

On Service

by Sean McGeary '09

At some point during our coming of age, the concept of altruism is planted firmly within us. "Helping others" is portrayed as a commendable and rewarding activity that a person simply cannot wear out. To believe this and only this, however, is to cover up a large portion of the picture: Helping others is one of the most difficult things we can do, because it forces upon us the rare opportunity to realize and feel our own selfishness and narcissism. This is a topic that you will never see in a brochure from the Swearer Center, nor will you ever see it addressed on the Peace Corps website. For this reason, it is of the highest moral priority that those people who consider themselves altruistic and charitable acknowledge their intentions and evaluate themselves within the context of their generosity. I was forced to do this when I enthusiastically (albeit naively) volunteered in New Orleans over my sophomore winter break.

The twenty-six hour drive down was no problem; in fact, my fellow passengers and I were having a great time on our cross-country road trip in a cliché, beat-up Subaru. Such faux-bohemianisms as not bringing an iPod (and thus listening to the local radio stations of each state), not stopping to sleep, and eating only the cheapest fast food we could find told of our ambition to connect with the beating heart of America, even though we didn't really know what that heart looked or felt like. These were decisions that I was originally proud of, but would later regret, and even later, I realized I'd never forgive myself for them.

Upon reaching the city, and more specifically, the parts that were hit the worst, all preconceptions and prior intention broke down into tiny pieces that seemed like they never should have fit together in the first place. I "knew" that New Orleans was hit hard by the disaster since the day I heard it on the news, but upon seeing the destruction, I knew that simply knowing wasn't knowing much at all. People have a tendency to take in numbers and facts without batting an eye, but when these numbers take geometry, fill a neighborhood, and cover an entire city, it is then that information is grounded in a reality so obvious and so terrifying that its staggering to realize it took this long to for you to come or that you thought anyone would give a fuck that you didn't bring the iPod, or ate McDonalds when you didn't have to.

Charity isn't satisfying because it makes a person think really hard about what one's doing. In order to really help someone else, one must understand the way in which that person has been hurt. With this understanding comes a sense of pity. Once *my* pity emerged, even for the split second it floated across my consciousness before I pushed it away, two more emotions followed. First, I felt guilt for every privilege that seemed to decide that I should be the volunteer and not the newly homeless New Orleans citizen. Second, I felt shame for even *thinking* about these ideas of privilege and guilt when everyone else seemed to be hard at work *doing* what these people needed. My unease was always exacerbated when we stopped work for the day and said goodbye to the owners of the home we had been gutting. I hated our unspoken agreement that we would pile back into the cars and paint the town red while they would still have no home, would still be living out of a suitcase packed for three days but made to last them a year and a half, and would continue to see no "back to normal" waiting for them around the corner.

While on a service trip, there is no easy fun to be had. This is not to say that there is nothing fun to do; any new environment has its share of adventures and hotspots to be explored. It is simply very hard to enjoy oneself under the weight of the group's actual "mission" to help those in need. I can't say I never had fun; on the contrary, most nights I found myself laughing, acting silly, and enjoying myself to the fullest at cafés, bars, restaurants, stores, and other tourist traps. Guilt reared its ugly head whenever the activities of our group subsided; it was then that I had the time to evaluate our free time in the context of the big picture. Is there any place for "fun" on a trip planned for disaster relief? While it's easy to retrospectively condemn the free time we consumed with sightseeing and revelry, I am obligated to admit that thoughts of visiting the French Quarter helped me get through the tiring work hours spent moving TVs and refrigerators across the lawn. I do not believe that a truly altruistic person can realize one's own desire to relax without some degree of self-aborrence.

Our favorite place to go during downtime was Rue de la Course. A converted post-office in the affluent area of the city near Tulane University, Rue de la Course served as the café for the professionals and academics of the community. One of the nights we spent there, a discussion began regarding truth, God, and purpose. Within ten minutes, it was pretty clear that not only was there not a single ardently religious person among our ranks, but most of us were either flat out atheist, or extremely agnostic and critical of current establishments of organized worship.

It was fitting that we Brown students, so enlightened and "free" of such shackles as believing in God and spirituality, would be subjected to listen as Marie Josepchs, an old woman whose house we gutted over two days' time, talked to us at length about how she thanked Christ Jesus for every day that we were there. She told us that it was the selflessness of people like us that strengthened her faith, and solidified her beliefs that God was at work in her life. When I scanned the faces of the crowd of students listening, I could see the same plastered-on smile that I knew I was making, and would continue to force for the entirety of the monologue. Not one of us would dare utter a word of our own religious views, and we instead sat in the silent complacency that it "wasn't our place." What wasn't it our place to do? The sad truth was that we didn't want to take away what looked to be one thing Marie Josepchs had left, after having shoveled kitchen supplies, classic vinyl albums, family diplomas, ruined photos, and her wedding dress out into the street over the course of the morning. It "wasn't our place" to refute the religion that gave her faith in a better future, the very religion that we had never been forced to view outside the contexts of our own latte-fueled concepts of anthropological necessity.

This was a manifestation of the pity we promised ourselves never to feel, yet would permeate through every neighborhood we passed, and every stroke of the shovel we made.

Our encounter with Ms. Josephs was the event that forced me to sit and try to put to coherent thought the confusion I had been feeling, and assumed most everyone else felt as well. I had come to New Orleans, hoping to learn about one of most important disasters of our time, to help in the rebuilding efforts, and to experience the culture of different part of United States. While I had enjoyed myself when partaking in the nightlife of New Orleans, the actual process of helping the citizens of the city emotionally fatigued me and weighed me down with contradiction and disillusion, and were it not for Ms. Josephs, I might have never understood why. Here we were, a group of thirty or so students from one of the most prestigious universities in the nation, taking ten days out of our fast-track lives to help gut some homes in New Orleans. Some of us came because we wanted to help, some came because our resumes were low on service projects, and some of us came to see Bourbon Street. Regardless of our individual motivations, the people of New Orleans wrapped us in colorful paper and ribbon, and thanked us for our limitless generosity. Some even told us that we were living proof of the God that we had written off the night before, but fraudulently, passively accepted the morning after. We were, as far as I was concerned, a sham.

The drive home was an altogether somber experience; there was much less talking and much more waiting. I waited, not simply for the car to be back in the Northeast, but mostly for someone or something to let me know that we were still good people, that we had done a great thing and that I had probably over-problematized our experience. This, of course, never happened, and I was forced to wade through our questions in the quiet of my own mind while passing an infinite line of tractor-trailers on the Tennessee turnpike. Our ephemeral ten days of service had expired, and we were on our way back to another semester of relative safety and certainty. I wanted to pause time to prepare what sort of things I would say to the people who would inevitably ask about it. What would I tell my friends? Would I tell them not to go to New Orleans, that isn't satisfying? That it only reveals your moral limits? The seemingly inherent absurdity of warning people not to help others allowed me to put my revelations in some context: I had only been viewing the trip in the context of what it had done for *me*. Clearly, the minute dent we had made in the rebuilding effort was still a dent all the same. There was some relief in the realization that charity is a matter of perspective: When the lens is zoomed in closely at the volunteer, one sees the minimal progress dwarfed by moral confusion and guilt, but when the lens retracts, and the volunteer vanishes, the actions of the groups of volunteers take shape, and this is the productivity that has tangible significance. And as such, I knew that I'd never tell another person to not volunteer, because the necessity of the project does and always will outweigh whatever we ourselves might have felt.

And there it is: the very contradiction that makes charity irrefutably unsatisfying also renders the point itself completely null. In searching for satisfaction by helping those who are less fortunate we will always come away morally empty handed, because in doing so we are objectifying the needs of others as a means to benefit ourselves. To help is to realize our own greed and become ashamed of it, just as I felt shame for every time I took a break during the work day and for every sigh of relief I breathed when it was time to stop for the day. Be careful, because it doesn't end when you leave: I wince when I think of how even this paper uses the tragedy of New Orleans for personal gain, from the seemingly benign example of listing Ms. Joseph's wedding dress last in the list of damaged items for dramatic effect, to the darker truth that this paper has really only been an opportunity for me to try to convince the reader and myself of my own profundity.