“MORE THAN GOOD WORKS”
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“At least do no harm.” American Red Cross
“Never resist a generous impulse, your own or someone else’s” Jack Harris

Ours is an ironic time. The United States has tensions and contradictions between its burgeoning national wealth and its continuing social problems. Many Americans feel contradictions between their personal material success and their emotional dissatisfactions. These contradictions contribute to that irony. This condition is aided by a significant fragmentation, uprootedness, and disconnection between family, work, spirit and place, resulting in a general lack of trust, in one another and in the future, and an uncertainty about values. In the past we could count on the direct, face-to-face support from our kin, our religious congregations, or our neighbors to provide a social safety net. Today we depend far too much on the abstract support of government, and this allows most of us to be bystanders, rather than active hands-on citizens.

Our forms of social organization often are quite harsh to those who are in need of public services. Our notion that personal or individual problems are private, and require private solutions stands at odds with what we know sociologically – that many personal and individual problems are a result of accidents of birth and unequal life chances, or results of intentional or unintentional social policy. How many of you spout ideologies and rationalizations that keep you away from public service such as the capitalist “That’s the way life is,” and “Its survival of the fittest?” Or how about the self-aggrandizing and mean spirited “They don’t deserve help?” Consider the most crass and self-centered, “It doesn’t affect me?” Alternatively, how about the self-protective “I don’t have time?” Each of these views may keep you and others from taking action that could ease some human suffering and create some more joy in the world. I realize that the source of this resistance to engagement and encounter often stems not from strength and certitude, but from F.U.D., your fears, uncertainties, and doubts. Now, or perhaps later, we hope you will break the bonds of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Do not fear to make waves, do not fear others who are different from yourself. Do not be uncertain about what is right and just, do not be uncertain of outcome. And do not doubt yourself, and the power you have to make a difference.
Let me tell you about Tim and Michelle. They started the Geneva Boxing Program a little less than two years ago, and are now affiliated with the Geneva Housing Authority. Tim and Michelle saw a need, and organized a now sizable group of young boys and girls who live at risk in public housing into a boxing club. They saw a need, had the desire and the skills to do something about it. Assisted by the “We Care Committee of Geneva,” Tim and Michelle now provide counseling, tutoring, peer counseling, and community and self-developmental recreational activities. It has resulted in several club members succeeding in school, and in a few cases, staying in school. By the way, I am sure that they could use some volunteers to help tutor and counsel, and if you box, well, maybe you can get in the ring.

Do you know people, or have you
- Worked in a soup kitchen?
- Tutored students to learn to read?
- Volunteered in a hospital?

So many of you have already participated in service, and this reinforces President Gearan’s belief that your generation is getting a bad rap. Based on your experience and observations, ask yourself, what do human beings need? How am I in a position to help people in need achieve this? Certainly there is a hierarchy of needs, at the top being food and shelter, but there are also critical needs for safety, recreational opportunities, and access to fresh air and nature.

I am reminded of the Center of Concern’s program to bring Christmas meals and toys to needy families in Geneva. Over the last several years, over 100 families have been recipients of this gift of giving. An effort like this does not happen overnight, and it is not accidental. What you will find is that the organizers are people like you, and have a spirit of connection and community that helps them put out that little extra effort for someone else.

In community service you can learn something about each other, and learn something about a small fragment of our local community, as you learn by working together. There are two college myths: The first I call "eat your spinach," in which you are told that it is time to put yourself in harness and prepare for a life of drudgery. The second is the claim that College is an “ivory tower,” that it is “not the real world.” In service learning activities, you integrate the real world with your academic world. As Robert Coles has
indicated, acts of service, combined with a rich intellectual discourse can lead to a life of growth and transformation, and of meaning and joy that money cannot buy. In your service this semester, and in the days and years to come, you will encounter multiple perspectives, and become a more active and insightful reader, listener, and communicator.

Public service activity should, as Coles indicates, contribute challenging intellectual inquiry, provide a context for passionate learning, provide for new experiences and ideas, create an awareness that ideas have consequences, and that you can act on those ideas in a community with others. Public service provides a mechanism for exploring with others the nature of the world, where we have been and where we may be going, and can provide a model of "real life" during and after your college years, a life filled with vitality and meaning through an active concern for the well being of our fellow human beings and of our planet. In this regard, service is not a special extra, an act of selfless altruism, but an affirmation of a whole life, one that integrates self and other, individual and community in a process of discovery and renewal.

Now I should also mention that service is not without its unintentional consequences. The following letter sent to a Principal’s office after the school had sponsored a luncheon for the elderly is cause for amusement:

Dear Middle School,
God bless you for the beautiful radio I won at your recent senior citizen's luncheon. I am 84 years old and live at the Home for the Aged. All of my family has passed away. I am all alone now and it's nice to know that someone is thinking of me. God bless you for your kindness to an old forgotten lady. My roommate is 95 years old and always had her own radio, but before I received one, she would never let me listen to hers, even when she was napping. The other day her radio fell off the nightstand and broke into a lot of pieces. It was awful and she was in tears. She asked if she could listen to mine, and I said screw you. Life is good.

Sincerely, Edna

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Traditions of service have been local, and Geneva has lots of local agencies. There are places such as the Smith Opera House, several churches and schools, several child development and family resource centers, Geneva Free Library, Red Cross of Seneca Falls, Women's Rights Park, Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, Ontario Pathways, Rose Hill/Johnson Drain Tile Museum,
Center of Concern, Geneva Food Pantry, Seneca Lake State Park, Washington St. Cemetery, American Legion, Montezuma Wildlife Refuge, and Community Lunch Program.

This is the local not-for-profit world of services provided to people to meet the many needs that come with life itself! This world is one that you are likely to use, as a person interested in historic or environmental preservation, or as a parent who needs quality day care, or as a child seeking hospice or care for an aging parent. These agencies provide incredible opportunities and services for people who otherwise might be destitute, hungry, sick, and without a future. This is a world that stands ready to reach out a helping hand, or to provide a lift up.

One of the questions so central to our consideration here at HWS is the difference between public service and charity. I think that this is a hard question to answer quickly, so let me just suggest that I think that the answer lies in the claims public service has about good citizenship, group identification, self identity, community connection, and that public service is always reciprocal in the largest sense.

At Hobart and William Smith we have so many different venues in which students can do service including working with agencies in Geneva, or around the globe doing public service in internships in London, Boston, Washington, or the Dominican Republic. In our coordinate system, we establish intersection of connection, on campus, in our local communities, and abroad in other lands. Public service is another map and compass by which you can orient yourself, actively, and effectively, in your communities.

I recall a Hobart student in my community course who expressed fear about his assignment to Lakeview Heights. Lakeview is a program for the mentally ill, and Steve was worried that he would be very uncomfortable around “crazy” people. He was not sure what they would do, or what he would talk with them about. Steve’s assignment was to go to the Geneva residence twice a week, for about 2 hours each session, and to play cards, watch TV, and just visit with the residents. And what he found out about these crazy people is that they were smart, warm, and welcoming. They did not judge him, and in their acceptance, he found his own. Steve followed the term with an independent study with me in which he designed a recreational program for the residents and spent even more hours in
volunteer work at Lakeview. They liked what he did so much that they offered him a job!

If our identities are going to be more robust than our self in the singular, then we have to go to where other people are. We have to encounter people with their vulnerabilities and their needs. We will notice that people of endurance and hope do good works in circumstances that would seem otherwise hopeless and despairing. And it is going out and working with the not-for-profit agencies and volunteers, and seeing your own humanity in the eyes of those that you serve that will help you realize that you, too, can be a person who makes a difference, and can help your community become a better place to live and work with each other. It is also the case that confronting commonality and difference can help prepare us for a global connectedness, one in which our fluid movements in the local area of community extends to more fluid movements in other, more global contexts.

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You can draw on feelings and thoughts about which you are already familiar in choosing to do service. You are drawn, like most people, to group and personal attachments.

Think about it – how many of you:
- are Yankees fans?
- come from New York?
- belong to a club?
- played on a team?
- live in Rees Hall?

People identify with others in common concerns and activities. You have the capacity for sympathy – to feel something for or about another. It often is expressed as “I feel sorry for you.” This is not a bad feeling to have, and it is often the tender motive for helping out a brother or sister, or even a stranger. However, as pity it will get us little and most people do not want pity, and are likely to resent it because it is undignified.

You also have the capacity for empathy – to feel what the other person feels, to know what it feels like to stand in the other person’s shoes. This is much more difficult, and often much more painful. Empathy drives us to a deeper
connection and with it sometimes deep commitments to aid in the lives of others. Robert Bellah says it well when he remarks in *A Search for Meaning in Modern America*, “Perhaps enduring commitment to those we love and civic friendship toward our fellow citizens are preferable to restless competition and anxious self-defense.”

In each case, whether by attachment, sympathy, or empathy, you can build bridges based on these feelings and the recognition of our commonalities and of our differences. In doing so, you can build a bigger circle – concentric circles if you will, and your own humanity, and your awareness of yourself and others can become more expansive as well.

In this regard, I recall Megan, a William Smith student in my community course who volunteered at Hannick Hall, in Newark, New York. Hannick Hall is a drug treatment and parenting program for single mothers who have problems with drug abuse. It is the mother’s last chance to get clean and to maintain custody of her children. If she fails, she goes to prison, and the child goes to foster care. Megan expressed early on that she was unhappy with her service task, which was to provide care for several children while the mothers were in class or program training. She thought that her service should be more than babysitting, that she could baby sit others for pay if that is how she wanted to spend her time, and was angry that she was being used in this way. But after some time of getting to know the mothers, and realizing not only how lucky she was but that life chances might have dealt her a different hand, she began to put her service into a context. She realized that this simple, perhaps boring and inconsequential act, from her point of view, might very well contribute to keeping a parent and child together, to sustaining an extended family, and to maintaining a community. She discovered, in the eyes of the woman for whom she served, a strand of her own humanity.

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One of the tenets of Hobart and William Smith Colleges is the idea that the individual citizen can be involved and active in his or her community and *make a difference*. In these situations we can begin to understand the nature of difference, the organization and purpose of social institutions, and an appreciation for the unequal life chances and unequal opportunities that are so fundamental to our experiences in American society. We really believe the saying over Demarest Hall about each one of you: “You are the hope of the world.” You can transform your life, and the lives of others so deeply that you can blaze a trail beyond your lifetime.
Acts of public service, then, are acts of creating community. Each one of you is about to become active agents in community making in your new hometown, and each one of you is about to become a critical component in affirming your self and each other, as you create a web of relationships through acts of public service. Just think – your public service can foster human dignity and human well-being. With an unsentimental eye, realize that in some service there may be sweat, tension, and perhaps even boredom, that you may not have fun, that you may not like the persons that you are serving. But that does not make the act less needed, less deserving, or less important, so keep your eye on the bigger picture. Realize, too, that a lifetime of service will bathe you in grace and light, such as when you hear the laughter of children, or see a senior citizen smile after a stroke, or hear a person reading who couldn’t before, or a mother who succeeds in keeping her children by getting off drugs, or by building a playground with other volunteers.

I think of a recent graduate, Mike, who was the personification of the idea that if you want something done, go to the busiest person. Mike is a magician, and invented “Reading Magic.” He shared performance after performance with local and regional schools, and excited children’s imaginations about reading. Many of you have various skills, as athletes, scholars, artists, equestrians, sailors, dancers. Think about ways in which you can use these skills so naturally to help others.

I know that you are going to surprise me, 5, 10, even 20 years out in the things that you will have learned in your college years. These building block moments will come back to you, as you find the way that you are going to do service and give back in you life in the years to come.

John Donne, in Meditation 17 from Devotions upon Emergent Occasions wrote:

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”
When I was ten I remember asking my Grandma Evelyn what heaven was. She did not hesitate – heaven, she said, is how others remember you. To be remembered well, as a benign contributor to humankind, as a friend, as a productive member of the community is heaven, as you live on in the celebration of your memory by others. Do the opposite, and you will be unremembered, or worse, remembered badly.

Ask yourself – when I die will I be remembered, large or small, as a person who was involved in humankind? Will I be remembered as one who left things better than they were, and reached out to others with my helping hand, ready to give a lift up?

You have the time; you just need to activate it. I remember one William Smith sophomore in my introductory course who told me that she feared that she didn’t have the time in her schedule for the classes community service component. At the end of the term, she exclaimed that she could not believe that she had thought she did not have the time, and she continued to volunteer for public service work every term up through graduation. It is now a part of her life, and a gift that she will bring as part of herself to every community in which she lives over her lifetime.

What a gift you give to those whom you serve, and I hope that you will find that it is the beginning of giving a lifetime gift of service to yourself.

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