

Oregon ASPIRE Readings and Discussion Questions
“Clasping Hands,” Sept. 2005-June 2006

September: Why do we serve?

*Readings: E.J. Dionne Jr. and Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, “United We Serve?”
Harris Wofford, “The Politics of Service”*

1. Responding to the idea presented on page 2 of the first reading: What do you think of the notion that some see the AmeriCorps program as “paid volunteerism?” Would people make such sacrifices if there weren’t some form of incentive?
2. As AmeriCorps members of all ages, what do you think of the claim that AmeriCorps is “a welfare program for aspiring yuppies?”
3. Should service (volunteer, military) be made mandatory? If the draft were to come back, should volunteer service be included alongside of military service?
4. Is volunteer service “necessary” or just “nice?”
5. Respond with your thoughts to the question posed in the first paragraph on page 4: “What if it (service) creates bridges across groups in our society that have little to do with each other on any given day?” (Aren’t we trying to do this specifically in our service?)
6. “What if service is not simply a good in itself, but a means to many ends?” Respond with your feelings and opinions.
7. “The debate over national service is a debate over how we Americans think of ourselves.” How does national service relate to the image of an American and how we think of or view ourselves?
8. What do you think about the national service discussion in “The Politics of Service” being targeted mainly at young people?

October: What does service mean to you?

Reading: Dorothy Parker, “Song of the Shirt”

1. What does service mean to you personally? (please elaborate)
2. “Besides, there was something—you didn’t quite know how to say it—something more of sacrifice, in making things by hand. She kept on a task that never grew lighter.” Does true service have to cause you pain? Both physically and mentally?
3. Do we make things harder for ourselves in our service than they need to be?

4. What keeps you going back to your site every day, despite some negative encounters with those whom you serve/benefit?
5. Do you feel you *should* serve others, or do you do it because you *want* to serve others?
6. How do you avoid people taking advantage of your willingness to serve and help? Did Mrs. Martindale set a trap for herself with her “big heart?”

November: What do we expect when we serve?

Reading: David Eggers, “Measuring the Jump”

1. What is Fish’s attitude throughout the story?
2. What is the relationship between Fish and Adam? Why is Fish so angry with Adam?
3. What does Fish expect from Adam? Is he disappointed?
4. “Tomorrow he can do these things better than he did today. Tomorrow! Tomorrow!” What were your reactions to this story? What point do you think the author is trying to get across?

December: How important is community?

*Readings: John Donne, “Meditation XVII”
Marcus Aurelius, “The Meditations, 7:13”*

1. “And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the but, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated.” Do you see yourself as connected to those around you?
2. “No man is an island, entire of itself.” “All things are implicated with one another, and the bond is holy; and there is hardly anything unconnected with any other thing.” Do you feel that connection? Is it important?
3. Why do you think the two authors wrote very similar Meditations?
4. Do you see yourself as more connected to those around you because you serve/are affiliated with a group (AmeriCorps)?
5. Would you feel less of a connection if you weren’t serving/affiliated?
6. Is that association/affiliation necessary in order to feel connected?

7. “Whatever anyone does or says, I must be good, just as if the gold, or the emerald, or the purple were always saying this, whatever anyone does or says, I must be emerald and keep my colour.” What does this quote mean? How do we stay true to ourselves while still connected to those around us?

January: What are we trying to accomplish through our service? How do we build community?

Reading: Wendell Berry, “Healing”

1. Why is this poem called “Healing?” What are we trying to heal, through our service?
2. Which words does Berry give a negative connotation to? Why?
3. What is the difference between loneliness and solitude?
4. What constitutes “good work?” What would constitute bad work?
5. Re-read section V. Do we have to come from a place of not giving/serving in order to give/serve?
6. Do you feel that service has to be an individual effort? What about a collective one?
7. “The teachers are everywhere. What is wanted is a learner.” Are you too busy serving/teaching others to learn? How do we become a learner? Does it have to be a conscious effort?

February: What should we aim for in our service? How can we best identify our own aims?

Reading: Daniel Blumenthal, “Service in the Pursuit of Social Justice”

1. What does “justice” mean or imply?
2. What is injustice? What constitutes an injustice?
3. Are we trying to heal injustices through our service? Or are we trying to make things/the world/our community/opportunities “just?”
4. “The key word is ‘everybody.’ We like to say that ‘public health is social justice.’” Does public health equal social justice? What about higher education?
5. Can we “fix” the injustices in society in order to reach social justice?

March: What are some dangers of service?

Reading: Mary Wilkins Freeman, "Luella Miller"

1. Who are the characters in this story? What happens to them?
2. Who narrates this story? Why?
3. What did you think of Luella? Was she really weak or fragile?
4. Were the people who served Luella helping or harming her?
5. Is Mary Wilkins Freeman trying to identify or warn us of some danger?
6. Do you think there is a moral to this story?

April: How does interaction with others help us see ourselves?

Reading: David Sedaris, "Nuit of the Living Dead"

1. Why does he start with the story of the burglar? Does it have any relevance? Why do so many people tell the narrator the same story about the burglar?
2. Why do visitors give us the ability to really see our actions and appearances in a different light?
3. Why do we assume that their view of us will automatically be negative?
4. What were your impressions of this story?

May: What is our duty to each other?

Readings: Robert Putnam, "Bowling Together" (from Bowling Alone)

Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Sixth Walk"

1. What did you think of "Bowling Together?" Do you agree/disagree with the author's statements?
2. In "Sixth Walk," why does Rousseau make a detour in his daily route?
3. Who gives, and why? Who does not give, and why?
4. "A purely voluntary good deed is certainly something that I like doing. But when the recipient uses it as a claim on further favors and rewards me with hate if I refuse, when he insists on my being his perpetual benefactor just because I initially took pleasure in

helping him, then charity becomes burdensome and pleasure vanishes.” Do you feel voluntary service becoming a duty that is burdensome?

5. Does a cause have to be worthy in order for us to give to it? Should we only give or serve because it is something that makes us feel good?

6. Looking at both “Bowling Together” and “Sixth Walk,” is service (national, community) a duty that is different from the financial giving Rousseau talks about? If we have the means, is it our duty to give money we have to those who need it? Does giving become irksome?

June: Do we have a civic duty?

Readings: William Clinton, “The Duties of Democracy”

Paul Light, “The Volunteering Decision”

1. What are our responsibilities as citizens?

2. Why do young people get targeted more for community service and civic engagement than older ones?

3. Do you think calls for national service from presidents encourage citizens to engage in volunteer service or hinder them from doing so?

4. Did you feel that discussing our service helped throughout the year?