

THE PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER RETURNS HOME

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AFTER service abroad the Peace Corps Volunteer is supposed to return and share his experience with his fellow Americans. Now that six months beyond the two-year tour have passed for the first volunteers, what are the returned volunteers doing? What differences in outlook has service abroad brought? These questions were discussed at a meeting of former volunteers held December 7-8, 1963, at Pendle Hill (the Quaker Center of Study and Contemplation) in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. Thirty-one former Peace Corps Volunteers and two former staff members representing service in Ghana, Pakistan (East and West), India, Tanganyika, Columbia, Nigeria, and the Philippines were present. They were joined by three volunteers from VISA (Volunteer International Service Assignments sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee) who had completed comparable service in India and Mexico. This fairly representative meeting of former volunteers is the first of its kind to be held. The conference was made possible by a grant from the Danforth Foundation.

Despite age, sex, skill, religious and marital status differences, the group had much in common. All had volunteered to work abroad for little pay in "less developed" areas. Both the Peace Corps and VISA were committed to service and peace efforts. All participants had lived abroad on a people-to-people basis, at a substantially reduced economic standard, with the intention of facilitating intercultural exchange.

The meeting was without formal agenda, being mainly an unstructured conversation. This provided a glimpse into what these volunteers are thinking now. Some opinions of individuals have been reproduced below as part II of this paper. Despite some difference in emphasis there was considerable acceptance of the points of view that have been quoted. The members of this group cherish their Peace Corps experience, are finding some difficulty in readjusting to

American life, and have a strong desire to find outlets to share their experiences for the benefit of America.

I. Volunteers Six Months After Completion of Service

Since almost half of the volunteers attending the meeting (15) had been part of the Peace Corps Philippines Project (working in rural elementary schools as aides to teachers in English and science), it was possible to assemble information on what most of the returnees from this project are now doing. The first portion of this report reviews these data. The Philippines Project was the largest Peace Corps overseas program; it contained one volunteer in ten. The project permitted the use of volunteers who had had only a liberal arts background. It was planned by Warren Wiggins who subsequently became the Peace Corps Associate Director for Programming. In 1961 the Philippines Project was considered the prototype of what Peace Corps was to become. The volunteers who are now back from the Philippines are Groups I and II (Group XI is now in training for the Project); 184 in all, they were trained at Pennsylvania State University in 1961 and ended their overseas tours in June and July of 1963.

Of the 184 volunteers who went out to the Philippines for the 1961-63 tour, data are available for only 100. Eighteen volunteers did not complete their overseas tours; 1 died abroad of amoebic dysentery; 6 were returned to the States early for reasons of ill-health; 5 female volunteers left the Project to consummate stateside marriages; 2 despaired of the Peace Corps and resigned; and the Peace Corps found the work of 5 others unsatisfactory and separated them from the Corps. No data were available for 7 others who, although they completed their tours, are still enroute home, having spent the last six months traveling. Eight other female volunteers remain abroad with new husbands, five of whom are Filipinos. Thirteen other females are also recently married and have been excluded as they described themselves as "stateside housewives." Another 28 remain in the Philippines; 22 are still in the Peace Corps and 6 are reportedly either working or studying in Manila. For a final group of 10 volunteers now back in the states there was no information available as to what they were doing.

The 100 returnees for whom there is information can be divided into two large groups. Fifty-three, or about half, are engaged in

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graduate study and the rest are working. Information was available on 39 of the 53 doing graduate work. Fifteen are working for advanced degrees in education and 7 are in the social sciences studying Southeast Asia in some way as an outgrowth of their Peace Corps service. The graduate programs of the others are in philosophy, English, architecture, languages, science and law.

Forty-seven returnees are working. Twenty-two are teaching, mostly at the elementary level. The next largest group (5) has been drafted into the Armed Services. The rest are in private business, the government (Federal, state or local), or are employed by some private social agency. To this group of 47 could be added the six volunteers who are employed by the Peace Corps in staff positions in Washington, Puerto Rico training, or some overseas project.

This inventory permits some generalization. First the overall figures for this one project are not very different from those released in October by the Peace Corps for all returnees—they said 223 of 413 returnees were continuing their education. The slightly higher overall figure for those in education included 41 completing their B.A. degrees. All returnees from the Philippines Project already had their undergraduate degree. The main thing, therefore, that volunteers are doing six months later is continuing their education, primarily at the graduate level. A second generalization is that Peace Corps service tends to be an overall gain for the teaching profession. Not only are all former teachers going back into the profession but many others as indicated above are now seeking necessary credits for certification. Those studying for advanced degrees in the social sciences plus most of the volunteers still in the Philippines project are also likely to go into teaching. Volunteers extending their tours had to submit a project in elementary education which would require an additional stay to complete. In general, extensions were granted only to those who had strongly indicated an interest in teaching as a career. There was considerable agreement with the following comment:

Volunteer: My experience over the past two years was a clear indication to me that I would never be happy with a passive, contempt'ative existence. I function best when deeply involved with people and living. I have returned home to do graduate work in education, and hopefully I will concentrate on the problems of the 'lesser developed' and spend my life working in this area.

The expectation that Peace Corps would be a training ground

for the Foreign Service has not materialized. Only one returnee to date has been recruited. This number may grow as many volunteers indicated a strong desire to go abroad again to live. The prevailing sentiment seemed closer, however, to the comment by one volunteer: "The difficulty with working for the Foreign Service is that while it's foreign, it offers little opportunity for service!" There is one important exception to this: the possibility that former volunteers who go on to Peace Corps staff positions may enter AID or the Foreign Service through lateral transfer. A number from the original Peace Corps staff contingent have elected to continue in the government.

The statement made when the Peace Corps was first organized that, "Peace Corps service will not mean an avoidance of military service," may also need some revision. Only 5 of 90 males of draft age have been called up. Service in the Peace Corps brought an initial deferment. Now for most PCVs there has been a second deferment to complete graduate study, and soon for an increasing number there may be a change in marital status, and perhaps an increase in the number of dependents. This may become a pattern through which military service becomes indefinitely postponed.

II. *The Outlook Six Months After Completion of Service*

Conversations at Pendle Hill covered three areas in which Peace Corps experience seems to have brought a different outlook: the former volunteer's view of himself, his view of the Peace Corps, and his view of the America to which he returns.

A. The Personal Dimension

"These were the best two years of my life." This statement, in one form or another, was uttered by almost every participant—Peace Corps or VISA volunteer. It could be equally affirmed in the "End of Tour" questionnaires completed by volunteers prior to their departure from the Philippines where 9 out of 10 indicated they would gladly repeat the two-year experience. This personal endorsement of Peace Corps experience seldom came in the context of the value of world travel or the importance of the service rendered to the host country. It was rather a way of stressing how the volunteers had matured as individuals. The following quotes suggest something of the quality of this feeling:

Volunteer: I think that I wasn't strong enough before to accept my own values. Now I know what I believe and have confidence in these beliefs.

Staff: Are you suggesting that this change has been for the better?

Volunteer: Yes. I'm more alone now but I'm stronger. My values are more in line with human things, perhaps because I sorted out my beliefs through living with people whose values were quite different from those prevalent here in America. But it's more than what I believe—it's why I do. Truth here (in the United States) is so often impersonal. I accept this kind of passive truth much less now. For me the greater truth comes after personally living through something.

Volunteer: Let me add to that. Before Peace Corps service I was afraid to express my individuality; it remained unspoken, lost in the group. Now I am more confident and I express my own individuality, but it seems equally lost as the group seems to have little interest in what I am saying. I think it is because I now express my own convictions rather than relating group norms.

The content of these new views differed with each individual but many volunteers mentioned particular ideals and preferred relationships with others which did add up to a new personal dimension. As a result of Peace Corps or VISA service (although perhaps this was a reason for joining), volunteers felt that they were now more interested in advancing peace, de-emphasizing material standards, and obtaining cross-cultural experiences. They seemed to have developed a new outlook on poverty, especially when experienced by themselves voluntarily. The group was strongly service-oriented but put more emphasis on shared experiences than on the completion of specific tasks. The relationships considered important were those arising out of individual rather than organizational efforts and there was a preference for voluntary activity requiring self-discipline and de-emphasizing external rewards or punishments. "As contrasted with graduate students of the same age," one volunteer put it, "I find former volunteers stressing more 'openness' in their outlook and more self-discovery in their approach. They are searching after the higher purposes for self and society."

B. The View of the Peace Corps.

Personal satisfaction in their service abroad has brought strong support for the Peace Corps from among the returnees. There is, however, a considerable desire to share their views of the Peace Corps with Washington officials. Volunteers raised the following

questions about Peace Corps operation:

1. Is the Peace Corps accurately representing itself to the American people? Many indicated that the service they rendered abroad was much less important than what they had learned. The help that was extended, others added, was not so much doing things that would directly meet the needs of others as the establishment of personal relationships, the product of which was a mutual feeling of greater confidence. As one volunteer put it: "Sharing had outdistanced service. We did more learning than prompting of social or economic change. Thus if we are to present the Peace Corps as an aid program, should not we stress aid to the United States?"

2. Is Peace Corps supporting efforts by other Americans working more directly in the foreign aid field? Since the needs of peoples abroad are great and Peace Corps efforts do not generally work directly to meet these needs, are we supporting the efforts of public agencies like AID and the work of private groups, e.g., missionaries? How valuable are our efforts to make the Peace Corps have a 'separate image' from other Americans abroad? By presenting ourselves as different, have we lent the prestige of the Peace Corps—through our silence—to the undercutting of other efforts in the foreign aid field? Is it not imperative that the efforts of volunteers to assist others not be understated? Is it possible that the success of the Peace Corps may bring a net decline in assistance being extended by America abroad? Similar comments could be made about Peace Corps support for the United Nations.

3. Are we still saying that Peace Corps service is hard or explaining what that means in the light of our accumulated experiences? Do we say that living conditions abroad are on the whole pleasant? Do volunteers know that the biggest frustrations arise not out of what will be missed in comfort abroad but what will be found in confronting self? Surely there is little value in talking about personal financial sacrifice when Peace Corps service is for most a time of saving and a period of opportunity.

4. Are Washington administrators aware that many of the early ideals in the Peace Corps have worked well in practice, e.g., volunteers are preferable to employees; living with people surpasses doing things for them; inspiration leadership is more functional than occupational example in staff qualifications; host country project supervision is more productive than Peace Corps supervision of hosts; our pool of American spirit is generally appropriate while our alleged reservoir of skills is generally inappropriate; and that the important relationships in the Peace Corps are between volunteers and others overseas and not between the PC directors in Washington and Congress or the press at home.

The basic question that volunteers seemed to be asking Washington was "Do you know what Peace Corps really is—and have you valid reasons for permitting America to think something else—or have

you too come to believe the myth of the Peace Corps instead of its reality?" It was not so much a balanced picture—one which would include mistakes—that volunteers seemed to seek, but rather they asked that Americans be allowed to learn what Peace Corps experience had to teach.

Former volunteers also had something to say about the people they had come to know abroad; these people should not be considered so backward or we so advanced as recruiting, training, and reporting materials seemed to imply. Our recognition of the world's needs should not be presented as being solved so easily. Poverty abroad is subject, particularly when one returns to America's overpowering affluence. Nostalgia for the spiritual resources of the pastoral folk abroad seemed to rise when volunteers feel an absence of purpose in America.

C. The America to which the Volunteer Returns

The training of volunteers for overseas service made preparation for "cultural shock," but the release of volunteers after the two-year experience did not take into account the dislocations that would accompany readjustment. The conversations touched on the preparation.

Staff: (a member of the training staff for the Philippines project): With full recognition of the dangers of 'retrospective falsification' let me mention our framework for training. Basic was a 'Second Culture Participation', i.e., we took our analogy from the ideas in second language teaching—volunteers should learn to function within Philippine cultural patterns. Fundamental was the awareness of your own or first culture in order to know what were the obstacles and assets in your own make-up that would hinder or help your coming to be a participant in the culture of the Philippines. We generally thought it was more important to be able to get along in Philippine society than to try to do some kind of job on it.

Volunteer: I recall that this irritated me—there being little in training related to the job. My orientation for joining was a strong interest in doing something. We got little of practical value in training about the job. I recall with distinct displeasure the suggestion that we carry on some project on the side.

Volunteer: Training brings back memories of the word 'learning' with a capital 'L'. "This is to be a learning experience," you reiterated in many ways. I find it interesting that in training this idea was rejected. We wanted to be up and doing. You emphasized our learning and cultural involvement.

Staff: We misread the intensity of the volunteer's motivation to be doing

something 'useful', and to do it in a demonstrable way. We were misled by the fact that less than 10% of you in your undergraduate majors gave indication of heading towards a specific career.

Volunteer: Let me add that we volunteers misread the strength of that job motivation in ourselves.

Volunteer: The Ministry of Education, in our case, had the job all neatly prepared for us. We had a job that had to be done. I'm not sure we ever did solve the problem of a satisfactory contact with the culture.

Volunteer: Yes, but what I'm saying is that we came to feel that involvement in the culture was a thousand times more important than the job.

While most volunteers present indicated that there had been little 'cultural shock' abroad, they did mention some difficulties in adjusting since their return.

Volunteer: My first impression upon returning as I sat in the Seattle airport was what elephantine monsters we are; before in the Philippines I recalled early thoughts on how short Filipinos are. My next impression was how meager was the dollar in the U.S. I later managed to adjust to all this and did not find us so rich or so awkward. What lasted longer was the rediscovery of our psychological make-up here at home. We are driven here. Relaxation comes so seldom and at such a premium. I also found myself forced to accept the fact that we are the most prosperous, most advanced technological society known. I recalled that one of the startling things about being abroad in the Peace Corps was the pleasant realization that just because my neighbors didn't live in the United States did not mean that God or whatever hadn't just 'left them out in the cold.'

Volunteer: I suppose the biggest shock any of us went through on leaving the Peace Corps and the Philippines was simply the absolute diminution of emotional involvement and concern. No matter whether you hated it or loved it you were there and it was probably the most intense continuous period of existence any of us have ever had.

One complete session turned out to be a discussion of problems these returnees were having in communicating with friends and relatives here at home. They spoke of an "interest gap" that had grown up between themselves and those they had been close to before service abroad. This interchange started one session.

Volunteer: How do you adjust to the American culture? I'm bored! Only my work at Cardoza (a study-teaching program using former Peace Corps volunteers which is now in progress at Cardoza High School, Washington D.C.) offers

relief. I have social problems; I feel that few people my age are interesting. I seem to gravitate whenever possible to those who have been in the Peace Corps. Am I a snob?

Volunteer: Is it necessary to adjust? If you do, are you in danger of losing the value of the experience?

Volunteer: In one sense it's been easy to adjust since we've been back; after all, we were nurtured here. We were able to get back in quickly. The problems arose after we had returned. We found difficulty in communicating what we felt deepest about, and unable to change our situation so that those physically near but attitudinally removed would think a little more the way we did and see why we felt our thoughts were important too. Life here is much more complicated.

Volunteer: It's hard to put your finger on what makes me so uncomfortable about my old group—it's a 'creeping meatballism' you find all around. It turns you to seek out Peace Corps people who have more in common with you. Adjustment is hard because we can't communicate with those we thought we liked best.

Volunteer: My frustrations are not so much the communicating ones as they are related to the sudden transition from there where I was for 24 hours a day in public life to here, where the emphasis is upon things private.

Volunteer: It's not a problem in telling people about the experience; it's our difference in outlook about life in general. It's this interest and value gap that concerns me.

Some of the differences in values which volunteers feel that they observe between themselves and their fellow Americans are indicated in the following quotations.

Volunteer: We joined the Peace Corps because we were discontented with the way things were going. We didn't think, for example, that the government was properly pursuing the campaign for peace. We wanted to get personally involved.

Volunteer: I can see now that an important tone in American society is to have change. Both slum and suburbia residents know that there is a primitivism about the way we do things. The way we bring up our children even though with the best of intentions, often turns out to cripple them.

Volunteer: A small town in the Philippines is much like a small town in the States. Both have their problems and opportunities which are often best seen by the outsider who has a fresh point of view and who can often serve as a catalyst of change. Since returning home I can see that there is much to be

done and yet there is underemployment of our resources. The problems confronting those called developed are essentially the same as those facing peoples called underdeveloped.

Volunteer: After coming back from Mexico where we were working with Indians I can see that we have the same need in Philadelphia to develop local leadership. We learned in Mexico that to jump in and to try to do things for the Indians can often be more harmful than good. We also knew that the status quo of poverty could not be permitted to remain.

Volunteer: The difference between our urban renewal program and the community development I met abroad was that there they were mainly interested in people and here we seem to put primary emphasis on buildings. They have much to learn from us and we have much to get from them.

Volunteer: I really miss the Philippines and the Peace Corps. That's one reason that I want to go to Washington. I want to know some people again who are concerned with things that happen beyond their own little, small-town world. I've really got culture shock in reverse, but since I know what it is, I hope I'll be able to cope with it.

Where From Here?

The Pendle Hill conversations were both enjoyable and valuable. Others should be held. Judgments about the experience six months later could supplement the "end of tour" interviews held abroad before volunteers return home. What this group of volunteers are thinking now might also be conveyed to subsequent groups now about to end their overseas tours.

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