

The Volunteer **Mexico City, October 11, 1980**

It appears that many of the people who are active in our Movement share a certain history—they have a background as volunteers, although this is not the same as believing in volunteerism. It seems that many are social workers, nurses, and teachers. That is, they are people about whom one can say that while they do their jobs and are paid for them, their wages are in no way their complete compensation. Of course, if they are seriously underpaid, they are going to protest just like anyone else, but the basic orientation of their activities does not end in themselves, but instead is turned outward toward others. After that comes the need to be paid and take care of daily necessities, which is only natural, of course—they can't live on air!

What can we learn from these people who, though typically underpaid, have that strong urge to teach others? And what of these others, social workers and the rest, who carry out activities where the rewards are not obvious? It seems that there are a lot of people in our Movement who have had experiences of this sort—people who set up groups in their neighborhoods, or who when they were young organized sports teams of one kind or another, the kind of people who get things moving. While many who come to our Movement are like this, others are not—they come in other ways, for other reasons, and only a little later do they come to understand the significance of these works, and then they, too, in their way begin to participate.

So it is that many people become active when our work gives them a meaning, gives them an inner justification. They start by following the tendency they already had, drawing in part on the experience of things they have done previously. One can easily observe this sort of participation; there are many examples. I don't know how things are here in Mexico, but I have seen these characteristics in many of our friends in the Movement all over the world. They tend to be, in general, the kind of people who get things moving. Generally their biographies demonstrate those kinds of experiences.

But why do some people do things without looking for any immediate return from their disinterested action? How can that be? What is it that they do in their heads that allows them to act in such a strange way? From the point of view of today's consumer societies, it is a very atypical way of going about things. All who are born, raised, and educated today have been affected by the impact of propaganda of a consumer structure, and thus they tend to see the world in terms of feeding themselves.

Let me try to explain what I mean. I am a consumer; therefore, I have to consume—to swallow—more and more things. I am a kind of enormous belly that must be filled up. Not for a moment do I entertain the idea or the register that something should come from me. Quite the contrary, I find it all too easy to say, "Enough comes from me already, so I have every right to these consumer goods. Don't I put in long hours at the office, don't I give up my time—which I'd prefer to dedicate entirely to consuming—don't I pay with all that time when I'm working for the system and not consuming?" Indeed, it's a good argument. In various ways people exchange hours of work for remuneration. Isn't that so? But where is the emphasis placed? People do not focus on the activity that they carry out in the world. They consider that activity a necessary evil that is unavoidable in order for the circuit to come back around full circle to themselves again. That is the way today's systems, under one banner or another, are set up. It always comes down to the same thing. being a consumer.

The entire populace is becoming neurotic, which is only logical considering that in reality, just as there is one circuit in a person for things to enter, there is another for things to go out. And if we close off the exit circuit, the circuit that goes out, the person is going to have problems. But the fact is that most people are locked into this pattern of exclusively receiving. And as this ideology of receiving spreads, people are less and less able to understand, even to consider, how there are some people who do things for which they receive little or nothing in return. From the point of view of the consumer ideology, such behavior is extremely suspicious. What would lead a person to do things without receiving any corresponding compensation? What motive could this person possibly have? What this suspicion really betrays, however, is an abysmal lack of understanding of the human being. Today, people tend to understand utility only in terms of money, while knowing nothing of the existence of life-utility, of psychological utility. There will always be someone who is "living well," without any job problems, without any health problems or problems of aging or retirement, with all these things completely resolved. Nevertheless, inexplicably, this person jumps out a window, or becomes an alcoholic and spends all day in a drunken haze, or takes drugs, or one day ends up killing a neighbor.

In contrast, our Movement publicly defends this behavior of disinterested giving, of giving without self-interest, which others disdain. We defend the man who springs out of bed because the house next door is on fire. He throws on his clothes, puts on a helmet, runs over, and puts out the fire. And when he returns home (at six o'clock in the morning, singed, smelling of smoke, bruised), the wife he dearly loves starts throwing china and saying, "How much do they pay you for that? You're going to be late to work and get us in trouble and have big problems at home, too, because of these crazy ideas of yours!" And when he walks down the street, people point at him and say, "There's that volunteer fireman." He's a kind of village idiot to those who feel so good about themselves that they jump out of windows. Normally, volunteer firemen don't jump out of windows.

That is, in their own way, empirically, such people have found a way to apply their energies in the world. These volunteers are able to do something more than launch themselves, cathartically, into certain activities

(the way other people throw themselves into sports, into games, into so many other activities). They do something much more important than what most people do. They express an inner meaning out into the world. And when they do this, they carry out an empirically transferential function. They are not responding to conventional stimuli, they are composing meanings that go out from themselves toward the world. Those people who start with their inner world and express it in the external world are very different from people who are obliged to do certain things, and after doing them are remunerated. In the first case, such people voluntarily shape the contents within themselves in ways that may not be altogether clear, even for them, although they may try to express them with words like "solidarity," perhaps even without understanding the deeper meaning of that word. Our poor volunteer fireman may, each time he returns home to rebukes and flying china, even wind up thinking that he really is some sort of fool, and conclude that "something must be wrong with me because this kind of thing always keeps happening to me." And if the volunteer is a woman, it's even worse-in this society, much worse.

So in the end, these volunteers wind up humiliated, feeling bad about themselves, and eventually giving in, assimilating into the system, because no one has ever explained to them how all of this works. They know they're different from other people, but they can't quite understand why that is. And if we go to them and say, "Come on, then, explain what you get out of all this," they stammer and shrug their shoulders as though they had been asked to explain something almost shameful. No one has ever made it clear to them, no one has ever given them the tools to understand why they turn that enormous potential they have within themselves out into the world, without expectation of personal gain. And after all, it is quite extraordinary.