I often hearken back to such family occasions because I believe that they inform much of what came later in my life. I have felt a tug between wanting to document deeds — to note their quite explicit nature and worth — and desiring to learn the origins of our actions and their connections to our worries, fears, and aspirations.

Not that these two different objectives are necessarily at odds. Sometimes the difference can be a matter of attitude or tone: how do we describe what we have seen and heard, how do we look, in my father's word, "within" others and ourselves — what kind of light do we choose to shine? I think my elderly father was making a gentle but urgent plea for care and caution as we try to look at the world and at ourselves — to use a filtered light, a lonely, small flashlight, with restraint, rather than searchlights burning relentlessly in every direction.

Once, as I talked with the sociologist David Riesman about what I was trying to learn from speaking with students involved in a community action program, his cautionary reminder evoked memories of my father's concerns. "Sometimes it's best to decide early on what you're *not* going to find out — at least right away and with great zeal!" He was letting me know that an observer can easily cross a certain line and become more than an irritant — can become an intruder who generates perplexity, if not outrage, even as he claims the dispassionate, even-handed mantle of the student, the social scientist, the psychological or sociological investigator.

I mention such vexing questions right off, as I introduce this book's subject matter, because from my early years as one of a group of high school volunteers in a hospital (we carried trays, pushed people in wheelchairs) to my recent stint as a part-time elementary schoolteacher in a ghetto school, I have wondered what to make of what I have seen and heard, and what to make of those of us who put ourselves in situations where we straddle our "regular" world and a world we "visit." (I use those words because so often I have heard them used.)

Sometimes I have been asked about these issues by a child who has quite pointedly challenged all sorts of assumptions and conventions, as a nine-year-old girl, Ruth Ann, did in one of my

fourth-grade English composition classes at the Martin Luther King School in Cambridge during the spring of 1988. She said to me, "We were wondering why you come over here to us. We thought, he must be busy with his regular life, so why does he take time out to come visit here, when he could be someplace else that's more important — that's what we asked."

I quickly tried to dispel her doubts with a well-intentioned, earnest affirmation of good intent. But Ruth Ann did not seem entirely convinced. "Well, it's nice that you're here, but where did you get the idea, that's what we wondered. Did you hear something bad about us?" I recognized the dangerous social and emotional and racial crosscurrents swirling around me as I prepared to answer a question disarmingly simple yet laden with complex undertones. Before I could speak, she continued, "A lot of people say they want to come here and help us. My momma [she worked in a Head Start program] says she's tired of the 'orientations' she has to give to all these folks: they come to you and they're ready to do what you ask, but it's a 'trip,' she says, Momma — they'll go back and stick their chests out and say, 'Hey, look at me and what I do!' So we're being a lot of help to them — it goes that way, too, you see."

I did see, and I indicated so with a nod, an exchange of looks I still remember: her eyes were aimed right at mine, with a moment's detour directed at my shoes, my pants, my shirt. I was sure that she was being sardonic, a brutally candid observer taking in a stranger's all too relaxed, casual self-presentation. I constructed in my mind a devastating critique of myself and my kind — confirming her uncompromising appraisal of me as yet another slummer, eager to wet his feet in a fashionably different terrain, all the more to inflate his sense of himself and the view others had of him. But Ruth Ann had another train of thought to pursue, I learned. She said, "It's nice that some of you folks come here to volunteer, and we'll try to tell you everything we know."

I was once more stopped in my tracks. Exactly what did she have in mind? How should I ask that question? She saw me mutely struggling, saw me uncross my legs and cross them again, saw me open my mouth and say nothing. She changed the subject, told me she liked my shoes and asked me where I got them. I was puzzled

by her shift of direction, but I knew to be forthcoming: "There are lots of stores in the Square that sell loafers." She replied, boldly and directly, "Why do a lot of you folks always talk about 'the Square,' as though there is only one square?"

Again I felt myself being examined rather toughly, even scornfully, given a searching once-over. I was about ready to tell her I had to leave and go back to "the Square." She sensed we were at an impasse that could be broken only by her. This she did in a startling about-face (or so I interpreted her remarks then). She told me she knew I had to leave, but she wanted to tell me something: "If you folks need any help, we could come and help, you know."

I saw on her face, at last, what I judged to be a thin smile — but a friendly one, I began to feel. I wondered, though, whether I wasn't trying too hard for a sentimental reconciliation. Of course that smile should be thin — a child's shrewd sense of irony, of detached curiosity, directed at a stranger who didn't know how strange he was felt to be by a child more familiar with his ways, his assumptions, than he had any way to comprehend. As such a line of reasoning raced, unexamined, through my stymied head, she took the lead in ending things between us, at least for that day: "I know you've got to go. See you on Friday!"

I was in no mood to say anything but yes, and then good-bye. I wanted out. I wanted time to stop and think, to separate my own preconceptions and nervous attributions from what she had actually intended to let me know. Her intent was admittedly not something I could figure out on my own, and I was having trouble even beginning to understand my own preconceptions, never mind the ambiguities and obscurities that beclouded our communication. As I left the room with her, we went in opposite directions, and she shouted, "It's beautiful out there! Enjoy it!"

For me, that moment brought to life both the trials and the opportunities that arise when volunteers, people doing "service," encounter those to whom they are offering "help." I would never really know what was going through Ruth Ann's mind — and maybe, as my father would say, I would get to know too much about what was in my own. She and I had struggled to know each other and had only partially succeeded — not a rare description, of course, for any human encounter. She was at once grateful and

doubtful, standoffish and engaging, wryly distant and quite openly responsive, attentive to a would-be teacher's eager, apprehensive intentions.

As I walked back to the Square, I thought of my mother and father and of the different ways they would have reacted to her — and the different reactions each of them might have elicited from her. I also thought that someday I would try to confront for myself, and for people like me, the implied challenges I thought this girl was posing for me.

My parents, in their own fashion, had challenged me to think hard about what one is doing as one renders service to others. For my mother, service was a religious obligation, part of the Catholic Worker tradition she so admired.[1] For decades she gave her time to clinics visited by the poor, to soup kitchens, to working with children suffering from cancer. For my father, service meant direct action and clear, unsentimental thinking, a comradeship with others. We are all fellow human beings, his attitude said, so "let's get on with it" — a phrase he used again and again. For Ruth Ann, service meant, I think, not only certain educational and human favors but also the chance to learn not only *from* others but *about* them. Who are these people, and what are they doing here, and why do they keep returning? Of course, these three views of service, two belonging to participants in extending it, one belonging to someone meant to be a recipient of it, hardly exhaust the various possibilities or paradigms. Many kinds of service are offered, and the attitudes that inform such activity are varied, as are the ways the "beneficiaries" respond to what is put before them in a clinic, classroom, retirement home, prison, nursery, or playground.

My conversation with Ruth Ann occurred after I had spent many years trying to work my way through the potential impasses she had put on the table for contemplation in her own polite and forthright way. After high school, I tutored children while at college; I lived in a Catholic Worker hospitality house and worked in its soup kitchen while in medical school; and I gave time to a state-run children's psychiatric hospital while taking my training in pediatrics and child psychiatry at university-connected hospitals. I joined the civil rights movement in the South for five years, working with children caught up in the school desegregation struggle,

and later, in the North, I got to know boys and girls similarly challenged in schools being "integrated" in response to *de facto*, as opposed to *de jure*, segregation. During the late 1960s and all through the 1970s, I spent much time with a group of young people known as the Appalachian Volunteers, who were very much like their age-mates at the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. SNCC was in the vanguard of the sit-in movement and was the major force behind the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, which marked a turning point in the South's resistance to voting rights for blacks.[2]

In 1978 I returned to Cambridge after years of doing research in New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.[3] During that time I met many VISTA volunteers who were assisting Spanish-speaking families or Native American people or Eskimos, even as I was trying to learn how children of these traditions come to terms with their situations. I worked in two south Texas clinics where the children of migrants received the pediatric care they so urgently needed. I also worked in a clinic devoted to the medical problems of Pueblo families, and, in Alaska, in a similar clinic for Eskimos. In each place I worked, VISTA volunteers and college students taking time off from school were a notable presence. So were older people, some in their fifties or sixties, who were eager to give of themselves for a few weeks or months.

I had more than enough to do, meeting with children, learning from them about their lives and about what they intended to do when they became adults. Yet I often heard questions not unlike Ruth Ann's, as I realize in retrospect. A Pueblo boy once asked me, referring to two VISTA workers he had come to know, "I was wondering why they came here. The teacher said to help, but they argue with her [about educational, philosophical, and political questions]. My dad said the VISTA people want to change the world, and the teachers just want to teach, so there's a difference. But both VISTAs say they want to be teachers when they're older, so they could end up the same" — meaning the same as the Bureau of Indian Affairs teachers this boy had come to know well and did not especially like.

In his own unpretentious way the boy was raising the biggest of issues — what happens down the road to young idealism and

activism as it contends with advancing age and with a society's notions of what is appropriate when? Back then I had little time to ponder this question. But later (in the late 1970s and early 1980s), when I returned to Harvard and was teaching medical students and undergraduates, I had plenty of occasion to wonder, with my students, how particular youths connect with the work of and commitment to service, and what it is that sustains them or, indeed, works to undermine their passion for such activity.

When I worked during the summers in Africa and Latin America, trying to understand how children learn their political convictions and attitudes, many times those young men and women, teaching the same children I was getting to know, made clear their own educational struggles.[4] One day I was sitting outside a rural school near León, Nicaragua, talking to a Georgetown University student who was working with a Jesuit-sponsored project that built and staffed schools in Third World countries. He said, "I've got four more months here, and when I leave, that's when I'll be starting to figure out what this has all meant! Probably for the rest of my life I'll be influenced by what happened to me here — I now think differently. I agree, it all could begin to wear off later. But I doubt it. Some of these kids have taught me a million times more than I've taught them. But maybe it will happen — maybe I'll just start in with the rat race again, and my memory will take the rear seat while my greed grabs the wheel and steps on the gas."

I realized, as I listened to this young man reflect upon the events of that summer and wonder what would happen during the years ahead, that his experiences were as morally persuasive as those of the civil rights activists I'd come to know in the South almost two decades earlier. Moreover, the children he was teaching and I was interviewing made clear to me how important he was in their lives. He shared with them openly the moral ambiguities that pressed upon him as he contemplated his future. And they had plenty to say to him in response: these empathic boys and girls were quite willing and able to step into his shoes, to try to imagine what they might do, given his choices. One afternoon I listened to those children and their teacher discuss their nation's civil war. As I heard them worry about people who had lost family members and heard them try to connect the teachings of Jesus to the