

From the Kitchen

18 April 2012



It is nice that governments and some private organisations hand out bravery awards and other forms of recognition to people who save others from imminent death or injury, or who contribute in wonderful ways to society and to the betterment of the lives of their fellow humans. Most people would act selflessly without such awards and few would even think about awards when they automatically jump in to help someone.

I recognise there *are* people who are on the lookout for opportunities to help. They need this to confirm something in themselves about being a good person and they may seek confirmation of this from others. Many people, on the other hand, put themselves out to assist others without ever receiving any recognition.

Society depends on selfless actions. It seems to be built into us to promote social cohesion. It is a shame that there is a tendency to monetise the unpaid contributions people make to society, in order for anyone to place any value on what they do. This even extends to the ‘work’ parents (usually mothers) put into rearing children. The same attitude leads to governments monetising the value of our natural environment, including our air and water. We are decreasingly able to intuitively recognise the value of these. This monetisation also opens the way for private businesses to be given or sold commercial control over these essential resources.

The argument is often made these days that, if we don’t place a monetary value on a forest, it will be hard to save it from destruction because people won’t value it. It is the sort of argument that a local council has used to declare a small park to be ‘surplus to requirements’, because too few people actually use it. Its simple presence apparently has no value. Things that have no recognisable value or utility seem to be invisible, as are many people who make no financial contribution. We forget that such ‘invisible’ places are essential for our very existence and many of the ‘invisible’ people contribute in often unquantifiable ways, the absence of which would impoverish all our lives.

Australia has a very high level of volunteerism. People give many hours freely to local sporting clubs, charitable organisations, service clubs, and even global organisations for which travel away from home is required. In the 1970s I worked for the fledgling Fitzroy Legal Service, a free community legal advice organisation and the first of its kind in this country. For the year that I was the (paid) co-ordinator there were eighty volunteers rostered; half of them were lawyers, half mostly local laypeople. It grew from a grassroots movement in the local community aimed at creating something that would assist those who could not afford proper legal advice and representation.

People’s lives are kept safe in many places and in many ways by people who volunteer their time and expertise: the lifesavers at beaches, country firefighters, search and rescue teams and other emergency services. Meals on wheels is only possible because of the volunteers who deliver meals, around the country.

One thing that is remarkable, is that volunteers will happily work alongside those who are paid to direct and co-ordinate them. Those same paid workers may be found volunteering somewhere else. It epitomises the egalitarianism that is the norm in Australian society.

There are secondary schools that, as part of the curriculum, have students do 'volunteer' work in places like hospitals, nursing homes, hospices and aged-care facilities. I have spoken with students who have completed their stint of this and they invariably say that these were amongst their most memorable and wonderful experiences of school.

There seems to be something ennobling about doing something for others without expecting something in return, although perhaps we are designed so that such selflessness has us feel good so that we will be selfless. There seem to be no limits to the ways in which we can give of ourselves to improve the lives of others, whether through mentoring children, driving frail older people to do some shopping or to their doctor, or taking groups of city-bound people to experience the countryside.

Some selfless action can be planned and well-organised and most of it is. What grabs our attention and makes headlines in the media is the spur-of-the-moment pulling of someone out of a burning car.