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Volunteering in retirement

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | May. 28, 2009

It is a challenging time for anyone facing retirement in the current economy. Some are finding that they can't retire as early as they wanted because of tanking 401ks and pension plans. Others are being laid off as plants close, and they aren't finding many job opportunities in the communities they have lived in for decades. This time we live in has a sore need for spiritual creativity about how to cope with the need to change plans and visions for retirement -- possibly keep working a few more years, or take on part-time work.

Articles abound on the subject of volunteering during this tough economy, such as with the **Baltimore Service Corps** [1]. However, volunteer service commitments are not just reserved for young people just graduating from college or looking to earn their GED.

My in-laws have just returned from a two year stint with a faith-based volunteer program, Brethren Volunteer Services. They had been working in Hiroshima, Japan, as full-time volunteer directors of the World Friendship Center. The center was started in 1965 as a hostel for travelers. The founders vision was to connect foreign travelers -- especially Americans -- with *hibakusha*, survivors of the American bombing of Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. Early on, there were a few visitors every few weeks to the house, and it was an excellent opportunity for an American volunteer or two to live in Hiroshima for a couple of years and get to know Japanese culture. It was also a time to see Hiroshima rebuild itself from the bombing that devastated nearly every corner of the city. People from Hiroshima are resilient: a streetcar system was up and running just three days after the bombing, and a professional baseball team (the Hiroshima Carp) were brought to town less than a decade after the bombing.

My in-laws, Kent and Sarah, arrived without knowing much Japanese other than a few words to get around a grocery store. They were welcomed as the youngest volunteers the center had ever seen, and were able to put a lot of time and energy into developing new systems for how to run the center. I know they learned a lot from this experience (It's safe to say that they probably will never run a bed-and-breakfast again together, having realized that they really like doing their own jobs, coming home in the evening and then catching up on the other person's day). The experience also shed light for them on what happens to generations after a natural or, in this case, a human-made disaster.

But the center is going through a change itself. The youngest *hibakusha* are now in their mid-60s, and every year more and more are dying because of old age (although sometimes hastened by lingering side-effects from the bombing). It has become more difficult for the World Friendship Center to meet its mission of introducing travelers to survivors. In part, this is because fewer survivors are around (although the remaining ones are still eager to share their compelling stories for why nuclear weapons should be abolished). Kent and Sarah were still able to send visitors to the Peace Museum in Hiroshima, which has a great overview of the events leading up to the bombing, the day of the bombing, the rebuilding process, and then an activism-section where they talk about building a culture of peace. Perhaps most amazingly, this museum is quick to point out Japan's own culpability in World War II, especially in how the Japanese treated Koreans during the war.

It has also become challenging for the World Friendship Center to make the connection for peace because the people who stay there are also changing. A few years ago, the World Friendship Center appeared in *Lonely Planet*, a travel guidebook for world tourists. Since then, the average guest at the house seem less interested in meeting survivors of the bombing and more interested in staying out until 4 in the morning and partying. It is a strange story: a nonprofit organization that is searching for its mission in the coming generations, yet has no problems generating cash flow from the number of guests who stay at the center every night (up to 14 on the busiest of nights). The board of directors has started to look into how to share their profits with disaster relief after the recent earthquake in China and tsunami in Indonesia. Kent and Sarah were able to lend some of their American business skills on re-envisioning what the organization could be.

Kent and Sarah are back in the United States now. They came to visit my wife and me, in fact, we just put them on a bus headed back to their old farmhouse in rural Indiana. They have a lot of friends to catch up with, not to mention needing to get cell phones, a car, etc., before they start figuring out what the next step is. A lot has changed since they left Indiana a couple years ago, but most of the people who were there are still around.

Their experience shows how possible it is to pick up and go try something new in retirement -- not that it isn't without fears and challenges, some that would never cross the minds of teenagers and 20-somethings who enter volunteer programs.

In their story too is something to be grasped for anyone searching for what to do during retirement. They made their choice before the economic downturn really hit America hard. Obviously, not everyone has the ability to move to Japan, but there probably are ways to be creative about how to do a program where you get free room and board while renting out your home in order to pick up some new job skills or just have a different experience. Kent and Sarah will no doubt need to find some work in the coming years because of the recent dives in the stock market, but there will be something intangible that they can lean on during the toughest of times -- those lonely nights in Japan where they were about as far as they could be from their family and friends, those times when they weren't sure about the direction they had just taken their lives in.

A volunteer program for retirees can serve as a shortened college experience again, where new interests are discovered, where one has to live on a shoestring budget in order to make it, and hopefully out of that, new beauty in the daily ordinary is discovered that makes the pressure of the down economy relax for a few pulses.

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