THE DAY THE VOLUNTEERS DIDN'T

BY BENJAMIN DEMOTT

Comedians always poke fun at den-mothering—the activity of leading a Cub Scout troop. And I remember that my wife's tenure at the job did produce a few funny stories. Mostly these were about the spectacular ineptitude of somebody in the group at apple-doll carving and other "arts and crafts."

On the whole, though, the den-mothering interludes, like my own experience on a school parent council, or in Boy Scout fund-raising projects, can't really be described as comic. Things keep happening that bring you up short. A highly likable youngster from a big family shows up for cold-weather hikes in broken-down shoes with holes in the soles; his father, it emerges, is unemployed. What to do? A Polish asparagus-farmer's kid quits the group after three sessions, in theory because of a conflict with church confirmation classes. But when my wife reschedules den meetings to avoid the conflict and calls up to explain what she's done, the Polish kid's mother refuses—in broken but emphatic English—to let him return.

Both my wife and I know that lots of people can't afford decent shoes for their children, just as we know that commerce isn't always easy between rural and urban types, or between unmeltable ethnics and WASPs like ourselves. But it's only when somebody you care about directly is involved that that kind of knowledge has any weight. "Democracy," said John Dewey, "is conjoint communication" among persons and classes elsewhere sealed off from each other. More than once, den-mothering and our other bits of "service" have led to such communication. A door opens outward from a middle-class, college-town, nuclear-family system and, for a moment, we have a wider view.

The broad label for the sort of activity I'm speaking about is "voluntarism"—non-money-compensated efforts by private persons at jobs they believe contribute to the health and well-being of the general society. And the reason for speaking about it just now is that, owing to a range of forces—the women's movement, increasing political militancy among the disadvantaged, and a new, so-called enlightened selfishness, or self-absorption—voluntarism in America is on the decline.

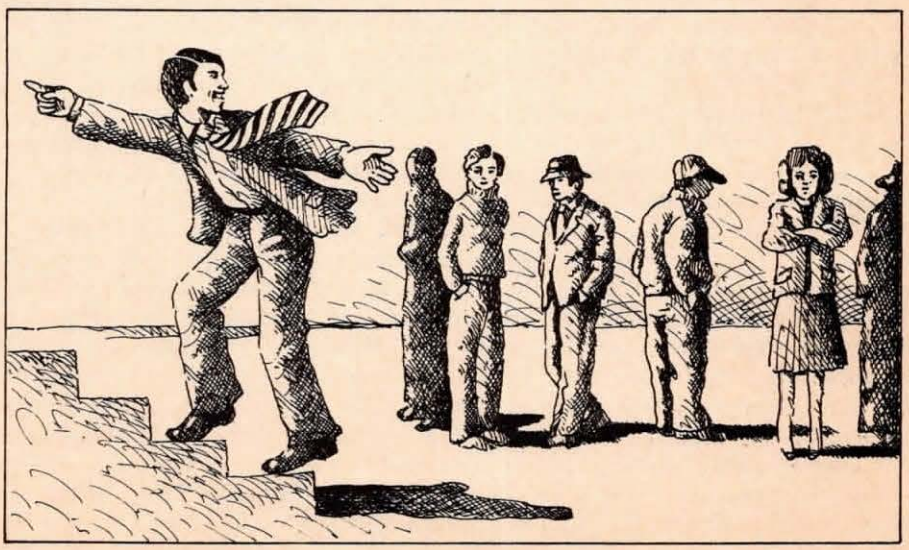
Of course our country has an enormous amount of capital to spend before its voluntary spirit goes broke. Nowhere in the world has the status of volunteering been higher than in the United States. The nation's innovations on this front are numberless—minutemen, barn-raising, volunteer fire companies, the Peace Corps, and many others. And a phenomenal portion of the population continues to participate in them. In 1974, a Census Bureau study reported that 35 to 40 million people—which is a quarter of the U.S. population over the age of 13—engage in volunteer activity every year. The National Center for Voluntary Action sets this figure about 10 million higher.

An American Tradition

The numbers don't tell the full story. Our sense that we, as Americans, possess a unique aptitude for spontaneous cooperative endeavor is a key element in our vision both of ourselves and our country. The traditions of American voluntarism amount to a faith, not only in the possibilities of self-realization and growth, but in the nation's capacity to defend itself against the types of alienation endemic to modern and postmodern industrial civilization. The news media are endlessly bemused by stories about citizens organizing on the spot as private persons associating for the common good, to contend against adversity—whether in areas ravaged by natural disaster, or towns abandoned by their chief industry, or city blocks harried by robbers and rapists. Time and again we choose as our political leaders people with a gift for clarion soundings of voluntaristic themes. President Jimmy Carter and California's Governor Jerry Brown are only the latest examples. Time and again the millions who subscribe to *Reader's Digest* are uplifted by elevating episodes of community spirit.

Yet despite statistical and other evidence of the continuing American commitment to voluntarism, there are significant danger signs. Some are psychological in nature—attitudinal shifts visible in various registers of popular taste, such as best-selling self-help manuals. Others are political and economic. All occasion worry at the leadership level in volunteer groups and organizations, including the influential National Assembly for Social Policy and Development.

A former executive director and a former president of the National Assembly, Gordon Manser and Rosemary



Bernard Bonhomme

Cass, recently published a study called *Voluntarism at the Crossroads*, which warns that forces currently in play could result in "death by erosion" for "the entire voluntary sector in the present critical period." The notion that "the vital spark of voluntarism should be allowed to flicker or be extinguished seems unthinkable," the authors argue. Nevertheless, they insist that "there is disquieting evidence that this is precisely what is happening."

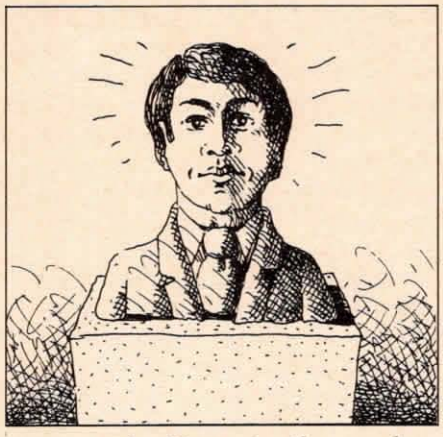
Not every spokesperson in the field sounds troubled—not, at least, when talking for attribution. Having heard some crisis talk among friends in the volunteer movement, I decided to check it out in interviews with executives of volunteer organizations. While conceding increasing difficulty in recruiting volunteers, some of them preferred not to be quoted on the subject, on the implicit ground that downbeat words would only worsen the situation, or at least darken the positive images organizations feel obliged to project.

It's a fact, though, that many authorities believe that the hour for professions of good cheer is long past. Rev. Donald Larsen, executive director of the Lutheran Council of the United States, told me bluntly that recruiting is now "a serious problem and getting more so." Shirley Leviton, chairwoman of the National Council of Jewish Women's Task Force on New Perspectives, sees voluntarism as "definitely facing a bad time." There are still some idealists around, says Mrs. Leviton, "but only some. People seem to be after instant gratification. 'What's in it for me? I'll do a service, maybe I'll give some time—but what do I get out of it?'" In other words, insiders feel that American voluntarism is in trouble.

Voluntarism as Exploitation

One of the problems most commonly cited is the change in attitude among women toward volunteer work. In the past, such work constituted a woman's best chance for personal development. But at present there's some powerful competition: advanced schooling, the promise of salaried careers without upward limit, and other opportunities. The situation is further complicated by a 1974 convention resolution passed by the National Organization for Women, which asserted flat out that practically all unpaid volunteer work now done by women is an unconscionable exploitation. The resolution didn't deny that this work needs doing; it claimed only that in a just society, necessary work is paid for, and that our society's reluctance to ante up betrayed a lingering instinct for oppression.

Henceforth, said NOW, let there be no more "service volunteers," only change- or advocacy-oriented volunteers—which is to say, political workers in the women's and allied causes. And that challenge has been heard. Census Bureau studies indicate that the most typical member of the volunteer movement in America is a married, college-educated, upper-middle-class



woman under 45—or, in other words, a person perfectly capable of comprehending the charges against voluntarism leveled by the NOW resolution. It's widely believed that the newer feminist attitudes of condescension or outright hostility, together with the expansion of life opportunities outside the volunteer sector, are not only hampering recruitment, but are also weakening commitment among workers already aboard.

Another problem for volunteers—less dramatic but by no means marginal—arises from the increasingly complicated kinds of social problems that volunteer workers are obliged to address. In the helping-others world, well-intentioned but untrained amateurs tend to be disasters on the job. At first glance, the growth of awareness in volunteer agencies that goodwill isn't enough seems a promising development. It's a step forward from moral preening and sentimental do-goodism to the unillusioned realization that to be genuinely helpful to another takes brains and understanding. Nancy Palmer, of Traveler's Aid, a well-regarded veteran agency executive, announces with relief that "the day of the unskilled volunteer is over." If so, a breakthrough toward higher effectiveness and better management of human resources is at hand.

Yet, regardless of the need for professional standards, most altruistic, unpaid human ventures cannot command for long the labor of the highly skilled. Few first-time volunteers come equipped with expertise. To become effective at social-welfare work, they need a stretch of on-the-job experience, exposure to professional methods, and objectivity. Their effectiveness depends not alone on native kindness but upon intellectual mastery of pertinent social, economic, and psychological realities as well.

But newcomers face other obstacles. More and more frequently, say agency executives, volunteers at the entry level of service meet chilly receptions from career-oriented professionals who doubt the seriousness of their commitment. Faced with such a put-down, the new volunteer asks, Why should I take this when I can have a "real" job somewhere else? Professionals are no doubt right to stress the need for knowledge, but too often they do so tactlessly, and thereby turn off recruits just as abruptly as NOW sought to do when it dismissed the woman volunteer as a victim of exploitation.

The Volunteer as Sucker

Then there are several subtler influences working against voluntarism. One is the emergence of a new cynicism about human solidarity in general, and service to others in particular. At the level of popular culture, it surfaces in dogma laid down by today's popular paperback self-help sages: that responsiveness to the needs of others contributes nothing to one's own self-development. *Face it*, say these self-proclaimed tough-minded realists. *There's nobody in the world who will ever matter as much to you as Number One, so why not be honest? When people ask you to pitch in, tell them to buzz off. It's your life and you only go around once.* Absorption in personal choices of "lifestyle" and self-fulfillment has brought on a wave of narcissism that overpowers the older ethic of human interdependency. In narcissistic eyes, unpaid volunteers are naïfs, suckers, or both.

Voluntarism has also been criticized in recent years in intellectual circles as

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politically counterproductive, a barrier to social justice rather than a means of achieving it. Hard-nosed sociopolitical thinkers condemn the "service ideal" as a form of moralistic ego-tripping—an indulgence on the part of people who are living out fantasies rather than attempting seriously to cope with the lives of others. This complaint has now been taken up by political movements. The once silent minorities of this country have begun to attack the motives of their former "longtime friends" among the privileged and powerful, who, they now say, have used the poor, rather than defending them. The federal government—so runs the argument—grants tax-exempt status to any organization founded to serve others, even though the others aren't consulted about whether they're interested in subsidizing, through their taxes, the Nice Folks who offer the free services.

Finally, there's the money crisis. Contributions to volunteer organizations have barely kept pace with inflation, and run badly behind the increased demand for services. Yet, while every authority in the field emphasizes, understandably, the financial crunch, I didn't come away—after talking with the experts and surveying the professional literature—with the impression that the root problem is money. Nor does the tension between professionals and amateurs, or between the volunteer movement and the women's movement, seem all that critical.

The pivotal problem, as the most thoughtful leaders perceive it, is the broad public conception of the volunteer effort. While that effort is popularly understood as "in the American grain," and as idealistic at its core, it's also seen as marginal, elitist, and incommensurate with the enormous social problems that it presumes to address. And for most people, unfortunately, the relation between voluntarism and personal growth remains obscure.

Prospects for the Future

What can be done to improve matters? One proposal with substantial support in volunteer circles calls for changes in the Internal Revenue Code that would democratize opportunity for volunteer service by altering the structure of tax deductions for charitable contributions. A person who contributes time and skills in volunteer work would be al-

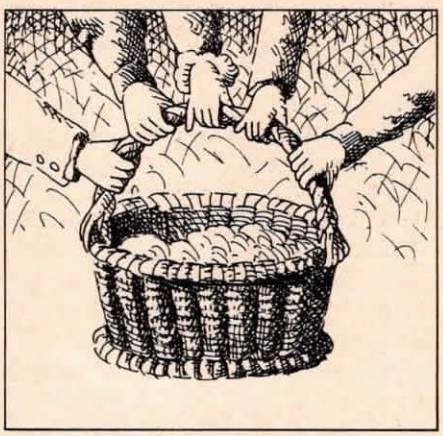
lowed to compute the value of the service rendered by multiplying a specified number of hours by the minimum wage, and claiming that amount as a tax deduction. Proponents assert that the effect would be to widen the socioeconomic range of citizens engaging in volunteer activity, thus erasing the elitist stigma.

Other leaders in the movement are turning more directly to federal and state governments for help in meeting the gap between rapidly increasing demands for services and much slower increases in donations for agency support. Many volunteer groups now compete with each other for direct government grants or for contracts under which the government buys a certain kind and quantity of social service from one or another independent agency.

The pursuit of government contracts, like the idea of seeking tax benefits for volunteer work, has met strong opposition. Throughout its history, the volunteer movement has had an advocacy dimension. Some leaders fear that acceptance of public funds will inevitably weaken their organizations as political-action groups or instruments of social reform. Others, skeptical about attempts to introduce compensation into volunteer work, stress that such a change could alter the whole spirit of voluntarism, quite aside from inhibiting political action. Tax benefits might or might not provide an incentive to persons from hitherto excluded socioeconomic groups to volunteer. But the real question is, What happens to commitment if the volunteer becomes money-oriented?

Some experts contend that both the magnitude of this nation's unmet social needs and the importance of nurturing the voluntaristic idea as a national resource argue for massive government intervention—in the form of federally funded volunteer programs. "Young people have a responsibility to serve their fellowman," says Don Eberly, senior policy analyst for ACTION and executive director for the National Service Secretariat. But now, he feels, they have the responsibility without a fair means of discharging it. Eberly is proud of the contribution made by students through ACTION's National Student Volunteer Program (close to 50,000 man-years of service annually). But he claims that if young people had the option of engaging in full-time national service that simultaneously contributed to their educational growth and to the financing of further formal schooling, this contribution could be increased "ten- to twentyfold."

Eberly does not believe it's utopian to think of providing that option. The government has learned a lot, he argues, from its experience with small-scale national service models like VISTA. And it could put that learning to productive use in creating a National Youth Service. What Eberly has in mind is a federally supported program of guaranteed service opportunities enabling all who want to serve to do so. He conceives of it not as an "elitist"



program like the Peace Corps or a nonelitist program like the Job Corps, but one that would attract a broad spectrum of young people from all classes; and one that would forge links, through cooperative arrangements with colleges and universities, between service and "service-learning." Such a National Youth Service would enroll a million participants a year at a cost to the government of about $5,300 each. The money would flow out from Washington to city, state, and other nonprofit agencies that qualified as NYS "sponsors" by establishing their ability to supply supervision, in-service training, and jobs to each participant, and by agreeing, in addition, to pay a fee of $200 to the government for each participant enrolled.

To economists of the Peter Drucker or E. F. Schumacher stamp, massive schemes like Eberly's look scary—despite the apparent feasibility of carrying them out without creating a huge new federal bureaucracy. And until new levels of understanding are reached about the place of volunteer activity in personal development, we will probably not see much broad-based support for the youth-service idea, for tax benefits for volunteers, for enlarged federal subsidies for enterprises like United Way, or for any other measure seeking to stimulate the volunteer sector. In other words, not until people are clearer about "what's in it for me." Official and unofficial discussion of voluntarism continues to focus on the country's failure to meet its pressing social needs or upon the feasibility of using volunteer programs as devices for reducing unemployment. The relevance of voluntarism to human psychological growth and the health of social and political relationships within the citizenry go virtually unnoticed.

It's not that the subject hasn't been broached by first-rate minds. William James studied it a half century ago in the famous proposal for a volunteer youth service that he called "The Moral Equivalent of War." American philosophers from Mead to Dewey have spoken forcefully on the stunting effect of privatism, separatism, and self-absorption on human growth. Resources are plentiful, in short, with which to develop a new, national dialogue on voluntary association as something far more consequential than a high-mindedness high. It could be an instrument of democratic renewal as well as of social problem-solving.

But if such a dialogue is to have impact, it will have to be based upon a clear understanding of the connection between giving and psychological growth. Voluntarism must be seen as essential to self-fulfillment, as a guardian of mental health. "After all," says Barbara Sloane, former director of the Council of Jewish Women's Field Services, "voluntarism allows people to give of themselves. That's what it's all about—unselfconscious giving. If you take away from anybody the opportunity to give of themselves, then you're holding them back. You're actually hindering their development as human beings."

The hip sensibility of the present hour, intent on being "realistic," but confusing realism with a mindless narcissism, tends to scorn that kind of talk. It holds that intelligent and imaginative caring is a human impossibility. Like other fashions in thought and feeling, this one won't last forever. But not until it's explicitly challenged will the chances for the rejuvenation of American voluntarism improve.

Benjamin DeMott is a journalist, essayist, book reviewer, and professor of English at Amherst College.