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Focus on Volunteerism

By Derrick Henry June 12, 1999

MORE READING

Recent books on volunteering & social activism:

Stone Soup for the World: Life-Changing Stories of Kindness & Courageous Acts of Service by Marianne Larned. Conari Press, 1998. \$ 15.95

Modeled on the format popularized by the best-selling "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books, this volume contains 100 inspiring stories of how ordinary individuals made an extraordinary impact. There's also a useful resource guide.

Paul Rogat Loeb thinks social activism offers a key to individual self-worth and our collective future. Loeb, an associated scholar at Seattle's Center for Ethical Leadership and author of numerous books and articles on social involvement, details his views in the just-published "Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time" (St. Martin's Griffin, \$ 15.95). The book examines the psychology and spirituality of community involvement, recounting numerous true stories of how ordinary citizens produced significant social change. "Silence is more costly than speaking out," writes Loeb, "because it requires the ultimate sacrifice --- the erosion of the spirit."

During a recent phone interview, Loeb, 46, discussed some of the central themes raised in "Soul of a Citizen."

Q: What motivated you to write this book?

A: It came . . . from speaking around the country, addressing questions people are hungry to have answered. We don't want to live cynical lives; we want our choices and decisions to matter. Yet we are told by society that we don't have a voice.

Q: Why should people get involved?

A: Very ordinary people can make a difference in their community. There is a strength that comes from speaking what you believe instead of bottling it up inside and feeling powerless.

Q: Yet you say there has been a significant drop in civic involvement in recent decades. Why?

A: People are working longer hours, commuting more. There's a frustration that everything is so corrupt there's nothing we can do. Or that people who achieve change are impossibly perfect or heroic or knowledgeable and we can't be like them. That's not true. We aren't being told the stories that might most inspire us, hearing of courageous things people have done and are doing today. In my book I try to tell those inspirational stories.

Q: You talk about the importance of just listening, of trying to understand the positions of those with whom we disagree.

A: It's terribly important. At the minimum it may help you think through your own arguments more clearly. You may find a common ground, or even change your position. I tell the story of a Ku Klux Klansman and a (black) activist thrown together on the same committee. The Klansman became a union supervisor. When the activist was asked why he would let a former Klansman serve in that position, the activist said: "He changed. I knew what he had been, but he is not there anymore."

Q: Do churches and synagogues have a responsibility to serve the less fortunate in their communities?

A: If you take seriously any religious tradition, they all talk about being common children of God, of the responsibility we have to one another. I don't see how they can duck it. Religious faith can strengthen us in taking on these challenges.

Q: What do you say to those people engaged in finding their inner path through self-help books and seminars and gurus but who do nothing to better their communities?

A: There's nothing wrong with focusing on internal growth, but when you turn away from the serious problems on the earth, I believe it eats away at your soul. You are limiting yourself by hunkering down

in a burrow, a little creature living in a tiny world when there is a rich, complicated world outside.

Q: Talk about the dark side of social involvement --
- the pain, the burnout, the risk.

A: I don't want to paint pictures of Candyland. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. and how he was blasted by the media for speaking out about the Vietnam War. Trying to change society calls for radical patience. It can be a hard process, and you can take some heat. But if we feel something is really worthwhile, we can have the faith to keep on, even if we don't see the results. Susan B. Anthony worked all her life for women's suffrage, but it wasn't until 14 years after her death that women won the right to vote. Sonya Vetra Tinsley, a wonderful singer/activist in Atlanta who has brought together different communities racially, says she wants to be on the side of faith because if you are on the side of cynicism, who wants to win that argument anyway. At heart, people get involved because they want to be able to look into the mirror and see someone who did what they could.

Volunteering: 101 Ways You Can Improve the World and Your Life

By Douglas M. Lawson. Alti, 1998. \$ 7.95

Lawson answers those questions about volunteering you always wanted to ask or never even considered, like: How can volunteerism heal my pain, enhance my dating life, make me feel young again or create meaning in my life? Twenty percent of the publisher's receipts will be donated to charity.

The Halo Effect: How Volunteering Can Lead to a More Fulfilling Life --- and a Better Career

By John Raynolds. Golden Books, 1998. \$ 21.95

One of the greatest beneficiaries of volunteerism is often the volunteer. Raynolds convincingly documents why. He also details the proper way to get started.

The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism By Robert Coles. Houghton Mifflin, 1994. \$12

A Pulitzer Prize-winning author examines the nature of idealism and offers his reflections on the rewards and pitfalls of social activism.