

A NEW THRESHOLD FOR VOLUNTARISM*

by

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There are many paradoxes within the world community and within our own national social order. We have neither the time nor the purpose to consider most of these incongruities, even though many directly affect the progress of voluntary action. However, it is deliberate that attention be called to the existence and prevalence of paradoxes. Why? Because my professional experiences over many years are being brought into sharper focus with increasing meaning due to the face-to-face confrontations I frequently have with people who currently scoff at the value of voluntary action, volunteer service, citizen participation, or whichever term may be used.

It is possible to listen to the questions, to understand the points of view, to even agree with some of the concerns expressed. Still, my own reaction is one of puzzlement when some people conclude that voluntarism is unreal, a hoax, ineffective, or at best a stop-gap measure.

Undoubtedly, these recent experiences prompted me to take full advantage of my previous position with the Center for the Study of Voluntarism. To many persons, the study of this phenomenon may seem uninteresting or inconsequential. However, these people overlook the fascinating relationship between voluntarism and the progress of this nation. Indeed, the history of our country is a documentary about voluntary action and volunteer effort. I cannot state this too strongly, but since this seminar is being presented within the framework of higher education, I should like to publicly suggest that faculty members within social science departments—especially history—seriously consider the influential nature of voluntarism upon America's beginnings and development.

As I said a little earlier, it is puzzling why so many people are skeptical about the importance of voluntary activity. Undoubtedly, their perception of voluntarism is clouded by stereotypes, myths, and misinformation. Further, the lack of commonly agreed upon definitions hinders clear communication and fruitful discussion of this subject. Nevertheless, even a pragmatic approach should produce awareness and appreciation of the results contributed by voluntary action. Christopher Columbus was a volunteer. The Minutemen of 1776 were volunteers. Without voluntary action how many universities and colleges would we have today? How many churches and temples and synagogues? What would this country be like without volunteer fire departments, the Red Cross, 4-H Clubs, the PTA, the Jaycees, Community Chests, community hospitals, the AFL-CIO, the AMA, the

*Keynote Address, Seminar for Supervisors of Volunteers, Indiana University-Purdue University, at Indianapolis, Indiana, October 7, 1970.

**A Research and Action Project funded by the Department of HEW, and conducted under the auspices of the National Auxiliary to Goodwill Industries of America.

League of Women Voters, the NAACP, the National Council of Jewish Women, Knights of Columbus, the Shriners? And the list can go on and on.

These are the formal and organized voluntary associations and societies. We often overlook the individual volunteer who comes forward in time of need. Two weeks ago I was in California and witnessed destruction and devastation by a series of fires. Time after time the personnel on radio and TV stations announced that enough volunteers were available, and therefore others should stop calling the stations and offering their services. Primary political campaigns were recently concluded and general elections will soon be conducted for a variety of governmental positions. Questions being asked with growing regularity by candidates are how and where to obtain more volunteer workers. And for a final example, attention is directed toward the blood bank programs that are growing in size and number. How many people can feel more secure because of the volunteers who donate their blood in advance of emergencies?

The amazing number and variety of voluntary organizations plus the immeasurable instances of individual volunteer effort are solid basis for national pride. Certainly in recent years, I have become genuinely impressed with, and grateful for, the values and benefits our society has derived from voluntary participation of the citizenry.

Of more direct importance to this seminar and you, the participants, are the changes that have occurred and are occurring within what I refer to as the world of voluntarism. It is not very profound to observe that our society has changed dramatically in the past 70 years. Many of you, like myself, have parents or grandparents who can remember life in America around the turn of the century. Together we can marvel at the changes in communication, transportation, industrial production, medicine, education, family life, even religion. There is not one major aspect of American life that has not been directly and substantially affected by recent social and/or economic changes. As an integral element of the fabric of our society, voluntarism has not escaped the impact of these powerful changes.

The shorter work week has provided many individuals with increased leisure time that can be devoted to pursuits of personal interest. Communications progress has informed more people of the problematic conditions within our communities. Medical advancements have prolonged the life span while business policies have compelled early retirement. Educational levels have increased so that there are more people with specialized knowledge and proficiencies, yet they lack opportunities to apply their talents. More people live in congested urban centers that are impersonal in nature and facilitate polarization. Socio-economic conditions have deteriorated to the extent of causing increased incidence of existing problems plus the rise of new problems.

The impact of these changes upon voluntarism is obvious. There are more potential volunteers. There is greater awareness of the problems within our communities. There is genuine interest in doing something to solve these problems. There is solid interest in being involved in activities that have meaning to the larger society and that bring personal satisfaction.

There has been official recognition by our national leaders of the value of voluntary action by citizens from all strata of our society. While there are various perspectives on this topic, the inaugural address of the late President John Kennedy is a real landmark in the development of status for voluntary citizen participation. A highly sensitive and central nerve within the body of the American people was electrified through the words "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." During the next six years, federal legislation provided channels through which the American people could actively respond: The Peace Corps, VISTA, Community action agencies and the principle of maximum feasible participation, citizen involvement in Model Cities projects, and the participation of volunteers in public assistance programs. Within the past two years, the establishment of the National Program for Voluntary Action has projected the promise of vigorous national promotion of voluntarism.

And what has been the response by the American people? Growing interest and involvement! The number of volunteers in the 1960's has been calculated at about twice the number active during the 1940's. Included are all ages, both sexes, all races and nationalities, all educational levels, the spectrum of economic strata, and a wide range of occupations and professions. Propelled by motivations deeply imbedded in national traditions, Americans are enthusiastically applying voluntary action to many settings that either are new, or at least appear to be new. Schools, courts, correctional institutions, public assistance programs, facilities for drug addicts and alcoholics, low income housing developments, homes for the aged, and senior citizen centers. Inspired by the words of John Kennedy and encouraged by the efforts of Richard Nixon, volunteers are actively responding to the appeals of established organizations. Even more impressive are the new volunteer programs that are created every week by citizens who accept the slogan—"If You Are Not Part of the Solution, You Are Part of the Problem."

From the vantage point of a national project the changes are sharp and exciting. How gratifying is the official and national recognition of the potential that is America's greatest resource—the volunteer. Not a new or untested resource, but a vibrant and underdeveloped resource. This is what is exciting about the project HEW has funded through the National Auxiliary to Goodwill Industries and its parent corporation, Goodwill Industries of America. How can volunteers be involved in rehabilitation programs—both in greater quantities and with increased effectiveness? All who are aware of the state of rehabilitation within this country easily recognize the potential and challenge of this ambitious project.

The societal changes, and the changes in voluntarism, confront all of us with challenges. Previously enumerated were some of the changes in terms of numbers and characteristics. These changes are minor compared to other changes and their consequences. Volunteers are more sophisticated today. They bring special knowledge, talents, skills, experience. They seek responsible assignments—not always the mechanical and routine tasks that often have been little more than busy-work. Volunteers may be highly motivated, but they also want to experience satisfaction, and know their service is important and appreciated. They understand the importance of volunteer service, and therefore expect training that will prepare them to participate as competent members of the team.

It is this team concept that projects one of the most significant challenges to those who are responsible for organizing and administering volunteer programs. Staff members of agencies, and leaders of organizations, must recognize and accept the team concept if they genuinely desire to achieve the fullest potential of America's resources. The application of this concept is not easy, but it has little chance of being realized unless it is understood and given serious consideration.

To be a member of a team means participation in the important facets of the activity or program. Team members are partners, and function—to the extent possible—as equals. The primary factor that is required to accomplish a workable partnership is a positive attitude. Although it sounds simple and most people express agreement about positive attitudes, achieving a partnership is a result of determined efforts and flexible approaches by all members of the team. Clear division of roles, responsibilities, and authority is essential.

In relation to community agencies, there are three key members on the service team: the client or recipient of professional service, the staff member or paid employee of the agency, and the volunteer. If the goal of effective and efficient service is to be accomplished, these three team members must participate on a cooperative basis. They all must acquire ability to work with the others, as equals and as partners.

This is most difficult, under normal circumstances, for the staff person. There is the tendency to think of clients as inferior or deficient—otherwise why do they need our services. It is equally common to equate “volunteer” with “untrained” and visualize the volunteer as a well meaning but incompetent do-gooder. This type of thinking is not only tragic, it is generally invalid. Staff members must increasingly realize that every individual possesses certain skills, talents, experience, or characteristics that have potential value for the agency's program and the people served by that program. Training of volunteers, like training of staff, can enable the productive sharing of skills or experience in ways that achieve the agency's goals.

There is no intention to suggest that it is always easy for volunteers or clients to function within a team framework, or as equal partners with each other and staff members. Yet, it is often more difficult for these

two team members to accept the reality that the staff member usually and appropriately is assigned particular responsibilities and authority.

On the other hand, it is definitely intended to suggest that supervisors of volunteers must understand the essence of the team concept and accept the essential nature of the partnership relationship as relevant to volunteer programs. In striving to promote such understanding and acceptance I have coined the phrase "egalitarian voluntarism." Hopefully, this phrase captures the significance of the concept of teamwork and can elicit favorable actions or reactions.

It is not a matter of coincidence that the emphasis of this presentation is upon changes, concepts and challenges. As supervisors of volunteers, or directors of programs that involve volunteers, I propose that you accept direct responsibility for understanding the changes, accepting the challenges, and implementing the concepts. For you are the gatekeepers of a new period that has been called the Volunteer Era or the Age of the Volunteer. If only enough persons in positions like yours will recognize the threshold that beckons, and act with conviction and courage there is reason to believe that we all may share in the realization of a society that reflects a higher quality of life—brotherhood, harmony, stability and tranquillity.

That may sound like something a pot smoker or flower child might say. I don't qualify in either instance. Still, I will admit to being a dreamer. Without shame I ask you to dream along with me—and it might turn out the dreams are not as wild as they seem.

The implications and by-products of voluntarism are simultaneously intangible and concretely documentable. Participation in voluntary activities has influenced attitudes and modified behavior to the extent of reducing current trends of polarization and materialism. The generation gap has been minimized through cross-age volunteer activities. Opportunities for cooperating can lead to satisfying relationships that transcend age, geography, race, or other socio-economic characteristics. Volunteer service has provided individuals with real situations that call for creativity, self-expression, and the exercise of special skills or talents. Active citizen participation can help people retain their sense of personal identity, and reinforce their feelings of being useful. Finally, there is the impact on our society that can result from voluntary action.

Our nation's future stability and advancement depends on intergroup harmony, common acceptance of fundamental values, and the ability of people to voluntarily get together on matters of mutual interest. Voluntarism has demonstrated the capacity to facilitate harmonious and collaborative relationships, and, therefore, has a unique and vital role to play in our society.

To fulfill its role and help with the realization of our cherished dreams, voluntarism requires leadership—leadership from a variety of sources and at all echelons. Previously mentioned was the impetus generated through the Presidency of the United States. In addition, there have

been individual voices throughout our history advocating the values of volunteer service. In recent years national organizations and projects have highlighted the importance of voluntary activity. Within the past few years, national associations have organized persons responsible for directing, coordinating, and supervising volunteer programs.

The formation of these national associations is a particularly significant development from at least two perspectives. First, national organizations produce centralization, and centralization can provide leadership. It is very possible that voluntarism will be effectively propelled into greater national prominence, and a strong volunteer movement will be mobilized through the leadership of national bodies composed of local staff members who administer volunteer programs. The prospects are exciting and I encourage each of you to consider your own role as a leader in this dynamic movement.

Secondly, national associations—both old and new—are seriously considering the matter of professionalization. There is strong interest in the development of curricula and courses of study that might lead to specialized degrees. At least one university is exploring the awarding of a degree in Volunteer Administration. This seminar is an example of what is happening more frequently in all parts of the country. The number of paid directors, coordinators and supervisors of volunteers is rapidly growing. The interest and need for education and training is expanding beyond what anyone had anticipated.

Thus, the stage has been set. Many of the props are still undetermined or incomplete. The list of players is constantly growing. Most significant of all is that the script has hardly been started at all. I am proposing that you here today, your counterparts in cities and towns all over our nation—that all of us begin to prepare the script that will guide the future of voluntarism. To do this we need to dream, to face reality squarely, and as partners who believe in teamwork, to create the sequence of scenes that will enjoy the longest run of performance in America's history.

My suggestion for Act One of this script is the crisis state of our country. Americans have always responded gallantly in times of crisis. The progress of voluntarism parallels the major events of our nation's history. Therefore, it is essential that our fellow countrymen recognize the current crisis prevalent—even though not always clearly visible—within our society. If we can convince people there are serious problems that are of crisis nature, then history will repeat itself and Americans will voluntarily respond by serving and acting.

One caution, however. We must be prepared for the response. There must be positive acceptance of volunteer colleagues as partners and team members. There must be real and meaningful jobs. There must be training, supervision, and recognition. In other words, there must be a well developed program that can produce important results and provide satisfaction. It is the recognition of these essentials that prompts a sharpening of focus on this seminar.

This seminar may seem inconsequential to some, but I view it as a very important link in a chain that must be forged for the benefit of our nation, our societal development, and ourselves. The problems are sufficiently clear. The opportunities to act are adequately present. The implications of action or inaction must not be discounted.

The content of this seminar is oriented to elevating standards of practice in some of the most vital areas of program operation. The purposes of this seminar are directed toward the major goals of voluntarism as an integral facet of our society. Beyond the mechanics, the organization, and the three days of energy and effort, one question assumes primary priority. "Will the knowledge gained and the skills acquired (or improved) through this experience assist the expansion and extension of voluntary action throughout the Indianapolis Region?"

Only you can answer that question. It is hoped your answer will be positive and indicate your willingness to enthusiastically participate in the sessions that have been carefully organized. It is further hoped that when the program concludes on Friday you will depart with renewed spirit and highly-charged motivation to generate greater understanding of, and commitment to, voluntarism.

Are these hopes as John Keats wrote "beyond the shadow of a dream"? I prefer to think not. Carl Sandberg wrote "Nothing happens unless first a dream." But the quotation I wish to leave you with is from the pen of Berton Braley:

"Back of the beating hammer
By which the steel is wrought,
Back of the workshop's clamor
The seeker may find the thought.
Back of the job—the dreamer
Who's making the dream come true!"

Thank you and Good Luck.