The Peace Corps Experience

E. Jane Luzar

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Joining

Senior year in college is exciting for so many reasons. Experiences are coming to an end, and new experiences are looming. Often, they involve the culmination of four years of academic preparation targeted for a degree related career. Early in my senior year in 1973 at the University of Oregon, the academic advisors of the Anthropology Department called the majors together to tell us that there were no jobs in our field. Well, unless one wanted to pursue a Ph.D. to instruct more students who would have no career prospects. They were equally blunt about the availability of positions to even do that.

I loved my major, Cultural Anthropology. My focus was Peoples of the Pacific, and I added a dose of Archeology and Primate Behavior. I should have realized that my job opportunities would be scarce, but in the back of my mind I always thought I would do a graduate degree in some form.

As fall quarter wore on, my focus shifted to the success of my crew team. I had joined on a whim my junior year when Oregon started a Women's Crew. We were all new to the sport and learned together, bonding in the process. My senior year, I lived in what we called The Crew House. It was an older, six-bedroom rental and we did it as a co-ed house. It was the central hub for both Men's and Women's Crew Teams. We blended our budgets and pronounced ourselves Oregon Crew.

I was Co-Captain of the team which was a great leadership experience. I liked crew as it was totally about the team. Unlike other sports where one person could be successful even if the team lost, crew was anonymous. No one stood out as a star as we won and lost together. Looking back, this was a valuable experience for suppressing my ego. It also set me on a path of physical fitness as we ran miles and even developed a university course, Training for Rowing.

Our coaches were volunteers and included a married couple, fresh back from serving in Peace Corps India. Tom was enrolled in an MBA program and Marti volunteered to be one of our coaches. She had been a coxswain in college and had lots to offer as a woman coach. They knew my major was a dead end and used to joke about me joining the Peace Corps. They did not talk much about their time in India, but they had an overall positive attitude about their service.

Growing up on a farm in Indiana, I knew just enough about agriculture to vaguely consider joining. The combination of my outward focused major and a youth spent

listening to my Dad's stories about his time in the WW II Pacific Theatre made an overseas experience seem possible. The lack of domestic career opportunities helped.

One day in the University Library, the Peace Corps was set up to recruit. We were standing nearby when Tom suddenly pushed me toward the recruiters yelling "She grew up on a farm. She knows how to grow stuff." They grabbed me and before I knew it, I was hearing about their Women in Agriculture programs around the world. I decided to keep an open mind and completed a contact form. I often thought that they mistook me for a relative of the Mayor of Indianapolis, Richard Lugar. The last names and state of origin were close enough that I was asked about it a number of times.

As the academic year progressed, we realized that we were in competition to row in the National Championship to be held in San Francisco in late June 1974. Meanwhile, the Peace Corps sent me more paperwork and flew me to Salt Lake City for an interview. They were great about working around my academic and rowing schedules (Luzar, Lugar…). My other plans for after graduation were vague, with one plan for some of my friends and I to ride our bikes from Oregon to Indiana. Oh, the naivety of youth.

We qualified to row in nationals which would occur after the end of my last quarter. I did not know that my Peace Corps recruiter did not realize that we were on the quarter system which ended later than the typical college semester system. My original placement offer was to serve in Botswana. I spent a lot of time in the university library researching the region and country. The Crew Team had made an investment in learning about Botswana, which I really appreciated.

Everything looked good on my end, but at the last minute, they decided that I would be too late to join the intended program in Botswana. The Peace Corps organized new volunteers into program groups to facilitate in-country training. Each group arrived in country at the same time and completed a month of training together.

Just before we headed out to San Francisco, Peace Corps offered me a position in Liberia, West Africa, developing a youth agriculture program. I would arrive three weeks later than my group, but they thought it wouldn't be too much of a problem. I agreed but I had no time to research West Africa or Liberia.

We placed third in Nationals, which was very rewarding. Instead of waiting for me to ride my bike across country, the Peace Corps offered to fly me from San Francisco back to Indiana and then on to New York for departure to Liberia. They added a week to spend with my family. Again, that Lugar/Luzar thing? When I arrived back on the farm, I broke the news to my family that I had joined the Peace Corps and would be leaving for two years in Africa later that week. No one believed me and we really did not talk about it for days.

No one in my family had heard of Liberia and the Peace Corps seemed vague to them. After explaining the organization of the Peace Corps to them and learning more about Liberia, my parents were at least not negative about my decision. I know that after two

years in Oregon, they were hoping I would stay nearer home. My brother Pat finally agreed to drive me to the airport in Indianapolis. I left feeling that they still did not approve of or understand what I was doing. And I already missed my Dachshund, Otto.

Serving

I arrived in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia and was checked into a hotel that the Peace Corps used to transition Volunteers coming and going. The first person I met was a young woman who had landed earlier with my group. The minute she arrived; she had a really negative reaction to being there. She would only eat peanut butter from a jar as she thought the local food would harm her. The Peace Corps quickly decided to terminate her service and moved her to the hotel where I was staying. She did not seem emotionally stable, and one day disappeared. I could only assume that she was quietly sent home. It was a strange welcome to Liberia.

The Peace Corps staff were up-country with my group and the Peace Corps doctor had completed his role with the new volunteers and had left for the states. As a result, I did not receive my medical kit which included Chloroquine, the anti-malarial medicine used by Volunteers. Monrovia was built on a swamp and most of the country was rife with Anopheles mosquitos, the primary vector of Malaria in West Africa. After a week, as part of my makeshift orientation, I was sent up-country to stay with a family near where I would be assigned. Still no Chloroquine, but I was not aware of the possible consequences. Today, people travelling to malarial areas typically start some sort of malaria prophylactic weeks in advance of their travel. After four weeks in the country, I finally received my medical kit and Chloroquine.

The first month was a blur of activity including a faint attempt at language and cultural training. My group of thirty was composed of volunteers recruited to teach in the public schools, and my sub-group of five women recruited for the Rural Youth Agriculture Program. At the end of two years, I was the only volunteer still in that program. For a variety of reasons, the others transferred to more structured teaching positions.

My group spent time learning to grow paddy rice, including the high yielding varieties emerging from the Philippines as part of the Green Revolution. Traditional Liberian agriculture was swidden agriculture, also known as slash and burn farming. I had studied the concept in my academic major, so I realized that we had an uphill battle to have local farmers adopt the new farming technique, primarily due to the lack of private property rights. Property in the rural areas was owned by tribal groups and farmers were assigned land every year. A good year occurred the year the land was burned due to the resulting pot ash. Farmers rotated being assigned a freshly burned area about every five years.

Once sworn in as official Peace Corps Volunteers, we departed for our assigned locations. I was assigned to live in a very rural area along a dirt road between a village

and mission school. I could walk to both locations, but I regretted that I was not really in a village environment. The only house available was a three-room mud stick thatched roof house. No electricity, no running water, and a newly built latrine. The Peace Corps handled the rental and provided a small propane refrigerator and stove. I used kerosine lamps and collected water from a rain barrel for boiling and filtering. I also had a small thatched outdoor kitchen. Furnishings in the house were sparse. The interior ceiling was a woven thatch. The sound of lizards scurrying around above me put me to sleep each night. I loved it.

Malaria

Most of my time those first months on assignment were spent helping schools develop paddies for their rice production projects. We were fortunate that two schools had abandoned aquaculture projects near the road. USAID had done an outreach project years before which had promoted aquaculture for schools. For whatever reason, the ponds were abandoned but perfect for transformation into rice paddies. As a result, I spent a lot of time in a mosquito rich environment.

After a few months, I noticed the early symptoms of malaria: chills and a low-grade fever. I thought I would shake them off, but the symptoms slowly progressed. We were approaching the end of the fall semester with a long holiday break approaching. I had mentioned to the school principals that I would be traveling for a while so no one noticed when I seemed to be gone when the break began. I wasn't travelling, I was lying on my bed, anemic, with alternating chills and a high fever.

Peace Corps did not always get the Volunteer assignments right. One member of my group had little to do on her assignment and designated herself as the person to help volunteers celebrate their birthdays. She lived in the county seat and had a pickup truck. She also had a list of all the local volunteers' birthdays. I am a mid-December birthday and it occurred to me that she might be the only person to show up at my house.

Marilyn showed up with a little cake on my birthday and basically saved my life. At that point, I was so weak I could not walk alone, so she got me into her truck and drove straight to the only hospital within a hundred miles. There was no public sector health care in the interior of Liberia. Phoebe Hospital was established as an interdenominational mission hospital in 1921. It was relocated three times and opened in central Liberia in 1965.

We checked in and I remember sitting in the general waiting area for hours. Evidently there was some confusion about their ability to treat a Peace Corps Volunteer. A young American missionary doctor finally took over and got me admitted and into a bed. He told me that I was so anemic that if I had lost all that blood at once, I would be in shock. I shared a room with a woman who was in labor. It evidently was not going well as she screamed for hours until she was wheeled away. The missionary doctor told me I

needed a blood transfusion but that it was complicated by my blood type, A-, and the fact that eligible Liberian donors had traces of malaria in their blood from childhood.

The missionary doctor finally decided I needed the blood, so he found a local bush pilot with my type and did the transfusion. The pilot had been in Liberia for over 30 years and had malaria repeatedly. I could only guess that they opted for a match of blood type over malarial blood. Whatever their decision, I had a strong reaction to the transfusion: a stabbing pain in my side near my kidneys. No one could explain it and I was told it would eventually go away. The night after my transfusion, the missionary doctor came to visit me and say goodbye. He put his hand on my arm and looked away and said "Don't worry kid, you are going to be all right. This just isn't for me." He was gone the next day.

I still had that pain in my side, but my fever of 105.4˚ had broken and I felt much stronger. I decided to check myself out of the hospital and hitched hiked a ride with a trucker to the capital, Monrovia. Arriving in Monrovia, I checked in at the Peace Corps office. The Peace Corps Doctor had just left for the States to get married. Everyone seemed excited that he was marrying "the Pillsbury Heiress." And he left firm orders that he was not to be disturbed. The Peace Corps Nurse, Comfort, was unsure about the next step.

Someone decided that I should do a few tests at JFK Hospital. Liberia was still strongly influenced by tribal medicines and cures. It was a joke that JFK meant "Just For Killing," as only wealthy, desperate people went there, usually as a last resort and to die. JFK Hospital had been built by USAID in 1970 but had been left to languish with few staff. While I was there, I saw the ward of feral children, left by their families to wander the empty halls of the hospital. After drawing more blood (which I suspect was never analyzed), we moved onto a new plan.

Comfort had contacted Peace Corps in Washington D.C., and they decided to medivac me for testing at the National Institutes of Health. Post Viet Nam war, the medicines used to prevent malaria in the U.S. military and Peace Corps had become less and less effective. They were also worried about new strains of malaria from Asia were reaching Africa. For whatever reason, I was flown back to Washington for another round of tests. All the tests involved drawing blood and my arms looked like well-worn pincushions. They were starting to turn green and yellow from the earliest blood draws.

While they were doing tests, they decided to let me fly home for a week to visit my family. It seemed like special treatment again (Lugar/Luzar?), but I agreed and headed out to Indiana. My family of course had no knowledge of any of this, so I told them I was back for a special meeting and a check up after a light case of Malaria. I wore long sleeves the whole time to hide my arms.

My parents were surprisingly familiar with malaria as my dad had it during his time in the South Pacific (New Guinea and the Philippines) during WW II. He had low grade

fevers and chills the first years they were married. As his cases were relatively light, they didn't suspect anything more serious. My Dad took me and my Dachshund Otto on a long hike through the hilly wooded part of the farm to check out my stamina. He told my Mom that I was fine, but that Otto might need to lose a few pounds. I had a great visit and then flew back to Washington. I never saw the need to share any details later in life.

Back in Washington, the medical staff said I could not return to Liberia without my Peace Corps Doctor's approval. They were reluctant to contact him, as by then, he was on his honeymoon skiing in Colorado with the Pillsbury Heiress. He again had left instructions so that they were not to be disturbed. I offered to contact my congressman or senator, and they finally gave in and contacted him. He quickly approved my return without seeing any medical information. He soon resigned as a Peace Corps Doctor and never returned to Liberia. I was quickly on a plane back to Liberia, still with malaria in my system, but relieved to be returning.