

GETTING TO “YES”
By David A. Watson, Ph.D

“A civilization flourishes when people plant trees under which they will never sit.”
– Greek Proverb

Traditions and holidays are often so closely intertwined that it is impossible to talk about one without mentioning the other. Therefore, as we approached another happy season of Yule, I began anticipating what has become my own holiday tradition. I read Christmas stories to children at elementary schools. Since I’m a school board member, it is my pleasure to be invited to carry out this task each December prior to the mid-winter school break. Rustic Oak Elementary in Pearland is a K-4 public school populated by bright shining young faces, and endowed with a sunken kiva ideal for reading. It was there I found myself first thing on a Monday morning with 22 fourth graders eagerly awaiting a story from me. Oh, by the way, I was off the clock – yes, I used a vacation day to read stories. Here’s some information about volunteerism.

According to the “Independent Sector” organization, there are in excess of 1.2 million nonprofit entities in the United States, roughly half of which are charities. One in every two adults volunteer (that is, give of their time without being paid to do so), ironically about the same percentage as those who vote. Unlike voting, however, the rate of volunteering appears to be increasing. Young persons pitch in as well; more than half of America’s teens volunteer. Women are more likely than men to volunteer, and African-Americans give of their time to a greater extent than other groups. Those with higher personal wealth are also more likely to volunteer. Two-thirds of those who volunteer do so on a regular basis. On average, volunteers donate between three and four hours of their time per week. This represents 10% or less of the number of hours we work

per week for pay, and (assuming eight hours of sleep per night – more, in fact, than most of us probably get) only about 5% of our waking, non-working hours. Given that the average American watches some four hours of television per day (according to the Television Bureau of Advertising), such a time commitment seems even less burdensome.

What motivates the average person to volunteer (or not)? The number one reason given in several surveys is that we want to help those in need. Having an interest in the organization or the activity is also a key reason individuals volunteer their time. Others are simply searching for new ways to view their world, or even to gain experience not available to them through their regular employment. Interestingly, in a recent survey conducted by Arizona State University, respondents indicated they are influenced to help out by the cause itself, as opposed to the appeals of celebrities (which appears to matter little). In addition, people are much more likely to volunteer when asked to do so; if asked, there is a greater than 70% chance an individual will volunteer, whereas only roughly three out of 10 persons will do so even if not asked. Those who volunteer are also more likely to give money, and to give more of it than those who don't volunteer but do give money (double the amount, in fact). I have mentioned previously, but it bears repeating, that those at the lowest socioeconomic level, even while they contribute less of their time, give a higher percentage of their income than do those in society who possess higher incomes.

Some advice from the experts at the Nonprofit Information Center of Independent Sector: contribute to a group or cause that is important to you; combine volunteering with learning something new; volunteer as a family; be a virtual volunteer (a few short e-mails

per week might make all the difference to a shut-in); and last, start small, since over-commitment can lead to neglect of other aspects of life that are also important).

Without hesitation I plunged into Santa Claustrophobia, a very funny new book. As is always the case my charges loved hearing the story. By now I know that kids almost universally want to be read to; what I have also discovered is that I want just as badly to read to them. Their smiles remunerate me richly. I'm told I should learn to say "no" more often; my answer is that perhaps more of us should say learn to say "yes." Reading really is fundamental, and so is volunteering of our time and talents. The pay may well surprise you.