What I Tell My Students (About Peace Corps)

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ONE HAND DOES NOT CATCH A BUFFALO

50 YEARS OF AMAZING PEACE CORPS STORIES

VOLUME ONE: AFRICA

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To all who served in Africa
and to all of those in Africa who welcomed them, worked with them, and taught them.
What I Tell My Students

Don’t underestimate the Africans...or yourself, either!

I am a geography professor at a small liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest. The college, which prides itself on internationalism, tends to attract a lot of students with an interest in faraway lands. It is also a somewhat left-leaning campus where students have a deep interest in making the world a better place. The courses I teach are international in scope, focusing on environment, development, and Africa. Slides from my Peace Corps days and other international development experiences often feature prominently in my lectures. That’s why, clearly, a number of students walk into my office every semester asking about my experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Most of them also want to know what I think of this as a possible opportunity. While I have all sorts of responses, I try to be honest, sharing both positive and negative aspects of that time in my life.

I don’t think I was ever out to save the world. I was pretty cynical about development in general, having read many of the classic development critiques in my anthropology, history, and economics courses. No, I think I joined Peace Corps to experience the world in some remote part of that global South. I wanted to be as far away from the “West” as I could. If I am to be brutally honest, I believe this desire to be “away from the West” probably had something to do with my mixed feelings about where I grew up, in the suburbs outside of Chicago. Clearly I had benefited from the good schooling this environment had provided me. Yet my college education and experiences abroad made me increasingly uncomfortable with the blatant materialism, homogeneity, and pro-business orientation of the suburbs. Perhaps Peace Corps was the logical antidote for my suburban American upbringing.

So where did I go, how did I live and what did I do? I learned in the spring of 1987 that I would be sent to Mali two weeks after I graduated from college in June. Of course, I had no idea where Mali was when I received my appointment letter—having to look it up in the world atlas just like all of the other non-sophisticates. Some members of my extended family thought I was going to Bali (Indonesia) or Maui (Hawaii), tropical states which were quite different from the semi-arid, land-locked, West Africa nation which is probably best known for a town many people are not sure really exists, that legendary city at the end of the world—Timbuktu.

Why I was sent to Mali I am not sure. I had told the Peace Corps recruiter I would go anywhere, and my French language skills are probably the best explanation for this appointment. Mali was also recovering from a major drought in 1984-85 which had struck much of Sahelian Africa. As a result, Mali and a number of other countries in the region were targets for expanding Peace Corps initiatives, all under an umbrella program known as the African Food Systems Initiative (AFSI).

I underwent four months of training in a small town outside of the capital city, Bamako. I perfected my French, learned a
local language known as Bamana or Bambara, studied community development approaches, and learned country-specific skills related to my chosen technical sector of agriculture and community gardening. To say that I was an agricultural expert would be a huge misnomer. I had studied history as an undergraduate and played around in the garden growing up. About the only other qualification I could claim was a high school career test which indicated, to the horror of the school guidance counselor, that I should be a farmer.

Training was amazing in terms of quality, as well as in the opportunity to bond with fifty other Volunteers who formed my training group; I was ready to begin my service when the training period was over.

Having listened to my request for a remote, rural site, I was sent to small Bamana village of 200 people about fifty kilometers from the nearest paved road. There were two other French speakers in my village, the grade school teacher and the government agricultural agent who was my counterpart. I distinctly remember the Peace Corps truck driving away that first day, feeling like I was really, really on my own.

Over the next six months, I would live in temporary homes while the village and I built my house. It was a basic adobe structure with three non-standard (for the area) improvements—a cement floor, a tin roof, and a pit latrine. While I had my own home, I took my meals with a family in the village that had been assigned to look after me.

During those initial months, my only real job was to perfect my Bamana language skills and to get to know the place. I spent a lot of time hanging out. One of the main ways men pass their time is to do tea in the evening. (This is, of course, while women are doing all of the work.) Over several hours, one will prepare and serve three rounds of strong, sweet tea to their friends. During the long dry season, this is typically done under the stars. It is here that I perfected my Bamana, discussing everything under the sun with my newfound Malian friends.

Hanging out is a difficult task for many workaholic Americans. Getting things done is so engrained in us that this initial phase is challenging for most Volunteers. Even after my initial start-up, there were often slow times, especially during the rainy season when all of the villagers were busy at work in their fields. I did work with people in their fields during this time, and even farmed my own peanuts, but there were real physical limits to how much I could do. This meant lots of time reading during the rainy season. I remember becoming totally engrossed in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and then emerging from my hut to rejoin village life. It could be surreal, very surreal.

While I was trained to be a gardening volunteer, I quickly learned that I had little in the way of agricultural insight to offer to members of this community. In fact, the more I observed, the more I became impressed with the agricultural and natural resource management practices of this and surrounding villages. These farmers' village techniques, their way of mixing different crops in the same field (known as intercropping), their knowledge of different soils, and their planning schedules were all fascinating to me. I became increasingly skeptical of the government's attempts to promote "modern agriculture," which tended to emphasize cotton production and the use of pesticides and fertilizers.

While I eventually did work with community gardeners, I did many other things in response to village interests. I helped form a beekeepers' coop—which sold honey in the capital city; built an improved, cement-lined well; offered basic nutrition training; grafted fruit trees; and experimented with different agro-forestry approaches. Had I been a formally trained
agronomist, I am not sure if I would have been as flexible as I was. Being a broadly trained liberal arts college graduate, I never positioned myself as the expert, but rather as someone who could work with the community to address certain problems. I also did not have large sums of project money with which I could purchase local cooperation. If people didn’t like my ideas, they eventually let me know their disapproval by dragging their feet, or just telling me.

It is at about this point in my conversation with a student that I pause, and let them know that I am very biased in my assessment of Peace Corps. It may sound corny, but it was a transformative experience for me. I found my calling—as to speak—which was to study, write, and teach about agriculture and natural resource management approaches in Africa. This was a rare moment in my life where I could just “be” and it taught me lasting lessons about how people think and live in a small rural farming community. Had I been hell bent on writing a dissertation at the time, or bound and determined to mount some huge development project, I am not sure I would have learned half of what I did.

Mine being well-trained, critical students, it is usually at about this time that I get two to three somewhat inter-related questions.

First, isn’t the whole development process a flawed, neo-imperialist project? (I told you I have left-leaning students.) Yes, mainstream approaches to development are highly flawed. Nonetheless, I argue that our job is to re-invent development and to begin to think about this process in very different ways. I further assert that places like Mali are increasingly connected to us, whether we like it or not. Our job is to figure out how to engage positively with the Malis of the world.

Once we acknowledge that Africans are already in contact with the Western world (whether we like it or not), I believe we open a new space for development. With its Friarian inspired, bottom-up approach to development, I believe Peace Corps is closer to a sound development approach than almost any other group active in this arena.

Second, students often ask if they are only serving U.S. interests abroad by joining the Peace Corps, becoming “an agent of the U.S. Government.” In my experience, today’s students are very skeptical of any good that could be delivered by a government organization. Perhaps this is a triumph of Realism, or Republicanism more broadly—but I suppose the right should take pride in knowing how skeptical left-leaning students are of government in general. While Peace Corps will not serve where the U.S. has no diplomatic relations, the reality is that most Peace Corps countries are of little strategic importance to the U.S. I never felt like an agent of the U.S. government in Mali. I know some of my village friends thought I might be CIA at first. But, as far as I know, they came to realize that this was not what I was about.

Third, there is the American workaholic question: Do Peace Corps Volunteers really achieve anything meaningful in terms of development? I certainly know some Volunteers who did not accomplish much in the way of work, but these were the exception. Some of these individuals were suffering from culture shock and/or depression; others eventually went home early. However, by and large, most of the Volunteers were hard working. I also remind my students that Peace Corps is more than just a development organization, but serves as a vehicle for cross-cultural exchange. While what we actually did as Volunteers may be difficult to quantify, the understanding we brought back home is just as important. God knows, the lumbering giant we call America can always use a more informed citizenry.

In other cases, Volunteers often plant seeds that take years to bloom. I remember being frustrated that a large community...
garden was never established in my village when I was there—
despite numerous suggestions that this be considered. I went
back several years later to discover that one had been estab-
lished and they thanked me for initiating the idea.

There are loads of other questions I am often asked. For
example, isn’t two years too long of a commitment, or isn’t it
to work on these issues at home rather than abroad? I
left Peace Corps ready to leave (two years and four months
was just about right for me), but anything less than this would
have been unfair to the people I was with. I laud those who
work on development issues at home, but I think there is
something very important to be gained from living outside of
your culture and country. It also allows one to appreciate the
immense power that the U.S. exerts on the rest of the world.

Peace Corps isn’t for everyone, and that my positive tenure
may not be the norm. But I also want my students to make an
informed choice, and I hope that they are open to considering
what was for me a life-altering experience.

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Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He was an agricul-
tural volunteer in Mali from 1987–89. He is married to another Mali
volunteer, Julia Eash, and they have two children, Ben and Sophie.

KELLY MCCORKEN

Slash and Burn

Giving thanks thousands of miles from home—making “there” home.

The Malagasy had taken me for crazy when they heard
the deep breath of defeat I exhaled in the face of freshly
butchered cow. Yet, now, as I glanced out of my hut to see
Michelle holding two chickens—their necks weeping red—I
breathed with ease. This dinner would be special, and recent
death no longer hindered me. We planned an ambitious meal;
considering we had no oven, only a broken two-burner hot
plate and a scrappy tin cooker that burned charred rainforest,
my excitement heightened.

We’d be cooking on ravinala, I thought, or eucalyptus.
I hoped not. Even with sanctions, Madagascar was being
stripped of its beauty. My village on the east coast of “L’Ile de
Platan,” or, Mad Land, as I lovingly called this African island,
needed little conservation warning. Survival defined a person’s
life, and survival was sometimes “slash and burn.” That under-
stood and partially accepted, my friends and I anticipated the
freshly gathered, that Saturday after the holiday

The gift of survival: Thanksgiving.