



Do We Really Need Volunteers? by Margaret Mead

Yesterday was a day I shall long remember. Because yesterday I had word from the Vietnamese wife of a dear friend and I could cable to her distracted husband in Hong Kong, "Good news!"

We knew that she had left Saigon, but after that—nothing. When the weeks passed, hope turned to doubt and doubt to despair. And then suddenly a telephone call. "I have a message for you," a young woman with a warm but very tired voice told me. She spelled out a long Vietnamese name. "You do know her, don't you? She asked us to tell you that she reached Guam on May ninth and wants you to know that she is safe and well."

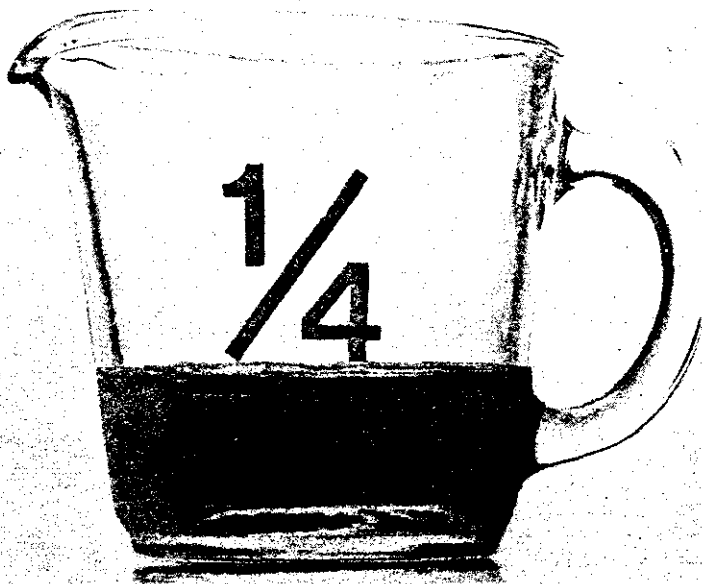
That telephone call, relaying a message from halfway across the world, was made by a Red Cross volunteer who had had to find out who I was, where I lived and how to reach me. She was one of hundreds of volunteers who have spent innumerable hours re-establishing the lifelines of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who are crowding the camps on Pacific islands, on the West Coast and increasingly in different parts of our country. Working day and night, these volunteers have carried out an immense emergency sorting and co-ordinating job. Scattered members of families have been located and put in touch with one another, and friends and relatives in this country and in Europe are at last able to reach out helping hands.

Soon the basic sorting process will be more or less complete. But this is only the first, and in many ways the easiest, step. Many more people will be needed—people with much energy, time and a great variety of skills—to help the Vietnamese refugees who are settling here find their way into American life. A very large number of those who are needed will have to be responsible volunteers. It is the only way the job can be done.

We live in a society that always has depended on volunteers of different kinds—some who can give money, others who give time and a great many who freely give their special skills, full time or part time. If you look closely, you will see that almost anything that really matters to us, anything that embodies our deepest commitment to the way human life should be lived and cared for, depends on some form—more often, many forms—of volunteerism.

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Our hospitals depend on boards of trustees whose members—most of them very busy people—put their expertise to work in the interests of health care. Most hospitals depend on donors, rich and poor, who give money. And they depend on many people without money to spare—as well as a few for whom money is no object—who give long hours to caring tasks.

Our schools depend on dedicated citizens who are willing to serve on school boards and dedicated parents who give time and money to all the extras that make a school something other than a storage place, a playpen or a prison for small children. And schools depend on the dedication of teachers who give their time to the PTA, to conferences with parents, to coaching a team or producing a play or to community projects that center in their schools. Whenever such activities cease to be voluntary and become requirements in addition to

teaching duties, resentment rises and the school begins to fall apart.

Without dedicated volunteers we would not have the parks where our children play, the sliding boards and seesaws and climbing towers in playgrounds, or the museums where children can see Greek temples, dinosaurs reconstructed or Indians in full-feathered regalia. And there would be few libraries. People living in small communities have always known this. But now in big cities everywhere, libraries are closing for lack of tax or voluntary support, and the volunteer boards are overwhelmed by the problems of city budgets.

In fact, if we look carefully, we cannot help realizing that virtually all the activities that make a town or part of a city into a community depend in one way or another on volunteers. But during the past 25 years, when so many things have gone wrong in a world rushing pell-mell to take advantage of new

inventions without stopping to fit them together with older, valuable ways of doing things, our thinking about volunteerism has suffered from destructive change.

As more and more socially oriented tasks have been fully professionalized and taken over by men and women as their major, money-earning occupations, the image of the volunteer has been debased. Thirty years ago a forceful, elderly woman could argue in favor of first-class higher education for women because, in her words, "after all, women must man the boards"—that is, take on responsible volunteer work. Today a great many people picture women volunteers as well-to-do, well-intentioned but poorly informed ladies with time on their hands, and male volunteers as retired men who drive clinic patients to hospitals or support the activities of the well-intentioned ladies.

The activities of many public-relations firms also have contributed to a debased picture of voluntary efforts. The time and energy given to good causes by prominent people no longer is seen as genuine public service. Instead it is often—and too often correctly—defined as a device for advancing some individual's social, political or professional ambitions. In addition, lists of those who have given to good causes are sold from one good cause to another, and today even the most modestly charitable individuals have their mailboxes jammed with appeals—their names misspelled and five appeals from the same good cause. Some appeals are completely genuine—appeals to feed the hungry in a country shattered by famine or to save some valuable piece of the environment. Others are barely concealed commercial ventures and still others are traps for unwary, kindhearted givers.

In these various ways both the sense of responsible public service by men and women who actually have given thousands of hours of hard work on committees and boards and the spontaneity of individuals who have given a few hard-earned dollars to a cause they care about deeply and personally have been largely destroyed. Volunteerism has been grossly commercialized, mechanized and deprived of the formerly generous motives of dedicated citizenship in communities that nevertheless continue to depend on volunteers for more than mere survival.

Most recently, as a *coup de grâce* to the whole idea of ever doing anything except for money, certain groups within the Women's Movement have branded volunteer work other than political work as a rip-off—just one more way of keeping women from being recognized as professional persons and from being paid adequately for work performed.

It seems to be touch and go whether volunteerism can survive.

But during this very period in which the old picture of the volunteer has been distorted and all but destroyed, new forms of voluntary action have come into being, and the number of volunteers—men and women with many

skills to back their commitment—has been growing steadily. According to one recent estimate, some 37 million Americans are engaged in voluntary activities.

Many of them are new volunteers—people who were not involved earlier. Over the last decade and more, these new volunteers have been especially active in the rapidly developing, controversial movements and programs that are the precursors of new styles of living. The civil rights movement, the upsurging movements of ethnic groups, the antiwar movement and counseling for conscientious objectors, centers for advising women about abortion and birth control, projects for prison reform and for the protection of consumers, all the causes connected with the protection of the environment and, indeed, the Women's Movement—these have drawn thousands, more likely millions, of devoted, committed and hard-working volunteers. But the significant thing is that they do not see themselves as "volunteers"; they speak of themselves as men and women doing jobs that need to be done. [You can find out about such jobs in your community by writing to VOLUNTEER, Department A, Washington, D.C. 20013, a nonprofit service that will refer you to a volunteer-placement center in your area.]

Elsewhere, in the well-intentioned but sometimes misdirected poverty programs, another new idea about the volunteer has been developing. This has

grown out of efforts to include what is sometimes called "indigenous personnel"—which is simply a more respectful way of saying that the poor should be involved in their own programs. Of course, this has been possible only to the extent that those who give their time to work in these programs have been paid for costs they are unable to meet while they are doing unpaid volunteer work—that is, the cost of baby sitters or a day nursery, carfare, lunch money and, sometimes, appropriate clothing.

In the same period a related idea has taken firm hold among young people, mainly high-school and college students, who have flocked to museums and laboratories and public offices, parks and playgrounds to work during the summer. They are not paid salaries and very few are given scholarships. Instead they are given small sums to cover lunch and carfare, no more. What they are giving is time and effort to hundreds of different kinds of jobs that in many cases would not get done without their willingness to work. Yet they do not seem to think of themselves as "volunteers" but as individuals doing jobs that they want to do.

These, and many others working on a great variety of tasks, are people whose basic subsistence is guaranteed in some way, whether they are welfare mothers, students living at home, retired women and men on small pensions or young

wives and husbands with children at home. They have skills and dedication and time but no money to spare.

We had come to think of anyone with time to spare as somehow a negligible person. We are learning—or perhaps re-learning—otherwise. The women and men who become responsibly involved in the poverty programs that are intended to change their lives and the lives of their children, the young student who is eager to participate in activities that may have bearing on her future life-work, the well-educated young mother who needs every penny her husband earns, the retired woman with 40 years of disciplined experience in getting a job done—every one of these people has something to offer that makes time an invaluable gift. Characteristically these new volunteers say, "It's essential. And if we don't do it, who will?" So they take on the job.

But we need to back up the new volunteers and support their view of what they are doing. And the time is now.

Everywhere essential services paid for from Federal, state and local taxes are withering away. Everywhere programs that we know are essential are being turned down because there is no money in public budgets to initiate them. Or programs are turned down because people do not realize that by law certain public funds must be matched by private gifts. But above all, services are being limited or withdrawn, programs are closing down and new projects are

refused funding because so much of our thinking about volunteerism is distorted and out of date.

We need to re-establish respect between professionals and volunteers. We can go part way by realizing that time, wisely used, is an invaluable contribution. We can take another step by being aware that a job well done, whoever does it, is the measure of a person's worth, not the money she may (or may not) be paid. And we can realize that *both* experience and training enter into the expert's knowledge of how to get things done.

The volunteer has to know that her job is worthwhile. A low rate of pay would be no answer. But even minimal reimbursement for expenses can help her feel that her needs too are being considered. However, we must go much further than this. Full respect means acknowledgment that responsible work is exactly what today's younger volunteers say it is: work that needs to be done. One form of acknowledgment would be to give every serious volunteer tax credit and social-security credit as a well-earned benefit in the present and for the future. It is high time we acknowledge that volunteers should get something as well as giving something. Americans never have believed wholeheartedly that virtue should be its sole—as well as its own—reward.

These are minimum aims to work for. But we cannot wait for them to happen. The need for volunteers is too pressing in every community and at every level. We must not neglect the needs of our home communities. Nor must we neglect those we have committed ourselves to helping—in particular, at present, the Vietnamese we ourselves brought into our midst.

We desperately need volunteers to get work done. But getting work done also will mean that we shall arrive at a much better understanding of our needs and our real capacities to meet them.

THE END

Do you agree with Margaret Mead that in many organizations volunteers are essential and that they should receive tax and social-security credits for their services? Or do you believe, with some segments of the Women's Movement, that everyone who works for any group should be paid at standard commercial rates? Redbook is interested in your opinion. Write to us at Redbook Magazine, Box V, 230 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

—THE EDITORS

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