

Volunteers

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The remarks I would like to make are related to the conference subject, "Seniors and Volunteering " rather than to this round table in particular, "Volunteers' contribution to the quality of day-to-day life and respect for the dignity of individuals", which is perhaps more the field of psychologists or sociologists, of which I am neither.

I should like to try to answer three questions:

- first, Why become a senior volunteer?
- second, How does one become a senior volunteer?
- and third, What does one do as a senior volunteer?

Why become a senior volunteer?

Naturally, there are several good reasons to make such a commitment, which can be placed into two categories:

1. external, i.e. citizenship,
2. internal, i.e. of a personal interest.

Citizenship

As a citizen, I see several reasons to "do something":

Giving back - talents - civic-mindedness - solidarity - criticism

Giving back, which I consider a duty, represents a form of repaying society for everything I have received and that has enabled me to be on "the right side of the fence": health, education, experience, not being among the poorest or the excluded. If I think about it, I owe what I am to myself, but let's be honest, life, luck, in short, society have all played a role.
Volunteering is a way of thanking society for everything one has been given.

And I continue with **talents**: with a combination of life, luck, and my own efforts, I have built up capacities, experience, knowledge, in short a considerable capital, which all of a sudden becomes unproductive.

What a waste not to increase the value of this capital for the benefit of society, a waste worsened by the tremendous needs of associations that go unfilled.
Do we have the right to allow such waste?

Civic-mindedness. There's a word that has lost meaning, which is good in a way, through the disappearance of conflicts and closer ties between peoples. But what is

less apparent is that this word represents another form of duty than what was often assigned to it in the past and which was contained in another word, that has become even rarer: patriotism! My generation still knows the meaning of "enemy", who triggered the horrors of war; we still know the meaning of "those lacking civic spirit". And in the name of this civic-mindedness, we made a commitment -I repeat, a commitment- at the risk of our lives, in the resistance or as enlisted volunteers. We volunteered, in short.

The enemy was external and visible and people now think there are no more enemies.

But the enemy has become worse, it is internal and invisible: solitude, drugs, illegal trafficking, illness, distress, exclusion and so on.

Being civic-minded is not simply picking up one's dog's droppings, sorting one's waste, respecting the environment: failing to do all these things is a lack of civic spirit but doing so is not a commitment.

Being civic-minded means making a commitment as a volunteer against today's enemies.

Solidarity. I shall be brief, because, in my way of thinking, this is self-evident.

What kind of world would we have if we obliged the sight-impaired to help the blind to cross the street? It seems to me that when one is on the right side of the fence there is a duty to look across at the other side and to take care of what one sees.

And lastly, **criticism**. I believe that criticism is a right that can only be exercised if matched with a certain form of duty.

I made a political commitment to serve on the local Council and when my friends learned of my decision, they teased me: "What? You're joining those imbeciles, that skulduggery, those incompetents?" and so on. So I asked them whether they knew why politics had that reputation, at least in their opinion.

They were quite embarrassed when I replied: "It's because you're not part of it!" By participating in politics, I earned the right to criticise it...

One does not have the right to criticise society and the way it works if one does not make a commitment to it.

Alongside these reasons, which I call external, there are those that are internal, which I classify under the heading:

Personal interest

Yes, why not? And fortunately, because otherwise there would be no volunteers: we are not masochists.

I remember being interviewed, along with two other very committed volunteers, by a group of journalists. After I had spoken, a journalist commented: "Yes, but you do that because you enjoy it!" and I replied immediately: "You mean it should get on my nerves on top of everything else?"

We cannot hide our head in the sand: volunteering gives and must give the volunteer tremendous satisfaction: this is what is known as psychological reward.

This type of satisfaction can be, in order: **defending a cause - being useful - meeting people - making good use of one's time - using and maintaining one's skills - securing fulfilment outside of work - learning new things - discovering one's talents.**

The problem is that one only discovers this **after** becoming a volunteer and it is very difficult to understand the rich rewards of this commitment without having tried it oneself.

How many walk right by a treasure without seeing it?

In my view, the main satisfaction lies in **maintaining a socially useful role**: society still needs me, I am still useful.

How does one become a senior volunteer?

I am going to **surprise** and maybe even **shock** some of you by my remarks concerning volunteering upon reaching "senior citizen" age.

The public has a totally false image about where candidate volunteers are found: logically it should be in the **non-working population**, among those who have time and for whom voluntary work could be an answer to the problem of inactivity.

This is the first error: when one does voluntary work, it is not "first" and primarily for oneself, -it has to be for oneself "too" but in terms of return and gratification-, and not a remedy to inactivity.

Public opinion holds that volunteers are people who stay at home, the jobless or retired people. This is a major error. There are such volunteers, of course, but that is far from the whole story.

You may be surprised to learn that in the age curve of volunteers, the peak lies between **35 and 45**.

You may also be surprised to learn that there are more young volunteers than retired persons.

But these are the facts!

Persons staying at home: When I made these same remarks recently to a woman Member of Parliament, she reacted as follows: "Yes, that's true! I remember when my children were still in school. Every time there were activities to be organised by the parents, a large majority of us who volunteered were working women. We even commented on it at the time..."

The unemployed: in this category, there is an additional explanation to the one I shall mention shortly and which applies to all the categories.

Voluntary work is directly proportional to the level of education: statistics are eloquent in this regard: there are twice as many volunteers who have a higher education than those who have only finished primary school. The curve is perfect: the higher the

education level, the more volunteers. And the tragedy of unemployment today is no longer the lack of work, but the lack of qualifications, often due to a lack of schooling.

And retired persons? I may surprise you or at least make you laugh.

Based on the principle that many people look forward to retirement as the time when they will do all the projects and plans they have had to put "on hold", I divide retired persons into four categories:

1. **those with voluntary experience:** those who have already worked as volunteers. This category builds on its past commitment.

2. **the dreamers:** those are going to do everything: clean the attic, finally do something with the garden, organise the photo albums, take care of the grandchildren and, of course, become a volunteer, not to be selfish... but not right away. I have met quite a few, who tell me: "OK, we'll meet in a year, but give me a year to put my things in order..." And a year later: "But you can't imagine everything I have to do! I really don't have the time..." A year later it's too late.

3. **the bitter, the blasé.** "I've already given enough! No more work! No more responsibilities! Work has worn me out! Now it's my turn."
And those in this category, who have never thought of anyone other than themselves, will continue to do so: after the routine of work-work-work... comes the routine of bridge-travel-sport!

4. lastly, there are **those for whom life was empty:** and these people continue developing their emptiness...

I could add another category, those who live in a small flat, to whom the missus says: "Why don't you go out a bit... You're in the way". These are the best and the most faithful.

I mentioned earlier that there was one characteristic that applies to all the categories: it is the fact that working people are the ones who make a commitment, and the busier one is, the more one volunteers. So it is not among the non-working that one finds candidate volunteers...

But, though it is rare, for some there is a real road to Damascus, a meeting, a temporary replacement that turns into a long-term commitment, a friend involved in voluntary work who calls for help...

But, don't be mistaken, retired persons are no gold mine of volunteers. And this is all the more unfortunate because there are more and more young citizens who are retired, in good physical condition and with the prospect of a longer life: it's hard to understand.

My point is that to be a senior volunteer, it's not upon reaching the age of retirement that things have to be organised, but well before then. It is during working life that things get started. I have participated in several briefings with candidate retired persons, without ever triggering a vocation.

In connection with this, I am working on a project of synergy between the "Association pour le Volontariat" and businesses, to develop a civic-minded business culture that would promote and support "citizenship".

But this is not the place to go into that project. The King Baudouin Foundation is interested in it and may help to develop it next year.

Lastly, what does one do as a senior volunteer?

There are things accessible to everyone: reducing isolation through visits, transporting the ill or the needy, helping pupils with their homework, etc., all of which are very important tasks.

But what is cruelly lacking in associations are management volunteers, people whose professional experience can be transposed to the voluntary sector. The ideas are there and there is plenty of good will, but discipline is lacking.

Too often, voluntary work is criticised for being amateurish. Unfortunately, this is still often the case.

It is not so much the volunteers who lack professionalism, but the associations that lack discipline. This is too often the case because of a lack of time or a lack of support.

And this is where there is room for experienced retired persons: there is a serious lack of volunteers with management experience, capable of taking on responsibility.

While it is true that retiring first and then becoming a volunteer does not happen as often as we might think, it is not too late to put the lie to this state of affairs.

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