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The Volunteer in Our Society

CIVILIZATION apparently is of such a nature that the further we progress in it the more difficult we find it to live together.

We are beginning to think about how poor a place earth would be if the mechanization of living were to deprive us of the contacts we gain in voluntary association with our neighbours. Major-General Georges P. Vanier, Governor General of Canada, said to a Canadian Welfare Council conference of community leaders from across Canada early in 1962: "as our society grows ever more and more complicated and more personal, the need for voluntary work becomes daily greater, for it is essential that there be preserved a balance between complexity and conscience."

One does not need to have a romantically heightened view of giving oneself away, but only to remember that the contribution made by individuals and groups voluntarily is the real foundation of democratic society, and that it is one of the ways in which, in spite of mechanization and automation, we remain human.

"Society", as it is used in this *Letter*, is the kind of life we live in organized communities, where interests and purposes are common to all. A "social" person does not mean one who enjoys parties, but, as Dr. Samuel Johnson defined "social" in his dictionary of 1755: a person "fit for society."

Besides social, there are personal values in voluntary service. The volunteer realizes the quality of experience that can be his through sharing viewpoints and working with others in pursuit of both individual and common goals.

The "why" of working with others is not greatly important. The Talmudic principle is: "A man should perform a righteous deed, even if he does so only for ulterior motives, because he will thus learn to do the right for its own sake."

You may wish for a sense of accomplishment, for the adventure of something new, for a change of pace from the workaday world, for self-expression, or only to belong. There is no better way to banish the blues or to counteract the poison of world crises than by engaging in thoughtful work with and for others. The

end result is self-fulfilment, which is on a higher plane than self-interest.

There is no stereotyped way of being altruistic. Every man in a free society can help in his individual way to shape it; that is what sets him apart from those in a slave society. He has ideas, opinions, interests and abilities to contribute.

Giving service, and not putting on a show, is the distinguishing feature of the good member of society. Charles Dickens gave us a portrait of the poseur in *Little Dorrit*: Mr. Casby, the bold expanse of whose patriarchal countenance was so valuable to himself and so disappointing to everybody else. He seemed brimful of benevolence if only one could lay hold of it.

It is through action that we become part of the setting around us and participate in the transaction of living. If we wish to develop into fully participating human beings we can do so by locating a social need and offering the help it is in our power to give. "According to one's power" was a favourite saying of Socrates, and it is a saying of great substance. Longfellow put it this way: "Give what you have. To someone, it may be better than you dare to think."

The nature of society

Students of anthropology and archaeology have reason for amazement when they consider the brief interval, scarcely a moment of the time this earth has been in existence, in which humanity has built up its present society and civilization.

Social service, in its broad sense as genuine interest in the welfare of others, is as old as the beginning of that civilization, but perhaps it is time for a restatement of our purpose.

In days when we are so concerned with defence, we need to ask ourselves what we are defending. It is not enough to be satisfied with expansive theories of universal peace. They may be proclaimed and paraded without any sacrifice of time or effort. What we must have is concrete illustration of our interest in survival of our society, both what we receive from it and the privilege of contributing to it. As was written in the *Report of the Royal Commission on*

National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences: "It would be paradoxical to defend something which we are unwilling to strengthen and enrich, and which we even allow to decline."

This is not a matter merely of broad interest: the interest is that of every one individually. In the long run and in the last resort self-interest cannot be separated from the interests of the rest of the community.

By helping a class of need, whether it be in the field of destitution or culture, of delinquency or health, the voluntary worker is promoting and protecting the welfare of all the community.

The self-sufficing ingrown man has no validity in modern civilization. It is fundamental in democracy that citizens do not have to agree, but they must take part. No one is solitary in his origin or solitary in his existence.

Just what sort of groups and social institutions will serve as the vehicles for our participation depends upon the cultural conditions involved in our life history and upon the opportunities we seize upon in our life environment. He is wise who tries to act in a number of different capacities. The men whose names shine brightly in history were versatile, and the stories of their lives tell us how greatly they enjoyed living.

An expanding life

Voluntary work is the source of expansion of our lives. It is characteristic of human beings to seek to extend the range of the setting in which they can carry on their lives effectively.

Whatever we possess in the way of skill, property and joy is enhanced, often without limit, by sharing it with others. Our richest experiences come when we are acting with other people to achieve some common goal. And survival itself depends upon our co-operation with other organisms like ourselves.

If the world seems tame and dull, candor compels us to confess that it is because we are so wrapped up in our own narrow interests that we resist it when other people try to take us into their lives. The instruction to the unhappy rich young man "sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor" was not directed toward the welfare of the poor but to the soul of the young man.

The high tide of civilization is heralded by the conscious and rational co-operation of individuals. Only as we shoulder our share of responsibility for planning, for goal-setting, and for working, do we learn the great satisfaction to be had out of directed constructive activity in a world which seems to be filled with chaotic mismanagement.

Men and women have within them truths to communicate, skills to contribute, songs to sing, which demand expression. When their contribution fills a need in someone's life, even for a fleeting minute, it adds to the world's happiness. We must major in the areas wherein we have special qualities, without forgetting the grace notes of understanding, sympathy and humour.

Whatever we do, we should be heartily in earnest in the doing of it. Then we shall find that we have released desirable impulses and qualities which have been repressed by the events of everyday life. One important feature about volunteering for a service is the sense it gives us of rebirth, of controlling our own destiny. This action is not something done of necessity, to earn a living or maintain a status, but something we choose to do as a gesture of free will, as our contribution to society.

Voluntary associations

In voluntary association we find one of the best means of education in the democratic way of life. The increasingly secularist and totalitarian trend of government and civilization warns us that we had better try to generate moral standards, standards of service, and standards of what becomes the good citizen. This setting up of standards can only be done in co-operation with like-minded people.

Voluntary associations are those in which a person is free to participate or not, as he chooses. They are open to persons who share a common interest or purpose. They build their own policy and direct their own activities. They contribute toward the creation of an alert, concerned and responsible public. They may be for learning, teaching or serving.

The importance of voluntary societies in a democracy should need no emphasis in a generation which knows that their suppression is the first move of a dictatorship. They are sometimes discouraged in a democracy in the name of efficiency, but the weakness in this argument is the fact that all-state discharge of caretaking responsibility fails to grapple with the instincts of human nature in its higher forms.

Let us look at some of the functions performed by voluntary associations. A local society is composed of members who manifest their practical interest by contributions of time, personal service and the raising of money. A member does not get his greatest satisfaction from paying dues or making donations.

Of special importance are the great functions of voluntary associations to experiment and to blaze trails which later may be followed up and perfected by the community and government; to stimulate, to check, to contribute a balance of social power; to co-operate with governmental efforts, to vitalize civic interests, to develop the whole field of community organization and institutional co-operation, and to build up an informed public opinion and guide it into effective channels.

These are not easy tasks. The kinds of challenges are more exacting than ever before, and the resources available are under increasing strain. The standard of the work to be done is higher than was demanded in a previous generation, and members must be prepared to study and adopt new methods which are shown to be better than old methods.

Cultural activities

Not all voluntary associations are for relief of need, treatment of the ill and custody of the deserted. Some are for participation in and encouragement of the arts.

One price we pay for mechanization is the cutting down of person-to-person cultural contacts. Mechanized entertainment so handily provided by television takes the place of family and community get-togethers for discussion and conversation. No adequate substitute has yet been found for the intimate knowledge obtained in the local group, not only by the performers and leaders but by their friends who come to criticize or applaud.

There can be no question of the enormous value of the contribution of voluntary societies to the cultural life of Canada. Evidence of their work appears in every chapter of the *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences*. In ballet, art, music, writing, and drama, the voluntary groups stimulate and develop native talent, while in the field of education they help to develop the informed public opinion which is so necessary in a democracy. Of the hundreds of briefs presented to the Commission, the great majority represented the views of voluntary societies.

Governments have been slower to assume responsibilities for cultural activities than for adjustment of health and economic needs, and their lack has to be made up by voluntary effort. About one adult in every twenty-five took part in an adult education class or course during nine months surveyed by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics. Private organizations, associations and agencies operated nearly thirty per cent of these courses.

To carry out these tasks, said the Annual Report of the Canadian Association for Adult Education, we need many more professionally trained adult educators, and many more dedicated and trained community leaders. "This means more residential schools like Banff and the Co-op College in Saskatoon, more university extension work like that at Alberta, British Columbia and St. Francis Xavier."

Government and voluntary action

The government's part in social welfare and cultural activity does not detract from the scope, meaning and effectiveness of professional work in private agencies, nor does it eliminate the need for experiment and service by voluntary groups. Though governments may spend millions of dollars every year on welfare services — family allowances, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, mothers' allowances, pensions for the blind, and aid to the handicapped — there are always problems and situations beyond the scope of governments.

Public relief cares for extremity and provides the necessities of existence. The voluntary services provide in the main for special needs and carry the heart into the material forms of aid.

Effective social work cannot be done wholesale. Let governments and government departments and the public service apparatus of all sorts do what they will, there remains the need for individual human contact and effort, which cannot at present be supplied to any great degree in mass programmes.

Public service is preferable to the extent that it gives expression to the duty of the community when it covers large numbers of people, and when the functions of those who administer it can be formulated in laws and in rules. Private service is specially called for where experiments are to be tried in new ways of dealing with needs, where pioneer work is to be done, where public opinion requires education by example of new methods, and in the big no man's land where people and families are not able to cope with their own problems but do not fall into the area covered by public service.

Today's voluntary social work aims at promoting the real welfare of dependents and their children. It is not directed solely to keeping them alive and out of trouble. It does not try merely to medicate and dress an open sore, but to heal it. The emphasis has shifted from relief to rehabilitation, from advice to counselling, and from amelioration to prevention.

There are in this world hundreds of things which are right but which cannot be legislated for, things which will never be done unless someone is prepared to volunteer to do them. As the Governor General put it: "Voluntary service is a boon to the individual and a blessing to the community."

Social agencies

The age-long quest for paths of adjustment to life and peace of mind is now aided by scientific methods of social work, and volunteers need to recognize the point at which their ministry ends and the services of professional people starts.

Up until not so many years ago social welfare services were performed entirely by volunteers, but as living became more complex it was necessary to have full-time and well-trained people. A new profession, among the most important of modern social movements, came into being as a response to need. There are, as indicated by membership in the Canadian Association of Social Workers, more than three thousand professionally qualified social workers in Canada. The first School of Social Work in Canada was established at the University of Toronto in 1914, and in 1918 the second was opened at McGill University. In mid 1962 there were eight schools.

Professional social work is a rewarding profession, in which men and women find their compensation not so much in the money they earn as in love of the work, a sense of its dignity and importance, and the feeling of contributing materially toward the happiness of mankind.

But in their work they need voluntary workers. Sound community planning must originate with the people who live in the community, and must evolve from the joint effort of the professional worker and the volunteer. The professional worker needs to guard against looking upon volunteers as merely unpaid help.

Commenting on the relationship between the professional worker and the volunteer, an article in *Voluntary Action*, published by the Canadian Association for Adult Education, says: "... the efficiency, the sophisticated acquaintance with her environment, the technical training, of a superintendent of nurses, of an executive secretary, of a trained publicist, can intimidate a volunteer to the point of uselessness."

In a world so changing as ours, it is necessary to maintain the active good will of the public and the earnest willingness of the volunteer. The professional worker needs to convey the feeling that beyond doubt this is the proper agency for the job it is doing and that it knows how the job should be done. But the professional worker needs to go further. He needs to do a job analysis so as to find the place which can be filled with the greatest personal satisfaction to the voluntary worker and with the greatest benefit to the agency's clients.

Boards and committees

Much of the work of voluntary organizations gets done by teams of people working on boards and committees.

A good working group is not made up of people appointed because they have caste, or influence, or wealth, but because they are interested in working toward the good of the organization and do so with intelligence, energy and good will.

Talking, even of the most earnest kind, is not the purpose of a committee. People may talk learnedly and with self-satisfaction about juvenile delinquency, but all the talk achieves nothing comparable to one small action. The earnest committee will not pose, nor indulge in vain rhetoric, but will hasten to seek the most appropriate way of accomplishing its purpose. It will brush aside debate about procedures and get on to grapple with the pith of its reason for being: human necessities.

The purpose of committees and meetings is this: one person rarely knows all the facts or all the angles. An exchange of opinions is necessary to spark right action. The conscientious member of a committee will study the problem so as to make his contribution worthy of consideration.

Business men are particularly valuable on service boards and committees because of their habitual way of looking at things. They apply their experience so as to locate the problem, validate it as one affecting this group, set up research and collect information, consider all the various ways of solving the problem or meeting the situation, and reach a decision.

They do not begrudge a minute of the time they spend in meetings of voluntary associations, but they do wish that the meetings were carefully planned and efficiently carried out.

Changing times

It is part of democratic responsibility to see that citizens are not submerged by the rising tide of a new civilization, to preserve them from the feeling of futility.

Some of their problems stem from conditions in society itself, some from the natural waywardness of human beings, some from physical environment, some from the changes involved in the industrialization of an agricultural society and the automation of a manual society.

We cannot say with assurance that the reason for need of help is this or that single cause. More likely the reason was better told in *Gulliver's Travels*, where the giant was bound by pygmies. It was not any one thread that held him to earth, but thousands of strands which the busy little people carried over his body in every direction.

We must realize that in a large and relatively complex society such as ours some people are going to get hurt through no special fault of their own. Multitudes of people require help, not because of fire, flood, and war, but because of heredity, culture and social environment. Great burdens sometimes fall upon people who are not equipped either physically or mentally to carry them.

And so: to work

What we require of volunteers is not a compliant dealing with things as they are, but a positive and spirited adventure into what might be. If it be true, as Galileo said, that you cannot teach a man anything but only help him to find it within himself, then voluntary work for social ends can be the greatest good a person can do himself.

The volunteer is one who is not content merely to change as the world around him changes. He wishes to be in the vanguard of a movement for improvement. He is determined to achieve his highest humanity through leading the way toward constructive relationships with others.

Despite the bomb-clouded nature of our environment, there is no need to give in to pessimism. It is possible to rediscover the foundation of our humanity, however obscured it may appear to be. Men may confront their loneliness, their fragmentation, their isolation from the great stream of events which they understand only imperfectly, by returning so far as it is in their power to a feeling of responsibility for society and to taking part in meeting social needs.