



## The New Volunteerism Project

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#### LEADERSHIP OF VOLUNTEERS--ROADS WE MIGHT STILL TAKE

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#### Draft for discussion August 1997 by Ivan Scheier

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No better place to begin than Robert Frost's great poem, "The Road Not Taken." Here, the poet confronts a cross-roads in which "Two paths diverged in a yellow wood." Realizing he couldn't take both at once, he chose the road that "... was grassy and wanted wear." that is, the road less traveled. Then, being human, he remained curious about what the other path might have held. He hoped to try that path another day though "...knowing how way leads on to way" he "doubted if I should ever come back." Partly for that reason, the poet concluded that the path he did take "...made all the difference."

It may seem a long way from a yellow wood to volunteer administration-or more broadly, organized attempts to mobilize volunteer resources. Yet, I strongly believe there is a parallel. Over its half-century or so of existence, especially in its earlier years, there were paths volunteer administration might have taken that, by and large, it did not take. Here, we are both better and worse off than Robert Frost in his dilemma. Worse off, because the road we did take is by now so deeply grooved and heavily invested, that we are no longer even aware there were ever other alternatives – and probably weren't aware even at the time. We are better off than the poet because, once aware of alternatives, we can, in a collective sense, take both at once; that is, go back to the crossroads and explore the other path without abandoning the path we have already explored, settled, and developed. In all this, it is not that one path is necessarily better than the other but – as Frost seemed to recognize quite clearly – that both paths are potentially better than either alone.

Finally, there are crucial differences between the poet's choice and ours. He consciously chose the road less traveled. I believe volunteer administration unconsciously took the road most traveled. Examples follow.

#### CROSSROADS I – IN OR OUT OF STAFFED AGENCIES

All volunteerism can be divided in three parts (1); volunteers working within an organizations which has paid staff, and volunteers working outside such organizations. The latter group further divides into entirely volunteer groups and freelance individual volunteers not primarily associated with any staff agency or organization.

Now conceive of a group of your professional ancestors deliberately pondering the following questions. In developing concepts and competencies for the future profession of volunteer administration, should we concentrate on volunteer programs in staff agencies/organization or volunteers not working in association with paid staff?

If you can imagine such a scene, you have far better imagination than I do. Nor have I seen any record of such deliberate dialogue in articles on organized volunteerism dating as far back as 1936. Rather, I believe the "choice" to focus on what were essentially agency volunteer programs, was mostly a matter of reaction to massive unconscious momentum in society at that time – and since. Agencies and staffed service organizations, then and now, promised support for organized efforts to engage and supervise volunteers. They had special access to many of the most significant people needing help. They had prestige as specialists in ensuring that such help was skillfully given. Not least of all was the potential of carving out a new professional career role in leadership of volunteers as a staff role in agencies. Add that this would likely to be a paid position. Though our profession is the last you would think of as greedy, still one must eat, and money does matter if you want to do so. This must have been especially so in the days when professional careers for women were more limited than they are today.

Of course, there was, and still is, some overlap and interaction between the agency and non-agency roads. As but one example, many volunteer centers have always worked with entirely volunteer groups, and even the freelancers. But on the whole, I believe taking one path rather than the other made a real difference. For examples, in a recent book, (2) I

concluded there were important differences, at the very least of emphasis, between effective leadership of volunteers in agency programs and in entirely volunteer groups.

So "agency volunteer programs" was indeed a distinct road most traveled by volunteer administration, even though "the other road" is one on which, I strongly believe, most people do most of their volunteering, including quite a bit of the more innovative kind. That this road was nevertheless, such less traveled, at least by us, is evidenced by a "book count" – perhaps 100 texts on volunteer programs in staffed organizations, and only two generic texts I can find on volunteers outside of such organizations (note "generic," I know there are handbooks for specific all-volunteer groups such as volunteer fire departments, 4-H groups, etc.)

Traveling back to the crossroads I begin to see a way around one of the potential barriers on the non-agency volunteerism path – the presumed lack of career potential in leadership. There is at least one very conceivable paid career line as consultant and contract operator to a set of entirely volunteer (or grossly, understaffed) groups. Part-time for each, on retainer and/or special contract, this person would offer services such as occasional on-call troubleshooting, technical assistance in planning or other program functions, plus as appropriate, actual operation of certain program pieces such as newsletter, membership campaigns, education events. In fact, Secretariat/Association Management firms or individuals have been performing this kind of function for many years, though rarely in the area of volunteer development. Two people who are doing that, too, thus pioneering the full role, are California-based consultants Barbara Bradley and Nancy Hughes.

## CROSSROADS II – THE GENERAL ROLE OF THE VOLUNTEER

The ways in which, historically, the general role of the volunteer was defined, were not, I maintain, necessary and inevitable. They represented, instead, one of two or more ways in which that could have been done, and in that sense at least, were "choices," though hardly conscious ones – the conditioning behind them was too powerful and automatic for that. The power and automatic-ness in turn resulted from a fundamental decision as to direction already taken and discussed here – to concentrate volunteer administration on situations in which volunteers coexist with paid staff in a program agency or other organization.

Thus, modeling on traditional views of paid staff roles in an agency, we have tended to view volunteers as "designated helpers" or resources, working with designated help-needer (clients). That is, the volunteer is almost always seen as someone who "has it" and is willing to share it with someone who doesn't have it, be it a skill, talent, or material resource. The literacy volunteer teaches the illiterate person to read, not vice versa. Indeed, rarely do we emphasize in any fashion, the ways in which the client can help the volunteer. Some years ago, I published research identifying the differences between successful one-to-one matches of volunteers with troubled youth, and unsuccessful matches. One of the most dramatic of the differentiators was that in successful matches, the youth perceived herself/himself as actively helping the volunteer. From the interviews with the volunteers, and experience as a volunteer in the program myself, I tended to believe that perception was generally true. And yet, the finding received little attention, for example, in its implication that we might well do more to train and encourage clients to help their volunteers. (I once heard of a program that trained volunteers and clients together to work better together, but I never tracked that program down). Yes, today, more attention is being given to peer counseling, peer monitoring and other programs of that type. And yet, it seems to me, if we were really following "that other road" more, we would be doing more to recruit, train and support "mutual assistance sets" as volunteers, as couples, triples, more extensive networks, and as self-help groups. (3) Further, we would clearly see each member of the mutual assistance set as equally volunteers and clients to one another.

But that is still the road that, by and large, we have not taken.

Another facet of volunteer role that largely grows out of the "decision" to focus on staffed agencies, is accountability. The "other road" here would be to do for individual volunteers what the effective community organizers does for groups – find out what they want to do and are willing to do, then help them do it, almost whatever that happens to be. But for the most part, and because we did take the agency – setting road, volunteer administration has emphasized volunteer "accountability" to the agency. In plainer words, that means a control agenda takes precedence over what might be called a "release" model. We want the volunteer pretty much to do what we want her to do and not do what we don't want her to do – all of this in basic conformance to the host organization's mission and purposes. That is why the chapter headings in a text on volunteer administration include headings like "job descriptions," "screening," "orientation," "training," "supervision," "evaluation," and even "recognition." Risk management? Liability, insurance? Staff-volunteer relations? Loose cannon need not apply. Management as enabling is a wonderful concept, but it doesn't extend to things like enabling a talented hospital volunteer to sing arias in the intensive care unit. Or anything like it.

The release model – helping a volunteer be what she can be, sometimes, instead of what the organization wants her to be – does have some presence in current practice; for example, when a volunteer center or RSVP sensitively identifies the volunteer's areas of potential growth and fulfillment, then places her/him in a position which best matches that, selected from a very wide range of possibilities. Similarly, for any single agency with a wide range of volunteer job opportunities and/or a flexible attitude towards allowing/encouraging volunteers to design their own jobs. Yet, where this is far more likely to happen is on the road not taken, that is, in entirely volunteer groups, especially smaller or newer ones, I should think. Most of all, it can happen with freelance volunteering and probably explains the attraction of that involvement mode for many people.

One aspect of volunteer accountability is to agree consistently to work on the problems the agency has decided are primary for it. Generally, and again in large part because volunteerism is agency-sited and oriented, our approach to volunteer roles is problem-driven. That is, we identify a problem, then try to find volunteers to work on the problem. The "other road" here would be asset-oriented rather than problem-oriented; we would discover the talents, abilities, and motivations of the volunteer, then find some problem to which these could be most effectively applied. I called the philosophy "people approach" (Working from glad gifts and all) and can testify that it was never the mainstream approach in volunteer administration. (4) How could it be, given agency needs, naturally for conformity of volunteers to its purposes and, even more important, perhaps, its style? All this with anxiety in the absence of the greatest conformity-encourager of all—money.

Sometimes – when the moon is full – I even wonder whether it is agency influence and habit that prevents us from seeing that volunteering is not so much a job as a style. Thus, instead of supporting people in the good things they do naturally, and not always on schedule, then honoring them with the title "volunteer," we insist on boundaries, training, minimum hours, etc.; in other words, definition of volunteering on the model of agency staff, as a job (which happens not to be paid). It seems to me, however, that intensifying what "walkaround volunteers" do naturally, in situ, is just as skillful and may be even more effective than what we do today to work on problems via programs composed of volunteer jobs.

I have glimmers of hope on this score. On two occasions, and perhaps three, I've been able to verify instances in which the person responsible for volunteers did not recruit one person whose "job" it was to help the client. Instead, they identified some actual or potential "natural helpers" in the client's environment and supported/intensified their efforts.

### CROSSROADS III – THE CAREER IN VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

If we had gone down the road of volunteerism outside of agencies, the career role would not have been-as it almost always is now-a staff role within the agency/organization. What the role might have been has been mentioned earlier: a consultant to entirely volunteer groups (where one couldn't be an inside paid staffer) because no single group could afford one. Otherwise, working with freelance volunteers, there was some intimation of a role as "community connector," connecting the freelancer with needed resources and/or with other individuals or groups of overlapping interest. Such a community connector/enabler might be a paid staffer in an agency, e.g. community development division of city government, but could also be an independent consultant or resource person.

On the road we took – volunteers coexisting with paid staff in a agency – it was natural enough that the professional leadership role for volunteers became understood as a paid staff position within the organization. Essentially, as I've understood it, the volunteer coordinator/director role evolves as specialist-the principal repository of in-depth knowledge about volunteers, and their advocate within the agency/organization. Of course, the hope was always to share that knowledge and that commitment, as widely as possible with other staff: the coordinator volunteers as an adult educator-but that didn't necessarily happen. In fact, an all-too-plausible, if rarely conscious scenario was for other staff to "relax" about volunteers, or virtually ignore them because Mary over there, the volunteer coordinator, was the specialist who would take care of the volunteer thing. Along that line, does it strike anyone as strange that we have a volunteer program, but not a staff program? What does that signify?

Another path is possible here, however, in which every staff person, would be equally responsible for volunteers as one of their expected competencies and commitment. They would be recruited and trained and supervised and evaluated on that basis. In fact, I saw this model on my first visit to Australia in the early 1970's. In service agencies, every staff member had essentially equal responsibility for working productively with volunteers; it was, OF COURSE, something every staff person should know and be able to take responsibility for. The notion of a volunteer coordinator/specialist frankly puzzled them, though, unfortunately or not, the next time I visited, a few years later, there were a few of them. I always worried that a few too many people may have listened to me, and a useful "experiment" therefore ended. Because, in the everyone-shares-responsibility mode, the Australians were doing very nicely, thank you, as far as I could see.

On that path then, every staff member would be recruited, screened, trained, supervised, and evaluated with the understanding that working with volunteers was a primary INTEGRAL responsibility of theirs. Much as every staff member in a mental health agency, outside of administration and support, would be expected to have satisfactory competency in mental health counseling.

In this mode, the person who today is a volunteer coordinator as staff person within one agency, would be an "outside" consultant trainer brought in to each of a number of agencies to upgrade the general level of competency in working with volunteers. In that role, they would be likely to have, I should think, more prestige and status than the average coordinator of volunteers today.

### AFTER THOUGHTS

If you've read this far, you might be wondering what you're supposed to do with this paper. Indeed, you might have some fairly specific ideas. My own idea would be to request two kinds of responses:

First, what do you think about the particular examples(s) I've presented about road(s) volunteer administration did and did not take? Plausible? Meaningful? Potentially useful as a basis for further action? Please note here that I've only

suggested that leadership of volunteers explore another road(s) without abandoning the present agency-related one. Indeed, people with inconveniently long memories may recall that way back in the sixties, one of the more vocal advocates of the present road was-guess who?

Secondly, can you think of other examples of alternative tracks never yet explored and worth exploring now? This is something like trying to think in some detail what it would have been like to have married someone other than the person you did marry. Not easy, and could be quite de-stabilizing emotionally. Actually, it's taken me about five years to articulate even partially the example I've presented here, and it remains a pretty emotional experience. So don't expect quick results. But in case you'd like to try, these examples might prime the pump...WHAT IF, the road we'd taken ----

- Made recognizing, rewarding and training staff far more primary than the same for volunteers?
- Saw ourselves more as ministers than as managers?
- Recognized from the outset that the most powerful national voice for volunteer leadership would be a facilitated network of independent local professional associations, rather than a relatively more hierarchical single organization? What if?

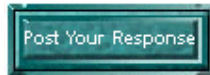
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(1) ...or in twenty-three parts, or any other ...depending on the purpose for which you categorized. The 3-part classification seems a useful framework for the present discussion.

(2) WHEN EVERYONE'S A VOLUNTEER; THE EFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING OF ALL-VOLUNTEER GROUPS. ENERGIZE ASSOCIATES, 1992.

(3) A related strategic restructuring with promise of "recruiting" more voluntary support for organizations, is seeing volunteers not just as "inside" enlisted workers but also as relevant outsiders with whom you can negotiate mutually beneficial working relationships. These cooperating "outsiders" would include entirely volunteer groups and freelance individual volunteers.

(4) But it may become more accepted elsewhere, as in John Mcknight's approach to neighborhoods and The Search Institute's Development Assets Youth Program.



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