

Briauna Azer

Final Reflection

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Service is Like a Ted Talkin' Onion from Canalou

I joined this class as an avenue to fulfill an experiential learning requirement for the Honors program. I selected this course specifically because it encouraged participants to continue in their past service engagements rather than forcing them into new situations. With this in mind, I decided I would volunteer at the University District Food Bank, an organization I had previously partnered with during the fall of my freshman year. Overall, I greatly enjoyed my time at the food bank. My duties included restocking items, managing the produce department, and assisting with shopper checkout. Aside from school, these experiences were both valuable and enjoyable. However, when I scrutinized them with the materials presented in class the very nature of my service became tangled in a net of theories, ideologies, rebukes, and personal accounts. It has been challenging to wade through the material this quarter but I have found three ideas to be particularly compelling as they have offered me valuable perspective on the work I was doing: the story of the Wharton's helped prepare me for my return to the food bank, Ernesto's Ted Talk challenged me to serve humbly instead of oppressively, and the article from The Onion kept me on my toes all quarter.

Coincidentally, before I returned to the Food bank for my first day back, we were assigned the radio interview with Ira Glass and the Wharton family from This American Life. I found myself deeply effected by the example of Jackie and Kenny: the couple moved back to their home town, Canalou, to serve its citizens and help restore the neighborhood to it's former

old-time glory. Yet their good intentions were met with huge opposition- Kenny and Jackie almost never heard a ‘thank you,’ their house was egged, car vandalized, they received death threats, and were even shot at. As Kenny Wharton reflects on these responses he sounds utterly defeated:

Maybe we hadn't done such a good deed for these people around here. It's not what they wanted that's for sure. Maybe it's more what we wanted than what they wanted. I'd have to think about it. They get it the way they want it. They've had it this way before we come here. And it'll be this way after we leave. (Glass)

The Wharton's are not bad people- they were just bad listeners. Canalou had changed and did not have any interest in going back to the way things were. Thus, when Kenny and Jackie returned with their oppressive goals of restoration they were not well received. Moreover, no one was better off because of their efforts. The Wharton's example was very influential as I considered my return to the food bank. Certainly, things must have changed in my absence. I wanted to be careful to listen, to humbly observe, and to see how I would best be able to fit in with the current state of the food bank, not the food bank I remembered.

This theme of listening continued to crop up in various places throughout the quarter. In addition to it being central to the lessons taught by the Wharton family, I also heard it stressed in the Ted Talk given by Ernesto Sirolli. He talked at length about his years of fruitless service and then shared how this all changed when he made listening the central aspect of his approach. Sirolli stressed his job was only to respond, never to initiate; his goal was to become a servant of local passion (Sirolli). Sirolli's ideas really resonated with me and challenged my work at the food bank. I needed to take time to get to know the population I was serving, and to listen. From

listening, I realized all people come to the UDFB under the pretext of getting groceries, yet many also seek to subtly fulfill other needs like community, shelter, friendly environment, and positive interactions with others. In addition to broadening my awareness, his perspective also helped me make sense of some really frustrating situations. For example, a lady came into the food bank and yelled at the staff, insulted the establishment, and was verbally abusing those around her. As I made myself available to shop with her I tried to make sense of this bizarre behavior. We were giving her free food, friendly service and access to community resources- why on earth was she angry and rude? Then, with the help of Sirolli's lecture, I began to understand that this woman was here for more than food and the act of taking her verbal abuse was actually an act of service. She was not just frustrated with me or the crowded facility- she was angry she had to come here, angry at her circumstances, angry at the people who let her down, and probably angry at herself too. Moreover, the food bank might be the only safe place for this woman to express these frustrations. Lashing out at me could be therapeutic, or the least destructive way to express her discontent. With this in mind it was easier to not take her comments personally and to reply to each jab with "I'm sorry you feel that way" or "thank you for coming in today." Although this example is quite unorthodox, I believe I served this woman well because I took the time to consider what might really be going on and tried to act according to these considerations rather than to my personal feelings or agenda.

In addition to being cautious with regards to exactly how I was helping others I was also weary about the reputation I was building for myself. This concern was underscored by the satire presented in the article "Soup-Kitchen Volunteers Hate College-Application Padding Brat" where members of the Salvation Army express malice towards Justin, a student volunteer:

“He can talk all he wants about how enriching this experience has been, but it's completely obvious that all he's thinking about is how good this is going to look on his transcript,” Perkins said. “Here at the Salvation Army, we try to appreciate all the help God sends our way, but I draw the line with that little shit.” (Onion)

Justin wanted to leverage service to help beef-up his Stanford application. I am using it to fulfill an honors requirement. As much as I do not want to identify with this seemingly self-righteous character, I must admit that we are in the same boat. Considering this, I have found it hard to think about motivations in concert with service. Do they really matter? Can they taint the work being done? I have come to the conclusion that, at least in the context of the food bank, motivations do not really matter. As long as the food gets on the shelf people will be fed and the organization's goal will be pursued. Moreover, impressions seem to be more important than motivations. This “brat” created such a negative environment in the hypothetical situation because he let his motivations become his identity, and such a focus inhibited his ability to really be conscious of what was going on at the food bank and what people thought of him. In light of his negative example I have thought a lot this quarter about my impression at the UDFB: what does the staff think of me? What do the shoppers think about me? What do they say about me after I clock out for the day? These questions drive me to do the best work possible so I can give people positive things to talk about. I want to make a good impression because it creates positive environment and increase the overall quality of the work being done.

The story of the Wharton's, Ernesto's Ted Talk, and the article from The Onion all made stressed the importance of cognitive, humble service and guided my approach throughout the quarter. I hope to continue to leverage these ideas in my future service endeavors. I am considering working at the food bank again next fall. After my community leader interview with Reverend Drew Burdette I am also considering how I might be able to incorporate service, business and ministry into my professional career. I have so enjoyed this class; it has redefined service for me, taught me more about the University District community and helped me learn more about myself as a leader.

Works Cited

Glass, Ira. "Do-Gooders: This American Life." *This American Life*. N.p., 9 Apr. 1999. Web. 28 May 2013.

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Sirolli, Ernesto. "Want to Help Someone? Shut up and Listen!" *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*. TED TALKS, n.d. Web. 11 June 2013.