



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: HOW LOVE AND DUTY CHANGE LIVES

Developed for Maine Humanities Council

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Overview of the Series

Scientists tell us that compassion and empathy are what make us human, are what distinguish us from all other animals. From infancy, we learn to see out of others' eyes, to appreciate their difficulties and their needs.

What happens, though, when we are called to act upon what we perceive as our duty, especially when such action entails considerable sacrifice? We may be family members caring for partners, children, aging parents and siblings; we live in communities, cities, a nation; we are graduates, professionals, workers; we have both vocations and avocations; and we are, like it or not, members of the human race. Confronted with questions of duty, responsibility, service, we choose how best to demonstrate our humanity.

The books that follow are designed for use in two Maine Humanities Council programs: *Let's Talk About It* and *Thoughtful Giving*, a program dealing with giving and serving. They illustrate how different people—both real and imaginary—have demonstrated compassion in difficult situations. Each has found himself or herself expected to serve, in some capacity, a group either small or large, ranging from one other person to multitudes. Each has felt called to “make a difference”—and although each has tried, not all have succeeded.

Libraries and facilitators may select 5 books from the following:

Mountains Beyond Mountains : The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, the Man Who Would Cure the World by Tracy Kidder. Paul Farmer is a physician who has devoted his life to bringing quality medical care to remote areas of the world. He began in Haiti, treating this hemisphere's most impoverished, and gradually extended his philosophy and practice to places as distant as Peru and the prisons of Moscow. Kidder's book, written after observing Farmer at work, traveling w/ him, and interviewing him extensively, provides a model for those who serve selflessly and effectively: Farmer has not only transformed health care in many parts of the world, but he has also forced us to question our entire system of health care delivery.

Plainsong by Kent Haruf. Haruf's novel is set in a small town on the High Plains of Colorado, but which could be any small town in the United States, peopled by characters familiar to all of us. In a spare, simple style, Haruf sets forth timeless conflicts and concerns when a high school student gets pregnant, is evicted by her mother, and needs to find a place to live. With the help of a teacher, she finds a home with two bachelor farmer brothers. The responses of individuals and the community to those in need form the heart of this impressive novel.

The Death of Vishnu by Manil Suri. Vishnu is a homeless Indian man, living on the steps of an apartment building in Bombay. Suri's novel alternates between Vishnu's dreams and visions as he lays dying and the tenants' lives that happen around him. In many ways, the apartment house is a very small community, housing families, a widower, Muslims and Hindus. Their experiences, their conflicts, their relationships with one another and with Vishnu form an unsentimental but enlightening picture of how a culture different from ours answers the question "What is my duty to others?"

The Late George Apley by J.P. Marquand. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1937, Marquand's novel develops a portrait of a way of life now gone—but one that offers both a contrast to modern times and an interesting perspective on the way we live now. George Apley is a Boston Brahmin; upon his death, his son asks the friend who delivered his eulogy to write a more complete and unsparing biography, using Apley's letters and diaries. Although Apley is in many ways privileged by his wealth and social standing, he also has a deep sense of indebtedness and duty, as well as how that sense will probably not be shared by those coming after him.

Truth and Beauty: A Friendship by Ann Patchett. When Patchett was a student at Sarah Lawrence College, she met Lucy Grealy—and both their lives were changed by the close friendship that followed. This work of non-fiction follows that friendship and details how Patchett sought to support and rescue her friend, a victim of disfiguring cancer, many surgeries, and various drug addictions. Patchett makes us wonder: when are the demands of friendship overwhelming? How much can we really do to save those destroyed by circumstance and forces beyond their control?

Lying Awake by Mark Salzman. Sister John of the Cross is a Carmelite nun who devotes her life to prayer and to mystical poetry. When she discovers that her visions have been caused by a form of epilepsy, she has to decide whether to be "cured," or whether to maintain her vivid spiritual life. Salzman's character confronts a striking dilemma: how can we best serve God? How can we best use our talents? And, ultimately, should we sacrifice our health in service to others?

All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque. Perhaps the most literal meaning of the word "service" refers to those who fight for their country. Remarque's classic novel of the First World War is told from the point of view of a young German who enlists, encouraged by teachers and friends, and is sent to the front. A harrowing look at the carnage and tragedy of World War I, **All Quiet** forces both readers and soldiers alike to ask, "What do we owe our country? Is such a debt ever too steep to be paid?"



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