

## THE NEW LOOK AND CHALLENGE OF VOLUNTARISM\*

by

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The Junior League of today is faced with a rare challenge, a rare opportunity to serve and to give leadership in finding the answers to our nation's problems. As League members we must ask not only ourselves, but also our organization—are we relevant? Is our leadership available in those areas of greatest need? We cannot be all things to all people, but we can be prepared to do “our thing.”

Never before has there been so much emphasis on the contribution that volunteers are making in the world of today. Never before have there been so many and so varied opportunities for volunteers. Why is this? Why are the jobs more meaningful? Why do we hear on all sides that voluntarism, citizen participation and involvement can be an answer to our nation's ills? If we are to answer these questions, we must look at our changing communities. What are the challenges they offer? Change is not new, but the rate of change seems to be steadily increasing. What is new is not new because it has never been tried before, but because it has changed in quality. The words aren't new, but perhaps they have taken on a new meaning and a new impact. Traditional agencies and programs are looking within their structures, asking, “are we in step?”

What are some of these changes that seem to be affecting the world of voluntarism?

We have had to learn a whole new vocabulary. Words such as: psychedelic, hippie, Medicare, smog, LSD, trip, dropout, sit-in, lunar landing, command module, space walk, etc. We can't give “his” and “her” presents any more, because we can't tell the difference. Alcoholism is a billion dollar national headache. In 1964 there were 40 million persons under 10. In the 70's one out of three will be in school. In the 80's the number over 65 will be doubled. Seventy-five per cent of the population lives on 1% of the land. In 1975 nearly 4 out of 5 will live in the major cities, and the center of the cities will be black. There are 30 million Americans who are poor by government standards. At least 10 other nations have a lower infant mortality rate.

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Faced with these facts, we realize that we can't buy status quo. The needs of people haven't changed, but the ways to answer them have. As decision-makers we must be sure that our decisions are related to the needs of people. Yesterday's answers are not good enough for today's questions. And it doesn't do us any good to know the answers if we don't know the right questions.

Automation: what has the computer done to us? In 1951 there were 100 computers in the country; in 1965 there were 22,000. People need people. We are not fulfilled and happy if we spend our days punching a machine; we need to punch a person once in a while. In these days of signs and buttons, I saw a good one the other day: "I am a human being; don't fold, bend or mutilate." Automation has given us more leisure time and it must be planned for. We must find opportunities to put people in touch with people; help them to use their time in a meaningful way. The key is not to take man out of the system, but to make sure that he is involved in a meaningful way. People want to be involved where the action is. We are being forced to decide what we will do with our leisure time; to re-examine the purpose of our existence and ask what fulfillment really means. We must look at our human possibilities and evaluate the obstacles to their realization.

Today we are surrounded by gaps—gaps between youngers and elders, middlers and youngers. The young think that the world is against them. They are asking to be heard, to be included in the decision-making process when the decisions affect them. There are gaps between the black, the white, the brown and the yellow. We have language gaps; gaps between labor and management; men and women; government and those governed; the private sector and the public sector; the establishment and the non-establishment. We are living in an age of "gapitis." This, therefore, is our major obstacle in solving the problems that surround us. As I see it the only real bridge to these gaps is communication. With true communication comes understanding. Our challenge today is not to help people, but to understand people. We do a great deal of talking but very little communicating. We hear only those words we want to hear, those words that make us comfortable or that we agree with. Or perhaps we write into the words our own meaning and interpretation. Real communication is based on trust, an honest feeling for what the other person is saying. John Gardner said, and I quote: "... communication in a creative society must be a means of cutting through the rigidities that divide and paralyze a community."

What has all this to do with volunteers and volunteering? If we learn the art of communicating, as volunteers, we can supply the bridge of understanding. We can be the bricks and mortar that bridge the gaps. We can link the old and the young, the agency and the client, the community with the policy-maker, the black and the white. We have a new

breed of volunteer who is not satisfied to be a bystander, but wants to be a stimulator, a needler, and more than anything, an interpreter. In spite of the impact of science and technology on our culture, in spite of the communication revolution, there is still no substitute for honest, person-to-person talk. It isn't easy. We must first admit our fears, our prejudices. What do we honestly think about black people, white people, poor people, dirty people, rich people, the old, etc.? If we care enough and are honest enough about our fears they will melt away and bridges will be built. We must start with an honest appraisal, not of the other fellow, but of ourself, then test our ability to communicate across a gap. If we are to be communicators, we must realize that it can't be a dead-end or one-way street. If you offer your hand, it must be taken. What if the other person won't or can't? I believe there are four important considerations: (1) timing, (2) sincerity, (3) honest caring, (4) patience. Think of the excitement for volunteers as they become bridge builders.

Speaking of training, what's new in this area? The main thing that isn't new is that we must do it! What we are learning is that we must bring the people who are going to be trained in on the planning of the training session. Also we have to use new tools and new skills. People no longer want to be talked at, they want to participate. We must get away from this business of planning for people; we must plan with them if we are to get the right and relevant message across. We need some "come-on" titles. Recently in my community we had a very successful session called "Generation Mix," and it was just that: all kinds of mix; old, young, black, and white, sitting around small tables mixing their prejudices, their skills, and their goals. But in the process they got marvelous training in the art of communication. We too often give people irrelevant training. Eva Rainman gives the example of a youth leader who said to her, "Don't bother with the history of the organization, just tell me what to do with those monsters Monday morning." In Watts recently we offered a training session for young tutors and titled it, "Tutoring the Tutors to Tute." Often the people who do the training haven't done the jobs themselves and consequently cannot relate the training to the job. What was adequate and effective a year ago may not be what is needed for today's programs or, more importantly, for today's volunteer.

All wrapped up in this new look of voluntarism is the Nixon Administration's emphasis on voluntary action and the volunteer. President Nixon said before he was elected, "the next President must move consciously and deliberately to inspire those voluntary efforts that bring freedom alive. Only if we restore the spirit of voluntarism to its historic place can we heal the deeper troubles we suffer from. In people helping people, we can find the spiritual cement to put our country together

again, and to make our nation whole by making its people one." To implement this conviction President Nixon has established a National Program for Voluntary Action involving on the governmental side the departments of H.U.D., H.E.W., Labor, Justice, Agriculture, Commerce and O.E.O headed by Secretary Romney and on the private sector side, the Center for Voluntary Action headed by Henry Ford II. The President of this creative partnership is Charles Wilkinson. An important part of this program will be the development of a clearinghouse that will assist local communities in the establishment of volunteer programs that have been tested.

And so, you see, we are living in a time of change; none of it will be easy. There is no place for tranquil acceptance of status quo. It isn't enough to just change our programs and institutions; we must change as individuals. Eric Hoffer says, "drastic change generates a need for a new birth and a new identity. And it depends on the way this need is satisfied whether the process of change runs smoothly or is attended by convulsions and explosions." We have seen this search for a new identity, and convulsions have occurred. Now the time has come to act. We can no longer be shocked by-standers. Our goal is achievement, and there is no achievement without risk. I say that volunteers and voluntarism are worth the risks involved.

The new dynamics of voluntarism calls for a high degree of patience, tolerance, willingness to change, and an understanding on the part of both the old and the new order. Junior Leagues can point the way.

A wonderful Rabbi has said, "what you are is God's gift to you and what you become is your gift to God."