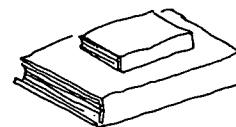


BOOK REVIEW



Robert Coles

The Call of Stories,
Boston, Houghton Mifflin
Co. 1989, pp. 212. \$18.95

The Call of Service,
Boston, Houghton Mifflin
co. 1993. pp. 306. \$22.95.

The story is told of Brahms and Berlioz walking together by the sea. "Maestro," laments Berlioz, "isn't it awful that there aren't any good young composers anymore?" "Look!" responded Brahms, pointing to the sea, "here comes the last wave."

Coles' accounts of persons giving of themselves is a refreshing plunge into a sea of swimmers whose goals are service, and whose varied travels down stream enrich society and their understanding of themselves. Each generation provides a new wave of those answering what Coles calls "the call of service."

His book reflects on volunteers; offering time, deferring careers, leaving familiar, comfortable lives to serve strangers. Intertwined with the stories of the young and old responding to that call, are Coles' reminiscence of the roots of his own commitment to serve.

Robert Coles has written more than 50 books, including the award winning *Children of Crisis* series. In *The Call of Service* he searches for the reasons people offer service, and what they give and receive from the experience. His exploration, while partly autobiographical, is not a series of "little" cases, but serious inquiry. The numerous life examples are linked by the persons' reminiscences of their

steps to service. It is a universal morality play, staged within the civil rights movement and today's inner city, rooted in family, spirituality, dreams of justice, and personal mentors.

The first story is of four Black six-year-old girls initiating school desegregation in New Orleans. Conversations with one of the children, and her grandmother lead to understanding their call to service. For this child, "service" meant running a daily gauntlet of curses, screams, and hating faces. She sees herself not as a victim but as a moral emissary, a missionary carrying out God's important work.

College students reveal other reasons for serving, a desire for social justice, outrage, feelings of guilt, a desire to be part of the action, and in a few cases, recognition on their school records. No matter the motivation or the suffering, each claimed they received more than they gave. Their life stories enriched not only by the service but by having to face the questioning of those served. "Why are you here?" In answering, they had to look deeply into their own lives, their inadequacies and strengths, and the wide gulf between them and those they sought to help. The children were most direct in their probing, questioning, and accepting, yet understanding the relationships were only temporary.

By Paul Abels, Ph.D.

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The volunteers did serious work. In urging people to register to vote, they knew they placed themselves and others at risk. This was a heavy burden to bare, and we see Coles, a volunteer himself moderating their stress, offering service, not psychiatric aid, but personal conversations.

These hundred or so true accounts are woven into the fabric of the book, helping us understand and believe in the power of service. Catapulted into a moral environment, we are grounded by life experiences and the participants' willingness to examine those lives. Much is to be learned about continuity and change from this book, and from Coles' life course.

He examines the influences of family and mentors on his path to serve, the power service gives, and the risks of self delusion. From conversations with Anna Freud he learns that the desire to understand the moral life of children is connected to his moral search. William Carlos Williams taught him how to listen actively. Volunteering with Dorothy Day helped him comprehend what it is like to live one's beliefs. Coles learns everywhere: from the young people and the children he serves. They teach him about himself, and how little he really understands about other person's lives and dreams.

After Anna Freud discusses with him the Greek origins of the word "Mentor", a mythical figure who offered himself as moral example; a wise and revered figure, a tutor

to be trusted, Coles wonders what enables that kind of relationship to develop. Why is a person willing to follow the mentor? How can we best help those who follow us? What creates success or failure? She asks if this is his search.

The entire book is a text on the relations between people, the persons offering the service, the ones who hear the call, and the persons who may be served. They need each other, yet the served often question the server's motivation. Coles sees beyond the questioning to the yearning, he sees too, the hope of the server that he/she can help the person move to a more satisfying, perhaps more just life situation. We see also the hopes of those served, particularly the youth, that someone cares about them, and there might be a way out of a seemingly hopeless existence.

Coles spent much of his life giving service. Volunteering during the civil rights movement, hoping to make a contribution and better understand the concerns and lives of those at risk every day. He was tutor, janitor, whatever was needed at the time. While he may have in part been motivated by a psychiatrist's curiosity it reflects the idealism seeded by his parents and later his teachers. At Harvard, he teaches outside the field of psychiatry, his courses require community service, reading novels, short stories and poems in which the characters are faced with the moral issues related to living their lives. He notes that in his classes there is a natural shift

from intellectual discussions, to how to lead an honorable and decent life.

He believes that the roots and key to that kind of life are in the stories learned from parents, teachers, mentors, and literature. In *The Call of Stories*, he discusses the power that stories have in shaping peoples' lives and "testifies to the nourishing moral insights that come from narratives, beginning with stories read aloud in the family circle and continuing through formal education and thereafter." He found that he could reach people's lives through their stories, but he had to learn how to listen first.

He tells the story of his mentor, William Carlos Williams, taking Coles with him to house calls, helping Coles listen to the patient's stories. He recalls another teacher saying to him "the people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story". Coles believes that the mentors who helped him most were those who understood his story.

The narratives in this book encompass the lives of children, his work with students, and the civil rights movement. His psychiatric practice is enriched by understanding his patients' stories. References to short stories, novels, poems, all which are used and influenced his work are woven into the fabric of his narrative. These stories

provide us with clues about how to teach and practice. They add interest, vitality and an urgency to experiment with his ideas.

The unity of the two books offer an inspiring resource to educator, practitioner and activist. a vital testimony in a cynical age. "the call to service", is an excellent response to those who believe today's youth is more selfish than those of the past. Coles' stirring accounts proclaim the call to service is strong, and that we have to find the best way to enable and nurture that service. The story of his own and others "call", reaffirms the magnetism of "the call of stories" and the magic that narratives perform as they force us to retell to ourselves and others the stories that brought us into service, and made that service rewarding. ☐

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