

America's Voluntary Spirit
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Brian O'Connell

My observations are based on a three-year project in which I engaged to try to get a better grasp of the contributions of voluntary effort to our society over all the years of our history. The results of that study were published by the Foundation Center in a book called, *America's Voluntary Spirit*.¹

Through this experience, I've learned a great deal more about this third part of our society. It would be impossible to summarize the major points of all the writers, but I do want to share six overall lessons.

The **first lesson** is the remarkable size and pervasiveness of giving and volunteering in America and what this means to the kind of society we are. Every time I focus on this sector, I am more aware and encouraged that giving and volunteering are characteristics of our total population. Ninety percent of all giving in this country comes from individuals. Of our living gifts, just about half comes from families with incomes under \$30,000. Nine out of ten adults are regular givers, and more than half are regular volunteers. Every economic group is involved. The United States is the only country in the world where giving and volunteering are such pervasive characteristics of the total society.

The impact of all this participation and passion is enormous. In his forward to the book, John Gardner says: "Virtually every

significant social idea in this country has been nurtured in the non-profit sector."

Think back where the ideas, money and energy came from to produce our vast public education system, the public libraries, abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, clean water, assimilation of refugees, humane care of the mentally ill, prevention of contagious disease, social security, child labor laws, employment of the handicapped, fire and other emergency services, and on and on and on.

One doesn't even have to go back into our history to come up with an amazing array of examples of citizen service and influence. In just the past ten to fifteen years, Americans have organized to influence every conceivable aspect of the human condition. Increasingly, we are willing to stand up and be counted on almost any issue and have proven again that people can have enormous influence on their lives, their communities, the nation and the world. In very recent times, we have successfully organized to deal with rights of women, conservation and preservation, learning disabilities, conflict resolution, Hispanic culture and rights, drunk driving, the aged, voter registration, native Americans, the dying, experimental theater, international understanding, population control, neighborhood empowerment, new religions, control of nuclear power, consumerism, and

Brian O'Connell is President of INDEPENDENT SECTOR, a national coalition of voluntary organizations, foundations and corporations which seeks to preserve philanthropic giving, volunteering, and not-for-profit initiative. Mr. O'Connell has been a national advocate for voluntary action for many years and with numerous organizations.

on and on. Our interests and activities extend from families and neighborhoods to the ozone layer and beyond.

The base of participation is also spreading. There are more young people, more men and more older people. Every economic group is involved. There are more people who have problems themselves. The mutual help movement is the fastest growing side of the voluntary sector. For almost every problem, there is now a group of people who have weathered the storm and are reaching out to help others newly faced with depression, divorce, abuse or heart surgery.

It is essential to your orientation and morale to realize that America's voluntary spirit is alive and well. But beyond the figures and enumeration of causes served, it is important to recognize what this participation and pluralism mean to the kind of society we are.

Merle Curti, the historian, is represented in the book with a piece, "American Philanthropy and the National Character," in which he states: "Emphasis on voluntary initiative . . . has helped give America her national character." In his conclusion written almost 30 years ago, he says: "All these philanthropic initiatives give support to the thesis that philanthropy has helped to shape national character . . . [by] implementing the idea that America is a process rather than a finished product."

What comes through again and again is that the participation, the caring, the evidences that people can make a difference do add wonderfully to the spirit of our society. There's a marvelous piece done by Inez Haynes Irwin in "The Last Days of the Fight for Women's Suffrage." Again and again she comes back to the spirit of those women, not only in deciding on the task and accomplishing it, but what their success meant to them as human beings.

They developed a sense of comradeship for each other which was half love, half admiration and all reverence. In summing up a fellow worker, they speak first of her "spirit," and her "spirit" is always beautiful, or noble, or glorious. . . .

She describes a wonderful moment in 1917 when a group of women who have just been arrested for picketing at the White House have been shoved into a

prison room and, because the experience is so foreign, they are absolutely terrified about both the immediate and the long-term consequences of their arrest. At the far end of the room is the wave of women who were arrested the day before—but absolutely no verbal communication between the two contingents is allowed. In a gesture to calm, encourage and salute, the veterans "raised their water-glasses high, then lowered them and drank to their comrades."

That spirit comes through in each of the chapters that describe so many of the great reform movements. It becomes wonderfully clear that when people make the effort, not only are causes and people helped, but something very special happens for the giver, too, and, in the combination, the community and the nation take on a spirit of compassion, comradeship and confidence.

Incidentally, but hardly incidental, it's been interesting and revealing to realize that when one thinks of the giants of this sector, one is as likely to think of women's names—Clara Barton, Jane Addams, Mary McLeod Bethune, Susan B. Anthony, Dorothea Dix, Alice Paul, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dorothy Day, Mother Seton, Carrie Nation, Margaret Sanger, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Tubman and so on. It's the only one of the three sectors that really taps the full spectrum of the nation's talents.

The **second lesson** deals with the origins of our pluralism and generosity. Obviously, ours is not the only participatory society in the world. Giving, volunteering and non-profit organizations exist in many countries. However, nowhere are the numbers, proportions and impact so great as here. It's not easy to know why, but if we hope to pass the lessons along to future generations, we need to better understand where all this participation comes from.

Most often the phenomenon is attributed to our Protestant ethic and English ancestry; but as important as they were, these are only two of many sources. What we identify as "Christian," or even Judeo-Christian impulses were also brought to our shores by each different wave of immigrants whether they came from Sweden, Russia, China, or India; and whether

they followed Jesus, Moses, Muhammed or Buddha.

I don't, by any means, undervalue the enormous influence of the Puritans and Pilgrims. One of the most significant chapters in the book comes from John Winthrop, the first Governor of Massachusetts. This was a piece he wrote just before he and his fellow Puritans boarded the boat, Arbella, to come to America in 1630. He read it to them the first time during the voyage. It's called "A Model of Christian Charity" and was intended to help the group understand how they would have to behave toward one another to survive and make the most of their opportunities in the New World.

As important as religious influences have been, we can't ascribe our tradition of voluntary action solely to their lessons of goodness. The matter of pure need and mutual dependence and assistance cannot be overlooked. The Minutemen and the frontier families practiced pretty basic forms of enlightened self-interest. To portray our history of volunteering as relating solely to goodness may describe the best of our forebears, but ignores the widespread tradition of organized neighborliness that hardship dictated and goodness tempered.

One of the most striking points about the origins of volunteering is that we shouldn't even assume that these characteristics and traditions were imported. In the chapter, "Doing Good in the New World," historian Robert Bremner makes clear that the Indians treated us with far more "Christian" goodness than we practiced on them. Reading his descriptions of the kindly way in which the Indians greeted us intruders and helped us adjust to their world, one is absolutely wrenched out of prior notions about imported goodness.

We came into a country where there was very little structure. We had a chance to start all over again. For most people, for the first time in generations, the family hierarchy was absent. There were few built-in restraints imposed by centuries of laws and habits, and yet we were terribly interdependent. In the absence of families and controlling traditions, we addressed our dependence and gregariousness by becoming, as Max Lerner de-

scribes, "A Nation of Joiners." These new institutions, whether they were churches, unions, granges, fire companies or other specific organizations, became our networks for socializing and mutual activity.

It's also important to realize that we were a people determined never again to be oppressively ruled by kings or czars or emperors and thus were suspicious of central authority. We were resolved that power should be spread. This meant that voluntary institutions carried a large share of what governments did in other countries. Richard Lyman's chapter, "What Kind of Society Shall We Have?" reminds us of Burke's description of "the little platoons" that became our own way of dealing with dispersion of power and organization of mutual effort.

We really meant and continue to mean what is written in the Declaration of Independence. We do believe in the rights and power of people, and these convictions cause us to stand up and be counted on a broad array of issues, and to cherish and fiercely defend the freedoms of speech, assembly and religion.

As we have experienced the benefits of so much citizen participation, including the personal satisfactions that such service provides, we have become all the more committed to this kind of participatory society. Along the way, we have constantly renewed our faith in the basic intelligence and ability of people. Our patterns and levels of voluntary association and generosity obviously have many roots. For those of us who presume some responsibility to preserve and strengthen this side of America, it is important to understand and nurture all of them.

The **third lesson** involves the ease and danger of overestimating and glorifying this sector. As important as it is, we tend to give it even more credit than it deserves, and we lose our credibility as advocates for it. Pablo Eisenberg in, "The Voluntary Sector: Problems and Challenges," among others, reminds us of the sector's limitations and problems. We lose our perspective on the sector and society when we exaggerate the importance of private philanthropy and voluntary organizations, particularly when we put them ahead of our responsibility to democratic government.

It is important to be reminded of the basic values of American society: freedom; worth and dignity of the individual; equal opportunity; justice; and mutual responsibility. Our largest vehicles for preserving and enhancing these basic values are:

- Representative government starting with one person, one vote;
- The freedoms of speech, assembly and religion;
- A free press;
- A system of justice beginning with due process and presumption of innocence;
- Universal public education.

An active voluntary sector helps preserve and enhance these larger vehicles, but doesn't transcend them.

The **fourth lesson** that has been reinforced is the importance of the independence of this sector. There are many contributions that its institutions make, including providing services and acting as vehicles through which the government fulfills some of its responsibilities, but the largest contribution is the independence it provides for innovation, excellence and criticism.

The great movements of our society have had their origins in this independent sector. Many of those who led those efforts were viewed as unpopular, troublesome, rabble-rousing and maybe even dangerous. One of our largest responsibilities is to keep open the freedoms which allow their successors to establish the new causes of tomorrow. There is no greater danger to our liberty than allowing those in power to have any great say over what their reformers can do.

I've now been through enough administrations in Washington to know that each one espouses that philosophy in the abstract but each wants to find ways to punish or restrict its own critics. In the chapter, "The Role of Philanthropy in a Changing Society," from the Peterson Commission Report, there is a delightful and apt parallel which goes:

There are some who may agree "in principle" with the worth of private philanthropy, but, when a crunch is on, they view philanthropy as Lord Melbourne, prime minister of England in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, viewed religion. "I have," said he, "as much respect for religion as the next person. But things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to interfere with England's interest."

The **fifth of the lessons** learned during this long literature search is the glaring contradiction between what the sector means to our society and how little the public really knows about it. I've gotten this far in this talk without quoting de Tocqueville—which I hope will be one of the values of the book. But, let me put in one here, hopefully a quite different reference than you're used to. He concludes his chapter, "Of the Use Which the Americans Make of Public Associations in Civil Life," with:

Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America. The political and industrial associations of that country strike us forcibly; but the others elude our observations, or if we discover them, we understand them imperfectly because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind. It must be acknowledged, however, that they are as necessary to the American people as the former, and perhaps more so. In democratic countries the science of associations is the mother science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made.

Among the laws that rule human societies, there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.

Obviously, one of the reasons that INDEPENDENT SECTOR² was formed is to help the American public know and understand the value of our third sector. It's why we produced the film, "To Care;" the Advertising Council Campaign, "Lend a Hand;" and the book, *America's Voluntary Spirit*. But these are just the beginnings toward the day when every person will

understand this third way that America addresses its problems and goals.

I was fascinated and encouraged in my research to come across a piece from McGuffey's *Reader*—1844!—which is one of the most succinct lessons about why people must care about their neighbors and others. It's entitled "True and False Philanthropy."

It starts with a "Mr. Fantom" talking about global designs for doing good while a "Mr. Goodman" tries to get Fantom to focus on some needs closer to home. For two pages, Goodman brings up a great many immediate needs of society, but Fantom disparages the attention each would take away from his sweeping solutions to society's problems. Mr. Goodman says:

But one must begin to love somewhere and I think it is as natural to love one's own family, and to do good in one's own neighborhood, as to anybody else. And if every man in every family, village, and country did the same, why then all the schemes would be met, and the end of one village or town where I was doing good, would be the beginning of another village where somebody else was doing good; so my schemes would jut into the neighbor's; his projects would unite with those of some other local reformer; and all would fit with a sort of dovetail exactness.

Mr. Fantom snorts: "Sir, a man of large views will be on the watch for great occasions to prove his benevolence."

And Mr. Goodman concludes:

Yes, sir; but if they are so distant that he cannot reach them, or so vast that he cannot grasp them he may let a thousand little, snug, kind, good actions slip through his fingers in the meanwhile; and so, between the great things that he cannot do, and little ones that he will not do, life passes, and nothing will be done.

The **final lesson** in this vast project is brief but perhaps the most significant. Although it is important not to exaggerate the worth of voluntary effort and the giving that supports it, it is also important not to underestimate how much this participation contributes to our opportunities to be unique as individuals and

as a society. Through our voluntary initiative and independent institutions, ever more Americans worship freely, study quietly, are cared for compassionately, experiment creatively, serve effectively, advocate aggressively, and contribute generously. These national traits are constantly beautiful. It is our mutual responsibility that they remain beautifully constant.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Brian O'Connell, ed., *America's Voluntary Spirit*, New York: The Foundation Center, 888 Seventh Avenue, NY, NY 10019, 1983.

² INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1828 L Street, Washington, DC 20036.