

VOLUNTARY WORK, MY IDENTITY AND THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

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I have always been surrounded by experiences of volunteering. My family, grandfather, aunts, uncles, cousins and their circles of friends were always involved in parish work and in the local band club. As one of the younger cousins, I was always taken to activities. I have a very fond memory of selling raffle tickets during fundraising events for the Ħaż-Żabbar and Baħrija parishes, going to homes singing Christmas Carols, and helping out during fundraising events.

I joined my parish's youth club, became the leader of its folk group and then a member of the local Third World Group, where I also met my husband. We married and migrated to U.S.A. and immediately became involved in parish work. After two years, we returned to Malta and Professor Peter Serracino Inglott approached me to help a group of parents address an educational dilemma Malta had. This led to the Parents' Foundation for Education where I was elected on its first Board. Memories of me, as a young mother, driving home at 02:00 after board meetings are still with me, including some adventurous drives in mists, storms and fogs (pre-mobile time). This also gave me an opportunity to be part of a board responsible for creating a school from which my own children benefitted. Talk about serendipity!

Since then, I have used my professional skills and expertise to help different associations. I cannot remember a time when I was not involved in volunteering, be it within an organisation or on an individual basis. I cannot imagine myself not involved in Civic Society and in voluntary work, it is part of my identity.

My present voluntary work is directly linked to my career. I am involved in various local and international organisations in the areas of dyslexia and counselling as an executive council member, an official, or a member. I have sought funds for activities and events for such associations and their members. Each successful activity brings great satisfaction as I see its benefits to individuals and communities. Whenever I can, I try to organise such activities in collaboration with my place or work, namely the University of Malta. These experiences have allowed me to grow academically, professionally and personally. My academic and professional work would not be so enriching without my voluntary contribution to these associations. Indeed, I think that this culture has been ingrained in me, and allowed me to be more deeply involved in my career and to look at the monetary payment received for my work as separate from my profession; which I also regard as a vocation. I suppose this is also influenced by being brought up as the daughter of a village doctor and a mother who was extremely kind and gentle with my father's patients, where a number of them would give my father gifts from their produce, such as rabbits or chickens as appreciation as they could not pay the doctor's fee. No one was ever turned away from his clinic.

I feel very fortunate that my university, employer and Dean encourage community engagement and volunteering, indeed see it as a duty of being an academic. My faculty puts this at the heart of its identity, so much so that the Faculty of Social Wellbeing actually has a committee which addresses this issue and continuously organises events to promote this. In its description, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing (2020) notes that "many of the members of staff engage with the community through their contribution to government boards and committees, to non-governmental organisations and professional associations" (para. 5).

WELLBEING

I have never carried out any academic research on voluntary work. I have just lived it from the day I was born. It was therefore interesting to see my life experiences conceptualised through the literature, mostly from the psychological and sociological disciplines.

Voluntary work is an important aspect of personal and communities' wellbeing as well as an important economic contribution to society. According to the International Labour Organisation (Medina, 2011): Volunteers constitute a far more significant share of the workforce of nations than is commonly recognized. Data generated by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project in 37 countries (Salamon et al., 2004) revealed... Approximately 140 million people in these countries engage in some volunteer activity in a typical year...the equivalent of 20.8 million full-time equivalent paid workers...these volunteers make a \$400 billion contribution to the global economy. (p.3)

The literature reports that volunteering attributes to our wellbeing (e.g. Farrell & Bryant 2009; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2016; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Van Campen et al. (2013) reported that "from a subjective well-being point of view, helping other people through care giving and voluntary work increases the subjective well-being of those providing the help" (p. 45).

Pinquart and Sørensen's (2003) meta-analysis on wellbeing of informal caregivers presented positive effect, life satisfaction, perceived better quality of life and lower depression levels. They referred to meaningfulness, rewarding of behaviour, love and affection. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) and Roberto and Jarrot (2008) concluded that helping others enhances feelings of confidence in one's competences, experiences of satisfaction, the creation and strengthening of relationships and social connections.

THE COVID-19: A FINAL REFLECTION

Marmot and Wilkinson (2001) argued that voluntary work positively affects one's health, health behaviour, self-care, and wellbeing, even in times of unemployment. They explained that deprived underlying functions of unemployment, such as time structure, organised activity, collective purpose, purpose to get out of bed, social contacts, and status elicited from being employed are addressed through voluntary work when unemployed. Malta seems to have risen to this occasion and the media is full of quiet heroism and commitment. Indeed, my own son-in-law decided to leave home to manage a local hospital. This has affected his studies and his personal life. He is very aware of his decision and has no regrets. Indeed, this has given him meaning in the present local and global situation.

I am presently living this reality differently, unfortunately more as a spectator than an actual volunteer. Due my family situation and (I have to extremely reluctantly admit) my age, I have to stay inside to abide by recommended social distancing directives issued by local authorities. This is my responsible contribution to the present situation. I try to do as much volunteering as I can virtually. I feel frustrated that I cannot help more. When this feeling overwhelms me, I read Milton's Sonnet 19 on how he coped with his blindness, particularly the last verse: They also serve who only stand and wait.

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