

WORK THAT PAYS BUT NOT IN COIN
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GLEANINGS FROM CONTEMPORARY WRITERS

Howard Cutler, M.D. *The Art of Happiness*

In recent years there have been many studies that support the idea that developing compassion and altruism has a positive impact on our physical and emotional health. Investigators at the University of Michigan, for instance, found that doing regular volunteer work, interacting with others in a warm and compassionate way, dramatically increased life expectancy and probably overall vitality as well. Many other researchers in the new field of mind-body medicine have demonstrated similar findings...

In addition to the beneficial effects on one's physical health, there is also evidence that compassion and caring behavior contribute to good emotional health. Research has shown that reaching out to others can help induce feelings of happiness, a calmer mind and less depression. In a thirty year study of a group of Harvard graduates researcher George Valliant concluded that adopting an altruistic lifestyle is a critical component of good emotional health.

Another survey by Allan Luks, conducted with several thousand people who were regularly involved in volunteer activities that helped others, revealed that over 90% of these volunteers reported...feelings of warmth, energy and a kind of euphoria. They also had a distinct feeling of calmness and enhanced self-worth following the activity. Indeed, it was also found that this "helper's calm" was linked to relief from a variety of stress-related physical disorders as well.

** REFLECTIONS **

If you attended services here on Labor Day you would have heard words of praise and appreciation for the employees of the Findorff Corporation and their sub-contractors who worked diligently and skillfully on this amazing building we have just begun to enjoy. Three weeks ago I extolled their craftsmanship, commitment to quality, efficiency and collaborative problem solving. The people who worked on this complicated project were well paid for their efforts, but I believe we owe them our gratitude as

well as our money. These are honorable people and they did well by us.

But there's another side to the story. Assisting the process were dozens of willing volunteers of varying skills and abilities. Among other tasks they helped deconstruct the Lower Meeting House, moved equipment and supplies into and out of our temporary offices and classrooms, chipped old mortar off blocks of limestone so they could be re-set in new walls, painted drywall, pulled wire through conduits and weeds from the berm. They created original artwork, built furniture, planted trees, shrubs, flowers and ornamental grasses, developed new signage and educational materials, generated publicity, press releases and financial reports and raised enough money to move the project forward.

Many things about this building make it special: the uniqueness of its design, the beauty of its natural elements, its spaciousness, the way it complements the Landmark Meeting House. But beyond all of that, throughout this facility one finds clear evidence of the instrumental role members of this congregation played in bringing this dream to fruition.

But this is what faith communities do, and this is what makes them fairly unique among modern institutions. Like any non-profit organization churches require a certain level of paid, professional staffing in order to be effective. But without an ongoing, dependable investment of time and energy from its members, FUS would be nothing more than a hollow shell. As organizational consultant **Douglas Johnson** puts it:

Most congregations can exist during a clergy person's vacation or times of illness or during the weeks or months between clergy persons. Churches do not close simply because a professional minister is not around. On the other hand, no church can exist for a month without volunteers.

First Unitarian Society is fortunate to be so rich in what **Robert Putnam** describes as "social capital." Hundreds of individuals step forward each year to collaborate with staff and with each other, creating thereby valuable networks of social connection and strengthening the bonds of community. Together, we get the work done and in so doing become present for one another and responsible to one another.

The United States is an exceptional country in this respect. Roughly fifty percent of Americans report regular participation in some sort of volunteer activity - twice the rate of their counterparts in other industrialized nations. Quite often, faith communities provide the context and the impetus for such involvement.

Historians say that this was one of colonial America's more notable departures from European conventions. When **Alexis de Tocqueville** came from France in the 1830's to observe life in the United States he was most amazed by its vibrant civic culture -- the plethora of organizations established and maintained not by professionals but by cadres of volunteers.

Religious fervor motivated many early Americans to serve as volunteers. Whereas citizens in the Old World typically had no choice about their religious affiliation - everyone was required by law to subscribe to a single confession or suffer the consequences -- across the Atlantic, a new pattern of voluntary association was being established. In a pluralistic and competitive religious environment, the success or failure of any particular faith community often depended upon the congregation's level of commitment as much if not more than the preacher's persuasiveness.

Outside the church, in the secular sphere, "enlightened self-interest" often played a key role in the development of volunteerism. Businessmen and artisans contributed time and resources to organizations that served the public interest because such investments, they believed, would give them a leg up in the marketplace. It was presumed that appreciative citizens would be more likely to return the favor and patronize those establishments that were less selfish and more civic-minded.

As a result of these two forces - religious and economic - a unique culture gradually grew up. Unselfish service to others or to the larger community became a virtue in its own right, independent of rational calculation or religious affiliation. Volunteering became a "habit of the heart" as **Robert Bellah** characterized it.

We are still living with that legacy, and it continues to inform our thinking and factor into our decision-making. Still, the impetus to serve is not as strong as it once was. With the ascendancy of market-place values and the professionalization of human services Americans' enthusiasm for volunteerism has waned. Between 1975 and 2000, **Robert Putnam** reports, overall rates of participation in voluntary enterprises declined significantly - especially among those

in the 30-60 age range. This shift may well reflect the increasing demands modern life places on people in mid-life. More hours of work are now required to support a family, maintaining larger, better equipped homes takes more time, and there is constant pressure to engage in consumption-related activities.

Though understandable, these trends are troubling because this country's social cohesion and civic health have always been closely tied to the selflessness of its citizens. To the extent that service clubs, neighborhood associations, faith communities, environmental groups, food pantries, blood drives and broad-based organizations like Dane County United can no longer muster public support, commitment to the "common good" wanes. The culture comes to be defined by the individual pursuit of short-term, unenlightened self-interest.

The symptoms of this shift are becoming more evident even in an organization as vibrant as First Unitarian Society. While it's been relatively easy to recruit members for some roles - singing in the choirs or knitting items for our new Shawl Ministry - finding church school teachers, fund raisers, gardeners, lay ministers and even ushers has been frustrating at times. We are a community of about 900 families, only a fraction of which have made a significant commitment of time and talent.

But why should we contribute in this manner, you might ask? The First Unitarian Society of Madison appears to be doing quite well on its own, without any hands-on involvement from me. The point is we're not doing as well as we could. We would be so much better and richer and more effective if more members of the congregation became meaningfully involved.

"For anything to happen there must be a dream," **Robert Greenleaf** writes, "and for anything great to happen there must be a great dream." This week the local newspaper published two lengthy articles about First Unitarian Society and its dream. The first, published in the weekly **Capital Times** supplement, highlighted our efforts to foster interfaith collaboration and to advance progressive religious values. The second dominated Thursday's front page and lauded the congregation for its commitment to sustainability, architectural distinction and to the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright.

These articles served to highlight our dream: to provide an inspiring space for the practice of thoughtful spirituality and radical hospitality; to promote proper care for the planet and the prudent use of its resources;

to create an environment where valuable traditions are maintained and new hopes nurtured; to serve as a catalyst for individual and social transformation.

A dream, **Robert Greenfield** continues, provides something that "lifts people's sights above the ordinary and gives them something to strive for." If the dream is clear and compelling enough, the members of a community won't need to be arm-twisted into contributing physically and financially.

We shouldn't think of such gestures as either our "duty" or a personal "sacrifice." The fact is, by placing him or herself in service to a dream, the individual is enriched. In *The Art of Happiness* **Howard Cutler** observed that volunteers enjoy greater life expectancy and better mental health than non-volunteers. But there's more to it than that. "This is the true joy in life," **George Bernard Shaw** once wrote, "to be used for a purpose recognized by you as a mighty one."

Note **Shaw's** use of the word "joy." There are plenty of ways in which a person can experience pleasure, gratification or transitory satisfaction. But joy is something else again, and if **Shaw's** words are to be trusted it has more to do with giving than receiving.

Robert Bellah echoes that assertion. Most modern human beings strive for two things in life: success and joy. Quite often people falsely assume that the second is a function of the first - that success opens the gates to joyful living. By building a successful business, gaining tenure, attaining high office, finishing a marathon we will feel our spirit soar and be able to say with conviction that life is as good as it gets.

But that's not typically how it works. Important as it is, success-oriented behavior - being ego-centered -- doesn't provide human beings with what they need to really thrive. Joy is other-centered and, as **Robert Bellah** writes,

is associated with the expressive ideal of a union of similar individuals bound together by spontaneous ties of love...where people cooperate and their purposes reinforce rather than undercut one another.

Now, "Joy" in the sense that I'm using it here doesn't mean euphoria or inflated feelings of a similar sort. It suggests serenity, the sense of being at peace with oneself that **Ted Mills**, that retired executive, conveyed. The

experience of a former building contractor in Arizona was similar to his.

Capitalizing on a seemingly limitless construction boom in that state, **Joseph** became a multi-millionaire. But then in the late 1980's the real estate bubble burst and **Joseph** lost his business, his marriage and became a heavy drinker.

Through AA he finally regained his sobriety and became a sponsor, helping others with their drinking problems. **Joseph** enjoyed his new role and started volunteering in other organizations. He put his business knowledge to good use helping underprivileged citizens with their financial affairs. "I own a very small remodeling business now," **Joseph** reports,

...and while it brings in a modest income, I realize that I'll never be rich again. The funny thing is though, that I really don't want that kind of money any more. I much prefer spending my time volunteering for different groups, working directly with people, helping them out the best I can. These days I get more pure enjoyment out of one day than I did in a month when I was making big money. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life.

The ancient Greeks drew a distinction between "animal" work and "human" work. The first involves the tasks a person must do to survive - that are necessary but not invested with enough freedom and dignity to make them meaningful or joyful.

Human work is of a different quality and serves a higher purpose. It has less to do with earning a livelihood than composing a life. "The concept of the 'hero' comes from human work," **Betty Friedan** writes and it provides the opportunity to participate in something larger than oneself or to create a lasting legacy. If animal work affords security, human work assures us of our relevance - a matter of no small significance.

Volunteerism is quintessential "human work." The very word, **Robert Coles** tells us, comes from the Latin root "velle" which means to wish. As volunteers, we aim to realize our fondest wishes for our community or for the world.

Like spiritual practice, serving others demands self-discipline: setting aside time, making space, removing mental and emotional obstacles, and interrupting habitual patterns. But like a spiritual practice, a consistent pattern of voluntary service delivers long-term personal

dividends: intellectual growth, a more open heart, collegiality with good and caring people, and an improved self-concept. One middle-aged hospital volunteer put it this way:

I feel lucky to be able to spend part of my week that way.... I don't mean to sound selfish, but if you asked me why I do my work I would have to say that I do it because I enjoy the world at the hospital and, frankly, it's a tremendous educational experience.... The people I meet who are struggling with pain and uncertainty...help me realize that you can take things for granted until you get sick, and then you stop and think about what life really means.

In drawing these reflections to a close I need to interject a note of caution. Service to others - whether voluntary or paid - can be a two edged sword. We've all heard the old expression, "If you really want something done, ask a busy person." Compassion and common sense would suggest otherwise. To solicit a volunteer or an employee who is already over-committed isn't kind. In order to be joyful, work needs to be manageable.

There's a word for people who over-function and weary their spirits striving to serve others: they are called martyrs. Whatever virtues she possessed, Mother Teresa was also a martyr. Her countenance betrayed suffering and weariness, not joy. "Martyrs," **Carol Pearson** writes,

...think giving is more virtuous than receiving and thus are more likely to give inappropriately and also to block the gifts others would give to them.

Healthy voluntarism is never a one-way street. It produces a community of grateful receivers as well as generous givers. It fosters a functional culture of true interdependence rather than a dysfunctional one comprised of helpers and the helpless. "True compassion" **Ram Dass** writes, "arises out of unity."

From the generation of the Stonehauers who helped complete Frank Lloyd Wright's original Meeting House to their modern counterparts, the men and women of this congregation are to be congratulated for some very remarkable achievements. May we continue to find joy in the work we perform together, the dream that we share together and the inclusive, loving community that we are creating together.