COMMUNITY SERVICE WORK
by Robert Coles

When I was a college student I did "volunteer work," as we then called it. I tutored some boys and girls who were having trouble with reading, writing, arithmetic. I left one part of Cambridge, Massachusetts, for another -- often on foot, so that I could enjoy what my father had taught me to call a "good hike." When I came back to "school," certain scenes I had witnessed and certain statements I had heard would stay with me -- come to mind now and then as I pursued various courses, lived a certain late adolescent life.

Often, when I went home to visit my parents, they inquired after my extracurricular teaching life. My mother was inclined to be religiously sentimental: it was good that I was helping out some youngsters in trouble. For her the sin of pride was around any corner; hence our need to escape that constant pull of egoism -- to work with others on behalf of their lives, with our own, for a change, taking a back seat. My father, a probing scientist, commonly took a different tack and asked me many times the same question, "What did you learn?"

I was never quite sure how to answer my father, and often I had no need to do so. My mother was quick to reply, emphasizing her notion of the education such tutoring can afford a college student: "the lesson of humility," a favorite phrase of hers. If any amplification was necessary, she could be forthcoming with another well-worn piety: "There but for the grace of God...."

My father's question often came back to haunt me, no matter my mother's hasty, biblical interventions. What **did** I learn? What was I **supposed** to learn? I was, after all, the teacher, not the student. Anyway, these were elementary school children, and there was nothing new in the ground I was covering with them every week. But I had listened to my father too often, on long walks through various cities, to let the matter rest there. He was born and grew up in Yorkshire, England, and was a great walker, a great observer as he kept his legs moving fast. He was also an admirer of George Orwell long before *Animal Farm* and *1984* were published -- the early Orwell who wrote *Down and Out in London and Paris, The Road to Wigan Pier,* and *Homage to Catalonia*; the Orwell, that is, who explored relentlessly the world around him and described carefully yet with dramatic intensity the nature of that world.

My father had introduced me to those books before I went to college, and they returned to me as I did volunteer work -- a scene, some words, or more generally, Orwell's social and moral inquiry as both are conveyed in his several narrative efforts. I was beginning to realize that Orwell was a "big brother" for me in a manner far at variance to the already widespread meaning of that phrase. He was helping me make sense of a continuing experience I was having -- sharing his wisdom with me, giving me pause, prompting in me scrutiny not only of others (the children I met, and occasionally

Reprinted with permission from **Liberal Education**, Vol. 74, No. 4, September/October 1988, pp. 11-13.

their parents) but my own mind as it came up with its various opinions, conclusions, attitudes.

Later, at college, I would read the poetry and prose of William Carlos Williams -- his long poem *Paterson*, his Stecher trilogy, *White Mule, In the Money, The Buildup.* Williams tried hard to evoke the rhythms of working class life in America -- the struggle of ordinary people to make their way in the world, to find a satisfactory manner of living, of regarding themselves. He knew how hard it is for people like himself (well-educated, well-to-do) to make contact in any substantial way with others, who work in factories or stores or on farms, or indeed, who do not work at all or are lucky to be intermittently employed.

When he emphasized his search for an American "language," Williams was getting at the fractured nature of our nation's life -- the divisions by race, class, region, culture which keep so many of us unaware of one another, unable to comprehend one another. Often as I went to do my tutoring, and heard words I never before knew -- or heard words used in new and arresting ways -- and as I learned about the memories and hopes and habits and interests of people in a neighborhood rather unlike the one where I lived, I thought of Williams's poems and stories and realized how much he owed to the humble people of northern, industrial New Jersey. As he once put it to me, years after I graduated from college, "Those house calls [to attend his patients] are giving me an education. Every day I learn something new -- a sight, a phrase -- and I'm made to stop and think about my world, the world I've left behind." He was reminding both of us that the "education" he had in mind was no one-way affair.

I fear it took some of us doing our volunteer work a good deal of time to learn the lesson Williams was putting to word. At my worst, I must admit, a sense of *noblesse oblige* was at work -- a conviction that I would share certain (intellectual) riches with "them." Only when I went with Williams on some of his house calls -- observed him paying close heed to various men, women, and children -- did I begin to realize how much his mind grew in response to the everyday experiences he was having.

Now, many days later, I find myself a teacher at a university, offering courses for undergraduates and for students in professional schools (law, medicine, business, education). I work with many young people who are anxious to do community service of one kind or another -- teach in urban schools, offer medical or legal assistance to needy families. At times I stand in awe of some of those youths -- their determination, their decency, their good-heartedness, their savvy. I also notice in many of them a need for discussion and reflection: a time to stop and consider what they would like to be doing, what they are doing, what they are having difficulty doing. A college senior put the matter to me this way one afternoon: "I started this work [volunteer work in a school near a large urban low-rent housing project] as something apart from my courses, my life here as a student. I wanted to be of use to someone other than myself -- and in a really honest moment, I'd probably add that I was also being selfish: It would beef up my brag sheet when I apply to a graduate school. But hell, I'd been doing this kind of [volunteer] work since high school -- a part of our church's activities, so I shouldn't be too cynical about my motives! But the last thing I expected was that I'd come back here [to his dormitory] and want to read books to help me figure out what's happening [in the neighborhood where he does volunteer work]. I've designed my own private course -- and it helps; I can anticipate

certain troubles, because I've learned from the reading I do, and I get less discouraged, because I've seen a bigger view, courtesy of those writers."

He said much more, but the gist of his remarks made me realize that there are social scientists and novelists and poets and essayists who have offered that student so very much -- their knowledge, their experience, their sense of what matters, and not least, their companionship -- as fellow human beings whose concerns are similar to those of the youths now sweating things out in various student volunteer programs. Put differently, those writers (or filmmakers or photographers) are teachers, and their subject matter is an important one for many of our country's students, engaged as they are in acts of public service.

Our institutions of higher learning might certainly take heed -- not only encourage students to do such service, but help them stop and mull over what they have heard and seen by means of books to be read, discussions to be had. This is the very purpose, after all, of colleges and universities -- to help one generation after another grow intellectually and morally through study and the self-scrutiny such study can sometimes prompt.