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What Do I Know and How I Should Act? A Reason to Perform Community Service

Taryne Brown, Psychology '08

Dorothy Day stated, "There is a call to us, a call of service—that we join with others to try to make things better in this world" (qtd. in Coles *xxiii*). Some may say, why should we give ourselves only to help others, shouldn't we all just help ourselves? My answer to that question, after what I learned in my Human Behavior Core class, would be no. There is a basic human instinct to help one another, whether it is a young man helping the elderly women cross the street, or a family who goes into a soup kitchen on Christmas to serve the homeless. Everyone needs a little help once in a while. Yes, some need more help than others, but I believe it is our duty as humans to give those people the help they need, a duty that comes from a natural desire to serve.

Near and far people help serve others, each doing so for different reasons. Perhaps many do it to make things better in this world as Dorothy Day stated, or perhaps they do it to make something up to society for some kind of injustice they have committed. Nevertheless, one thing is for certain: service means different things to many different people. Before entering Core 103 I don't think I truly knew what service meant to me or even why I did it. I had completed the required community service in high school, working at an abused women's center, building a playground and babysitting kids whose parents couldn't afford a sitter. Yet, at the end of it all, I think I only did it to get the credits to graduate. Sure, I felt like I was helping the community, but only because I *had* to. However, after reading Elliot Liebow, Robert Coles, *The New Student Politics*, listening to class discussions, and volunteering at Lucy's Hearth, I feel as though my eyes have opened. Reading and learning about why others serve allowed me to understand why I serve.

Elliot Liebow, author of *Tell Them Who I Am*, talked to many everyday people who spent a portion of their time helping homeless women whom they didn't even know. One would assume that these volunteers enjoyed their time working at the shelters and continued to volunteer because so. However, "staff came with many different attitudes. Some, both volunteers and paid staff, actively resented homeless people" (126). If these volunteers resented the homeless women they were serving them, why did they continue? Perhaps the reasons they did it outweighed how they felt. Perhaps they had a family member or friend who became homeless at one point and this was their way of helping a cause that hit close to home. Although I don't know why these women continued to help the homeless women, it must have meant something to them. They must have gained something positive from the experience that allowed them to keep returning. What I learned from Liebow was that even if volunteers don't enjoy their service, they still continue to serve because they know they are contributing to society. These homeless women would be on the street if it weren't for these volunteers, and I believe that is why the volunteers continue to serve—to better our communities and our country. Therefore, not all service is enjoyable, but it has to be done.

My experience at Lucy's Hearth fits with Liebow's study. I did not enjoy being there: I felt uncomfortable and unwanted. I felt resentment that these mothers were being given so much and did not take advantage of it. However, I always returned and always left feeling happy. Maybe this was the same for the women Liebow observed; if asked offhand how they felt about the shelters and they stated they resented the homeless, still when they actually volunteered they showed "kindness, courtesy and generosity" (128) to the homeless women. I found that I was not at Lucy's only because I had to be, but because I felt as though I were helping—maybe giving the kids in the shelter a different outlook on life. I soon found I really wasn't only going because I had to, rather because I knew that I may have made some kind of difference in at least one of those kid's lives. Even though I did feel resentment towards the mothers at the shelter and felt uncomfortable being there, the positives outweighed the negatives.

Robert Coles, author of *The Call of Service*, writes about the different kinds of service rather than solely about the service of working in women's shelters. I learned a lot from this book and from one chapter in particular. The chapter entitled "Young Idealism" enlightened me about the kinds of service in which people my age participate. The story of a college aged man tutoring a boy named Billy especially caught my attention. Billy asked a question of his older, wiser tutor that the tutor could not answer: "Why do you come

here?" (175). The young man was speechless. He could not find an answer for Billy. Why didn't he know? Why didn't he know why he went to help a young boy in need? This goes back to my point about not knowing why I did the service I did, both in high school and at Lucy's. Was it just because I had to? Was this tutor only helping because he thought it would look good on a resume or because he felt he was supposed to? These are the questions that ran through my mind during the course of this semester. Knowing that I was not alone and that I was not the only person my age who just could not answer why they were there to help made me feel better and led me to believe these issues really need to be contemplated.

Once we figure out what we want to do, why we are doing it and how we can do it, then we can act on it. There are many different ways to act upon the service we find meaningful to ourselves. According to *The New Student Politics*, there are three different kinds of "service." They include conventional politics, community service and service politics. *The New Student Politics* stated conventional politics "focus on local, state, and federal government and entail working within institutions to shape policy and create systematic change" (Long 15). Community service is less government centered and is person-to-person engagement. Lastly, service politics is citizen centered vs. government centered. The work we did at Lucy's Hearth would definitely be considered community service. The volunteers Liebow came in contact with would also be considered community service. All the shelters, the ones in *Tell Them Who I Am* and at Lucy's Hearth all involve a lot of person-to-person engagement and contact. The service done at the shelter was not done to change the laws like conventional politics and was not done to then go fight for homeless women after volunteering, like service politics. While it could potentially lead to service politics and even conventional politics, my time at Lucy's was purely community service.

This is what I have determined I do community service for, wanting to help fellow humans who are in need. I have discovered after completing my Human Behavior Core I do community service because I like the feeling I get after helping someone. If this sounds selfish I don't mean for it to; I just feel as though my service has both bettered my life and also the people whom I have helped. I don't think I am serving to make things better in this world, like Dorothy Day stated, and I am not doing it because I have committed an injustice to society. I am plainly doing it because it makes me feel better about myself to know that I may have bettered someone else's life. I think knowing this will change my perspective when continuing my community service, for I will have a reason to be doing it and know why I am completing the actions that I am. I will continue to perform community service because it will better myself and hopefully the lives of many others.

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