

The notion of volunteerism, for some, evokes a wistful if antiquated memory of do-gooders in woolen cloaks wiping the brows of injured soldiers on the battlefield. For others, it's a vibrant image of Peace Corps volunteers fanning out across the globe during the Kennedy administration. For others still, volunteerism represents the best of contemporary society, citizens engaged in unremunerated activities to meet the needs of fellow citizens where government programs fall short.

Volunteerism in America: Retro or Active?

TEXT: KIM LARSON

The fact is, it's all of that and a lot more. A recent posting on Facebook, for example, activated a swarm of volunteers across the US where a third of the National Park service sites remain closed. The government, mired in a partial shutdown due to a political stalemate over a wall on the southern border of the country, has frozen funding and parks have suffered significantly from illegal off-road vehicles to tree damage and trash accumulation. To the rescue, a squadron of active citizens volunteering their time to act as watchdogs and maintenance crews. Some have labeled this Volunteer Love.

The American tradition of philanthropy

Let's back up for a moment to reflect on the roots and origins of such altruism. **Aesop** is quoted as saying "*No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted*". Likewise, **Aristotle** from an earlier era, states "*What is the essence of life? To serve others and to do good*".

In modern day lingo, many call it "paying it forward", the idea of "giving back". Volunteers bring the human touch, the glue, some say, that holds it all together. And one of the Founding Fathers of America, **Thomas Jefferson** inspired others with the promise "*May I never get too busy in my own affairs that I fail to respond to the needs of others*".

At the time of Thomas Jefferson and the beginning of the new democracy, later in the 18th century on the heels of the Revolutionary War, Americans began to be preoccupied with the ideas of self-improvement and their "duty to stay well-informed". Intellectuals such as **Noah Webster**, author of English language and grammar books, traveled far and wide giving lectures on scientific discoveries and cultural trends spurring the imaginations of citizens of this nascent nation to look beyond and think more broadly than only unto themselves.

After all, the escape from European feudalism was still within the recesses of collective memories and one can only imagine the stark comparisons reflected upon: freedom of individualism along with it, the opportunities and perils vs. the self-contained patriarchal unit of oversight.

Some argue this paradigm gave rise to the American tradition of philanthropy, which is a phenomenon far bigger than in Europe. In certain circles, this is also viewed as a tenet of volunteerism as ones financial assets are at work in the service of others' well-being, doing something for the community. Volunteerism, if stretched, can include NGO's, for their mission-driven agendas and non-profit status.

The internet in general has provided an added impetus for volunteerism and activism as citizens are afforded

opportunities to see real need in real time, almost as witnesses to a rapidly changing world of connectivity. At a dizzying rate of speed, societal need as well as societal excesses are called into question, cause for public review, rebuke or debate. The internet has been called the Great Equalizer, for better or for worse, as self-indulgences are often scorned while altruism is rewarded.

To look, to care, to act

Recently the global debate on responsibilities regarding immigration has highlighted the issues of poverty and shunted opportunities, dictators and rogue governments, clear causes fomenting unrest and fear resulting in citizens seeking safer ground.

The Peace Corps volunteers, a program began under President **John F. Kennedy** in the early 1950's, aimed to help those countries in need by sending armies of young volunteers to teach English, help farmers in rural and attack poverty in urban areas through community development activities. The intractable persistence of these same problems has led some to wonder if the capitalist system itself has yet to evolve in such a way to stem inequities rather than perpetuate the problems.

In America, some of the biggest volunteer organizations have boards of directors who, while very generous in their giving, often make a profession in un-

der-regulated sectors. One private investment banker in Washington, DC stated that while giving is part of the American culture, it's often motivated by tax incentives.

That dark view can be offset by hundreds of examples of communities who pitch in because the need is in their midst and, whether dire or not, unavoidable. It's arguably simply the right thing to do whether it's helping America's newest immigrants more smoothly assimilate whether in New York, Texas or California to Habitat for Humanity started by former President Jimmy Carter which builds houses for the homeless.

It can include a Muslim youth organization which organized community cleanups to schools encouraging—if not requiring—students to choose a cause and accumulate hours and achievable results to share.

It's a “giving back”, a “cultural grooming” of sorts, for focusing on community engagement as a life-long endeavor. To look, to care, to act.

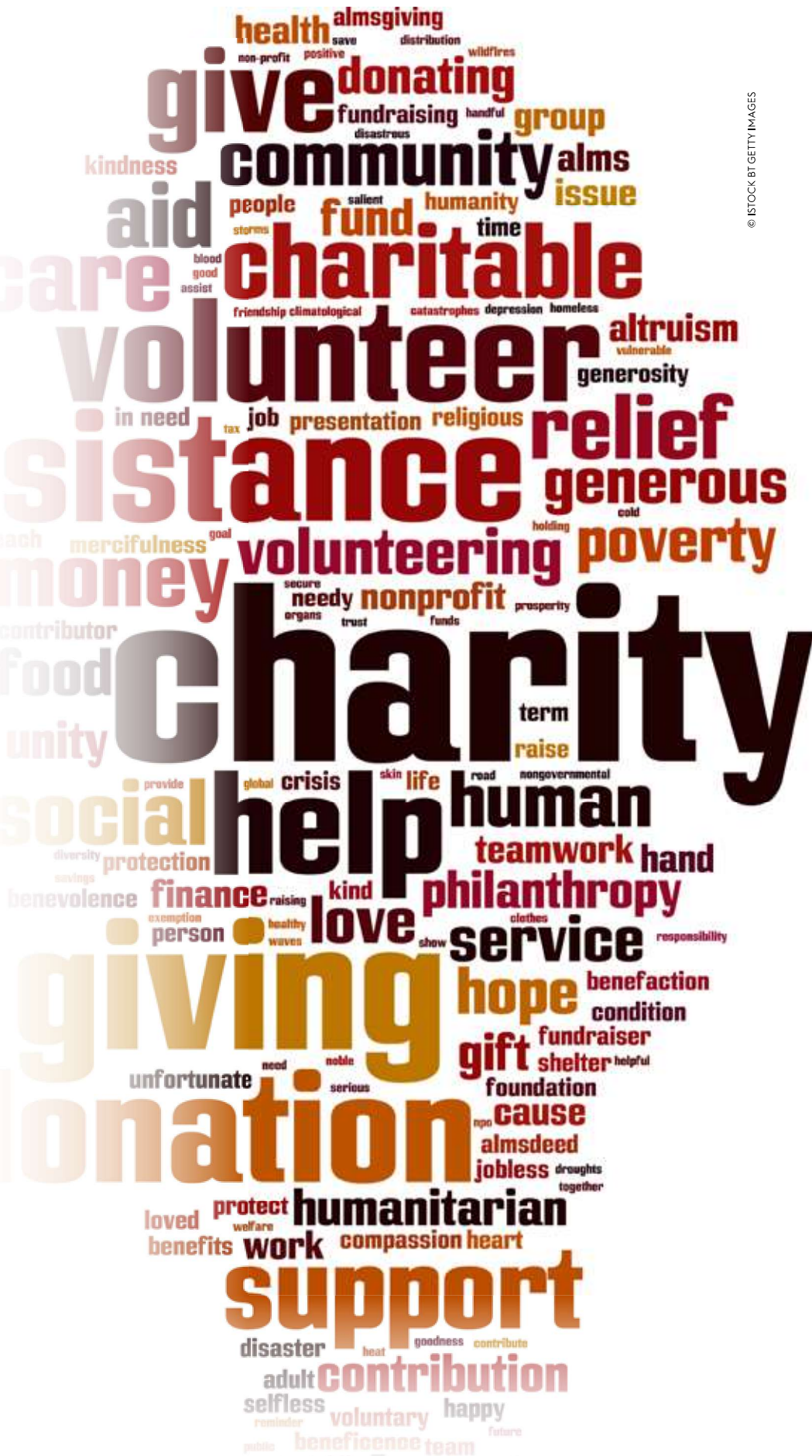
The right thing to do

Unlike the Scandinavian countries, America is clearly not a social democracy that offers a wider social safety net and where civic responsibility may be more baked into the fabric of the culture. So in that sense, Americans have to work harder to instill the idea that if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem and in the face of climate change and environmental degradation, it's not a moment too soon to harken our “better angels” and accelerate the mentality of a “good global citizen”, accentuating that the air we share and the water we use is ultimately all the same.

So, in a sense, this urgency has resulted in a call for all citizens across America and indeed the globe, to find ways to help and to secure a regenerative future from healthy soup kitchens to better board members. To do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, celebrating impact, resilience, relevancy and connectivity and above all, a sense of purpose that indeed will improve lives, if for one, then for all.

As my friend Hillary says, a volunteer at a school garden in San Francisco, “Ultimately, we volunteer because we human beings crave meaning, doing something that matters, being a part of the world.”

It so beats sitting on the couch watching daytime tv.



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