The Call to Service

by Robert Coles

As a child I often heard my mother use the word "charity" in referring to her constant involvement in the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, a Catholic Worker soup kitchen, and in numerous hospital fund drives, as well as in her reading to sick children and helping people in the hospital as a volunteer. Still, my so-called research, which would become a lifetime of observation, of conversations and more conversations and efforts to understand what I'd heard, all began in the South, with the children and young volunteers I got to know there. I have chronicled that research many times, but as I have already indicated in connection with young Tessie, I wasn't always prepared to think of my work as a study of service. Nor were many of the boys and girls and older people who got involved in those momentous confrontations inclined to think of themselves as Tessie did, as people trying to offer what they could to others.

As Stan, a civil rights activist who would later become a VISTA volunteer, declared to me one day, "You keep asking me why, why I'm here. I'm here because I believe in something. I believe in racial equality—`black and white together,' and I'm willing to stand up for it, for what I believe. That's what I'm doing here. You could even call it selfish—it's important to me, and I feel I'm lucky to be here with others, doing this. Do I think of them, the segregationists? [I had asked.] No, I really don't. I mean, I do, of course—the sheriffs, the mobs. But a lot of the time I close my eyes to all of that, to them. I say to myself, Hey, you're here, and you're ready to keep putting yourself on the line, and that's as far as I let my mind go—one day at a time, one step at a time."

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He had carried to the South the values he had learned in a white, fairly well-to-do, secular home up North. Or, it might be said, those values had carried him to Dixie, and though he might not have dwelt on them explicitly, they were a part of his life, as he acknowledged, and they help us understand what he was doing, what others like him were doing and continue to do. There he was in Canton, Mississippi, in 1964, amid the frantic activity

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

and constant anxiety of the SNCC Summer Project, stopping for a while to think about his parents and what they taught him, and how that helped to characterize what he was doing with his life.

"I was brought up on the idea that you have to think of others, the poor, not just yourself. My dad is a lawyer, and he makes a good living; but he always contributes some of his time to causes - to people who need his help and can't afford it, or to politics. He joined the NAACP when he was a young man, when that was itself a real political statement, at least in the neighborhood where he and my mother lived.

"Neither of my parents are religious; my mom never goes to church, and my dad says his parents were agnostics, though they went to a Congregationalist church at Christmas and Easter. But both my parents had strong political ideals: they wanted the New Deal to last forever, and to expand, and make the country more egalitarian. They weren't socialists or communists. They were old fashioned liberals or progressives, but they really believed in political commitments—and those commitments were sort of their meal, the bread and potatoes of their life. I think it was always like that for me too—it really mattered who was president, which party ran Congress, what laws were being passed, how the Supreme Court voted. The ways some kids are all tied up with church calendars or Hebrew school, I was tied up with this law (will it get through the Senate?) or that idea (will the president really push it?), and it's still like that for me.

"I guess you'd say that I'm here because this is a big moment in American history, and it really matters that Negroes get the vote and that the segregationists lose this political struggle, and it matters not only to me as a voter, an American, but to me and my family, [because] that's the kind of people we are, and this is what we believe in doing: to stand up for your ideas, your beliefs, and, like we say in SNCC, to put your body on the line, and if it's dangerous, then you don't walk away then, not if you want to hold on to your self-respect."

He didn't mention the real help, the genuine and important service he was offering every day as a teacher, as an advocate. In the above-quoted remarks and in hours of other comments, his

emphasis was always on his politics, his activist purposes, his willingness (indeed, eagerness) to join with others, to link arms in a movement dedicated to those purposes—all on behalf of his principles, which he eagerly discussed at great length. For him, tutoring children in Mississippi, providing health information to families, and teaching a civics class to men and women in hopes that they would take the considerable risk of walking to the county courthouse and attempting to register as voters—all these activities were part of a social and political struggle that he used as his defining compass. He pursued those directions that served "the movement's ends," a phrase that appeared repeatedly in his sometimes urgently impatient statements.

"I have so damn much to do," he would say over and over, as if uttering mere words—which he liked to do and could do very well—was an indulgence. When I told him how impressive his work with schoolchildren was, he brushed aside the compliment and made a point of indicating the relationship between his teaching and his social activism: "We need to earn the confidence of the people here. We can't just come in and ask them to put their lives on the line—and that's what they feel they're doing when they go into that courthouse, and who can blame them!" He had little apparent interest in acknowledging the worth of the tutoring per se. And given the risks he was taking—his life on the line!—I felt I could not press the matter.

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