

A Tradition of Voluntary Service

Health care, education, and welfare claim a major share of our resources. That's the first point. The second point is that all three areas are labor-intensive -- technology is only a small part of the total cost, and technology can only provide a small part of the services that are needed.

The third point is that we can no longer afford to pay people to serve as substitutes for the families, friends, and neighbors we have lost. The only way out of our moral and economic slough of despond is the fragile and uncertain tradition of voluntary service.

Money and technology have liberated us from place. Addresses of college alumni change 20 percent a year; it seems that for sale signs show up on the lawns of suburban houses at almost the same rate. The number of people living in rental property grows, along with the number of people living alone. Being free to live where we want and to seek employment where we want, we are increasingly members of very small social units. Families are scattered; claims of blood and kinship are limited to the nuclear family, and even that bond grows more tenuous. Children not only don't know their grandparents, they flee their parents the first chance they get. Parents often send their children away, in any case: it is considered enlightened to send children away to college, ignoring the fact that most of them never come back. Families are more frequently broken up by divorce (divorce even without marriage); we find competing legal claims of biological parents against adoptive parents. Millions of people, especially the elderly, live in isolation, often friendless and sometimes without hope.

Not all the signs are bad, of course. Among the people who are living longer are increasing numbers who continue to be productive. People earn more because they can work longer; and people can save more because they earn more. Older people are healthier, more vigorous by far than their counterparts were a generation or two ago. Public education about good nutrition and exercise has paid off. We are in fact so healthy that we are living longer than we had planned on; more and more of us face depletion of our savings, much of it in the last few months we are alive.

My generation -- I'm 67 -- is the first generation in the history of the world whose greatest source of anxiety is living too long.

We remain the wealthiest nation in the world. It is embarrassing to hear complaints about our economic problems when the poverty line is set at \$14,500 for a family of four in a world where average annual family income is \$200.

A better way to deal with our national angst may be found in our most distinctive and admirable tradition. Voluntary service is the best hope we have to bridge a threatening liberty on one side and an oppressive collectivism on the other. In the endless debates about the reform of health care, welfare, and education, we ignore these salient facts:

-94 million Americans volunteer

-The average volunteer gives 4 hours of service a week o Collectively, volunteers provide the equivalent of 7.9 million full-time jobs with a dollar value of \$179 billion

-People who volunteer their time also give their money more frequently and more generously than those who don't.

These facts suggest a new national strategy: Professionals in health care, education, and welfare should devote increasing amounts of their time to training the rest of us to help them. Volunteers already guide visitors through museums, make recordings for the blind, collect and wrap packages of clothing and food for places like Somalia, build houses for the poor, teach religion and morality, and plant trees. Volunteers give exercise therapy, help people learn how to use prosthetic devices, go grocery-shopping, give back rubs, serve as playground and hallway monitors, make beds and clean house, read aloud to children, play the piano, sing, push wheel chairs in the park, baby-sit. Some volunteers listen patiently. Others maintain a vigil at the bedside while death approaches.

Often for strangers. Often for people of different color, different faith, different habits, different temperament. Often for those who can make no formal claim on us.

Volunteers are usually guided and monitored by professionals. Professionals often need instruction in how to work with volunteers. To volunteer is to make a promise, and most of us break or amend or reinterpret our volunteer promises to suit our convenience. We need instruction in the ethics of volunteering. There is an ethics of service that goes beyond the interest of the professional and the interest of the volunteer. Our first responsibility is to those we serve.

We serve ourselves, too, of course. Service to others is a reminder of our own vulnerability, our own radical, inescapable, human dependence. Voluntary service reminds us that we depend on other humans on whom we have no other claim than a moral one.