

How volunteering can help the youth

IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

EACH year, more than one billion people are engaged in volunteering worldwide. Their actions have economic, private and social values. You may wonder

how helping others has economic value when no monetary transaction is involved. Well, when volunteers give up their time to feed the poor or build a shelter for tornado victims, what is the value of the output they are producing? How much would we need to pay for these jobs if they did not do these for free?

The private value of volunteering is a lot trickier to measure. Studies suggest that it is great for personal well-being. Helping others makes us happy. And then there are social benefits. Helping people in distress, has, in terms of economics, substantial "positive externalities"—improved employment and income opportunities, fewer crimes, lower risk of mental-health problems, and so forth.

Why do people give up precious time to help others? Why is it that we offer to volunteer or donate instinctively after a natural or man-made disaster? One reason is that as humans we have evolved to survive in groups, not alone. Rallying together makes us less alone in that experience. When something terrible has happened which threatens our survival, we tend to reach out and connect with people around us. We show empathy. It is fundamental to human nature, says Christine Carter, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley.

It is not only in countries like the US, Canada and the UK, that a lot of people dedicate their time to social causes for free; in fact, the top two countries in terms of participation in volunteering time are Turkmenistan



Volunteer work can be an effective way to engage the youth.

PHOTO: MD ATA ISLAM KHAN MOJLISH

and Sri Lanka where approximately 56 and 45 percent of the population engage in some kind of voluntary work. Governments in these countries encourage citizens to do so.

In our country, it can be an effective way to engage the youth. Young men and women, gasping to be part of something bigger than themselves, will find a sense of purpose by serving others. We lack in adequate numbers of libraries, sports facilities, gardens and outdoor activities. Many private universities and colleges do not have a campus. Cultural activities seem to be on the decline. In the alleyways of the residential areas of the capital, it

is a common sight to see young men sitting idly by the roadside looking transfixed at their cell phones during the afterhours. They are on Facebook trying desperately to "connect" while the best days of their lives go by. They have nothing better to do. Someone has decided that it is more important to fill their pockets than enrich their souls.

While individual acts of generosity are good, voluntarism is most effective when organised through a formal channel. In North America, organisations select voluntary workers based on skills just like in the real jobs. Volunteering experiences are given

equal credit by employers during hiring process. Opportunities are aplenty in Bangladesh—in hospitals as a visitor, helping elderly people with grocery shopping, feeding the homeless, tutoring underprivileged students, etc.

Now let me share a personal experience of how I benefitted from volunteering during a most difficult time of my life.

Last year, soon after arriving in Canada as an immigrant, I found myself in a state of confusion. A great confusion that arose from physical and psychological abuse. It came from someone I had vowed to live the rest of my life with. I moved out with the help

of a friend. I managed to get a full-time job. The days were long and the nights mine alone. At times, I experienced numbing grief.

I had to turn myself around. I sought counselling. I tried reading more. Still feeling a void inside, I decided to reach out. So I signed up as a volunteer for a local organisation. Once a week I would visit an isolated, elderly person for conversation. They found a match in "M" who I was told has bipolar disorder. Born in a conservative country in the Middle East, he is 75. He is diabetic and without a family.

M was funny. M was also intelligent. He could see through the brave face that I put on every time I visited him. One day he wanted to know why I volunteered to see him. He asked about my family. I briefly told him what I was going through. I said that I wanted to stay positive. I had to be useful to people and myself.

M would always greet me outside his tiny apartment with a big smile on his face. One day he announced that he would like to start a business from home. A month later, he said that he wanted to become a professional model. On another occasion he said that he would like to create a podcast. Surely, he had a lot of ideas. And his energy was contagious.

The colourful summer slowly turned into a pale winter. I was now visiting M once every two weeks. His health deteriorated. One day I went there only to learn that he was in a hospital. He is back home now, weaker.

M did not become an entrepreneur or a professional model. But he managed to do something magical. Despite his age and poor health, he was able to inspire a much younger, healthy person. "I said all those things to motivate you," he said.

All this time I thought I was helping someone in need. Who knew that I would be the one being helped?

Amitava Kar is a mechanical engineer.

Make America white again

Racism powered Trump, but will it work in 2020?



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

WITH whisker-thin majorities, Republican candidate Donald J Trump flipped the Democratic bastions of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania to beat Democrat Hillary Clinton in 2016 to become America's 45th president. Obama-Trump voters, who switched from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016, made it happen. Predominantly working-class whites—the demographic appellation was "non-college-educated whites"—they had soured, so went the conventional wisdom, on the American economy and globalisation that had left them behind.

Research, however, suggests something else. In the 2016 election, Iowa had more counties flip from Democrat to Republican than any other state. Three researchers tried to find out what motivated Obama-Trump voters in a recently published study. Iowa State University sociology professors Ann Oberhauser, Daniel Krier and Abdi Kusow analysed county-level data. Their results showed white, rural voters without a college education were more likely to switch to Republican.

But it was not economic anxiety that was the main driver.

"It was important to look more broadly at social identities, including race or in many counties whiteness, education and age to help explain this shift," Oberhauser said. "We see why the nativist narrative about taking back America and the anti-immigrant

sentiment became stronger forces than economic issues."

A news release added: "These counties were often rural areas, which tend to manifest traditional cultures and attitudes reflecting white, masculine identities and a nativist version of Americanism that rejects globalisation."

There you have it. It's the fear of the other, that most atavistic of human prejudices, aggravated by ignorance. Sure, economic grievances play a role, but we need to look at the racist fears squarely in the face.

Trump—with the Republican Party in tow—appears ready to play the race card again as they eye the 2020 elections.

Will it work?

The short answer is the jury is still out, because increasing polarisation has made US presidential elections too close to call.

However, my own hunch is that it will be very difficult for Trump to pull this off this time around.

Trump's race-baiting antics rile up the base all right, but that might not be enough to win the election. The 2018 Congressional races make this abundantly clear. Trump was in his element as he went on public rants about immigration and building the wall, peppering his speeches with untruths and bigotry.

It did not work. His party lost the House to the Democrats decisively in a way that should scare Republicans. Candidates were swept out of power from long-standing Republican bastions in America's suburbs. Democrats did so well in Michigan and Pennsylvania that some analysts are saying these states may well be out of reach for Republicans in 2020.



President Trump, with the Republican Party in tow, appears ready to play the race card again as they eye the 2020 elections.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ERIC THAYER

No matter. Trump has doubled down, bringing the government to a halt on a specious demand for funds for an unconvincing "border crisis."

That hasn't worked out too well for him, either.

"Surveys show that Trump has never persuaded more than 45 percent of the country to support the border wall, and that number stood at just 40 percent, with 60 percent opposing, in a Gallup poll," political analyst Ronald Brownstein wrote in *The Atlantic*. Polls "consistently find that two-thirds of Americans, an even more preponderant majority, oppose Trump declaring a national emergency to build the wall," he added.

My own feeling is that Trump will hang on to his base, but support will

begin to peel off the margins—with many reluctant prior voters refusing to vote for him again.

Trump, remember, remains a perennially unpopular president who has yet to come even close to 50 percent approval in a single national poll.

His erratic policy statements create situations that are downright silly. He recently declared, for example, that he was coming up with a new healthcare plan then hastily backed off after Republican senators balked.

His administration continues to be plagued by chaos, with top officials leaving and a remarkably large number of high positions remain unfulfilled.

Then there is the Mueller report, which pointedly refused to exonerate

the president for obstruction of justice. Republican hacks and their media circus would have you believe otherwise, but the spectacle of the attorney general dissembling like a sleazy defence attorney on national television underscores a compelling image of an administration bogged down by corruption and incompetence.

It all adds up to a pretty challenging presidential race for Trump. However, it is true that he has proved the pundits wrong before.

And what of the Republican Party?

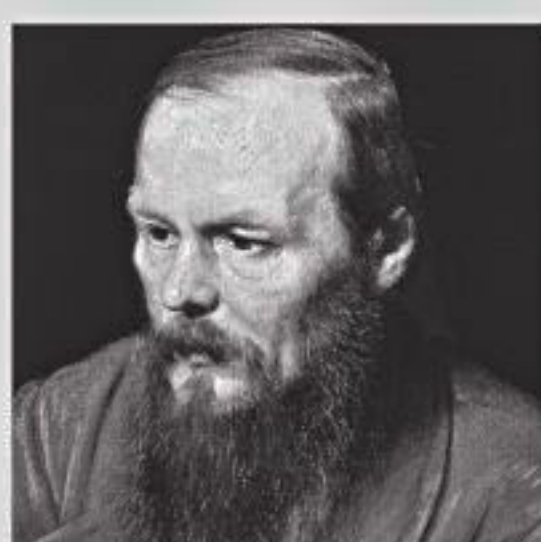
The party is held in thrall by the most recalcitrant, racially polarised cohort of the party. Pretty much any Republican running for office is terrified of antagonising this cohort. But there is a steep price to be paid for that, as was evident in the 2018 elections, where the Republican Party was decimated in the suburbs.

Republicans would do well to learn from their party's experience in California. In 1994, erstwhile Republican Governor Pete Wilson romped to victory, riding on Prop 187, a viciously anti-immigrant ballot referendum initiative, which denied undocumented immigrants state assistance. However, the sugar high did not last, and today the California Republicans finds themselves in the political wilderness. Democrats have a supermajority in the legislature and control all state-wide offices.

If it isn't careful, that may well be the fate the national Republican Party is courting.

Ashfaq Swapan is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

QUOTABLE Quote



FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY
RUSSIAN NOVELIST, JOURNALIST
AND PHILOSOPHER

Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

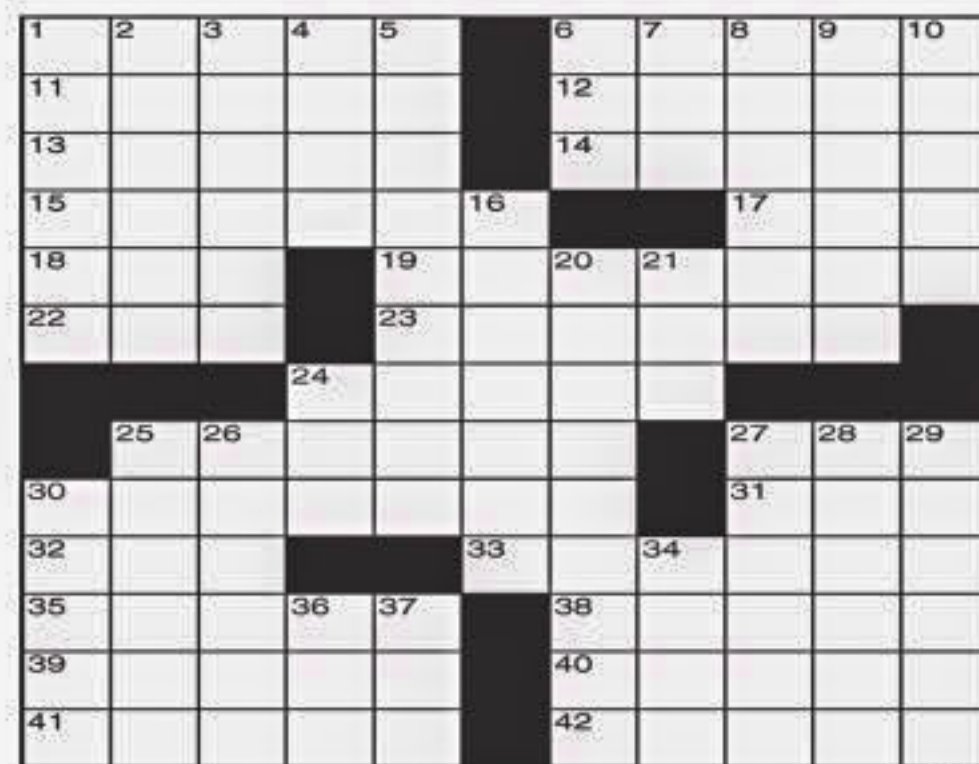
ACROSS

- 1 Map lines
- 6 Abacus parts
- 11 Directional sign
- 12 "Bolero" composer
- 13 "Alfie" star
- 14 Concert spot
- 15 Shoe part
- 17 Quick taste
- 18 Long time
- 19 Cold comfort?
- 22 Writer Deighton
- 23 Sounded a horn
- 24 Two-faced god
- 25 The Pequod, for one
- 27 Assn.
- 30 Blew off

DOWN

- 1 Like some
- 2 Grove growth
- 3 Out of bed
- 4 Warning word
- 5 Cajole
- 6 Lingerie buy

- 7 Lobed organ
- 8 City way
- 9 Said no to
- 10 Strikes
- 16 Lead the way
- 20 Bread type
- 21 City ways: Abbr.
- 24 Pickle purchase
- 25 Riddle question
- 26 African mammals
- 27 "Green Eggs and Ham" character
- 28 "Swan Lake" role
- 29 Loving touch
- 30 Suffice
- 34 Part of A.D.
- 36 Lyricist Gershwin
- 37 Comfy place



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsopinion@gmail.com.