Maryland’s Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend originally commissioned this collection of readings to serve as a curricular supplement for the Maryland Student Service Alliance. Each of the fifty texts in Courage to Care encourages thoughtful reflection on volunteer service. The unique Touchstones discussion format is outlined in the introduction to help teachers who are new to leading discussions. Reflection and discussion help foster the spirit of volunteerism in participants as they begin to consider their experiences through the eyes of writers including Florence Nightingale, Frederick Douglass, and Henry David Thoreau.

“A program of community service gives students the opportunity to use their talents, energy and intelligence to help others. Unreflective action is insufficient to create a citizenry able and willing to make wise choices. For that, reading and thinking are necessary. The following readings have been selected because they raise enduring human concerns. With these readings students are provided a tool with which to understand and speak about the issues that they confront.”

— Lt. Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend

Reflections on Community Service

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COURAGE TO CARE, STRENGTH TO SERVE

Reflections on Community Service

by
Howard Zeiderman

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The old idea about this life was that it was something to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. It was something to be shaken off. It wasn’t connected in any large degree with the life that is to come. More and more we are learning, however, a new idea of life—that each of us is a continuous being. The life in this world is as important as the life in the next world. We simply continue to live after we pass from this stage of being into another stage of being. In a word, the idea is becoming more and more emphasized that this life is something to be made great, something to be improved.

I believe that it is impossible for a person to live a high life—a noble life in the future world—who does not live a noble life in this world. I don’t believe those individuals who are mean, low, and ungrateful in this life are transferred into another life and made higher beings. I believe, very much, that in another life we are what we are in this life. We are certainly preparing ourselves here for what we are to be in another life. So we should practice the habit, day by day, of trying to get all we can out of life. Be sure we get the best things in this life, be sure we learn to do the best things in this life, be sure we learn the higher things in this life.

The person who has learned to love trees, to love flowers, or has learned to get enjoyment and pleasure out of rain—out of everything that is put here by our Creator for our enjoyment—is a person who is happy and contented. Perhaps there are many things we have not yet discovered, but I do not believe there is a thing put on this earth that is not meant for our use—to give us enjoyment and comfort. The more we learn to love trees, the more we learn to love sunshine and rain, the more we learn to get out of nature, the nobler we shall grow day by day.

And so, I want you to get the idea that each day brings to you a serious responsibility. You should try to get as much out of the twenty-four hours as possible. Learn to get out of every hour, every year, as much as is possible for you to get. You have only one life to live. Remember you pass through this life but once, and if you fail, you fail perhaps for all time. You should consider closely the serious obligation you have upon you to live properly through a day,
through a year, and you should try to get everything that is best out of that day, out of that year.

Suppose you have only a dollar to spend during the year. Would you spend every cent during the first six months? Now, you have only one life that you may shape as you will. You will not have it tomorrow again. How careful then you should think about how to spend each moment, each hour, each day of your life!

My experience has been that one gets out of life what he puts in it. If he puts hard, earnest study and effort into his life, he gets pleasure, satisfaction, and enjoyment out of it. As I have said, if an individual puts hard, earnest work into his life, he will get strength out of it. On the other hand, if he is indifferent and reckless, you will find him continually complaining, finding fault, seeking another place. You will find such an individual unhappy, and at the same time, making everyone about him unhappy too. He is simply living on the outer edges of his work, instead of entering into the life of it.

An individual gets happiness out of his study or work in proportion to how much hard, earnest work he puts into it. Suppose you find a person who is constantly complaining that the world has no love in it. You will also find an individual who is cold and hard-hearted himself. He doesn't love the people in the world—he is not loved by the other people. He gets out of life just what he puts into it. Suppose you find someone constantly complaining that those around him are selfish and cold in their treatment of him. Examine into the cause of that individual’s complaint. You will find that he is cold and selfish himself. We get out of every part of life just about what we put into it.

Life should give us the opportunity for the highest mental, physical, and spiritual enjoyment. The old idea that people used to believe, and still believe, is that in order to get happiness, one must punish the physical part of oneself. This idea has largely passed away. Out of earth, out of nature, out of everything with which we come into contact, we should learn to get the highest physical, mental, and spiritual enjoyment. We would then learn to look at life in the right way.
Charitable Effort
Jane Addams

All those hints and glimpses of a larger and more satisfying democracy, which literature and our own hopes supply, have a tendency to slip away from us. We are left sadly unguided and puzzled when we attempt to act upon them.

Our conceptions of morality, like all our other ideas, pass through a course of development. The difficulty comes in adjusting our action, which has become hardened into customs and habits, to these changing moral ideas. When this adjustment is not made, we suffer from the strain and indecision of believing one view and acting on another.

Probably there is no relation in life which our democracy is changing more rapidly than the charitable relation—that relation between benefactor and beneficiary. At the same time there is nothing in our modern experience which reveals so clearly the lack of that very equality which democracy implies. We have reached the moment when democracy has made such inroads upon this relationship that the complacency of the old-fashioned charitable man is gone forever. Yet, at the same time, the very need and existence of charity denies us the consolation and freedom which democracy will at last give.

It is quite obvious that the ethics of none of us are clearly defined, and we are continually obliged to act in circles of habit, based upon convictions which we no longer hold. Thus our estimate of the effect of environment and social conditions has doubtless altered faster than our methods of administering charity have changed. Formerly when it was believed that poverty was synonymous with vice and laziness, and that the prosperous man was the righteous man, charity was administered harshly with a good conscience. For the charitable agent really blamed the individual for his poverty, and the very fact of his own superior prosperity gave him a feeling of superior morality.

We have learned since that time to measure by other standards and have ceased to accord exclusive respect to the money-earning capacity. While it is still rewarded out of all proportion to any other, its possession is by no means assumed to
imply the possession of the highest moral qualities. We have learned to judge men by their social virtues as well as by their business capacity, by their devotion to intellectual and disinterested aims, and by their public spirit, and we naturally resent being obliged to judge poor people so solely upon their lack of wealth. Yet our democratic instinct instantly takes alarm. It is largely in this modern tendency to judge all men by one democratic standard, while the old charitable attitude commonly allowed the use of two standards, that causes much of our present difficulty. We know that unceasing labor becomes wearing and brutalizing, and our position is totally untenable if we judge large numbers of our fellows solely upon their ability to keep working.

We sometimes say that our charity is too scientific, but we would doubtless be much more correct in our estimate if we said that it is not scientific enough. We dislike arranging things merely alphabetically without indicating what is important and what is insignificant. Our feeling of revolt is probably not unlike that which afflicted the students of plants in the middle of the last century, when flowers were listed in alphabetical order. No doubt the students, wearied to death, many times said that it was all too scientific and were much perplexed and worried when they found traces of structure which their so-called scientific principles were totally unable to account for. But all this happened before science had become evolutionary science, before it had a principle of life from within. The very indications and discoveries which formerly perplexed, later illumined and made the study absorbing and alive.

We are singularly slow to apply this evolutionary principle to human affairs in general, although it is quickly being applied to the education of children. We are at last learning to follow the development of the child; to expect certain traits under certain conditions; to adapt methods and matter to his growing mind. No “advanced educator” can allow himself to be so absorbed in the question of what a child ought to be as to exclude the discovery of what he is. But in our charitable efforts we think much more of what a man ought to be than of what he is or what he may become; we ruthlessly force our conventions and standards upon him with a sternness which we would consider stupid indeed were an educator to use it in forcing his mature, intellectual convictions upon an underdeveloped mind.
The Rhetoric
Aristotle

There are very great differences between young and old men. The young have strong desires, but these change very quickly. Their desires are very strong while they last but are quickly over. The young often get angry. This is because they love honor and can’t stand being insulted. Therefore, they become furious when they imagine they have been treated unfairly. Yet, while they love honor, they love victory even more because the young are eager to feel superior to others. And they love both victory and honor more than money because they don’t know what it’s like to do without money. They look at the good side of everything because they haven’t seen much wickedness. They are very trusting because they haven’t been cheated much. All their mistakes come from overdoing everything. They both love and hate too much. This is because they think they know and are sure of everything. If they hurt others, it is because they mean to insult them rather than harm them. They are always ready to pity others because they think everyone is basically honest. They judge their neighbors by their own harmless natures and so can’t believe that people deserve to be treated badly.

Old men are very different. They have often made mistakes and have been taken in many times. For them, life is bad business. The result of this is that they are sure about nothing and so always under-do everything. They “think” but never claim to “know.” Because they are hesitant about everything, they add a “possibly” or a “perhaps” to whatever they say. Their experience makes them suspicious, and they think that everything is worse than it appears. They are not generous because money is one of the things they need, and they have seen how hard it is to get and how easy to lose. They lack confidence in the future partly because of the experience that most things go wrong and turn out worse than one expects. They live by memory rather than hope, for what is left to them of life is very little compared to what has passed. They are always talking about the past because they enjoy remembering it. Their anger is sudden but weak. They guide themselves by reason much more than by feeling, for reason is directed to what is useful; feeling to what is right. If they harm others it is because they want to injure
them and not, as in the case of the young, to insult them. Both young and old men feel pity towards others. However, they feel pity for different reasons. Young men feel pity out of kindness. As was said, young men believe people are better than they really are and so don’t deserve to be harmed. Old men, on the other hand, imagine that anything that happens to another might happen to them. And it is this possibility that stirs their pity.