

Busy doing nothing

“Will you sponsor me to swim ten lengths of the pool for old folk?” asks the little girl at the front door. What curmudgeon could refuse? Such eagerness, such energy, such benevolence!

But demonstrate the logic of the proposition: twelve people will each give 20p for old folk *if* Susy swims ten lengths of the pool. Why won't they give it otherwise? Presumably because then no child would have called on them with proud beam and collecting tin, announcing, “I swam ten lengths-that's 2Op!”

If the demand and opportunity are all that is needed, Barkisses all being willing, school-children could equally well raise funds for charity by simple door-to-door collecting, substituting a short account of the need for and purpose of the money amassed, for the proposal to expend gratuitous energy. Truth would thus be better served, as would the young social awareness. Why then interpolate the energy factor -- walking round parks, pushing wheel-barrows on unlikely routes, learning to spell lists of words *for money*?

I suppose this is seen as the child's personal contribution, to let him/her feel he/she has worthily given his/her all to the utmost exhaustion for the cause. But is it a good formula to teach so early – that good intentions + plentiful expenditure of energy = solid, relevant achievement? That if the end is good, then irrelevant, misdirected means don't matter? Isn't it just such a foolish philosophy of disorganized well-meaning and woolly-mindedness that leads to much of our political and

administrative waste and confusion? Hearts in the right place alone butter no parsnips.

I think it is a dangerous policy to propagate in schools or anywhere else. Better to teach the hard truth, that energy must be appropriately applied to achieve results, however worthy. If there is a genuine need for funds, and donors willing, the only work needed is that of moral persuasion and physical collection; other activities are an irrelevance. Fun, perhaps; good for the circulation and the spelling, no doubt; but why make it appear that the public pays for these side-benefits-to-the-child, rather than generously contributes directly to the cause?

If the abundant available energy could be channelled into genuinely useful, even relevant, tasks, fine-litter clearing, gardening or chores for the disabled or old; authentic community work. 'Community service' is highly organized now, with 'Good Neighbour' schemes, Councils of Voluntary Social Service, and is even offered as an alternative to conventional punishment for young offenders; it must now be practicable to coordinate it with fund-raising by the young. For these we could make glad, valid payments. But for cycling around parks or sitting silently in evening class-rooms – Young Persons not Required.

Hazel K. Bell in NHR Newsletter No. 27, Autumn 1979