**Digest of Notes**

**from**

**Volunteering the Yale Way**

**A Yale Club of London Event**

**24th July 2018**

**Context**

At Class Day 1958, Yale professor Paul Weiss told the assembled men that they were inheriting a miserable world and admonished them to “go out and make it a better place”. In June of this year, remaining graduates marked their 60th reunion with a collective account of their various and varied days of service. The world has changed since June 1958. Yet the challenge then remains true today – How do we “give back” through who we are in the world and the choices we make each day?

**Overview of the Evening**

We began with current YCL members reading excerpts from *Volunteering: Personal Stories of Commitment from 130 Octogenarians* (see separate document) and proceeded to four panellists – Anant Jani, Kamilla Arku, Rachel Littman, Thomas Swidler – on their original motivations for volunteering, the scope of their volunteering and the lessons they’ve learned along the way.

They discussed ways in which volunteering can build communities, especially for us global nomads and expats. Volunteering also develops a sense of continuity for people and opportunities to explore local contexts for global issues. You can bring what you’ve learned as a volunteer from one place to a new place.

Panelists stressed the value of being physically present and listening for what really matters to people and what they’ve set as their own goals. They all echoed a panelist’s comment that volunteering increases a sense of creativity through responding to encounters with people who may not share our language, point of view or life experience.

Volunteering breaks us out of our silos, gets us talking to our neighbors and challenges us to take our civic duty beyond sorting the recycling.

**Specific Notes from Panelists**

Tom Swidler urged us to make a clear distinction between volunteering and charitable giving. Each has its role and it’s important not to confuse them, e.g. encouraging YCL members to engage in sustainable volunteering beyond DoS versus organising events that help raise money for our DoS partners.

Rachel Littman suggested opportunities for common ground between YANA’s purpose and scope and raising awareness of and commitment to volunteering within YCL. There may well be alumni-run non-profits that could benefit from skills available among YCL membership provided on a voluntary basis, e.g. governance.

Anant Jani underscored the risks of failing to research how organisations are making use of your resources as a volunteer. He also underlined the importance of asking people what they want and really listening to what they have to say before volunteering. Anant mentioned the book Freconomics and the film Bitter Lake as powerful means of putting some of our best intentions into a global context.

Several of the excerpts read at the beginning of the evening added to this.

**Reflections for Potential YCL Action**

* Ensure a report on this event with specifics makes it into the AGM
* Consider an annual event (not in July) that focuses on volunteering, both as a review of the year and looking ahead.
	+ Celebrate the commitment to and impact of voluntary work among particular members nominated by their peers.
	+ Shift the focus of the Christmas Dinner from an outside speaker to an opportunity for sharing stories of ‘Volunteering the Yale Way’ in YCL
* Make volunteering central to the YCL brand
	+ Add a tab on the website listing opportunities and calls for specific skills
	+ Feature member volunteering profiles in newsletter and website
* Link volunteering to the Diversity-Inclusion-Equity challenge from the 2017 Leadership Summit hosted by YCL
* Encourages mentors to propose volunteering as a means of developing skills and widening both local and international networks
* Provide a link to a virtual forum (Rachel Littman has examples) and host live events for people working as volunteers across all sectors to offer insights and inspiration, share experiences and good practice, inspiration, possibly even pool resources and swap expertise
* Use our own volunteering to develop and sustain new partnerships for DoS that will engage more of our members; give people a reason to volunteer

**In Summary**

This YCL supported event helped us feel good and focused about our service. It provided an opportunity to listen and to learn from each other. We look forward to similar events in the future and to nurturing the seeds that were planted tonight. We’re committing ourselves to spreading the word and bringing more people to events like this.

**Reflections on Volunteering the Yale Way & Our own Ways**

(in 100 words or less)

“’Yale is committed to the idea of a liberal arts education through which students think and learn across disciplines, literally liberating or freeing the mind to its fullest potential.’ (from <https://admissions.yale.edu/liberal-arts-education>) Our professional lives often drive us to focusing on just one discipline and sometimes on very narrowly defined tasks, which effectively masks the benefits of a liberal arts education. One remedy to this is volunteerism, which opens one to move freely into different sectors and engage in various tasks outside of our comfort zone. For me, volunteering liberates me and gives me the opportunity to express my full potential.” *Anant Jani (YGS 2009)*

“What is a volunteer? To me, a volunteer is a person who spends time doing something extra for someone or for some cause without compensation for his/her time and effort. Volunteering can be done as an individual or with an organization. By this definition, volunteer activities can range from the complexity of organizing a multimillion-dollar fund drive to something simple such as grocery trips for a handicapped person or tutoring a child to read or to learn English.” *Fred Cantor (YC 1958)*

“It’s about the fire in the belly, something you do because you believe you have to. When you listen to this compulsion it makes it possible to take action
that is otherwise easily neglected.” *John Fiske (YC 1958)*

“Whenever I work with children, I’m struck by how important fairness is to them. They’re naturally empathetic, and are the first to call out injustices on behalf of themselves and others. Volunteering, to me, is a way to revive that hopeful idea of what the world should be. It’s realising that for every person born into privilege, there’s another ambushed by circumstance. But it’s also realising and finding joy in the fact that there’s always something we can do about it. Volunteering means making the world fairer and more beautiful, the way we imagined it would be as children.” *Kamilla Arku (YC 2005)*

“I remember volunteering as a kid, with Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, church groups, at charity car washes, bake sales, soup kitchens, retirement homes—good Christian values and all that. I remember reading Ayn Rand in high school and thinking all this volunteering just makes us feel good about ourselves—haha!—and will enhance our college applications. These days I volunteer to remember that people do appreciate the leg up, the willing ear, the comforting embrace, the middle finger to adversity. Yeah, it feels good.” *Nixi Cura (YC 1988)*

“When I sat at graduation some sixty years ago listening to the philosopher, Paul Weiss, I could hardly imagine that my life would take the path it did. I was shocked, if not stunned, to have anyone call us, the graduating class of 1958, ‘a miserable lot’ and then challenge us to try, ‘at least try’, to make a difference in the world we were entering. I took it to heart and never forgot it.” *Stephen Riker (YC 1958)*

“Service, like other important human activities – sex, gastronomy, prayer, and meditation – is always more interesting in the doing than in the describing.” *Scott Sullivan (YC 1958)*

“For me, volunteering is about serving and engaging communities in a connected way. It is a way to give back with purpose and meaning. It is a means to give back to society through groups, old and new. Through a Yale lens, this may be through organising events for the YCL or volunteering as an ASC interviewer. In a wider context, this may be through supporting a charity, being a governor of a school, or engaging with a professional body. At its heart, the most meaningful volunteering puts the human touch first.” *James Ford (YC 2011)*

 “As a volunteer I often receive more than I give. When I step outside my own comfort zone I’m given a chance to walk in other people’s shoes. In the process I learn about myself, neighbors and organisations that serve our communities. Volunteering has opened surprising ways for me to engage fully with our deep human need for both pleasure and meaning, now and in the future.” *Margaret Glover (YC 1981 & YSD 1988)*

“To me, there was always a Yale tradition, perhaps obligation, to give back. Somehow that must have influenced me in adult life.” *Philip Ness (YC 1958)*

“Returning the favor of a privileged upbringing and the gift of education. Like a duty and a calling. To help where I can with whatever resources and skills I have. Try to make life a little better for those who need. Equalize opportunities, preparation, and access in a society that is stacked towards the privileged. Inspire and support the next generation who are much more focused and skilled in helping others than I could have imagined.” *Rachel Littman (YC 1991)*

“Volunteering means three things to me. Firstly, it is about expressing gratitude for the privileges and opportunities I have had. Secondly, it is about justice and lack of complacency. I don’t want to live in a world where people suffer, are treated differently for their gender, the colour of their skin, their ethnicity. We are the same. ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men (and women) should do nothing.’ Thirdly, it is about time. Giving our time. Time is more precious than money. Kind words, care and support of others is fundamental to our humanity.” *Victoria Allen Stainsby (YC 1987)*

“Probably does some good. Selfishly rewarding. Selfishly fun.” *Thomas Swidler (YC 1958)*