

Answering the Call to Service

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My grandmother, who died last February, fussed almost every evening well into her 96th year that she didn't deserve to sit down to a good hot supper because she hadn't done any work to earn her keep.

It is easy to think sometimes, when news of Ponzi schemes dominate the news, and high school students behave in an un-sportsman-like manner, and big insurance uses scare tactics to try to defeat health care reform, and financial institutions connive to get around regulations capping the amount of executive bonuses, it is easy to think sometimes that humanity--individuals and our society as a whole--is out for only one thing. Call it greed, or me-first, or looking out for number one. Most of us seem to share this opinion. "Kids today," we murmur, shaking our heads. Or, "in my day folks were grateful for what they had." It is an easy and perhaps understandable but, I believe, false indictment.

Too often we fall victim to our society's "if it bleeds it leads" preoccupation with violence, deception, and mayhem. Feel good stories are boring--unless it happens to be child who does something self sacrificing and has a contact in the media. No one seems to want to hear about those who do the right thing, the honorable act, the selfless deed. I don't know what lies at the root of our desire for blood-lust, but I know we have it and I know it colors our perception of the world.

But in my heart I am convinced my grandma wasn't so unusual. In her protests that she didn't deserve supper she was really saying, "I miss being productive. I want to be of use." And I believe she's not an anomaly. Western society places a heavy emphasis on useful employment. The remembered phrase from a long ago sociology class is "the Protestant work ethic." We are, almost all of us, taught from a very early age that family members have a responsibility toward one another and each has his/her assigned chores for the good of the family. And soon that lesson expands to include an understanding that each member of a society has a responsibility and a duty to be a productive citizen. Accepting hand-outs, living on the dole, using food stamps, are shameful indicators, we're taught, of a life gone wrong, of laziness, of expecting something for nothing. We take those lessons to heart until we too are 75 or 96 and still longing to earn our keep, deserve our food.

Mostly I base my sense that Grandma was not alone in desiring to be useful on my gut and my observations and my innate optimism, but research supports that belief. The website Volunteeringinamerica.gov details the numbers of volunteers, volunteer hours, and the dollar value of those hours. The figures are impressive, especially in these trying economic times.

The protestant work ethic, as I remember it, was an outgrowth of Calvinism which taught that eternal salvation and damnation were predetermined. There was nothing one could do to earn salvation if predestination determined a different fate. One's destiny, however, could be divined however through one's earthly circumstance in the present life. Those who were predestined for salvation, it was thought, tended to be industrious and prosperous. You can see where this leads. Industry and prosperity could not earn one salvation, but if these were the signs of salvation, well, then everyone wanted them, to assure themselves and others that they were saved. These days, I believe, a different sort of ethic might account for the numbers of people volunteering through tough times. An ethic expressed by American president and Unitarian John Adams, "If we do not lay out ourselves in the service of mankind, who should we serve?"

Volunteer service becomes manifest in an astonishing array of forms. As a young adult and up until a cornea transplant about five years ago, I used to regularly donate blood and platelets. I was surprised one April, National Volunteer Month, to be given a volunteer appreciation token. I knew donating blood to be a good and vital thing to do for the community but I hadn't thought of it as volunteer work. Similarly, while serving on the board of directors of a YWCA I was surprised to be invited to the volunteer appreciation luncheon. I thought of service on the board as an honor not volunteer work. After all I wasn't filling sandbags against a flood, tutoring under-served children, feeding the homeless or visiting a nursing home. But I received no monetary compensation for my service, and my time, skills and perspective were valuable to the organization. I was, without realizing it, a volunteer.

Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner (ironically an heir of early Calvinism) has said, "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." If there is something you excel at, or can tolerate, or simply love to do, chances are that somewhere, someone needs exactly that thing done. Gardening, housekeeping, childcare, accounting, car repairs, driving, legal services, swimming lessons, tailoring... The need is great; the opportunities limitless.

Mohandas Gandhi once observed, "Men and women approaching retirement age should be recycled for public service work, and their companies should foot the bill. We can no longer afford to scrap-pile people." RSVP, a program of Senior Corps, has been putting that principle into action for forty years, matching seniors with organization in their communities that need their particular skills, education, and experience. Enlightened businesses take Gandhi's idea a step further. American Express has long offered employees time off to volunteer in their communities, and I learned last week that Windings, having cut back production to 32 hours a week, is offering full pay to employees who volunteer at approved organizations. That is amazingly generous and community-minded, especially in these times. Everyone benefits, it seems, the organizations that need unpaid workers, the workers who get paid for a full week's work, and Windings, which is no doubt rewarded by employee loyalty, improved moral, and a positive reputation.

Of course volunteerism is just one kind of service. The service industry, one of the fastest growing and most poorly paid sectors of our economy is another. And, at the forefront this week, military service is yet another.

My brother is a veteran of the first Gulf War. A few years back I called him on Veterans Day. "I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to say," I said. "Happy Veterans Day?"

He replied, "I think you're just suppose to glance at a vet."

I'm still uncertain about the proper, most meaningful way to honor veterans each November, but I do know this: Veterans Day sales at Hy-Vee and Hancock Fabric and thousands of other retailers of all kinds, in every town, city and state in the country miss the mark--by a wide margin. I suppose one could argue that men and women fought and died for our freedom to buy cheap merchandise, but somehow I don't think the vets themselves would accept that argument. We heard just a few minutes ago what some Canadian military men and women have to say about serving their country and I think we can assume their American counterparts have similar sentiments. And cheap fabric isn't one of them.

There may have been some, in these past eight years, who enlisted out of anger or a desire for revenge, but military service carries many rewards and benefits. Education, job training, direction, discipline, camaraderie, and a genuine desire to serve one's fellow citizens, and bring about peace and justice among them.

I grew up and came into awareness of national and world events in the immediate aftermath of the Viet Nam war. I carry with me, into my encounters with any subsequent wars or armed conflicts, lessons of that era: the way US involvement in that war destroyed lives, and how the conflict surrounding US involvement in that war tore apart families, congregations and communities, and an understanding that wounds of those domestic battles were as lasting and damaging as wounds suffered in battle. I have a deep longing for peace and for the justice that so often lies at the heart of the promise of peace. But I, and I believe, most Americans, have learned to separate my feelings toward war from my feelings toward those serving in our military.

"We Support Our Troops" yard signs may for some be a code for "we support the war" or even, "we supported President Bush." But attitudes have shifted, due to the hard lessons of forty years ago, and supporting troops is no longer a blanket seal of approval on any particular armed conflict, nor is it a sure indicator of certain political leanings. In the end that might be the best way to honor our veterans--not solely on November 11--but every day, by recognizing the humanity and the inherent worth and dignity of each man and woman now serving his/her country, and simply acknowledging their daily sacrifice.

In the very early days of this country's own struggle for independence, Thomas Paine wrote of summer soldiers and sunshine patriots. We might just as well speak damningly of summer supporters and sunshine civilians. Gone, perhaps forever, are the days of

good wars, conflicts everyone could rally around, waving flags, eating meatless and wheat-less meals, buying war bonds. But remaining forever is the need for support and honor of those who serve our country--in all forms of service, and especially this week, in our army, navy, air force, marines and coast guard.

Glance at a vet this week, and at a volunteer, and in your heart give thanks that we are served by such as these.

Amen