



The Call of Service

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Robert Coles, Harvard child psychiatrist, preeminent authority on the inner lives of children, and author of more than fifty books, has found time throughout his busy life to devote a large share of his energy to service to others. In *THE CALL OF SERVICE*, he draws extensively on his own experiences, which include working for desegregation in the South during the civil rights era and teaching and tutoring in inner-city schools in the northeast. Throughout the book, he allows the many fellow volunteers he has known to speak at length in their own words, drawn into serious, thoughtful reflection by Coles's skillful interviewing.

The book opens with a detailed discussion of Coles's "method," which might be summarized as a combination of deep personal engagement and attentive listening. He goes on to devote separate chapters to the different kinds of service, from political struggle to personal gesture; from the varieties of satisfaction people derive from community service to the personal hazards of service, including anger, cynicism, and despair; and from the long-term consequences of service on those who are called to serve to the consequences faced by the larger society. Throughout, the volunteers who speak in these pages examine with remarkable honesty and insight their own motives—which are usually complex—and the impact of their service on themselves and on others.

Coles also devotes an "interlude" in the book to the topic of mentoring, as he struggles to define a unique type of relationship that transcends teaching or helping. Woven through his exploration of his own life of service is the influence of his own two most notable mentors, William Carlos Williams and Dorothy Day, whose actions and reflections, recounted by Coles, wonderfully enrich this eloquent study of human nature at its best.

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