

CHAPTER 3

“The Spirit that Moves Inside You”: Puzzles of Using Volunteering to Cure the Volunteer’s Problems

“BEING WILLING TO FAIL EVERY DAY”: PUBLIC SPEECH ABOUT THE SPIRIT THAT MOVES INSIDE YOU

A favorite speaker at Snowy Prairie’s volunteer events was a Jamaican musician, a born-again Christian, Ezeky’el. At one event, his assignment was to describe the inspiration for volunteering and tie it to the day’s theme of “leadership.” Pacing across the school auditorium’s stage, building up a sweat, tossing his clean dreadlocks, he said:

Leadership. That’s what they want me to talk about. It means taking risks, joy *and* pain, risking getting lost. You have to know what it is to be lost. How many of you have been lost?

(enthusiastic shouting from the audience, as if at a prayer revival meeting)

So you know how it is to be lost. Leadership: It’s failing. Failing every day . . . Leadership: It’s sharing—some days it feels like give, give give . . . it’s a spirit that moves inside you. *Nobody can see it, but you know it’s there.*

“What a moving message,” I thought to myself. “This is why volunteering is so important! You recognize the unfathomable mystery of each other; ‘nobody can see it, but you know it’s there.’ What is respect, if not awe before this human mystery?”

Empowerment Talk suggests that volunteering is good because it is soul-changing, and organizers embraced this mission. To fulfill this mission of deeply inspiring and transforming the volunteers, volunteering would be *hard*. To fulfill the mission of helping needy volunteers themselves—youth who were “not the usual leader type,” who lacked confidence—however, organizers had to make sure volunteering was *easy*.

These two missions came into possible tension with each other, and with a third: helping others, which usually requires knowledge, or even expertise, not just inspiration. There was a possible three-way dissonance between inspiring all of the volunteers, helping the needy volunteers, and having the expertise or know-how to help other people. These possible

discords, and their various resolutions, harmonious and otherwise, are the topic of this chapter.

Soul-Searching and Inspiration versus Easy and Accessible Help for the Needy Volunteer

Youth Empowerment Projects in Snowy Prairie never *did* those kinds of soul-changing projects that Ezeky’el proposed. It would be too hard and would scare off potential volunteers. The contrast became clear when youth participants divided up into smaller groups right after his speech, when Samia, Bonita, Marie, and Marisol, Emily’s four most active volunteers, led a workshop that they had designed on “How to Start a Group.”

Marisol stood at the head of the classroom, in front of a group of about thirty teenagers, many resting their heads on their desks, looking pale, tired, and grumpy—grumpy because it was early morning on a school holiday, and many were there because their parents had made them go, so that they would not be home having sex and taking drugs. The day’s slogan, written on folders and posters, was: “It’s a Day On, Not a Day Off,” but many participants would have preferred a day off.

Marisol: How many of you have ever volunteered? (Lots raise hands.)

Marisol: What did you do?

Voices from audience pitch in:

- Concessions stand at a soccer game.
- Cleaned litter on a highway.
- Volunteered at Snowy Prairie Festival.
- Blood drive.
- Volunteered in my church.

Organizer of a rural Youth Center, turning to the kid who said he cleaned a highway: *Is it a lot of work, or not too bad?*”

Youth participant: It’s a mile stretch, you go 3–4 times a year; it’s not too bad.

Next, there was a long discussion about how easy it was to pick up highway litter, about dates, and about how you did not have to do it in the winter.

These easy, half-day activities did not easily mesh with the unfathomable, mysterious good that was supposed to come from selflessly serving, buoyed on the vast internal ocean where Emerson said that the most personal meets the most universal. Programs needed to attract as many youth as possible, by making it sound easy, comfortable, and fun, not risky, terrifying, or “failing every day,” as Ezeky’el put it. The needy young

people whom organizers most wanted to reach were those who were already failing, and organizers guessed that they would not want to set themselves up intentionally to risk even more failure. And so, all youth participants knew that their volunteering was almost never full of “risks and pain.” You could not get “lost.”

Of course, having the litter picked up is better than not, but that was not the groups’ main point. Their hope was that just having a taste of volunteering might whet a few participants’ appetites for more serious, soul-changing work. Organizers spoke about the projects such as litter cleanups as if they were *just like* the kind of self-directed, soul-changing, soul-threatening work that Ezeky’el described.

The Regional YEP’s visit to the Pediatric Hospital was typical of the tension between doing something soul-changing and difficult, doing something easy that could help them overcome their own problems, and helping others. At the group’s meeting, VJ, a non-disadvantaged volunteer, described in a proud but humble voice:

I went to Disneyland over spring break and there was this family that had taken their child there. She was terminally ill, and going there was her one big wish. She was so skinny and pale, but she was so happy to be there! They let me go around with her one day—I’ll never forget it—I was just so—I mean, I couldn’t go to work for four days after that. I couldn’t leave the house without thinking of this little girl and everything she was going through. I wrote about it for my college entrance essay and gave it to my English teacher. He really liked it—he said it was so touching, it actually made him shed a tear.

His story evoked the heartbreaking, spiritual ideal that Ezeky’el’s speech had evoked—something life-changing, frightening, touching one’s soul, coming straight from a common humanity, personal, fervent, direct. Such experience was rare, and to be treasured (in VJ’s case, it also turned out to be good for the college application, as the English teacher’s tear attests).

The youth group was excited by the idea, and thought of throwing a party for the sick children, but it turned out the hospital had rules about visitors. A party would be too much work for the hospital: it would expose both volunteers and patients to unpredictable germs, and each ingredient of each brownie and cupcake would need approval, for patients who were on special diets. So the volunteers decided that reading to the sick children would be good. But then, they learned that volunteers younger than eighteen years old required intense supervision, and that would have demanded a large investment of the hospital staff’s time—too large, unless the youth group could pledge to volunteer weekly for a year or more, which was a promise that the volunteers could not make since

turnover in the group was too high for that. Something more than inspiration was needed; expertise that might develop in the course of a long time commitment was also needed. Without that, there was almost no possibility of direct contact with the patients.

VJ reported to the group, “This policy might change soon, especially if the Regional YEP shows itself to be responsible. So, in the meantime, the hospital suggested helping decorate the walls for Christmas.” Fellow volunteers eagerly approved the new plan.

When the time came, only four of the twenty or so Regional YEP teens participated, along with about fifteen local university students, who had also come for a one-day, plug-in volunteering opportunity through their own service-learning program. Still, the original inspiration was so perfectly in harmony with Empowerment Talk, Regional YEP members and organizers often retold the tale of the hospital visit for at least three years (minus the part about only four Regional YEP members coming).

Some easy, non-soul-changing projects were so appealing, they attracted too many volunteers who gathered too much stuff. In a meeting of the Community House Board of Directors, we talked about the annual rummage sale, which always included hundreds of pounds of books. The director said, “The guy who donates used books runs a used book store, and can give as many books as we can take in our cars, as many trips as we want to make.” Similarly, sorting and storing many tons of food takes space and time, so the food bank coordinator did not even want youth volunteers just to gather as much food in one day as they possibly could.

HELPING THE VOLUNTEERS HELP THEMSELVES VERSUS HELPING THE VOLUNTEERS HELP THE RECIPIENTS OF THEIR AID

Since volunteers’ inspiration was itself so highly prized, volunteers were showered with gratitude, no matter how unhelpful they were. This made it hard for them to learn from experience.

Trudy, the paid staff person at the Community House, at the program’s annual rummage sale: We used to have these people who would send beads—big, hand-made beads. They would send a whole big bag full of them. But the kids just didn’t like them. We would tell them that the kids just loved the beads. And every year, they’d send more beads, and we’d bag’em up at the end of the day and send them on to St. Vinnie’s [a second-hand store]. You know, they felt so good about what they were doing, contributing the beads to us, and we didn’t want to make them feel bad, so we’d just say, “Oh, yes, the kids just loved them!”

Nina: What happened—do they still send them?

Trudy: No, they were very elderly, and just got too old to make the beads.

Community House members had to be grateful for each ugly bead . . . even if they ended up throwing them in a bin to give to a second-hand store. “Do Something!” was the name of one local Empowerment Program. This way, whether or not they were helpful, volunteers could symbolize the idea that “someone out there cares,” as organizers put it.

Deluged with praise, youth and adult volunteers alike could not easily learn from their mistakes, because no one could point them out. An Americorps volunteer¹—a music major, fresh out of college—helped arrange a Christmas toy give-away, in which poor, minority children would receive wrapped gifts. The event went on and on, starting in late afternoon and continuing till long past children’s bedtimes on a school night, without any food except cookies and chips.

The multipurpose room of a mega-church was divided into different “stations”—you could make glittery cards here, do face-painting there, sit on Santa’s lap and have a photo taken in another location, and so on. Carrying their huge winter parkas and boots and mittens and scarves and hats and snow pants through the hot din, about 400 people waited patiently on line at each “station,” and waited again for each kid’s toy. So if they had three kids, they had to wait three separate times. But the young Americorps volunteer did not want it to feel bureaucratic, and did not know how to arrange such a big event. Families had arrived before 6, so they could be sure to enter their kids’ names on the toy give-away list. An experienced planner might have calculated in advance that it would have taken thirty-three hours for each child to sit on Santa’s lap and have a photo taken!

I had come with my own kids, and was carrying my one-year-old. Sweat was cascading down his back and over my forearm.

By the time we left, it was 9 p.m., past most kids’ bedtimes, and these are the same parents who teachers so often accused of not making sure their kids get enough sleep—how unfair! When we made our exit, no one had eaten dinner yet. There was no food except for some chips and cookies, and the toys had still not been given out. Luckily, my kids had not expected to get toys, so there was no promise for me to undo. It was a school night, and many kids still had to take two buses to get home.

The amazing thing was that people hardly complained. One grandma very gently complained by mentioning that she would have to take two buses home, and by pointing to her overexcited granddaughter who had eaten too many cookies, but she was quick to say that it wasn’t too bad.

Whether she did not complain because she was accustomed to such treatment, or because she figured that I was white and therefore had helped organize the event (since no white people were there as recipients, but only as volunteers, social workers, and police), or because it seemed unfair to complain about receiving a gift, I cannot say for sure. Whatever the reason, it was clear that the parents and grandparents who stayed with the increasingly wild children had to shower gratitude on the young, sweet Americorps volunteer.

An experienced organizer would have made sure that the families got home earlier, and would have given them dinner if they had stayed past dinnertime. Details about food, heat, noise, time, sleep, numbers of buses, and bedtimes had not occurred to the young Americorps volunteer (though someone had made sure that there were two police cars parked in front). Perhaps this volunteer had never taken a city bus in Snowy Prairie or he would have known that the wait for the bus was long, and frostbite on a December night was a definite risk. The next day, the children's teachers would probably blame the parents when the children were sleepy and crabby, after staying up three hours past the bedtime that schools recommended.

Right before I left the sweaty Holiday Toy Give-Away, I asked the Americorps volunteer how he thought the evening was going. He sounded unequivocally proud. I quickly realized that he assumed that the question itself was a form of congratulations for his voluntary efforts, so an expression of pride was his appropriate response. The event was good for inspiring a spirit of voluntarism *in him*, and possibly making him into the kind of person who would continue, throughout his life, to do good civic work. The volunteer spirit was there, even if the details were wrong. If the Christmas toy give-away had been held by a government agency, recipients could have criticized it for its inefficiency, or might have said the state should have used its funds differently; this situation short-circuited any such complaint.

Volunteers who paid to be in volunteering programs—helping poor people in faraway places, for example—were even less likely to have an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. At a regional environmental educators' conference, held in Snowy Prairie, a speaker described his ecotourism outfit's project of getting teen volunteers to help save Costa Rican sea turtles. The obvious comparison was with a normal vacation to a tropical beach hotel. When someone in the audience asked if knowledge of Spanish was required, the leader said no, though he added that sometimes, local residents did not understand what the volunteers were doing, and told a story about locals getting in a fistfight with a participant from his program. Nobody questioned whether flying volunteers to Costa Rica was worth the pollution and the offense to the natives.

The volunteers' parents would be paying, so no elaborate public justification was necessary.

One way to smooth over the tension between helping needy volunteers and helping needy others was to let the volunteers make decisions without worrying about the decisions' effects on the needy recipients of aid. Planning a trip to a sister city in Nicaragua, for example, organizers invited Snowy Prairie youth to plan projects before they knew anything about the village—whether the village had running water or a health clinic, for example. When they got there, they were, according to Emily who went with them, surprised and chagrined to learn that the Nicaraguans had their own ideas of how the Snowy Prairie volunteers might help. Much like when the youth volunteers fed the homeless, the symbol—of eager, hopeful youth taking initiative—was more important than the concrete action. Once again, inspiring the youth volunteers and helping the faraway recipients of their aid were two missions that did not quite match.

These examples have all shown how challenging it was to balance needy volunteers' evanescent inspirations with the needs of recipients. Valuing inspiration's effect on the volunteers worked well for picking up litter. Litter has no feelings and never disagrees with the volunteer who cleans it up. Valuing inspiration's effect on the volunteers worked for decorating the hospital, but less well for making direct contact with the patients. It worked still less well for people who have sensitive, strong feelings, such as the Costa Ricans did about wealthy volunteers invading their beach. It works even less well when the recipients of aid need something at regular intervals—food, for example—or might die if their urgent needs are not met immediately, regardless of the volunteer's inspired feelings, as the next chapter will show.