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Doing what you love makes service official

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In the third grade, I wanted to be an artist. The dream didn’t stick when my attention turned to writing; still, art remained a hobby. I even made sure to take an art course every year for all four years of high school. In my junior year, two friends of mine started a club, called Splatter Paint Society, where they planned to paint murals, and so naturally I was eager to join. We had a little money from the school for the club, but it wasn’t enough for all the supplies, primer, paint, brushes, etcetera, that we needed. We planned out a mural to paint on the wall you could see entering Blue Hall, also known as the Language and Computer wing. With the little money we had and some lent by the club president, we primed the wall and drew a picture of the world splitting open and famous monuments spilling out. To raise money, we held a fundraiser where people could pay to splash a little paint in the ocean or on the land and then sign their name in the “universe” around the Earth. We did this during lunchtime, and I gave up many of my lunch periods to sit and watch over the fundraiser. With the money from the fundraiser, we bought more paint and started painting the monuments. I gave up many Tuesday afternoons to paint the Easter Island heads and help a little here and there on the other monuments. We worked on the mural through senior year and were extremely proud when it was finally done and we had left our mark on the school.

One day my friend, who went to a private school, was at my house complaining about his senior service project. He remarked that I was lucky that my high school didn’t require service and that I never had to do it. I disagreed. I believed that helping to raise money and then painting the mural were service acts. The mural had, after all, helped to improve the school and bring students together to help us. My friend said what I had done for Splatter Paint Society wasn’t service—it was a club and therefore just a hobby I pursued. My hours of given up lunch periods and Tuesday afternoons were flushed down the drain.

Ask anyone and he or she will say that service is a positive activity that benefits the community. However, ask what activities he or she defines as “service” and certainty seldom follows. Some typical activities may be named, such as serving in a soup kitchen or helping out at the local animal shelter, but there are plenty of other types of service activities. People do service everyday without even realizing it. Even if an activity isn’t officially recognized as “service,” it is still service as long as a person volunteers his or her time and the activity aims to improve, help, or benefit others, because these actions aid some aspect of the community.

To figure out why certain activities are considered service, we must first figure out what isn’t service. In order for something to be service, I believe someone has to be physically there, giving up his or her time for free. Therefore, if a person works for a non-profit organization that does service, but that person is paid, I do not consider that service. Service should be done pro bono and the only profits should be the gained experience and joy of helping others—all non-materialistic. Charity, by way of donation, although very good, isn’t service either. Putting money in a box or giving a can of corn to a food drive isn’t giving up your time and helping out. Working in the food drive to collect and sort the cans and other foods would be service.

Charity that wouldn’t ordinarily be considered service by my definition, can be turned into service. For example, a friend of mine wanted to donate to the Breast Cancer Foundation. Instead of just encouraging people to write checks, she came up with a better idea. She decided to put on a play, proceeds of which, after paying for the scripts and theatre space rental, would all be donated to the foundation. A cast of about ten teenagers, myself included, volunteered for rehearsals several times a week to put on a fabulous performance of *Rumors* by Neil Simon. We could only get one date for a performance, but in that one performance we had a full house and made hundreds of dollars for the Breast Cancer Foundation. Raising money through ticket proceeds was much more successful than just asking people for donations. Not only did the performance benefit the Breast Cancer Society, but it also benefited the Milford community. Many people turned out to support us and were brought together for the performance. Everyone had an amazing time for a good cause. We, the cast, were rewarded for volunteering for the play, not by money, but by good memories and a sense of accomplishment—things you can’t buy.
Hobbies, and other such activities, can be turned into service, even if no one calls it that. You can see from my examples of acting in the play to raise money and painting the mural that dressed up the school, that hobbies can be turned into service. No one ever asked me if I wanted to perform “community service” by acting and painting, but upon reflection you can see they truly were forms of service. Another hobby that can be turned into service is singing. By joining a church choir, school choir, or community choir, a person can perform free concerts that bring the community together and can either act as an event to raise money or just make an elder’s day at a nursing home. If the person is confident in his or her voice, he or she could even volunteer to sing the national anthem at a local sporting event. Sports are other hobbies that can be turned into service. Someone who really enjoys his or her sport could give free lessons to the younger kids on his or her street. Someone who loves to read could volunteer to read to elementary school children. My father is the perfect example of this.

Every year that I was in elementary school, my father would talk to my teacher and volunteer to come in once a week, on either Monday or Tuesday (his days off), and take half the kids to the library for an hour or so and then return and take the other half. My dad has always wanted to be a writer and to teach, but ended up in the Post Office as a teenager and never broke away from it. In the library he would read to us or have us do some type of activity. One time he had each of us write our own stories, and then he went home and pieced them all together into one big story. The next week he came into school and to the entire class read the big story we had all created. We were all excited to hear where our own story fit in, and we felt very proud of ourselves. This was a wonderful service my dad performed, helping out the teachers and teaching the kids, one he never got any official recognition for—unless you count the thank you cards the teachers had us write for him.

When a person performs service, he or she gains much more than money. Service is in no way selfless. While performing service, a person can connect with all kinds of people and create lasting friendships and memories. Service gives people an opportunity to do things they love—acting and painting in my case; reading, writing, and teaching in my father’s case. Doing what a person loves makes up for the fact that it might not be officially recognized by any organization as service. In the end, the sense of pride and accomplishment in what the person has done and the thanks from others—even in the form of construction paper and marker cards—makes giving up time well worth the sacrifice.