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A Student's Reflections on Service: What Is Service? Why Serve?

by J. Jeremy Wisnewski

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THERE IS AN OLD STORY about an ancient Greek philosopher named Thales. According to this tale, Thales was looking to the stars as he walked about Athens, attempting to answer certain troubling philosophical questions. He became so engaged in thought that he didn't even notice the well he was approaching. Needless to say, Thales, one of the most brilliant of ancient Greek philosophers, fell into the well and became the butt of many Athenian jokes. His head was so lost in the clouds, some said, that he didn't even notice the world around him.

In our current tumultuous era of fast food drive-thrus and 24-hour convenience stores, we can no longer afford the luxuries Thales had. We can no longer ignore the world around us. As we consume our well-earned products and whistle down an interstate with plastic cups of coffee, propelling ourselves onward, plagued by an advertisement landscape, it is certainly easy to forget what it means to live in a society. Even with history offering us reminders such as Rousseau's idealistic vision of community, and the present offering us John Rawls' ultra-liberal version of the social contract, we quickly forget what we colloquially call — in a revealing television metaphor — "the larger picture." These thinkers have pinpointed what has for too long been left on the periphery of the cultural consciousness: the basic fact that, regardless of who we think we are or how self-indulged we proved to be, we have a responsibility to ourselves and to those individuals around us who compose the community in which we live.

The notion of service has stood at the heart of every great religion. From familiar Christian mantras to the proverbs of the East, human beings have been compelled to recognize the value and importance of service to others. Whether this is the product of an eternal normative order or simple human sentiment is of no consequence: the fact remains, beneath human endeavors, there is a basic need to demonstrate that we can in fact care — that there is a world that is larger and more profound than the solipsistic microcosm in which we try to contain ourselves.

But what do we mean when we speak of service? Is it mere self-abnegation? Perhaps an example might aid our answering of this question.

In my most recent work, I have been teaching the Chinese game of "go" (Igo) to four classes at a local elementary school. The game dates back 4,000 years, making it the oldest board game in existence. Its basic rules are as simple as tic-tac-toe, its possibilities endless and complex. Through a multicultural program, the game of "go" has facilitated communication between elementary students in Virginia and six-year-olds in Northern Japan (where the game took root and developed). Questions are asked, stories are told, and games are played. Even aside from the immense benefit of early exposure to other cultures, the game of "go" teaches a lesson in and of itself — a lesson we would all do well to learn. The ideas behind the game, while often interpreted as Buddhist in nature, demonstrate a profound sense of fairness and community. In brief, the game is played in such a way that an individual wins and loses an equal amount of times. The Western emphasis on competition is thwarted with a necessary element of cooperation: egos cease to clash over a wooden board. Patterns of "stones" (pieces) emerge as if the game were nothing more than an aesthetic endeavor. And in a sense, it is just that. Ideally, one doesn't compete. One engages in a mutually beneficial activity that produces a process of cooperative beauty. Each player's set of stones "grows" in accordance with the other player's actions. One of the oldest metaphors surrounding the game depicts this process as the growth of species in a once-empty environment. When the board becomes crowded, there is struggle but at the end of the game, all stones are still and all are content with the process that has led to a beautiful creation.

This metaphor provides a key insight into what the notion of service entails. To claim that we are now in a time of struggle would seem to me a massive understatement that fails to capture one of the foremost dilemmas we now face. In an age where Hollywood teaches us even how to fall in love, how do we care about the real people around us? How do we make them more than images flickering on a screen in our mind's eye? In a sense, the game of "go" provides an answer to even this question. The answer is: we engage in the world around us. We accept the struggle and its origins and we actively take part, in our own ways, allowing the struggle to progress as it must in order to be resolved — in order for the stones to be still, the players content.

This, to me, is at the heart of service — to simply engage in the world because one sees that, without engagement, nothing can change. Service involves taking responsibility for a world in which you are thrown, a world you did not create, and in which you did not choose to live. Call me an existentialist, but there is something very beautiful about the type of responsibility a person takes on her shoulders when she decides that it is not enough to simply watch the world go by.

When we begin to think about things in these terms, the question, "Why should I serve others?" ceases to be intelligible. One doesn't view oneself as separate from the basic context that al-

lows things to have meaning and purpose. One accepts the way the world is and recognizes that it doesn't have to be that way. The issue ceases to be one of motivation. When you see yourself as part of something larger, you act in a way that benefits more than your own self-interest. You see the world in a way that makes it something more than late night TV or talk show reruns. You see it as a part of you that needs your assistance. Why do I still participate in service learning? Not because I want to, but because, as a member of a community, I need to.

The most basic bleeding-heart appeal is grounded on an attempt to allow people to see the roles they play in a larger social context. Even if one cannot accept this reasoning, there are simple rational reasons for service to others. Even for the psychological egoist (who, I might add, has been thoroughly refuted by sociobiology), service is a means to make the world in which you live a better place. This means it is better for the agent who serves as well — whether in the satisfaction of helping others or in the simple awareness that one is changing things, however small these things might be. In the final analysis, we must view service as a beacon that has shined down from the dawn of civilization, not as a mere historical atavism. From pre-historical societies such as Crete to modern day America, the call to aid others has rung out like the deepest call of conscience — a call which cannot be considered anachronistic, no matter how much we try to prove this to ourselves through "bad faith." Service is far more than self-abnegation: it is the recognition of a community that has come down to us through history and an autonomous decision to take some responsibility for the errors in that community, no matter how far removed they might seem. It is thinking through the dilemmas we, as a society — as a world — face in our current predicament and engaging in the world in such a way as to resolve those dilemmas. It is recognizing that the world is more than one's own solipsistic microcosm, that it is more than what lurks beneath a pile of paperwork and a cup of McDonald's coffee, more than the new Volvo and climbing a corporate ladder, more than few college courses aiming at either education or salary. And even if a "kingdom of ends" can never be attained, the notion of service leaves us without excuse for our indifference. We can no longer stare at televisions with glazed over eyes, nor can we merely think about the problems we read about in the papers and shrug our shoulders, falling into wells when we encounter them. Service is being Thales with open eyes.

Presently, J. Jeremy Wisnewski is a Ph.D. scholarship student at the University of California—Riverside.

Announcement from the Editor

In this Issue of the *NSEE Quarterly* we are introducing two new columns: A Letter To the Editor and Student Reflections Spotlight. We have decided to establish these new columns for several reasons. As of now, there is no place where readers can voice their opinions about the *Quarterly*. Also, since working with students is the foundation of our work, we've decided to create a space for them to have a voice in the form of critical reflection and discussion. We hope you will encourage your students to submit their reflections and critiques to the *Quarterly*.

NSEE Consulting Services

for Businesses, Nonprofit Organizations, and Government Agencies

For organizations considering the establishment of an internship program

Feasibility Study and Report: A consultant will assist with assessing the commitment which would be required of the host organization in relation to the potential of an internship program to support and advance its goals and interests.

For organizations launching an internship program or needing consultation in specific areas —

Designing an Effective Program: A consultant works with an organization in researching its needs, the availability of interns who can meet them, and the organization's ability and willingness to provide learning opportunities required by academic programs. A consultant provides examples of internship programs that have similar needs and resources. A consultant assists with developing organizational policies regarding the nature and length of internships, intern responsibilities, forms of compensation (if any), and the roles of the internship program manager, supervisor(s), and other staff.

Creating or Restructuring the Internship Program Manager Job: An effective internship program serves the needs of the host organization, the intern, and the educational institution. The intern manager is critical to ensuring that the internship is a meaningful learning experience, for the intern receives appropriate feedback and evaluation, and the host organization benefits from the intern's work. A consultant can assist with formulating the role and responsibilities of an internship program manager.

Some specific consulting topics include:
- designing internships and developing written internship position descriptions
- creating work-learning agreements between the host organization, academic institution, and the intern
- identifying appropriate academic and community programs from which to recruit interns
- providing guidance on the intern selection process
- developing a plan for orienting interns
- designing a system for feedback among intern supervisor, staff, intern(s), and the educational institution
- recommending solutions for intern management problems
- other needs identified by the host organization.

For more information, contact NSEE, 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh, NC 27609-7229, 919-787-3263.