A Reason to Rise Each Morning:
The Meaning of Volunteering in the Lives of Older Adults

By Dana Burr Bradley

Volunteering by older adults is fascinating both for the value it brings to individual lives and for the benefits that accrue to society. While not every older adult chooses this noncompensatory activity, for those that do, it provides a way to give meaning to their lives. Individuals use volunteering to construct an enhanced sense of purpose by doing things for others, to build a fuller sense of identity by pursuing personal interests, or to create a reasonable structure for their daily lives. Increasingly, older adults will provide important resources for many public and private entities; those who manage these entities will benefit from understanding the trends and dynamics of the older people’s lifestyles. Understanding how and why elders volunteer will help us to better formulate ways to support their efforts.

In 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the pervasiveness of volunteer activities in the United States, which remains a country of volunteers. Between the government and the private sector, there is a large third or independent sector of unpaid individuals working with and for others. But current debates about the state of our society suggest that people now volunteer less and are less connected to each other, despite the great contributions of this unpaid labor force. Today, older people who constitute the best-educated, healthiest, and largest older population in U.S. history, may be the nation’s only increasing natural resource (Freedman, 1997).

Volunteerism acts as a mirror reflecting personal values and identity. Because one engages in this activity with no expectation of monetary compensation, the choice of volunteer “opportunity” is related to an individual’s interests, personal goals, or life perspective. I was challenged to write on this subject because I spend a great deal of time teaching about the administration and management of aging organizations. Many are incorporated as nonprofits and provide a home for older volunteers. I had just begun a pilot study looking at the impact newly formed foundations have on their communities. The study included a number of older members of the community. But as I began the job of writing, I found myself recalling the last few years of my father’s life. The activity that he recounted in the most detail was the effort he spent on securing donations for the annual fund drive and composing the quarterly class letter for his alma mater. Increasingly frail and in ill health, he still
found the energy to ensure that his class remained well represented.

What follows is an examination of how older people now fit into our understanding of broader volunteering trends and a discussion about how volunteering helps to create or maintain meaning for them. This article examines these trends and the motivations behind older people’s choices, all with the objective of enabling those who rely and manage volunteer resources to better avail themselves of the invaluable opportunity older people can provide.

Understanding Volunteerism in the U.S.

Widowed in her late 50s, Carol worked full time for several years before pursuing her lifelong avocation in theater. She usually has a role in every musical that her local community theater group puts on. When she is not on stage, she searches for interesting items to add to the group’s prop collection and fund-raises year-round. Bill, who just turned 90, spends twenty hours a week greeting visitors and talking with patients at the local hospital. Blind since his mid 70s, he recently moved within walking distance of the hospital so he would not have to depend on others to get him to his volunteer assignment on time. Eloise, a retired schoolteacher, devotes her Wednesday lunches to five first-graders at the elementary school where she taught for thirty years. How are Carol, Bill, and Eloise like most volunteers? Why have these three people made these choices? How does volunteering change as we age?

Many volunteers report that they are involved with some sort of organizational activity or spend their efforts in hands-on activities. Forty percent of respondents in a recent study sponsored by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) said they spent time either fund-raising or managing events for an organization. Similarly, 41 percent have volunteered to prepare, serve, or deliver meals, to provide childcare, to provide transportation for others, or to do some other type of physical labor. Twenty percent of respondents, a relatively large percentage, reported teaching and tutoring as primary choices (Guterbock and Fries, 1997). Individuals spend time giving informal help to people in their community as well. Over 86 percent in the AARP study reported having spent at least one hour in the past twelve months helping a neighbor, friend, or disabled family member.

Religious organizations involve the largest number of volunteers (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1994). About one in three volunteers says that a religious group sponsors their formal volunteering. Schools and educational groups rank a very close second. Organizations that support youth or community activities are also popular places for individuals to volunteer.

Volunteering is clearly part of the American experience. Almost 50 percent of people over the age of 18 identify themselves as a volunteer (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1994). A recent survey found that 44 percent of Americans have spent at least some time in the past twelve months volunteering for charitable, civic, or helping organizations. Of the respondents who say they volunteer, about 40 percent report volunteering an average of more than ten hours a month (Guterbock and Fries, 1997).

Studies indicate that volunteering varies by age. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, those aged 30 to 49 are most likely to volunteer, with over 50 percent indicating some volunteer experience. Older adults (ages 50-plus in the AARP study) maintain volunteering levels around 40 percent through age 70, although the percentage who volunteer is not as high for this age group as for those who are in the child-rearing years (age 30 to 49).

Several factors appear to influence the question of who will become a volunteer, independent of age. These factors include community involvement, religious activity, education, and income. Those who are integrated into their community are far more likely to volunteer than those who do not know their neighbors. Those expressing a desire to help and a feeling that they share common interests with others in their community are more likely to volunteer than those that do not express these feelings. One way that this connection to the community shows is in religious activities. There appears to be a strong relationship between religious behavior (prayer or religious service attendance) and volunteering. Only 29 percent of those who never attend religious services volunteer, com-
pared to over 60 percent of those who attend more than once a week.

Socioeconomic status, as measured by education and income, is strongly related to an individual’s participation in organizations and volunteering. Those with no more than a high school education are twice as likely not to volunteer as those with more than a college degree. Higher-income individuals (annual income over $75,000) are twice as likely to volunteer as those with incomes under $20,000. These wealthier individuals may have more time and skill and thus would presumably be highly desired by organizations recruiting volunteers.

People over age 75 volunteer the least, with more than 70 percent not volunteering at all (Guterbock and Fries, 1997). This lower rate of participation by older Americans may be due to several factors. Compared with younger age groups, this group of older people has less formal schooling and less income, limiting the potential range of available volunteer activities. Changes in an older person’s health may also have a negative influence on the person’s ability or willingness to volunteer. For example, frailty may increase with age, severing or limiting an older adult’s connections with his or her religion and the community-at-large. While many volunteer opportunities do not require physical strength, the isolation that accompanies physical decline can severely limit an older person’s volunteer experience. Unfortunately, most traditional volunteer experiences require mobility on the part of the volunteer and may not take into account that limitations of income or health may restrict access to appropriate transportation.

The fact that older people often have a lot of time available would seem to make them an abundant source of volunteers. In fact, just the opposite is true. Retirees, who could be presumed to have spare time are not as likely to volunteer as those in the work force or homemakers. Data from the Commonwealth Productive Aging Survey confirmed findings of previous research that retirement is not associated with higher rates of volunteering (Caro and Bass, 1997). While conventional wisdom would have us believe that retirement brings about a change in the nature and scope of activities, this is clearly not so when it comes to defining volunteer experiences. Individuals who volunteered before leaving the work force continue to do so as retirees, sometimes for more and sometimes for less time.

Nevertheless, recently retired nonvolunteers may present an opportunity for volunteer recruiters. In the AARP-sponsored survey, of those 50 and older nonvolunteers, 57 percent say they are “not at all interested” in volunteering. Nevertheless, within the first two years following retirement, nonvolunteers show an increased willingness to take on volunteer assignments. They show a heightened interest in volunteering, are more willing to take on assignments, and show more ability to do so than elders who are employed or who have been out of the work force for longer periods of time (Caro and Bass, 1997). These retirees suggest that volunteering may be a potential way to give meaning to their new identity as retirees.

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

What motivates older people to volunteer? The answer mirrors the diversity of older Americans. Each individual’s volunteer experience reflects, in part, his or her own personal interests, constrained by the availability of volunteer opportunities, and factors such as health, time available to volunteer, and access to transportation. However, it is possible to divide motivations into three categories: Enhanced sense of purpose, personal growth, and continued productivity.

Enhanced sense of purpose: giving back to society. Probably the most prevalent reason given for volunteering reflects the idea that individuals want to make a difference in the community in which they live. The reason most cited by the volunteers in the AARP study of civic involvement volunteering was “helping others” (Guterbock and Fries, 1997). Consider Mabel, a 70-year-old former executive secretary, who volunteers at her senior center several days a week. She makes phone calls to homebound elders as part of a telephone reassurance program. “My phone calls mean so much to them,” she says. “I may be the only person they speak to all day. If I couldn’t get out, I hope that someone would think to remember me, too.” On the days that
Mabel is at the senior center, she is not just a retiree waiting for the next activity to begin. She is a telephone reassurance volunteer, whose cause is relieving loneliness.

Bill, who continues to volunteer at the hospital, does so because he knows what a difference a good volunteer makes for a patient’s recovery. Referring to his own extended stay in the hospital, he said, “I really looked forward to having my mail delivered every day. The talks with that volunteer helped to keep my spirits up. I want to do the same for other people.” Volunteering provides an outlet for an older adult’s desire to feel useful. As Bill explained, “I could spend my days listening to the radio and waiting for someone to come see me, but at the hospital I have something important to do.” He is a hospital volunteer, whose cause is easing the anxiety and fear that accompany illness or infirmity.

Having a cause to devote time to helps make sense of the volunteer experience. For some elders, the cause might become a passion, a lifelong avocation, or a passing interest. Mabel happened into the telephone reassurance position as part of her orientation to the senior center. She had not thought about volunteering in the program, but the program director made it sound interesting, and volunteering turned into a powerful way for Mabel to contribute to her community.

Personal growth: following through on an interest. Others choose to volunteer in order to explore something that has captured their attention. In this case the volunteer experience becomes a way to achieve personal growth. Some 41 percent of the volunteers in the AARP study said that they contribute because they wanted to learn about a particular issue or problem (Guterbock and Fries, 1997). Carol, the active member of her community theater group, had been an enthusiastic member of her college drama society forty years before. But graduate school, marriage, and raising three sons had taken precedence over her interest in the stage. After her husband died, she attended two grief support meetings and found them to be “a bore.” She said, “I didn’t want to end up like those women, just playing bridge once a week.” While she had taken singing lessons and performed regularly in a vocal group, it wasn’t until recently that she began her second “career” on the stage. Her role as a theater performer gave her the opportunity to reignite an old passion.

People who volunteer to accomplish personal growth may be passionate about the subject or just want to expand their knowledge. For some, like the older Californians who all shared a great concern for wildlife, it may involve taking their knowledge about a subject and passing it on to future generations. As active volunteer wildlife education docents, they became focused teachers about animal care and protection. Their role as wildlife educators gave them the opportunity to raise children’s enthusiasm for protecting the environment and wildlife (Kidd and Kidd, 1997).

Continued productivity: providing structure to daily life. Volunteering for an organization provides more structure than does helping out a neighbor or a friend informally. The routine of daily telephone calls, weekly rehearsals, or monthly board of directors meetings gives a sense of direction and accomplishment to the volunteer. Consider the retired woman who recorded books on tape for blind people or the retired couple who take widows and widowers out to lunch to ease their loneliness and isolation (Driscoll, 1997). Whatever the altruistic feelings of these volunteers are, their actions provide a tangible set of rewards at the end of the day. The widow knows that the book must be read, cover to cover, and in order to finish her “assignment” she must plan time to sit with her tape recorder. The couple must carefully plan each outing, including making reservations and delegating transportation responsibilities. Their day’s schedule is organized around their lunchtime volunteer experience.

Volunteer Roles in the Future

Because retirement is a fluid social phenomenon, it is difficult to predict the nature of retirement in the future. For example, increasingly retirement may be phased, involving multiple transitions out of and into paid and unpaid work (Moen, 1998). Individuals may leave one type of paid activity, “retire,” and then take up another type of activity, and retire yet again. Volunteering may play an important role in mediating these transitions. Volunteer opportunities can give someone the chance to try out new skills
or hone old ones, to experiment with an interest or to sample life as a retiree without making an irreversible commitment. When an individual is not part of the paid work force, taking on the role of volunteer plays an important part in creating an identity for that person apart from paid work.

If phased retirement becomes more popular, then the time spent in volunteer activities may become more structured. Noncompensatory activities may be viewed not as an identity or a social place holder when paid work is not available, but as a legitimate and even necessary activity to prepare for the next paid job. If this situation becomes the case, then these momentarily retired volunteers will be more likely to search for activities that provide for personal growth than for those that they perceive add structure to their retired life.

Our knowledge about volunteerism may help to change the way we think about work. For example, we typically equate productive work with paid full-time employment. But with formal volunteer activities, there is a clear understanding that someone is doing something of value. Volunteers engage in activities because they want to accomplish something either for themselves or for others. Researchers have found that this sense of purpose, or generativity, is an important developmental need well into later life (Fisher, Day, and Collier, 1998).

As baby boomers begin to retire, their experiences may challenge current assumptions about volunteering. This is the age group that currently reports the highest rates of volunteerism. So while participation rates may remain strong as this group’s ages, the types of activities are likely to reflect an amalgam of personal interests. In general, baby boomers report less interest in religion-based activities than do currently retired volunteers, but we know little about how baby boomers’ motivations might change over time.

We still have much to learn about older adults’ volunteer experiences. For example, most studies only examine formal or structured volunteering though organizations and do not capture effectively the experience of informal “helping out.” Because of this approach, the numbers and characteristics of volunteers are underrepresented. In addition, current research on volunteering focuses mainly on the experiences of middle- and upper-income individuals.

**How Can Everyone Benefit?**

What are the implications of these trends and motivations for those who seek to harness the opportunities older volunteers provide? How can older people maximize their benefits from volunteer activities? Volunteer managers would be wise to consider the factors both limiting and motivating a person’s capacity to volunteer. Taking part in a formal volunteer opportunity requires time free from responsibilities, accessibility to transportation, and a climate that is respectful of older adults. The volunteer job should match the volunteer’s expectation. This could include learning a new skill or activity, revisiting an old experience, or carrying knowledge to another generation. The notion of reciprocity may be another compelling reason to volunteer. Older people already volunteer in order to help meet the needs of other older adults.

Some have called for an increased recruitment of older people for voluntary national service positions (Scheibel, 1997). Older Americans are strongly attached to their communities and give considerably of their time and resources and, given the opportunity and organizational framework to do so, could be motivated and situated to provide even more in the way of volunteer help than they already do. However, volunteer managers would be wise to consider the growing diversity of older people and develop ways to reach them that are culturally and ethnically appropriate (AARP, 1997).

Older people who are considering volunteering would be wise to examine their own needs and lifestyles. Their own experiences are more than likely a wellspring of potential directions for volunteer activity. The benefits are clear: Researchers have concluded that older people get an increased sense of well-being through volunteering, and it enhances their self-image through a continued sense of usefulness and productivity (Wheeler, Gorey, and Greenblatt, 1988). However, older people should choose wisely and devote their valuable time to efforts that are closely aligned with their own values.
For some, volunteering provides a reason to get up in the morning. The motivation that draws them up and out into their community may be rooted in a desire to improve the community, to improve self, or give better definition to their daily life. My father felt compelled to remain connected to the college that had provided a vast reservoir of happy memories and friends more than fifty-five years after he had graduated. I still recall the pride in his voice as he read to me the last set of class notes he composed shortly before his death. Whatever cause an individual is pursuing, the ultimate motivation may be that volunteering just feels good. Bill, Carol, and Mabel would probably agree.

Dana Burr Bradley, Ph.D., is assistant professor of political science and gerontology, University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

REFERENCES


