

What Young People Really Need: Not Volunteerism but Happiness and Heroes

By Andrew Bernstein, Ph.D.

The volunteerism campaign of President Clinton, George Bush and Colin Powell marks its first anniversary this April. Volunteerism holds that service to the needy is good for young persons, that it will inspire and motivate them and fill their lives with meaning. "We want to spark a renewed sense of obligation, a new sense of duty, and a new season of service all across our nation," says the President.

But is volunteerism actually good? Is service in slums and nursing homes a proper moral ideal that will galvanize the young, adding value and significance to their lives?

The answer is: no.

Teaching college ethics courses for the past eighteen years has taught me that the best American students and immigrants, even more so, desire one thing: freedom to pursue their own happiness. They are not excited by the prospect of selfless service at a homeless shelter; they are motivated by budding careers in such areas as business, law, medicine and computer science.

And what young people need to inspire them in their careers and lives is not Bill Clinton pushing them toward community service, but a vision of man the hero, of man the bold individual, who holds his own values, sets his own goals and pursues his own happiness. Human beings need heroes to emulate and the young need them most of all.

Ironically, General Powell himself is an example of this not in his function as a cultural figure pushing self-sacrifice, but as a hero who rose out of Harlem and the South Bronx by his own effort. It is as a heroic achiever, not as an advocate of duty, that Colin Powell will motivate others.

Bill Gates's extraordinary achievements in the field of computers has inspired a generation; and the same can be seen in Martha Stewart, whose tireless productive energy has created an enormous business empire and has inspired millions to seek improvement in their lives. As one of her many admirers puts it: "She motivates me when I watch her I feel invigorated and encouraged, and I want to hurry and make my life better."

This inspiration is of special importance to the poor, the handicapped and the immigrants, for they face the greatest obstacles to achieving personal success. They, above all others, need a picture of man the hero, man the achiever, man the noble creator of values. It is a sight such as Oprah Winfrey rising from poverty, succeeding by her own effort and becoming the wealthiest woman in America that will offer courage and hope to young people growing up in the slums (or anywhere). What Bill Clinton gives them, instead, is man the indentured servant.

There is nothing wrong with an individual doing charity work, if it is not a sacrifice for him. But charity is not a moral ideal, nor does human life depend on it. Achievement is the moral ideal because man's life does depend on it.

If you live by this code of achievement, and struggle for your own values and attain happiness, then, as a by-product, your life will serve as an inspiration to others, showing them how much is possible, giving them courage to struggle for their own achievements. Michael Jordan, for example, has been termed a "know-nothing capitalist" by those who, like the President, hold that goodness consists of taking poor children to the zoo on a summer day. But a question needs to be raised to the advocates of volunteerism. What do you think young people find more inspiring: the sight of Jimmy Carter building churches in the jungles of Guatemala, or the vision of Michael Jordan soaring through the air, winning championships and earning millions, then flashing his joyous, brilliant, life-giving smile? The truth is that Michael Jordan's extraordinary success has inspired far more young people, poor, middle-class or rich, black, white or Asian, to strive for their own dreams than an army of social workers could ever think possible. As Ayn Rand puts it in *Atlas Shrugged*, "The sight of an achievement is the greatest gift that a human being could offer to others."

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