

Royal Bank Letter

Reflections on Our Times

In Praise of Volunteers

Nearly 7.5 million Canadians give freely and willingly of their time to enrich the lives of others. They help organizations reach new heights by not only providing basic human resources, but also by bringing fresh ideas and much needed skills. In this international year of the volunteer, they deserve our praise.

THE ACT OF VOLUNTEERING is on the rise in Canada, according to the most recent National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating. In 1977, 5.3 million Canadians donated their time and energy to make an immeasurable contribution to their communities. The increase in that number to 7.5 million in 1997, almost one-third of the country's population, shows that the

passion to make a difference is growing.

More than a decade ago, an article published in an American news magazine described how women were using volunteer work as a foot in the door to the employment market. Today another large group, those 15 to 24 years of age, has joined the volunteer forces in record numbers. This group, whose number of volunteers has almost doubled, believes that by participating and helping others, they can acquire valuable interpersonal and job-related skills that will open the door to increased job opportunities.

Money is a common measure of one's success. If that is so, it makes a disturbing commentary on current social values. For surely much of the work that is done for money is worthless to anyone but those who profit by it. Voluntary service, on the



other hand, is so valuable to its beneficiaries as to be literally priceless. Who could ever count what it is worth to a handicapped child to be taught how to swim, or to an elderly shut-in to have someone do the shopping and drop in for a chat once or twice a week?

The attitude that only paid work matters is lamentably common. You will look in vain in books on economics for so much as a mention of the contribution which voluntary service makes to the

national well-being. Yet, one in every three adult Canadians is engaged in some sort of volunteer activity. Seniors top the list with an average of 202 hours per person volunteered. In some cases, former employers co-ordinate and sponsor their work. Organized volunteer work in Canada totals 11.1 billion hours, a number equivalent to 578,000 full-time jobs — approximately the same total as the labour force of Manitoba.

But the economic statistics are the least of it. Though great numbers of Canadian volunteers are active in the fields of sports, the arts, consumerism and civil rights, 31 per cent of them work in the social welfare and 22 per cent in health fields. Another 23 per cent donate their time to religious groups, which are also partially involved in health, welfare and education. In other words, these people are directly concerned with helping others. And in helping others, they are helping the whole society.

One of the mainstays of society, after all, is the common understanding that the stronger must share their strength with the weaker. There could be no social order if the community interest did

not come before purely selfish pursuits. The religions which did so much to establish that social order in the first place have always stressed that the individual has an obligation to his

fellow human beings. The concept of mutual support is implicit in every major religious belief.

For instance, it is a maxim of Hinduism that “he does not live in vain who employs his wealth, his thought, his speech to advance the good of others.” “The way to heaven is to benefit others,” the Taoist philosophy says. According to the Prophet Mohammed, “A man’s true wealth is

hereafter the good he does in this world to his fellow man.”

In the Old Testament we find the example of Job: “I was eyes to the blind, and feet I was to the lame. I was father to the poor and the cause which I knew not I sought out.” In the New Testament is the Parable of the Good Samaritan: “Go and do likewise,” Jesus enjoined.

John Ruskin made an acute observation of scriptural teachings when he wrote: “It is written, not ‘blessed is he that feedeth the poor,’ but ‘blessed is he that considereth the poor.’”

Meeting the need throughout the ages

“To feel much for others and little for ourselves; to restrain our selfish, and exercise our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature,” wrote Adam Smith. As the father of classical economics, Smith was an upholder of laissez-faire, the doctrine that the public good is best served when governments intervene least in people’s lives.

Laissez-faire dominated the social policies of western countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Governments shied away from dealing with social problems. It was left mainly to individuals, churches and other charitable organizations to attend to the public welfare. Though it was a full-time job for many of them, the people who worked in charitable institutions were essentially volunteers.

The last century brought the birth of universal tax-supported programs in health, welfare and education. The political thrust for more government involvement came from early socialists who believed that undeserved privileges were perpetuated by laissez-faire. They regarded the old system of charity as not much more than self-serving paternalism, a scattering of crumbs from rich men’s tables. They insisted that the needs of society could never be met by private benevolence alone.

“A little thought
and a little kindness
are often worth
more than a great
deal of money.”

JOHN RUSKIN

It is true that the old system was spread too thinly and was too selective. The churches understandably looked after their own adherents first. Among non-sectarian charities, some causes were more popular than others. The less-popular ones did not receive the attention they deserved.

As time went on, the place of religion in society diminished. Governments took over much of the work that was formerly performed by religious communities.

Today, even right-wing political parties agree that governments should provide some basic measure of social service and security for people who really need it. At the same time, even left-wing parties (in the western world, at least) agree that governments cannot do all that has to be done. Public services lack the human touch that people in distress need so badly. Volunteers can either supplement the services provided, or take care of special problems that government programs tend to overlook.



Volunteerism in a self-centred age

In Great Britain, where a socialist government introduced a comprehensive welfare state after World War II, the functions of the public and voluntary sectors have long since been reconciled. As an official British government publication put it, "State and voluntary services are complementary

and co-operative. Both central and local authorities make grants to voluntary social services. Public authorities plan and carry out their duties taking account of the voluntary help available." Much the same could be said of the situation in Canada today.

After years of governments taking on more and more of the social responsibilities once borne by private citizens, the pendulum has swung back to the voluntary sector. The deep government debt of a decade ago caused significant cutbacks in publicly funded services.

The question is whether goodness of heart and neighbourliness can still grow in an era when the solidarity of groups — families, neighbourhoods, communities, associations, etc. — is not at its strongest. Will charity decline as a result of individualism?

The wisdom of the ages proclaims not. The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca wrote: "He that does good to another, does good also to himself, not only in the consequences, but in the very act; for the consciousness of well-doing is, in itself, ample reward." For a more recent authority, take Sir Wilfred Grenfell, who spent a lifetime helping the people of Labrador: "Real joy comes not from ease or riches or the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile."

"There are two kinds of gratitude — the sudden kind we feel for what we take, the larger kind we feel for what we give."

EDWARD ARLINGTON ROBINSON

The rewards of doing something for nothing

The 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating noted, "Almost everyone, 96 per cent, agreed that the reason they volunteered was to help a cause in which they personally believed. Over two-thirds of volunteers participated because

they have been personally, or know someone who has been personally affected, by the cause the organization supported.”

When volunteers are asked the reasons why they volunteer, they usually cite the satisfaction they derive from helping others. A typical reaction came from an ex-champion figure skater who teaches skating to blind children. “Don’t get me wrong. I don’t teach these classes as charity, I’m basically a very selfish person. I teach them

because I get tremendous gratification,” she said.

At least some volunteers would not do the work they do if a price were put on it. Said a hospital auxiliary worker with

a hard and occasionally unpleasant job: “I would not do this for any amount of money, I do it because I want to. I feel I owe something to this community. This community has been very good to me.”

The idea of giving something back to the community of your own free will seems to have undergone a revival among the people who were least expected to be interested in voluntary service — the members of the “me generation.” Community affairs offices in Canadian high schools have been mobilizing students to help the disabled, entertain children, drive people to and from hospitals, tutor slow learners, baby-sit for working mothers and the like. Added to the continuing good work being done by organizations like 4-H, the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides, this makes it look as if the grossly selfish “me generation” was a swiftly passing phenomenon. Perhaps it never really existed at all.

New ways to make a difference

While there will always be a need for people to do basic chores like mailing out of fund-raising literature, pushing carts around hospitals, and bringing

meals to the disabled, there is a growing trend towards more empowering forms of help. This includes the sharing of knowledge and resources to help the needy develop the self-esteem that greater self-reliance and autonomy can bring.

Learning enrichment programs are an example of the activities that have grown up as a result of government economy measures. When provincial education departments found themselves with relatively less money to spend, they went over the curriculum and cut out non-essential “frills.” In some localities parents took it upon themselves to conduct after-hours classes in aspects of art, music and physical education. It shows how volunteers are needed more than ever and the difference they can make.

The need for volunteers is bound to grow, not only because of the limitations of government support, but also because of our aging population. During this international year of the volunteer, we should honour the volunteers among us and think about what else we could be doing ourselves. The watchword of voluntarism is “do what you can.” If you do all you can, it can never be too little. The late Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 1979 for her work among the poor in India, put the idea of service into perspective when she said: “We feel ourselves that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, I think the oceans would be less because of that missing drop.”

“It is more
blessed to give
than to receive.”

THE BIBLE, JOHN 20:35



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