

THE FABRIC OF SERVICE—A NATURAL WEAVE

By Rebecca Blair '80



Toni Peabody

“The making or designing of servants is not what we’re about,” asserts Toni Peabody, sitting in her Good Hall office. The walls are lined with pictures of students, colleagues, and community residents, working and laughing together in scores of service-learning projects, the servants largely indistinguishable from those being served. Such a statement may sound ironic or perplexing coming from the faculty coordinator of so many community-based initiatives and someone who has mentored students in countless service projects over fifteen years at the University of Indianapolis. These include an eleven-year partnership with Baxter YMCA, Laurelwood Housing Community, and UIndy.

Yet, for Peabody, service must emerge as part of the natural weave of one’s life fabric to be genuine and effective, a point often missed in academic settings. In academe, she observes, we think we are going to compel or encourage students to engage in service through the process of academic inquiry, but, in Peabody’s view, we’ve missed the point. For her, the University functions as a kind of portal. Students who participate in service learning are already engaged and involved with social concerns, cultural issues, and human needs. The University provides human and financial resources as instruments to empower students to serve by empowering



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others. Her gaze fixed on a photo showing a group of young adults in brightly-colored T-shirts, pausing in the midst of working on a construction project to smile at the camera. Peabody offered the following example:

“It’s a little like saying you’re going to make someone smart. It’s a little late at 19. Now, they might catch on fire about an academic topic they didn’t know much about before, but to think that intelligence is not already present is erroneous. This is a very traditional academic notion—that we can teach them what they need to know in four years. Undergraduate education is really a launching pad.”

Peabody contextualizes her definition of service by referencing her own discipline, social work, noting that her professional focus encompasses the whole person, “the sum of all of his or her emotional, spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social characteristics,” all of which constitute an “intake inventory” that she uses to figure out the best way to empower that individual comprehensively. This process of empowerment first recognizes how the social categories that culturally define each person’s identity can also stigmatize that individual. Once these stigmas are identified, the individual can then be “assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and the performance of valued roles” to break through the stigma and exert personal power. It is empowerment of this sort that functions for Peabody as the prime gesture of service, forging a deep interpersonal connection in which power can be shared, a rudimentary interweaving of service.

One of six children—all first-generation college students who were raised on a Michigan apple orchard—Peabody has always inhabited and understood the warp and weave of service. Her father became heavily involved in Kiwanis, the service club whose motto, “We Build,” has inspired educational and community-focused service projects nationwide. “A pillar of the community” in his daughter’s eyes, her father modeled community service for his children, providing resources and services to the local schools as he identified need. As she remembers, “Dad was always generous with what we had.” He also employed those persons in the community generally labeled as unemployable. Peabody’s mother also worked tirelessly in support of civic and political causes, organizing numerous fundraising events at the family’s home. As she considers the role of her family in her professional and personal orientation to service, Peabody has realized that “our parents were raising us to get educated for service.”

This model of service bore fruit in the lives of Peabody and her siblings. Her brother, a PhD in sociology, works as an agricultural consultant in “third world” countries to develop irrigation systems, two sisters work in nursing, one other sister holds an MSW degree and works in social service settings, and yet another sister volunteers with the Rotary Club and Horse Association of Michigan in community service projects. Peabody also holds an MSW, training students in university and field settings for work in the social service sector.

In fact, Peabody’s experience as a first-generation college student led her from positions at IUPUI, Indiana University at Bloomington, and Butler, to the University of Indianapolis, where she discerned a greater opportunity to mentor students, particularly first-generation college students like herself. “That’s what I like about service learning,” she notes. “It’s the ultimate socioeconomic equalizer.” She explains that “what commonly happens with service in a university context is that the students who win the volunteer awards and leadership positions in student government do so because they can afford socioeconomically to volunteer.” In contrast, Peabody thinks the premise of volunteering for most students who come to the University of Indianapolis springs from a sense of personal rather than socioeconomic investment. Students come with their own wonderful stories of church, school, or mission service into an educational milieu that fosters or illuminates what’s already inside—the impulse to relate with and serve fellow human beings. Toni and her family have hosted international guests from all over the world for periods of time ranging from six weeks to six months. In so doing, they have had the opportunity to learn from their experiences of extending hospitality to strangers.

It is this essential impulse that fosters genuine service, an impulse that often comes to fruition in spontaneous and unplanned ways rather than as the deliberate outcome of academic enterprise or formal social service programming. Peabody recounts an example



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from her tenure in Juneau, Alaska, as a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. She lived with other college students in the midst of an impoverished community of native Alaskans. While the Volunteer Corps had planned service activities, those unplanned tasks which Peabody was invited to take on to meet a community need proved the most meaningful for her and those she served.

Conversely, she observes that each of our own motivations to service may be unexamined, unclear, or complex as well. We may be required to engage in some form of service as a part of our employment. Peabody offers the example of the University of Indianapolis, where service to the University and Indianapolis communities is expected of employees, who are rewarded by the institution for outstanding service. Alternatively, we may be “good worker bees” in an organization in which others take notice of

our skills and suggest that we would be well-suited to take on a particular task on behalf of a larger group of people. Sometimes we are “promoted” to leadership roles in service because the organization needs our skills even if this was not our original intent or motivation for service.

More particularly, we may experience a sense of vocation, a calling to life service of some sort, which we identify for ourselves or which is revealed or affirmed for us by others. Though Peabody comments that she cannot claim a “clear sense of Christian calling,” she provides one instance in which her calling has been pointed up for her. Clyde Fields, an administrator at the University of Indianapolis, had learned of Peabody’s father’s involvement in Kiwanis. Sensing her dedication through this connection to the Kiwanis service principles, Fields asked her to serve as the advisor to Circle K, the college Kiwanis club, at the University. Peabody observes that, as a result, she has been privileged over a period of years to mentor a number of talented young women in leadership activities, an undertaking that has truly emerged as her calling. Several Circle K leaders were awarded outstanding volunteer recognitions at the University’s annual Honors Convocation. Whatever the motivations to service, however, it is the choices we make as we serve others that count most. As Peabody quips, “some of the women I have known who have been the best mothers didn’t plan to get pregnant.”

In her work at the University, Toni Peabody seeks to equip students to make the most meaningful choices as they serve others. The service learning offerings in the University curriculum—now largely institutionalized—began with Peabody’s development of a Spring Term course called “Service Learning in the City” seven years ago. She offered one section to twenty traditional and non-traditional students. Two of the students, older single mothers, commented that they had always wanted to find an avenue of service and learning, but the demands of working, attending college classes, and caring for children left them with no time to pursue this interest. Students in this

course experienced a taste of service “on the ground” in real-life urban settings in which they encountered real-life human needs.

That offering led to the enrollment for two sections of the course the next year with four or five students placed in field experience sites within the community, primarily in Fountain Square. Barb Lucas then developed a service learning Spring Term course in which students lived and worked at the In Pursuit Christian Camp in Seymour, Indiana, serving low income, at risk and special needs children. These programs continued to mushroom in enrollment and options for service, leading to Dr. Tim Maher’s development of the minor in service learning, one of two such programs in Indiana. The eighteen-hour minor is designed to accommodate those students who choose to pursue service learning later in their academic experience. Such experiences come with an added bonus of unexpected employment for students after graduation. For example, one student working with the SEND program during Spring Term received a job offer to direct inner city youth activities program. Today, the Social Work program, directed by Jeff Bryant, offers a wide array of service learning and community engagement opportunities with field practica in a range of urban settings.

The essence of service learning speaks to the University’s core values, all of which are centered in relationships. As Toni Peabody affirms, most of the faculty at the University are focused upon and ready to engage in transformative learning relationships with students as individuals: “It’s not as much about producing a product as it is about process.” She reminisces about her own motivations for becoming a teacher. “I borrowed tens of thousands of dollars to get a college degree,” she said, “and I made it a mission to be the best teacher I could be.” It is the generative process of engaging others that forms the essential basis of service learning. The institution’s founders, the United Brethren in Christ, developed a similarly committed “faith of the warm heart” that privileged the grace located in personal relationships accented by higher intellectual development.



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Indeed, the impetus for service here is faith-based in part as well as rural and family-oriented. Echoing the statements of institutional ethos from earlier decades, Peabody comments: “If you are a couple from rural Indiana who wants to send your daughter away to college, wouldn’t you want to send her here? Such parents wouldn’t worry that they have given their most important package to us because we offer the kind of background, commitment, and values that are significant for them.” This points to the importance of reflecting on vocation and discerning one’s internal and external calling when choosing an educational experience in preparation for engagement in service.

Similarly, for Peabody, social work is a vocation, a “feeling that what [she is] doing is significant, not artificial, and not everyone or anyone in the world can do it.” Always keenly interested in sociology, Peabody trained to be a teacher at Ball State University and was encouraged to pursue social work by a professor who discerned more specific gifts in her. Initially, Peabody pursued the sociology/social work track because she thought she would be more employable, a viewpoint she labels as “very blue collar.” Reflecting upon her Catholic Jesuit roots, however, she recognized a larger calling to work for social justice and social change through her professional vocation.

She evaluates her two years of volunteer service in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps as a period during which service became a confirmed way of life for her. “Service is a philosophical decision,” she asserts. “It doesn’t mean that profit is a dirty word, but rather that the premise of what you do is really about others and making or leaving the world a better place for other people.”

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits (Society of Jesus), invites participants to reflect upon the specific elements of their lives that represent the presence of human brokenness and the gifts of divine grace, to correlate these elements with particular scriptural passages, and then to apply the insight gained in this exercise to the service of others in the contemporary world of the participants. Such a practice becomes an intention, a habit, and then a part of one’s identity. As Toni Peabody describes it, “by intentionally aiming to do something daily—like wearing a seat belt—that [decision to act] becomes a part of you. For our students, that decision to act should be service because those who have [received] the most also have the most to give.” For Peabody and her students at the University of Indianapolis, such service is only natural.

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

- Recognized for her work with student volunteers by Fletcher Place Ministries (2004)
 - Medal of Honor, Mary Bryan Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution (2005)
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Toni Peabody

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- C (p. 115) Toni Peabody with students (and faculty colleague Dan Briere) standing/sitting beside building at Belzer Scout Camp for United Way Day of Caring. Photo provided by Toni Peabody and used with her permission.
- D (p. 116) Toni Peabody with her family (ca. '98) daughters sitting beside her and husband standing behind her. Personal photograph of Toni Peabody used with her permission.
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- F (p. 117) Toni Peabody with DAR official (flag in background) holding plaque at awards ceremony at which she received the Medal of Honor. Personal photograph of Toni Peabody used with her permission.
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