

Of Service's Role in a Person's Life

On my recent flight to Israel I sat next to a woman from Boston. Oh you're from Wyoming?! It's so nice there and when you are stuck by the side of the road people there will actually stop and help that's so nice. Yes, I smiled but all I could say in return was that 'I've never been to Boston'.

I would like for us to have a moment of silence and think about how service changes us.

I titled my talk 'Of Service's Role in a Person's Life'.

Part 1: Introduction:

A company I once worked for had as its by-line 'A Geological Service'. Although we are in a 'Service Economy' I never felt comfortable with this use of term. A person's profession is closely linked to his pay check and this is an obligation towards himself and his dependents. I provided oil and gas companies my abilities and they provided me with funds to put the proverbial 'bacon on the table'.

Service for me starts where the obligation ends.

It is that part of the action which is 'above and beyond the call of duty' to borrow from the armed services speak.

In Hebrew, a common response to 'thank you' is 'it's for nothing'. The intent is to put the two parties the one thanking and the one being thanked on an equal footing. Why would one bother to express thanks for something that is nothing? A much better response in my opinion is one in the English language 'much obliged'. Here too the response is intended to put both parties on equal footing but this is done by reducing what they are thanked for from a service to an obligation. Obligations are equalizing, Service relies on an in-equality. The service is a choice we make where we give something be it in the forms of skills, time, funds or an 'in kind' which we have to someone who is in need of it. If everyone is equal then there is no need that justifies the service.

Imagine a world with no 'thank-you's. It is still a world with needs but these needs but these are not answered through service but are met through obligations. Does the highway patrolman thank you for stopping when he pulls you over? Do you get a thank you letter from the IRS for sending in your taxes each year? Service is a choice we make and we have no choices when it comes to obligations.

Part 2: Subtitle- Aiming High, or Versions of Utopia

John Lennon wrote his song:
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of Man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world.

The offending subject here is of possessions since these are what are preventing us from obtaining the goal of 'a brotherhood of man'

Thomas Paine, revolutionary hero was in fact the ultimate revolutionary and ended up in a French dungeon for being too revolutionary for the French revolution leaders. In 1795 he wrote his last major pamphlet 'Agrarian Justice' with the stated aim of eliminating poverty. He wrote "Poverty, therefore, is a thing created by that which is called civilized life. It exists not in the natural state." He wrote in his English Preface to the book 'It is wrong to say God made rich and poor, He only made only male and female; and He gave them the earth for their inheritance....'

Poetic and to the point. Lennon and Paine are stylistically much better than my next quote from the Chinese Communist Party Constitution adopted in 2002:

'We must uphold and improve the basic economic system, with public ownership playing a dominant role and diverse forms of ownership developing side by side as well as the system of distribution under which distribution according to work is dominant and a variety of modes of distribution coexist, encourage some areas and some people to become rich first, gradually eliminate poverty and achieve common prosperity, and continuously meet the people's ever-growing material and cultural needs on the basis of the growth of production and social wealth.'

Did your eyes glaze over? That was a single sentence. My point here was to show how this constitution aimed at eliminating poverty.

I will now quote a few lines from Deuteronomy. Maybe before the quotes I should say something about the book. This book is a sort of constitution for the kingdom of the Israelites. It tries to show how the ideal people function in the ideal kingdom or republic. It is a vision of a utopia.

Deuteronomy 15:4- 'Nevertheless, there shall not be among you a poor person because the Lord will certainly bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving to you as an inheritance, to take possession of it.'

Three lines later, Deuteronomy 15:7- 'If there is a poor person among you from among one of your brothers within your gates in the land that the Lord your God is giving to you, you shall not harden your heart and you shall not shut your hand toward your brother who is poor.'

And four lines after that: Deuteronomy 15:11- 'For the poor and needy shall never cease out of the land; therefore I am commanding you, saying: You shall willingly open your hand to your brother, to your needy and to your poor that are in your land.'

One of the more common explanations for this progression and contradistinction all within a few lines is a move from the idyllic to a realistic view of the world. That the first line is idealistic like John Lennon, Thomas Paine and the Chinese Communist Party try

to eliminate poverty. The last line is a realist acceptance of poverty as the way things are. I don't buy this explanation, it isn't like the writer of the bible accepts other things they don't approve of as a fact they must live with. 'Do not commit adultery but if you do...'

An alternative explanation for the contradiction presents both as a form of utopian society. That in order for a person to develop to their fullest potential they must open their heart and their hands. Without the poor there is no opportunity to open hands. A Hasidic saying is which I was not able to attribute to anyone specifically says 'The physical needs of the poor are the spiritual needs of the community.' end quote. Therefore even in the perfect world, there are poor. In this version of a utopia poverty is a temporary situation people find themselves in which allows for service and service is needed in order to be a better person. Indeed the passages I skipped between the quotes mentioned above deal with ways to relieve the poor from their poverty so that this poverty is temporary in nature.

Part 3: Summation- Call to Action:

Each December for the past seven years I have participated in the Sheridan Jaycees Christmas Shopping Tour. Children in need are taken to Walmart and get winter boots, coats, and clothes. After that we go the JB's for a breakfast and meet Santa and after that we go to the Centennial Theater and see a movie. Of course taking part in this service, and this is one of the most clear cut charity activities I take part in, gives me a warm fuzzy feeling inside. The parents' 'thank you' sometimes really moves with me.

This year the movie we saw was Disney's 'Frozen'.

I would like a quick show of hands to see how many of you saw 'Frozen'?

Spoiler alert. I'm happy they kids left. This is the Disney adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Ice Queen' Today's kids are much too sophisticated for a remake of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty. The story line follows some of the same turns. A damsel is somehow gravely compromised (poisoned, magically sleeping) or in this case afflicted with a 'frozen heart.' We are told that only 'an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart'. As the princess slowly gets colder and colder two potential suitors are leading candidates for this act of true love. But here the plot changes from the Disney standard. First the true prince turns out to be rotten and then the more significant twist. Instead of being kissed the princess herself performs the act of true love and in a sense cures herself. She saves her sister in an act of selfless sacrifice and this fixes her own condition. I like this more self-reliant approach than the Deus-ex-machina Prince Charming on a white horse or Messiah on a white donkey as in the Jewish tradition, second coming (Christian tradition) or the Twelfth Imam or Mahdi in the Muslim tradition.

By opening our hands, by service to others, a true service of our own choice we elevate our own condition to that closer to the sought-after utopia.

I'm not saying Wyoming is perfect or a utopia but the fact that we do help drivers who are on the side of the road does make a difference. Service makes us better and improves us as individuals and as a community.