



**THE POWER OF DIVERSITY:
THE GLOBALIZATION OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE**

By

**Ambassador James A. Joseph
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I am pleased to have been invited to help honor the legacy and celebrate the life of Franklin Williams. I first met Ambassador Williams in Ghana in the mid 1960s. I was there as the leader of an Operations Crossroads Africa project working in a rural village north of Kumasi, and he was the America Ambassador who came out to visit us from time to time --- usually in a white suit and with white shoes. It was not surprising that Sargent Shriver consulted with him in developing the Peace Corps because he had both a keen interest in the work of Crossroads Africa and in the idea of international voluntarism more generally.

He was also strongly committed to diversity, both as an Ambassador and later as President of the Phelps Stokes Fund. I especially remember a conversation he and I had some years later during an unplanned meeting in Addis Ababa about the need to get more people of color into leadership positions in foundations and other forms of organized philanthropy. He was especially pleased when a few years later I became the founding chair of the Association of Black Foundation Executives and he took great delight in my selection as President and CEO of the Council on Foundations

It is thus fitting that we pause tonight in his memory to honor those selected for the Franklin Williams Award, to celebrate and affirm the Peace Corps commitment to diversity; and to recognize and affirm our interdependence as one world, one people bound together in a common humanity. I want, thus, to talk about the power of diversity and the globalization of volunteer service.

But let me begin my acknowledging that these are difficult times to get people to think about, talk about and help to create a consciousness of our connectedness. These are difficult times conceptually because it is our peculiar destiny to live between two worlds, an old order that is dying but not yet dead and a new order that is conceived but not yet born. All around us we see the trauma of transition and the tragedy of division. We are divided by color and culture as well as religion, race and region. We are divided between those who are open to new ideas and those who are wedded to absolutes of the past. We are even divided between those who think and those who refuse to think at all. Many Americans feel such a strong affinity with the “we” group with which they identify that they fail to recognize the need to embrace the “they” groups with whom their destiny is now bound together.

We are fortunate, therefore, that the Peace Corps experience brings people together across the many chasms that divide. It may be that your greatest legacy has been your ability to demonstrate that diversity need not divide; that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit and not a burden; and that the fear of difference is a fear of the future.

These are difficult times to celebrate and affirm our diversity not only conceptually, but functionally as well. We live in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. The more interdependent we become, the more people are turning inward to smaller communities of meaning and memory. For some, this seems like a reason for despair, but it may be that the search for beginnings, even the focus on remembering and regrouping, represent the first stage of the search for common ground.

As I travel around the world, I hear more and more people saying that until there is respect for their primary community of history and heritage they will find it difficult to fully embrace the larger community of duty and destiny.

For a time, those Americans seeking common ground with distant people in distant places thought that they would find it in the convergence of political cultures with an emphasis on the ballot and the emergence of new democracies. Later we thought that we would find common ground in the economic culture with its emphasis on markets and the ties created by an interdependent world economy. Increasingly, it appears that we find common ground not so much in the political or economic culture, but in the emergence of a transnational civic culture with its emphasis on volunteer service and its ability to bring people together across old boundaries to participate in the development of their communities.

People around the world are coming to agree that a good society depends as much on the goodness of individuals as it does on the soundness of government and the fairness of laws. They are reclaiming responsibility for their lives through neighborhood associations in squatter settlements, farming cooperatives in rural areas, micro-enterprises in urban areas, housing associations, mutual aid associations and various other forms of self-help groups to improve local conditions. What they need is not charity, but assisted self-reliance, the kind of participatory development that volunteer service reflects and embodies.

The events of the last several years have caused us to think often and deeply about whether transnational community is really possible. I am convinced that it is, but it will require us to think and act differently. The paradigm of community that will best serve our efforts to build relationships abroad was best described by the black mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman who was a contemporary of Franklin Williams. Thurman was fond of saying "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say "I want to be an American without making it difficult for Asians to be Asians, Africans to be Africans and Arabs to be Arabs?" Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say "I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for Muslims to be Muslims, Jews to be Jews, Buddhists to be Buddhists or Hindus to be Hindus?"

If volunteer service in the Peace Corps can help develop that sort of discernment, first in the ranks of volunteers and then abroad, the Corps and the Congress can both feel rewarded, volunteers around the world can feel appreciated and we can restore respect for the values that gave birth to democracy. It goes without saying, however, that we must conduct our work abroad with a demonstration of respect for local traditions, local cultures and local concepts of community. While not as well organized and not as well supported as in the United States, the idea of helping neighbors in need, the idea of service to others as an essential part of the pursuit of happiness, can be found among many people in many places.

In South Africa, where I have been living full or part time for the last fourteen years, there is a concept of community called ubuntu. It is best expressed by the Xhosa proverb "People are people through other people" which is to say that my humanity is bound up in yours. What dehumanizes you dehumanizes me. I belong to a greater whole so I am diminished when others are diminished by oppression or treated as though they were less than who they are. It is not I think, therefore I am. It is I am human because I belong. I participate; I share because I am made for community.

The highest praise that can be given anyone in South Africa is to say he or she has ubuntu, which means that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. And, of course, they are forgiving. I was involved in the development and launch of City Year South Africa and I can tell you that it would be both arrogant and plain wrong for anyone to approach the promotion of volunteer service in places like South Africa as though it was a Western value rather than a shared value. The absence of a well-organized volunteer movement does not necessarily mean the absence of a service ethic. What Americans can bring is experience in how to mobilize and even how to motivate, how to communicate an existing ethic and how to coordinate existing energy.

We meet tonight at a time of free-floating anxiety in our world. We have become so anxious that we are anxious about the fact that we are anxious. These are without doubt difficult and dangerous times, awesome and almost apocalyptic times. Yet, there is reason for optimism because moments of crisis and great change are often the moments of greatest possibility. They are the moments when we have to see and create possibility where there appears to be none, moments when we have to call upon the strength within, moments when we have to draw upon our faith in something bigger and more mysterious than the self.

Real leadership often emerges in times like these because the most effective servant is often the one who is willing also to be a critic and the most effective critic is often the one who is willing also to be a servant. British oppression of India gave rise to Gandhi, apartheid in South Africa gave rise to Nelson Mandela and segregation in the United States gave rise to Martin Luther King. This is, thus, a moment of great possibility precisely because it is a moment of crisis and change

The historian Tacitus once defined patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors. I recall that definition of civic virtue tonight to remind you that each generation has an opportunity, indeed, an obligation to contribute something as meaningful, as significant and even as extraordinary as those who preceded them.

It has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are not only transformed, but they experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was "their" problem becomes "our" problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, doing something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is a powerful force in building community. When you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when you help a community to find its own strength and to release its potential, you are far more likely to find common ground, and you are likely to find that in serving others you help create the conditions for enduring community. So wherever those of you honored tonight find yourselves in the years ahead and however you choose to live out your dream, I hope the Peace Corps experience will cultivate an enduring impulse to help transform the laissez-faire notion of live and let live into the principle of live and help live.

So let me conclude by re-emphasizing my initial assertion: volunteer service, as you practice it in the Peace Corps is an idea whose time has come not only at home, but

also abroad. It provides not only help, but also hope, the kind of hope that Vaclav Havel had in mind when he wrote, “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything ends well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that every thing ends badly, but I could not accomplish anything if I did not have hope within me. For the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.” When you are asked, then, why you are engaged in promoting or practicing volunteer service, tell them that you are providing not simply help, but hope, and the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.

(James A. Joseph, a former U.S. Ambassador to South Africa, has served in executive or advisory positions for four U.S. president, including Under Secretary of the Interior and the first Chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service. He serves presently as Professor of the Practice of Public Policy and Director of the United States – Southern Africa Center for Leadership and Public Values at Duke University)