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Waata Hipango
University of Canterbury

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Introduction: The City and the Context

On the 4th of September 2010, at 4:35am, the South Island city of Christchurch in the Canterbury province was violently shaken by a shallow magnitude 7.1 earthquake merely 10 kilometers deep (GeoNet, 2010). This initial event would trigger over 8000 aftershocks to be felt by the city and surrounding area (Nicholls, 2010). The city's infrastructure was crippled, with extensive repairs required to restore electricity and water to homes. Soil liquefaction caused sand and water to rise up from the ground swallowing cars, engulfing lawns, and causing water damage. Some found that their family home was now uninhabitable. Despite widespread damage and loss of property, there were no fatalities in the initial September quake. The largest earthquake since September 4th occurred on the 22nd of February at 12:51pm, measuring magnitude 6.3 and was located a mere 5 kilometers deep (GeoNet, 2011). The February earthquake claimed the lives of 186 people (New Zealand Police, 2011). In addition to the loss of life, infrastructure was again damaged, and the buildings that were home to many workplaces or families were either damaged or destroyed. Portable toilets lined the streets, and bottled water was publically distributed because the possibility of water pipe and sewer pipe damage meant that tap water could not be trusted. The impact on the Christchurch community was profound. With businesses closed and many activities suspended, a cloud of uncertainty loomed over the city. National news footage showed the extent of the damage and rescue efforts, with analysts beginning to make estimates of costs in the order of billions of dollars.

The aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes presented everyone with personal challenges. People wanted to know if their families and friends were safe. They wanted to know if they still had jobs, or if they could still be students. The earthquakes left us with no guarantee that our lives could, or would, be stable. The greatest challenges, in terms of peoples’ frustration, were imposed by what used to be relatively simple tasks: going to the toilet now entailed a walk outside; sorting out an administration issue at University now took a few days instead of a few hours. Tradespeople, of which there exists an acute shortage, were booked out for weeks in advance. Christchurch had pressures put on systems that had previously never had such strain. This paper will discuss the events that have transpired since the September earthquake, and how these relate to my engagement in service-learning. I will also discuss how these experiences, and how learning through and with others, shaped the development of my own personal attributes.

Waata Hipango is a recent graduate (December 2011) with honors from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, having studied Business Management and Indigenous Entrepreneurship. He is one of the first of his family (whanau) to graduate from university and credits his experiences and relationships developed through his service-learning courses as an important factor. Furthermore, Waata has published and presented internationally in the field of Indigenous Entrepreneurship.
Method

"A critical reflection process that generates, deepens, and documents learning does not occur automatically-rather, it must be carefully and intentionally designed" (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27). In accordance, this reflective article will be guided by ideas presented in the scholarship of service learning. I will follow the format of service learning's DEAL model as described by Molee, Henry, Sessa, and McKinney-Prupis (2010). In doing so, I will first describe the service-learning experience, and then examine it in light of learning objectives for personal growth and civic engagement, in order to articulate my learning with the reflections presented in this article.

Describing the Service Learning Experience

When I decided to volunteer my time to help those affected, I had some decisions to make regarding who to help and how to help them. I decided to give my time to the people that mattered most to me: family and friends. Even making this choice presented me with more information about myself. I could prioritize the needs of others in relation to my own and make a decision about where I wanted to allocate my efforts for the outcomes I wanted to achieve. Groups of student volunteers decided to help strangers, but I decided this was not what I wanted to do. I knew people in need and I knew how to help them, so my services to them were personal. My goal was to help my friends and family until they were once again comfortable. I placed no limit on the time I would spend nor the kind of help I would give. I gave everything I was able to without neglecting my own responsibilities as a student and family member. What I was able to give amounted to about twenty hours a week, which I gave for about thirteen months. I decided that I wanted to help those according to need: I would give the most to those I knew needed it the most. I decided to give because I wanted to be able to feel better about the situation I was in. As a student, the time I gave was valuable. I had to use all the tricks I had learned to conserve time and meet my academic deadlines. My service experience saw me spending hundreds of hours doing miscellaneous tasks. In these hours I helped move the contents of six houses. I helped load three containers full of furniture and belongings. I shoveled liquefication out of a **property**. I helped relocate and secure countless items of furniture. I helped uninstall and reinstall computer equipment. I cleaned garages and garden sheds so they could be used for storage. I installed medicine cabinets and even uninstalled sinks and light fittings. I performed all kinds of random tasks to help those around me. This was my service project.

For me, the most important part of my service-learning experience was to engage with those who my actions were helping. As I helped pack boxes or remove household fittings, I would tell jokes and listen to stories. Sometimes my presence was appreciated more than the task I was performing. This is why I chose to give my time to family and friends. My efforts were amplified. I was emotionally engaged with these people already and I valued the intrinsic returns of my actions to a greater extent than I would have had I been helping someone I did not know. It also helped that my aid was disguised a little with friendship.

When friends help, it does not feel
like an obligation or debt to the receiver. I wanted to feel like I could ease some of the burden for those I cared about. It turned out that part of my learning experience was to be able to teach. Having trained as a technician before University, I was familiar with like an obligation or debt to the receiver. I wanted to feel like I could ease some of the burden for those I cared about. It turned out that part of my learning experience was to be able to teach. Having trained as a technician before University, I was familiar with some of the tools Christchurch would need to rebuild. I was able to teach those around me to use tools and lift objects. Feeling useful and valued was like chicken soup for the soul at a time when so many of my friends and family members were suffering hardship.

Giving of myself was not a selfless act. My ultimate learning goal was to build capacity. I wanted to be able to handle more. I wanted to be able to be mentally tougher. I wanted to be able to cope with more on my plate. I wanted to be braver. I wanted to be able to look back at the disaster and feel like I did as much as I could. These were the gifts I wanted to receive with what would become my self-led and personally driven service-learning experience. I was able to grow from relating to others. I grew personally by discussing common sources of frustration with others. I grew from acknowledging that these problems existed and could be addressed with perseverance and patience. I grew from realizing that none of what had happened was my fault, or the fault of anyone around me. I realized that it was going to be up to us, as Cantabrians, to do something about our situation. The way I saw it, I had two options: to either feel sorry for myself, or to do something empowering like help others. By giving of myself, I built capacity: to be a little more than I was. To move one more box, to repair one more broken thing, to handle one more problem...these were the moments that helped put my life into perspective. At this stage in my life, I had youth, strength and time. I offered these attributes to those who I knew would find a good use for them. What I received in return were great gifts sometimes overlooked. From my older friends, I received gems of wisdom acquired over lifetimes; as well as the special kind of encouragement that only age can give to youth. From my younger friends, I received loyalty and the kind of enduring friendship only forged in times of hardship.

*Academic Enhancement*

When I was helping my friends and family, I would discuss my schoolwork with them and ask for their thoughts and opinions on the subjects I was studying. It was a great opportunity to do so. Their input into my life and academic work helped me just as much as my work helped them. Many of the ideas that enabled me to achieve higher grades in my classwork can be attributed to the discussions that took place walking over debris and broken glass. I could see connections between what I was learning in my classes and the relevance of what I was witnessing first hand in my community. It is strange to think that creativity like this could be fostered in the midst of such destruction. I think that learning takes place when your ego is in a state of submission or servitude. I believe this because being able to let go of a currently held belief requires humility in order to accept the possibility of another truth. Given such, I believe that being a volunteer and offering servitude to others primed me for learning.
I have reason to believe that this factor is partially responsible for improving my Grade Point Average. Whilst engaged in my personal service project, I maintained a higher than “A” average across all of my subjects for the whole year. I was the busiest I had ever been and I was awarded the best grades I ever had been. At the time, however, it felt like I was over burdened with work. It felt like I was giving too some of the tools Christchurch would need to rebuild. I was able to teach those around me to use tools and lift objects. Feeling useful and valued was like chicken soup for the soul at a time when so many of my friends and family members were suffering hardship.

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Looking at these feelings now, it was the pain of creating the increased capability I had so coveted. With my academic work, I was determined to complete my work to a high standard. With the time I gave to my family and friends, I was determined to help get them back on their feet. The motivation and determination I felt when faced with the aftermath of the disaster that befell Christchurch spilled into all areas of my life. Being able to stretch myself and achieve more, given greater constraint pressure, suggests that over the course of my service project I was able to increase my personal capacity.

**Civic Engagement**

I feel that the service I gave was a result of my civic engagement and not the other way around. I have always felt an obligation to others, to help those who need helping and to be kind to those around me. These behaviors are rewarded in kind by those who experience your benevolence. After being involved in a service project that took place for more than a year, I have developed different notions about civic engagement and what being a responsible citizen is. A good person sees somebody in trouble and helps. This behavior is natural. When groups of people come across a threat like a bear in the forest, or a tiger in the jungle, those who work together to overcome the threat are the most likely to survive. Working together is the only reason the world is the way it is today. In isolation, we have to solve all of life's problems by ourselves. That is not natural for us. That is why service projects, like the one I undertook, help put things into perspective. We are so used to having help around that we fail to recognize it until it is no longer present. It is only by giving help that we know the value of it when we receive or see it. I believe my service project helped me to appreciate the help that I receive from others just as much as the help that I give to others. I now have a meaningful understanding of what it means to be a responsible citizen.

**Conclusion**

I would characterize the gifts conferred from my service-learning as being the gift of increased personal capacity, the gift of greater self-respect and the gift of increased empathy. By recognizing that I was able to help, and by choosing to do so, I made the decision to make the best of a bad situation. If anything could be said about service, it might be that one must give to receive. The gifts given to givers are intangible and open to interpretation, but are gems of character: life diamonds to be acknowledged and treasured.
Works Cited


