



## Why We Serve: On Modest Ambitions

Nathan Hopkins

I came to national service two years out of an alma mater that has a reputation for producing idealists (this year, it ranked first among its peers for producing Peace Corps volunteers) and immediately after earning an MA in political philosophy. My decision to join AmeriCorps, then, was initially motivated by grand social and political ideals. I had the youthful optimism that my baby-boomer father warned me about: faith in my generation's ability to make a substantial, progressive impact on the world. I'd like to think that, as I reflected on my service in those first few weeks, I never stooped to clichés about "changing the world," but I'm sure it happened. Probably more than once.

Don't think eight months in AmeriCorps have made me a cynic. They haven't. I am still just as optimistic and progressive as I was when I began my year of service. However, my idealism no longer plays a major role in my day-to-day motivation to serve. My desire to correct alienating social structures is still an important part of my identity, but it isn't what gets me out of bed at 6am on cold, dark Chicago mornings. It takes a very special kind of person to live on ideas alone. Most of us need more concrete forms of sustenance; we need successes, however small, that we can actually point to. These are what I have learned to appreciate over the past months and they have become the main motivation behind my service.

When I leave Noble Street College Prep today at 5:30pm, "the world" will be almost exactly as it was when I arrived this morning: an oil rig will still be pouring crude into the Gulf of Mexico, Arizona will still have a controversial new immigration law, our national and

global distributions of wealth will still be profoundly unequal, and so on ad infinitum. What *will* be different when I leave at the end of the day is that Alejandra will have learned about Japanese-American internment during World War II, Alex will be able to find the area of a cone, and Jessica will have a better essay to turn in to that scholarship committee.

These accomplishments – small though they may be in the face of staggering social pathologies – are real and impactful. They are not purely aesthetic gestures, tragically beautiful affirmations of being in the face of inevitable defeat; these small accomplishments actually matter. Perhaps learning about the internment of Japanese-Americans will set Alejandra on the path to becoming an important human rights lawyer. Or perhaps it will simply make her a bit more likely to get a decent grade in US history this year. Either way, it makes some positive difference.

Bertolt Brecht puts his finger on this idea nicely in his poem "A Bed for the Night:"

*I hear that in New York  
At the corner of 26th Street  
and Broadway  
A man stands every evening  
during the winter months  
And gets beds for the  
homeless there  
By appealing to passersby.*

...  
*A few people have a bed  
for the night  
For a night the wind is  
kept from them  
The snow meant for them  
falls on the roadway  
But it won't change the  
world  
It won't improve relations  
among men  
It will not shorten the age  
of exploitation.*

Brecht, the orthodox Marxist, would never renounce the fundamental importance of his large-scale, world-historical goal (ending "the age of exploitation"), but such idealism does not blind him to the significance of more modest achievements (finding a temporary shelter for one lucky homeless person). Brecht knew that an idealism which fails to appreciate the significance of the *actual* – even in its most humble presentations – is only a thinly veiled nihilism. *This kind of outlook is, I think, essential for an ethic of service: for, while it would be naïve to neglect the political, refusing the daily nourishment of small successes can emaciate one's passion for service. A garden tended, a child taught, a bed for the night: this is not the work of revolution, but it is the heart of service.*

Finally, I am emboldened by my hope that the division between aureate idealisms and middling victories is not so absolute. As an AmeriCorps volunteer, I am not standing alone on the snowy corner of 26<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. I am part of a larger movement, a movement which, I believe, encourages a sense of responsibility and solidarity across traditional boundaries of race and class, and a movement which therefore is laying a foundation for social action that could have the potential to change the world.

Tomorrow I will get up at 5:45am so I can help administer the fitness tests at Noble Street College Prep. It will not shorten the age of exploitation, it won't improve relations among men, but it will do a little to encourage healthy behaviors in kids, and it will do a little to teach me about what it means to be a part of a community, and that is enough to earn my time.