Assignment Prompt:

In this paper, reflect on your understanding of and motivations for engaging in community service.

Final Paper:

Why I Serve

It takes some people quite a bit of reflection to discover why one chooses to serve. For me, it can easily be summarized in the wise words of a dying man. He told me, “Never, ever lose your Christian faith. It is the most important thing there is. Secondly, take care of your family. After that, serve others, because what is really important at the end of your life is what you have done for others.” That wise man was my grandpa and he spoke those words a week before he died from cancer. The simplicity of this advice and its effects that I have seen displayed through countless lives have convinced me of what is truly important. My grandpa’s concern was never for himself, but rather for his God, his family, and his country. Likewise, I feel a moral responsibility to those who are not as blessed as I am. So, I serve. I serve to fulfill this moral responsibility to my faith, my family, and my community.

Deep inside me is a desire to not be alone in this world. Humans value relationships and cooperation and are undoubtedly a communal species. With that said, I believe that we are also, as Boyte and Farr propose, “caring members of a moral community who share certain values and feel common responsibilities toward one another” (37). As a citizen, I cannot simply pity those who are in need, my morals compel me to aid them and stand beside them as well, thus fighting individualism within the community in the process.

To some, though, this view of citizenship is as an egregious violation of individualistic expression. In an increasingly factionalized America, it would be idealistic at best to suppose that all members of this “moral community” share common values. To further advocate that someone should serve based solely on a value that he or she might not share seems egotistical and vain.

Others argue that no one has any responsibility for others. Media and society constantly advocate the concentration on self and the pursuit of individualistic goals and pleasures. While considered by some as selfish, it is an acceptable behavior. In America, the United States Constitution endows us with rights
and freedoms. No one is forced to interact with others, let alone serve them. Yet, a simplistic feeling of right and wrong, justice and injustice, fair and unfair pervades my conscience, compel me to escape my selfishness and self-centeredness and engage other humans. The obligation that I have to my fellow citizens is not one of legality, but rather of morality. Because of this personal belief in basic values and a responsibility to others, I volunteer my time and efforts.

My sense of morality, however, does not tell me in what ways to serve. I have the free will to determine how my services are distributed. One of the ways in which my personal discretion leads me to volunteer is through charity—the modeling of “[Christ’s] attentiveness to the poor, the sick, the lame, the halt, the blind, the humiliated, and the scorned” (Coles 54). Regarding service to those who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, or incarcerated, Jesus states in the New Testament, “Whatever you’ve done for the least of these, you have done for me” (New International Version, Matt. 25.40). My beliefs in God and the Bible have a strong influence upon my life. While I cannot follow every rule as stipulated in the Bible, I believe that I can follow the basic precepts as instructed by Jesus. He commands, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13.34-35). I take these verses as directions to serve those who are less fortunate than myself and to display my faith for others to see. Beliefs without actions are meaningless.

However, I do not believe that this is solely a call for Christian ministries. While past services on missions trips and as a Sunday School teacher are examples of me directly sharing my faith and testimony through service, I believe that my efforts stuffing food packages for African orphans, building houses for Habitat for Humanity, as well as preparing Thanksgiving meals for the homeless are equally sanctioned by my faith. God has blessed me with immense resources. The least that I can do is to use my talents to help those less fortunate than myself and to share God’s love and hope with them through acts of charity.

I am cognizant of the fact that “charity” can be thought of as begrudgingly giving of money to the poor or as patronage in an act of condescension. However, my view of charity involves selfless giving. Because of my interpretation of charity as an act of following Christ, I join in rebuking all acts done in a
conceited, resentful, or “holier-than-thou” manner. God commands selfless service and work done with a pure heart.

I am also fully aware of the consternation that some people have regarding the role of religious beliefs in the realm of society. They feel that there should be a clear and definite line between church and state. Some argue that religious convictions should not be the main reason for voting as one does and that faith-based initiatives should be abolished on the terms of being unconstitutional. Yet, what is so wrong about religious convictions telling me to bring cookies to someone in the hospital or to create a safe shelter for abused women and drug addicts or to help an autistic child to plant a garden or simply to help an old lady cross the street? If my mom was struggling to carry her groceries while also keeping track of my youngest siblings, I do not think that I would question the motives of someone who took the time to stop and help lighten her load. I would appreciate the act for what it truly is, a kind gesture to help someone in need, and count it as furthering a just society rather than hindering it.

Besides my faith, my family has a close place in my heart and serves as another motivator for my service. Disease and medical trials have burdened my family for years. My grandma has had Alzheimer’s Disease for almost fifteen years and I have watched as she has slowly been robbed of her memory. She can no longer recognize me, let alone speak. The pain that this disease has put my family through has been significant. My grandpa cared for her every day, even while he faced his own struggle with cancer. He always put others before himself. My grandpa died from that cancer two years ago and his last few weeks were some of the most emotional times of my life. Being robbed of a close friend, who never missed a birthday and drove long distances to simply watch a baseball game and loved me so much, was difficult to comprehend. I didn’t want anyone else to have to go through these experiences. Yet, in recent years, I have witnessed my other grandma and two uncles also face the trials of cancer. This made the impact hit even closer to home.

So, I resolved to do what I could to make a difference. Some people have the ability to perform scientific research regarding the factors of Alzheimer’s Disease and cancer. I am not gifted in those ways. Instead, I raise money so that they have the financial backing to do this research. Through organizing a
“swim-a-thon” for Alzheimer’s and becoming involved with Relay for Life, I have been able to both raise funds and show my support for those who have ever had to face these trials. I know that through my personal encounters with my grandparents and their illnesses, I have been moved to help. The more I serve, the more I realize that service takes on many different forms and meanings. In this particular case, “service,” as Robert Coles explains, “can mean a connection that waxes and wanes, yet somehow lives within the individuals” (Coles 51). My connection with my grandparents has had its up and downs over the past two decades, but I know that they have greatly influenced my life and will forever live on in me and I, in turn, have attempted to right the wrongs in theirs. I don’t know if I would know what Alzheimer’s Disease was if it were not for Lucille Hunt, my grandma, but knowing her made it all too real and our relationship compelled me to act.

I wish that I could do more than simply raise money. If I knew that I could successfully lobby Congress to increase financing for research into these diseases, I would join that political struggle in an instant. However, I have neither the skills nor the resources to do this. I must pick and choose my battles. Somewhere out there is another person so impassioned and they will choose to join in the political struggle of this cause. Maybe the difference that I am making isn’t very large and ultimately inconsequential, but I choose to hope for the best rather than stay still and remove all doubt. If I have saved one person’s life or added one more smile to someone’s face, then it will all have been worthwhile in my opinion.

Finally, I work through community service. My grandpa’s assertion that “what is really important at the end of your life is what you have done for others” still resonates within me. I will always remember my grandpa’s service to others. He would never say that he wanted to change the world; he simply wanted to make life a little better for whoever crossed his path. Whether it be fixing a single mom’s car in a Wendy’s parking lot on a cold, winter day, or volunteering, as general contractor, to build a Christian school, or helping the staff at the local nursing home to feed its patients, he always had time to help. So, in carrying on his legacy, I serve. Through Christmas caroling at the local nursing home and rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and playing bingo with the elderly, I view community service along
the lines of the college students interviewed by Robert Coles, as “more a person-to-person thing, and it’s us trying to be friendly to people who aren’t having the best of times” (Coles 48). I am not looking to win a Nobel Prize, I simply try to put a smile on someone’s face by doing what I would want done to me if I were ever in their situation.

I will readily admit that my actions are not going to make New Orleans spring up in a day. Volunteering in a soup kitchen will not eradicate hunger among the homeless. Creating a Youth Court will not prevent juvenile crime. However, it can make a dent in the problem. If enough people abandon their individualism and join together in a moral community, then it is impossible to predict what could be achieved. Some may say that I shouldn’t just hope that people will get involved and hope that a small difference will be made. They would say that we are “practical agents of a civic world” and, as such, everyone should actively engage the looming problems that we face and try to “change the world” (Boyte and Farr 37). While I recognize and affirm their beliefs and actions, my own views compel me to leave the choice as a moral urging, rather than a civic obligation. So doing, there may not be as many people volunteering or projects undertaken as there could otherwise be, but the work is done with a willing heart and caring spirit. In my mind, that is what service is all about.

The world continues to yell at me to think about “Me. Me. Me”. It’s not about me; it’s about us. We live together as a community and we thrive and struggle as a community. While there are many different types of communities, my experiences with the religious community, familial community, and societal community have shown me those who are far less fortunate. It is not always socioeconomic difficulties that I see these people experience; it is sometimes physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. So, as a matter of principle, I serve to “stand up for what [I] believe in” (Coles 44). I raise funds for Alzheimer’s research. I teach Sunday School. I play bingo with nursing home residents. I feel “the impulse to engage [myself] in a broken world and find a place for [my] moral energy” (Coles 48). I am not required to serve, but I am compelled to serve. As my grandpa told me, my faith, my family, and my relationships are the most important things in the world. I believe that if something is that important to you, then not only should one show it through their actions, but is actually morally obligated to act in whatever capacity is
possible. When I die, I know that my physical body, money, and knowledge will all be useless. Yet, if I have contributed to the lives of others, I hope that I will have made an eternal impact, just like my grandpa’s words of advice.
