed the character of voluntarism. Traditionally, most volunteers for social and health service were homemakers with time on their hands. Now that so many women use up all their time in their dual capacities as workers and homemakers, the ranks are being filled increasingly by men and young people. Of the 100,000-odd volunteers in the Montreal area, for instance, 40,000 are male, and a large proportion of them are from 16 to 19 years of age.

Older people, too, are volunteering more and more to make good use of the free time they have in retirement. In some cases their former employers are co-ordinating and sponsoring their work. In Minneapolis, Honeywell Inc.'s Retiree Volunteer Program has about 300 volunteers on its roster. Some ex-employees volunteer their expertise in their specialties, while others look for a change from what they did during their working careers.

Businesses are getting involved in volunteer work in another way, by lending their expertise and resources to non-profit organizations. Since 1969 the Volunteer Urban Consulting Group of New York City has helped a variety of bodies in social affairs and the arts to manage their own affairs. Management people such as accountants, financial planners, corporate lawyers and systems analysts voluntarily act as consultants to non-profit groups, and their companies often contribute technical resources. A similar organization, the Agora Foundation, was recently formed in Toronto. It offers the services of both working and retired managers to non-profit groups requiring management aid.

While there will always be a need for people to do basic chores like mailing out fund-raising literature or pushing carts around hospitals, there is a growing trend towards more challenging forms of service. One of these is Citizen Advocacy, in which able persons are paired off with mentally or physically handicapped persons who cannot entirely look after themselves. Among the other fairly new developments in voluntary service are round-the-clock telephone listening services for people with emotional problems, meals on wheels for shut-ins, and palliative care for dying hospital patients.

If you do all you can, it can never be too little

Learning enrichment programs are an example of the activities that have grown up as a result of government economy measures. When provincial education departments found themselves with relatively less money to spend, they went over the curriculum and cut out non-essential "frills." In some localities parents have taken it upon themselves to conduct after-hours classes in aspects of art, music and physical education. It shows how volunteers are needed more than ever now that cost-conscious governments are partially withdrawing from various fields.

The need for volunteers is bound to grow, not only because of this but because there is so much trouble and hardship to be alleviated. During Volunteer Week in North America, held this year from April 18 to 25, we should honour the volunteers among us and think about what else we could be doing ourselves. The watchword of voluntarism is "do what you can." If you do *all* you can, it can never be too little. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 1979 for her work among the poor in India, put the idea of service into perspective when she said: "We feel ourselves that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, I think the oceans would be less because of that missing drop."

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