Why ‘Servanthood’ Is Bad

In a small, relatively isolated community on Martha’s Vineyard, about every tenth person used to be born without the ability to hear. Everybody in the community, hearing and nonhearing alike, spoke a unique sign language brought from England when they immigrated to Massachusetts in 1690. In the mid-twentieth century with increased mobility, the people ceased to intermarry, and the genetic anomaly disappeared.

But before the memory of it died—and the sign language with it—historian Nora Groce studied the community’s history. She compared the experience of the nonhearing people to that of the hearing people.

She found that 80 percent of the nonhearing people graduated from high school as did 80 percent of the hearing. She found that about 90 percent of the nonhearing got married compared to about 92 percent of the hearing. They had about equal numbers of children. Their income levels were similar as were the variety and distribution of their occupations.

Then Groce did a parallel study on the Massachusetts mainland. At the time, it was considered to have the best services in the nation for nonhearing people. There she found that 50 percent of nonhearing people graduated from high school compared to 78 percent of the hearing. Nevertheless, service systems build on people’s deficiencies; communities on their capacities.

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children, that's the equivalent of $24,000. Three years ago the median income in Cook County was $23,000. In one sense, we spend far more on every poor person more money than half the people in Cook County make. But Chicago still has poverty.

So I asked our researchers, “Of the money appropriated for low-income people, how much did they get in cash and how much in services?” They replied, “They got 63 percent in services and 37 percent in income.” Now, if you’re a family of four, that means your servants walked away with over $15,000 of the money appropriated for you while you got less than $9,000.

Bureaucracy is not the problem. (Bureaucracy eats only about 6 percent.) The money goes to health- and human-service professionals: nurses, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, public-housing administrators, land-clearance officials, welfare workers. It doesn’t go to poor people.

The second problem with service systems is that they base programs on “deficiencies.” I fight, whenever I can—in legislatures and before policy-making bodies—against “needs surveys” in low-income neighborhoods. Here is why.

I was organizing block clubs in West Side neighborhoods. I wasn’t very good. But people responded. They understood what I was saying. Then the antipoverty program came, and within three years organizing became incredibly difficult.

The antipoverty program sent people out to interview people this way:

“Mrs. Jones, we’re from such-and-such. We’re doing a survey. Can you tell me how far you went in school?”

She looks down a little and says, “Well, I just got through tenth grade.” So they write on the clipboard, “Dropout. Two years.” Not “educated ten years” but “dropout two years.”

Then they say, “I wonder if you could read this to me.”

She looks at it, embarrassed. “No, I can’t read.”

“Illiterate,” they write. Then they say, “Just now you squinted your eyes. Do you have trouble seeing?”

“Yes, I think I need glasses.”

“Visual deficit,” they write. “Do you have any children?”

“Three daughters, ages fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen.”

“Do any of them have children?”

“The fourteen-year-old has a child, and the eighteen-year-old has a child.”

“Teenage pregnancy,” goes on the clipboard.

Then they say, “We’re going to get you some help. Just wait. We’re going to make a service center here.” And they cash in their needs inventory for a GED dropout training center and three people who work there, for an illiteracy program with four staff people, for a neighborhood optometrist who is responsive to the community, and for a new teenage-pregnancy
There's a point where things called services can be useful. Most low-income communities are well beyond that point. If you improve the professional credentialing of big-city school teachers and systems, knowing and wisdom will decrease in direct relationship to the increase in that system's power. The increase in medical resources in Chicago is now decreasing the health status of poor people.

The fourth rule is a sort of subhead of the third. If those in power are hell-bent on giving poor people services rather than income, then fight for those services to come in the form of vouchers. That way the persons who must be served at least have a choice as to who will serve them. And there may be some competition.

Fifth, develop hospitality. Abraham, the head of a tribe, decided to follow a God who claimed to be the only God. That made Abraham and his people strangers in their own land. They journeyed as strangers through the world. And they developed some unique ideas about responsibilities to strangers because they were strangers themselves.

Jesus' disciples were also people who decided to become strangers—in their own land and in others. They built communities based on their decision. That renewed their understanding of obligations to strangers, and hospitality was renewed.

In every household, in every tent, the door was open—to the stranger, the outsider, the enemy, or potential enemy. And the stranger was one with whom one acted not in service but in equality.

Then a terrible thing happened in thirteenth-century Italy. At the side of a monastery, they built a little room for strangers. And they called it a hospice. The church took over responsibility for the stranger. And Christians forgot what had been unique about their community—how to welcome the person who was outside and hungry.

The hospice took hospitality out of the community. "Hospice" became "hospital." The hospital became Humana, a for-profit corporation buying up church hospitals. Communities and churches have forgotten about hospitality. Now systems and corporations claim they can produce it and sell it and that you can consume it.

You must struggle with all your might to reclaim the central Christian act of hospitality. You will have to fight your local hospitals. You will have to fight Humana. You will have to fight the United Way. You will have to fight the social services. They have commodified hospitality and called it a service. They have made a market of the temple. And you know what you're supposed to do then. Get 'em out! Or bring into the church the hospitality that is at the center of understanding a relationship as a friend not a servant. A church's response to people without should be hospitality not services.
I met a remarkable woman in a little town in southern Georgia. She worked for a service agency responsible for mentally retarded people in a three-county area. Her agency decided it was too focused on deficiencies and needed to think about the gifts, contributions, and capacities of the people who were its charges.

So this woman began spending time with the people the agency had once called “clients” to see if she could understand—in their homes—what gifts they had to offer. She went to the home of a forty-two-year-old man who had been the victim of special education—segregated education. His name is Joe. He has one short leg (at least he limps), and he doesn’t speak the way a lot of people speak. (I’m not sure what label deficiency-finding psychologists would give him. But I’m sure they would give him one.)

At age twenty-one, Joe had no place in society. So he went home to a pig farm. Every day he did two things. He fed the pigs twice a day, and he sat in the living room where he listened to the radio. (He couldn’t see to watch television.)

The woman told me that after four days at Joe’s house she couldn’t find his gift.

“But on the fifth day,” she said, “I realized what his gift was: he listens to the radio.

“I found out that three people in town spend all their time listening to the radio, and they get paid for it. One is in the sheriff’s office, one in the police department, and one in the local civil-defense office. So I looked at each of these places where a person sits, listening to a radio all day. I liked the civil-defense office best. It’s a voluntary organization. They have a house that somebody gave them; so the voluntary ambulance people sleep in its bedrooms. There’s a desk and sitting right by the desk is a radio getting all the calls from the county. At the desk sits a twenty-seven-year-old woman who listens for calls and dispatches volunteers when someone needs an ambulance.”

So she told the dispatcher, “I have somebody here who likes to listen to the radio as much as you do. I’d like to introduce you to him.” And so she introduced Joe to her, and they put a chair on the other side of the desk, and he sat there every day listening to the radio.

This little house is also the neighborhood community center. Somebody is always there. People come and talk and drink coffee in the dining room. Sometimes they show movies.

Whenever anybody was there, Joe would go in. Everybody came to know Joe, and he became a part of that neighborhood. When Christmas came, the volunteers gave Joe a radio of his own to listen to at home in the evening because Joe had been with them and had shared his gifts in the face of their hospitality.

Joe began to go downtown at noon to eat at the diner. One day he went into the diner and the owner of the diner said, “Hey, Joe, what’s happening?” Joe looked at him and said, “The Smith house over in Boonesville burned down this morning. And out on Route 90, at that town where you can have picnics, there was a drug bust. And Mr. Schiller over in Athens had a heart attack.” Everybody in the diner stopped talking and looked around at Joe. They couldn’t believe it. They realized that Joe knew the answer to the question “What’s happening?” because he listened to the radio all morning.

When I went to visit this town and the woman who introduced Joe’s gift of listening to the radio to the community, I saw an incredible thing. I saw, first of all, that the dispatcher and Joe were in love with each other. Then when I went with Joe to lunch, I saw that everybody who came into the diner came over to Joe first and asked, “Joe, what’s happening?” And I realized that I was in the only town in the United States that now has the gift of a town crier.

The woman told me she was planning to take Joe over to the newspaper editor. It had occurred to her that in this little town, with a little newspaper and one editor, the editor couldn’t possibly know “what’s happening.” But by noon Joe knew. And if Joe would go over and talk to the editor every noon, the grasp, the breadth, the knowledge, of the newspaper and what it could report would expand mightily.

So Joe is now a stringer for the local Gazette. He shows; his gifts on the community because somebody knew that community is about capacities, contributions, and hospitalities—not about deficiencies, needs, and services.

—John McKnight