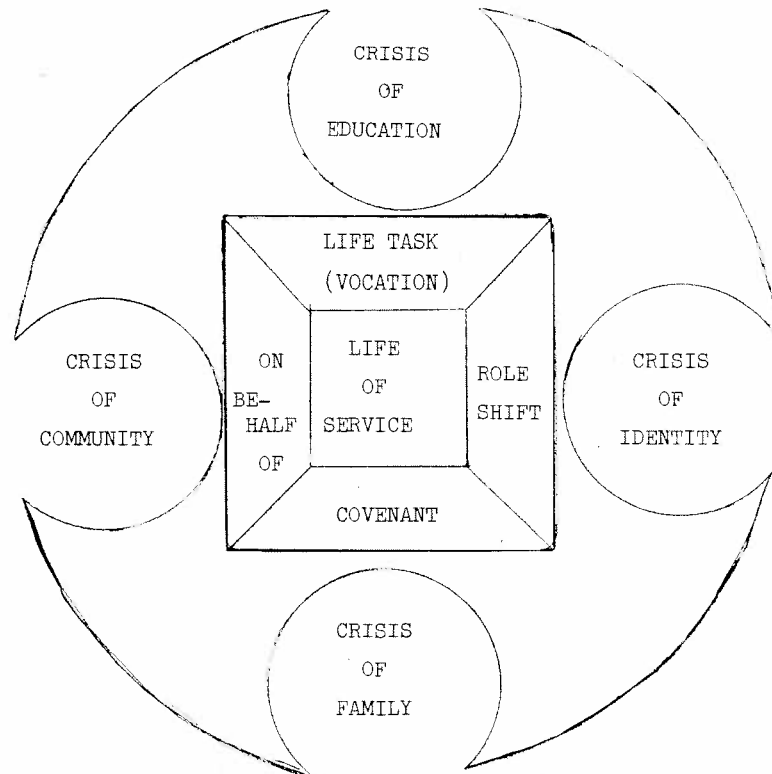


LIFE OF SERVICE

T-663



Just a few days ago, I learned I was assigned to the Global Youth Presidium, but I didn't anticipate having to give a talk on the "State of the Youth Revolution." In fact I made sure I did not go near the floor where the Presidium was being held, until just a few hours before the opening session, figuring that it would be improbable to receive an assignment that late. Well, as always around here--the improbable happened. After I decided to say "yes" to giving this talk, I asked for the 4x4.

There was a long pause and then, "We hate to say this, Mark, but there is no 4x4. You have to create it." I died three times over, especially when I heard the topic of the talk, "State of the Youth Revolution."

This is not to apologize for what I'm about to say but to point out that no one knows the answers to this question. This talk is designed to provoke your insights for you are the real experts. It is a talk to set a context for the remainder of the weekend, to help us look at the radical alternatives required of youth now for the sake of the 21st Century. I want to do this by raising two questions indirectly: Is there a revolution now?, and, What is it that youth are calling all of society to be?

I started preparing this talk by looking through myriads of materials written about youth. One writer would say youth are in a state of moral collapse; another writer would say that youth are the most creative part of society today. What all the writers failed to recognize is that youth are in a position where everything that they may have known is gone. All their parents may have known is gone. There is a collapse of values.

The criteria of what it means to be a self, to be a family, to be a community, to have a vocation, no longer hold true today. The call is for the creation of the new screens which allow youth to decide anew what their role is in society.

In the 60s and the early 70s youth saw the inadequacies of society. They literally tore down old modes of the family, vocation and institutions. This was not just true here in North America, it was true in Japan, Korea, England--it was happening in every nation.

Now in the 80s youth are called to begin building the new--the new family, the new communities and the new nations. I believe the youth in Iran were doing this when they took over the Embassy. They were trying to discover, "What does it mean to build a new nation?"

Youth today are not in a state of collapse but they are experiencing impingements which are the beginnings of new forms of the future, impingements which are calling all of society to a new level of humanness. I will talk about these impingements in four general arenas.

First, there is a Crisis of Identity. What does it mean to be a "self" in the midst of what other people have decided youth should be. This first occurred to me on my trip to Asia about a year and a half ago. I noticed youth beginning to break away from the traditional family patterns. They were trying to find ways to establish who they were as selves and establish an identity for themselves, and for all youth. This is one reason why there is a great desire to move to the city. "I have to get out, I want to get into the city because that is where I can establish who I am." This is one manifestation of the crisis in identity.

There is a gal in my school who was just married. She is 19 years old. She says the reason she got married was to get away from her family. They kept hanging on to her and she wanted to show that she was an independent person, a self, and that she had a life to lead. This was her way of doing it. Now, whether or not you have problems with the way she did that, the point is that she was trying to establish for herself her identity, "Who am I as an individual."

We have talked about another aspect of this crisis this weekend when we discussed cliques. Maybe they are a perversion of the struggle of identity. Perhaps youth gather in some groups so they don't even have to talk or try to establish who they are as individual persons. We are all the same group. Nobody's going to question one individual, they are going to question the group. If they do call in question the group, it doesn't affect anyone personally right now because they're referring to the whole group's action.

Another aspect of the crisis of identity is knowing that I am capable now, right now. I think of working in a small community in the state of Washington. I remember being in a community meeting when the youth wanted to participate. There would be a question calling for group input. One of the youth would say something, and the adults would say, "That is very good, John, that is very good. Would you like to go serve the cookies?" There was a yearning to find a way to serve in the community. Finally, the youth decided to do a project themselves as a way of contributing to the community. They decided to start showing community movies. Then, they went out and raised money to buy materials to build a youth center. When it was finished, they let other groups use the center for their activities.

This impingement of being an individual or having an identity in a community is one of the crises that is forcing youth to look into the future.

Another impingement is the Crisis of Community. I have a hard time talking about this because the collapse of community has been talked about so much--almost run into the ground. The manifestation of this is the fact that youth are isolated, the adults are here and the youth over there. Even in community meetings you see the same separation. What it's done is push the youth into saying, "Now where do we as youth move next?" This is the time that youth realize that, "I am responsible for my community. No longer can I say it's Joe or Mike, or, go see my father." It is my community. I am the builder of my community. I am the builder of both my future and my community's future. At the same time, the present economic conditions, with unemployment, etc., has created an enormous struggle. Youth became really passionate about what was really going on in their community. Then they would graduate from high school, look around for employment and found they literally had no other alternative but to leave home and go to Spokane. "My passion is here in this community but if I don't want to dig ditches for the rest of my life, I had better go to Spokane."

Another crisis that youth are experiencing today is in education. We were talking about it yesterday. Youth find themselves being caught between the teachers and administration. Not too long ago, I listened to a TV interview with a student whose school had been on strike for a couple of months. He was filled with frustration. When asked about the strike, his response was, "Society tells me that if I want to function successfully and effectively, I have to get a high school diploma. At the same time, I am caught between the teachers who want higher pay and the administrators who say we don't have the money. The result is a strike and I'm left out. So what are the alternatives."

Another aspect of this are the outdated methods and curriculum that exist in our schools. So much of school is irrelevant to the present needs of youth. Just a few days ago, a teacher who is a friend of mine was in a classroom where a young kid was talking to the teacher. He was about 15 years old and wanted to talk to his teacher about a situation at home. His mother was a doctor and his father, a middle level bureaucrat. The night before his parents started discussing what they thought it would mean for Johnny to get educated. Each parent had a different story. The tension between them was incredible and the evening ended with a horrendous fight between his mother and father. He went to school to talk to his teacher and the teacher said, "Well, learn your multiplication tables and your algebra and I think you will make it." He just sat there and cried. The frustration overwhelmed him.

What does it mean to give people screens and tools to deal with what is going on now and what the future holds for them in the 21st Century? Youth have no screen other than a monetary one, for dealing with the Vocation Question. People in my school shift their majors in order to get a high paying job. There is the Crisis of the Family. Again, youth are caught between family desires and where they think they need to be. Mom and Dad want you to be a doctor but you want to be something else. Or Mom and Dad want you to be something else and you want to be a doctor. You are caught in that tension. You are called to look at what the alternatives are, with no real screen available to make a decision. Youth know that it is no longer true that it is only the mother and father who are responsible for the family. They look around and see Mom and Dad fighting, high divorce rates, homosexual parents, and people living together without being married. How can they ask the question of whether they are responsible for their family now. They are responsible for their family. And I am responsible for my family.

One of my friends at school is 19 years old. Her family is a Ukrainian family, an established, traditional family. Recently, her father died of a heart attack. When he died, the family went into a state of paralysis. What are we going to do now that the central figure of the family is gone? Her married sister didn't want to move in with Mama, Mama couldn't take care of herself because she didn't speak English. My friend decided rather than let this happen (she could have moved out) she would stand in the midst of that family while going to school, while preparing for the entrance exams for medical school and carry the family.

What does the family of the 21st Century need to look like? Right now, in one generation, there may be from three to four marriages and divorces so that family trees look like Christmas trees. It is an incredible uproar that is going on in families. Youth are beginning to ask, "What does it mean to be a family on behalf of the 21st Century? What does it mean to be responsible for their families knowing there are 15 or 20 generations behind this family? These impingements are not paralyzing factors, they are not problems. I believe that these very crises are windows to the future. If you look through them you begin to see the fundamental question that youth are raising. What is it that these impingements are calling youth to be and to create in the 21st Century? Perhaps the real underlying question is, "What does it mean to live a life of service?" Somebody once said that a real revolution is not just political in nature, it is not just becoming an activist and raising hell. A real revolution pushes people into a new level of humanness. This is the question, that youth are struggling with. This is the question youth are pushing all society to deal with. What does it mean to live a life of service? What does it mean to maintain a life of service?

I see this kind of question being raised over and over today. The students in Iran (whether their action be right or wrong) were not joining off the street; they were students from the Harvards of Iran. What they believed they were doing was beginning to jar people loose to see what it means to build a new nation.

The youth in Manila have been demonstrating because the cost of education is so high. They are beginning to call forth new educational structures in their own schools. They are calling forth what it means to live a life of service. Youth in Boston participated in a "Growlathon" which is a sponsored fast. It is called a Growlathon because your stomach growls when you fast. They stimulated conditions of what it means to live in a starving condition. They tried fasting for two weeks and were given six cents a day to go to the store and try to buy something. They raised \$400 to \$500 and gave it to the Third World. They began to look beyond their own concerns and their own little world. Living a life of service is one of the depth questions that youth are pushing us all to begin to deal with.

There are four components to this question or nerve center of the life of service. One is my Life Task. When I talk about vocation, this is what I am pointing to. I decided this year that I was going to put away any inhibitions when talking to people at school about what it is that I am doing. Remember going to school and somebody says, "What did you do this weekend?" "Well...." Or, "Why don't we go over to your house after school?" "No..o..o, no, let's go over to your house, Mom's cleaning the house today," or, "Mom's very busy." Well, I decided to put aside my inhibitions this year. One day, we were sitting around at lunch. It was Monday, we were talking about what everyone had done over the weekend...some studied, some went to the movies and then it came around to me. I said to myself, "Well, here goes..." "I took care of kids."

"You what?" was the response. "I took care of 35 kids." Needless to say, this took some explaining so I went into gory detail of what I have decided to do and be. There was a long pause until someone I hardly know said, "I guess this puts new perspective on your being in medical school, doesn't it?"

It hit me then that it didn't matter one damn bit whether I became a doctor, or was even accepted in medical school. That could never alter my vocation. My whole life, ¹¹⁻⁶⁶³ my being is on behalf of the thousands or hundreds of thousands of generations to come. Everything I do is in the context of historical destiny.

I know a guy who gave up law school to go into the Peace Corps, even when his father got all up in arms about it. A couple of months later, he received a letter from his dad who said he had started a local action group in his community. Through his action he began to call forth not just himself and his own decision, but called other people to reflect on what it was that they were about, what was the life task or vocation. To take the attitude that you are going to find a job purely out of monetary values is a fool's story you tell yourself, a lie, period--just period.

The other component of this life of service has to do with Covenant. What does it mean to be in covenant in our times and particularly what it means to be in covenant in the context of a life of service. Nobody knows what the new form of covenant looks like. People are over an abyss, in a vacuum--when you begin to talk about covenant.

I was listening to a talk show not long ago about a group of youth called, "The Guardian Angels" in New York. They have decided to be in covenant to their community in reducing the crime rate in the subways. They got together and built an incredibly disciplined group of people. Some had previously been in youth gangs. They have to keep up with their studies, they have to go through an entrance test--stay up 48 hours without sleeping because that is the kind of thing they will be doing. Then, they are trained in martial arts. They go out and ride the subways in order to protect the riders. They have reduced the crime rate drastically and have begun to form and show what it is to be in covenant with the community they live in.

I did a training session not too long ago with a group from a high school on the south side of Chicago. We were having a tremendous day. The students got so excited, I thought, "This must be the cream of the crop." Well, I found out afterward, when we started planning a CYF for the entire student body, that these guys were some of the troublemakers. One of them became so excited about what it was that he could do that he decided (he stated this later on) that he was going to commit himself to showing other students in his position that they could make the same kind of decision and do something. These examples are subtle forms of demonstrating what it means to be in covenant with the community, your neighbors, your family and yourself.

Another component to the life of service is the "On-Behalf-Of." What does it mean to look beyond my own petty concerns? There is a new interest and desire for youth to travel globally. They want to look around, they work in communities and in other countries. There are foreign exchange programs, work-study programs and even the Growlathon is another example of the "on-behalf-of." Youth are looking beyond their own little universe.

Down the street on Lawrence, there is a group called the "Pencil Pushers". They are a group of students who are running their own office supplies business. They have outside funding but they run the business. They are really neat kids and I like to talk with them a lot. I said, "Why do you do this?" They replied, "We are trying to show to the educational structures that there are ways to equip people with life skills necessary for dealing and living in our world. We have decided to do this on behalf of the educational structures. There is a realization that they have an important task to do for the world. The alternative to this is self-centeredness, self-absorption and selfishness. Another example is the Rochester youth delegation to the UN looking beyond themselves and dialoguing with world problems, and talking about leadership roles for youth.

You hear so many questions about the role of youth today. That is a valid question. But what would it mean to begin to venture to say what is the role of youth in the next 20 years? What is the Role Shift needed for the future? When I was working in a small community, the residents began questioning the work and whether we were a part of a cult. We had community meetings to discuss the issues. I was delegated to be the one to stand up and answer questions at one of the meetings of about 150 people. Standing and talking while people were shooting me down. What an experience! But one night this gal stood up and yelled, "Stop! Just stop. You people are concerned about some organization and you are afraid of their 'hidden motives.' They are not what's important. We and the towns next to us are what is important." It's this kind of an attitude, this kind of style, this kind of decision that points to a new leadership role for youth. That daring to make a stand, to call forth others to allow them to see into the next 20 years. Now in small communities there are young mayors. One of the small rural towns in North America has an 18 year old mayor.

Youth are no longer the ones who destroy or take down structures (which was necessary at one time). Youth are the builders. This is the time of the builders. This is the time of calling forth a life of service.

Have you ever read Ancient of Days? Ronstrom the builder, the main character, builds Stonehenge. The story is a myth of how Stonehenge was built and how it was a symbol for that community. I want to read a very short paragraph from Ancient of Days where this symbol has been torn down and Ronstrom is really frustrated and has all but given up.

"Ronstrom," he says, "the people wait for you to speak."

I push his words away with a gesture from my hand. I turn again and continue to walk.

"Ronstrom!" Thorp calls once more.

I stop; I face him.

"Speak to them!" he cries out. "Speak to them."

I do not want to speak. I have nothing to say.

"Ronstrom, I ask you to speak to them!"

I cannot deny Thorp anything and I nod. I raise my hands and motion the people to come closer. And I say to them, "The sun will begin its backward course. Each day the sun will linger in the sky longer."

I stop and breathe deeply, sending smoke from my mouth in a wild rush. I look at the people. Their faces are all turned toward me. They are my people. Though I lead them, I am of them.

"The past is gone," I say. "We have come out of the forest together. Together we did what no other people could do. We fought and drove off those who came to destroy us. We have shelter and we have meat. None of us will give up his life spirit for want of meat. We have done all this because we have stayed together. We will build again what was destroyed. We will build so that no man will be able to pull down what we raise. This place is our home. We will build again."

(But as all things happen, it came to pass that the marauders came again and tore it down and he is fighting with the marauder)

"...The man roars with laughter. He lunges at me.

I cannot move. I am still looking at my hand.

His blade opens my belly!

I stagger and drop to my knees.

I fight to keep my life spirit with me a while longer.

I look into the distance. I see deep into the days to come. A man from my people will drive the marauders from the plain and from the forest. I can see that.

And I can hear The Giver of Life call to me.

That voice is my own. That voice comes from inside of me!

I am The Giver of Life and He is me. Neither of us is complete without the other.

"You are Ronstrom the builder," He tells me.

And I answer, "Yes, I am Ronstrom the builder..."

"Ronstrom the builder," his voice calls.

"Ronstrom the builder," I answer.

The sound of my name is like the crash of summer thunder. I hear it over and over again in my skull: "Ronstrom the builder...Ronstrom the builder...Ronstrom the builder."

Even as I see Thorp bending over me, I free my life spirit...

You are the ones who are looking at this this afternoon. What does it mean to create the new radical alternatives required of you today? That is a serious task but it is an exciting one. And history is here today. You have only to choose between creating it or watching it slip through your fingers.