

WHEN SERVICE ISN'T ENOUGH: BUILDING A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF MORALITY

Bethany Horstmann, Trinity '13

There was no watershed moment—no bells were heard, no epiphany was had. In fact, it took some consideration to realize a change had even occurred, but once I did it was undeniable. Since arriving at Duke two years ago, I have shifted my perception of what it means to live a moral, purpose-driven life. Through my academic courses and my extracurricular involvement I have reexamined what “moral purpose” means academically, intellectually, and spiritually.

It all began with a simple decision in May of 2009—just after my high school graduation—to apply to the pre-orientation program Project Change. I had always been interested in service, so Project Change immediately appealed to me. PChange was fun and exciting, but more importantly, it became one of the most formative experiences I have had thus far at Duke.

As commencement speaker at my high school graduation, I spoke of how my classmates could use their education to “serve” and “help others.” Up until I came to Duke, this traditional model of community service guided much of my life. I thought that the most moral path would be one of dedication and service—for many years I wanted to work at a non-profit organization after I graduated. No doubt, I still believe in the virtues of service; however, Project Change began to plant the seeds of doubt in my mind that perhaps service was not enough. For the first time, I truly thought about my own motivations for serving—was it for the benefit of those I claimed to be helping, or was it for myself?

I suppose this is a fairly obvious moral dilemma that many who have engaged in service orientated careers or projects face. But as a naive, suburban-sheltered 18-year-old, I had never really forced myself to ask tough questions about effective models of service and engagement. But once I asked the question, I couldn't stop trying to explore the answer. After PChange, I became involved with re-founding Duke Organizing, a community-organizing chapter of Durham CAN; on campus, I enrolled in a service-learning course; and I found a work-study job through Team Kenan that allowed me to explore issues about community engagement of service on a more practical level.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the past two years have also been a time in which I have reevaluated what moral purpose should mean in the context of religion and spirituality. My family has never been the most religious, but for several years we have attended an Episcopal Church and we typically attend holiday services. I have found that during my time in Durham many of the community organizations I have worked with through Durham CAN are faith-based. I have been enlightened by numerous conversations with members of churches, synagogues and mosques who expressed their sense of mission and purpose in working with Durham CAN.

There is no “bumper sticker” articulation of exactly how my views on service and its role in a moral life have changed since I gave that commencement speech in high school two years ago. However, I

believe now that true, ethical service cannot be possible without actually understanding and getting to know a community. And perhaps the greatest change is that I am now very aware that I'm doing just that—working with others rather than for them.

I still want to go into a career in which I'm doing more than collecting a paycheck. But, unlike before, I no longer think that means that all I can do is a traditional "community service job." The greatest purpose I believe I can achieve is to do something I'm passionate about that will allow me to work with, help empower, and give resources to those who do not have access to them. For me, college has helped me realize that my preconceived notion of service is not mutually exclusive to my passion in academics—public policy. Instead of pursuing a career and then filling my free time with "service," I believe that a truly purposeful career will be one in which I can do both at once, such as working to implement new policy with the State Department or becoming a Foreign Service Officer.

The cliché model of service and morality I had in high school has been systematically torn down, and now I am slowly but surely piecing a new one together. Every class I take at Duke about the morals of policy choices, every late night conversation in common rooms about feminism or the consequences of invading Libya, and every sermon I hear adds a new layer to my understanding of my life's moral purpose. Maybe two years from now, I'll have a whole new perspective and understanding. But my job, I believe, is to make sure that I actively seek out new layers to add, tearing some of the old ones down on the way, and always being open and willing to push myself past my preconceived ideas.