

Minor A Few Adjustments

a handbook for Volunteer support



Peace Corps
Information Collection and Exchange
Publication No. M0099

Information Collection and Exchange

The Peace Corps Information Collection and Exchange (ICE), a unit of the Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support (OPATS), makes available the strategies and technologies developed by Peace Corps Volunteers, their co-workers, and their counterparts to development organizations and workers who might find them useful. ICE works with Peace Corps technical and training specialists to identify and develop information of all kinds to support Volunteers and overseas staff. ICE also collects and disseminates training guides, curricula, lesson plans, project reports, manuals, and other Peace Corps-generated materials developed in the field. Some materials are reprinted “as is”; others provide a source of field-based information for the production of manuals or for research in particular program areas. Materials that you submit to ICE become part of the Peace Corps’ larger contribution to development.

This publication was produced by Peace Corps OPATS. It is distributed through the ICE unit. For further information about ICE materials, or for additional copies of this manual, please contact ICE and refer to the ICE Publication Number.

Peace Corps

Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support
Information Collection and Exchange
1111 20th Street, NW, Sixth Floor
Washington, DC 20526

ICE@peacecorps.gov
Tel: 202.692.2640
Fax: 202.692.2641

Abridged Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) Number: 303.48

Share your experience!

Add your experience to the ICE Resource Center. Send your materials to us so we can share them with other development workers. Your technical insights serve as the basis for the generation of ICE materials, reprints, and training materials. They also ensure that ICE is providing the most up-to-date innovative problem-solving techniques and information available to you and your fellow development workers.

A Few Minor Adjustments

a handbook for Volunteer support



Peace Corps
Information Collection and Exchange
Publication No. M0099

*Originally published by
Peace Corps Office of Special Services, 1991
Reprinted October 2012*

Contents

Introduction
1

Chapter One: A New Country
3

Chapter Two: The Pre-service Training Experience
13

Chapter Three: Settling In
19

Chapter Four: A New Culture
25

Chapter Five: The World of Work
35

Chapter Six: The Peace Corps Experience
41

Chapter Seven: Coming Home
43

Introduction

The subject of this book—cultural adjustment—is a daily necessity and, arguably, the central reality of the Peace Corps experience. While Volunteers work in a wide range of programs and hold down a variety of jobs, the key challenge for you and every other Volunteer—and the cornerstone of effective service—is the ability to adjust successfully to the host country and its culture. This book identifies some of the kinds of adjustments Volunteers make overseas and outlines strategies for successful adjustment.

There is no foolproof formula for successful adjustment. On the contrary, adjustment is a highly personal matter that each of you will approach at your own pace and in your own style. Some will adjust easily; others with more difficulty. Some will assimilate quickly; others more slowly. This is not to say, however, that adjustment just happens—or doesn't—that it's beyond your control or intervention. Not at all. You will need to take matters into your own hands here and there and push yourself past some common obstacles. But the timing of the push, where you apply the pressure and how much, will be different for every Volunteer.

Adjustment is the ability to figure out, get used to, and become effective in unfamiliar circumstances and among unfamiliar people. It is an ongoing process that begins when you arrive at staging and only ends when you get on another plane and come home (and it doesn't even end there, as Volunteers who have been through readjustment can testify). Adjustment is necessary for anyone who lives and works abroad, but it is especially important for the work of the Peace Corps. From the beginning, what has been unique about the Peace Corps is not what it offers host countries, that is, technical expertise, but the way that expertise is delivered—in the form of Volunteers who speak the local language, understand the local culture, and live in local towns and neighborhoods. The manner of service is as important as the service itself and adjustment for Volunteers is not merely a means to an end, but a virtual end all its own. The cross-cultural adjustment of Volunteers is not just what enables them to make a contribution; it is itself a significant part of that contribution.

Volunteers who have been in-country for more than a day or two don't need to be sold on the importance of adjustment; they just want to know how to do it. This book covers six adjustments a Peace Corps Volunteer faces:

- Adjusting to the new country
- Adjusting during pre-service training

- Adjusting during the settling-in period
- Adjusting to the new culture
- Adjusting on the job
- Adjusting to life back in the U.S.

You begin adjusting to the country almost at once, and the same goes for the pre-service training program. Settling in comes next, of course, followed by adjusting to the job and workplace. Though culture is a daily reality from the beginning, you don't really begin to encounter it until you are out on your own and beginning your service. Culture and job can't really be separated easily, but jobs have their own category so the cultural basis for many job- and work-related difficulties is explored. Finally, what we call "readjustment" occurs after you complete your service and return home.

Adjustment will vary profoundly from person to person, from program to program, and from country to country. There are so many variables that virtually any generalization is suspect the moment it is given. Regardless, there are certain key issues, common principles, and universal truths that characterize the Peace Corps experience the world over. So, if you're reading an interesting vignette herein that seems to have little to do with your corner of reality, please consider the broader context.

It's hard to discuss adjustment without sounding a sour note now and then. After all, if adjustment were easy and pleasant, you wouldn't need a book to get you over the rough patches. That being said, successful adjustment, though difficult, will provide many benefits and rewards. Something that is difficult is not necessarily something to be afraid of or worried about—it is usually out of the difficult moments in our lives that we learn the lessons that matter most.

Chapter One: A New Country

For Peace Corps Volunteers the world over, the long, bumpy, and always interesting road to adjustment begins in the same place: starting with staging and continuing as you arrive on the tarmac; and with the same, rather prosaic gesture: putting on or taking off an article of clothing, usually a jacket or a sweater. Welcome overseas.

Adjustment begins with just this phenomenon: getting used to the new country (in this instance, to the weather). Note that by country we mean the physical place and living conditions, not the culture itself. Country is what Volunteers encounter first and what makes the strongest initial impression.

While adjusting to the country, your first challenge as a Volunteer is quickly followed by another. As you are making the various adjustments described in this chapter, you are also participating in an intensive eight- to 12-week pre-service training program (PST), which is a major adjustment all its own (see Chapter 2). Taken together, the adjustments to living abroad and the adjustments to being in training make the first two months of Peace Corps life an intense, exhilarating—and sometimes overwhelming—experience. While training may mitigate adjustments to a new country and help neutralize some of the frustrations of being a trainee, there's no denying that going through the two simultaneously makes life very full.

3

Even though this training is a challenging and dynamic practicum, most trainees manage nicely, and nearly all Volunteers will tell you they wouldn't have missed the experience of pre-service training for anything.

The Climate

The first thing that may strike you about your host country will be the weather. For many, it's not what you're used to (or not what you're used to at that time of the year). Whether you come from a dry climate and are set down in a humid one, or you come from a cold climate and are set down in a warm one (or, more likely, a very warm one), your body will notice the difference.

You may be cold all the time, hot all the time, or, in countries where there are monsoons, wet all the time. You may be tired earlier in the day; it may take you longer to walk to places; you may not get enough

sleep at night because it's too hot or too cool. You may have to take several showers a day, not be able to shower at all, or be wary to bathe because it's so cold. You may catch a cold or become dehydrated. In short, the weather can make you uncomfortable—and may even make you sick. And, as it goes after the body, the discomfort naturally affects the mind. You may worry, be anxious, or get depressed because you aren't feeling well and may be falling behind in your language or technical studies. Numerous adjustments have to be made because of the weather. Weather can wreak havoc with your exercise regime, for example. It may be too hot or too cold or raining too much for you to jog or take a walk at your usual hour (or at any other hour, for that matter).

In some countries, your problem is not heat but cold. You just can't get warm, whatever you do; or you can get parts of your body warm, those nearest the electric coil, but other parts remain untouched. In some posts, the only way to keep warm at night is to go to bed immediately after dinner.

A related issue (though not weather-driven in the strictest sense) is the different lengths of the days and nights at different latitudes. The further north and south you go, the longer the days in the summer months and the shorter the nights in the winter. For Americans used to darkness at 5 p.m. in the winter and at 9 p.m. in the summer, days that end an hour earlier or two hours later can take some getting used to.

4

Adjusting to the weather is not always just a matter of getting accustomed to an unusual outside temperature or an unexpected atmospheric phenomenon, such as snow or rain, but a matter of changing whole aspects of your lifestyle. Weather, in short, is not simply part of the scenery of your Peace Corps experience, the background of your adjustment experience; it is itself a major player in that experience.

The Food

Another adjustment you must make overseas is to the food. Three times a day you may have to eat something you're not used to. "My diet," noted one Volunteer in Micronesia, "is fish, fish, fish, and fish." You may genuinely like the new diet or come to like it, at least some of it, but you may also miss some of the staples of your previous diet. With so much else that is new, especially during Peace Corps training, it sometimes seems almost too much that even mealtimes have to be a learning experience.

Your body may initially reject the new foods or get sick from them. Even if you don't get an honest-to-goodness disease, you are more than likely

to get diarrhea, constipation, or some other kind of gastrointestinal malady. None of these afflictions is especially serious, but they can put you in bed for a day or two or at least drain your energy. Of course, if you do get a bona fide disease, if you catch a parasite or an amoeba, then you may be down for longer.

While you may survive the physical discomfort easily enough, there's an emotional and psychological side to consider. Getting sick heightens an already elevated sense of vulnerability and helplessness—you may feel you're not in control of your own body. It isn't fun to think of the food you eat as something of which to be wary. The bottom line is that when you're sick in bed, and that bed is located in a foreign country, things can seem pretty bleak.

The New Community

As you cope with the weather and the food, you're also trying to find your way around your new town. Getting used to a new community may not be hard, but it's time consuming. It can also be surprisingly tedious, requiring conscious attention and deliberate effort. Where are the services and the shops? How do you get to them? How do you buy a stamp after you find the post office? How do you cash a check after you find the bank? What's the system for buying medicine at the pharmacy? What are the hours for these places? How much should a taxi cost and how do you hail one? How do the bus routes work?

5

Remember that during training and beyond, Peace Corps staff will work closely with you to help you adjust to your new surroundings and successfully integrate into your new environment.

The Loss of Language

One of the greatest shocks of overseas life may be the sudden loss of language if you're a Volunteer in a country where you don't speak the language. In your early days and weeks abroad, you may neither speak nor understand the speech of most people you meet. You communicate a lot through gestures and gradually learn to handle simple exchanges, but meaningful, substantive interaction is beyond you. It's hard to overestimate the impact this phenomenon can have. On the practical level, if you can't communicate your needs, how can you be sure they will be met? If you can't manage simple, everyday transactions—transactions you're used to doing without thinking—you may begin to have doubts

about what you've gotten yourself into. You may feel inadequate, foolish, threatened—and a little scared.

On a more existential level, if you can't communicate your views and explain yourself, how can anyone know you? And, if you can't understand others, how can you know them? Not knowing anyone and not being known by anyone can make you feel isolated and profoundly alone. As returned Peace Corps Volunteer Moritz Thomsen wrote in his book *The Saddest Pleasure: A Journey on Two Rivers*, "Because I speak no Portuguese and have chosen to move through those parts of [Rio de Janeiro] where tourists do not go, I find after a few days of not speaking that I have begun to doubt my own existence." No wonder you form such close friendships in such a short time with your fellow trainees; they reassure you that you exist. Even communicating with folks back home may be difficult. While more and more sites have Internet and cellphone and land-line telephone access, many do not. You may have to hike to the nearest town to email family and friends in the States.

The Lack of Amenities

As if getting accustomed to so much that is new isn't enough, adjustment involves getting used to all the things that are missing; the countless useful items they simply don't have, for example, in Kazakhstan or Cameroon. Electricity, indoor plumbing, size AA batteries, telephones, sit-down toilets, hot water, oregano, an oven, English books and newspapers, Snickers bars, decent pens and paper, tape, chalk, toilet paper, certain spare parts, and flour that doesn't have little bugs in it. Then there are the appliances that don't work because of the current, the services that don't exist (reliable mail delivery, Internet access, good camera repair), and all the things you may not be able to do as easily or as safely as you did in the States: things like jogging or swimming, catching a film or a concert, stocking up on books, playing your favorite sport, or spending a quiet afternoon at an art gallery.

These countless tiny adjustments are at the core of the overseas experience. You do get used to them and even grow rather fond and protective of some of them, but in the beginning, when there is so much else that is new, it would be nice, after a long day of coping, if just once your water or soda could be ice-cold. The difficulty is that these things may have been what you used to relieve tension, relax, and recharge when the going got tough.

None of these adjustments poses much of a threat by itself; they are, for the most part, not especially significant and are sacrificed readily

enough. You may even take some satisfaction in doing without. But in the right circumstances, when they start to pile up or when other, more substantial changes begin to wear you down, just one or two of these petty irritations can become the *coup de grace* that may lead you to want to quit. Consider a Volunteer who terminated early from an island in the South Pacific. His termination report contained two paragraphs. The first explained that his job had not panned out how he'd expected and that there were host country people quite capable of doing what he had been sent to do. He went on to explain that he had tried to carve out an alternative where he could still prove useful, but that hadn't been possible. Thus, there seemed no recourse but to resign. His second paragraph, consisting of one sentence, was more heartfelt: "And besides," he wrote, "the salt doesn't come out of the shaker."

The Loss of Routines

The net effect of all these adjustments is the loss of many of your routines, and some claim that the essence of cultural adjustment is losing and re-establishing routines.

What is a routine and why is it so traumatic to lose one? Simply stated, a routine is something you do while your mind is on something else. It is an action you have done so many times that you no longer need to think about it to perform it. Most routines involve simple, uncomplicated behaviors that are easily mastered and always executed in a predictable, unchanging manner. For most people, brushing their teeth is a routine. You don't have to be consciously aware of picking up your toothbrush, opening the tube of toothpaste, squeezing the tube, raising your brush to your mouth, etc. You may give parts of this procedure fleeting attention, but, by and large, you are probably giving conscious attention to something else while you brush your teeth. The same can be said for numerous other actions you perform day in and day out.

Many routines involve basic coping and survival behaviors, such as bathing, dressing, eating, going to the bathroom, and driving. More complicated behaviors can also become routines over time; for some people, cooking certain meals can be a routine. Even some of the most complicated behaviors can have routine elements. Routines, by their very nature, use up very little of your mental and physical energy.

When you move to a new country, where nothing is known and familiar, your routines get disrupted mightily. Suddenly nothing, not even going to the bathroom, is a routine. The loss of routines means the energy that was available for higher-order, more sophisticated tasks now goes

to basic coping and survival. With the minutiae of everyday life now demanding much of your conscious attention, bigger things, like learning a language or a technical skill, may get put aside or take longer to master. Though many routines can be easily re-established—the second time you brush your teeth overseas, the action is fast becoming automatic—others, such as learning how to eat with your hands or taking a bucket bath, will take longer to master.

While you expect to have to learn how to do new things overseas and even new ways of doing familiar things, you may discover that you have to relearn how to do things you normally do without thinking. One Volunteer vividly remembered her first encounter with a squat toilet the first day of Peace Corps training. Taped to the wall was a six-step explanation of how to proceed, which she read with a mixture of relief and horror—relieved because the instructions were absolutely necessary, horrified to think that cultural differences could be quite so all-encompassing.

Alone

There are other things to get used to overseas, but these six—the climate, the food, the new community, the loss of language, the lack of amenities, and the loss of routines—have the most immediate, visceral impact. Each one takes a toll, but when they are encountered all at once—which, alas, is the norm—it can be nearly overwhelming. And while your fellow trainees are experiencing these same adjustments, sometimes it can feel like you are going through these experiences alone. But remember, Peace Corps trainers and staff and, of course, your fellow Volunteers, are all there to help you through training—and will be there throughout your service.

Culture Shock

Faced with so many adjustments all at once, most people experience what is commonly called culture shock (though “country shock” is a more accurate description). You begin to feel lethargic and require more sleep; you are easily bored, easily irritated, and effortlessly homesick. You feel increasingly inadequate and dependent. As even basic tasks elude you, your self-confidence takes a beating and doubts begin to spring up. You may start to wonder about your decision to become a Peace Corps Volunteer and whether you have made a terrible mistake.

In a sense, culture shock is both a reaction to novelty and a defense against it. There are definite physical symptoms that slow you down and may even take you out of circulation for a day or two. By pulling back and lying low, you shield yourself from further stress and have a chance to regroup.

In his *Orientation Handbook for Youth Exchange Programs*, Cornelius Grove describes culture shock with great clarity:

The reason why intercultural contact—especially a complete immersion experience such as an individual homestay—potentially results in this condition is that the sojourner is obliged to respond not merely to isolated instances of novelty in an otherwise familiar and reasonably predictable environment, but to novelties throughout many or most of the subtle and complex patterns of daily life that provide background and context for everything he or she is doing moment by moment. Usually the problem is not that a single stressor in the new environment is completely overwhelming, but rather that the body must respond to multiple stressors on a constant basis over a period of time lasting throughout the first several weeks or even months of the sojourn in the host culture.

Stress by no means has undesirable consequences every time it occurs. Stress does become a problem, however, when the neurological and endocrine systems are compelled to respond to environmental novelty constantly and over a long period of time. When this happens, the neurological system, and especially the endocrine system, can become debilitated through overstimulation. Repeated activation of the endocrine system over an extended duration disturbs the normal pattern of hormone secretion, which, in turn, has several undesirable physiological consequences such as a sharp reduction in the production of white blood cells (the central components of the body's immune system), which, in turn, lead to susceptibility to various diseases and/or exacerbation of chronic illness. Furthermore, the body becomes more and more exhausted as energy is used constantly to keep the two systems operating, to keep the brain and sensory organs in a high state of alertness, and to keep the body readied for fight, flight, or adaptation.

Physiologically speaking, culture shock is precisely this state of debilitation, exhaustion, and susceptibility to disease.¹

Culture shock isn't just in the mind and the emotions. It's also clear that merely ministering to the body isn't going to make culture shock go away. Your mental attitude toward adjustment, how you react to the novelty that surrounds you, will play a key role in your adjustment and assimilation.

So What Should I Do?

By reading this first chapter, you've taken an important first step. You know that culture shock is coming, and much of the sting of culture shock is in being caught off-guard. While being on your guard doesn't mean you won't get sick or feel discomfort, it does mean you may not react as strongly when you do. In short, the softer the landing, the quicker you'll get back up.

It also helps to be realistic. You've taken on a lot. It's only normal to be thrown, to feel a bit ill at ease, under the weather, out of sorts, scared, disappointed in yourself, and generally doubtful. Remember: This isn't just one more new experience; it's a whole new world. And whole new worlds, as a rule, take some getting used to.

Meanwhile, don't suffer in silence. Talking to others who are going through the same adjustments cheers you up, gets you out of yourself, helps them, and gives you what you need the most—perspective.

Remember, too, that you've adjusted to new situations before. They may not have been on this scale, but you've been in tight spots in the past and lived to tell about it. Give yourself some credit; you already have most of the knowledge, skills, and instincts you will need to prevail. You may have to apply them more deliberately and consciously, but you don't have to manufacture them on the spot.

As Craig Storti notes in *The Art of Crossing Cultures*:

We should try to be precise about the source of our frustrations. Some of our trials are new, the result of our new environment and changed circumstances, and may require original solutions. But many others are simply old trials turning up in a new place. As such, we already know what to do about them (i.e., the same thing we did the last time), provided, that is, we identify them for what they are. On the whole, life doesn't pose that many dilemmas; it merely recycles the same ones in new packaging.²

Besides cultivating the right attitude, you can take some concrete actions to fight culture shock. First, look after your health; if you protect the body, then you can take on the mind. Get plenty of rest and sleep; be careful about what you eat; get exercise and try to keep fit. A rested, healthy body can't dodge all parasites, but it can bounce back more quickly. To combat loneliness, make a conscious effort to keep in regular contact with friends and family. Email or write friends and family back home—even a short missive will help you feel connected.

In the end, you can't escape any of these adjustments; they come with the territory. But you *can* complicate and prolong adjustment by worrying too much about it. Have faith: In time, you *will* get used to the weather, make your peace with the food, learn your way around the community, get better in the language, start shedding amenities with reckless abandon, and create new routines. Meanwhile, don't lose sight of the fact that encountering and adjusting to another way of life was, after all, one of the reasons you joined the Peace Corps.

¹ Cornelius Lee Grove, *Orientation Handbook for Youth Exchange Programs* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1989).

² Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (Yarmouth, ME: Nicholas Brealey Publishing/Intercultural Press, 1989, 2001).

Chapter Two: The Pre-Service Training Experience

As Peace Corps trainees encountering and adjusting to the new country all around, you are simultaneously adjusting to another new world right in front of you: the Peace Corps pre-service training program. As a distinct and rather unique phase of the Peace Corps experience, PST, as it's known, presents its own special challenges quite apart from those described in Chapter 1.

There are two types of PST. Traditional PST revolves around a training center where most classroom activities and formal sessions occur and where trainees may also reside. Trainees often live with host country families in the vicinity of the training center and they come to the training center every day for most training events. The other type of PST is community-based. Here, trainees typically live in clusters in one or more villages or neighborhoods and come together with others in their cluster for language, cross-cultural, and some technical training. In this latter training method, the whole training group—all the clusters combined—will also gather periodically, usually once a week, for certain activities. Except where indicated, the issues discussed in this chapter apply to both traditional and community-based PST.

13

Strangers

Even though staging provided an opportunity and sessions to introduce you to your fellow trainees, to the Peace Corps and training, and to your country of service, once you are in-country, whatever style of PST you end up in will still be full of people you don't know very well, if at all. Meeting new people may be one of the reasons you joined the Peace Corps, but it still takes a lot of time and effort. The problem is largely one of scale: we meet new people all the time, but we are rarely in situations where everyone around us is a stranger. In pre-service training, that table at lunch is full of new people. And, after lunch, you go to a classroom that is likewise full of new people. And after that, you go back to your room or to your host family where you live with yet more strangers.

Getting to know one new person can be an enjoyable, often stimulating experience; getting to know 20 or 30 is a major undertaking. Think for a moment of what it's like to have a conversation over lunch with a friend as opposed to someone you've just met. With friends, you can relax and be yourself. With a stranger, you are naturally on your guard;

you have to concentrate and listen carefully. You have to be unusually self-aware and circumspect, monitoring closely everything you say and do because you can't know how he or she will react to you. While such a high state of awareness is possible for limited periods, it can only be maintained with great effort and concentration. Far from relaxing, making new acquaintances is more likely to be a draining experience.

People we know are usually our refuge and recourse when we go through change or otherwise trying times. They are the familiar and the constant we turn to even as things around us are unfamiliar and in a state of flux. But now, in the early days of PST, the people are just something else we have to get used to, part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Not in Control

During training, your time—and, indeed, your life—are not your own. Most PSTs are tightly scheduled; there's a lot to cover and not much time. This means spectacularly full days, partially filled evenings, and pre-empted Saturday mornings. You are told when to eat and where to be. You will probably feel like you are being treated like a child at times. You understand that training must be an orderly affair, that it's better if certain things are decided and done for you. All in all, it's not a bad bargain: you give up handy little personal freedoms and turn control of your life over to total strangers and get some very good training in return. Being adult humans, you quite understand this state of affairs, you readily accept it, and you smilingly acquiesce...

...And, if you're at all normal, you resent it.

Most trainees come from jobs where they did things. Now you're in training, and things are done for you. Even in the most participatory, hands-on training program, you are constantly in situations where someone is providing you with information, giving you advice, showing you how to do something, telling you how to behave and what to say. In short, people are helping you. This is natural enough under the circumstances—it is called training, after all. But if you've been a professional, competent in your field, responsible for your own work and even for the work of others, it is new and potentially unpleasant to suddenly feel a loss of control and a dependency on others.

Note that community-based training tries to give trainees more control over the training schedule and hence, over their lives. While there is

still much “doing unto,” trainees often feel they have more freedom with this kind of training than in the traditional PST.

Living with a Host Family

Most trainees live with a host country family during all or part of PST and sometimes for months or the full two years following swearing-in. This experience alone is a major adjustment, quite apart from any other novelties you might be facing. To begin with, most trainees haven't lived in a family setting for a while, so merely getting used to sharing living quarters with strangers takes some adjustments. You have to think about what you're wearing before you come out of your room, think of how whatever you're doing in the house is affecting others, and regularly check in with a number of people before planning your life. You are likely to have much less privacy than you had in your pre-Peace Corps living arrangement.

On top of all this, you might not understand a lot of what these people are saying or why they are doing the things they do. And they're having the same problem with you. Living with a host family is a tremendously enriching experience, teaching you more about the local culture in a day than you can learn from books and lectures in a year. The problem, of course, is that you aren't exactly in control of your learning. You never know where your next cross-cultural moment will come from, or when it's going to come, from whom, in what form, how long it's going to last, or what it's going to require of you. You only know that a learning experience is never very far away, hinging on almost everything you say and do.

Living with a host family is a constant adjustment, much of it cultural, some of it interpersonal, some of it physical. Most aspects are not especially taxing or complicated; some are even quite familiar, the kind of adjustments you'd make whenever you share living space with others. What is difficult is the *amount* of adjusting you have to do—the sheer number of things that are different from what you are used to. You do get accustomed to these things, of course—some of them rather quickly, others at a more leisurely pace—but at times your load seems almost too heavy to bear.

More is...More

If adjusting to the country, the host family, and the nature of training were all a trainee had to do, that would still be a tall order. But a trainee, after all, is in training: going to classes, going on field trips, trying to learn a new language, a new culture, and any number of brand-new skills (or at least how to apply old skills in this new setting). A trainee's primary activity is supposed to be learning—mastering a wide variety of new skills and absorbing enormous amounts of new information.

In one way, this dynamic of excess actually works to your advantage. Faced with so many adjustments, you can escape into books and handouts, into the content of training. Language, technical, and cross-cultural classes become something of a safe haven, a familiar setting where you know what's expected of you and how to behave. After all, you don't have to adjust to language class or a cross-cultural lecture; you just have to show up. The training agenda gives your otherwise chaotic, unstable circumstances some welcome structure and a discernible pattern.

A Volunteer in Mali writes:

You will receive training in cross-culture, in languages, sector-specific technical training, community development philosophies, and skills transfer. Also, you will learn to care for your health and safety. As if that weren't enough, you'll be dealing with culture shock, diarrhea, sickness, and reassessing your commitment. There is much to learn, a lot of structure, and everything and everyone is new. Prepare yourself to be challenged, enthusiastic, and flexible.

Guilt

For most trainees, training and its associated adjustments will start to take their toll. You may get impatient with people, and lose your sense of humor—and perspective. You may fly off the handle at the drop of a hat, resent almost anything you're asked to do, especially things you know are good for you. And you'll feel guilty about all this. Here are these nice people, doing all they can to help you, this great series of learning opportunities designed expressly for your special needs, this lovely host family going out of their way to take care of you. And you're counting the days until it's finally over.

What's wrong with you? Why should you want something that is so good for you to be over? It may make perfect sense intellectually to keep wanting more of what's good for you, but it makes no sense emotionally. The fact is there will be several times during training, especially the latter half, when you will feel physically and emotionally drained, quite incapable of absorbing any more input.

Curiously enough, for all your impatience for it to be over, you may also miss training. As frustrating and tedious as it can be at times, training is still the known world. You have, by the end, gotten the hang of it. You know your way around and what's expected of you; life as a trainee has become predictable. Training may be an ordeal, but at least it's a familiar ordeal.

Solutions

As you encounter the various frustrations of PST and of living in the new country, it's important to distinguish them. While any one can manifest at any time, it's not likely they will all be active all the time. If you can identify the two or three things bothering you at a given stage, then you have a better chance of coping with them. It doesn't help to say it's training or it's the host country. Maybe it's just the food, which a trip to a nice restaurant might ameliorate. Or maybe it's your language teacher, when a word with the language coordinator might clear up the difficulty. Unless you can be precise about the problem, you can never be sure of the solution.

17

Of course, not every problem goes away once it's discovered and identified. If it turns out you're homesick, being precise about it probably won't make you feel any less homesick. But even then, just pinning down what's the matter can be something of a relief; at least now you know it isn't all those other things it might have been. To that end, here is a list of some of the things that usually affect trainees. Use it to help put your finger on what's bothering you.

- No mail from home
- Upsetting mail from home
- The weather
- The food
- No time to myself
- No one to talk to
- Too many Americans
- Tired of being culturally sensitive

- Don't get along with roommate(s)
- Don't get along with host family
- Don't get along with trainers
- Feeling guilty about not liking everything about, and everyone from, your host country
- Worried about someone back home
- Not feeling well
- Missing a certain activity (e.g., tennis, reading, movies)
- Missing certain foods
- Sick of feeling vulnerable or dependent
- Miss feeling like an adult
- Not used to such a competitive environment
- It's too nice here; I'm not suffering enough
- This isn't what I expected
- Worried about progress in technical training
- Tired of time being scheduled by other people
- Worried about progress in language

It's not fair to characterize Peace Corps training as a kind of necessary evil, that it somehow doesn't get anything right. It actually gets many things right. We've dwelt on its inherent frustrations and difficulties so you can better understand the process. But any trainee will tell you that, while it can be intense and even overwhelming, PST is also a time of tremendous personal growth and self-discovery. You discover new levels of endurance, patience, tolerance, and strength inside yourself. You make lasting friends in no time at all. You will be sorely tested—but you will prevail!

Chapter Three: **Settling In**

Like pre-service training (PST), settling in is a distinct period of Peace Corps service and one that poses unique adjustment challenges. The most striking thing you will learn during settling in is that life as a Volunteer bears precious little resemblance to life as a trainee. This might not matter so much if you were expecting these differences, and, therefore, the adjustments they require, but you're probably not. If you've thought about life after training at all, you're probably expecting it to be some kind of variation on the theme of PST, but not a different theme altogether. After all, training is to prepare you to be a Volunteer, so there must be some carryover, some similarities, to actually being a Volunteer.

The Vanishing Americans

The first thing you will probably notice is that you're no longer in daily contact with other Americans. While there were times in PST when you wanted nothing more than to get away from all the Americans, you have to admit it was nice to speak English once in a while. It was also nice to spend part of your day around people from your own culture with whom you could somewhat relax, be yourself, and not have to worry about being culturally insensitive. Only now do you realize that during training you really lived just part-time in the local culture. Now you are living in it full-time.

You also miss the company of your fellow trainees for other reasons. It's a little scary being on your own and would be reassuring to have someone to confide in, to compare notes with now and then. You'll occasionally have some doubt, and even second thoughts during this transition period, before things begin to fall into place.

Talking Points

Another surprise you may have during settling in is to discover that your language skills aren't as good as you thought. This is partly because you weren't using your language as much in training as you are now, and you may not have seen the limits of your ability quite so clearly. It is also because your language trainers and other training staff, and even members of your host family, understood your level of linguistic competence and were careful not to exceed it. Moreover, these same people were accustomed to the error-laden version of their language spoken by beginners and may have given you the impression you were

doing better than you really were. Now, very few of the locals you meet speak the “special” Kiswahili or Spanish people used in training. Nor do they always recognize their native tongue in the sounds coming from your mouth.

Culture Lab

Not only is PST something of a linguistic no-fault zone, it is a cross-cultural one as well. Training is supposed to be a place to make mistakes and learn from them. It’s a kind of laboratory in which you can experiment in a protected, controlled environment and consequences of missteps are largely contained. Your host families have probably even been warned that you’ll be unintentionally boorish now and then and that they shouldn’t take it personally. In short, people know you’re on a learning curve and will make allowances for you. Unfortunately, this can give you the false impression that you’re more culturally sensitive than you are or that cultural sensitivity isn’t as difficult as it’s been made out to be.

It will be different outside the world of PST. Gone are the days of the special response, the long-suffering smile followed by the gentle correction and the patient explanation. While host country people typically give foreigners the benefit of the doubt, your cultural mistakes will definitely have consequences. People will judge you by what you do, not necessarily by what you meant to do.

Another striking difference between PST and settling in is all the free time you suddenly have—especially in the first few weeks after training. Your days as a trainee were incredibly busy, full of scheduled events from early morning until early evening, with hardly a moment to catch your breath. You would have given anything for some free time. Now, before you settle into your job, there are days when you would give anything for something to do. As hard as it was to adjust to the frenetic pace of training, it turns out to be even harder to be weaned from. Even when you start your Peace Corps job in earnest, chances are you will still not be as busy as you initially were as a trainee.

Cooking? No One Said Anything About Cooking!

Another discovery that awaits you during settling in is how many things were done for you during training, things that you now realize you’ve never had to do in-country. You may never have cooked a meal, for example, done your own laundry, gone food shopping, had your bicycle

fixed, or been inside a bank, a butcher shop, or a clinic. This was intentional, of course. Training staff take care of the nitty-gritty of everyday life for you so you can concentrate on the big stuff. If you went on a field trip during training, chances are the transportation was all arranged; you just had to step into a van or climb on a bus. If you went on a visit to a Volunteer's site, you were probably given an extensive orientation on how to get around the area, a detailed map to your host's house, and emergency numbers to call if you got into trouble.

As necessary and well intentioned as all this help may have been, it didn't do much to prepare you for life after training. It may have even set you back a bit. That is, you got used to it and may even have come to depend on it. When this support is suddenly taken away, you're left high and dry and probably a bit puzzled. Training, after all, was supposed to prepare you to become a Volunteer, so why is it you suddenly feel less competent and able to look after yourself than when you first arrived in-country? The short answer is that while the content of training—language, technical, safety, and cross-cultural know-how—does prepare you to become a Volunteer, it can't substitute for actually living in the culture. So you may know, for example, the Hungarian words for 15 different spices, but may not have prepared a meal for yourself since you arrived in Budapest.

The Culture of PST

21

What you've been adjusting to has not been the local culture and life as a Volunteer, but the culture of Peace Corps training and life as a trainee. It's only natural, of course, that you have adjusted to the experience you've been having, not the one you're preparing for, but it still comes as a surprise, perhaps even a disappointment, that you've been in the country so long and still have so much adjusting to do.

Don't make too much of this. There will be some unexpected adjustments coming your way during settling in, but you'll learn to manage. Nor should you look at your PST as having failed you or somehow set you up for a fall. The typical PST does a remarkable job of preparing Volunteers—the proof of which is those same Volunteers' outstanding record of service to their host countries.

Community-based PST has made great efforts to minimize the artificiality of training. Indeed, this style of training was created to address this very issue. If you were part of this kind of training, you may find the transition to becoming a Volunteer somewhat smoother.

Slow Starting

Another issue you may face during settling in, unrelated to the culture of training, is the possibility that you won't get down to your job as quickly as you expected. You leave PST thinking that the waiting and the preparing are finally over. After months of contemplating Peace Corps service, several more months of being an applicant, and two months or more as a trainee, your service is about to begin at last.

The reality for many Volunteers is that the first month or two of settling in are a transition between PST and the actual start of work. You may be fairly busy during this period, but much of what you'll be doing is, well, settling in. You may need to arrange for housing, maybe even water and electricity. You'll have to buy furniture, set up a bank account, arrange for mail delivery—take care of all the tasks associated with setting up shop in a new place.

You may not have to report to work right away. Even if you do, you'll probably be eased into your duties. You'll be oriented to how the office or clinic or school or cooperative works, you'll be introduced to and perhaps feted by your new colleagues or even some VIPs, and maybe you'll even get some on-the-job training. In some cases, there may not be specific work, but rather a job to create. In any case, much of what you do during the first month or two will feel like still more preparation, more waiting and anticipating, instead of honest-to-goodness *doing*.

Where Are the Hardships?

Another realization may now strike you that the Peace Corps isn't going to be hard in quite the way you thought. Many Volunteers find their living conditions plusher than they had imagined, that they aren't going to be coping with the dreaded hardships they had anticipated and steeled themselves against. "For the first few days I was in awe," a Volunteer in Malawi wrote. "I didn't expect my house to be this nice."

Volunteers often feel that the greater their suffering, especially their physical suffering, the greater their contribution. They may think that they will somehow be more effective if they read by candlelight and bathe in the river. Some Volunteers even eschew readily available comforts so they can experience what they consider the requisite degree of deprivation. Doing without is part of the image and mythology of the Peace Corps, and some Volunteers associate it with success. In truth, there is no such equivalency. Even if you do have hot running water, you

can still cover yourself in glory just as easily as a Volunteer who sleeps under a date palm and takes sponge baths.

This is not to say that sacrifices aren't part of the Peace Corps package. It's just that they aren't always as obvious, dramatic, or romantic as warding off bat-sized insects and enduring weeks of plain rice. The real sacrifice you make in the Peace Corps is in the tremendous daily and hourly effort required to speak in another language and be effective in another culture, the constant struggle to be self-aware and sensitive. Writes a Volunteer in Guinea Bissau:

Most of us agree that although we knew Peace Corps was going to be hard, it is often hard in a different way than we expected. We all worried about adjusting to the bugs and the heat, but that's the easy part. It's more of a challenge to get used to dealing with a perplexing bureaucracy, the lack of motivation in some host country counterparts, the lack of technology and education, and cultural barriers.

So in the meantime, don't worry: It's still noble work even if the shop on the corner does carry M&Ms. They're probably stale anyway.

But This Isn't What I Expected!

23

All Volunteers have expectations. Some are undone by them. Expectations are normal and inevitable; they are our way of dealing with the unknown, which is inherently unsettling. While you're still back home, you naturally begin to wonder about what your Peace Corps experience will be like—about the country, the job, the people—and whether you're up to it. You get all the information you can and begin to create an image of what it may be like. The more you dwell on and fill out this image, the more you start to believe in it—until you forget altogether that this is only your notion of how things might be.

All of which is terribly reassuring. Now that you “know” how things are, you imagine yourself in these circumstances and realize that you can cope (or that you can't, at which point you do not pursue Peace Corps service any further). From this point on, you no longer expect your Peace Corps experience to be a certain way; you depend on it being that way. In short, this is no longer a vision of what your experience might be like; it's a vision of what it had better be like. When the reality differs from expectations, as it often does, you can become disappointed.

This reaction is natural enough under the circumstances, but you need to get beyond it. You owe it to yourself, to the Peace Corps, and, most especially, to the host country to consider whether the experience it now appears you're going to have, different as it may be from what you expected, can still be satisfying and fulfilling. If you can still make an important contribution under these admittedly unforeseen conditions, does it really matter that much that you've been taken by surprise?

Chapter Four: **A New Culture**

Cultural adjustment continues as you step off the plane and meet a foreigner. It could be at the customs counter where the fellow tells you he's rather busy at the moment and then saunters off into his glass-paneled office for a conspicuous and rather lengthy coffee break. That incomprehension and mounting frustration you feel are the beginning of your reaction to the new culture. And reaction is where all adjustment starts.

You've been adjusting to the host culture from day one, of course—in formal and informal ways, sometimes on purpose and sometimes by accident. Once you begin life and work as a Volunteer, you encounter culture more regularly and in a greater variety of circumstances than you have before. You have to understand and deal with it more thoroughly than you have up till now. As a trainee, culture is something you study and practice getting used to; as a Volunteer, practice season is over and the game has begun.

Culture As Behavior

You should not think of culture as an abstraction, an intellectual construct composed of a pattern of various assumptions, attitudes, and values. It is that, of course, but it is not in that form that you actually experience culture. Rather, you encounter it in the behavior and actions of people who have been conditioned by, and respond in accordance with, certain assumptions and values. As Craig Storti wrote in *The Art of Crossing Cultures*:

25

It is behavior, the principal manifestation and most significant consequence of culture, that we actually experience. To put it another way: it is culture as encountered in behavior that we must learn to live with.

It is not Islam that annoys us—most of us know very little about it—but the actions of our Moslem landlord. We don't have to adjust to Buddhism, but it behooves us to try to understand our Buddhist gardener or our Buddhist colleagues at work.

Behavior, then, is [the] subject. But not all behavior. While it is in behavior that we experience—and express—culture, not all behavior is rooted in culture. Many of our actions—caring for our children, communicating through language—are inherently human, the common property of our species and unchanging from culture to culture. At the opposite end of the continuum

is the behavior which is unique to each individual, rooted in personal experience. It is this behavior which allows us to distinguish individuals within a particular culture. Our landlord behaves in certain ways because he's a Moslem (and that's his culture) and in other ways because he's Hassan, second son of Ali and Khadija, raised by his grandmother in the village of Tetouan where the family moved when he was three.

Nearly all Americans eat three meals a day: one in the morning, one at midday, and one in the evening. This is cultural behavior. But some people have cereal for breakfast, others toast; some have a light lunch and a full dinner, others vice versa; some people eat in the dining room (at least when company comes), others in the living room with the TV playing. These are individual behaviors, personal variations on a cultural theme.¹

Don't think of culture in the abstract. For one thing, it makes the notion of adjusting to culture seem more like an intellectual exercise than the day-to-day, almost moment-to-moment psychological and emotional reality that it is. For another, it depersonalizes adjustment, suggesting that somehow it doesn't have much to do with people. If I can just adjust to the culture, you think, then maybe I'll get along with Raoul. But Raoul *is* culture; if you can get along with him, you have adjusted. Thinking about and looking at culture as concrete behavior and specific actions demystifies it and reduces it to manageable units you can readily identify and come to terms with. This doesn't mean there isn't a link between behavior and the more abstract assumptions, but only that in talking about adjusting to culture, it's essential to think of it in more human terms.

Intellect and Emotions

The process of cultural adjustment is relatively easy to explain—and devilishly difficult to grasp. You can understand the notion intellectually and, at the same time, fail utterly to appreciate the true meaning. Understanding a cultural concept is only the first and possibly easiest step in a very long and often never completed process leading ultimately to acceptance and true adjustment. At any given time, concerning any given cultural attitude or behavior, you can be anywhere on this continuum. The Volunteer about to complete service will have adjusted to certain behaviors long since, be well on the way to adjusting to others, and be just starting to deal with still others.

Don't confuse an understanding or appreciation of the process of cultural adjustment with the actual achievement of successful adjustment. Likewise, don't assume that because you are favorably disposed toward adjustment—or at least toward meeting, living, and working with foreigners—that the hard part is over. As you'll see below, it is not true that because you understand why foreigners behave the way they do that you accept that behavior. Cultural knowledge is part of the foundation for successful adjustment, but it isn't the goal. This is especially important when you consider that the content of many of the Peace Corps' cross-cultural training sessions and materials include just that kind of information. Information is a tool, a necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition for successful adjustment. For instance, knowing that a Tanzanian is going to try to bargain with you doesn't mean you're going to like it when he or she does. And if you're still not liking most of what Tanzanians do, you haven't adjusted.

Adjusting to another culture requires three abilities:

- Predicting the behavior of host country nationals
- Accepting host country behavior
- Changing your own behavior

This chapter will consider these abilities one at a time, but they are not necessarily acquired in this sequence. It may be quite possible to conform to certain host country norms before you've altogether accepted them.

Predicting the Behavior of Host Country Nationals

Predicting the behavior of others is essential for any interaction, whether at home or abroad. In your own culture, you know instinctively how people are going to behave in most situations, including how they are going to react to what you say and do. If this were not the case, then most human interaction would be chaotic. If you didn't know generally what was going to happen when you walked into a meeting (that people would sit on chairs, not shout, wear clothes, etc.), drove out onto the highway (that people would obey all the written and hundreds of unwritten rules of highway and driving behavior), stepped up to the checkout stand, or got in an elevator—if every such incident were completely unpredictable each time it occurred, you would be unable to function. As the pioneer inter-culturalist Edward Hall wrote: "Staying comfortable is largely a matter of culture. Informal or core culture is the foundation on which interpersonal relations rest. All of the little things people take for granted depend on sharing informal patterns."²

These expected actions are behavioral norms. They are unconscious, but they are at the heart of any interaction between two or more people. If you doubt this, just remember how you feel when one of these norms is not obeyed. Consider if a man next to you suddenly sits down on the floor as soon as the elevator door closes. Without having to think about it, you are instantly aware that something odd has happened. And you know it's odd because it's different from anything in your previous experience, *because it's not the norm*. We even call such behavior *abnormal*.

Predicting behavior, then, is essential for successful human interaction. It's no less essential overseas than at home. The problem is that overseas you don't know the norms and therefore can't predict the behavior. Actually, the problem is even more complicated because even though you don't know the norms, you will still predict the behavior. That is, you automatically expect the same behavior you would find back home. This isn't logical or rational, but you're not in the realm of logic here; you're in the realm of conditioning that kicks in quite instinctively. Even if you could intervene, if you could check and override your conditioned responses or instincts, how would you start expecting, say, Romanians to behave? You can't expect behavior you've never encountered before. And yet you have to expect *some* kind of behavior, so you fill the void with those expectations that come most readily to mind: those from your own culture. What you need is to learn the norms of the host country and internalize them so that they become what you start to expect. Then you will have taken the first step to successful cultural adjustment. You can learn these new norms in three ways: through reading about them, through discussion, and, most importantly, through your own personal observation. As you observe how host country people behave in different situations, you will come to expect these behaviors in these same situations.

The most favorable circumstances for observing behavior are situations in which you're not personally involved, where you are a bystander and an observer. It's difficult to participate fully in an interaction and observe it at the same time; you are too busy responding to and trying to manage in the situation to actually see very much of it. As much as possible, during the early days and weeks of your tour, try to put yourself in third-party situations. Look for situations that don't necessarily require your presence, but where it also wouldn't be obtrusive. Ask counterparts to take you along to meetings, site visits, and various appointments. This can happen quite naturally in the beginning, when you are being oriented to your job and aren't expected to do or say very much. It can be an excellent opportunity to study all manner of inter-

actions and learn the prescribed patterns and norms. You can use the same technique off the job, too. Ask friends if you can tag along when they go shopping, get a haircut, or go to the post office or to the bank.

Accepting Host Country Behavior

It's one thing to be able to predict and expect host country behavior; it's quite another to like it. Knowing full well that your landlord is not going to reimburse you for the emergency plumbing work you had done last week doesn't make you any happier when he refuses. While being able to predict behavior is essential for effective interaction, that skill by itself doesn't constitute successful cultural adjustment. It may very well mean you won't be surprised as often, but it doesn't mean you're feeling fine about the locals.

The next step in adjustment, then, is developing the ability to "accept" host country behavior. The word accept is being used in a special sense here: it does not mean liking or approving, and especially not adopting, but rather accepting the inevitability and logic of a particular behavior, of trusting that, irritating as it may be, the behavior is nevertheless appropriate in the other culture. You accept the behavior because you understand that it makes sense in the local culture, however rude, offensive, or strange the behavior would be in yours.

29

Just how do you come to such an understanding? The classic route to cultural understanding and acceptance has three basic steps:

- You become aware of your own cultural assumptions and values
- You accept the reality of your own cultural conditioning
- You accept the reality of the cultural conditioning of others

Unlike the three parts of adjustment, the components of acceptance must be acquired in sequence. Until you believe that you actually *have* cultural assumptions, you aren't likely to accept that you've been conditioned by them. Unless you can accept that *you* have been conditioned by your *culture*, you're not likely to accept that *others* have been conditioned by *theirs*. As a rule, people rarely believe something to be true of others that they have not found to be true of themselves. You might accept such a thing intellectually, but you will probably not trust it emotionally. At the heart of successful cultural adjustment, it turns out, lurks a fundamental paradox: Only by seeing that foreigners are just like you in certain respects can you accept that they might also be different.

You must start by becoming aware of your own cultural assumptions and values. You might think this is easy; you live in your culture, after all, so your assumptions should be readily apparent. But the people who live in a particular culture, who manifest that culture in their everyday actions, are the least likely to be aware of it. This is because you express your culture naturally, unconsciously, without thinking about it. The values and assumptions that underlie your behavior are buried deep in your psyche, well beyond conscious awareness. You almost never have a need to examine them. This is why it's not until you leave your own country that you begin to learn about it. This is why foreigners can tell you more about America than most Americans ever could.

Behavior is intimately tied to values and assumptions in a cause-and-effect relationship. The things you say and do are based on what you cherish (your values) and what you believe in (your assumptions). Once you see this truth at work in yourself, you can begin to accept that it must also be at work in others, in particular, in the host country nationals you deal with every day. If you can accept that people do the things they do based on values and assumptions, that their behavior is caused or conditioned, then you can also accept that people with values and assumptions different from yours will, of course, behave differently from you.

30

At this point, you will have an appreciation of the authenticity of host country behavior, even those behaviors you may not like. You won't immediately translate that appreciation into wholehearted acceptance of all local cultural norms, but you will start to see the host culture in a genuinely different light.

Changing Your Own Behavior

A third step in adjustment is the ability to change your own behavior to conform to host country norms. Effective Peace Corps service requires not only that you predict and get used to host country nationals, but that you adjust your own behavior so you don't offend them. You try to behave in a way they expect. If you have observed the behavior of the locals and know how they are going to act in a given situation, then you may know how you are expected to act as well. Over time, you can adjust your behavior to conform to more and more of these norms, thereby hastening the day when not only are you more accepting of the behavior of the locals, but they are more accepting of you.

Cultural Sensitivity

None of this means that you will like or even grow accustomed to everything host country nationals do—or that you should even try to. This is neither a necessary nor desirable goal. It isn't even possible. But Volunteers may think there's something wrong with them if they can't approve of and embrace everything the locals do. Indeed, the two most charged words in the Peace Corps lexicon are "cultural insensitivity." Volunteers will admit to almost any other fault—being weak in Russian, having poor technical skills, being impatient, overeager, under-eager—but accuse a Volunteer of being culturally insensitive and you will get an almost visceral reaction.

Being culturally sensitive means being aware of and alert to the norms and behaviors of the local culture and, as far as possible, not transgressing them. It does not mean liking or accepting all these norms, much less embracing them or substituting them for your own. This is confusing cultural sensitivity with cultural conversion. While there may very well be certain host country values and behaviors you genuinely like or even adopt, there are bound to be other aspects of the culture that you will find troubling, even offensive, just as the locals may find aspects of your culture offensive. You're not about to adopt or even like these norms, nor do you have to do so to be an effective Volunteer.

31

Can I Still Be Me?

Occasionally, Volunteers have a more serious problem with cultural sensitivity. In this scenario, the problem is not holding yourself to an unreasonable standard, but what to do when the actions or behavior necessary to be culturally sensitive conflict with deeply held personal values and beliefs. What do you do when cultural sensitivity can only be bought at the price of your own self-respect?

This is one of the greatest challenges of the Peace Corps experience. It embodies a classic confrontation between a core value of the Peace Corps and a fundamental truth of human psychology: namely, that to be happy and well-adjusted, one has to be true to oneself. What happens if being true to yourself flies in the face of local cultural norms? Let's say, for example, you work in a clinic for poor mothers and their children. You discover that one of the nurses in your clinic regularly treats her two sisters and their children although they are not poor and therefore not eligible for this service. When you confront your colleague, she says that, in her culture, for someone in her position not to help out her own family would be unthinkable. For your part, you find this behavior unacceptable. What do you do?

In some cases, the dilemma is not quite so dramatic or so imbued with moral overtones. In many Peace Corps countries, for example, social drinking is culturally *de rigueur*, but you may not drink and do not want to start. What do you do to keep from offending the locals? In some cultures, being culturally sensitive means that female Volunteers should not frequent cafés, cinemas—even restaurants—by themselves, or make eye contact in the street with men they don't know. What do you do if you find these adjustments to your lifestyle unacceptable? As one female Volunteer observed, "I became a good Tunisian woman, but I liked the way I was before."

When you are faced with these dilemmas, your first course of action should be to make sure you understand what lies behind the particular behavior you find so troubling. What is the explanation in that culture for this behavior? Whatever you may think of the reason behind a particular behavior, chances are it makes sense in the local culture. Why? Because, by and large, whole cultures don't behave in ways that defy logic. Once you see the local logic, you may be able to live with the behavior.

Using the example of the nurse, you may decide that the logic here—that people in certain cultures look out for their own, and everyone understands and expects this—is acceptable, in which case you no longer have a conflict between your principles and the local cultural norm. But then again, you may conclude that this behavior is just unfair to poorer women and children, that you can't look yourself in the mirror if you don't do something. Now what?

Now that you've chosen to take a stand on personal principle, you need to decide what level or degree of action on your part will satisfy your principles. To that end, you should examine your options in the particular situation. You may decide that speaking to the nurse or to her supervisor is enough. Or you may decide that she will have to change her behavior before you will be satisfied. In evaluating your options, you should consider the probable consequences of each one. For many situations, all that's necessary is to explain to people why you feel the way you do about something or why you are not able to do what is expected of you. In any case, if you're being responsible about all this, you will try to select a course of action that strays no further than necessary beyond local cultural norms. In other words, when you decide for reasons of conscience to knowingly act in a culturally inappropriate manner—to depart from the letter of the law of cultural sensitivity—you can still try to be faithful to the spirit of that law.

Even when you decide on your overall course of action, there will still be numerous smaller decisions to make, dealing with such matters as timing and tactics. You need to choose your moment and your battles carefully, not to mention your words. When you take a stand on principle—a stand that may not be understood by others—you should try to pull it off as gracefully as possible.

We come back to the question at the head of this section: Can I still be me? In the end, you have to be yourself or you will be neither content nor effective as a Volunteer. Most of the time, this is easy. But on those occasions when it isn't, when being you may not be appreciated or understood in the local culture, you will have to stand your ground. Remember: if you're not happy with who you are, chances are other people aren't going to be either.

The Possibility of Friendship

The advantages of adjusting to the local culture are self-evident, though one merits special notice. Schooling yourself in the host culture not only allows you to get along and work well with the local people, it allows you to know who they are. Until you know what behavior is mandated by the culture in any given country, you can't know what it is about, say, Alfredo that is Ecuadorian and what is simply Alfredo. In your own culture, you instinctively know what behavior is culturally appropriate or normal in a given situation. Thus, you can attribute variations to the individual; you start to see individuals almost at once. Overseas, until you know the norms, you can never be sure where the culture stops and Alfredo begins.

33

Your relationships with host country nationals, then, as well as their relationships with you, are necessarily unsteady in the beginning—more cultural than personal. It is only when each of you emerges from the protective cover of culture that the truth of your individual personalities can be seen and known. And it is only on this foundation that deep and lasting friendships can be built.

¹ Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (Yarmouth, ME: Nicholas Brealey Publishing/Intercultural Press, 1989, 2001).

² Edward T. Hall, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 1984).

Chapter Five: The World of Work

Probably the most common source of frustration for Peace Corps Volunteers is their work. While the nature of these frustrations varies widely from country to country, program to program, and even among individuals within the same program, the sources of these various difficulties are the same the world over: programmatic problems, cultural differences, and interpersonal problems. The first and last of these are not unique to the Peace Corps; you can be frustrated in any job by the nature of your work or by the individuals with whom you have to work. However, job frustrations caused by cultural differences are something new to many Volunteers and deserve some discussion.

Culture: A New Ingredient

Culture as the cause of job problems is often overlooked by Volunteers. For one thing, it's not one of the usual suspects. In the past, job frustrations have resulted from dissatisfaction with the work or from problems with colleagues and managers. So, when something goes wrong on the job overseas, you try to explain it in the usual way. Another reason cultural explanations are overlooked is that Volunteers often don't know enough about the culture to identify it as the source of the problem. If you don't know that deference to superiors is expected in Morocco, for example, then you wouldn't know that culture is the reason your boss is so cold to you.

35

Some Volunteers, incidentally, take just the opposite tack and blame all their problems at work on the culture. They assume that culture is at the bottom of everything that goes wrong overseas. In these cases, they overlook more prosaic explanations right under their noses, such as obvious interpersonal differences, in their rush to lay the blame of culture at the door. If you have a problem with a host country colleague with whom someone else from your culture gets along quite nicely, then the cause of your difficulty may not be cultural. Though culture is often to blame for problems on the job, it isn't always the guilty party.

Common Culprits

Wherever you serve, there will be numerous U.S./host country cultural differences in work-related behaviors and values. While these will not be the same for every country, there are four differences that are widespread throughout the Peace Corps and particularly difficult to adjust to for many Volunteers. These are:

- The concept of power
- Cultural dichotomies
- Direct and indirect communication styles
- The pace of events

The Concept of Power

Power distance refers to the degree to which people in a given culture accept the unequal distribution of power and influence. In low power-distance cultures, such as the United States, distinctions between manager and subordinate are generally downplayed. Managers don't normally pull rank or otherwise claim special status, and subordinates generally work independently of their bosses. For this reason, Volunteers in high power-distance countries might perceive bosses as power hungry, even dictatorial. Volunteers sometimes feel micromanaged and restricted by such bosses. It can be annoying to have to check with superiors for permission to do even routine tasks, to learn that taking initiative is not always appreciated, and to discover that going around your immediate supervisor to the next level of management can make you unpopular. You may find that it's unwise to question or contradict your boss, even though you know better. You may have to be much more deferential and subservient than you're used to being.

36

Not surprisingly, your bosses often wonder the same about you. You may embarrass them by disagreeing with them in front of others or by going around them in the chain of command. You undermine their authority by going off and doing things without asking for permission. You're more concerned about getting things done than getting them done according to established practices and procedures. You only come to them when you have a problem or question and don't keep them closely informed about what you're doing. You often don't show them the proper amount of deference, treating them the same way you treat everyone else, thereby undermining their status and position.

Cultural Dichotomies

Equality, trying to treat everyone the same, is a bedrock American value. The notion of making fundamental distinctions between people and treating them accordingly smacks of inequality to many of us. The idea that some people should get special treatment or certain advantages because of circumstances or connections puts many Volunteers off. It's unfair and unjust; it's not right. But for many people in other cultures, life isn't like that. If circumstances seem to favor you, you'd

better make the most of it, for you never know when your status may change. How can it be unfair or unjust to have good fortune? People in these cultures don't always understand why Volunteers get so worked up about showing favoritism or giving certain people preferential treatment. Why would you want to treat everyone the same if you could treat those near and dear to you better?

Americans see the locus of control as internal; ultimately, there's no excuse for not getting things done or getting what you want. Or, more accurately, the only excuse is that you just haven't done or won't do what it takes to get the desired result. The effect of this worldview is at once quite liberating: I can do whatever I want; and quite daunting: if something doesn't happen, it's my fault. Volunteers don't always understand when host country people fail to see the link between their actions and a certain desired end. There's always a link, you can always have an affect, if you're willing to be the cause. And if you're not willing, it's either because you don't understand or you're lazy.

But what if the world isn't like that? What if there are limits to what people can do to get the results they want? What if there are other factors, that after you've done all you can, you may still not get the result you want? Imagine how people who believe this feel when a Volunteer is upset with them for not caring enough or not wanting something badly enough to make the required effort. What if they want this thing desperately, even more than the Volunteer, but simply feel they have done all they can?

37

Direct and Indirect Communication Styles

Americans are direct communicators. We tend to interpret the words people say more or less literally. We also expect people to interpret our words literally and not read any meaning into them that isn't there. For us, what isn't there wasn't meant. And we assume, in turn, that other people mean exactly what they say and not something else.

The problem for direct communicators is that they miss a lot of what indirect communicators mean. Direct communicators are not good at reading between the lines because they put their meaning in the lines, in the words. American-style direct communicators sometimes come across as unduly blunt or harsh to indirect communicators. Host country nationals may interpret meanings that were not intended, or, trying to read between the lines, assume Volunteers don't mean what they have actually said.

The Pace of Events

Very few Volunteers escape from their tour of duty without bemoaning how long it takes to get things done in-country. In many cases, this complaint is related to several of the cultural differences discussed above. Decision-making, for example, often takes much longer in high power-distance cultures where authority and responsibility are much more centralized. The tendency to favor one's in-group can also mean that Volunteers' needs don't get much attention whenever they're dealing with people who don't know them. And the more external/fatalist point of view common in many developing countries often means that things happen with less urgency than in more activist cultures.

There are also more immediate reasons why things can take longer in developing countries. These include poor transportation and communication systems, lack of supplies and parts, lack of funds, and poorly paid employees with few incentives for being efficient. "Imagine being dropped into a huge vat of honey," a Volunteer from Jamaica observed. "That's how things are accomplished here. Slowly."

This frustration is especially acute for Volunteers. Americans tend to define themselves by their achievements. If you don't have any achievements to point to—which you don't if you're a Volunteer still waiting for your project to get off the ground—you are deeply affected. This can be frustrating because you know you're only in your host country for a limited time, and that time is slowly running out as you wait for, say, the district procurement officer to get back from his vacation and sign your request for a used generator.

Trust Me

Two related problems are time and trust. When you start any new job, you are going to be under observation for several months. No responsible employer will trust you with important tasks, tasks that can directly affect the well-being of the organization and of fellow employees, until you have demonstrated that you're up to the job. This can be magnified in another culture where the presumption, unlike at home, is that you can't possibly know what's going on. Put yourself in the place of, say, a Swazi national to whose office you've just been assigned. In you walk, in clothes that aren't quite appropriate, speaking rather child-like and ungrammatical Kiswahili with an appalling accent, exhibiting culturally curious body language and other slightly exotic nonverbal behavior, and generally unsure of where or even who you are. Would

you be impressed by such a person? Would you immediately turn over important work or decisions to this individual? Would you give this person authority over areas that might have a direct impact on your own work or well-being?

Or, let's say you're a Peruvian farmer who has worked his farm for 30 years, knows this land and this area and this weather and the local crops and animals and cast of local characters like the back of his hand. Would you nod your head and agree to some crop improvement scheme suggested by a stranger who can't speak Spanish, doesn't know a rain cloud from a hole in the ground, and hasn't pronounced your name right even once? Would you trust this person, even if you were absolutely convinced of the sincerity of his or her intentions?

The issue here isn't whether you're liked or appreciated or whether your credentials are adequate or whether your intentions are good. It's a matter of trust and credibility, which can only come over time.

Adjusting On (and to) the Job

These, then, are some of the common work-related frustrations Volunteers face. But what do you do about them? The process of adjusting to cultural differences on the job is the same as the process for adjusting to cultural differences in general. The three steps, as applied to the work context, are

1. Predicting the behavior of host country nationals in work situations.
2. Learning to accept the behavior of host country people on the job, including their attitudes toward work, by:
 - becoming aware of your own cultural assumptions and attitudes concerning work,
 - accepting the reality of your own cultural conditioning in this regard, and
 - accepting the reality of the cultural conditioning of host country nationals.
3. Changing your own behavior to conform to host country norms.

If you can predict how host country people are going to behave in various work situations and relationships, then your interaction with them will be much more successful. However, just knowing how they're going to behave doesn't mean you're going to like what they do. To get beyond the stage where the now predictable local behavior has you regularly shouting (or crying) into your pillow, you will, once again, need to

appreciate its authenticity and accept its inevitability, through the process described under No. 2 above. While this won't lead to uncritical acceptance, it will help you to temper your judgments with understanding and sympathy.

Structural Challenges

One common job frustration Volunteers face has little to do with cultural differences, but still needs considerable adjustment. This concerns not being quite sure just what your job is. The jobs most Volunteers had at home came complete with job descriptions, with specific duties and responsibilities. You knew what was expected of you and how to go about doing those things, the procedures and policies involved. You had guidance and direction, someone who managed and took responsibility for you. The sometimes loose structure and broad mandate of many Peace Corps assignments can be challenging for some Volunteers.

While you might initially relish this kind of freedom, you may eventually tire of the lack of direction. If you're extremely disciplined and self-motivated, you will probably thrive in the absence of structure; if you're not, you may founder. In either case, creating work for yourself can be time consuming and challenging. "I sometimes feel that too much is being expected of me," writes a Volunteer in Micronesia, "while very little is provided in the way of guidance and expectations."

Agents of Change

Many Volunteers see their real job as being agents of change; they expect and hope to make a difference in people's lives. You like to think that when you leave your host country things will not be quite the same as you found them. This notion is deeply embedded in the Peace Corps ethos and part of what motivates many people to apply in the first place. This is entirely appropriate for people involved in development work, so long as whatever change you bring is wanted, appropriate, and achieved hand-in-hand with the people who will live with these changes long after you're gone.

Chapter Six: The Peace Corps Experience

While people join the Peace Corps for different reasons, most Volunteers hope for the “Peace Corps experience.” That is, you seek a profound encounter with a foreign culture, a series of experiences that change forever the way you think about the world, your own country, and yourself. You expect to be challenged, to have your patience and your mettle tested, to be pulled, pushed, or otherwise forced into new ways of thinking and behaving. And yet, while this experience is available in varying degrees in every Peace Corps country—some Volunteers have it, but many do not.

To be sure, in a handful of countries—like Bangladesh or Micronesia or Uganda—you will have the Peace Corps experience whether you want it or not. These countries are so different from the United States that you will have a profound encounter with another culture just by virtue of your assignment there. But, while it may be easier to have the Peace Corps experience in such places, every Volunteer, regardless of where he or she is posted, is still going to end up in a foreign country. If you’re not having a profound encounter with another culture, it’s not because you haven’t gone overseas.

The problem, then, is not that the Peace Corps experience isn’t available in your town or city, but that some other competing experiences may be. In several countries, especially in the large cities, there is often a good-sized expatriate community of people from several Western and other developed countries and, often, a number of non-Peace Corps Americans. In many cases, your work may draw you into this expatriate orbit. Before long, you’re spending most of your time, on and off the job, in this community. Even Volunteers who do not come in contact with expatriates on the job often live in cities where there is a large population of expatriates, and they spend much of their free time socializing with them. Without denigrating the value of such an experience, we can agree that it does not constitute a profound encounter with the local culture.

Another experience available in many countries, particularly in those towns and cities where there is a large concentration of Volunteers, is called the Peace Corps lifestyle. In this experience, you may work with host country people, but you live with other Volunteers, spend weekends with other Volunteers, and go on vacation with other Volunteers. You become more and more absorbed in the personalities and politics of

the Peace Corps itself until, suddenly and unaccountably, a new Peace Corps policy or a change in Peace Corps staff reverberates through your circle with more impact than any comparable development in the host culture ever could. As this happens, the country you have come to serve recedes ever further into the background.

The point here is not that Volunteers who befriend expatriates or spend time with other Volunteers cannot be effective or achieve the goals of the Peace Corps. It is, rather, a question of degree. If you are spending most of your time with English speakers and other Westerners, then you can't also be spending your time with the host country nationals improving, say, your Russian and learning about the culture. While a balance is natural and necessary, the appeal of these alternate lifestyles is almost irresistible. We instinctively gravitate toward people who understand us and whom we understand.

The danger of these alternative cultures is that it can be so easy to be immoderate about them. The solution is to be alert, to watch how you spend your time and with whom you spend it. At what cost do you purchase the relief of hearing and speaking English every afternoon at the expatriate compound? Regularly, as marked on your calendar, look at the life you're leading and make sure it's the one you signed up for. While you're at it, keep your distance from those time-worn rationales that imply that this isn't a Peace Corps country or that isn't a Peace Corps job. There is no country, Peace Corps or otherwise, that doesn't have an indigenous culture, nor is there any Peace Corps job that precludes interaction with host country nationals. Wherever you serve, the Peace Corps experience is there for the asking.

Chapter Seven: **Coming Home**

As frustrating and challenging as it is to be a Peace Corps Volunteer, many Volunteers will tell you it's even harder to be a *former* Peace Corps Volunteer. It can be as hard to leave the Peace Corps, it seems, as it is to be in it. As one returned Volunteer from South America wrote, "My problem is I'm 23 years old and I've already had the experience of a lifetime."

The Notion of Home

The trouble with coming home is that you don't expect it to be difficult, at least not in the way you expected Mali, or Turkmenistan, or Guatemala to be difficult. These were exotic "foreign" places, after all, and the whole point about foreign is that it's bound to take some adjustment.

But home is the antithesis of foreign, it's the other extreme. Among other things, it represents the known, the familiar, the place where you know how to act. Surely no one needs to prepare you for diarrhea-proof ice cream, air-conditioned theaters, and the luxury of speaking English wherever you go. In short, whatever applies to foreign by definition does not apply to home.

43

This is all true except that in most senses of the word—including all those just mentioned above—the place you call home is now, in fact, a foreign country.

The problem, then, has to do with this word "home" and what it really means. In *The Art of Coming Home*, Craig Storti writes:

In the sense that home is the place where you were born and raised, where people speak your native language and behave more or less the way you do—what we might call your home land and your home culture—then it is indeed home that awaits you as you step off the jumbo jet. If you should happen to think of home only in this limited sense and expect nothing more of it, then the place you return to will not disappoint you.

But this is not what most people mean by home—which is where all the trouble starts. Most people use the word in a more profound sense, referring to a set of feelings and routines as much as to a particular place. In this formulation, home is the place where you are known and trusted and where you know and

trust others; where you are accepted, understood, indulged, and forgiven; a place of rituals and routine interactions; of entirely predictable events and people and very few surprises; the place where you belong and feel safe and secure and where you can accordingly trust your instincts, relax, and be yourself. It is, in short, the place where you feel “at home.”

This is a much broader definition, of course, though much closer to what most people expect and require of home. Needless to say, it is also a much higher standard by which to measure the place you have returned to—a standard, in fact, that any such place cannot possibly meet. As we will see, this very realization, that home is really not home, is at the core of the experience of reentry.¹

The trouble with re-entry is that you suddenly find yourself in transition when what you expected was to simply pick up where you left off. Of course, neither the place where you left off nor the person who went overseas exists anymore. Transitions, even when they're expected, can be troublesome. When they're not expected, they can be genuinely debilitating.

How Nice

44

Your self-esteem isn't helped when no one seems especially interested in what you've been doing for the last two years. You have just gone through what may be the seminal experience of your life—an experience which has transformed your view of the world and of your own country—and yet your family and friends somehow aren't bowled over. You have so much to explain, but alas, their capacity to absorb is not nearly matched by your need to recapitulate; they're filled up before you're even half empty. Martha Gellhorn writes in *Travels With Myself and Another*:

Upon your return, no one willingly listens to our travellers' tales. "How was the trip?" they say. "Marvellous," we say. "In Tbilisi, I saw..." Eyes glaze. As soon as politeness permits or before, conversation is switched back to local news, such as gossip, the current political outrage, who's read what, last night's telly; people will talk about the weather rather than hear our glowing reports on Copenhagen, the Grand Canyon, Katmandu.²

"When someone asks you about your experience," a Volunteer from Cameroon observes, "give them five minutes and then shut up."

A Face in the Crowd

Another frustrating dimension of readjustment is the sudden return to anonymity. While Volunteers often complain about living in a fish-bowl overseas, they nevertheless enjoy being the center of attention and interest. It makes them feel special, even important. Speaking the local language, for example, makes celebrities—even heroes—out of Volunteers, as does, say, being the first American to teach at the King Hassan II elementary school or to ride the local bus from Song Kwah to Phu Banh. Now, suddenly, no one looks up when you enter a room or squeals with delight when you start speaking in Kiswahili. No one is impressed that you speak English, and your every move has more or less the same novelty value as everyone else's every move. You aren't special anymore—and you miss it. “[Overseas I had] a feeling of empowerment, having a lot of influence,” a Volunteer from Swaziland remembers. “Coming back, it was weird to fall back into the role of just another Joe.”

In his book *An Area of Darkness*, V.S. Naipaul, who was born and raised in Trinidad of Indian parents, remembers the first time he visited India, after living in countries where he had always stood out because of his appearance. The feeling he describes will sound familiar to many returned Volunteers:

[Now] I was one of the crowd. In Trinidad to be an Indian was to be distinctive; in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied a part of my reality. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into the Indian crowd.... Recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how.³

Back to Normal

Something else you miss, acutely, is the intensity of the Peace Corps experience. Even when it was difficult, the experience of living and working among a foreign people had an almost palpable richness about it. You could practically feel yourself growing and maturing, being stretched beyond what you thought were your limits and forced to come up with more patience or tolerance or persistence than you thought you had in you. You knew you were being transformed. This was immensely stimulating and sustaining. Back home, life is often easy and predictable; your character no longer gets a regular workout. “Everything

overseas had a purpose and involved planning,” a returned Volunteer from Hungary notes. “I considered it a triumph to get my visa renewed in one day. Everything’s so easy back home and therefore deprived of real significance.”

Back to Work

A related adjustment is to the diminished independence and responsibility that is common to many jobs in the United States. Overseas, many Volunteers had a broad mandate and considerable autonomy, which were simultaneously the bane and boon of the experience. Now, back home and back to work, you miss the freedom and scope of your Peace Corps work where the odds against making a difference were admittedly great, but at least there was the possibility. One returned Volunteer remembers:

My job back in the U.S. consisted of sitting at a desk in a large room where several other men spent most of the day drinking coffee and chatting with one another. When I asked for something to do, I was told to take a coffee break. After about a week of this, I begged the supervisor to give me something—anything—to do. He finally brought me a large book, a rubber stamp, and an ink pad and proceeded for about 10 minutes to show me how to press the rubber stamp to the ink pad and then to stamp each line on each page with this single stamp. After about half an hour I was told to slow down my pace by one of my co-workers.... I only lasted four weeks on that job, and that was because I gave two weeks’ notice.⁴

Home Alone

These are just a few of the adjustments returned Volunteers face, all guaranteeing, incidentally, that you’re not going to just pick up where you left off. What’s worse, the typical Volunteer must go through these adjustments alone or as a couple and largely in silence. For the last 27 months, throughout all the excitement and frustration of culture shock, pre-service training, settling in and beyond, you’ve been surrounded and supported by other Volunteers going through the same experiences. Now, suddenly and precipitously, you’re on your own. You have your family and friends around you, and they are sympathetic, but they don’t really understand. Readjustment, which can be trying under the best of circumstances, is even more trying for being such a lonely experience.

The Stages of Readjustment

What is the returned Volunteer to do? It helps, of course, to know that readjustment is coming; you may still be thrown by the experience, but you'll get up quicker. It can also help to know how it evolves. For most Volunteers, readjustment unfolds in three distinct stages.

The first stage is a period of great excitement and joy, when you're thrilled to see everyone and they're thrilled to see you. Typically, you spend this period traveling around visiting relatives and friends, being welcomed enthusiastically wherever you go. For the moment you are a kind of hero, and because you don't stay too long in any one place, no one tires of your tales.

This period is followed, a month or so later, by the second stage. This is when people really do have to get on with their lives and, no offense, but shouldn't you be doing the same? This is the stage the average returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) isn't ready for. During this period, you will run up huge phone bills calling other RPCVs, spend many waking hours hating and refusing to adjust to America and scheming madly to get back overseas. You will actively resist adjustment, fearful that it will somehow cheapen and diminish all that has happened to you. An RPCV from Costa Rica observes:

I'm afraid I may be becoming readjusted. Readjusting would take me back to what I was before. I think of it as being back in the mainstream grind. I want life to be slower paced. It helps me remember what I lived like overseas. I don't think I'll ever totally readjust. I hope I don't.

In the third stage, you begin to make your peace with being at home. You find work or go back to school or continue with your retirement activities. You meet interesting, decent people who, oddly enough, were never in the Peace Corps. You identify as much with the present and the future as with the past. You're even starting to become a bit more objective—about America and about your overseas country. You see that carving out a new life for yourself back home doesn't have to mean that the Peace Corps never happened.

Think Back

Knowing the stages of readjustment, you then realize that what you're going through is normal, that it's not just you, and this takes some of the anxiety out of re-entry. You will also want to think back to those early days in-country when you were overwhelmed by so much that was new and had so many adjustments to make that you wisely lowered your expectations of yourself. Your goal during the difficult parts of re-entry, just like during the period of culture shock, should be simply to get by.

In this regard, when you are looking for work, be modest in your demands. You have expenses and will need money; money can come from the perfect job, which isn't easy to find, or it can come from the less-than-perfect job, which is more readily at hand. The longer you hold out for the job you want and perhaps deserve, the more anxious you may become, and anxious people, as a rule, don't make wise decisions. Take work that pays the bills, and then look, unpressured, for work that meets your needs.

Coming home isn't all trauma, of course, nor is it the same for everyone. If we have highlighted the problems, that's because they need the attention. But the pleasures are there, too. The pleasures of discovering how you've changed and grown; of seeing America through different eyes; of teaching others about the worlds you've been to. As you share the experiences and insights you learned abroad, you repay your foreign friends all the understanding and acceptance they offered you.

Consider the last words in the enduring classic *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle* by Moritz Thomsen:

I climbed the hill for the last time with Ramon for a last cup of coffee and to say goodbye to Ester. Ramon was just completing a new house which sat at the top of the hill on the edge of the co-op farm.... He said it would be a monument to the Peace Corps. He wanted to make a sign to hang outside the house by the gate—*Luz de America*, the Light of America.

So I drank the coffee...and then I said goodbye to Ester, and everything was under control, everything like a dream. But as I stepped down off the porch to leave, Ester screamed and I turned to see her, her face contorted and the tears streaming down her cheeks. We hugged each other, and Ramon rushed from the house and stood on the brow of the hill looking down intently into the town.⁵

-
- ¹ Craig Storti, *The Art of Coming Home* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1997, 2001).
 - ² Martha Gellhorn, *Travels with Myself and Another: A Memoir* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1978, 2001).
 - ³ V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1981, 2002).
 - ⁴ Sam Longworth, "The Returned Volunteer: A Perspective," in *Cross-Cultural Reentry*, edited by Clyde Austin.
 - ⁵ Moritz Thomsen, *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle* (Washington: University of Washington Press, reprint edition, 1997).

