

VOLUNTEERING AND THE LEISURE-TIME PROBLEM

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We hear it said that volunteers cannot do the job, that you cannot expect competence, responsibility or reliability from people unless you pay them, unless you have the control over them that is built into a regular employer-employee, wage-contractual relationship.

We also hear it said that volunteering is not respectable, or that it is the exclusive preserve of the rich and well-born who work off in volunteer service their sense of guilt at being privileged and who get photographed in the process at benefit performances in mink coats and white ties, or that it is only for women and too routine, or that it is no adequate substitute for the paid work which permits the "working" man to hold up his head when he returns home every Friday with his weekly paycheck in pocket.

Only a fool would deny that there is much current truth and meaning in these views. Work, wage-earning work, with opportunity for the industrious and the virtuous to earn, to save, to get rich, to rise to the top of his society, has been a fundamental of the American way of life, a cardinal tenet of American religion. But wage-earning work has become devalued by the very success of its application. American industriousness and scientific genius have automated work down the scale of American values. The average American's work hours are steadily going down; he retires earlier, either optionally or by mandatory policy; he lives longer in better health. In sum, he has a rising quantity of material goods and bodily comforts for a declining output of effort and a great deal of new free time which he doesn't know how to use to his real satisfaction. All of this may be creating a sort of material heaven but it is knocking American religion into a cocked hat. The Biblical words, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" and the early-rising, penny-saving admonitions of Ben Franklin no longer have the meaning they used to have.

This revolution makes it imperative that all professions and disciplines, all thoughtful individuals, review and re-evaluate our attitudes towards work and leisure (or non-work). It demands that we refuse to accept wholly negative views of volunteer activity. We have a problem of leisure time which cuts across all strata of American people. Our scientific genius has created a problem of finding purpose and meaning in life for those who have hitherto found their sole *raison d'être* in trying to be a successful housewife and mother or breadwinner. Some other form of genius must arise to keep the newly leisured from becoming "vegetables" or mental cases.

A major difficulty is that this problem does not cry out as loudly as do some of our more easily identifiable problems of international or domestic tension, and also that its solution cannot be achieved by any single discipline, profession or institution. The Civic Center and Clearing House has therefore been established in Boston as an independent, flexible type of agency with the specific purpose of drawing on the community's total resources and of developing new approaches and new practices so that present attitudes towards voluntary service can be changed as a result of successful demonstration. It concentrates on the pioneering of new types of volunteer work with a strong emphasis on the introduction of new educational programs to prepare citizens for such work. It admittedly is tackling only one aspect of the whole leisure-time problem, though an important one. It is not attempting a Grand Design for living in the new world of leisure and material comfort.

A retired man once came to the Civic Center and Clearing House after an unhappy volunteering experience in a hospital and said, "I don't want to be

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uncomfortable for nothing." His attitude was not wholly admirable; his failure to find satisfaction in the hospital job must have been in good part his fault. But he said something more significant than he intended or knew. It could be argued that he was asking not to be paid for being uncomfortable but to be comfortable while doing something for nothing, comfortable meaning challenged, satisfied, using his talents in some productive way. And yet he wasn't very talented. He had been an accountant, probably competent enough at his job, probably a good family man and respectable enough citizen; "mediocrity" wouldn't be an unfair label to apply. As a retiree he was lost and hostile.

This person in one variation of competence, attitude and experience or another is multiplied endlessly throughout our urban society and at a rapidly increasing rate of reproduction. The problem is most severe with retired men; from a study of suicides reported in the Boston HERALD of December 9, 1966 we read that "among men, retired workers represent the largest suicidal group in the city." There is ample evidence, however, that middle-aged housewives, "grown-up" mothers, are searching for meaning and purpose without too much success. Even single young people coming to a city such as Boston to work or study show evidence of need for opportunities for challenging, creative involvement in urban life.

To those, then, who downgrade volunteering, be they potential volunteer workers or those who would "employ" them, the answer is that the urgency of the problem is evidenced and it demands a change in practice and understanding of volunteering. Such a change can be made only by innovating, by creating new fields for volunteer service, by daring to make mistakes (and the Civic Center and Clearing House has made plenty). This is not a recommendation to replace traditional types of volunteer service, but it is a demand to supplement them. At the same time it is to be recognized that even full success here will bring meaning to but a small percentage of the "lost leisured". To other institutions and professions is left the responsibility for broadening and deepening opportunities for the development of rich, creative, non-breadwinning lives in other areas - music and art, contemplative or philosophical pursuits, suitable forms of play, travel, etc.

The Civic Center and Clearing House operating as a laboratory and demonstrator has had some successes in its chosen sector of activity which point the way towards further and more substantial development in Boston and which may possibly serve as a guide to similar development elsewhere. It has attracted in five years some five hundred or more curious, interested, often seriously "lost" citizens ranging widely in age, in employment, in residential location, in educational background and in sophistication. It has successfully engaged more than 150 of these in special work projects most of which involved some form of preliminary training or instruction. A small number, 25 or so, have been referred to existing agencies for volunteer work in their regular programs. Many retirees, chiefly men, have come to the Center seeking paid work but in the course of being interviewed revealed that they really did not need income (although they were far from wealthy) and did not relish the idea of returning to the routine of paid employment, but knew of no alternative for the self-respecting use of their time. Many others have inquired, investigated and not been heard from again.

The type of work project developed by the Center can be classified as belonging generally in the public sector of community service chiefly in three areas of public need: (1) architectural, historic preservation or inventorying in connection with urban redevelopment; (2) environmental health (clean air, clean water, parks, shade trees, etc.); and (3) tourism.

Several groups of volunteers have been researching old buildings, identifying and locating historic site markers, recording and describing public art for a complete registry. One small group after a general course in Metropolitan Conservation and a special study of trees made a detailed survey of the shade trees on Boston's streets. The Civic Center and Clearing House headed the Greater Boston National Cleaner Air Week program in October of 1966 and has subsequently involved a number of volunteer citizens in such tasks as clipping newspapers, reviewing air pollution literature and operating an environmental information

service for both professionals and interested citizens. A group of more than sixty ranging widely in age was trained in local history, landmarks and natural features and has been manning a tourist information booth for the State Department of Commerce and Development.

The primary result of these projects has been to show that opportunities can be developed in the public sector of community service to engage volunteer citizens effectively and with great satisfaction in the performance of the work. Public recognition - the shade-tree survey was front-page news - and awards by the Governor to those serving the tourist effort help to motivate and sustain the enthusiasm of the workers, hardly any of whom, incidentally, fall into the traditional group of socially elite workers in "good causes".

Full scientific evaluation of these experiences in terms of the effects on individual participants remains to be done. Certain conclusions relative to the overall program of the Civic Center and Clearing House are possible and might be of interest. The most significant accomplishment of the Center has been identification of the target population and its needs. The five hundred or so people who have responded to the Center's very limited publicity constitute an adequate sample of the large group waiting for some effective effort to reach and involve them. There is no question that a stepping up of the use of mass media would create a substantial clientele demanding something to do of meaning and of use to the community - and also carefully suited to their own individual tastes, talents, experiences and personalities. This clearly indicates the need for competent avocational counseling - though carefully disguised so as to give no hint of therapy or treatment, no suggestion of need to those who cherish their independence.

The Center began its operation under a name and stated purpose limiting it to work with older people. It soon realized that this was a mistake. A large majority of 75% at the very least of older people neither need nor want any special age-related attention, no labeling and treatment as "Seniors", "Golden Aged", etc. - no coddling. They resent, most of them, efforts to single them out for special treatment. And they in large numbers have presented clear evidence that chronological age is a very inadequate measure of strength, vitality, imagination, desire and capacity to learn, readiness to serve and zest for participation. So the Center then advertised itself as a developer of opportunity for adults of all ages and has even attracted and engaged a few high-school and college students.

The selection of the public (civic) sector for development of volunteer opportunities was made because it was an undeveloped area, because there was no need for a new operation to service the traditional health and welfare fields and because it seemed to offer a wide range of interesting work as well as flexibility of time and place of work. This factor of flexibility is essential because, despite the Center's decision to seek to attract and provide opportunities for all adult ages, it is an obvious fact that older people constitute the largest and most severely afflicted of all the "leisure-stricken" and a high degree of flexibility is required for them. The projects have therefore been designed to permit people to work at times and paces of their own choice, and even to provide work such as reading, editing, monitoring radio programs or telephoning for those of strong minds and eager hearts whose mobility is restricted by physical limitations.

Projects involving research into old buildings or surveys of shade trees have proven to be of clear value to the community; they have not previously been undertaken under the regular programs of appropriate agencies because of the latter's limitations of budget and staff. They are important to these organizations but not of first priority. Under the Civic Center and Clearing House program they have been professionally guided; they do not constitute "busywork" in any sense of the word, but they do constitute valuable community service capable of being performed at a relaxed pace free of the heavy, intense pressures inherent in institutional programs.

As an important by-product, these projects demonstrate the validity of one

of the Center's most persistently held guiding principles: that the citizen, especially the urban citizen, can play a part in determining the shape and quality of his urban environment, that motivation isn't lacking so much as the machinery for involving citizens already eager to participate. The Center's concern has been to help build such machinery and test it. Initial success has been achieved. The need for major development is indicated.

The Center's experience in introducing educational or training programs to prepare volunteers for action projects has been one of its major contributions. What makes this sort of training different from that given to Peace Corps or VISTA volunteers is that it is sub-professional, informal for the most part and non-credit, therefore more widely applicable. As compared with training given for volunteering in health and welfare agencies it is "liberal", more general and therefore more widely appealing as education. There was real joy in learning for those who were to apply their new knowledge of conservation and trees to a shadetree survey and of local history to staffing a tourist information booth. For the most part those who participated in these learning-doing programs had received very limited previous formal education. The surface has been only scratched; much more development is both needed and possible.

Because of its success in demonstrating what opportunities can be developed for the "leisure-stricken", in proving that the "leisure-stricken" are all around us in greater numbers than we may have suspected and in establishing the need for a professionally competent organization to "service" these people the Civic Center and Clearing House is soon to evolve from an unincorporated, experimental and developmental operation into a professionally competent, firmly secured Volunteer Clearing House, Incorporated. Nearly six years of experience has proven this need. It is clear that only an independent organization can with any hope of success tackle the enormously complicated problem of leisure and the "leisure-stricken". One reason for this is that the latter are more truly "stricken" than is recognized, partly because they themselves will not admit it, partly because the problem has not yet commanded the attention which it deserves. One method of attack is by enhancing the joys, prestige, usefulness and general acceptance of work without money wages, of volunteering.