

1998 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

Listening To Today: Envisioning Tomorrow

Excerpts from the Keynote Address

Marlene Wilson

ABSTRACT

Times are changing so rapidly we sometimes see only a blur. In this keynote address, Wilson brings into focus five umbrella issues for volunteer administrators: diversity, technology, funding, risk management and our role as leaders. She also questions some of our common assumptions, from the existence of very separate social sectors to the very definition of the word volunteer. In conclusion, Wilson identifies some traits and qualities needed for the adventure ahead.

I am truly thrilled and delighted to be in this place at this time, with this incredible group of colleagues and friends. I am eager to share with you as we explore together the issues and challenges of today a vision for the future. I have been immersed in reading your e-mails (thanks to those who responded to our request for your thoughts on these issues) and also catching up on that inevitable stack of articles and books as I prepared these remarks.

One book title caught my eye especially, and that title is *BLUR*, by futurists Stan Davies and Christopher Meyer.¹ They point out the blurring of so many of the "givens" we in our society have traditionally had. For example: Products are services; buyers are sellers; homes are offices. The lines between structure and process, owning and using, knowing and learning are dissolving. The pace is so furious, the meltdown so severe, the erasing of borders so complete, that the whole picture is going out of focus: It's a blur.

And they use the powerful analogy that it's like either being in or standing and watching a bullet train speed by. It's

amazing, efficient and very disorienting.

In sorting through the blur of issues we could possibly consider, I'm going to have you disembark from the bullet train for a while and join me in another mode of transportation. We're going to parasail instead, and look at things from a broader perspective. I hope we can achieve several things:

- Stop feeling frantic and enjoy the ride.
- Gain perspective regarding the issues of our profession as they relate to one another and to the mega-issues of the world at large: hunger, housing, health, environment.
- And finally, be more able to live and work with a deep appreciation for the past, an enriched sense of the present and a joyous anticipation for the future.

I am going to concentrate on five umbrella issues those that seem to encompass many of the others that were mentioned in your e-mail: 1) diversity, 2) technology, 3) funding, 4) risk management, and 5) our role as leaders. We will end with a vision for the future.

As we delve into each of these, I ask you to ponder two things. First, are we

Marlene Wilson is internationally known for her groundbreaking work in volunteer administration as one of the foremost authorities and dynamic trainers in the field. Her techniques are based on years of experience in the public and private sectors and with faith-based organizations. She has authored four books and created twelve video/audio tape workshops. She is president of her own publishing and consulting firm, Volunteer Management Associates. Marlene Wilson earned the Distinguished Member Award from AVA and an honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree from Wartburg Seminary.

asking the right questions? Anthony Jay has said, "A non-creative mind can spot wrong answers, but it takes a creative mind to spot wrong questions."² Second, what are the paradoxes within these issues?

ISSUE I: DIVERSITY

For as long as I've been in the field, when the issue of diversity has been discussed, the question has usually been stated like this: How can we recruit more ethnic minority volunteers and volunteer directors? As you can see by looking around this room, we have still not been very successful in dealing with that challenge.

I would like to suggest that this is already the wrong question in many communities you serve, and by the end of the first decade of the new century it will be the wrong question for us nationally, for white Americans are rapidly becoming the minority (and we are very good at recruiting THEM). So the new question becomes: How can we recruit more of the majority of Americans to become volunteers and volunteer directors? Think about that as it relates to the future of volunteerism and our field, and the issue moves up from the back burner very quickly!

Secondly, the whole meaning and challenge of diversity has exploded into something much larger and more complex than we traditionally viewed it. That is why I received more e-mails related to this topic than to any other, and why it's the topic of dozens of articles, and is debated in global forums.

I would ask you to revisit the image of the blurring of societal boundaries portrayed by Davis and Meyer, and apply it to our own field. What are a few of those blurred boundaries that greatly impact not only what we do but how and why we do it? Here is a sampling:

- Clients are volunteers.
- Volunteerism is being mandated.
- Employed people make up the majori-

ty of the volunteer work force, and some volunteers are paid.

- And that myth about there being a traditional volunteer: Today we have seven generations of volunteers working simultaneously—sometimes in the same programs!

It's time to blast the lid off many of our assumptions and stereotypes. Here are just a few suggestions of stereotypes that disintegrate when viewed from our paraisails.

Assumption A:

There are three distinct and separate sectors in democratic societies: the public (government), the private (for profit) and the voluntary (not for profit). Viewed from above, we can see that in volunteerism, the boundaries between these sectors have not only blurred, but have almost disappeared. For example:

- *The Government* has established thriving volunteer programs at local, county, state and national levels. They have also legislated and funded programs of national service (Americorps, Senior Corps, Learn and Serve, etc.) In many other countries (e.g. Britain, Canada, Poland) government has been the primary funder of most voluntary efforts.
- *Corporations* have hired directors of volunteers, instituted release time for employee volunteering, and made a strong commitment to corporate social responsibility, thanks in large part to the efforts of Points of Light.
- *The Voluntary Sector* has been expected to assume responsibility for many of the programs once considered to be the government's responsibility, but which have been diminished or dropped due to funding cutbacks. We've also been given the challenge of helping to make new government initiatives, such as "welfare to work," succeed.

The paradox is that in the midst of the confusion of these now blended versus separate sectors, there has never been a greater opportunity of meaningful collab-

oration. We each need one another in increasingly significant ways.

Assumption B:

Volunteerism is a uniquely American phenomenon. Here are some of the realities:

- Since 1970, an organization called the International Association for Volunteer Efforts (IAVE) has held biennial worldwide conference. Just since 1990 these have been held on all five continents—in France, Argentina, South Africa, Japan, and this year in Alberta, Canada, where 2900 volunteer leaders from ninety nations participated.
- For more than ten years, a group founded by Elizabeth Hoodless from Great Britain has been conducting conferences for volunteer leaders in European and North African communities.
- Eighteen Eastern European countries are in the process of establishing volunteer centers, and Poland already has several.
- We're delighted that every year at this conference we have more and more attendees from other countries. We look forward to that trend continuing.
- The United Nations has declared 2001 the Year of Volunteers.

So much for our outmoded provincial thinking! Global boundaries have blurred, and what an exciting and enriching opportunity that is for all of us.

Assumption C:

There is a common understanding and acceptance of the definition of the word *volunteer*.

The traditional definition, as stated in the excellent book, *By the People*, by Susan Ellis and Katherine Noyes, has been: "To volunteer is to choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one's basic obligations."³ The key elements are free choice, social responsibility (benefiting others), and absence of personal economic gain.

That's the definition of the word, but there's a more esoteric aspect of volunteerism that is difficult to define. You have to experience it. It is the wondrous phenomenon of helping people, often with anonymous acts of kindness that ennoble the human spirit. At its best, volunteerism creates hope in the hearts of the receivers and meaning and purpose in the lives of the givers—and the result is a more caring and civil society. It is love made visible. And it changes lives, changes communities, and can change the world. This, my dear friends, is what keeps us doing what we're doing and loving it passionately.

The challenge that has emerged as one of the most critical we face in this profession is not about the phenomenon of volunteerism, but about the semantics and statistics we use in interpreting its many iterations to the world. Why has the problem occurred? Again, it relates to the problem of blurring. Some aspects are:

- 1) The enormous influx of mandated, court-referred volunteers. (How can you *mandate* volunteerism?)
- 2) The movement requiring students to volunteer in order to meet graduation standards.
- 3) The increase in stipended volunteers. The question is, at what point does one cross the line from enabling funds to economic gain?
- 4) The increased emphasis on citizen participation or citizen involvement, e.g. America's Promise.
- 5) Finally, the expectation that managing all of these forms of "free" service should be enfolded into the job description of the Director of Volunteers, and the results reported under the one heading of "volunteers" in our statistics.

Sarah Jane Rehnberg, a past president of AVA and Director of the Center for Volunteerism and Community Engagement at the University of Texas, issues the challenge in powerful and compelling terms in a recent internet article entitled, "The Limits of the 'V' Word":

Are we helping ourselves by continually trying to group everything that happens in our field under the label "volunteer"? Are we selling ourselves short by not clarifying our language and by lumping all manners and forms of service within the one broad and reasonably useless classification of "volunteer"?

And so, some of the questions I would suggest we seriously ponder, debate and decide about are:

- 1) How do we acknowledge, encourage and support the important movements of citizen participation and still maintain the integrity of the philosophy of volunteerism—free choice without economic gain?
- 2) Is it time to advocate for a change of title, from Director or Coordinator of Volunteers to Director of Volunteers and Citizen Participation, Citizen Involvement or Community Service?
- 3) Do we record and report on the two as separate but equal so we and others can understand the difference? In the words of Ken Martin, "Two things can be different without one being better."

I suggest this be a major project for AVA during the next year so that the clarification and definition come from this professional association concerned solely with volunteerism. It deserves our best attention.

Versatility and flexibility are the keys and the view from our parasail suggests we have never before in history had a richer, more extravagantly luxuriant variety of cultures, talents, ages, professional skills and opportunities to truly make a difference in this field called volunteerism.

ISSUE II: TECHNOLOGY

Not too long ago, the chief concern of volunteer administrators regarding technology was, "How can I get my agency to get the volunteer department its own computer?" Then it became, "How can

we get a computer that is not donated and two or three generations out of date?" Now our field is right in the middle of the technological revolution that is impacting all of society, and it is affecting every aspect of what we do, including:

- 1) *Records and systems*—dozens of computer programs are now available to help us become more efficient in this important area.
- 2) *Communication*—more than 500 websites contain information and services regarding volunteerism, and the internet, e-mail and faxes have given us "the world on a keyboard," as so eloquently stated by Susan Ellis.
- 3) *Recruitment*—website recruiting and virtual volunteering volunteer without ever leaving home have great impact.
- 4) *Education and training*—new learning opportunities for ourselves, for paid staff and for volunteers are available through internet courses, interactive video, distance learning, videotaped courses and compact disks.

As I researched all these new avenues on the information superhighway I was reminded of a quote from Will Rogers, commenting years ago on the transportation revolution: "Trouble with American transportation is that you can get somewhere faster than you can think of a reason for going there."

May I suggest just a few cautionary questions for us to ponder as we explore and master these technological wonders?

- 1) How do we ensure that we utilize technology as another valuable means to an end versus becoming an end in and of itself? We must never get so enamored with the machines that we neglect people, for we are in the people business—first and foremost.
- 2) How do we become increasingly skilled and discriminating "web surfers"? (The best ocean surfers learn quickly which waves to just let go by and do nothing about, and which waves to catch that will take them right into shore, which is where they want to go.)

3) How do we ensure that in virtual volunteering and internet recruitment we never allow convenience to replace commitment? The matching of right volunteers to right jobs is still primary, and involves skilled and professional interviewing.

4) Are we willing and ready in this profession to begin to move beyond just more information and knowledge into wisdom? T.S. Elliot asked the question so poignantly:

- *Where is the life that we have lost in living?*
- *Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*
- *Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*⁴

What do I mean by wisdom? In its simplest form I would say:

- Wisdom deals with the "why" questions; knowledge and information deal with "what" and "how."
- Wisdom deals with future implications; knowledge and information tend to concentrate on the present.
- Wisdom deals with principles and values; knowledge and information deal with practices.
- Wisdom seeks to understand the questions; knowledge and information look for the answers.
- Wisdom is going deeper; knowledge and information tend to just keep getting broader.

The paradox is that it is not a choice of either/or, but a need for both to keep our profession viable and valuable in a changing world. Both will help us move out of the developmental stage of an emerging profession into the influential stage of a maturing profession.

ISSUE III: THE PROBLEM OF FUNDING

The question that is surfacing more and more frequently is "How can we keep our jobs and our volunteer programs from being reduced or dropped during funding cutbacks and downsizing?" What if we changed that question to "How will

we become an employee and program that the organization will fight to keep?"

Most of us have read or heard what has become almost a mantra for our field. I quoted it in my first book in 1976: "We, the willing, led by the unknowing are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much for so long with so little, we're qualified to do anything with nothing."⁵

It has often been quoted with a sort of victim emphasis as we discuss inadequate salaries and lack of support to do our work.

From our parasail, let's look at it from a different perspective, one that acknowledges that we are in fact miracle workers, without a doubt the most creative entrepreneurs in the whole organization. Let's capitalize on just that fact as we sell the importance of our program and positions.

Of course, we need to also be smart enough to use the rubric of the decision makers: bottom line, return on investment, value added.

1) The bottom line return on investment is staggering when you consider the accepted value of the volunteer hour is now \$13.73 according to Points of Light. We also have new technology to display our statistics on colorful computer graphs and charts—and video capability to tell the stories of volunteers.

2) Value added is where we shine, for we are the link to commercial and corporate involvement. Community volunteers are voters and donors and give 2 1/2 times more than nonvolunteers.

3) Funders and foundations are looking ever more carefully at the quality of volunteer programs as they consider funding requests for agencies.

Now I ask you, who in their right minds would knowingly fire a miracle worker today?

ISSUE IV: RISK MANAGEMENT

A question currently being asked by organizations is "How can we keep from being sued?" Again, I would suggest that

the question itself is wrong. It should be, "How can we provide a safe environment for our clients, volunteers and staff in the process of achieving our mission?" This then suggests the need for developing sound and sensible risk management practices that are both necessary and appropriate. Invaluable guidance in this area is provided by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center in Washington, D.C. Visit their website and get on their mailing list, or phone (202) 785-3891. The paradox is: "How can we be responsible and prudent, and yet not become immobilized by fear in a society that on the one hand has become exceedingly litigious and on the other hand cries for innovations and new approaches to community problems?" Obviously there is a desperate need here for that most uncommon commodity—common sense! Peter Drucker provides wise advice: "There is the risk you cannot afford to take. And there is the risk you cannot afford not to take." Determining the difference is a function of wisdom.

ISSUE V: YOUR ROLE AS A LEADER IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD

Perhaps the question I hear most frequently from directors of volunteers and trainers in our field is this: "How can I keep from burning out?" It is obvious many don't find the answer as tenure in the field is generally 3-5 years. This has a devastating effect not only on the directors and their volunteer programs but on our field as well. People rarely stay around long enough to develop into leaders.

Do we just wring our hands and say that that is just the way it is, or are there things we can do to alleviate the problem? May I share a few suggestions, these coming from a slow learner who has come very close to burnout—three times?

Let's again change the question from "How do I avoid burnout?" to "How can I stay well and creative as a leader in today's 'bullet train' society?"

The first step is to shift the emphasis

from roles to relationships. Margaret Wheatley, in her book, *Leadership and the New Science*,⁶ talks about the need to let go of our present machine models of work and instead refocus on the deep longings we have for community, meaning, dignity and love in our organizational lives. To do that we will need to become even more savvy about how to build relationships and how to nurture growing, evolving things. This will require better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups. These are the talents that build strong relationships, and relationships versus roles or tasks, functions and hierarchies are the cornerstone of the new organization in a quantum world.

Secondly, when you have confronted unrealistic role expectations (many of them self inflicted) then you can begin to discover and develop that unique, wonderful person called you. As e.e. cummings put it: "Be yourself. No one else is better qualified." Let's ponder some Native American wisdom to help us do that. It suggests that everyone is a house with four rooms—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not complete persons.

As we visit these rooms, we need to do the necessary housecleaning to rid them of clutter and toxic waste. And we need to be sure we slowly and lovingly furnish them with things that nourish and replenish us and give us joy. As Thomas More reminds us, "We need to become the artists and poets of our own lives."

When our personal house is in order, we can be more creative, more open to all three types of creative insights:

- The *Ahs*—having keen sensory perception to the beauty and to the metaphors which surround us.
- The *Ha Has*—the comic insights that occur when we laugh together. One of the traits of exceptionally creative groups is that they laugh a lot together. Laughter releases endorphins which create energy.

- The *Ahas*—those startling and often fleeting insights we get that cause an almost physical reaction, like an electric shock. Those mean you've just had your own personal creative revelation. They are precious and powerful.

What do you do with these gems? Two insights have been valuable to me. One came from an 85-year-old friend, one of the first volunteers at the center I founded thirty years ago. I asked Clara's advice regarding taking on a major challenge about a year ago, and she said, "Say yes to the big, Marlene, or your life will fill up with the little."

The second insight is this: Never make decisions regarding the *ahas*, or your big dreams, based on logistics. Say yes, and then figure out how to make it happen. That's the fun and creative part. I've never known how to do anything I've accomplished in this field when I said yes to it—write a book, establish a volunteer center, become my own publisher, found a training center, produce videos..., but I have experienced over and over again the incredible truth expressed by philosopher Joseph Campbell: "Follow your bliss and doors will open where there were no doors before... and you will experience a thousand unseen helping hands."

As I look toward the new century and the multiplicity of issues, challenges, difficulties and opportunities, my goal is to remain an optimistic pragmatist—*informed and hopeful*. I have been around long enough to not even pretend to predict the future. As Annie Dillard observed, "We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all." Or, as Woody Allen puts it, "If you want to make God laugh, just tell him what your future plans are."

But dreaming is different from predicting, and I do want to share some of my best dreams for our field in the new century:

- That we use the wonders of technology and the blurring of global boundaries to blend the efforts of volunteers around the

globe, combining their energy, talents and creativity to truly make the world a better place for all of us. (What fun it would be to have an international "Make a Difference Day" beamed by satellite around the world during the International Year of the Volunteer).

- That we be leaders who are wise enough to know that we don't "make the music." We invite the volunteers to make their own music. And we are teachers and mentors who help those who don't yet know how to be able to join us.

- That we learn to value the joy in what we do, for as Kathryn Graham once said, "To love what we do—and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?"

And finally, that our philosophy might be that of Helen Keller, who believed: "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable." May God bless each of you in this wonderful adventure we share.

ENDNOTES

¹Davies, Stan and Meyer, Christopher, *Blur*, 1998. Reviewed in *Fast Company*, April-May 1998.

²Jay, Anthony, *Management and Machiavelli*: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967.

³Ellis, Susan J. and Noyes, Katherine H., *By the People*: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

⁴Elliot, T.S., *The Rock*, part 1, 1934.

⁵Wilson, Marlene, *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs*: Volunteer Management Associates, 1976.

⁶Wheatley, Margaret J., *Leadership and the New Science*: Barrett-Koehler Publishing, 1992.