Hotdog Harry

E. Jane Luzar

11 4 2024

During my first two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Liberia, West Africa in the 1970's, I was stationed in the interior (up-country). I did not have a counterpart until my third year in the Peace Corps. A counterpart is a person from the host country who works closely alongside the Volunteer. I worked with many teachers, but I did not have an individual assigned as my counterpart. A good counterpart can be like a window into the place and people with whom you work as a Volunteer. Without a counterpart, I often suspected that I was seeing a superficial picture of Liberia and its people.

Two months from the end of my tour, I was working with school children in a school rice paddy in Bong County. Our rice paddy was beside one of the few roads in the county. I could tell someone important would be approaching as all traffic had been stopped on the dirt road to prevent spraying dirt and dust on a special vehicle. I was surprised when William Tolbert, President of Liberia, slowed to a stop to watch the children plant rice. After a while, I was summoned to talk to him at his limousine. He asked me about the county level program which introduced Green Revolution technology and plant varieties through school demonstration projects. I explained that the program also included girls, who were largely left out of agricultural demonstration projects.

At the end of the conversation, he asked me "Can you do this project at a national level?' Without hesitating, I said "yes, with adequate support from you". I also explained that my two-year tour of duty with the Peace Corps was ending in two months and that I had been accepted to a graduate program with full funding. I would need to have that delayed a year and have the Peace Corps agree to a third-year extension. Without hesitation, he said "I can take care of that for you." Sure enough, he made it happen.

As I moved to the capital city, Monrovia, to start a nationwide version of my up-country school agricultural program, I was excited to hear that I would finally be assigned a counterpart. My counterpart, Harry Pennoh, was a middle-aged man, conformably situated in a mid-level government position with few responsibilities and little to no accountability. As Director of the Liberian Rural Youth Program in the Ministry of Agriculture, Harry had no budget other than his salary and a gasoline allowance for trips up-country, trips that never occurred.

My arrival as his counterpart signaled the beginning of more accountability and activity for Harry. I can't say that he was pleased to move into this new role, but he graciously accepted the challenge of working with an overly eager 22-year-old Peace Corps volunteer. I initially thought we had little in common. But over that year, Harry became my valued counterpart, who eventually shared his personal experience of going overseas at a similar age.

Harry was an Americo-Liberian, descended from the group of emancipated and freeborn slaves sent to Liberia by the American Colonization Society (ACS) in the 1830's. Their plan was to establish a new country in Africa and simultaneously address the "issue" of the growing number of free black people in the United States. In 1847, Liberia declared its independence from the ACS as a new republic in Africa. The mass exodus of freed slaves from America never occurred and promises of support from the U.S. Congress faded away. Americo-Liberians created what appeared to be a memory of the antebellum south along the coast. The interior of the country was divided by tribal groups into counties and left largely undeveloped. Medical care, schooling, and infrastructure like roads simply did not develop up-country.

Liberia remained an afterthought in the U.S. until WWII. With the Philippine supply of raw rubber cut off by the Japanese, Liberia emerged as a new source. Firestone Tire and Rubber had signed a concession agreement with Liberia to lease over one million acres of land in the interior for six cents an acre for 99 years. It became one of the largest plantations in the world and the single largest employer in Liberia. Similar concession agreements with European nations for precious metals like iron and gold and raw materials like lumber largely funded the government and the surviving Americo-Liberian population that controlled the country.

The United States rediscovered Liberia as a source of raw materials and also as a foothold on the Africa continent during the growing Cold War. Several programs were implemented by the U.S. to strengthen ties and educate the Americo-Liberian ruling class. In the 1950's, one such program sent young men to the U.S. to study agriculture at an American University. Harry Pennoh was one of the first to participate in that program. As my friendship with Harry grew, he finally confided in me details about that experience.

Chosen to study agriculture at a university in California, Harry sailed across the Atlantic on a merchant marine vessel. He didn't remember the week-long trip because he was seasick most of the time. He remembered landing in New York and being whisked away to a hotel. Still woozy from being seasick, he didn't pay much attention to how he eventually got to his hotel room.

After a long night's sleep, Harry woke and looked out a window to see where he was in New York. At that point, he realized that he was many stories above ground, with no recollection of getting there. He was supposed to meet a U.S. government host in the hotel lobby that morning. As he entered the hallway, he realized that he had no idea how to get down to the first floor lobby. He lingered in the hallway and watched people disappear into a small room that reappeared again in time, empty. He finally decided to step into it and punched all the buttons as he had seen others doing. As he finally

emerged in the lobby after stopping at every floor, his host explained that he had been on the 12th floor and just used an elevator. Harry said he decided to stay on the first floor wherever he was for the rest of his stay in the U.S.

As they were leaving the hotel for the train station, Harry asked for a drink of water. His host pointed to a metal box and stepped aside. Harry approached the box but did not see any water. He moved back a few feet and watched someone walk up to the box and saw water emerge from the spigot. He tried again, with no luck. He finally decided that it was a fountain for white people, part of those Jim Crow laws he had heard about. Laughing, his host showed him the foot pedal that operated the fountain. At that point, Harry said he truly realized that he was a stranger in a strange country.

The train trip across the country was long but uneventful. Harry was fortunate to fall under the care of a series of black train porters who knew of Liberia. They shepherded him through train changes and saw that he was fed during the trip. Harry said his awe of the U.S. only grew as he travelled across the country. He said he felt reassured that this would be a great experience in a great country.

Harry did not realize that he would be the only black student at his college. The first week at college, the only other black people he saw on campus were the kitchen staff who prepared and served meals in his dorm's dining hall. He came to trust them as they explained American dishes to him and kept him well fed. He became a bit of a celebrity in the cafeteria due to his race and large appetite.

One day, while moving through the cafeteria line, the cooks told him that they had something special that day: hot dogs. Harry said he thought he misunderstood them and moved quickly through the line, past the hot dogs. In Liberia, saying that someone eats dog is one of the worst insults that can be offered. He was sure he had misunderstood them.

The next week, hot dogs reappeared on the menu. The cooks persuaded him to take one. He took it outside on his tray covered by a napkin so that no one could see him with it. He found a private spot on the lawn and began an inspection of the hot dog. He pulled it out of the bun and dissected it, trying to see what part of a dog it was. He said he was very confused and disappointed about why people in such a great country would eat dog. Harry said for the first time, he questioned whether he had made the right decision to come to America. He sat on the lawn with that dissected hot dog for over an hour.

After much soul searching, and sure that no one could see him, he took a small bite of the hot dog. To his surprise, he liked it. Still not sure what part of the dog it was, he ate the whole thing. He decided that he had to trust such a great country if he were to be successful there. He walked back to the cafeteria and asked the cooks for another hot dog. They added mustard, relish, and onions to this one. Harry ate it in the cafeteria and then ate 22 more. From that point forward, Harry was affectionately known as Hotdog Harry on campus.

It took Harry a long time to share that story with me. As we became friends and colleagues, he said that he understood all too well what it was like to be a stranger in a new land. After sharing those experiences with me, Harry went out of his way to explain customs, traditions, and behaviors for me. We shared our appreciation of Liberian Standard Time (LST), about five minutes off of Greenwich Mean Time and the Constant Comment Tea my Mom sent every month. Harry was always after me to stop rushing, a trait Liberians ascribed to white people. "Take Time" was almost a national motto and something I often heard from Harry.

My third year in Liberia was successful in many respects as we launched the national program. For me, having a confident and counterpart who helped me navigate Liberia made it especially rich. Harry and I corresponded throughout my graduate programs. He kept me up to date on our national program as well as his family. He often asked me about still being on LST and always being just a little late. He was killed in the senseless, brutal revolution in Liberia in 1980. I wear my watch face down to remind me to take time and I have been on LST ever since.