

COMMUNITY SERVICE IS ESSENTIAL TO YOUR CONSTITUTION*

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Increasingly we hear the lament that Americans don't really have a civic spirit anymore. There is a pervasive view that in earlier times we were far more willing than we are today to help one another and to become involved in causes and public issues.

Actually, the past was not as good as remembered and the present is far better than perceived.

A far larger proportion and many more parts of our population are involved in community activity today than at any time in our history. We organize to influence every conceivable aspect of the human condition and are willing to stand up and be counted on almost any public issue. We organize to fight zoning changes, approve bond issues, oppose or propose abortion, improve garbage collection, expose overpricing, enforce equal rights, or protest wars.

As contrasted to those so called "good old days", in very recent times we have successfully organized to deal with a vast array of human needs and aspirations...rights of women, conservation and preservation, learning disabilities, conflict resolution, Hispanic culture and rights, education on the free enterprise system, the aged, voter registration, the environment, Native Americans, the dying, experimental theatre, international understanding, drunk

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driving, population control, neighborhood empowerment, control of nuclear power, consumerism, and on and on. Our interests and activities extend from neighborhoods to the ozone layer and beyond.

It is important to our national morale that we recognize and rejoice in the fact that we the people still care and still have enormous influence on our lives, our communities, the country and the world.

It is also important to realize that this active citizenship and community service now reflect every segment of our society. What had largely been the province of the upper classes and then of the upper and middle classes has finally broadened to include all of us. We owe a tremendous debt to Dorthea Dix and her kind and to the community leaders who served so many causes; but the grandest cheers should be reserved for the here-and-now when participatory democracy has truly come alive with all parts of the population joining in the traditions of service and reform.

There are more young people, more men and more older people.

To the surprise of all who have matter of factly assumed that with so many women now in the workforce that it's harder to find female volunteers, the happy reality is that there are more women serving as volunteers. Indeed, recent Gallup surveys provide the fascinating information that the woman who works for pay is more likely to volunteer than the woman who does not.

In a revealing piece on the importance of volunteering by women in the workforce, Rhoda M. Dorsey, President of Goucher College, explains that she and an increasing number of managers will not hire or promote women who don't have good records as volunteers because they lack experience, exposure and commitment.

She says:

"More and more corporations are becoming aware of the added value that employees who volunteer bring to their jobs. In marked contrast to twenty years ago, the majority of America's volunteers now also hold full time jobs. The Bank of America even evaluates its employees for promotion based in part on their community involvement.

There's a reason that corporations encourage their employees to volunteer. They know that volunteer work can break the routine of daily life and perk up interest and enthusiasm on

and off the job. The fact is that a person without outside interests is a very flat individual indeed. He or she is not the kind of person I'm interested in spending much time with in or out of the office.

The young women who aspire to the corporate boards of tomorrow need to start establishing their track records today. Volunteer work can provide visibility, experience, and confidence. But, more important, it can offer a very special brand of fulfillment not found at work or at home. Networking is just a small part of the story. Paying society back in some small way for all that we receive from it is the real 'bottom line'."

Every time I focus on this voluntary sector, I am more aware and encouraged that community service is a characteristic of our total population. Ninety percent of all giving in this country comes from individuals. Just about half comes from families with incomes under \$30,000. Nine out of ten adults are regular givers, and more than half are regular volunteers.

Twenty million Americans give five percent or more of our income to charity and twenty-three million of us volunteer five or more hours a week. The tithers are still the quintessential models of our caring society, but we should all at least be "fivers" — of money and time.

We are the only country in the world where giving and volunteering are already pervasive characteristics of the total society. It is absolutely essential to our organized neighborliness and to our success as a civilized people to build on that participation. "Fiving" is now the basic measure of our personal fulfillment of community responsibility.

Beyond the figures and enumeration of the many causes served it is important to recognize what these opportunities for outlets and pluralistic problem solving mean to the kind of people we are. I submit that all this voluntary participation strengthens us as a nation, strengthens our communities and strengthens and fulfills us as individual human beings.

The historian, Merle Curti, says, "Emphasis on voluntary initiative — has helped give America her national character...."

In doing the book, America's Voluntary Spirit I reviewed a great many of the major reform movements and what comes through in all of them is how much they contributed, not just to social change, but to the spirit, empowerment and freedom of people and country.

What comes through again and again is that the participation, the caring, the evidences that people can make a difference do add wonderfully to the spirit of our society. There's a marvelous piece done by Inez Haynes Irwin in "The Last Days of the Fight for Women's Suffrage." Again and again she comes back to the spirit of those women, not only in deciding on the task and accomplishing it, but what their success meant to them as human beings. "They developed a sense of comradeship for each other which was half love, half admiration and all reverence. In summing up a fellow worker, they speak first of her 'spirit,' and her 'spirit' is always beautiful, or noble, or glorious --."

It becomes so wonderfully clear that when people make the effort, not only are causes and people helped, but something very special happens for the giver too and in the combination, the community and the nation take on a spirit of compassion, comradeship and confidence.

Beyond the urgent causes and crusades, the independent sector simply provides people a chance to do their own thing -- to be different -- to be a bit freer -- to be unique. In the book, The Endangered Sector Waldemar Nielsen summarized the variety of interests that Americans freely pursue through their voluntary organizations:

If your interest is people, you can help the elderly by a contribution to the Grey Panthers; or teenagers through the Jean Teen Scene of Chicago; or young children through your local nursery school; or everyone by giving to the Rock of All Ages in Philadelphia.

If your interest is animals, there is the ASPCA and Adopt-a-Pet; if fishes, the Izaak Walton League; if birds, the American Homing Pigeon Institute or the Easter Bird Banding Association.

If you are a WASP, there is the English Speaking Union and the Mayflower Descendants Association; if you have a still older association with the country, there is the Redcliff Chippewa Fund or the Museum of the American Indian.

If your vision is local, there is the Cook County Special Bail Project and Clean Up the Ghetto in Philadelphia; if national, there is America the Beautiful; if global, there is the United Nations Association; if celestial, there are the Sidewalk Astronomers of San Francisco.

If you are interested in tradition and social continuity, there is the society for the Preservation of Historic

Landmarks and the Portland Friends of Cast Iron Architecture; if social change is your passion there is Common Cause; and, if that seems too sober for you, there is the Union of Radical Political Economists or perhaps the Theatre for Revolutionary Satire.

If your pleasure is music, there is a supermarket of choices — from Vocal Jazz to the Philharmonic Society to the American Guild of English Hand Bellringers.

If you don't know quite what you want, there is Get Your Head Together, Inc. of Glen Ridge, New Jersey. If your interests are contradictory, there is the Great Silence Broadcasting Foundation of California. If they are ambiguous, there is the Tombstone Health Service of Arizona.

You and other recent generations have taught us how essential it is that people be able to do their own thing and to have greater control of their own destinies. Whether it's expressed as doing one's own thing or empowerment, we are all now rigidly alert to the value and the joy of having options and alternatives, and having the power of citizens to experiment, to influence and, where necessary, to reform.

In essence, we have been painfully relearning the fundamental lessons of our ancestors, that independence — of persons and of societies — is the pre-eminent value.

That lesson has come so hard for many of us that we have become suspicious and wary of any interconnections that in any way might detract from our independence. Along the way of our learning, we became skeptical, bordering on cynical, about most of our institutions, even those created to serve or unite us. We want a religious experience, but are cool toward organized religion. We want democratic government to serve the common need, but are frightened and critical of the bigness of it. We want philanthropy and voluntary organizations for the support of our causes, but we don't want any self-appointed groups to define the public good.

We are aware how many of our aspirations and problems require joint action, but we are not comfortable with cooperation.

What has happened is that our attention to independence has vastly out-distanced our attention to the interdependence so necessary to almost everything we want to accomplish.

I suggest that we have now come to the absolutely essential next stage, which involves building a capacity for interdependence that

will enhance, not stifle, our uniqueness as individuals and as a society.

Perhaps the most urgent challenge faced by all of us who are trying to find solutions to staggering public problems is to build or rebuild institutions capable of representing the interdependence of so many diverse people. This will depend on whether educated men and women understand how this country really works and how much the future depends on their grasp of the balance between independence and interdependence and on their willingness to get involved.

As the long-term Director of the Mental Health Association, I watched a growing and maturing process as people with greater freedom and mobility searched for stability in a society that seems to be in agonizing flux and a world that seems to be spinning utterly out of control.

We say we feel powerless or frightened or overwhelmed. Everywhere there's evidence of our ubiquitous search for new schemes, philosophies and lifestyles that might help us cope, survive and maybe even be happy.

All of these problems would probably lead to my own depression were it not for the distinct glow of hope that I see coming up on the other horizon. We may be at a loss to know what to do with the increased independence and freedom most of us have, but at least we have it, and at least the search for more enlightened standards is widespread.

John Vasconcellos, a young California legislator, has contributed to my understanding of the chaos of our times by describing it as a period of "human revolution." In Vasconcellos's terms, this revolution involves a change in our basic assumptions and a challenge to many of our basic institutions. He says that the encouragement is "not so much that institutions are breaking down, but that people are growing up."

One of the very first lessons of this latest revolution for independence is that people need and want the discipline of values in their lives. Fulfillment relates to a values system, and independence relates to the worth of our interdependence.

In just one generation we have cast off laws and attitudes that oppressed at least our minds, learned that freedom in the form of empty excesses doesn't get us very far, and are now learning that the intelligent use of that freedom is to allow individuals and

communities to tailor-make the more enlightened discipline that we do want to govern us.

There are abundant evidences that people are seeking ways to achieve growth. The best-seller lists are heavy with self-help books. Many new groups are organizing to help expand our human experience and our coping mechanisms, new religions are being tried and old religions are reorganizing to find better ways to reach out, and more and more of us are experimenting with transcendental meditation, bio feedback, relaxation response, assertiveness training, E.S.T., mind control, reality therapy, psychocybernetics, transactional analysis, Zen, "I'm o.k. you're o.k." and we are even learning to screech the primal scream. We are also turning to altogether new lifestyles such as a return to nature, communes, voluntary simplicity and other arrangements in which we might find greater stability, peace and fulfillment.

The common denominator in all of these experiments is a searching for better ways to identify for oneself what the basic values are, and to build support for our own efforts to live our own true values.

Though each search produces an individual framework of values the end result of almost all such explorations is that the individual and society find their own understanding and their own articulation of such basic values as honesty, kindness, loyalty, fairness, sacrifice, discipline, peace, love and service. The new religions have in common with Jesus, Moses, Muhammad and Buddha that whether it's the Bible, Old Testament, Koran, Commandments, Torah or contemporary equivalent. Goodness remains basically the same and provide the greatest opportunity for personal fulfillment.

For reasons revolving around self or community, a predictable outcome of most painstaking searches for meaning will include a self imposed commitment to service. It is also predictable that though people who get involved with service open themselves to frustration and disappointment, —through it all and after it all— those moments of helping others and of making change happen for the better are among our lasting joys.

When any of us take inventory of the meaning of our lives, these special experiences of service have to be among the high points. Happiness is, in the end, a simple thing. Despite how complicated we try to make it or the entrapments we substitute for it, happiness is really caring and being able to do something about the caring.

In the community sense, caring and service are giving and volunteering. As far back as the twelfth century, the highest order and benefit of charity were described by Maimonides in the Mishna Torah: "The highest degree; than which there is nothing

higher, is to take hold of a Jew who has been crushed and to give him a gift or a loan or to enter into partnership with him or to find work for him, and then to put him on his feet so he will not be dependent on his fellow man."

In a world just forty years removed from the slaughter of six million Jewish human beings and still rampant with disease and other indignities of the vilest form and breadth, there is room for concern and caring, charity and volunteering. Indeed, in this still young democracy there is total dependence on citizen determination to preserve the freedoms so recently declared and to extend them to all.

The problems of contemporary society are more complex, the solutions more involved and the satisfactions more obscure, but the basic ingredients are still the caring and the resolve to make things better. From the simplicity of these have come today's exciting efforts on behalf of humanitarian causes ranging from equality to environment and from health to peace.

In the course of these efforts there is at work a silent cycle of cause and effect which I call the "genius of fulfillment," meaning that the harder people work for others and for the fulfillment of important social goals, the more fulfilled they are themselves. Confucius expressed it by saying that "Goodness is God," meaning that the more good we do, the happier we are, and the totality of it all is a supreme state of being. Thus, he said, God is not only a Supreme Being apart from us, but a supreme state of being within us.

A simpler way of looking at the meaning of service is a quotation from an epitaph:

What I spent, is gone
 What I kept, is lost
 But what I gave to charity
 Will be mine forever

Whether we want to express the meaning of service in involved ways or prefer simpler forms doesn't really matter. It can be charity or enlightened self-interest or people's humanity to people. These are all ways of describing why we serve, why service provides some of our happiest moments, and why the good that we do lives after us.

President Harry Truman is reported to have suggested that the best person to ask for advice or opinion should only have one arm. People like that, he said, are least likely to respond "Well, on the one hand this, but, on the other hand, that."

So, let me be very definite and conclude this way:

The democratic compact was recently beautifully but bluntly restated by John W. Gardner:

"Freedom and responsibility,
Liberty and duty -
That's the deal."

The United States is the longest-lived democracy in the history of the world.

This democracy has provided almost all of us with greater freedom and opportunity than any nation of human beings has ever known. Among the crucial factors that foster and preserve that democracy and those freedoms are active citizenship and personal community service.

No citizen -- particularly, no educated citizen -- can presume that fostering active citizenship to prolong our longest lived democracy to extend those glorious freedoms to those who come after us, is someone else's business.

Along the way of our service to others and community, we learn that a very large side benefit is an enormous sense of personal satisfaction, personal purpose and personal worth.

Thus, it is absolutely obvious to me that active citizenship and community service are essential to your own constitution and I know they are essential to the Constitution we all share.