

FROM WHENCE WE CAME

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The Spanish came first, and stayed for 300 years. The Americans came next and stayed for 50. Independence followed, after World War II. But then in the 1960s there was another influx of Americans into the Philippines. Hundreds, even thousands of young Peace Corps Volunteers invaded the archipelago. I was one of those brash, naïve enthusiasts, confident in our ability to help anyone, intent on spreading the American Dream. In looking back today, I can only wonder: What were we doing? What were we thinking? Why were we there?

For the Filipinos, we materialized out of nowhere. The country had been limping along after independence, following the democratic tradition imposed during a half-century of colonial rule. Two political parties took turns in power, with peaceful transitions, at least for the first twenty-five years, though election violence was commonplace. The country remained very much part of the developing world, what we used to call the third world. And people didn't really know what we were trying to do when we appeared. Then again, neither did we. Ever-optimistic, we did the best we could, trying desperately to help people understand that we were part of the Peace Corps, whatever that was, rather than being members of what our Filipino friends innocently and unknowingly called the Peace Corpse.

My involvement happened haphazardly. I graduated from Harvard in 1966, a couple of years after President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps. While at Harvard, I lived in Winthrop House, where all three Kennedy brothers had lived, and I was caught up in the rhetoric of the age. “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country,” Kennedy had thundered in his inaugural address, and I was stirred by his appeal. I was also moved by the observation of historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who served as a Kennedy advisor, that the Peace Corps was an effort “to replace protocol-minded, striped-pants officials by reform-minded missionaries of democracy, who mixed with the people, spoke the native dialects, ate the food, and involved themselves in local struggles against ignorance and want.” I had friends from Harvard and elsewhere who gravitated upon graduation into the Peace Corps. But the notion of joining myself never crossed my mind.

Instead, I decided to go to graduate school. I went to Columbia, near where a girl friend lived, in the hope that the relationship would last, and indeed, we decided to get married during my first year there. I attended Columbia on a large federal fellowship that provided me with tuition and a generous living stipend. And I had an academic deferment from the draft that in 1966 meant I didn’t need to worry about being shipped off to Vietnam. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was part of the last class to be deferred regularly each year, as long as you remained in good standing at school, all the way through your 26th birthday, when, evidently, the Army didn’t want you any more.

For me, Kennedy loomed larger than life. I was terrified as we almost vanished in a nuclear holocaust during the Cuban Missile Crisis, relieved by the more peaceful initiatives of the New Frontier years. I was caught up in the Kennedy mystique – for me the Kennedy administration really did seem like the Camelot of King Arthur’s day, popularized in a Broadway musical in 1960. Fifty mile hikes seemed within reach. And I could imagine I was in Hyannis Port, with John and Bobby and Teddy as I played touch football on the Winthrop House lawn.

Like most Americans, I followed the development of the Peace Corps, first as an idea, then as an institution. Presidential candidate John Kennedy was certainly aware of Harry Truman’s 1949 Point Four initiative to provide aid to developing countries. In Congress, he had voted against an effort to cut off such assistance, once it began. And in 1959, he indicated that he wanted to establish a “new relationship” between the United States and developing nations. In the campaign of 1960, he started to reflect on a possible national service program. Then, in mid-October, he arrived at the University of Michigan at 2 AM, just after his second televised debate with Richard Nixon. There he found 10,000 students waiting to see him. Energized, he plunged into an extemporaneous address aimed at them. He asked how many of them would be prepared to go work in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The response was overwhelming. Two weeks later, just before Election Day, at a rally at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, he assailed the Foreign Service and spoke of a foreign policy for peace. He

suggested that skilled Americans could be helpful in the developing world. And he proposed a new government agency: a Peace Corps. He got front page coverage in the *New York Times* the next day. Once elected, he established a task force under the direction of his brother-in-law Sargent Shriver, and the effort was underway. An executive order in March 1961 established a pilot program, and a law providing for a full-fledged organization followed about six months later.

The Peace Corps got tremendous publicity in its first few years. Thousands of young people my age joined up and went overseas. I hesitated. As I prepared to leave Harvard, I did wonder what to do next. Butch, a college friend from Vermont, was intent on the Peace Corps, and the last I heard he was on his way. Mark, a friend from Rutgers with whom I had grown up, likewise joined. But I thought I wanted to go to law school, until I realized that perhaps the intense pressure of the legal profession might not be for me. Instead I ended up taking the easiest course of action, especially for someone growing up in an academic family, and I decided to go to graduate school.

Columbia treated me well. I soon learned that the program entailed writing a Master's thesis, the degree to be awarded at the end of the first year. Everything moved according to schedule, as did plans for a wedding in June. My fiancée, Alberta, finishing up at Rutgers, just 30 miles down the road, had a job waiting for her at a wonderful private secondary school in Manhattan.

But I found Columbia lonely. After Harvard, where I was surrounded by friends all the time, Columbia was a shock. People came to class on the subway, and then left the same way. There were just a few people I got to know. And, while I went to plays or concerts or recitals every week, I began to realize that I missed green grass and trees. Still, I never thought about leaving.

Then, one afternoon in early spring, I was sitting in Alberta's living room reading the *New Yorker*. I came upon an advertisement that said, "Join the Peace Corps, See the World." I read it aloud to her, then added, for reasons I'm still not sure I fathom, "How would you like to try the Peace Corps?" I assumed she would laugh off that question, and that would have been that. But instead, she answered, "What a good idea," and the notion took hold. I called the Peace Corps the next day, received applications within a week, sent them back and learned we had been accepted about two weeks later.

In an age of BA generalists, I suppose that with a Master's degree, I looked pretty good to the Peace Corps. That soon became evident when we received our assignment – to Micronesia. We had requested Asia. Africa I still regarded as a dark continent, which had no attraction at all. Alberta's family had worked resettling Cuban refugees, and she wanted nothing more to do with Latin America. Asia, halfway around the world, sounded promising.

Then I talked to my father. He had been in the South Pacific during World War II and told me that Micronesia was hot and disease-ridden. Suddenly the idea of a tropical paradise sounded less likely. But I had heard about a Peace

Corps program about to start in the Philippines, where my father had also served, and he said that sounded like a better idea. With *chutzpah* that still amazes me, I called up the Peace Corps and said, “How about the Philippines instead of Micronesia,” and the recruiter said, “You’re in.”

And so I asked for and received a leave of absence from Columbia, and Alberta resigned her appointment at the private school. I also contacted my draft board to give up my educational deferment, and to request an occupational deferment instead. There was no regulation requiring any draft board to comply with such requests from Peace Corps Volunteers, but virtually all did, and mine came through.

That created a curious dynamic at home, one I didn’t really recognize until years later, after I had returned from my service abroad. To his credit, my father never voiced to me his reservations about my decision to leave graduate school and go overseas. But, in fact, he thought it was a questionable, if not a stupid, decision, and he evidently worried a good deal about my draft status as the war in Vietnam went from bad to worse. My sister Karen, who was in college but came home for vacations, bore the brunt of his displeasure, and withstood it as best she could. Meanwhile, I looked forward and plunged first into training, then into my assignment in the Philippines.

The Peace Corps notified us that we would be training in Hawaii, and we were delighted. Alberta and I were to be married in June, with training to begin in

July, so we assumed Hawaii could be an extended honeymoon. Little did we know.

In an era when airplane travel took longer than it does today, the trip from the Atlantic seaboard to the middle of the Pacific was a nightmare. It lasted twenty-four hours and seemed like forever. In subsequent years, with much more flying under my belt, such a journey has become routine. But not then. One long flight followed another, and after finally reaching Honolulu, we still had another hop over to the big island of Hawaii. We arrived in the middle of the night, and the Peace Corps had us fill out forms for a couple of hours for reasons that still puzzle me to this day.

And then we saw our accommodations.

Any hopes of a romantic honeymoon in a Pacific Ocean paradise vanished. The nine married couples who were part of the training group were to be housed in two large rooms in a deserted school on an abandoned sugar cane plantation. It was beautiful outdoors, to be sure. Mauna Loa, one of the island's major volcanoes, rose dramatically in the distance. Everything, everywhere was green, thanks, we soon learned, to 200 inches of rain a year. But indoors was something else.

There was a measure of privacy. Each couple had a small cubicle with cardboard walls and wide doors made from shower curtains. But that was about it. Our bed consisted of two metal army cots lashed together in the middle. Other furniture was non-existent.

We had been married for about three weeks, and that made us the third oldest married couple. Many of the others, much to their dismay, had been married just a couple of days before. In such close quarters, confidential conversations were impossible. We got used to hearing the creaking of bedsprings, though we never fully adjusted to the close quarters.

But we had other things to do. Training consisted of four or five hours of language training each day. The Peace Corps trained us in Tagalog for about three months, only to decide then to send us to Leyte, a Cebuano-speaking region, and so we had to learn a different dialect. There were similarities, and it didn't prove as daunting as we had first imagined. But it did give us pause.

We also were trained in what we were supposed to do, once we got overseas. Alberta was a science teacher, and learned she would teach science. As a historian, I figured I would probably teach English, and that was fine. But then the Peace Corps, in its infinite wisdom, decided that I would be better off teaching elementary modern math. And because I had a Master's degree, I was reassigned to a college – hence the shift from one language area to another – so I could teach future teachers all about something I didn't really understand. But I learned about sets and set theory, number lines, and different counting bases, and discovered I actually liked what I was doing.

Our most difficult time came when we were asked to participate in a peer review exercise by naming the five best and five worst volunteers. Evidently, Alberta, often outspoken, had rubbed some people, including her supervisor, the

wrong way, particularly when she went on a rampage collecting bugs for an insect collection to use in her classroom. One of the other volunteers – anonymously – targeted her as one of the worst volunteers, because “she killed bugs indiscriminately,” and for a time it appeared as if our collective status was in jeopardy. But we became friends with the psychologist who was there to assess our mental health and survived that scare. Still, the bug-killing moniker followed Alberta all the way to the Philippines, where some staff members thought this might be a really good thing.

Our close quarters notwithstanding, we loved the Peace Corps training. It was something like summer camp, which I always enjoyed, though in retrospect it didn't really have a lot to do with what we would face when we got overseas.

Our first real initiation came when we flew to the Philippines for in-country training. We lived in Cebu, the second-largest city, at the center of the archipelago, with another young married couple, who had been volunteers for the past year or so. We taught classes to real Filipino students, and had a chance to use our fledgling language skills. But it was a curious time. Carolyn confided to Alberta that she and her husband of about two years weren't sleeping together any more – that may have explained why they gave us their bedroom and double bed – and we both found that news vaguely disquieting. Why did we need to know that, anyway, we wondered? And what did it say about the pressures on young married couples lurking ahead?

After a couple of weeks in Cebu, we went off to our assignment on the island of Leyte. There Alberta settled in to her post in a barrio school about a half an hour by jeepney from the city of Ormoc, while I worked at the obvious assignment for a nice Jewish boy from New Jersey – St. Peter’s College, run by German and Filipino Benedictine nuns, which included students from kindergarten on up. While I taught young children occasionally, my major assignment was to teach older students, mostly young women, training to become teachers. In the process, I discovered how much I enjoyed teaching.

But I got into trouble at the end of our first year. The Peace Corps asked all volunteers to come up with a summer project, and I decided I wanted to run a workshop for elementary teachers in the local public schools. I spoke to Pedro, the local superintendent of schools, who was amenable, but he wanted to hold the workshop in his bailiwick – in an Ormoc city school – while I wanted to do it at St. Peter’s College, which had nicer facilities. I should have realized, of course, that this was his show, and I was simply there to help. But I was a Harvard graduate, AND I had a Master’s degree, and I figured I knew what would work best. And so, rather than negotiate with Pedro, or better, do what he wanted, I decided to write a letter to his superiors in Manila. After all, shouldn’t we be free to do things in the most efficient way?

Little did I realize the potential impact of my letter. When the officials in charge of the country’s central education office asked Pedro what was going on, he was apoplectic. Other education officials in the town told me to be careful.

Belatedly, I realized the folly of my actions and tried to apologize. But I soon realized that the best thing I could do was to get out of town as soon as the semester was over. And so Alberta and I scrapped the idea of the workshop and travelled to the city of Dumaguette, on a neighboring island, where we participated successfully in a comparable workshop – in the city schools.

As the summer came to an end and we began to think about returning home, I went out of my way to find a gift for Pedro, a book of poetry, which I knew he loved. I inscribed a warm greeting inside the cover, and resolved to do whatever he wanted – on his terms. Over the course of the next year, I taught a number of workshops – all in the city schools, and we got along just fine.

But the best part of the experience was probably the activities we pursued outside the classroom. St. Peter's College had a small library, yet all of the books were locked behind glass doors, to protect them against theft, and they never circulated. Because SPC, as it was called, was a private institution, it was required to pay a small monthly fee for each volunteer, to prevent the institution from trying to use a free volunteer to replace a regular salaried teacher. I began to consider the possibility of using that money for the school's benefit, and proposed to our Peace Corps boss that we be permitted to spend the money to build a small library for children. He agreed, and so I took the idea to the head of the school. Sister Mechtilde was eager to go ahead, though she was wary of the requirement I insisted on that all books be placed on open shelves, and be available for students to borrow. But we pushed on, hired a local carpenter to

build kid-sized furniture, and watched the library take shape. Then I had the brainstorm of writing to our local newspaper back home. Before I knew it, one of the local elementary schools had organized a book drive, and provided us with 5,000 children's books, most in excellent condition. Alberta and I, along with several other volunteers, went to a library school on another island to learn how to catalogue books systematically. And by the time we left, the library was done – and children flocked to it and loved just sitting and reading and borrowing books on their own. The best part of it came when I returned to Ormoc City on a State Department lecture tour about 15 years ago, and saw the library still going strong.

Another project involved arranging free operations for children with hare lips or cleft palates. Here in the United States, a child born with such an ailment undergoes surgery almost immediately, and a normal life is possible from the start. Not so in the Philippines. We had noticed a small neighborhood boy named Carlos with a hare lip, though his palate was intact. We thought he would make a good first case. And so we arranged with a surgeon in Cebu to do the operation for free, and with the local Rotary Club to pay for the hospitalization. It all went off like clockwork, and five-year-old Carlos came home far different than before. Pleased with what the result, the Rotary Club was eager to continue, and physicians from Ormoc itself indicated their willingness to perform such surgery themselves.

And then there was tennis. We were not the only Peace Corps Volunteers in Ormoc. Ed had reupped after a two-year stint. And Bruce and Mike, who had trained elsewhere, joined us when we arrived. Bruce was an avid tennis player, and we discovered an old clay court at the local sugar processing plant. We received permission to play there – as long as we cleaned off the leaves and debris first. We did, and were soon joined by Jesse, the Filipino vice mayor who was married to a former Peace Corps Volunteer. Once Jesse, who had been a college tennis player, began to come out, others did too, and soon we had a wonderful entrée into local circles that made our lives far easier.

We were playing before tennis had become really big. But about twenty years after we had departed, when I was back in Ormoc, Jaime, our former Peace Corps doctor, took me to the extraordinary new tennis center, right smack dab in the middle of the central town square. He was playing under the lights that night, and I just sat in the stands, reveling in the difference between then and now – and quietly reflecting that our first forays into tennis back in the 1960s may have been the spark that started this entire movement.

Not everything was easy. In training, our instructors told us all about culture shock. We would arrive in-country, they said, exuberant, ready for an adventure, eager to change the world and confident we could. Then reality would set in, frustrations would mount, and about six or seven months into our stay, we would be ready to throw in the towel and go home. But we would

persist, make our peace with the complications, learn to lower our expectations, and enjoy the second year far more than the first. And we did.

Still, the difficulties were sometime serious. Alberta got sick midway through our first year, and was hospitalized on a neighboring island. I worked at my assignment during the week, then took an overnight boat trip every weekend to Cebu, where I was the “bantay,” allowed to sleep on a cot in her room. At first the doctors thought she had leptospirosis, an infection evidently spread by rat pee. But that turned out not to be the case, and the physicians figured out that an amoeba had lodged in her liver. Once they had settled on a diagnosis, they managed to get her better fairly quickly. But it was a rough couple of months.

In our second year, my parents came to visit. My father worked out a State Department lecture tour that took them all over East Asia, and they ended up in the Philippines. We went to meet them in Manila, then brought them down to Leyte to see where we lived. As we arrived in Ormoc, the friends who met us at the plane chattered furiously in Cebuano, telling us that Bruce, one of our fellow volunteers, had been shot in the leg by an angry Filipino neighbor. Gradually, the story came out. Bruce, Ed, and Mike had been drinking San Miguel beer. Ed was on his way to becoming an alcoholic, and the drinking must have gotten noisy. The Filipino neighbor, who had served in the American merchant marine, and may have been abused by fellow sailors, got irritated. So he got his gun, went to the volunteers’ door, and fired a shot.

The Peace Corps airlifted Bruce up to Clark Field on the island of Luzon, where the military brought wounded soldiers back from Vietnam. Surgeons there decided that it would be difficult to remove the bullet, and so Bruce returned to Ormoc, a conquering hero with shrapnel in his leg. He resumed his teaching duties, played tennis again, and finished his service. The gun-slinging Filipino was never arrested or prosecuted, and continued to live next door. And we all went on with our lives.

I almost got in trouble myself. On one occasion, I needed to make a phone call home to find out about an illness. We take cell phones for granted, even for international calls, but it was harder back then. I had to take an overnight boat trip to the next island over, take another boat to a small island housing an American military base, persuade the soldier on duty to make a short wave call to the States, and hope someone there could patch us in to my parents. It worked, and I had a successful 10-minute conversation. Then I had to retrace my steps, taking another day to get back home. On that trip, I hopped into a taxi, and, in Cebuano, told the driver where I wanted to go. He immediately began going in the opposite direction, as if to refuse to believe either that I could speak the language or knew my way about town. I got irritated, but he didn't stop. Finally, I began using the Cebuano vernacular I had learned. It made no difference. At that point, I made a near fatal mistake. I said to him, "Imog utik morag imong utin." "Your brain is about the size of your prick." He jammed on the brakes, brought the car to a screeching halt, and moved to do

something I knew I wanted to avoid. I shoved my door open, grabbed my bag, and ran like hell into some back alleys. Mercifully, I escaped. And I was more careful in my use of language from that time on.

Another time, I was involved in a conversation with a friend who had spent some time not long before talking with Bruce about religion. The Philippines, of course, was about 97 percent Catholic. Bruce had told our friend that he wasn't a Catholic, but was rather an eclectic, and tried to explain what that meant. Later, our friend asked me what my religion was. When I replied I was Jewish, he asked, "Is that like eclectic." I didn't know what to say, and hedged. Then he came back with his own assessment. "I knew you were too short to be a real American," he said.

It wasn't always easy to be in the Philippines as my own country fought an unpopular war. Because we were allies, Filipino soldiers participated in the conflict, and American soldiers, those still whole, came over on R & R. But we were neither soldiers nor diplomats, and sought consciously and aggressively to distance ourselves from official government policy. We tried never to set foot in the American Embassy, and managed to hold out until the very end when we had to stop by for some official termination exercises. Fortunately, our friends made it easier by making a distinction between official government policy and the views of American friends. But then, as anyone who travels abroad realizes, that is exactly what is happening today.

So was it all worth it? One volunteer, a young man of my vintage who served with his wife in Guayaquil, Ecuador was irritated by some of his experiences. “From the time we moved into the *barrio*,” he later recalled, “the question we were most frequently asked by the people we were supposed to be organizing was whether we would leave them our clothes when we returned to the States.” He came home disillusioned: “I saw that even the liberals I had wanted to emulate, men who seemed to be devoting their lives to fighting injustice, were unable to accept people from alien cultures on any terms but their own.” He called his book about his own odyssey *The Making of an Un-American*.

In my case, the hard cold reality is that I taught some teachers modern math, and I assume they taught the same thing to some students. But did that make any difference in the larger order of things? For years, I wondered. Then, about five years ago, I happened to encounter Bob Moses, the civil rights leader who helped plan and implement Freedom Summer – the effort to send black and white volunteers to Mississippi to help register people to vote in 1964 – and learned of the Algebra Project, his major effort these days to promote numerical literacy. He believes fervently that mathematical facility can be a key to making it in America, and is devoting his life to working with less fortunate African Americans to that end. So maybe there was some value to the kind of thing I did after all.

A couple of kids in Ormoc had their hare lips sewn up, and I suppose that was a good thing. I still have before and after pictures of little Carlos, the first

Filipino child we helped, and I sometimes look at them when I'm down, just to remind myself that little things do count. I've been gratified in recent years to follow Operation Smile, the effort of plastic surgeons from all over America, to go to countries in the developing world and do just what we tried to do, only far more efficiently and effectively. Maybe we were ahead of the curve. Maybe our efforts somehow helped spark the larger effort. I don't know.

The children's library in Ormoc is still going strong, and that too is a good thing, I guess. I don't think we changed the larger patterns of lending and borrowing in the city or the country. I'd like to believe that the main library at St. Peter's College is now open to readers who want to browse and borrow books, though I'm just not sure. At least the little kids in that school can go into a warm and welcoming room and lose themselves for a while in the wonderful world of books.

But then, it was always a fantasy to assume that a bunch of 21 or 22-year-old BA generalists (or in my case, MA generalists) could change the world in any meaningful way. Over the years, the Peace Corps has become more professionally focused. The people sent overseas, unlike us, are supposed to have marketable skills, to really be able to help the people in developing countries overseas. And I hope they do.

Yet perhaps, in the long run, the greatest value of the Peace Corps was in what it did to and for us – the Peace Corpse Volunteers. For going overseas, to a part of the world we had barely contemplated before, was a powerful experience.

I had been to Europe when I was ten years old. My father had a Fulbright grant to Great Britain, and we lived in Wimbledon for a year, then traveled to France and Switzerland on the way home. But I never really felt that the world was my home until I went to the Philippines. Travel was far less common back then, and this journey – over a two year period – was a big deal. I didn't know it at the time, but in fact the experience opened the way for me to go anywhere, anytime, the rest of my life. As my professional career progressed, I had opportunities to teach for a year at a time in Finland, the Netherlands, and then Kenya, and I jumped at every opportunity. And as I worked abroad, I learned that there were all kinds of ways to work out lecture tours, and I delighted in being able to go to Europe, Asia, and Africa as a government representative or consultant, to talk about whatever people wanted to hear. I felt – and feel – a little like a modern-day Palladin – “Have lecture, will travel.” But I can't imagine living any other way.

My Peace Corps service helped make that overseas activity possible in another way as well. In college, I had majored in European history. Then, after graduation, I worked for a summer at the Rutgers University Center of Alcohol Studies on a project studying drinking on the American frontier. That effort turned into a paper, then into a Master's thesis at Columbia, and finally into my first published article, so I had begun to drift into the study of the American past before I went overseas. But the Peace Corps experience solidified that transition in my mind. Living for two years in Southeast Asia, right around the corner from Vietnam at the height of the war, I needed to know what my country was doing,

to be able to explain issues to my Filipino friends and to myself. I resolved to study American history on my return, and I've never looked back. Best of all, I found that people around the world want to learn about America, and that has been my ticket to lecture abroad.

Finally, I would be remiss without acknowledging that the Peace Corps inadvertently helped me avoid the draft. For two years, I enjoyed my occupational deferment, but I was reclassified 1-A, draft eligible, the day I returned to the United States in August 1969. Richard Nixon created a draft lottery, scheduled to go into effect that December. But I was called up for a physical the month before. I spent weeks worrying about what to do. Like many young men of my generation, I contemplated fleeing to Canada, or simply resisting. But in the end, I decided the easiest course of action would be to fail my physical. And so I asked doctors to document childhood allergies they had conveniently forgotten when they filled out my Peace Corps physical form. And I wrote to our Peace Corps doctor Jaime back in Ormoc, asking him for a letter as well, noting he had treated me for a tropical fungus, in all honesty not much more than athlete's foot, in my toes and my groin. Jaime, whose English was superb – he could beat me at Scrabble every time we played – responded with a much-appreciated letter documenting the tropical fungus *from* my toes *to* my groin. The physician at the Selective Service center in Newark, New Jersey took one look at the letter and said, much to my relief, "We don't want you, kid."

So the Peace Corps was valuable to me – and to tens of thousands of fellow volunteers. But is that enough? Last summer, my wife Sara and I led a three-week Miami University summer course in Kenya, where we took students up Mt. Kenya, lived with the Maasai, and explored other parts of the country. Toward the end of our stay, we asked the students to read an article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about the value of foreign study. It cited a student who came back expansive because he had learned how to negotiate living in a foreign land and felt empowered by the process, and that, I suppose, is a good thing. I think we felt something of that sense of empowerment in the Philippines. But the article went on to ask whether that was enough. Was that student – and were we – learning to interact with all groups, or just those like us? It's all well and good to discover something about yourself, but was that student – and were we – really learning something of value about the people of another country? And if so, what?

The more I think about it, the more I do believe that we *did* learn something important about the Philippines, and that the experience *did* make a difference. We learned how other people, far less fortunate, lived their daily lives, and we gained, I hope, a sense of empathy and appreciation for all they did.

Not long ago, I got an e-mail message from the Peace Corps asking whether any returned Volunteers would consider going back somewhere for another tour. I'm just about 65, and I suppose that's the nominal retirement age, so it could be a possibility. For a moment, I thought about asking my wife Sara

where she'd like to go. But then I caught myself and asked: What in the world am I thinking. After all, I've been there, done that. No need to replicate the experience. But I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world at all.