

As I See It

Work Worth Doing

By Jacqueline Wexler



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WORK, TO ME, MEANS DIGNITY. IT SEEMS to me that you can analyze work as it applies to yourself—the kind of work that is worth your doing, that fits you, that energizes you. But perhaps more important, you can analyze work that is worth your doing for others. If something really needs to be done, then it's got to be worth somebody's doing it.

I have a stroke when people look down upon garbage collectors. It doesn't seem to matter whether or not we call them sanitation engineers. All it would take is a long gar-

bage strike in New York City in hot weather for these people to understand and appreciate the work of garbage collection. Yet, there is validity to the rags-to-riches notion in the United States. Something in our society has made us look down on certain kinds of work—whether it's done by paid people or by volunteers.

Women know that that was the problem with housekeeping and that was the problem with child-rearing. Until men began to share in the diaper changing, you couldn't convince very many women that men believed it when they said there is great dignity to being a mother. I think that people with your commitment have to work to bring back this central pervading theme: that work is worth doing to the degree that it needs to be done by an individual or by the society.

We have moved from the time when there were assigned people we could count upon, either in the paid work force or in the volunteer force, to do certain things. I gave a seminar on this topic for high-level corporate executives several years ago. During the discussion period, one of the participants asked me, "But why isn't it enough for my wife just to volunteer?" I answered him with a question, "Is it enough for you just to volunteer?" He told me afterwards that my remark was like a kick in the stomach, that it had made him think at a gut level about this question in a way that he's never thought about it before.

Please understand, I believe there are people, men and women, who "just volunteer" in the sense of being supported by somebody and doing something worthwhile all their lives. But it cannot be a segregated responsibility. It seems to me that we are coming to a much healthier state in which the sharing—though it is never 50/50 in any espousal, family or group—is at least significant. Those people who work for "the coin for the realm" for the major part of their lives are learning more and more to volunteer. And those people who have spent a long time volunteering in the sense of *not* for the coin of the realm, are also moving into the paid work force. I believe this is one of the healthiest syntheses in our American society.

Like all great truths and all beginning integrations, however, it is fraught with problems and misunderstandings and unevenness. Those who come in late want lots of credit for what they do, and those of us who were in early get a little tired of congratulating them and not getting enough support for ourselves. But one of the things I believe about good volunteers—people who give themselves to the works of society—is that they have in them, whether they ever have been professional teachers or not, a lot of the spirit of the teacher-mentor. The good teacher-mentor knew long before it appeared in the education psychology books that you take the students where they are and work with their individual differences. You're a stern task master and you correct the errors.

But you are also the cheerleader. You are the one who gives the papers back with lots of marginal notes because you respond to everything that looks like growth in the people you work with. I want to suggest that we've got to be able to transfer that talent that we use on the "students" we work with to all the other people we're trying to bring along in our society. They are so absorbed in the Puritan work ethic to make enough money to support their fancy families and

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country clubs, that they are very retarded students about volunteering, as many men were retarded students about women.

But in order to bring them along, we've got to correct the errors; we have to write a lot of marginal notes. For if we are to win more and more people to this kind of endeavor, we will do it by that kind of teaching-mentoring rather than by being cynical or loading people with guilt.

We've got to give a true needs test to the worth of work. Is it cooperative? Is it always cooperative? The good teacher who works with children with learning disabilities knows you've got to get them to cooperate, to do much of the work for themselves. And if the teacher doesn't do that, he or she is sustaining the children as basket cases.

So work is always cooperative. Those who are the beneficiaries in the major sense of the word have got to become cooperative. But so does the rest of the society who is no longer free to assign to certain persons and groups certain tasks and expect them to be done by those groups. This is somewhat different from the world we grew out of, the world of noblesse oblige in which the royal classes did good works in their spare time and with their spare money. The Medicis, for example, made it possible for Michelangelo to create those priceless ceilings. In more recent times, we have moved from that noblesse oblige in our country to something I recognize very well.

I entered a religious order in 1948, just after the close of the second world war. My motivations, as much as I can understand them, were to do something above and beyond the call of duty. And, in my world, in my situation, that was the place that offered me the greatest opportunity to serve people—but to serve them in ways that fit my talents and my desires. The order I joined was conceived in the United States as a social service order. The original members crossed the frontier and slept in open wagons to go where nobody else would go. What I didn't recognize until a few years ago was that that group offered me the most wonderful role models of anybody in my world for whom I wanted to be professionally.

In 1948, a comparable role model for young men was the Marine Corps because Marines represented the service that was "above and beyond the call of duty." I think the motivation on the secular level for joining the Peace Corps in the early '60s was very close to the 1940s' desire for the best of the social service religious orders and in some ways for the Marine Corps. It was above and beyond the call of duty, but it had zest and esprit de corps. It was attracted to strong role models and worthy causes. It offered a support group that said, "Isn't that a hell of a thing for him or her to do?"

Then came the crisis, and we asked, "What went wrong?" Obviously, it was the Vietnam war and the disaffection about that war which I shared. The international chaos that followed was partly a result of that, but also simply a result of the extraordinary explosion of communications, technology, hopes and expectations in the world community. On the international scene, we experienced a total change. I did

termination conferences for the Peace Corps in the mid-'60s. Its concept was just beginning to shift. Were Peace Corps volunteers really wanted? Were they really appreciated? They went from their easy condemnation of the older, more crotchety and bureaucratized versions of American foreign service to the realization that they, too, were beginning to take some of the guff. That may have been one of the healthiest things young Americans ever learned.

I'm convinced that humility and courage are two sides of the same coin. The continuing courage to keep going even

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when it isn't very exhilarating takes humility. All of us learn as much from being humbled as we do from achieving. I believe those are the kinds of things that went wrong.

I submit that the motivation which drove us with a lot less insight in the '40s to do something above and beyond the call of duty was to do something that was "worth it." And in so doing, whether you take the Marine Corps, the Peace Corps, or the novitiate, they were all boot camps. They were rigorous. They were authoritarian to some degree. They disciplined you and kept in your sight what work was worth doing. They were not narcissian pools in which people sat around in buzz sessions asking, "What would I get a kick out of doing for people?"

I am sick to death of that kind of mentality and "spirituality" that has been nurtured in the halls of ivy and even in some church groups. I think that is phony and false. I do not think we need wonder what really happened to the volunteer effort if people see it as table hopping, a floating crap game in which they become messianic leaders for as

long as it amuses them. That is not volunteering.

In my 10 years at Hunter College, I dealt with the dominantly more needy socio-economic classes. In those same 10 years, I became an instant mother of two relatively affluent teenagers. I began to see that what looks like the two sides of the bipolar curve were very much alike, much more alike than the middle of the curve. We need to find ways in the affluent community to need those kids and not give them busy work, and to find ways at Hunter College to let those students know that volunteering—saying yes to something that you could say no to—cannot be the possession of the rich or the poor, the black or the white, the male or the female, the haves or the have-nots. We need to let them know that nobody should be culturally deprived of the sharing and experience of volunteering.

I am not here to tell you how to do it, I struggle with that every day of my life. What we really need in our society are professional volunteers, and we have a lot of them. But we also need "volunteering professionally." The productivity in this country wouldn't be in the hell of a mess it is in if we had more voluntary professionals, people who are there working because they think working is worth doing and that what they are doing is important for their brothers and sisters in the society. We wouldn't have the kind of cars we had in the 1970s if the rest of us, particularly those of us in the intelligentsia, had not made so much fun of the assembly line. We got what we deserved by denigrating work, by saying that some work is not worth doing.

Let me tell you why some of us got involved in the Committee to Study National Service. The idea of the committee was conceived in the president's house at Bryn Mawr College by a long-term friend of the Peace Corps, Harris Wofford and myself. We decided to try the all-volunteer effort and to see if we could find a group of people who would volunteer to be the committee. We put together a very interesting group with a great cross-section of backgrounds and situations. We did get a little bit of foundation money to support the staff work and occasionally there was enough left over to pay for our transportation. But I think it was important that every committee member never took a stipend for this particular activity and never asked for one.

We worked very hard. We looked at a number of issues and I think we came out in the following place: We believed that the disaffection with Vietnam had become the disaffection with any war and the disaffection with the military. And we were split on whether all of those disaffections were healthy.

I am appalled, as were most of the people on that committee, that through the all-volunteer army we have given the task of defending the nation primarily to the have-nots of society. And I say that's not good enough. We have to restore even in the defense community a respect for service to this nation. We have great numbers of unemployed youth, but if volunteerism becomes another way for them to act out their temporary, fleeting interest in something, it will do nothing for them or for the society.

So I think if we put together a new platform for service, it has to have real need. It has to be really disciplined and have some authority. It has to have its own kind of boot camp, appropriate to itself. It must communicate to the volunteers humility and courage, a sense of zest and a sense of limitedness.

So the kinds of things that so many of you are doing are precisely what is needed if we are ever to get to a more nationalized service concept in the United States. Because the kinds of things so many of you are doing are meeting the real needs of the people—through shelters, homes for abused women, the string of services that have only begun for the elderly and for working women.

I think we could win the society again to a couple of years of service. I think we could win the whole society to saying, "One of the investments we make in this society is to do

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something worth doing for everybody for a couple of years of our lives with subsistence support!" How do we do it? Number one, by beginning to create job banks for the real stuff that needs to be done out there, not the busy work. We organize a loosely federated structure that would begin to create that set of networks of needs banks in the United States. If it isn't done before we get national legislation—if we get it—we are foolish and almost immoral, because national service will collapse on its own self.

I believe I will want to do some things all my life that are above and beyond the call of duty. But not everything. I believe for all my life I will want to say yes to some very hard things and no to others. I believe that there are no great saints and sinners but only something my beautiful mother, a farmer's wife of brilliance and elegance who died at 87 this year, taught us: That there is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us that it ill behooves any of us to condemn the rest of us. That's what volunteering is all about. ♡