A Call to Serve
Quotes on Public Service

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Compiled by:
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Introduction

We are all public servants at some point in our lives: employees of government and not-for-profits, elected officials, members of boards and community organizations, volunteers, philanthropists, etc. The purpose of this book is to emphasize the concepts of civic engagement and the common good, to foster an understanding of the spirit of service already evident among many citizens, and to suggest a broad array of pathways to public service.

Public service attracts a special kind of individual and is often based on a sense of duty or an intense inner commitment to a cause that extends beyond the pressures of the moment. Public servants achieve internal satisfaction by making a contribution to a society as opposed to a commitment to achieving only personal goals. Those who enter public service do so out of a desire to serve the public interest and link themselves to the larger community.

Public Service embodies the ethical principles of the common good, service to others and social equity. Public Service is important because the essential components of our society are largely carried out
in the public sphere: public education, public health, justice and security, environmental protection, museums and the arts, etc. We hope the quotes contained in this volume inspire, encourage and draw more of our fellow citizens to public service.
And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

JOHN F. KENNEDY
35th President of the United States

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.

MARGARET MEAD
American Cultural Anthropologist

I can assure you, public service is a stimulating, proud and lively enterprise. It is not just a way of life, it is a way to live fully. Its greatest attraction is the sheer challenge of it – struggling to find solutions to the great issues of the day. It can fulfill your highest aspirations. The call to service is one of the highest callings you will hear and your country can make.

LEE H. HAMILTON
Chairman of 9/11 Commission
Service to others is the payment you make for your space here on earth.

MOHAMMAD ALI
World Champion Boxer

We are all called to serve as long as we call ourselves free.

TOM RIDGE
Former Governor of Pennsylvania

We are here to add what we can to, not to get what we can from, life.

SIR WILLIAM OSLER

I shall pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.

MAHATMA GANDHI
Global Humanitarian

The vocation of every man and woman is to serve other people.

LEO TOLSTOY
(1828-1910) What Is To Be Done
This is man's highest end, to others' service, all his powers to bend.

SOPHOCLES
Greek Playwright

There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow men. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to have done it well.

WALTER REUTHER
American Labor Union Leader

Citizen service is the very American idea that we meet our challenges not as isolated individuals but as members of a true community, with all of us working together. Our mission is nothing less than to spark a renewed sense of obligation, a new sense of duty, a new season of service.

BILL CLINTON
42nd President of the United States
I was taught that the world had a lot of problems; that I could struggle and change them; that intellectual and material gifts brought the privilege and responsibility of sharing with others less fortunate; and that service is the rent each of us pays for living, the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time or after you have reached your personal goals.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN
Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund

What made you choose this career is what made me go into politics — a chance to serve, to make a difference. It is not just a job. It is a vocation.

TONY BLAIR
Former Prime Minister of United Kingdom

Do nothing — Or, take history into our own hands and like few generations are given the chance, bend it, bend it, in the service of a better day.

VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN
at Syracuse University
The service we render to others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth. It is obvious that man is himself a traveler; that the purpose of the world is not 'to have and to hold' but 'to give and to serve.'

SIR WILFRED T. GRENFELL
Medical Missionary
to Newfoundland and Labrador

Every life speaks to the power of what can be done.

OPRAH WINFREY
Talk Show Host
The moral test of a society is how that society treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadow of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.

HUBERT HUMPHREY
38th Vice President of the United States

What do we live for if not to make life less difficult for each other?

GEORGE ELIOT
English Novelist

Let us not be satisfied with just giving money. Money is not enough. Money can be got, but others need your heart to love them. So, spread love everywhere you go.

MOTHER TERESA
Global Humanitarian

The miracle is this – the more we share, the more we have.

LEONARD NIMOY
Actor, “Star Trek” series
Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.

SIR JAMES M. BARRIE
Scottish Author and Dramatist

Volunteers are the only human beings on the face of the earth who reflect this nation’s compassion, unselfish caring, patience, and just plain love for one another.

ERMA BOMBECK
Novelist, Columnist

How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong.

GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER
American Scientist, Educator and Inventor

It is important to engage those we serve, but often we do an adequate job of ministering to the poor, but not with the poor.

ANONYMOUS
I have been the recipient of love and service; therefore I can love and serve. There is great satisfaction in service to others, in seeing people and their conditions change.

CLARENCE E. HODGES
Former US Commissioner for the Administration of Children, Youth, and Families

Living is the art of loving. Loving is the art of caring. Caring is the art of sharing. Sharing is the art of living. If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON
American Educator, Orator, and Author *Up from Slavery*
Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.

WILLIAM JAMES
American Psychologist and Philosopher

Everyone can be great because anyone can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t even have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve… You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love…

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
African American Civil Rights Leader; Pastor, Ebenezer Baptist Church

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

EDMUND BURKE
British Statesman and Orator

I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER
Author and Journalist
The Ethics of Reverence for Life
The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
16th President of the United States

The highest of distinctions is service to others.

KING GEORGE VI
Insist that we support the sciences and the arts, especially the arts. They have nothing to do with the defense of the country; they just make the country worth defending.

KEN BURNS
Documentary Filmmaker

It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.

CONFUCIUS
Chinese Thinker and Social Philosopher

I was having a better time at my job than were those of my peers who had opted for private practice. Life as a public servant was more interesting. The work was more challenging. The encouragement and guidance from good mentors was more genuine. And the opportunities to take initiative and to see real results were more frequent.

SANDRA DAY O’CONNOR
Supreme Court Justice
Yes, our greatness as a nation has depended on individual initiative, on a belief in the free market. But it has also depended on our sense of mutual regard for each other, of mutual responsibility. The idea that everybody has a stake in the country, that we’re all in it together and everybody’s got a shot at opportunity. Americans know this. We know that government can’t solve all our problems – and we don’t want it to. But we also know that there are some things we can’t do on our own. We know that there are some things we do better together.

BARACK OBAMA
44th President of the United States of America

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
American Essayist, Philosopher, and Poet
I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW
Irish Playwright

The time is always right to do right.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
African American Civil Rights Leader; Pastor, Ebenezer Baptist Church

I always wondered why somebody didn’t do something about that. Then I realized I was somebody.

LILY TOMLIN
American Actress, Comedian, Writer

Let the public service be a proud and lively career.

JOHN F. KENNEDY
35th President of the United States
Careers focused on lifting up our communities – whether it’s helping transform troubled schools or creating after-school programs or training workers for green jobs. These careers are not always obvious, but today they are necessary.

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA
Without community service, we would not have a strong quality of life. It's important to the person who serves as well as the recipient. It's the way in which we ourselves grow and develop.

DR. DOROTHY I. HEIGHT
President and CEO of the National Council of Negro Women

The magnitude of our social problems will require that all citizens and institutions make a commitment to volunteering as a way of life and as a primary opportunity to create needed change.

GEORGE ROMNEY
Former Michigan Governor

The care of human life and happiness is the first and only legitimate objective of good government.

THOMAS JEFFERSON
3rd President of the United States
Never before has man had such a great capacity to control his own environment, to end hunger, poverty and disease, to banish illiteracy and human misery. We have the power to make the best generation of mankind in the history of the world.

JOHN F. KENNEDY
35th President of the United States

I think the events of September 11th remind us that there are issues larger and more transcendent than the issues we thought they were before September 11th, things we took for granted before September 11th – the idea of progress and prosperity, the sense of our security – are now very much at risk. And as they come to be very much at risk, the imperative of service to society becomes all the more important.

LAWRENCE H. SUMMERS
Former President of Harvard University
I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.

JOHN ADAMS
2nd President of the United States
Giving kids clothes and food is one thing, but it’s much more important to teach them that other people besides themselves are important, and that the best thing they can do with their lives is to use them in the service of other people.

DOLORES HUERTA
Co-founder and First Vice President Emeritus of the United Farm Workers of America

How can we expect our children to know and experience the joy of giving unless we teach them that the greater pleasure in life lies in the art of giving rather than receiving.

JAMES CASH PENNEY
Businessman and Entrepreneur; Founder J.C. Penney stores

Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and help them become what they are capable of being.

GOETHE
German Writer
It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
American Essayist, Philosopher, and Poet

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, who am I for? And if not now, when?

RABBI HILLEL
Jewish Religious Leader

Never forget that the purpose for which a man lives is the improvement of the man himself, so that he may go out of this world having, in his great sphere or his small one, done some little good for his fellow creatures and labored a little to diminish the sin and sorrow that are in the world.

WILLIAM E. GLADSTONE
Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
When you cease to make a contribution, you begin to die.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT
First Lady of the United States

Doing nothing for others is the undoing of ourselves.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
A Founding Father of the United States of America

I’ve met many people across the public sector who are as efficient and entrepreneurial as anyone in the private sector, but also have a sense of public duty that is awe-inspiring.

TONY BLAIR
Former British Prime Minister

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.

AESOP
Greek Slave and Writer
It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best knows achievement and who at the worst if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT
26th President of the United States

We make a living by what we do, but we make a life by what we give.

WINSTON CHURCHILL
Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
Focusing your life solely on making a buck shows a poverty of ambition. It asks too little of yourself. And it will leave you unfulfilled.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA
44th President of the United States
Try not to become a man of success but rather try to become a man of value.

ALBERT EINSTEIN
Theoretical Physicist

A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER
German-French Theologian, Musician, Philosopher, and Physician

Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.

EDMUND BURKE
Anglo-Irish Statesman, Author, Orator, and Political Theorist

I have the consolation of having added nothing to my private fortune during my public service, and of retiring with hands clean as they are empty.

THOMAS JEFFERSON
3rd President of the United States
Being good is commendable, but only when it is combined with doing good is it useful.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

The citizen can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsive and accountable, and keep them honest.

No one else can.

JOHN GARDNER
Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under Former President Lyndon Johnson

My creed is that public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation with full recognition that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration, that constructive criticism is not only to be expected but sought, that smears are not only to be expected but fought, that honor is to be earned, not bought.

MARGARET CHASE SMITH
Former Maine Senator
As soon as public service ceases to be the chief business of the citizens, and they would rather serve with their money than with their persons, the State is not far from its fall.

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU
Major Philosopher, Writer, and Composer

When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT
Former First Lady of the United States

And I say to you that it is the work of public employees – it is the work of those who work in the public sector – to hope, to be optimistic, and to build a better, safer, fairer, more just society.

LAURENCE H. SUMMERS
Former President of Harvard University
Where is the man who owes nothing to the land in which he lives? Whatever that land may be, he owes to it the most precious thing possessed by man, the morality of his actions and the love of virtue.

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU
Philosopher, Writer, and Composer
We seldom stop to think how many people’s lives are entwined with our own. It is a form of selfishness to imagine that every individual can operate on his own or can pull out of the general stream and not be missed.

IVY BAKER PRIEST
Former United States Treasurer

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

MAHATMA GANDHI
Global Humanitarian

No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it for someone else.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
A Founding Father of the United States of America

Your nation will succeed or fail to the degree that all of us citizens and businesses alike are active participants in building strong, sustainable and enriching communities.

ARNOLD HIATT
Former CEO of the Stride Rite Corp
We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean, but the ocean would be less because of that missing drop. We can do no great things, only small things with great love.

MOTHER TERESA
Global Humanitarian

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

ANNE FRANK
Author The Diary of a Young Girl

Everything that lives, lives not alone, not for itself.

WILLIAM BLAKE
English Poet, Painter, and Printmaker

One reason not to wait to address the world’s biggest problems is that they need your attention before you accept the status quo, before you are plagued by the knowledge of what is impossible.

WENDY KOPP
Teach for America Founder
If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain.
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

EMILY DICKINSON
Poet

It is possible to eradicate hunger. How can we live and sleep comfortably knowing that millions of our sisters and brothers go to bed hungry?

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one.

MOTHER TERESA
Global Humanitarian
Be the special envoy of your ideals. Be citizen-ambassadors, using your personal and professional lives to forge global partnerships built on a common commitment to solve our planet’s common problems.

HILLARY CLINTON
Secretary of State
Volunteering can be an exciting, growing, enjoyable experience. It is truly gratifying to serve a cause, practice one’s ideals, work with people, solve problems, see benefits, and know one had a hand in them.

HARRIET NAYLOR
National Director of the Office of Volunteer Development

Throughout my life, I’ve seen the difference that volunteering efforts can make in people’s lives. I know the personal value of service as a local volunteer.

JIMMY CARTER
39th President of the United States

I urge young people to consider public service, whether they do it now by volunteering in their community or prepare for public service as an adult.

JOHN WALTERS
Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy
A volunteer is a person who is a light to others, giving witness in a mixed-up age, doing well and willingly the tasks at hand—namely, being aware of another's needs and doing something about it.

A volunteer is a person who remembers to do the thing to make other people happy, who takes the loneliness out of the alone by talking to them, who is concerned when others are unconcerned, who has the courage to be a prophet and to say the things that have to be said for the good of all.

A volunteer is a person whose charity is fidelity, who is faithful in an unfaithful world, grateful in an ungrateful world, giving when all about are grasping, listening when others need to tell about their fears and problems.

THE BEACON
Newsletter of Birthrite, South Africa

Opportunity + Preparedness = Success. Volunteer to help others be prepared for the opportunities afforded them.

ANONYMOUS
A volunteer is a person who can see what others cannot see; who can feel what most do not feel. Often, such gifted persons do not think of themselves as volunteers, but as citizens – citizens in the fullest sense: partners in civilization.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH
41st President of the United States

There is something enormously fulfilling about being engaged in something bigger than you yourself. It imparts a satisfying sense of purpose which, in my experience, is not attained in any other way.

GENERAL BRENT SCOWCROFT
United States National Security Advisor
Though government has an important role to play in meeting the many challenges that remain before us, we are coming to understand that no organization, including government, will fully succeed without the active participation of each of us. Volunteers are vital to enabling this country to live up to the true promise of its heritage.

BILL CLINTON
42nd President of the United States

≈ Sources ≈

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