This is a book about that other side of American life.

Altruism, it's called.

It means a concern for and devotion to the interests of others. It's commonly used as the opposite of egoism, or selfishness.

A word confined to the dictionary, sniff the cynics. But in real life, here and now? What place does altruism have? Who cares about anyone but "me"?

Lots of people do. More than 105 million Americans volunteer an average of four hours a week to help causes or individuals. Of this number, 98 million are adults, and nearly 8 million are fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds. The value of their volunteer time is estimated at $174 billion a year. But you can't put a dollar sign on their worth; it's priceless.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of unselfish behav-
ior is the hero or heroine. They are the people we honor because of their exceptional service to humankind. They help others when there is no possible gain for themselves. In fact, their courageous deeds often place their own lives in jeopardy.

We've read about great heroes of the past in world literature, in the romances and epics of many cultures. Everyone knows about the Congressional Medal of Honor awarded for extraordinary heroism in wartime. But there are men, women, and children in time of peace who also act to rescue their fellows. Here are just a few of them:

- Derek Lambert, sixteen, of Andrews, South Carolina, who saved a man who had fallen from a boat and severely cut his hands on the propeller.
- Michael B. LaRiviere, eighteen, of Rockaway, Oregon, who died while swimming to save a man caught in an ocean current.
- Jerry L. Conrad, thirty-five, of Toledo, Ohio, who leaped into a moving car to save a three-year-old girl.
- Allen N. Davidson, thirteen, of Gaffney, South Carolina, who crawled into a burning house and dragged an elderly woman to safety.

These examples of heroism are taken from the lists of people honored each year by the Carnegie Hero Fund. It recognizes outstanding acts of selfless heroism performed in the United States and Canada. Established in 1904, it has honored nearly 3,000 people.

We know of one man who has dedicated his life to helping others. It's almost certain that many won't know his name. But his Medals were awarded for acts of extraordinary heroism, often "ordinary" people doing extraordinary things. As Mark Twain pointed out, "The chief end of man is to Die, Death is certain, but human life is not."

What matters is not that they have gone beyond their limits, but that they have set new limits for others.
HEROES—AND ORDINARY PEOPLE

we honor

they

themselves.

own lives

world lit-
cultures.

 Medal of
wartime.

peace
just a few

outh
fallen

the

away,

ave a

Ohio,

time.

arning

to

the lists of

o Fund. It

formed

1904, it

has honored nearly 7,500 North Americans since that time.

We know of course that even heroes are not perfect. It’s almost certain that none of those awarded Carnegie Medals were without weakness or blemish. Heroes are often “ordinary people who somehow manage to do extraordinary things,” as the writer Madeline L’Engle has pointed out. “The heroic personality is human, not perfect, but human. And to be human is to be fallible.” If you trace heroes through literature and legend and history, you see how often heroes make terrible mistakes. What matters is their ability to stretch themselves beyond their limitations at times of crisis.
This gives the rest of us hope. Maybe we can do it, too. The seed of altruism is within ourselves, wanting to spring forth and grow.

There is more than one kind of heroism. What the Carnegie Medal singles out are the emergencies that involve threat of harm or actual harm, and the selfless heroism of people who come to the rescue.

What about the people who express their altruism in social action, and do it daily? They are able to identify with others—in need, in trouble, in danger—to do what many of us are afraid to do, fearing the threats and sacrifices that come with commitment to others.

Mother Teresa is an example recognized and admired the world over. The Yugoslavian nun has worked more than forty years among the desperately poor of Calcutta, India. She founded the Roman Catholic Missionaries of Charity who live no better than the poor among whom they work in dozens of countries. Mother Teresa and her coworkers do not try to convert others. They simply tend “the poorest of the poor,” to live out, as she says, “that life of love, of compassion, that God has for his people.” To her the rights of others not only matter as much as her own but matter even more, in a true spirit of selflessness.

The same spirit emerges from the pages of our pre–Civil War history. We read of abolitionists who devoted their lives to the struggle to end slavery. Some of them, at great risk, went into the South to rescue black people from bondage. Perhaps 2,000 slaves a year escaped from their masters, most of them through their own ingenuity and daring. Many fugitive slaves, however, were helped to freedom at Harriet Tubman's urging. In 1849 she escaped from slavery in Maryland and returned 18 times to help 300 slaves. During the Civil War she served with the U.S. Sanitary Commission as a nurse for the Union forces.

One of the heroes of the Underground Railroad was a slave named Robert Smalls. Born in the early 1800s in South Carolina, he escaped to the North and joined the Union Navy as a scullion (a cook's assistant). When his ship was raiden by the Confederacy, Smalls oversaw the vessel and helped transport slaves into the Union lines. He later served in the U.S. House of Representatives as the first African American to represent South Carolina in Congress.

Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery. She stands on the deck of a ship, her head held high, holding a flag. The ship is filled with “passengers,” black people escaping from slavery.
HEROES—AND ORDINARY PEOPLE

...do it, too. There is a strong feeling that one can't simply sit back and allow others to do it. What the media loves are the heroes who do it, the people that inspire us to see a little more into the selfless heroic.

What is the role of this kind of altruism in our society? How do we begin to identify heroes? Who are the people to do what? We need heroes in our society and sacrifice.

The story of Harriet Tubman and admired by many. Among the few who worked more to rescue enslaved people than those at Calcutta, Harriet Tubman, the mothers of the missionaries of the world, is one of the many among whom we have no record in literature. She and her brother and her husband, who simply tend the land, are the only people who say, “that America is for the black man, only is people.”

Harriet Tubman was such as her mother told her in her early selflessness. Many of the stories of our mothers are stories who describe her knowledge. Some of them were not sure how to rescue black people. They were afraid of the war escaped with her and her brother were. But owners interfering. Harriet Tubman, however, were...
toward abolitionism. One day he decided to do more than preach against slavery among Northerners. He would identify himself with the black people “that are in bonds as bound with them.” So he crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky. It was in this slave state that most of his daring rescues took place. He helped dozens of slaves reach free soil. He was caught twice and sentenced to prison each time, serving a total of seventeen years behind bars.

More than a hundred years later another group of Americans, black and white, like Tubman and Fairbank, went into the South again. This time their mission was to register African-Americans to vote. Using local ordinances, threat of job loss, and violence, white racists had succeeded in preventing most blacks from exercising their right to register and vote. For though the Civil War had ended slavery, it did not end discrimination and segregation. Black people still lived in poverty and were oppressed. They seemed free in name only. Jim Crow laws narrowly restricted their lives. Even their participation in the U. S. armed forces that helped win victory over Hitler’s Nazi system in World War II did not change many things for African-Americans.

Then in 1954 the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision revolutionized American education. The court declared that separate schools for blacks and whites were unconstitutional, and called for an end to segregation. When the legal barriers fell in education, a dream was rekindled in the heart of black America—to live in a nation where all people were treated equally and were not judged by the color of their skin. But this dream begins, freedom cannot advance the cause of black Americans until the barrier of segregation and discrimination is lifted. So in 1963 those blacks began to come together and form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Its organizers were the Southern Poor People’s Project, hot on the heels of the Civil Rights movement. SNCC was formed by northern students and recent graduates, from all over the country, many of whom were black and many of whom were white. They worked in the South, they worked in the North, and then went on to bring this spirit of equality to their campuses across the country.

That summer young leaders of SNCC organized an even larger march, the 1963 Poor People’s Campaign. There were over 30,000 participants. Thirty young organizers and Michael Schwerner and Paulinz moved onto the Mississippi Delta, to live in a nation where all people were treated equally and

A spirit of adventure and discovery

were not judged by the color of their skin. In the 1950s blacks began the modern civil rights movement to make that dream become a reality. Activists used boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, picketing, and mass marches to advance the cause.

One of the organizations founded to speed victory was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Its objective was to promote integration in the South. In 1964 SNCC conducted the Mississippi Summer Project, hoping to bring about changes in that most backward of states through black voter registration and education. SNCC volunteers included about 1,000 northern students, lawyers, doctors, ministers, and teachers, from all over the country. About half were young whites, many of them of upper-middle-class background. They underwent intensive training on an Ohio campus and then went down to Mississippi to begin their work.

They organized fifty freedom schools and established another fifty community centers.

That summer in Mississippi the unprovoked killing of African-Americans multiplied and went unpunished. There were over 1,000 arrests of the young freedom volunteers. Thirty were wounded by gunfire, and three young organizers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—were murdered by white terrorists.

What made these young men and women volunteer in the face of such dangers? Religious values? Secular values? A spirit of adventure? “All of these,” suggests the Harvard psychiatrist and author Robert Coles, who inter-
viewed many of them, "and maybe any number of idiosyncratic motives."

One of the voter registration volunteers that summer was Michael Yarrow, a young white man. He had been born in Mississippi where his father had a one-year teaching position at the state university. The family later returned to the North. After the orientation session in Ohio in 1964, Yarrow, then a Queens College student, reached Mississippi and was taken into the home of an elderly black couple, the Shields, in the town of Ruleville. From the letters he wrote his family and friends, we can get a good idea of what he did and saw that summer. Here's the first of a number of excerpts:

*Just the precautions [in Ohio] are scary: beware of cars with tags, they are always dangerous; never go out alone; never go out after dark; never be the last out of a mass meeting; watch for cops without their badges; listen for an accelerating car outside; turn off the globe lights and tape the door lights on your car; if you wake up at night thinking there is danger, wake everybody up. (There seems to be an instinct for self-preservation.) The Negro civil rights workers from Mississippi told how they played like real Uncle Toms to the cops when in real danger. They advised us to play like Northern kids just come down to see how things are, to say we had read all this stuff in the Northern press and couldn't believe it. They stressed the importance of sticking together—going to jail together, taking the blows for someone else.*

He was scared from the first night he slept in the Shields' home and saw that they locked his bedroom
HEROES—AND ORDINARY PEOPLE

windows. In the morning he realized his fears connected him with people who had lived in fear all their lives. They—and he—had intensely personal reason to be fearful, for the three civil rights workers—Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner—had just disappeared. No one yet knew for sure that they had been murdered. Again, Yarrow writing home:

These people live under the almost absolute power of the white community. This relieves the whites of most of the external limits to their use of power. As the Negro community becomes united in its determination to stand up, it becomes much harder for Negroes to be pushed around. Perhaps one of the most exciting things about this town is the way Negroes talk to us or wave to us in full view of their employers or the police.

But even with the strong movement that is growing in Ruleville, justice seems far off. One man told me that he hasn't been able to get compensation from the railroad even though he had been totally disabled for six years. Others have been fired or taken off social security for registering to vote. The lady next door was told by the mayor that she might be beat up if she took in some freedom workers. Recently three field workers were killed when they fell off an overloaded truck coming back from the fields. A state trooper told the director of our project that if he had a chance he would grind him into the dirt like a bug. When the mayor came around to investigate the shooting into three houses a year ago where SNCC workers were
staying, he said he wished they had got a whole bunch of them niggers.

The project leader in Sunflower County was Charles McLaurin. Yarrow found him to be a dynamic speaker whose determination, good humor, and calmness about dangers were massively impressive. He would tell local high school students drawn into the struggle about some of his personal experiences, wanting them to know the dangers they were facing:

He told of his first beating, how they took him out of the cell after dumping the beaten body of his friend back in the cell. He said he was so mad his body sort of became detached and the blows didn't hurt even though they knocked a tooth loose. Mac related this all with a certain easy humor which is the product of being able to look back on terrible experiences. He meets the future with these experiences under his belt. This makes him what the mayor calls a "dangerous rattlesnake." His experience, lack of fear, and easy way of kidding folks into taking risks for the movement make him effective.

Tuesday night four or five houses were pelted with bottles. Last night the small church in which we meet was set on fire. Luckily it isn't far from the house of somebody who is active in the movement. He saw them light it and the fire department arrived to put it out before it did much damage. This morning as we gathered for our staff meeting the sheriff, the mayor, and the FBI arrived. The mayor thought we must have done it since we found out so soon. The FBI
didn’t even take samples of the broken glass to check for fingerprints. Our main fear now is the haunting question of what is the next step in this escalation.

Yarrow’s group went up to Drew, a plantation town to the north, to do the first canvassing the town had experienced. Whites walked through the black neighborhood glaring at the residents. But after a number of canvassing trips to Drew and Indianola, people started signing the freedom forms. A few were willing to go to the courthouse to try to register, like the seventy-year-old man, “with a wooden leg and a strong, piercing gaze.” He had been in the First World War and said he hadn’t seen more freedom as a result. “He said now he was about to die anyway and would much rather go fighting for freedom than any other way. A few days later he went to the courthouse to try to register and after a long wait was denied.”

Yarrow tells how his group was arrested in Drew, Mississippi:

We were holding a rally in a vacant lot with about 15 kids from Drew joining us while the adults watched from across the street. A black student from Mobile, Alabama, gave a song sheet to one of the onlookers. The police arrested him for passing out literature. I was worried about what would happen to Fred so I handed song sheets to some girls on the edge of the rally. A cop rushed across the street and told me to come along. I was taken to a little, square cinder block jail from which I hear Fred’s courageous, off-key rendition of a freedom song so I joined him as we
came near. Shortly four more of our group joined us. We laughed about how integrated we were, black and white, women and men.

The next evening 30 people were arrested. . . . The little jail was crammed with people and surrounded by grim-faced white men with high-powered rifles in the gun racks of their trucks. The police were nervous. We were bused to the county farm and county jail in Indianola. This time it took several days to raise the $4,800 in bail.

In Indianola the Baptists contributed a school they owned for a freedom school. We had a rally in the new freedom school. The room was packed with 250 people. Over 100 signed up to participate in the freedom school.

The actions of young men and women like Mike Yarrow were only a small beginning, which cost them dearly: Three young civil rights workers were murdered; thirty-seven African-American churches were burned down; eighty volunteers were beaten, and scores were arrested. But the media coverage gave the nation a close look at the violence in Mississippi, and soon the number of blacks registered to vote began to climb.