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Volunteers

My children once asked me who my hero was. I did not hesitate to tell them about the man I remembered from my childhood in Taiwan who made breakfast and Chinese green onion cakes in front of his tiny two-story street corner house. (Some of my Italian friends do not believe that these cakes were what inspired Marco Polo to bring back the idea of pizza from China!) I never knew his name, but he was a happy man with a wife and two little children, living a simple life on a tight budget.

I was a child of about ten. Often in the late afternoon I liked to watch him making the cakes, especially during cool winter days. I used to save up my change until I had enough to buy a hot cake.

One day, a high-rise building full of department stores caught fire. In those days in Taiwan, life was a struggle and buildings were built with little regard for fire issues. I saw many fire fighters busy in that building that day.

After the fire, I never saw the man making cakes in front of his tiny shop again. Eventually I learned that he had been killed in the fire. He had been the volunteer fire fighter squad captain who had taken the lead going into the building. Unfortunately his oxygen breathing equipment malfunctioned. The others in his family survived after him in their tiny little corner house of around four square meters. They still happily continued to make breakfasts. But there were no more green onion cakes.

I told my children that he was my hero—a volunteer fire fighter few ever

knew or cared about—but whose actions were larger than life. Still, the idea of what “volunteer” embodied was puzzling to me for many years.

Later, I have become a volunteer myself in personal and professional communities, albeit not in life-threatening venues. I have come to realize that volunteers are indeed the pillars of almost every part of human society. For example, in IEEE’s case, we are a leader in

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technology not because we are in the hottest technology area on Earth, but because we have tens of thousands of dedicated volunteers who make good things happen.

Think about *IEEE Signal Processing Magazine*. We would never be able to serve our readers well without the unselfish volunteer work of our colleagues: whether they are editorial board members, guest editors, reviewers, authors, readers, or our IEEE staff members. These are the true unsung heroes! While few may know who they are, they make a big difference. As the magazine editor, I know I cannot accomplish much without the dedication of these unsung hero volunteers!

All of us are busy making progress in our own research, teaching, development, and business careers. But I would like to caution and remind you that many of our colleagues are struggling hard in developing and under-developed countries, in poor research and living environments. Some of them also are subject to dictatorial or suppressive governments.

This ethical issue is seldom brought up in our field. However, I believe that in addition to technical responsibility, we have a higher moral social responsibility as scientists and engineers to reach out to our colleagues in developing and less-fortunate countries. There are unsung heroes struggling in many places, wanting to make their world better. We cannot simply turn our backs on them. The world will be better off only if we begin caring for each other.

Here is my question: Have you ever thought or done anything to reach out to your less-fortunate colleagues? Is building a community of engineers and scientists without borders an issue to which we should pay more attention? We cannot rely solely on governments and institutions; instead we volunteers should be a nonpolitical, pivotal driving force for good.

The world will become a better place only as every place on earth is a better place!

SP

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ray".