

May 29, 1984

As I was rushing down Second Avenue wondering if it was my turn to be the resource person this week, an idea suddenly occurred to me for a theme. The idea came naturally, because it is something I have been thinking about for the last three or four years in an unresolved sort of way. It is also something we have touched upon once or twice before in our own meetings here, including in the last one, and so in some sense it might seem like beating a dead cat. However, I did think it might be interesting to take a more thorough-going look at the subject.

What I am thinking about is the matter of motivation, particularly motivation for undertaking either spiritual work or service to others.

The American Friends Service Committee obviously specializes in service, and one would think that this whole issue of what constitutes service, and what is the proper motivation for service, would have been sorted out after 67 years of existence. But the truth of the matter is that, as far as I can tell, the issue remains very cloudy and confused.

The question comes up in its most simple form when dealing with high school volunteers. They are willing to work with Haitian and Cambodian tots needing tutoring, provided that you also allow them enough time to socialize with each other. It is not that they do the service work grudgingly, but if it suddenly became all service and you did not let them socialize with each other, they will let you know very quickly that something is amiss.

This kind of thinking even affects their parents, who seem to need to be told that their teenage children will be "getting something out of" the service they are giving. Clarification about future careers, self-confidence, or the chance to put their academic skills into practice, are the kinds of things we are apt to come up with as "excuses" for service whenever the single fact that tots from refugee camps need help seems insufficient.

Adult volunteers present much the same problem, as when a new person first comes to the AFSC office. How rare it is for someone to say "I would like to help. What needs to be done?" Rather people usually come in expecting you to have a kind of smorgasbord of service opportunities awaiting their arrival, from which they can pick the one which promises to exhilarate them the most. I am overstating the situation slightly, but often the description I have given would be only a slight exaggeration. It is also quite clear that people often come to volunteer as an escape from loneliness or boredom.

On still another level people will often seem to expect the AFSC to provide them with a credible scenario about how a nuclear holocaust will be averted as a way of justifying their allocation of time energy to work on something like the Freeze Campaign.

Perhaps it is not too far fetched to say that the problem of ego-centered motivation is introduced even in scripture, where the virtuous are promised rewards in heaven, in the case of our own Bible, or knowledge, consciousness and bliss, or serenity, in Eastern scriptures.

At a conference about a year ago which drew together people of various faiths and backgrounds to discuss service, one participant, a Quaker, who also holds a professorship in social work, asserted with stunning simplicity that all service work is based on self-interest. Subsequently this same Friend developed an article in a professional social work magazine analyzing volunteer motivation in connection with the Fresh Air Fund. The Fresh Air Fund is an agency through which families in the suburbs, presumably comforta-

ble, white, middle-class families, provide weekend hospitality for inner-city children. The article observes that when families in the suburbs first volunteer for this service they are rather vague and unfocused in terms of their reason for doing it. The Fresh Air Fund, apparently, quickly straightens them out by asking them to reflect upon what they hope to get out of this experience for themselves. Not surprisingly, the inner-city kids in many cases fail to live up to these now carefully defined hopes, and about 40% of the host families are disappointed and do not participate again. But would it not be better for the people organizing this exercise in cultural exchange to allow the host families their initial vagueness, indeed, to encourage them not to have any expectations, but simply to try as best as they know how, in the situation which arises, to meet the need which the young person from the city brings—not to expect them to be the best chum of the family's natural children, or to fit in neatly with the social environment and be presentable to the neighbors in such-and-such a way. Is it not possible that the families might get more out of these visits if they approach them without expectations for a reward?

Often the AFSC involves people in its work by promising them that they will become "empowered." A great deal of our organizing activity is frankly pitched toward self interest: liberation from economic oppression, or racial oppression, or the reallocation of hard-earned tax money away from "useless" weapons to social projects that will make for a more comfortable living; alleviation from the stresses of an unsettled international environment; reduction of the health hazards in the ecosystem.

One often hears a person speaking about attending meeting-for-worship "for what I can get out of it." Often what is desired is vague and amorphous, and perhaps this vagueness is all to the good. But it is nevertheless an interesting thing to contemplate—this seeking after results lodged in the ego.

There is clearly something unsatisfactory about all this, and yet is very difficult to put one's finger on it quite precisely. Meister Eckhart has some wonderful passages in which he decries the "merchant mentality" through which service, spiritual work, or the pursuit of virtue is done for the reward it will bring to the practitioner, as if undertaking these things was a kind of payment in a mercantile transaction. The Bhavad Gita, too, is very clear in certain passages that work undertaken, or gifts given, out of the self-centered desire of the doer or the giver is inevitably poisoned and futile. Yet, in other places, the same scripture makes some extravagant promises about the rewards to be reaped from virtuous behavior. And while Meister Eckhart is clear throughout regarding the merchant mentality, one seeks in vain for some clear articulation of what frame of mind, exactly, is supposed to replace it.

It seems clear to me that if someone undertakes service to others or pursues spiritual work, or seeks truth, they will feel better as a result. They will feel more precisely attuned to life, they will get more out of life, they will know something valuable which they once did not know. But it seems equally clear to me if the spiritual work or the service is undertaken in order to achieve these results, not only will these effects not be achieved, but the service will be likely to do more harm than good.

When all the seekings after companionship, after peace of mind, after freedom from nuclear holocaust, after empowerment, after friendship and even romance, are laid aside, what is left as the legitimate reason to do service, or to undertake spiritual work? Clearly, it is simply to discover Truth, and to become Truth's servant; to express Truth and to affirm it. On the discursive, intellectual level, this is not apt to be very persuasive to people whose sole habit of mind is mercantile, who can scarcely think beyond a kind of capitalism of the spirit. Indeed, the true reason for undertaking service is apt not to be known by most people who first undertake it. It is something which can only be

known experientially, which is why Quakers probably believe more in doing than in talking about doing. For if brought into the right atmosphere where service is rendered in an impartial, objective, and compassionate way, simply because it is needed, volunteers may "pick up" this deeper kind of motivation by actually experiencing it, rather than by having it "preached" at them. It is also why silence is such an important rooting place for service, because it is in our inner silence that we let fall away all the desires, compulsions and ego needs which warp and skew our service, and where we begin to make space for true objectivity and true motivation to emerge.

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Comments:

1. You have raised an issue which we can talk about for hours. Here I am, about to get my Doctorate of Divinity degree, and I am wondering if I can face doing what needs to be done. I do not know if I want to be a pastor! Furthermore, a lot of what people want you to do for them as their pastor is rooted in their ego needs, so there is my ego and their ego getting entangled up in each other, all in the name of spirituality! Somewhere in Tantric Buddhist scripture it is observed that everyone first comes to spiritual work out of selfish motivation. There is no other way that people can be induced into it otherwise. It is only after much growth that people at last begin to see the flawed nature of their motivation, and then first face the serious possibility of acting from some higher basis.
2. I first came to Friends meeting because I was deeply distressed about my brother being in Vietnam. I did not come to give or to help, but simply because I needed something. At first the silence was very difficult for me because my mind was so troubled about my brother being in Vietnam. Eventually, my brother came home and I stopped going to meeting for a long time. But eventually I did come back with a better basis in spirit. God takes care of all things in the end. It does not really matter what a person's motivation is, in the end it will all work out, as long as they do what is right and is good.