

What We Don't Talk About When We Don't Talk About Service

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" Do acts of service move us toward equality? Where will the server be, five years from any particular service transaction? Where will the served be? What do we learn, when we serve? What do we learn when we are served? What don't we talk about when we don't talk about service? "

--Adam Davis

Director, Center for Civic Reflection

OUTCOME [Civic Engagement](#)

DESCRIPTION Adam Davis is the Director of Project on Civic Reflection. With Elizabeth M. Lynn, he co-edited *The Civically Engaged Reader* (Great Books Foundation, 2006), from which this essay is taken. Davis begins the essay by commenting on the recent "vogue for service" that is sweeping the nation, but notes that we seem reluctant to reflect on that service. "It seems to be so clear that Service is Good (SIG) that we do not need to question service or to talk about it; we only need to do it." Davis goes on to question the assumption that service is good, as well as the assumption that we need not reflect on it, asking why we serve, whether service is always good, and why we are so reluctant to talk about it. Davis's piece also brings up questions about motives and values in relation to service and how these impact why we serve.

What We Don't Talk About When We Don't Talk About Service*

Adam Davis

There is this odd thing happening: a vogue for service. Look around and you can't help but see it: more community service, more service learning, more compulsory volunteering. Elementary schools, high schools, and colleges across the country have adopted community service programs quickly, seamlessly, and with relatively little opposition or argument. Students are no longer simply concerned with their classes or even with their clubs—now they are collecting clothes, ladling out meals, wrapping gifts, building houses, tutoring younger kids, chatting with elders, and serving the community in numerous other ways as well. And the trend goes far beyond students: young people in record numbers are applying to City Year, Teach for America, and other AmeriCorps organizations; retirees are volunteering with various service organizations; and professionals, too, at and away from work, are engaging in community service.

This trend toward service, unlike many trends, is generally praised, though often in imprecise terms. Service Is Good (SIG), we seem to assume—good for those of us doing the serving, good for those of us being served, good for everyone. It has become so clear that Service Is Good (SIG) that we can demand service activity—even “voluntary” service activity—as we require classes in math, science, and the humanities. We can demand it after school or work and on weekends. We can demand it from our brightest young people, our busiest professionals, and our most experienced elders.

It seems to be so clear that Service Is Good (SIG) that we do not need to question service or to talk about it; we only need to do it. It even seems that talking about service might be a problem—first, because if you're talking about service, you might not be doing service, and second, because if you're talking about service, you might start to wonder about its goodness.

But neither possibility, I believe, is something to fear. We ought to wonder about service, and we ought to talk about service with those we're serving with and perhaps also with those we're serving. It may (or even must) be worthwhile to call the goodness of service into question, and with that, to ask why we so rarely ask questions about service. For the length of this piece, then, I want to call into question the assumption or conclusion that Service Is Good (SIG). I want to look briefly at what we mean by service and what we mean by goodness and also at activities we engage in but refrain from discussing. And then I want to suggest that talk, not in place of but in addition to service, might also be good.

* from the *The Civically Engaged Reader*, ed. A. Davis and E. Lynn, Great Books Foundation, 2006.

good rather than that of whomever she serves. It's good for you, yes, but I'm doing it because it's good for me.

We become significantly more cynical when we turn to those who explain service by appealing to the reputation it wins for the server. Here the good of the server remains primary, but the good of the served is tertiary rather than secondary. I ladle food onto your plate because others who see me do so will think better of me. And, oh yeah, you won't be quite so hungry.

With this last explanation, we move back toward the devout, though from the other side. Now it is not love that explains humble service but guilt. I am bad, I am evil, I am a sinner—and I know my sinful nature is seen. By serving I acknowledge my consciousness of my sinful nature and mitigate it somewhat. I suck, please let me serve you, perhaps I will suck somewhat less.

Why serve? Here are five reductive answers: (1) we are God's children; (2) we share the earth; (3) I find myself in you; (4) I win praise by serving you; (5) I suck.

Goodness

In each of the above cases, we explain service by referring, usually in a tacit way, to a good or some goods. But the location and content of these goods appear to change as we move from one set of reasons to the next. Here I mean only to point out that service might be good for me (doing the serving), it might be good for them (being served), it might be good for us (as a society), or, weirdly enough, it might be good for God (though this would seem to be presumptuous to the point of impiety). Some might also make the case that service is simply good, in some abstract and objective way, without necessarily being good for anyone. Service, to repeat, might be good for the server, good for the served, good for all of us, good for God, or objectively good.

Whomever service is good *for* (or wherever the goods produced by service reside), we should also note that different reasons for service appeal to different understandings of what the good consists (or the goods consist) in. Service Is Good (SIG) because of the aid it brings to those served, because of the habits (of discipline, humility, and generosity) it instills (probably in the server rather than the served), because of the pleasure it provides (again, most likely to the server), because of the sense of unity it begets among all parties involved, because it is divinely sanctioned, because of its capacity to move the way things are toward how they ought to be. That is, service might produce goods that are necessary, educational, pleasurable, beautiful, holy, or right.

Service activity, then, might produce goods external to the transaction itself, internal to the transaction itself, both, or neither. Any particular act of service could be demeaning to the served and uncomfortable for the server, but it may at the same time provide the served with what she needs. You serve me a meal at a soup kitchen, and this puts my need on display, which demeans me and makes you uncomfortable, yet my hunger is appeased. We might therefore call this act of

All of us wipe (I hope). Few of us talk about it. Our silence on the subject of wiping, however, does not derive from our collective disapproval of the activity. In fact, I think we would all say, if pushed, that wiping is good (WIG). But we only want people to do it, not to discuss it. To discuss it would be in bad taste (consider this paragraph).

We could talk about the very first thing we do when we sit down in the driver's seat of our cars, but we don't. We don't discuss this because nobody cares, because it's insignificant, because it's boring.

We could talk about what we imagine while the attractive person behind the counter serves us coffee, but we don't. We don't discuss this because, again, it is bad, or in bad taste, or boring.

Then, too, many of us follow an unwritten rule not to talk about politics or religion. But this impulse to avoid talk of politics or religion does not develop because the avoided subject is bad, or in bad taste, or boring; rather, politics and religion are things we care about, and because we care about them, we might disagree with each other, even disagree hotly, and if we disagree hotly, something must be wrong. So we don't talk about them.

Many of us also do not talk about money—about how much we make, how much we pay to live where we live, how much our families do or do not have. We don't talk about money, I want to suggest, because of our peculiar blend of democratic political culture and capitalist ethos. (There may also be some residual aristocratic notion that talk of money is vulgar, or cheap, though that would mainly explain why the wealthy among us remain reticent here.) We think of ourselves as democrats, or as citizens of a democracy, so we like to think that we are all equal, whatever that might mean. But we also think of ourselves as free marketers, and we seem to believe that those who have money have earned it, or deserve it, and so money can seem like a measure of merit. To talk of money would then be to talk of difference, and not just any difference, but difference of worth and power. To talk of money would be to put our inequality in front of us.

Now we return to our silence on service. To talk of service, to really look at it, would require us to look closely at inequality. This is a difficult and uncomfortable place to look.

Inequality and Service

Here is an exaggerated pass at the relation between inequality and service: I serve you because I want to; I choose to. You receive my service because you have to; you need it. I live in the realm of freedom; you live in the realm of necessity. Serving you, I confirm my relative superiority. Being served, you confirm your inferiority. By my apparent act of humility, I raise myself up. "The happiness," as Nietzsche writes, "of slight superiority," only we don't say so.

Instead we say very little about why we and especially our kids serve. It's good, that's why; our kids learn valuable lessons and those they serve receive

Service Is Not Simple

I have not meant to suggest that service is bad, or at least not that it is necessarily bad, or that inequality is bad, or, for that matter, good. Instead I want to suggest that inequality is present and in many ways desired and that this accounts in large part for the fact that service is not simple (SINS), no matter what we pretend.

The crux of this piece, however, might be simple. Here it is: by pretending service is simple (SIS), we risk turning service bad—bad for the served and for the server. And by pretending service is simple (SIS), we saddle ourselves with a burden we do not acknowledge. It may originate as a salutary burden, for it derives from and endeavors to satisfy our aspiration to live more justly, to do right by those we are with and among. But it remains a burden, and the less we acknowledge it, the heavier it gets.