

5 Reasons Why We Serve by ServiceSpace Coordinators

At the height of the dot-com boom in 1999, a few of us walked into a homeless shelter to give without any strings attached. We were young twenty-something's then. Our motivation? We just wanted to be of service. The word 'service' here represents a practice of selfless giving -- something that we all have access to, no matter who we are or what we do. Our trip to the homeless shelter led to us building a website for them at no charge. That experiment in giving blossomed into an organization called ServiceSpace, which went on to develop and gift websites to thousands of small nonprofits. But the ripples didn't stop there. ServiceSpace has now evolved into a remarkable incubator for dozens of gift-economy projects, touching millions of people.

While the external impact of these projects is tremendous, what is most striking is the fact that ServiceSpace doesn't fundraise, has no staff, and remains 100% volunteer run. Everyone involved is driven simply by a volition to grow in service. In a world dominated by financial incentives that appeal to a mindset of consumption, ServiceSpace is a counterculture invitation to engage in small acts of generosity, continually shifting the mindset towards one of inspired contribution.

It's a beautiful fact that in practicing kindness, we can't help but deepen our understanding of how inner and outer change are fundamentally intertwined. Here are five reasons to serve that we've discovered through our own journey:

1. Serve to discover abundance: the radical shift from me to we

When you serve, you discover that often the most important things you have to offer are not things at all. You start to uncover the full range of resources at your disposal -- your time, presence, attention -- and recognize that the ability to give stems from a state of mind and heart, a place much deeper than the material. Inspired by the possibilities this opens up in every moment, you begin to discover humble opportunities to serve -- everywhere.

This process begins a shift from a me-orientation to a we-orientation. You start to look at people and situations with an eye for what you can offer them and not vice versa. You break the tiresome tyranny of questions like "What's in it for me?" The mindset shifts from consumption to contribution. Paradoxically, serving in this way, you are no longer operating from a space of scarcity. Your cup fills and overflows.

2. Serve to express gratitude

Such joyful gratitude becomes a foundation in service. When you acknowledge the fullness of your life, you can manifest a heart of service in any situation. In that sense, service doesn't start when we have something to give -- it blossoms naturally when we have nothing left to take. And that is a powerful place to be.

Yes, external change is required for the world to progress, but when coupled with inner transformation, it can affect the world in a radically different way. "We can do no great things -- only small things with great love," maintained Mother Teresa, a woman who made a difference to the lives of millions. It's a matter of what we focus on. Or, in other words, it's not just what we do that matters, but the inner impetus behind our action that really counts.

3. Serve to transform yourself

Any time we practice the smallest act of service, even if it's only holding a door for somebody, but doing it with a full heart that says, "May I be of use to this person," that kind of giving changes the deep habit of being self-centered. In that brief moment, there is other-centeredness. That other-centeredness relaxes the patterns of the ego, a collection of unexamined, self-oriented tendencies that subtly influence our choices. This is why no true act of service, however small, can ever really be wasted.

To serve unconditionally in this way takes practice and constant effort. But with time and sharpened awareness, we begin to brush against the potential for transformation that is embedded in every act of generosity. It's a realization that "Oh -- when I give, I actually receive." You begin to internalize this, not at the intellectual level but by experience.

4. Serve to honor our profound interconnection

Over time, all of those small acts, those small moments, lead to a different state of being. A state in which service becomes increasingly effortless. And as this awareness grows, you inevitably start to perceive beyond individualistic patterns: each small act of service is an unending ripple that synergizes with countless others.

As Rachel Naomi Remen puts it, "When you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole." With that understanding, we begin to play our part -- first, by becoming conscious of the offerings we receive, then by feeling gratitude for them, and finally by continuing to pay forward our gifts with a heart of joy. Each of us has such gifts: skills, material resources, connections, presence -- everything we consider ourselves privileged to have. And when we actually start to use our gifts as tools to facilitate giving, we deepen our understanding of relationships and start to sync up with this vast "inner-net."

5. Serve to align with a natural unfolding

When we increasingly choose to remain in that space of service, we start to see new things. The needs of the current situation become clearer, we become instruments of a greater order and consequently our actions become more effortless. When a group of people perform this kind of service as a practice, it creates an ecosystem that holds a space, allowing value to emerge organically. All of this indirect value, the ripple effect, has space and time to add up, synergize with other ripples, and multiply into something completely unexpected. In humble fashion these ripples continue to seed unpredictable manifestations. Such an ecosystem can have its plans and strategies, but places more emphasis on emergent co-creation. So a lot of the ripples will remain unseen for years; some perhaps will be the basis for a seventh-generation philanthropy. It doesn't matter, because they are unconditional gifts.

What each of us can do, on a personal level, is make such small offerings of service that ultimately create the field for deeper change. The revolution starts with you and me.