



(occasional) Think Piece

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VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY AND THE NEWSPAPER MUSEUM

Back in the early '90s, not long after the Soviet wall went down, I was invited to go to Prague, Czechoslovakia with a team of American press people to talk about the free press.

We met in a large hall that formerly was a meeting place for some sort of workers' committee. About 100 persons were in our audience. All of them, not many months before, had been editors of Communist publications. We were supplied with a translator, a young woman who smoked a lot of cigarettes and spoke halting English with a clipped English accent. I had a microphone around my neck. There were two or three stand-up mikes out in the audience.

When my turn came, I found that it was a brand-new experience: (1) You talk for 60 seconds or so in English and the audience just sits there, not comprehending. (2) The translator talks for another 60 seconds and the speaker stands there and searches faces for reactions. Speaker talks again. on and on. The rhythm, the continuity of the spoken word, this way is constantly being broken.

My message, though, was to tell these people about volunteer activity: the fact that volunteers will do a lot more work, and have a lot more fun, than people who work because they have to do it. I used, as an example, our own newspaper association, about 400 newspapers in which members belong not because they have to belong or because they're expected to belong, but simply because they want to belong.

There's a lot more energy, I claimed, in such an arrangement such a system (the reference to the communistic system was obvious) than in a system run from the top by planners.

Well, the whole thing fell flat. There was no reaction. Nobody moved or smiled or threw anything. They just sat there. I couldn't tell, of course, what the translator had said. Of course, some months earlier she herself had been a Communist; maybe she didn't get it, either.

I decided to take another tack. "How many of you here ever belonged to a voluntary organization? By that, I mean an organization in which you could join if you wished or NOT join if you wished?"

Silence. Then one man stood up in the back row, came to the mike and said that he had belonged to a group like that, a group of hunters.

I had made a big mistake. I didn't realize that these people, born and trained in a totalitarian state, simply could not understand volunteerism. It was inconceivable to them that a group of people could, if they wished, simply get together, organize, and do what they wanted to do without their government, their culture, their religion. or somebody telling them what to do.

That brings me to the volunteers who, right now, are working at the Minnesota Newspaper Museum at our state fair.

These men and women go far beyond what they'd be expected to do or be required to do. They do it because they want to do it. Carlton DeWitt, for example, a working weekly newspaper publisher from Glenwood City, WI, works the afternoon shift every day of the fair. Carlton refuses to accept payment for mileage. The Printers' Committee gives him its standard pay: one fair ticket for every day's work.

There are about 70 volunteers like Carlton. They do it -- we all do things like that, it's our American way -- because we want to do it. We don't see it clearly, though, because we seldom talk to totalitarians. -- RMS

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