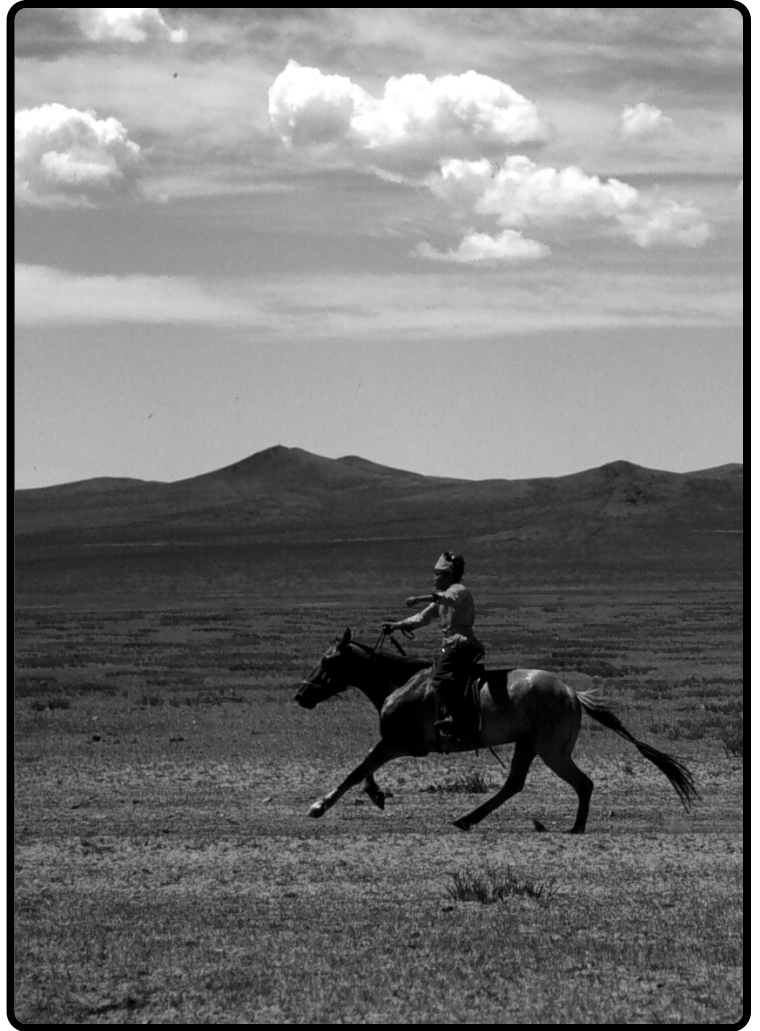


# Crossing Cultures With the Peace Corps

Peace Corps Letters From the Field



---

Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools

## FOREWORD

Peace Corps Volunteers experience adventure and challenge every day as they serve in communities around the world. They leave a legacy and a better understanding of the United States in their host countries, and they come back home as changed persons. As Volunteers share their experiences back home, they change us as well, helping Americans better understand other cultures and peoples.

Every Peace Corps Volunteer has a story to tell. This book is a small sampling of their journeys. My wife, Nancy, and I came home from Peace Corps service in India in the late 1960s. We have been telling our stories for some 40 years, and our experiences then seem just as alive today as they did the week we got home.

In telling their stories, Peace Corps Volunteers also convey the essence of community service. Not only are Volunteers trained professionals, but they are also dedicated Americans who share a spirit of service and a commitment to making a difference in the lives of the people they serve. I hope the stories in this volume will inform and entertain your students, perhaps plant the idea of service to others, and leave them with a bit more understanding of the world around us.

Ronald A. Tschetter  
*Director, Peace Corps*

## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction and Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>World Map</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Fitting In</b>	
“A South African Storm,” by Allison Howard (South Africa) .....	<b>8</b>
“Hey, Driver!” by Thalia Kwok (China) .....	<b>16</b>
“One Step at a Time,” by Fred Koehler (Togo) .....	<b>22</b>
“Girl Farmer,” by Angela (Rich) George (Dominican Republic) .....	<b>32</b>
“Angel,” by Barbara Arrington (South Africa) .....	<b>38</b>
“How Does One Spell Happiness in Paraguay? ...” by Jane Troxell (Paraguay) .....	<b>44</b>
<b>Local Flavor</b>	
“Waking Up, Stepping Out,” by Steve Iams (Nepal) .....	<b>50</b>
“Soneka’s Village,” by Richard Lupinsky Jr. (Tanzania) .....	<b>58</b>
“Enough to Make Your Head Spin,” by Elizabeth (Vernon) Kelley (Bulgaria) .....	<b>66</b>
“A Day” and “A Year,” by Jordan Earl (Uzbekistan) .....	<b>73</b>
<b>Witnessing Change</b>	
“Looking Back,” by Carla Bachechi (Macedonia) .....	<b>83</b>
“Just Like the Old Days,” by Jonathan Phillips (Mongolia) .....	<b>90</b>
“Respect for Authority,” by Jonathan Phillips (Mongolia) .....	<b>97</b>
“Reduce, Re-Use, Recycle,” by Nina Porzucki (Romania) .....	<b>103</b>
<b>The Challenges of Service</b>	
“Chiggers and Other Challenges,” by Joan Heberger (Honduras) .....	<b>110</b>
“A Life of Sacrifice and Hardship?” by Robin Solomon (Kazakhstan) .....	<b>116</b>
“Lessons Learned as a New Teacher,” by Christian Deitch (Kyrgyz Republic) .....	<b>124</b>
<b>National Standards</b> .....	<b>131</b>
<b>Author Updates</b> .....	<b>135</b>

## INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Many students who have never left their neighborhoods have ventured into worlds unknown. They wait in anticipation for the letters sent to them by [a] Peace Corps Volunteer.* —Teacher, New York City

*The accounts of the personal interactions of the Volunteers are incredibly valuable in helping [students] see things from new perspectives. They are filled with important life lessons on struggle, sacrifice, triumph, friendship, understanding, and common bonds that define the human experience.* —Vice Principal, New Jersey

Peace Corps Volunteers wrote the stories in this book to an audience of classroom students in the United States. The letters were—intended to help U.S. students get to know and understand other cultures. Posted on the Peace Corps website of the Coverdell World Wise Schools program ([www.peacecorps.gov/wws](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws)), they are compiled here with lesson plans and teaching suggestions to help teachers employ them effectively in the classroom.

Peace Corps Volunteers agree to serve in order to meet the three goals of the agency: to provide assistance to the peoples of other countries; to help the people of other countries better understand Americans; and to help Americans better understand other peoples. This book helps fulfill the agency's third goal through remarkable stories by Volunteers in the field.

### **A Flexible Curriculum Resource**

*Crossing Cultures With the Peace Corps* will be most useful for elementary teachers and for language arts and social studies teachers in grades 6–12. Each story is followed by a lesson or teaching suggestions. Standards for English, social studies, and geography are listed for each lesson and spelled out on pages

131–134. In addition, each lesson is accompanied by “enduring understandings” and “essential questions,” which focus on the fundamental ideas underlying each lesson—ideas that the teacher wants the students to come away with. These terms are derived from the curriculum framework “Understanding by Design,” by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in 1998. Underlined words are defined in the margin of the page on which they appear. The stories and lesson plans give teachers all they need to design active and engaging learning experiences for students of many ages and ability levels.

### **About the Peace Corps**

The Peace Corps is an independent agency of the U.S. government that was established through the vision and efforts of President John F. Kennedy, who challenged Americans to dedicate two years of their lives to helping people in developing countries. The first group of Volunteers arrived in Ghana in 1961. Today, more than 7,500 Volunteers are serving, with more than 187,000 Volunteers having completed service in 139 countries.

Although programs vary from country to country based on the host nation’s needs, Volunteers traditionally offer skills in education, agriculture, small-business development, community development, the environment, and health. For complete information on the Peace Corps, visit the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

### **About the Coverdell World Wise Schools Program**

The Coverdell World Wise Schools program seeks to

help U.S. students gain an understanding of cultures around the world and to instill the ethic of community service. To do this, it matches actively serving Peace Corps Volunteers with individual U.S. classrooms so that the Volunteers can communicate with teachers and students at home. Since the program’s inception in 1989 at the initiative of late Peace Corps Director and U.S. Senator Paul D. Coverdell, more than 3 million students in all 50 states have communicated directly with Peace Corps Volunteers all over the world. The program also publishes cross-cultural classroom materials, and it recently initiated audio and video broadcasts from its website. For more information about Coverdell World Wise Schools, visit [www.peacecorps.gov/wws](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws). To download *Crossing Cultures With the Peace Corps*, visit [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/crossing](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/crossing).

### **Authors Narrate Their Letters Online**

Most of the authors represented in this book have narrated their letters online. To listen to them reading, visit “Volunteer Voices” at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/multimedia/podcasts](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/multimedia/podcasts). Hearing the authors will lend an immediacy to the stories and provide students with an even better idea about what living in another culture is like.

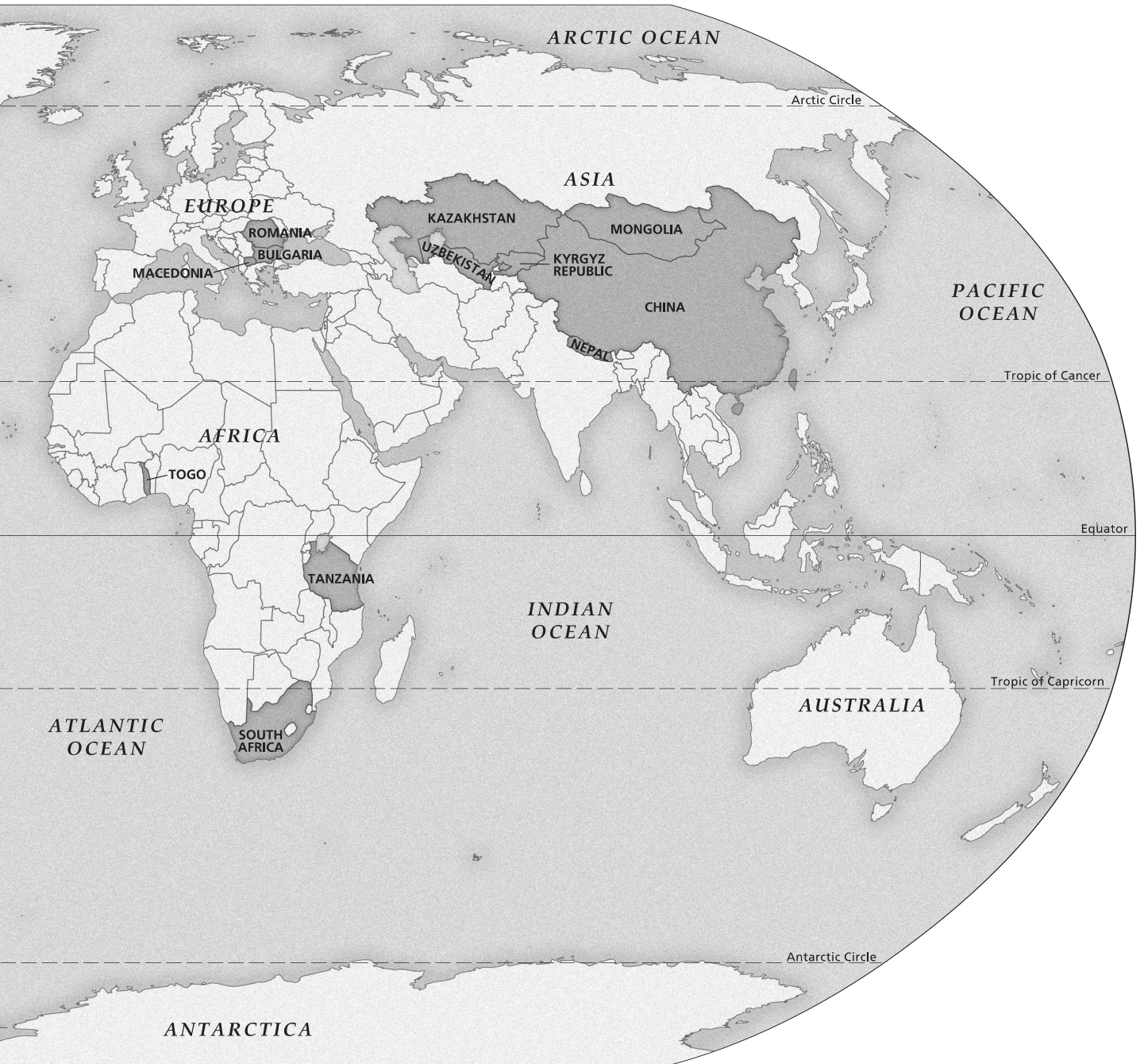
### **Acknowledgments**

The Peace Corps is grateful to the authors represented in this book, all of whom were Peace Corps Volunteers, for their efforts in writing about their experiences for the benefit of students in the United States studying other cultures.

**WORLD MAP**  
**Countries in which**  
**Peace Corps Volunteers**  
**in this book served**

- Bulgaria  
*Page 66*
- China  
*Page 16*
- Dominican Republic  
*Page 32*
- Honduras  
*Page 110*
- Kazakhstan  
*Page 116*
- Kyrgyz Republic  
*Page 124*
- Macedonia  
*Page 83*
- Mongolia  
*Pages 90 and 97*
- Nepal  
*Page 50*
- Paraguay  
*Page 44*
- Romania  
*Page 103*
- South Africa  
*Pages 8 and 38*
- Tanzania  
*Page 58*
- Togo  
*Page 22*
- Uzbekistan  
*Pages 73 and 76*





## A SOUTH AFRICAN STORM

by Allison Howard

Peace Corps Volunteer, South Africa (2003–2005)

It's a Saturday afternoon in January in South Africa. When I begin the 45-minute walk to the shops for groceries, I can hear thunder cracking in the distance up the mountain in Mageobaskloof. But at 4 p.m. the sky is still light and bright and I am sure—famous last words—I will be fine without an umbrella.

Just the basics: eggs, bread, Diet Coke in a bag slung into the crook of my elbow. Halfway from town, two black South African women—domestic workers in the homes of white Afrikaner families—stop me with wide smiles. They know me; I'm the only white person in town who walks everywhere, as they do. They chatter quickly in northern Sotho: "Missus, you must go fast. *Pula e tla na!* The rain, it comes!" They like me, and it feels very important to me that they do. "*Yebo, yebo, mma,*" I say—Yes, it's true—and I hurry along in flip-flops, quickening my pace, feeling good about our brief but neighborly conversation. These are Venda women.

My black South African friends tell me it's easy to tell a Venda from a Shangaan from a Xhosa from a Pedi. "These ones from Venda, they have wide across the nose and high in the cheekbones," they say. But I don't see it; I'm years away from being able to distinguish the nuances of ethnicity. Today, I know these women are Vendas simply because of their clothing: bright stripes of green and yellow and black fabric tied at one shoulder and hanging quite like a sack around their bodies. They've already extended a kindness to me by speaking in northern Sotho. It's not their language but they know I don't speak a word of Afrikaans (though they don't understand why; Afrikaans is the language of white people). They know I struggle with Sotho and they're trying to help me learn. So they speak Sotho to me and they're delighted and amused by my fumbling responses. And I am, quite simply, delighted by their delight.

The Venda ladies are right: the rain, it comes. Lightly at first, and by habit

## VOCABULARY

**Afrikaner:** a white South African, especially one descended from the Dutch

**nuances:** small differences



I begin trotting to hurry my way home. Just a little rain at first and there are plenty of us out in it. I can see others up ahead on the street and others still just leaving the shops to get back before the real rain begins.

The people who are walking along this swath of tar road are black. Black people don't live in this neighborhood—or in my town at all, for the most part. They work and board here as domestic workers, nannies, gardeners. Their families live in black townships and rural villages—some just outside of my town; others far away, in places like Venda.

Today, we're walking together in the rain, and I'm quickening my pace because—after all, *it's raining*. That's what you do in the rain. And even though it's coming down noticeably harder, it's 80 degrees and I'm not cold, I'm just wet. My hair is stuck to my forehead and my T-shirt is soaked ... and I'm the only one running for cover. And I think: So what? It's just water and in the middle of the January summer, it's warm, refreshing water. Why run? Why do we run from the rain?

In my life back in the United States, I might run because I was carrying a leather handbag, or because I wore an outfit that shouldn't get wet. I would run because rain dishevels and messes things up. Mostly though, we run because we just do; it's a habit. I've done it a hundred times: running to my car or the subway station with a newspaper sheltering my head. I have never *not* quickened my pace in the rain until today.

It took all of my 27 years and a move to Africa, where I don't have a leather handbag to shelter or a pretty outfit to protect. I'm wearing an old cotton skirt and a T-shirt, and I'm drenched, and I love it. I learn things here in the most ordinary circumstances. And I feel like a smarter, better woman today because I got groceries in the rain.

But on the long walk home, positively soaked and smiling like a fool, I notice a car pulling over and a man yelling in Afrikaans to get in, get in. I look in the direction I've come from and several meters behind me is a woman with a baby tied to her back and an elderly man carrying bags, leading a young boy by the hand. On the road ahead, a woman about my

#### VOCABULARY

**swath:** a narrow strip

**dishevels:** rumples

## VOCABULARY

- precariously:** riskily
- reverie:** joyful celebration
- unravels:** comes undone
- infinitesimal:** extremely tiny
- conventionally:** done according to custom
- anachronistically:** done out of tune with current times
- apartheid (pronounced: uh-PAR-tite):** the formal policy of segregation and discrimination against nonwhites by the former government of South Africa from about 1950 to 1991

age carries a parcel wrapped in plastic, balanced precariously on her head. There are maybe 20 people walking with me in my reverie of rain and they are black. And the man in the car is white and he's gesturing frantically for me to get in. Why me? Why not the others? Because I'm white and it's about race. Everything is about race here.

This man in the car is trying to do something kind and neighborly. He wants to help me and his gesture is right, but his instincts are so wrong. How do you resent someone who is, for no benefit of his own, trying to help? But I do. I resent him and I resent the world he lives in that taught him such selective kindness. This whole event unravels in a few seconds' time. He's leaned over and opened the car door, urging me in ... and I get in. And we speed past my fellow walkers and he drops me at my doorstep before I have time to think of anything besides giving him directions.

It feels like a mistake because I'm ashamed to think what the Venda women would have felt if he'd ignored them and they had watched me climb into that car. In some ways, the whole episode seems absurd. I'm not going to atone for 400 years of South African history by walking with black people in the rain. If I'd refused his ride, he wouldn't have thought anything besides the fact that I was certifiably crazy. That's the thing about being here: I'm not going to *change* anything. But I believe it matters in some infinitesimal way that people like the Venda women, and the dozens of people who may walk alongside me on any given day, know that I'm there. In black South African culture it is polite to greet every person you pass. That's what they do, so I do it, too. On the occasional morning, someone might greet me as "*sesi*," sister. I have to believe that matters; I know it matters to me.

I was disappointed in myself for getting into the car because I acted according to the same habit that makes us think rain an inconvenience. Just as we run from the rain, I hopped into that car because I'm *supposed to*. Conventionally, it makes sense. But convention compels us to do so many things that don't make any sense at all. Convention *misinforms* our instincts. And in a larger sense, it is convention that propels Afrikaner culture anachronistically into the future. Ten years after the supposed end of apartheid, I'm

living in a world of institutionalized racism. Convention becomes institution—and it's oppressive and it's unjust. I know that if I'm going to make it here for two more years, I need to walk in the rain. It's a small, wasted gesture, but it's an uncorrupted instinct that makes me feel human.

So much about living here feels like that fraction of a second when the Afrikaner man was appealing to my conventional sensibilities and the people on the street were appealing to my human instincts. It may feel unnatural to reject those sensibilities just as, at first, it feels unnatural to walk in the rain. But if I lose a hold on my instincts here, I'll fail myself and I'll fail to achieve those tiny things that matter so much. It's simple and it's small; and it's everything. Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Indeed. Let it rain.

#### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

I spent the first 22 years of my life in New Hampshire, beginning in the small town of Bedford, and then attending the University of New Hampshire for a BA degree in political science and English literature. I first became interested in nonprofit organizations during several internships in college and, after graduation, I moved to London and found work with a small nonprofit working to promote the arts in healthcare.

There, I learned the basics of nonprofit organizations, but I knew that I wanted to work internationally. As so many people experience, once I began traveling I found I couldn't stop. I left England for travel in Eastern and Central Europe and to the Southeast Asian peninsula. This exposure to developing and transitional societies made clear for me the connection between my studies and human faces in the world.

My time in Vietnam in early 2000 broadened my understanding of the challenges to development and the threats to social justice in societies burdened by violence, war, and poverty. As an American, I felt an acute connection to the people—past and future—of Vietnam.

I returned to the United States and took a job with an international NGO (nongovernmental organization) in Boston whose mission centered on public health, prevention of war, and the promotion of a peaceful global order. The primary work of the organization is to advocate for the abolition of nuclear weapons and land mines and to control the devastating global trade in small arms and light weapons. The dialogue of war prevention is concerned with the root causes of war and violence—the poverty, disease, and inequity that destabilize communities. It was this consideration that led me to the Peace Corps—that we cannot work toward more peaceful societies if we do not work to alleviate the burden of poverty that engenders violence.

Peace Corps Volunteers work at the grassroots levels, and when I was accepted for a program in South Africa in NGO capacity-building, I felt it was a perfect fit. I was right. South Africa is a fascinating and complex country, progressing slowly toward a new democratic order. It is a transitional society in every way and the scourges of poverty and violence are rife, only 10 years after the end of apartheid. I'm a long way from Bedford, New Hampshire, and I'm exactly where I want to be.

### **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in South Africa in the NGO capacity-building program in HIV/AIDS, I have been assigned to an NGO in Limpopo Province. Tsogang Water & Sanitation brings water, sanitation, and health and hygiene training to the poorest of the poor in Limpopo. Tsogang's work ethic is participatory; we train communities and villagers to help themselves, to choose, manage, and maintain their own water systems. Tsogang requested a Peace Corps Volunteer to "mainstream" HIV/AIDS education into its existing projects. I'm working with Tsogang's management and staff to build a knowledge base and strengthen training skills in HIV/AIDS issues. As the pandemic rages in South Africa, development organizations have a responsibility to bring information and assistance relative to HIV/AIDS to the communities they serve. It is my job to support Tsogang in its capacity to serve the poor, rural communities in the province.

## A SOUTH AFRICAN STORM

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

The writer confronts issues of racial prejudice that she encounters in South Africa, years after the abolition there of the official policy of apartheid.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Students will analyze the challenges—and the subtlety—of relationships between blacks and whites in South African society.
- By examining the author’s style, students will learn about literary techniques such as foreshadowing and the use of symbolism.

**GRADES:** 9–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Allison Howard carefully crafted her letter “A South African Storm,” including some powerful ideas. Her letter deserves scrutiny both for the way it was written and for the messages it contains. Following are questions designed to facilitate classroom discussion about Allison’s technique and her messages. Ask the students to read the letter.
2. At first glance, Allison’s letter might seem to be about rain and how we respond to it when we are outside. But there’s much deeper meaning concerning race and equality. When Allison wrote her letter, she could have simply related how the white man stopped and invited her into the car. But she carefully established earlier how important it was to her that she be identified as one of the common folk in her community. How did she do this? [The interlude with the Venda women

#### STANDARDS

##### English Standards:

1, 2, 3, 6 (see page 131)

##### Social Studies Standards:

I, IX (see page 132)

##### National Geography Standard:

10 (see page 133)

##### Enduring Understandings

- Racial prejudice has deep roots and may linger after official policies that condoned it have changed.
- Adapting to another culture requires one not only to speak the language, but also to follow some of the simplest local routines.

##### Essential Questions

- How can an individual person effectively combat prejudice so as to make a difference in society at large?
- How do we choose between two options when neither one is an entirely good one?

##### Materials

- Map of South Africa
- Photocopies of story for the whole class

establishes Allison's feelings about being one with her neighbors.]

3. What efforts does Allison make to be like her neighbors, and not to be privileged? [She speaks Sotho; she tries to greet everyone she passes; she walks among her neighbors, rather than riding.] What indications are there that she retains some of her American habits? [Her inclination is to run when it rains; she wears a T-shirt; she accepts the ride from the driver.]
4. Why do you think Allison chose to include a discussion of how difficult it is for her to distinguish ethnicities by sight, while her black African neighbors and friends can make such distinctions easily? [Students might point out that she is setting up the background for distinguishing types of people by sight—which leads to her being singled out for her whiteness in a way that she ultimately resents.]
5. What reasons does Allison give for our habit in the United States of running when it is raining? Find specific reasons in the text. Do you personally run when it is raining outside? Why or why not? If you do usually run to avoid raindrops, are there circumstances in which you might not run? [Answers might include: when dressed in a swimsuit; when dressed in athletic clothes; when already so wet that it doesn't make any difference anymore; when not carrying things that can spoil if they get wet.]
6. Why did Allison get into the man's car, against her better judgment? Why did she regret doing so after the fact? Be specific in your answers, finding evidence in her letter to support your answers.
7. Allison's letter is a general discourse on her neighbors and the weather until it suddenly turns into a more serious, issue-driven essay. Exactly where does she introduce the troubling aspects of race, and how does she cue the reader? [The simple word "But" in the ninth paragraph is the cue, and Allison uses it strongly by starting the paragraph and changing the whole tone of her letter in one word.]
8. Allison writes that she cannot change things, except perhaps in an infinitesimal way. Do you agree that she cannot change things? Do you think she really believes, deep down, that she cannot change things? Provide evidence for your opinions. [Students might observe that if Allison really thought she could not effect change, she would not try. But she appears determined to stick to principle and try to make statements through her actions, hoping that people will notice. Students can cite her examples of walking to get from place to place and her inclination not to accept a ride offered to her because of her race.]
9. Allison writes: "I know that if I'm going to make it here for two more years, I need to walk in the rain. It's a small, wasted gesture, but it's an uncorrupted instinct that makes me feel human." Do you think her gesture is "wasted"? Why or why not? Find evidence in the letter, and draw on your own opinions to answer.

10. Why do you think Allison titled her letter “A South African Storm”? In discussion, help the students realize that the “storm” represents both rain and racial prejudice. Teachers of writing can use this aspect of Allison’s letter to teach foreshadowing and symbolism in literature.
11. Ask students to write a carefully constructed letter, in which they begin by addressing one topic, but segue into another, central theme, using some of the techniques they have observed in Allison’s letter.
3. Use the World Wise Schools publication *Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Classroom Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding* in the classroom. It contains short and easily adapted exercises to enhance students’ understanding of cross-cultural issues. It is available free online ([www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/bridges](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/bridges)), or in hard copy by e-mailing a request to the World Wise Schools program at [wws-info@peacecorps.gov](mailto:wws-info@peacecorps.gov).

#### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Students can read Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, about South Africa in the years immediately preceding the instigation of apartheid in the 1940s, and then report to the class on what they have learned about social and racial issues in the country. Ask them to relate what they have learned to what they observed in Allison Howard’s letter.
2. Students may research the life of Nelson Mandela—his role in the African National Congress, his long imprisonment, and his presidency in South Africa.

## HEY, DRIVER!

by Thalia Kwok

Peace Corps Volunteer, China (2005–2007)

Saturday evening, and I'm hitching a cab ride back to my school. The first words out of my mouth reveal me as a foreigner. It's the usual struggle trying to get the driver to understand where I want to go. But for once, this isn't about language barriers. The driver and I exchange the usual trivialities:

*"What country are you from?"*

*"America."*

*"Oh, your Chinese is very good."*

*"Riiight, that's why you didn't understand me when I got in the cab."*

*"Are you a student?"*

*"No, I'm teaching English."*

*"How much money do you make?"*

*"One thousand five hundred yuan."*

*"Really? That's not very much."*

*"I'm a Volunteer."*

*"How old are you?"*

*"Twenty-four."*

*"So young!"*

### VOCABULARY

**trivialities:** small matters

**yuan (pronounced YWEN):**

Chinese currency, worth  
about 12 U.S. cents in 2007



He is a friendly man who laughs easily and often. In the usual manner, he weaves in and out of the thinning evening traffic, abusing his horn like a professional—or a maniac—depending on your take. Unlike many in his profession, he initiates the conversation and keeps it going.

*“I’m from right here, of course. Lived here all my life. Can’t say whether I like it or not. We don’t think about it like that. Not in this business. I was born here. It will be where I die. What’s the use of saying I like it or dislike it? There aren’t other options. If I say I like it, what do I know? I have never been anywhere else. I cannot say I dislike it, it is my family home.”*

I sit quietly, feeling a little sorry for him, and not a little guilty for the miracle of an opportunity that allows me to be sitting in his cab at that moment, 10,000 miles away from my family home.

*“America is a great place. How much do people make in America?”*

“It’s hard to say.”

*“Well, just average, as a teacher, three thousand dollars a month?”*

“Maybe; I don’t know.”

*“Well, it’s much more than here, for sure.”*

“Yes, but it costs more to live in America, also. I can eat a good meal here for 5 *yuan* [about 63 U.S. cents]; the cheapest meal would cost \$5 in America.” He nods his head appreciatively, as if that’s what he wanted to hear.

He takes a shortcut, winding through a back street that I only vaguely recognize, but know is faster than going down the main roads. So when we arrive at my destination I am a bit disoriented and surprised. After realizing that it is indeed where I need to get out, I begin simultaneously fumbling through my pockets for the fare and clumsily falling out of the cab.

*“No, no, don’t worry about it.”*

## VOCABULARY

**disoriented:** having lost a sense of direction

“What?” I look at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. “No! Here!” I exclaim, thrusting my wad of crumpled bills toward him.

*“No, keep your money! You are here doing good things for China, thank you.”* He speaks quickly as he deftly leans across the passenger seat pushing my hand forcefully out of the cab. Next thing I know he has shut the passenger door. I helplessly stand there, looking flabbergasted. Only moments before he disclosed to me that he makes a mere 200 *yuan* a month (a sum so low I was sure I must have heard wrong), and now he is refusing to take my money. He waves a cheerful goodbye, hits the accelerator, and then he is gone.

Thank you, Mr. Taxi Driver.

#### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

I grew up in a small city in a state that many people know very little about: Tulsa, Oklahoma. (My name is pronounced tuh-LEE-uh KWAWK.) My parents worked at a local hospital—my mother, a lab technician, and my father, a pharmacist. When I graduated from high school, I was one of two Chinese Americans in a graduating class of nearly 800. You could say my brother and I were the typical whitewashed second-generation Chinese Americans. When the opportunity came along with the Peace Corps to return to the place of my neglected heritage—the place my ancestors called home—the decision was easy.

#### **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

I serve in “the biggest city in the world that you’ve never heard of.” It’s a municipality the size of Wales with a population of 30 million people and counting. Twenty minutes along the light rail to the east is a major downtown area with the high styles of Prada and Armani. There’s Pizza Hut, Starbucks, McDonald’s, KFC. All easily accessible, albeit not affordable on a Peace Corps budget. You get the idea. Living in a big city in China means having most everything you need or want at your fingertips—at a cost. In a place developing this fast, you might expect pollution to be a problem.

#### VOCABULARY

**flabbergasted:** amazed

However, emotional and psychological challenges far exceed the physical ones. Because of the sheer size of the communities we serve in, it is not uncommon to feel insignificant, underappreciated, and powerless to change things. All the Peace Corps Volunteers here teach English as a foreign language at universities, right alongside the paid foreign teachers. It is difficult to find your place in the community when they see you as “just another foreign teacher.” But the longer we’re here, small things, like our efforts to learn the local language or the secondary projects we initiate, make us stand out. And that’s when we can start making a difference. Our presence here challenges the stereotypes typically held by the locals about Americans: that all Americans look alike—blond hair, blue eyes—that all Americans are rich. You might say we’re out here showing the Chinese what our America is really all about.

STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standard:**

I (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

6, 10 (see page 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- Generosity is a trait that derives more from a person's character than from a person's ability to give away material wealth.
- An author's message often lies not on the surface in plain words, but embedded subtly in the storyline of a simple anecdote.

**Essential Questions**

- What is gained through being generous? Is the recipient the only one who benefits from a gift?
- Does the degree of generosity depend on the degree of sacrifice involved in giving?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of story for the whole class

## HEY, DRIVER!

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will examine a deceptively simple story to decipher the messages it contains about the relations between a Western Peace Corps Volunteer and an Eastern taxi driver.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Students will examine the notion of generosity and discover that it is not dependent upon wealth.
- Students will see how literary devices such as use of quotations and providing details function effectively to convey meaning.

#### GRADES: 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Ask students to read Thalia Kwok's account of a taxi ride. Then use what follows to guide classroom discussion.
2. The author's account of a taxi ride in a city in China may appear, on the surface, merely like a brief anecdote in her life as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Upon closer examination, there's much more going on than a simple conversation or a random act of generosity. What is it that makes the story interesting? What is significant for the author? What is significant for the taxi driver? [Answers will vary, but, in general, the author discovers a remarkable degree of generosity in a man who has little; and the driver discovers and expresses gratitude for a degree of altruism that amazes and pleases him.]

3. In the initial dialogue on the first page, there is one comment from the author that she conceivably invented. Which line could that be, and why might a reader suspect she invented it? [“Riiight, that’s why you didn’t understand me when I got in the cab.” The line *sounds* like a sarcastic thought that one might harbor but not utter aloud; the author has the right, as the storyteller, to include it as if she had said it aloud. She may, in fact, have said it to the driver, but the subsequent conversation is so respectful and friendly that it sounds out of character for her to have actually said it.] What is the effect of the line? [It tells the reader that the driver is being generous with his compliment, since the author clearly does not have much confidence in her mastery of the Chinese language.]
4. At the top of the second page, the author describes the driver as “abusing his horn like a professional—or a maniac—depending on your take.” Readers will better understand this remark if they read a short passage from another Peace Corps Volunteer’s experience in China: Peter Hessler’s captivating description of a Chinese taxi ride in a chapter excerpted in the Peace Corps book *Uncommon Journeys* (available free at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories)). [Have students read the four paragraphs starting with “Noise was even more impressive.” Hessler describes a 15-minute ride in which the taxi driver honks 566 times!] Do you think the author’s driver was “a professional” or “a maniac”? What influences your opinion?
5. When the driver asks Thalia how much people in the United States make, she demurs, or deflects the question. When he asks specifically how much a teacher makes, she professes ignorance. Was she really unable to answer his questions, or did she choose not to? If you think she chose not to, why might she have done that? [Thalia appears embarrassed by the discrepancy between Chinese and U.S. incomes and likely was eager not to make the driver feel bad.]
6. Ask students to examine the paragraph that begins, “He takes a shortcut....” Why does the author bother to tell us this detail about both the shortcut and the sudden arrival? [She confirms that the driver took the correct route and was not making the trip longer than necessary; in other words, she’s telling the reader that the driver was trustworthy. The sudden arrival sets the scene for her slight confusion in trying to pay and being refused. It puts the reader right there, witnessing the flavor of the event, rather than just hearing a quick report about it.]
7. In the next-to-last paragraph, the author quotes the driver and describes his action in pushing away her hand, rather than simply saying that the driver refused payment and drove away. What does the author accomplish here? [The author conveys both the driver’s reason for his generosity and his resolve in insisting that Thalia keep her money.]

## ONE STEP AT A TIME

by Fred Koehler

Peace Corps Volunteer, Togo (2002–2004)

We each have our own idea of what's right and what's wrong. We each judge for ourselves whether something is good or bad, fun or boring, worthwhile or pointless. There are some things, though, that many Americans pretty much agree on, such as: When you're sick, you go to the doctor; when you need money, you go to work; and if you don't know the answer, ask—or look it up. I have learned, however, through my experience living in West Africa that the beliefs I have held since growing up as a child in the United States are not necessarily held everywhere else. Beliefs vary from culture to culture. Sometimes you need to look through the eyes of others to comprehend what's going on.

Here in Togo, in West Africa, I've been put in charge of a project to improve the health conditions of a village called Blitta-Gare. I was trained to bring villagers together to help them analyze their problems, look at their resources, and come up with effective ideas for solving the problems as a community. So here I am, with my opinions and ideas, wondering why there are so many obstacles.

To begin with, I've learned that I have to find the right starting point. Everyone told me that all things here begin at the home of the chief. If there are problems or issues within the village, one must go to the door of this quiet old man and tell him your ideas and plans.

Second, there are well-established ways of getting out the word about anything. Whereas meetings or important health alerts in the United States are communicated through newspapers or local television, here in Togo they are passed on by gongoliers, or town criers. The *gongolier* is a man with a strong voice and a noisemaker who walks through the streets of the village and announces the news. *GONG. There will be a soccer match tomorrow afternoon between the high school seniors and freshmen. GONG. The American says if*

## VOCABULARY

**comprehend:** understand**obstacles:** things in the way**gongoliers** (pronounced gong-goh-lee-AZE)

*you don't wash your hands before eating you can get sick. GONG. This ends the news.* But whereas everyone will show up for the soccer match, the same people will fall sick every year having contracted diseases as a result of poor sanitation.

In fact, there is a functioning hospital here. The medical assistants ride motorbikes out to neighboring villages to give vaccinations to the children. Mothers come in every Thursday to weigh their babies and ask the nurses questions. Yet a person might wait to come in until he or she is hours from death because of malaria, hoping it will go away. I needed to find out why.

What I found was that all of these starting places—the chief, the town crier, the hospital—were little more than just that: starting places. It comes down partly to a problem of resources; the chief's time is greatly limited and his resources are scarce. At the end of the day, the week, the month, little has actually been accomplished as a result of my discussions with him. As to health, the people now wash their hands, but the only water there is to wash with is absolutely filthy. And people can't go to the hospital until it's absolutely necessary, because if they did they wouldn't be out in their fields and their family wouldn't eat.

To respond to the problems in my village, I have to step into the shoes of those who have lived here their entire lives, which often means having no shoes at all. If I may assume another role for a moment ...

I am a Togolese father. I have a family of 12, including three wives and eight children. I have three wives because to have only one wife is to be laughed at. I have eight children because each one shows how strong I am, and I expect to have more. Two of my wives are pregnant again. There is no work; at least none for a man without an education. I left school at the age of nine to help my father in the fields. I can get a sum of money perhaps twice a year, once when I harvest the corn and once when I harvest the yams. Money for school fees and food comes from my wives, who earn a small income preparing and selling food at the market.

## VOCABULARY

**sanitation:** condition or system that is healthful and clean

**functioning:** working

**yams:** root vegetables, including sweet potatoes

If my children get sick, I cannot take them to the hospital. The doctors will tell me to buy medicine, which would mean the rest of us could not eat. I will take them instead to the traditional healer, whom I can pay with a bag of corn or a bottle of homemade wine. It is true that often the traditional healer does not help the sick person, who sometimes becomes worse. But it is all I can do. When more money comes, perhaps we can visit the doctor.

When one of my wives is ready to give birth, she will have the baby at the house. Her sister learned as a child how to deliver babies, and she will come from the next village. If there is a complication, we will go to the hospital, but only if one of them is going to die. If they die, we will sell all of the corn and have a grand funeral. All of the family will come, and they also will bring small amounts of money. If I respect the dead in this way, many will respect me when I am dead also.

The stranger with the light skin tells me to boil my water and run it through a cloth before drinking it. He does not understand that there are no pots for boiling near the river where I keep my fields. And I drink from my hands, so how would I run the water through a cloth? He tells me to wash my plates with soap, but he does not give me the soap. Where shall I find this money? Stranger, your face is kind but your thoughts are not prudent. Your ideas are little better than a fool's ramblings.

... And now I'm back to myself again. The American. The Peace Corps Volunteer. I realize that I can't resolve problems with a wave of my hand and a few magic words of instruction. In fact, it will take years and years, but each generation will come to address health issues better than the one before it.

## VOCABULARY

**traditional:** usual; familiar

**prudent:** wise

**ramblings:** expressed thoughts that just come to mind



**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Hello. This is Fred Koehler [pronounced KEE-ler]. Actually, when I was born my parents named me Timothy Allen Koehler. After thinking it over, my dad, Fred, decided he wanted a “junior,” so they renamed me Frederick John Koehler II. That was in Charleston, South Carolina, where I lived till I was five or so with my older brother Kenny (he got named for my grandfather). As a child I was called Freddie; by high school in Florida it changed to Fred. In my graphic design classes at Florida Southern College the professors referred to me as Mr. Koehler. At the advertising agency and newspaper where I worked afterward it was always just plain Fred. Fred for my friends, Fred for most of my family (except Mom, who still uses “Freddie”). Now in West Africa it can be Koffi or Habalo, but usually *Monsieur Frederic*. You can call me Fred. Good to meet you.

**MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

My job in the Peace Corps is being a health worker. The official title is “Community Development/AIDS Prevention Extension Agent.” Basically I’m a health worker, though. I work a bit with the hospital and a lot with social services on education and health development in the community.

My host country is called Togo. It’s in West Africa, right between Ghana and Benin. They speak French here, along with about a hundred other languages that are tribal. The people of my village face many problems, including an AIDS epidemic and scarce supplies of clean water. In addition, there are few jobs here, other than farming or selling at the market what the farmers have grown. It is with these problems in mind that I work.

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IV, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

4, 6, 10 (see page 133)

### Enduring Understandings

- It's easy to misinterpret things people do in a cross-cultural setting.
- To keep from misunderstanding the behavior of individuals from another culture, you have to try to see the world from their point of view, in addition to your own.

### Essential Questions

- Why might I misunderstand individuals from another culture?
- Is it possible to understand two different viewpoints without thinking one is more valid?

### Materials

- Photocopies of story and worksheets (pages 30 and 31) for the whole class

## ONE STEP AT A TIME TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

### OVERVIEW

Students will see that it is crucial to understand the perspectives of another culture if one is trying to work within that other culture to effect change.

### OBJECTIVES

- Students will know that understanding another culture involves being able to interpret behaviors, customs, actions, and practices from more than one point of view.
- Students will know that any behavior has to be interpreted in two ways: the meaning given to it by the person who does the action and the meaning given to it by the person who observes the action.
- Students will be able to explain how various people may interpret the same reality in different ways.
- Students will practice the skill of interpreting a situation from two different points of view.

**GRADES:** 6–12

### PROCEDURE

**Day One:** Establishing the Concept of Differing Viewpoints About Behavior

(Excerpted from the Coverdell World Wise Schools booklet *Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Classroom Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding*.)

1. Ask students whether they have ever had the experience of going to a

movie or watching a video with a friend; then, at the end of the movie, each person thought different things in the movie were important, funny, sad, boring, or interesting. Ask students how that can be. How can two people watch the same movie and see different things?

2. Now, on an overhead projector, if possible, show the class a complex scene with many things happening—from a painting, an advertisement, a book illustration, or another source that none of the students has seen before. Ask the students to concentrate carefully, and expose them to the scene for exactly 10 seconds, and not longer. Then ask several students, in turn, to report what they saw. Ask them to be specific about details, and invite other students to offer their recollections or interpretations if they saw things differently. Students are likely to see and interpret different details—just as witnesses to crimes and accidents often differ as to the details of what they saw fleetingly.
3. Follow these first two activities with a class discussion. Lead students to the awareness that no two people see the same thing in exactly the same way. All people bring to the situation their own values, beliefs, and life experiences—and powers of observation.

Explain that each of us believes that we observe reality—things as they are. But what actually happens is that the mind interprets what the eyes see and gives it meaning. It is only at this point, when meaning is assigned, that we can truly say we have seen something. In other words, what we see is as

much in the mind as it is in reality. If you consider that the mind of a person from one culture is going to be different in many ways from the mind of a person from another culture, then you have the explanation for that most fundamental of all cross-cultural issues: the fact that two people looking upon the same reality, the same example of behavior, may see things differently.

Make the point that any behavior observed by two people from different cultures can be interpreted in two ways:

- The meaning given to it by the person who does the action
- The meaning given to it by the person who observes the action

Only when these two meanings are the same do we have successful communication—successful in the sense that the meaning that was intended by the doer is the one that was understood by the observer.

4. Now have students participate in a lesson that will help clarify these concepts. Distribute copies of Worksheet 1, “Understanding Cultural Viewpoints (Part 1),” on page 30, and have the students complete the worksheet.

Ask students to discuss their answers to the questions in groups of three. Have them note similarities and differences in their responses to each question. After five minutes of small-group discussion, ask students whether all three students in each group shared exactly the same response. Were their view-

points similar, was there some variation, or were they quite different? Confirm that it is rare that three people will have exactly the same opinion on a subject. Opinions might be similar, but not identical—or, depending on the makeup of your class, they might be distinctly different.

Reinforce the idea that if two people from the same culture often view a situation in different ways, it is even more likely that two people from different cultures will view a situation differently. Culture exerts a powerful influence on our point of view.

5. Now have students complete Worksheet 2, “Understanding Cultural Viewpoints (Part 2),” on page 31. In their same groups of three, ask the students to compare their responses to the same questions, but now with the knowledge of the cultural context. Ask how their responses changed.

Explain to students that if they were to go to another culture, they would need to be careful not to make judgments about a particular behavior or custom until they understood the cultural context—and the reasons that behavior was accepted as “normal.”

6. Tell students that they are going to read a story by a Peace Corps Volunteer in Togo. Assign Fred Koehler’s letter for homework. Ask students to list in a notebook or journal some of the challenges Fred, a health worker, faces in his Togolese village. Have them bring in their observations for discussion the next day.

### Day Two: Understanding Differing Viewpoints in Togo

1. Explain that to paraphrase is to retell a story in your own words. Ask a student to paraphrase Fred Koehler’s story to review the main points.
2. Ask students to identify three health issues Fred and the people of this village have to deal with. On the chalkboard, or overhead, make a chart like the one on the facing page. Fill in the first column as students give you answers from their homework. [Possible entries: High birthrate, reluctance to visit hospital, lack of clean water for drinking and washing]
3. Ask students to identify key words, phrases, and sentences that tell us how Fred feels about these issues. Fill them in under “Fred’s viewpoint.” Do the same for the second section of text, when Fred speaks from the Togolese viewpoint. Why do these two men, one real and one imaginary, have such different points of view about the same reality? Try to elicit from students the idea of cultural context (the unwritten rules or norms that have evolved and become part of a group’s expected behavior in various situations). How are the cultural contexts in which these men grew up different?
4. Ask students to identify what resources are available to help the villagers. How could Fred enhance these resources as a health worker?

- Put students into small groups. Ask them to propose solutions to each problem the villagers face. What additional resources would be needed? Would the villagers use them? Give the students about 15 minutes to work and then ask for reports.

Is Fred’s presence as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Blitta-Gare important to the villagers? What does he have to learn in order to be effective?

What method did Fred employ in order to understand the culture in Togo? How would you have approached Fred’s challenge?

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

- Reread Fred Koehler’s statement, “To respond to the problems in my village, I have to step into the shoes of those who have lived here their entire lives, which often means having no shoes at all.” Have

students brainstorm what it would be like to “step into the shoes” of someone else. What might a typical day be like for an elderly person living in their neighborhood in the United States? For someone from a different culture? For someone who is disabled? Students should consider the ways in which different people may interpret the same reality in different ways.

- Ask students to identify some beliefs that they have held growing up. Which of these beliefs might or might not be shared by people from other cultures?
- Have students do further research about health issues in developing countries. They might also compare their findings with research on critical health issues in the United States. A good starting place is the World Health Organization website, organized by country and by issue: [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

Issue	Fred’s viewpoint	Togolese viewpoint	Resources available	Your suggestion

## Worksheet #1:

### Understanding Cultural Viewpoints (Part 1)

(Adapted from the Peace Corps publications *Culture Matters* and *Insights From the Field*. You can find the full texts of these publications at [www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/culturematters/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/culturematters/) and at [www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/insights/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/insights/).)

Directions: Read the description of the seven behaviors below and write down your immediate response or interpretation. (This will reflect your own cultural values, beliefs, or perceptions.) The first one offers an example of a possible answer.

1. A person comes to a meeting half an hour after the scheduled starting time.

Your response or interpretation:

(Sample response: This person is late and should at least apologize or give an explanation.)

2. Someone kicks a dog.

Your response or interpretation:

3. A woman carries a heavy jug of water on her head while her husband walks in front of her carrying nothing.

Your response or interpretation:

4. A male guest helps a female host carry dirty dishes into the kitchen.

Your response or interpretation:

5. A young man and young woman are kissing each other in public.

Your response or interpretation:

6. While taking an exam, a student copies from the paper of another student.

Your response or interpretation:

7. A guest at a dinner party belches aloud after the main course.

Your response or interpretation:

## Worksheet #2:

### Understanding Cultural Viewpoints (Part 2)

Directions: In this part of the lesson, imagine how some of the same behaviors would be perceived or interpreted by someone from a culture different from your own. A different cultural trait is described in each case. Read each behavior and the description of the culture, and then write in the space provided how you think a person from such a culture would interpret that behavior. If you need more space, use the other side of this page.

1. A person comes to a meeting half an hour after the scheduled starting time. How would this act be interpreted by someone from a culture where it is normal to arrive half an hour—even two hours—after the scheduled starting time? The response or interpretation:  
(Sample response: It's no big deal. We'll start when everybody's here.)
2. Someone kicks a dog. How would this act be interpreted by someone from a country where dogs tend to carry disease and food is scarce? The response or interpretation:
3. A woman carries a heavy jug of water on her head while her husband walks in front of her carrying nothing. How would this be interpreted by someone from a culture where carrying water is a woman's responsibility? The response or interpretation:
4. A male guest helps a female host carry dirty dishes into the kitchen. How would this act be interpreted by someone from a culture where men are not expected to clean up after a meal? The response or interpretation:
5. A young man and young woman are kissing each other in public. How would this act be interpreted by someone from a culture where men and women never touch in public? The response or interpretation:
6. While taking an exam, a student copies from the paper of another student. How would this act be interpreted by someone from a culture where it is expected that you help a friend succeed, and sharing is the norm? The response or interpretation:
7. A guest at a dinner party belches aloud after the main course. How would this act be interpreted by someone from a culture where belching is the normal way to express pleasure about food? The response or interpretation:

## GIRL FARMER

by Angela (Rich) George

Peace Corps Volunteer, Dominican Republic (2001–2003)

When I arrived in my community as the promised agroforestry technician and Peace Corps Volunteer, a number of men said to me, “I thought we were getting a man.”

I usually smiled and replied, “There must have been some sort of horrible mistake.” They would smile back, and I would swallow hard, knowing my work was more than cut out for me. Living in a remote village in the mountains was difficult, but getting the male farmers to look to a female technician for help with their land seemed impossible.

For the first few months, a male technician working for a local non-governmental organization took me under his wing. I accompanied him to the farmers’ properties and began to get to know a few of the farmers this way. After some time mostly observing their work, I began to ask my own questions and make my own suggestions. I found the technician less responsive to me than the farmers were. I knew that I would have to make my break from the technician soon, or the locals would never listen to me. I took advantage of the days when the technician did not come up the mountain to work with the farmers one on one.

I would help the farmers with their work, talking about projects and possibilities for their land. I asked many questions and learned much more alone with the farmers than when I was with the technician. Nevertheless, in the first six months, I got very little accomplished with the men. In the meantime, I started a home-garden workshop for the women, to strengthen the existing gardens. We had weekly meetings and demonstrations, and each week worked in a different garden.

After spending months on the gardens, I tried once again to turn my attention to the farmers. Some days I would find myself alone, planting a hun-

### VOCABULARY

**agroforestry:** the system of growing and harvesting trees around agricultural crops so as to improve the productivity of the land.



dred trees, and some days, with a group of farmers, planting 2,000 trees. I continued to wake up early every morning and strap on my work boots. After nine months working in my site, I had established a few strong friendships with farmers. I encouraged them to start building soil barriers in the dry season, in preparation for the next rains. Then, one morning, a farmer came to my house and asked me if I would like to come out to his land to start building barriers. I looked into his face, expecting him to laugh, but he was serious. In that moment, I felt nine months of persistence and struggle all come together.

After I worked a few weeks with that farmer, some of the other farmers came to me asking to build barriers as well. With three farmers and other helpers, we formed a work party and rotated our work among the different pieces of land. In two months, we had established more than 11,000 feet of barriers and I had created a strong bond with these men, who now talk with me daily about work and projects.

As a woman who works with male farmers all day long, while their wives stay close to home cooking, washing clothes, and tending to children, I am challenged every day. The work in the fields is often physically demanding, but with sheer persistence, I have managed to convince most of the farmers in my community that my work is useful. Although it took time to wedge myself into the farmers' lives, I feel I have accomplished something great. Today, I spend most of my time with the farmers. Recently, they even voted and made me the official "educator" of their farmers' association.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

My name is Angela (Rich) George, and I work as an agroforestry community development Volunteer in the Dominican Republic. Growing up the youngest of my family in Racine, Wisconsin, was not easy. I constantly competed with my two older brothers, but I also looked to them as role models. Often, I aspired to do the same things they were doing. When my older brother was leading short-term development projects in Honduras, I was still in high school, but I began to think about traveling and working abroad.

I received my bachelor of arts from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in May of 2000. I majored in English, Spanish-American literature, and comparative literature. Although I began Spanish classes in the seventh grade, it wasn't until I studied abroad in Oaxaca, Mexico, after my second year in college, that Spanish came alive for me. Opportunities to speak Spanish were abundant; speaking Spanish was even a necessary survival skill, and I began to excel. The trip also solidified my interest in undertaking development work in a Spanish-speaking country.

### MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT

As an agroforestry community development Volunteer now, I try to combine agriculture with forestry; while I work with farmers, I teach them to protect the land by reforestation and using soil-conservation techniques. After three months of Peace Corps Spanish and technical agroforestry training, I was placed in the southwest part of the country, in a small village in the mountains called El Mundito, which translates as “the little world.” We have no running water, no electricity, and no paved road, and it truly is its own little world. We have one generator in the town, which is occasionally turned on to play the traditional *bachata* and *merengue* music and light up the dance floor.

I also work with villagers to establish organic home gardening. We have organized a group within the community to pass out seeds, talk about nutrition, and learn how to make and use organic fertilizers and pesticides. The people of El Mundito are not accustomed to planting and eating vegetables, and most suffer from malnutrition.

Currently I have a grant to build 20 latrines within the community. Although the project provides the materials for the latrines, the people provide all the labor. When I arrived there were no latrines, and this has been a health problem for the people.

Besides these main projects, I work with the farmers' association and a women's group, and I teach English classes.

### VOCABULARY

**Oaxaca** (pronounced wah-HAH-kah)

## GIRL FARMER

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will examine gender roles in a developing economy and discover how difficult it can be for a person to bridge the divide professionally between traditionally female roles and traditionally male roles.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn that it may be possible to transcend traditional gender roles professionally when it is practicable.
- Students will understand that transcending traditional gender roles on the job may take patience, sensitivity, and perseverance.

**GRADES:** 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Have students read “Girl Farmer.” Then use the following questions as impetus for class discussion and activities.
2. The author begins her story with this statement: “When I arrived in my community as the promised agroforestry technician and Peace Corps Volunteer, a number of men said to me, ‘I thought we were getting a man.’” What the author reports literally is that the men were surprised. But the quotation implies more than surprise. What more does it say? How do you know? [If Angela’s gender were not an issue, they wouldn’t have remarked about it. Also, in the text that follows, her friendly—and sarcastic—remark about a “horrible mistake” confirms that she recognizes their disappointment.]

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**  
I, IV (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**  
4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14 (see page 133)

#### Enduring Understandings

- Gender roles generally follow societal rules and define expectations of women and men in a society.
- Acting in a role usually assigned to the other gender may be possible but challenging.

#### Essential Questions

- What factors determine the expectations for women and for men in a society?
- Why is it difficult to play the role of the other gender in a society?
- Under what circumstances might it be useful and constructive to violate traditional gender roles on the job?

#### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class

3. Why were the farmers surprised that their Peace Corps Volunteer who came to work with them was female? How can you know why? (Be specific about evidence in the story.) [The author states in the second paragraph that the local farmers are male, and that a female expert in that field is unusual.]
4. In the third paragraph, the author says that a male technician took her under his wing. What does that expression mean, and where do you think it comes from? [The expression means to be protective; it comes from the behavior of many kinds of birds, such as chickens, that protect their offspring by sheltering them under the wings.]
5. In fact, after a while, how helpful was the technician in taking care of Angela? (Find the answer in the text.) What made it possible for Angela to visit the farmers on the technician's days off? [As a Peace Corps Volunteer, Angela was living among the farmers, so she was available to take advantage of opportunities on a moment's notice. If she had been working for a non-governmental organization outside her village, it is likely that she would not have had the opportunities to work one on one with the farmers when the technician didn't visit the village.]
6. What strategy did Angela use to become accepted by the farmers? What traits did she exhibit that made the acceptance possible? [She worked with the farmers without imposing herself. She focused on one farmer in particular, until the success of his work with her set an example for others to join. In the meantime, she also worked effectively with the women, demonstrating her competence. Her traits? Persistence—as she herself observes—patience, technical knowledge, among others (Answers to both questions may vary.)]
7. In her situation in the Dominican Republic, Angela as a woman was able to enter a man's world and function effectively. Do you think that a man could be accepted to work in a rural area with women in a job traditionally assigned to women, in much the same way the author managed to do the other way around? Why, or why not? [The answers here may be speculative, but it is unlikely that men, who frequently play a dominant role, would allow another man to work with the women of the community in roles usually reserved for women. It is common, for example, for Peace Corps Volunteers who live in areas where women and children are responsible for obtaining and carrying household water, not to be allowed to carry water, no matter how much a male Volunteer might want to assist in carrying his own water.]
8. In being accepted by the farmers as an agricultural consultant, what advantages might Angela have enjoyed over other women in the Dominican Republic? [As an outsider, she may have presented less of a risk to the men than a local woman acting in a man's traditional role.]

Also, because the men knew that Angela was a Peace Corps Volunteer, they knew she was a temporary resident and not someone who was an integral part of their culture. In an ironic sense, that might have helped her be accepted.]

9. Can you think of examples in the United States or Western Europe in which women have successfully worked in a role traditionally occupied by men? [Answers will vary. Students might not recognize today that women bus drivers are a relatively new phenomenon. All early astronauts were male. Female Supreme Court justices are relatively new in the course of American history. Encourage students to think of contemporary examples. Germany, in 2005, elected its first female chancellor. In the top levels of the United States government, two women have recently served as secretary of state, and the U.S. House of Representatives in late 2006 elected its first female Speaker of the House. ]

### EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Perhaps the chief factor in Angela's challenge to work effectively at her post in the Dominican Republic was her gender. Those who work in empowering women to fulfill roles not traditionally assigned to them distinguish between factors that are a biological given and those that are societally determined. The distinction may be seen as one between the sex of a person and her gender.

Ask students in a class discussion to come up with several criteria distinguishing between aspects of a woman's life that are biologically determined and those that are societally determined. On the board, write these headings over two columns: "One's Gender Roles Are..." and "One's Sex Is...." Try to elicit the following, as a start:

#### One's Gender Roles Are...

- Socially constructed
- Learned
- Dynamic—they change over time
- Multifaceted—they differ within and between cultures

#### One's Sex Is...

- Biologically determined
- Universal
- Unchanging (with few exceptions)

For further activities in women and development, go to [www.peacecorps.gov/www/educator/lessonplans](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/educator/lessonplans) and then search for "gender."

## ANGEL

by Barbara Arrington

Peace Corps Volunteer, South Africa (2002–2004)

I awoke to the sounds of singing and the pounding of feet. The beautiful yet haunting sound of voices in harmony moved closer as men and women paraded down the red dirt road in a Saturday ceremony for the dead. AIDS was making its own inexorable march across my village of more than 3,000 families, snatching someone away almost weekly. And while AIDS was talked about, few people accepted its existence among them. Those who had the disease were shunned.

One of those was a young woman who called herself Angel. When she was born, her mother named her Mankhu, which means “death” in Northern Sotho. In the end, she would use her life to be an example so that others could live.

My primary job as a Peace Corps Volunteer was to help teachers imple-  
ment a new curriculum adopted by the South African government in their schools. My secondary job was left up to me. Based on the needs of my community, I could decide what project outside of the school I wanted to do. As I sought the perfect fit, one came knocking at my door.

“Mabatu!” My host mother called out my South African name.

“*Yebo, Ke etla!*” (Yes, I’m coming!) I replied.

“You have a visitor,” my host mother said at my door, coming to me instead.

Outside, under a large mango tree, sat a woman, neatly dressed in a white button-down blouse and navy blue skirt.

“*Dumelang*” (Hello), I said.

“*Aowa! O bolela!*” (No way! You are speaking my language!) she said, as many do when they hear me speak.

### VOCABULARY

**haunting:** eerie; troubling

**inexorable:** determined and unchangeable

**shunned:** avoided

**implement:** start up

Though I am black like they are, I am still a stranger, and so they are surprised that I can speak their language. We chatted a while about general, small topics, and then she explained that she had started a home-based care group that would visit the sick in the village and take medicine or food to them. She wondered if I could come and train them about HIV/AIDS and how it is transmitted. I quickly agreed and made arrangements to run a series of weekly workshops at the small village clinic.

Among the regular attendees at these sessions was a young woman in her 20s—Angel—who sat quietly, listening intently. She was exceptionally thin for her height and walked with a slight limp. I noted her and wondered about her, but never approached her. During a special session, I invited a fellow Volunteer who was a retired nurse to make a presentation. When she was finished and final words were being spoken, the young woman stood up. She thanked me, and her smile and beautiful large eyes spoke volumes across cultures, across language barriers. Afterward, she asked if I could come and visit her. This was the beginning of a significant life lesson for me.

I went the following week to Angel's home. She lived in a small, bare concrete house. Only one of the rooms had walls on all sides. She didn't invite me in; we sat outside on two wire chairs, and she began to tell me her life story: She didn't know her father, and her mother had left her with her grandmother when she was a girl. She had three children, two of whom lived with relatives. I had often seen her third child in the village. Her current boyfriend, she told me, had given her AIDS. As she continued to talk, I inwardly despaired at the bleakness of her situation. I was there to help, but nothing could prepare me for this woman's story. Nothing could prepare me for the hopelessness or helplessness I felt. She had no job, no money, and a child to feed. There was no medication for her disease. She had full-blown AIDS and would undoubtedly die within five years.

"Mabatu," she said, "I want to talk to people about my life. I want to warn other girls. You taught me so much. And you didn't just teach; you hugged me. No one ever hugs me because they are afraid they will catch AIDS. Thank you, Mabatu."

Angel wanted to share her story. I sat stunned, awed that she wanted to talk about her disease to people in a village where she could easily become ostracized. And I was amazed that something so small as my simple hug could mean so much.

I went to the local high schools and middle schools to ask if Angel could come and talk to the life-skills classes. Though the teachers were hesitant, they knew a growing number of teenagers were dying of AIDS and so they agreed that she could speak to the students.

By telling her story, Angel found confidence and a reason to live. She found a church and became part of a community. The challenges were still there, of course. Even my host mother would whisper and ask me why I bothered with such a woman. Yet, she realized, like so many others in my community, that Angel was worthy of being loved, she was worthy of *ubuntu*, which means treating fellow humans with dignity.

Toward the end of my Peace Corps service, Angel asked me to help her make a memory box for her daughters. As we sat together and prepared this box that would be given to her children after her death, I realized she was creating it not with sorrow, but with practicality and love.

I had started out the teacher, but in the end it was I who was taught. She taught me strength and survival and love. She taught me how to live. I often complained about the small worries of life. Now, even so far away from Africa, I remember Angel, who learned to embrace her situation, prepared for it, and worked to help others along the way. She taught me that my problems are not so big that they cannot be conquered with courage. Angel still lives, as far as I know, and I hope that the memories she has to give to her daughters through the box she made and how she lived her life will be many—and unforgettable, like Angel.

## VOCABULARY

**ostracized:** excluded; pushed out



## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

As a youth growing up on the South Side of Chicago, I associated the Peace Corps with “those people who had the grand idea of changing the world.” So, when I found myself in college, idealistic and determined to change the world, the Peace Corps was the first place I looked. The day I was invited to join was one of the happiest of my life. I floated on cloud nine for a month. Early on the first of July 2001, I hopped a bus and headed to Philadelphia, where my life-changing journey was about to commence. There in the city of brotherly love, I met my fellow agents of change, many of whom became close friends. We were all on a journey, beginning the adventure of a lifetime. And what an adventure!

## **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

Living in South Africa rattled all my stereotypes about life in an African village. I had dreamed of Africa. I dreamt of lions roaming the savannah and giraffes hiding behind trees. Yet, reality was meandering cattle and cackling hens dodging speeding cars on dirt roads. From the very first day, when a cheeky youth, dressed to the highest level of “bling”—silver chains around his neck, faux diamond earrings in both ears, and saggy-bottom pants—greeted me with “What’s up?” I knew that whatever stereotypes I had come with I had better toss out the window. For many young people have a common bond in places the world over—the bond of pop culture. Even girls living on the southern tip of Africa love Beyoncé.

I worked as a teacher trainer. And though I appreciated my primary job, it was through one of my secondary projects that I learned to truly appreciate the strength and love that strive within the human spirit. I worked with a group of 10 women who had come together deciding that they wanted to help those in our village who suffered from AIDS. By doing this, they were standing up against the prejudices and the stereotypes that many people had of individuals with HIV or AIDS in South Africa. Their courage is one of my most profound memories.

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:**

1, 2, 3, 4 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

4, 10 (see page 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa is all encompassing, imposing itself on all aspects of everyday life—for the victims of the disease as well as for the survivors.
- Even when facing advanced stages of AIDS, an individual can maintain hope and a positive attitude to help others avoid the disease or at least live productive, inspired lives.

**Essential Questions**

- Why is HIV/AIDS so widespread in South Africa?
- What personal resources can one call upon to lead a constructive life in the face of HIV/AIDS?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of story for the whole class

When I first flew over the Atlantic Ocean and down toward the tip of the African continent, I believed that I had set off to change the world. Yet a funny thing happened somewhere along the way on my journey through Africa. I changed. I found that changing the world is a bit like trying to swallow an elephant whole. Now, everyone knows you can't swallow an elephant whole, but that doesn't mean you can't eat it. An old African proverb goes, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." And so it is with changing the world. How do you change the world? One life at a time, beginning with your own. So, perhaps I didn't find a cure for AIDS, or bring education to the masses. Yet, I learned a lot about life and the joys in it from some pretty neat people who lived in my village. And perhaps they learned a little about me. And that is indeed grand.

## ANGEL TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**OVERVIEW**

Students get to meet a victim of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa and see personally how it affects her, her community, and the author, who meets and befriends her.

**OBJECTIVE**

Students will understand the many dimensions of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa and learn about one of the strategies being employed to control the disease and help its many victims.

**GRADES:** 9–12

**PROCEDURE**

1. Have students read “Angel.” Then use the following questions as a guide for class discussion.
2. A worldwide effort is underway to control the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Peace Corps assigns almost 2,000 Volunteers exclusively to this effort. The fight against AIDS involves prevention, suppressive medication, care for patients suffering from the disease, and support for the many orphans and for the victims of the disease who are often ostracized from their families and communities. Ask students to identify Barbara Arrington’s chief contribution to fighting the effects of AIDS and how it helped her community. For another vivid and moving account of the effects of AIDS in South Africa, refer students to Peace Corps Volunteer Allison Howard’s essay “Where Life Is Too Short” ([www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories)).
3. If Barbara Arrington had been writing a newspaper report, she might have introduced Angel right away and proceeded to explain Angel’s role. Instead, she started with an anecdote. What does the author achieve by telling a little story in the first paragraph? [She sets the scene and the tone, making sure the reader understands the extent and effect of the AIDS pandemic among the population. She also establishes a context so that readers get a feeling for the physical environment.]
4. A great many South Africans outside of urban areas rely on traditional healers called *sangomas* for medical treatment. These healers use herbs and rituals to help heal those suffering from injuries and disease. Some of the traditional medications that *sangomas* use ironically act to negate the effects of antiretroviral medications that would otherwise help those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Ask students how they might try to help communities fight the AIDS epidemic in places where *sangomas* preside over most medical procedures. Then refer the students to an essay by Peace Corps Volunteer Amber Bechtel, who has been facing just that situation in South Africa. In her essay “Brand New Muti” (on the World Wise Schools website, at [peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://peacecorps.gov/wws/stories)), students will learn how Amber included the *sangomas* in her training regimens, and why the traditional healers agreed to adapt their rituals.
5. When the author is looking for a secondary project, she says that an idea “came knocking at my door.” Explain to students that the author is using a literary device called personification. She attributes human characteristics to an inanimate object—in this case, an abstract noun, the idea, came knocking. Ask in what ways personification adds to the description. [The author could have said simply that she “got an idea,” or that it “fell in her lap.” The image of an idea arriving at her door is much richer and more interesting than a simple report would have been.]

## HOW DOES ONE SPELL 'HAPPINESS' IN PARAGUAY? CHE AVY'A

by Jane Troxell

Peace Corps Volunteer, Paraguay (1999–2001)

All Peace Corps Volunteers who come to serve in Paraguay arrive thinking that, by the end of their service, they will achieve their dreams of speaking fluent Spanish at the drop of a *sombrero*—or hat. Why wouldn't they, after living two years in a South American country? Because Paraguay, a small developing nation nestled between gigantic Brazil and Argentina, speaks in two official tongues: Spanish and, more importantly, the indigenous *Guaraní*.

I had hoped to be sent to a Spanish-speaking nation and was pleased when the Peace Corps placement officer told me that a trip to Paraguay was in my near future. The booklet that headquarters sent me talked about this “Guaraní” thing, but I didn't pay too much attention to it. I looked it up on the Internet, and Guaraní ran something to the tune of “*Mba'éichapa? Ipora, ha nde? Che amba'apota kokuepe kueste día.*” They had to be joking. I had just taken some night classes in Spanish so I figured—hoped—I'd get up to speed in that language in no time, too.

The Peace Corps wasn't joking. People speak Guaraní in Paraguay. Without a doubt, my hardest challenge as a Peace Corps Volunteer has been the languages. Paraguayans speak Spanish in the few big cities here, but in the pueblos—small towns—and in the campo—the countryside—Guaraní is spoken. I was assigned to the campo, where people understand Spanish, more or less, but don't speak it at all. When I got to my site, I didn't know how to ask in Guaraní where the latrine was or where food came from. I asked in Spanish, but the campesinos—the country folk—answered in Guaraní.

### VOCABULARY

**indigenous:** born locally;  
natural to a region

#### *Guaraní*

**(pronounced GWAH-rah-NEE):**  
a language widely spoken in  
Paraguay, and, to a lesser extent,  
in neighboring countries

**pueblo (pronounced PWEB-loh)**

**campesino (pronounced  
KAHM-peh-SEE-noh)**

I cried. I studied. I cried. I listened. I cried. I talked. I cried. I was trying to get the hang of it. One night, I attended a birthday party with my Paraguayan work friends. They all spoke in Guaraní and no one translated. A person can tell when she is being talked about, even if she doesn't understand the words. They were saying something about me and laughing uproariously. One of the guys put his arm around me. My face burned and I started to cry into the guy's breast pocket. The only phrase I did understand the whole night was "Ndopukavy'i" (She's not laughing).

With time, things got better. Fortunately, my next-door neighbors embraced me and patiently taught me Guaraní. Doña Zunilda gave up her evenings for two months to sit in front of the fire with me and my notebooks. Her niece Marlene seems to be able to read my mind and still gives me the exact phrase I want to learn. After a few months, I finally got the knack and now speak great Guaraní. I don't understand everything, but can mix Spanish and Guaraní like a champ.

Guaraní is a fun and rhythmic language. It's a true pleasure to speak it and see people's faces light up when I do. Paraguay is such an "underdog" of a country that they find it amazing that a "Norte"—a North American—like me would dedicate herself to learning their language. Paraguayans also enjoy the poetry of their language, even though they wouldn't conceptualize it in those terms. For example, here we would say "*Ipo pinda*" to indicate that someone is a thief. Literally translated, it means, "His hand is a fishhook." Technological terms in English would not translate into Guaraní, as the *campesinos* have very limited technology and, hence, no words for it. My time here has shown me how differently people think, by virtue of their language.

Through the once impossible Guaraní language—that is, impossible for me—I learned that anything is possible. I learned the importance of communicating with others in the language in which they are comfortable. The poorer one is in Paraguay, the more likely one is to speak Guaraní, so the

## VOCABULARY

### **Doña** (pronounced DAWN-nya):

a woman's title of respect, meaning "madam" or "lady"

**conceptualize:** think about;  
consider

more Guaraní I learned, the more effective I became as a Volunteer. Learning Guaraní lessened the barriers between us, and people accepted me as a friend.

The Peace Corps isn't about going to touristy places; it's about people. The experience of the Guaraní language changed my experience of Peace Corps service and brought me closer to the people I came to help and learn from. As I now tell other Volunteers, if you want to learn Spanish, buy a TV. If you want to be happy, learn Guaraní.

#### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

My name is Jane Troxell, and I have an identical twin sister named Jean. We were born three minutes apart in Cumberland, Maryland—a stone's throw from West Virginia, across the Potomac River (if you have a strong arm). After giving birth to the two of us on the same day as President John F. Kennedy's funeral, Mom declared that twins were more than enough to handle, so it's just us. Jean and I both attended the University of Maryland, where I managed the women's sports teams in order to pay tuition. In 1986, I took a degree in political science.

Two years ago, when we were 34, Jean had her first baby and I decided to join the Peace Corps. Today, we are two twins living worlds apart. She lives on the Chesapeake Bay with my nephew and brother-in-law, and here I am in Paraguay, South America, bathing in a bucket. I miss Jean and my family (and hot showers), but I know that they will be there when I get back. In the meantime, I am speaking two new languages, helping out people who appreciate me, and making great friendships with the funniest people you could ever meet. Peace Corps life is sometimes hard here, but it sure is enjoyable.

## MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT

As a small-business-development Volunteer, my main goal here is to help a group of farm women make as much money as they can from their only source of income—the weekly market, or *feria*. The women cultivate vegetables, fruit, and herbs, raise pigs and chickens for meat and eggs, and make homemade cheese and *empanadas* (meat pies) to sell in town. The average weekly profit for each woman is the equivalent of about \$9. Thirty-six dollars a month does not seem like much—and it isn't. But it allows the women to buy flour, cooking oil, soap, basic toiletries, bread, sugar, *yerba* (herb) tea, and a few cookies for the children. Their husbands are farmers who are poor, too, so every little bit helps.

For many years, I owned a bookstore in Washington, DC, so this Peace Corps form of “retail” is right up my alley. At the *feria*, I help these beginning businesswomen to set up and break down their stalls, improve presentation of goods, encourage good selling techniques, work on better client services, teach basic budgeting and accounting, and think up new products to sell. Peanut butter cookies were my latest “great idea,” but so far the Paraguayans in my town haven't developed a taste for them. I realized that many of the women grow peanuts on their farms, so I am teaching how to make, sell, and eat peanut butter. At least I have a tasty assignment!

## HOW DOES ONE SPELL 'HAPPINESS' IN PARAGUAY? *CHE AVY'A*

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will examine the challenges—and the rewards—of learning the language where one is living, and discover a bit in the process about Guaraní, an indigenous language of Paraguay.

#### OBJECTIVE

Students will appreciate the difficulty, along with the importance, of communicating with a people in their own language.

#### GRADES: 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Have students read Jane Troxell's story "How Does One Spell 'Happiness' in Paraguay? *Che Avy'a*," then use the following questions as a guide for class discussion.
2. The author makes the point that in most South American countries, Spanish is officially the language spoken nationally. Ask students why this is true, and have them research the history of exploration in South America to bear out their answers. What language would Jane Troxell likely have had to learn if she had been stationed in Brazil? Why? [Portuguese, because of early Portuguese exploration and colonization, starting in 1500.] What if she'd been sent to Belize, in Central America, which is surrounded by Spanish-speaking countries? Why? (Ask students to research the answer.) [English, because the British settlers and military prevailed in displacing Spanish forces in addition to displacing the indigenous Maya.]

#### STANDARDS

##### English Standards:

1, 2, 3, 4 (see page 131)

##### Social Studies Standards:

I, IV, X (see page 132)

##### National Geography Standards:

4, 9, 10, 12 (see page 133)

##### Enduring Understanding

- It is likely that you will get more respect and cooperation from people you are working with if you speak with them in their native language.

##### Essential Questions

- In what ways is speaking one's native tongue different from speaking any other language?
- How does speaking to someone in his or her native tongue differ from speaking to the person in any other language?

##### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class



3. The author wrote, "I was assigned to the *campo*, where people understand Spanish, more or less, but don't speak it at all." What circumstances would lead people to be able to comprehend a language without speaking it? [Proximity to speakers of Spanish, and the need to understand enough Spanish for reasons of commerce and transportation, might lead locals to understand a language that they had no need to speak at home and among themselves.] Ask students whether they have encountered anyone who could understand them but not speak English. It's possible that they have experienced this in areas where large numbers of immigrants live.
4. Former president of South Africa Nelson Mandela once said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart." What did he mean by that? What practical implications does his observation have for Peace Corps Volunteers and others visiting, working, or living in a culture other than their own? Even if students do not speak a second language, ask them to imagine someone who didn't speak English communicating with them effectively in sign language or through pictures. How would that differ, for them, from a similar person communicating with them in fluent English?
5. Would students be surprised to learn that English has borrowed a number of words from Guaraní? Ask the students to research Guaraní to see which words in English—related to animals—are derived from the language. [Jaguar, toucan, cougar, piranha, tapir, agouti.] The cougar also goes by the names catamount, mountain lion, and puma. Ask students to find out where the word "puma" comes from. [Quechua, another indigenous South American language, from the Andes.]
6. Jane Troxell reports how descriptive Guaraní is, providing as an example the fact that a thief is said to have a hand that's a fishhook. Ask students to work in small groups to devise imaginative expressions in English that are similarly descriptive in a metaphorical way.
7. In a class discussion, have students speculate as to why Guaraní is spoken more by rural, less educated, and poorer residents of Paraguay, and Spanish by more urban, more educated, and wealthier citizens. Then have some students research why this is so and report their findings to the class.

### Extension Activities

1. For an informative and entertaining account of the extreme challenge one Peace Corps Volunteer experienced in mastering another language—Chinese—and the reasons he thought it was important to do so, see Peter Hessler's story, "Running," at [peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://peacecorps.gov/wws/stories).
2. To see how politics can influence which languages are spoken where, see Peace Corps Volunteer Amy Maraney's story "Language and Identity in Narva, Estonia," at [peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://peacecorps.gov/wws/stories).

## WAKING UP, STEPPING OUT

by Steve Iams

Peace Corps Volunteer, Nepal (2003–2004); China (2004–2006)

*The author wrote this account about his experience in Nepal.*

I wake to chattering voices, a bus horn, bells ringing, an old man with a hacking cough, the squeak of a rusty latch opening across the hallway. A year ago, any of these noises would have been a disturbance, but now the morning ensemble is simply a part of my day. I push open the flaps in the mosquito net and step out into my bedroom. I stretch my arms upward to the ceiling and exhale a bearish yawn. It's six in the morning.

Meanwhile, the village has been up for several hours. At the tea shop two floors below my bedroom window, rush hour has arrived. When I walk downstairs to the ground floor, the shop's four tables are packed with village men dipping *sell roti*, a doughnut-like pastry, into their milk tea. Some of the men draw long breaths of cigarette smoke as their conversation hammers away above the shop's buzzing commotion. A rice-filled pressure-cooker whistles, spouting white steam like a miniature locomotive while the adjacent pot sizzles to life with the aroma of onions and garlic. Each customer has brought with him a silver bucket overflowing with milk, fresh from the barn. As the men pass time in the shop, the buckets await transfer to the street bazaars of Kathmandu, Nepal's frenetic capital city 10 miles down the road at the base of the valley.

In front of the shop, I sit down on a wooden bench between Janak, a short, amiable teacher at the school where I taught English last year, and Hajurbaa, my 104-year-old host grandfather. From the inside of the shop behind me, I hear someone calling my Nepali name, "Hare Krishna!" Gita, the shopkeeper, smiles and stretches her hand beyond the counter to hand me a cup of tea. "Namaste!" she says, and then "Good morning!" With this English phrase she lets out an excited giggle in anticipation of my approval. Over the course of my year in the village, Gita has been learning bits of

### VOCABULARY

**ensemble (pronounced on-SOM-bul):** a collection of all of the parts together

**adjacent:** next to

**bazaars:** outdoor markets

**frenetic:** frantic; wildly active

English and practicing with me, although we rarely get past “Hello—How are you—I’m fine” without her erupting into laughter. Gita is typical of many Nepali women in that she married young—in her case, when she was 14—and never attended school. Now 30, she gave birth to her son when she was 16 and her daughter at 18. For the past eight years, she’s worked alongside her husband at the tea shop, which opens before dawn and closes after dark. Since I arrived last year, I’ve never seen her take a day off, nor have I ever heard her complain about it.

Next to me, Hajurbaa asks a question I strain to comprehend, although with Hajurbaa I’m typically able to guess what he’s asking. Our conversations tend to be an exercise in stating the obvious. When he sees me drinking tea, he’ll ask, “Are you drinking tea?” “Yes! I’m drinking tea,” I’ll respond. It’s a tacit agreement that helps to bridge our extremely wide lingual, cultural, and generational gap. Today he’s wearing a light-blue *dowra surwal*, the traditional dress for Nepali men, a knee-length lightweight robe and pants with a matching cap. While I might be laughed at if I were to wear a *dowra surwal*, Hajurbaa wears the clothing naturally and gracefully. “Where are you going today, Hajurbaa?” I ask. I ask him this question every morning and always get the same response. “Going? I’m 104 years old! I’m not going anywhere. I’ll stay here.”

A young boy stops his bicycle on the dirt road in front of us to deliver three copies of the daily newspaper. Janak gets a copy and buries himself in the front-page headlines. The big news of the day is the king appointing a new prime minister, someone who, many people seem to agree, will fail to bring stability to the country’s shaken political ground. Over the past seven years, the country has witnessed a deadly civil war responsible for more than 10,000 deaths, the massacre of the royal family in 2001, and the 2002 dismissal of parliament and suspension of elections. Very few people, including Janak, seem to be optimistic about the future of the country.

But Janak has other things on his mind. Today, like every other day for the past three months, he wears white clothing from head to toe in remembrance of his father, who passed away in early March. For the first 10 days

## VOCABULARY

**comprehend:** understand

**generational:** having to do with the period of a lifetime

after his father's death, Janak mourned his loss in the traditional Hindu way, by remaining at home in a corner of the house, draped in a white sheet. He shaved his mustache and his head, fasted all morning, and ate only rice and fruit in the evenings. One rainy morning I went to visit him. I wasn't allowed to touch him and had to sit on a chair several feet away from his makeshift grieving area. My instinct at the time was to reach out to him, to shake his hand or give him a hug, but this wasn't allowed. Janak needed this time to purge the grief from his body, after which time only the happy, warm memories of his father would remain.

Close to the tea shop, a group of women congregate at the base of the village *chautara*, which translates in English to "resting tree." In rural Nepal, these giant trees mark the center of the village and provide a canopy of shade where the villagers relax and escape from the sun during the hot summer months. Today, as they wait for the bus to arrive, the women chat and stand over their *dokas*, handmade wooden baskets they're using to transport heaping loads of cucumbers and pumpkins for sale in Kathmandu. Among these women is Amma, my host mother. She wears a red sari with decorative gold trim; a sari is a long, flowing wrap worn by Nepali women. Amma is hauling nearly 50 pounds of pumpkins to Kathmandu, where she can earn about 20 cents a pound. If she can make 10 dollars today, she'll be happy; within a few weeks the markets will be flooded with pumpkins from all over the Kathmandu Valley, and the going price for a pound of pumpkins could drop to 10 cents. When I ask if she'll bargain for a higher selling price, she lets out a hoarse cackle and waves off my suggestion. "I don't fix the price. What can I do?" she says with a smile.

Around 8 in the morning, the business of village life slows as people retreat to their homes for their morning meal. Steaming plates of rice, curried vegetables, and lentil soup await the men, women, girls, and boys of the village, many of whom have worked up an appetite in the surrounding fields, cultivating the soil for the coming rice season. The rituals and routine of village life—the work, the meals, even the conversation—are as unchanging as the seasons. The only thing that seems to be different here is me. But, after a year of living and working here, even I'm starting to fit in.

## VOCABULARY

*chautara* (pronounced CHO-tuh-rruh;  
the *rr* is rolled, or guttural)

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

As a high school student in Ohio, I never imagined I'd join the Peace Corps. My mother had enough trouble getting me to travel as far as Colorado for a family vacation. I was famous in my family for wanting to travel only to places where there would be a Taco Bell. When I was 20, my uncle invited me to visit Ecuador with him. In one small town, we stopped at a post office to ask directions and bumped into a Peace Corps Volunteer. He told us he'd been teaching health and nutrition in a nearby village. He was enthusiastic about his job, but I remember thinking to myself, "Wow—this is something I could never do."

Several years later, after graduating from the University of Virginia, I was working at the Ohio House of Representatives, in Columbus, when I started to think about traveling and working abroad. My mom had given me a newspaper article about teaching English in Japan. I had nothing to lose, I figured, and the next thing I knew I was living in Tokyo, teaching conversational English to adults. Teaching abroad enabled me to further explore my interests in traveling, writing, and photography, and Tokyo became a staging point for trips to China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Australia. When my term of service expired in Japan, joining the Peace Corps seemed like the perfect way to further both my professional and personal goals.

When I'm not traveling, I enjoy spending time with my mom and dad; my brothers, Andy and Alex; my sisters, Sara and Molly; and my dog, Packer. When I am traveling, my Uncle Marty and friend Tommy make for the best of companions.

**MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

My assignment is to work with the Nepali government schools as an English language teacher trainer. I spent the first year of my service teaching English to grades 4–8 in a small village near Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. During my second year, I'll conduct training in English

language and teaching methods for the primary-level teachers of English in my school district. \*

Some of the projects I've worked on outside of my assignment include a conversation class for the higher-level students of English, where the students had the opportunity to practice using English in a fun, informal setting. I also organized training in the use of improved cook stoves. During this five-day training, village women learned how to build safer, more efficient wood-burning stoves. In addition to the teacher training I'll do this year, I'm organizing a GLOW Camp (Girls Leading Our World) in my village, a leadership and skills-development camp for girls ages 12-18.

*\*In September 2004, the Peace Corps suspended its program in Nepal and withdrew all Peace Corps Volunteers from the country for their safety because of political violence.*

## WAKING UP, STEPPING OUT

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will focus on a rich and colorful description of a culture unfamiliar to most of them, and then compare the similarities and differences they find between Nepali culture and their own.

#### OBJECTIVES

After studying the letter and engaging in activities, students should be able to explain how or why

- Cultures endure over time.
- Cultures in other regions differ from our own.
- Our similarities as people can bridge cultural differences.
- People can adapt to new cultures.

**GRADES:** 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Ask students to make a list of holidays they personally celebrate, with descriptions of how they celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or Ramadan. Record students' responses on the board. If there is little diversity in the responses, ask students to name other holidays they personally might not celebrate, but that others do. They may also consider differences in the way holidays are celebrated (e.g., wooden shoes set out in the Netherlands for *Sinterklaas* instead of stockings for Santa Claus). Ask students why there are differences in the holidays they celebrate. Guide students to arrive at the conclusion that we are raised with different traditions stemming from different cultures.

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3, (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**  
I, IV (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**  
4, 6, 10, 12 (see page 133)

#### Enduring Understandings

- People, settings, and routines define the culture of an area.
- We can learn to adapt and fit in to a culture that is not our own.

#### Essential Questions

- What is culture?
- What elements define culture?
- How do people from different cultures adapt in order to live together?

#### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Large T-chart (newsprint or poster board)—a graphic organizer with a line across the top and two columns
- Stick-on notes
- Student handout: T-chart for Cultural Similarities and Differences (page 57)

2. Ask students to define “culture.” Give them a few minutes to write a response; then have them share it with the class. Put one or two definitions on the board and explain to students that they will be testing these concepts of culture during class.
3. Explain that the students will be reading a letter from a Peace Corps Volunteer in which he describes the people in a Nepali village as they go about their daily activities. Show them Nepal on a map and give them some information about the country.
4. Once students have a context for the letter, give each student a copy of the letter and the T-chart on the next page. Ask students to read the letter carefully and to record similarities and differences they see between the Nepali culture and their own culture in the appropriate columns on the T-chart.
5. Allow students time to read the letter and make notes. Pass out two stick-on notes (preferably different colors) to each student. Once students are finished, ask them to record a similarity on one note and a difference on the other and place them on a class-size T-chart you have posted. Review with the class and ask them to draw conclusions about what they see recorded. They should address, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Education
  - Gender roles
  - Language
  - Socioeconomic factors
  - Rituals
  - Typical activities (e.g., drinking tea)
6. Ask students to consider these as aspects of culture and revisit the definitions they wrote earlier. Do the definitions still work? Do they need to be broadened or narrowed? Make the appropriate adaptations until the students arrive at a definition similar to this: “The behavior patterns, art, beliefs, values, institutions, and other products of human work and thought typical of a population or community at a given time, often passed between generations.”
7. Discuss with the class what they think it would be like living in Steve Iams’s village in Nepal. What would they have to do to fit in? What would they have to get used to?
8. Focus the class discussion on the concept of similarities. There are many actions and beliefs Iams describes that are different from what we may do or think in the United States, but if we dig deeper below the surface, there are many core similarities. Help students to see that while Janak, for example, wore white clothing and confined himself to a corner of his house for 10 days after his father’s death (which may seem unusual to students), he was grieving for someone who died—an emotion or experience they can all understand. Ask them to identify other ways the villagers and Americans are similar on a core, human level.



## T-Chart for Cultural Similarities and Differences

On the chart below, record how the Nepali culture, as described in Steve Iams's letter "Waking Up, Stepping Out," is similar to or different from your daily culture.

Similarities	Differences
Conclusions:	

## SONEKA'S VILLAGE

by Richard Lupinsky Jr.

Peace Corps Volunteer, Tanzania (2003–2005)

I would like to tell you about my special friend Soneka and his people in Tanzania. Soneka is 10 and a member of the Maasai tribe. He helps his family by delivering *maziwa*, or fresh milk, to my house every morning. Soneka carries *maziwa* in small plastic jugs and pours it into a metal pot on my back porch. He does this because I must first boil the *maziwa* to kill germs before I can drink it safely. Soneka walks from his village about half a mile to my house with his sister Adija and his tan dog, Bobi. When he arrives, he doesn't knock on my door; instead, he stands outside and shouts, "*Hodi, Hodi, Hodi!*" This is his way of saying, "Hello, are you home?" in Kiswahili. That's the language used widely in Tanzania.

Soneka's people have preserved the traditional customs of their ancestors—the people who came before them. Most Maasai dress alike. They usually wear red or blue sheets of cloth called *shuka*, along with a belt that holds their tools. Almost all Maasai men carry long sticks they use to herd their cattle, as their ancestors did. Most Maasai men carry long knives and wooden clubs, and some even carry flashlights and cellular phones! Maasai usually wear white or black sandals. The black sandals are made from old car tires.

One day Soneka and his sister invited me to visit their village. I was happy for the chance to see how my Maasai neighbors live. From the hill behind my school, I could see their village down in the flat lowlands. I walked to the village with another teacher, Mr. Mhagama. Together we hiked down a long trail that twisted and turned through bushes and trees until we reached a dry riverbed. On the other side was a Maasai man on a bicycle. Mr. Mhagama spoke with the Maasai man, Sumieri, and asked him if he would take us to his and Soneka's village. With a big smile, Sumieri said yes, and we followed him up the trail.

### VOCABULARY

**Tanzania** (pronounced  
TAN-zan-EE-yah)

**Maasai** (pronounced mah-SYE)

**traditional:** like the old ways

We walked for about five minutes, and then I saw the brown Maasai houses through the trees. The walls were made of dried mud and sticks. The roofs consisted of dried grass. Each house had a door, but no windows. Six Maasai women were sitting outside on a blanket. They were making beautiful jewelry by stringing together tiny, colorful plastic beads. I had often seen Maasai men wearing these white, red, blue, yellow, green, and black beads. They wore them around the lower legs, forearms, waist, and chest. This was the first time I had seen how the jewelry was made. In the village, the men and the women were wearing these beads, along with chains that held shiny metal disks. As the Maasai walked around their village, the silvery disks made a sound like *ching, ching, ching*. I couldn't help noticing how proud the Maasai look wearing their traditional style of dress. As I was looking around the village, Sumieri came over. He brought two small stools, each carved from a single tree, and he asked us to sit with him.

I was about to ask Sumieri questions about his village when my good friend Soneka came and greeted me. "*Shikamo*," he said. This is the word younger people say when they greet an older person. In English it means, "I hold your feet." I replied by saying "*Marahaba*," which I think means, "Thanks, my feet are tired." I was happy to see Soneka and I thanked him for letting me visit his village.

Soon, I met all the children of the village. I was the first American they had ever met. They were all laughing and seemed excited to meet me. I asked Sumieri how long he and his fellow Maasai had lived in this village. He told me his group moved to this area about three years before because it has good grasses on which their cattle can graze.

Cattle are important to the Maasai. In fact, their whole culture revolves around cattle. Maasai are pastoralists—people who raise livestock. Pastoralists often move around in search of sufficient grass and adequate water for their herds. If the rain stops and the grasses dry up, pastoralists like the Maasai must travel, often far, to find new land.

## VOCABULARY

**pastoralists** (pronounced  
PASS-tor-uh-lists)

I once went to a cattle market where Maasai from all over the Morogoro region of Tanzania had come to sell their cows. They herded the cows into a ring where they could compare the animals and decide which ones they wanted to buy. After the trading was finished, the Maasai men gathered under small *bandas*, or huts, to drink and eat. They talked about the news of their villages, because some of them hadn't seen each other for weeks, or even months.

Knowing the important work of the men who graze the cows, I asked Soneka if he ever goes out to help herd the cattle as the older Maasai men do. He said no, because he was not yet a *moran*—the Maasai word for warrior—and Soneka said he will be a *moran* when he reaches the age of 18.

The *moran* take the cattle out to graze and find water by day. The women stay behind to do various jobs in the village, such as taking care of the babies and young children. They also prepare the food and clean the clothes. The Maasai use open charcoal fires to cook their food. To do their wash, they take their clothing down to the lowlands, where they can find enough water. The small villages have no electricity for microwaves and refrigerators, and they don't have running water for washers. Since Maasai women must do this work by hand, it takes a long time. The women also have the responsibility to milk the cows in the mornings and evenings. They milk the cows by hand, squirting the milk into carved gourds called calabashes. The Maasai sell some of the milk and keep the rest in calabashes for drinking throughout the day.

I asked Sumieri if it would be all right if I took some pictures of him and the other people of the village. He said it was, and all the young boys wanted me to take their picture. They were fascinated by the way the image could move on the screen of the digital camera. I promised them I would share the pictures when I was able to print them out. At first the girls went into their huts, so I thought they didn't want their pictures taken. But soon I realized they just wanted to go into their huts so they could put on their fancy jewelry and beautiful purple and white skirts. All the girls stood in a line for their picture, but I couldn't get them to smile. They are not accustomed to getting their picture taken, so they took it very seriously.

When I was able to print a few of the pictures, I brought them back to the village. The children were happy to see their photographs. They laughed and laughed, chasing each other around trying to get a look at the pictures. I had to tell them to share because I didn't have enough pictures for each of them. I was really happy after visiting Soneka's village. There were so many things I learned about the Maasai on my visit, and I'm glad I am able to share this experience with you. I told Soneka I was going to write a story about him to tell American schoolchildren. He told me to tell you all he says hello.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

My name is Richard Lupinsky Jr. and I am 29 years old. I was born and grew up in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I have two younger sisters, Kim and Kelly, and an older brother named Jeff. After graduating from high school, I joined the Army and was sent to the 82nd Airborne Division in North Carolina. In the Army, I had the opportunity to jump from airplanes, which was always very scary and exciting. I was promoted to sergeant and I finished my enlistment in four years.

After leaving the Army, I studied at Mansfield University, in the northern part of Pennsylvania, where there are more dairy cows than people. Both the cows and the people in Mansfield are very friendly. In college, I earned degrees in biology and English. In my free time, I enjoy going for long walks, reading, writing, learning Kiswahili, and spending time with all my friends. I am also keenly interested in the natural world; I like to look under rocks and in ponds to catch bugs and reptiles like lizards and turtles. I look at them and then show my friends, who surprisingly don't always seem to like meeting a snake or a bug. But I always release the animals where I found them.

For many years, I wanted to serve somewhere in the world with the Peace Corps. Now, I find myself in Tanzania.

### **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

My village is in central Tanzania near the capital, Dodoma, and the regional city of Morogoro. The landscape is flat, but there are high mountains to the west and north that are impressive. I live at the secondary school about four kilometers from the village. If I want to go to the village itself, in order to buy food or to visit people, I usually ride my bicycle. All of those who teach at my school must live on the school grounds.

The majority of my time is spent at the school, which is my primary focus in terms of my Peace Corps service, and the rest of my time is focused on my secondary projects. One of my goals is to become more integrated and active in the village, but for the time being, my focus is at the school. All of my projects involve the students at the school in some way.

My village is a wonderful place for a Peace Corps Volunteer to serve because the people are so very friendly and helpful. Learning the language, though, is essential because most of the villagers know very little English.

Most of the people are subsistence agriculturalists who don't have a long tradition of even primary education. The people grow corn, rice, potatoes, sugar cane, tomatoes, and onions as their staple diet. They supplement their diet with chicken, beef, goat, and fish. The village is at the mercy of the rainy and dry seasons. If it rains very little during the year, there is no irrigation to alleviate the dryness. When it is dry, everything starts to turn brown. But when the rains come, everything from trees to insects seem to explode in color and profusion overnight. Farmers plant their crops to coincide with the rainy season, which usually lasts from January to April.

Wells throughout the village supply drinking water. The village is actually a truck stop because of its proximity to one of the major highways in Tanzania. This is part of the reason I was chosen for this site. As a part time health Volunteer, I can make an effort in educating the local people at a place where HIV/AIDS is introduced, because of the constant stream of truck drivers passing through.

## SONEKA'S VILLAGE

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will focus on aspects of the Maasai pastoralist culture and compare it with their own.

#### OBJECTIVES

After reading the letter and participating in class activities students will be able

- To identify a few traditional and modern features of Maasai culture.
- To list characteristics of the pastoralist way of life.
- To distinguish the roles of Maasai men and women.
- To describe what it's like for a Westerner to visit a Maasai village.

#### GRADES: 3–8

#### PROCEDURE

1. Show the students a globe or world map and point out Tanzania. Explain that there is an indigenous, or native, tribe called the Maasai that lives in Tanzania and neighboring Kenya. If you have photographs from books or the Internet, show them to the students so that Richard Lupinsky's descriptions will be reinforced. Explain that the tall and slender Maasai, with their draped outfits and beads, have become fairly well-known in the Western world because so many tourists have visited their land to see the wild animals that live where the Maasai move about with their cattle.

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**  
I, IV (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**  
4, 6, 9, 10, 12 (see page 133)

#### Enduring Understandings

- Cultures change noticeably over time.
- Cultures elsewhere in the world differ markedly from cultures in the United States.

#### Essential Questions

- Are all features that define Maasai culture, such as beads and cattle herding, unique to the Maasai? If not, what is it that makes the Maasai distinctive?
- How do traditional cultures maintain their identity as they adapt to change? Does change require giving up traditional culture?

#### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Reference materials on the Maasai, especially pictures
- The book *Masai and I*, by Virginia Kroll (Aladdin Paperbacks), or another children's book on the Maasai
- World map or globe

2. Draw a chart on the board with two columns, labeled Traditional and Modern. Use this chart as you read the letter with the students to help the students record which aspects of Maasai culture are traditional and which are modern.
3. Distribute the letter “Soneka’s Village,” by Richard Lupinsky Jr. Have the students read the first two paragraphs, or read them aloud. Ask the students which items to include in which column on the board. Help them distinguish which items of Maasai culture are traditional and which are modern.
4. Can the class suggest why the riverbed was dry? [Rather than having four seasons, like much of the United States, East Africa experiences two main seasons—the wet and the dry. In the dry season, little to no rain falls, and many rivers temporarily dry up.]
5. Ask the class why the Maasai might have chosen to make sandals out of old tires. [Discarded tires cost nothing, or next to nothing, and the rubber is both pliable and extremely durable. Explain that a great many Africans are extremely resourceful in recycling used or discarded materials into new objects, including useful items, toys, and art objects.]
6. Read another two paragraphs with the class. When the students get to the end of the fourth paragraph, ask how Richard knew that the two small stools were carved from a single tree.
7. Read the next four paragraphs with the students, and review the lifestyle of pastoralists. Discuss with the students why the Maasai (and any other peoples who depend on grazing animals) have to move around to where the grasses are. Ask the students if they can think of any profession in the United States that requires people to move around. [Migrant farmer workers follow the crops. Beekeepers sometimes move their hives from one region of the country to another. Herders in the Midwest and West often move their herds in search of better grazing.]
8. In paragraph 9, Soneka reports that he cannot herd cattle as a *moran*, or warrior, until he is 18. Ask students if they know of any rules or laws in the United States that give teenagers a special right when they turn 18. [Some students might know about the right to vote.] Ask students what turning 18 in each culture seems to mean. What are other benchmarks of age for American youth?
9. After finishing the letter, ask students to describe the different roles assumed by Maasai men and Maasai women—i.e., cattle herding by men, and cooking, washing, and child-rearing by women. In a discussion with the class, ask if there are similar, clear-cut distinctions in roles played by men and women in the United States. If students generalize—for example, that men drive race cars or that women serve as



nurses, point out that distinctions that might have been true some time ago—before the children were born—are no longer valid, and that men and women in the United States more and more are occupying less distinct gender roles.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Try to find a Tanzanian or Kenyan living in the United States who can come visit, or an American who knows both Kiswahili and English. Have that person visit and teach some Kiswahili to the class.
2. The letter contains references to change in traditional Maasai culture, such as cellphones and plastic beads. In class discussion, ask what recent changes the students have noticed in their own culture.
3. Focus a discussion on Soneka's job of delivering milk. How long do students think it takes him to walk to Richard's place with the milk? Explain to the class that milk used to be delivered to many homes in the United States by special milk deliverers with small trucks. Ask the students how most milk in the United States is distributed today.
4. The Maasai have a pastoralist culture. Have some students research other pastoralist cultures, and compare them with the Maasai. Have them share what they learn with their classmates.
5. Students can build a diorama of a Maasai village by building models of stick-and-mud houses with thatched roofs, as described by Richard.

## ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR HEAD SPIN

by Elizabeth (Vernon) Kelley  
Peace Corps Volunteer, Bulgaria (2003–2005)

“I’ll have coffee,” I tell the waitress at a cafe during my first week in Bulgaria. She shakes her head from side to side.

“OK, tea,” I say, thinking that maybe there’s something wrong with the coffee machine. Again, she shakes her head.

“Um ... cola?” Once more, she shakes her head. By now, she’s looking at me like I’m crazy, and I’m totally confused.

Then I remember: A shake of the head by a Bulgarian means “yes,” and a nod—what the rest of the world does for “yes”—means “no.”

I knew about this before I arrived in Bulgaria, but it’s amazing how something that seems simple and easy enough to remember can lead to so much confusion, and so many funny moments. Early on, when I communicated with Bulgarians, it seemed like my head was moving in ways my brain hadn’t told it to. Sometimes I wanted to grab my ears and use them as controls. Learning a language with a completely different alphabet was challenging enough, without trying to figure out whether to nod or shake.

When I began teaching, all this head bobbing made communication in the classroom interesting. Although I had made sure my students knew about this cultural difference on the first day of school, we all frequently forgot what we were doing. My students would answer a question correctly or say something really great, and I’d nod. A second later, they were trying to change their answer, since they thought the nod meant they had been wrong. But the confusion went both ways. Sometimes I’d ask a student a yes-or-no question and he or she would answer with a nod or a shake, without saying anything. Not remembering the difference, we’d have to go through the motions several times before I understood. Frequently I found myself saying: “*Da* or *ne*—just tell me one or the other!”

I also had to deal with confused colleagues who couldn't figure out why I kept nodding my head while they talked, as if I were arguing with them. In truth, I was just trying to show that I understood and was following along with the story. And then there was the even greater problem of how to act with Bulgarians who spoke English and were aware of the nodding–shaking problem. Was I supposed to nod or shake for “yes” when I was speaking English with them? And what was I supposed to do when we were speaking Bulgarian? What if we were in a situation where both languages were being spoken? To make matters even more complicated, after going a couple of weeks without any contact with other Americans, we'd finally get together and I'd find myself shaking when I should have been nodding. My head was spinning!

After a year of living here, the gestures have become second nature, and I rarely have to think about what my body language should be. Once in a while, if I'm really tired or not thinking clearly, I find my head moving in a semi-circular nod–shake wobble, which the Bulgarians find quite amusing.

Along with all the funny moments this cultural difference has provided me and my Bulgarian friends, I've come to understand the importance of using all my senses in a new culture, and of not making assumptions that a gesture or other form of communication, even one that seems very simple and universal—means the same thing everywhere. Beyond being conscious of the yes–no difference, I must make sure I am really listening and watching for other clues when someone is communicating with me. Here, a sound along the lines of a cluck of the tongue often accompanies a “no,” and being aware of that helps me steer clear of confusion.

Tuning in to how the people around me communicate has brought me closer to the people and the culture here. And whenever we slip up and forget to control our heads, the laughter that follows brings us together. Luckily, a smile is a smile the world over.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

“Welcome, Isabelle!” said the sign children held as they greeted me when I arrived in my Bulgarian town. On paper, my name is Elizabeth Vernon\*, but in Bulgaria, I answer to all sorts of names. Among them are *gospozha* (“Mrs.” in Bulgarian—never mind that I’m not married), Miss, Missus, Teacher, and Elli. Having many names and wearing many hats—English teacher, project organizer, translator, and token American—is what keeps life here interesting.

I get to do all sorts of things I never did back in the United States, where my main title was editor. I worked as a newspaper copy editor—editing stories, writing headlines, and designing pages—for five years before I decided it was time to stop sitting in front of a computer. I wanted to see more of the world and do something to help people improve their own lives in the process.

When I’m not working or socializing with my Bulgarian neighbors, I enjoy reading, cooking, hiking, visiting other Volunteers around the country, and keeping in touch with family and friends in America through e-mail. I’m an only child in America, but here I’m lucky to have become part of many families.

I grew up in Northern California, then went to Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, where I studied communications, Spanish, and religion. After a short jaunt to the southwestern United States, I headed back to Washington State for several years, so I’m not quite sure where to call home. But if home is where the heart is, this little corner of Bulgaria will always be one of my homes.

*\*Now Elizabeth (Vernon) Kelley. Elizabeth married after her Peace Corps service. At the time she wrote this, she was Elizabeth Vernon.*

**MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

My town is in north-central Bulgaria, where the Balkan Mountains slope down onto the Danubian Plain. Winters are cold, icy, and snowy, and summers are super hot. About 10,000 people call this town home, but it's the municipal center for many villages, so that bumps the area population to about 30,000 people. About 70 percent of the residents here are Turkish, 20 percent are Roma, and 10 percent are ethnically Bulgarian. This means I'm more likely to hear Turkish on the streets—and in the classroom—than Bulgarian. The diversity of the area and the fact that the majority of children speak Turkish at home makes my job of teaching English to fifth through seventh graders at Academician Daki Yordanov Junior High School challenging. But my students have lots of questions about America and love hearing stories from my home.

I also work on a variety of small projects, including seeking donations of books in English for my school, helping an orphanage in the region, teaching an English class for adults, and working on summer camps.

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:**

1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IV, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

6, 9, 10 (see page 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- Gestures we take for granted may be culturally based—and therefore learned—and may not have the same meaning in another culture.
- Cross-cultural communication is a complex task, partly because of cultural differences in body language, alphabet, speech patterns, and voice intonations.

**Essential Questions**

- How are body language and spoken language both elements of effective communication? Is it necessary to use both forms of communication?
- What is it about cross-cultural communication that can lead to misunderstandings, or even insults or hurt feelings?
- Are there some nonverbal communications that are the same in all cultures?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Map of Bulgaria or globe

## ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR HEAD SPIN

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**OVERVIEW**

Students will learn to appreciate the value of nonverbal communication, focusing on the shaking or nodding of one's head, and the meanings attached to each activity in Bulgaria and in the United States.

**OBJECTIVES**

After analyzing the letter, students should be able

- To explain how body language aids communication in the English language.
- To explain how body language aids communication in Bulgaria.
- To explain the body language conflict that would occur for English speakers speaking Bulgarian, and vice-versa.

**GRADES:** 6–12**PROCEDURE**

1. Discuss qualities of good communication for speakers and listeners (in America, for English speakers). Have the students brainstorm a list for speakers and a list for listeners, which you write on the board or on an overhead. [Speaking qualities would include clarity, proper volume, use of inflection, interesting topic, appropriate vocabulary, looking at the listener. Listening qualities would include good eye contact, thinking about the content of the information conveyed, letting the speaker talk without interrupting, asking relevant questions at the appropriate time, paraphrasing or summarizing important data, not interjecting personal anecdotes unrelated to the subject, and affirming the speaker through

- nonverbal communication or body language such as smiling and nodding.] Introduce the idea of a continuum of good listening, using a scale from 1 to 10.
- (Optional) Have students evaluate the importance of nonverbal affirmations for the speaker and listener by doing an experiment. Divide the class into two groups—speakers and listeners. Pair up the speakers and listeners. Then divide the listeners into four subgroups. Give each a different set of written directions. One group of listeners will use no nonverbal affirmations while listening to their partners—remaining deadpan while listening. A second group of listeners will use a positive nonverbal affirmation—smiling at appropriate times. A third group will use a different positive nonverbal affirmation—nodding their heads at appropriate times. A fourth group will use negative nonverbal confirmation—shaking their heads instead of nodding at the appropriate time. Give the speakers a prompt, such as their favorite vacation or the funniest thing that ever happened to them. Allow the speakers one minute to speak to the listeners, who follow the directions for their subgroup. Have each speaker record the quality of the listening on a scale of 1 to 10. Students should then report to the class and tally the results. Discuss the mixed message that speakers received from the head-shaking listeners.
  - Now tell the students they are going to read a story about an American Peace Corps Volunteer in Bulgaria who faced a similar problem.
  - Locate Bulgaria on a globe or map. Point out its location and ask the students to predict the climate from the latitude. Read them Elizabeth’s description of the climate from her biography.
  - Read the story with the class. Help the students identify Elizabeth’s major nonverbal communication difficulty, and the problems that ensue as a result of this difficulty (head nod vs. head shake). Have the students identify the adaptations Elizabeth made to deal with this difficulty. [(1) Asking her students to use *da* (yes) or *ne* (no); (2) listening for the tongue cluck that often accompanies “no”; (3) laughing at her own mistakes; (4) practicing correct head movements when speaking Bulgarian to Bulgarians.] Ask the students to identify some traits Elizabeth must possess to succeed in her work. [Good learner, good sense of humor, hard worker, determined, sensitive, good listener.] Ask them what the rewards are for Elizabeth’s efforts. [Brings her closer to the people and the culture; laughter; smiles.] Ask the students to identify the cultural universals in communication that Elizabeth mentions. [Laughter, smiles.] Ask them if they agree with the statement, “A smile is a smile the world over,” and if so, why they think it is true. [A smile, like a laugh, is a physical reaction, not a culturally learned one.]
  - With a volunteer, demonstrate good Bulgarian-language listening practices while speaking English (head shake—yes; head nod and tongue cluck—no). Have all the students pair up and use Bulgarian

body language while speaking English. Ask them for their reactions to the activity, and point out how this probably simulates Elizabeth's experience when first encountering Bulgarian language cues.

7. To reinforce the body language communication issue, have the students do a tally at home on listening practices of their friends and family. Tell the students to talk to a friend or family member and tally how many times their listener(s) smiled or nodded over a three-minute period. Have the students share Elizabeth's story with the volunteer at home. Students should report their findings on nonverbal gestures and compare their tallies in class. From the students' research, see if there are any additional gestures that appear relevant.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Have the students take positions on what to do in the three circumstances Elizabeth describes in paragraph four of the letter concerning head movements (1) when speaking English with English-speaking Bulgarians, and (2) when speaking Bulgarian with Bulgarians who understand English. Have a class discussion to point out the benefits of each strategy, and try to predict what Elizabeth did in each circumstance.
2. Have students research the Bulgarian alphabet, which is Cyrillic, and share the results with others. Highlight differences from English in letters and sounds.
3. Ask some students to research the benefits of smiling for one's mental, physical, and emotional health. Share the results with the class.
4. Peter Spier's book *People* covers a wide variety of cultural differences. After reading it, have students make a list of all the differences he mentions that they think are individual or physical (such as noses). Then they should make a list of all the differences they think are mostly cultural (such as clothing). Ask students in pairs to compare their lists. Point out that this is one way to learn about culture.
5. Have a Mix-Up Day, where students shake their heads when they mean "yes" and nod their heads when they mean "no." Do they master the new technique within a day, or is it confusing throughout the time? Many children have experienced a "backward day" where children say "no" when they agree, and "yes" when they don't. If they are familiar with that exercise, ask them to compare it with shaking or nodding the head for the opposite intent.



## A DAY

by Jordan Earl

Peace Corps Volunteer, Uzbekistan (2001–2004)

One of the mysteries of living as an outsider in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, involves the attempt to correctly identify social and cultural differences. Volunteers here cannot get by merely by labeling everything as “other.” We are daily witnesses to Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Korean, and sundry other influences on a fluid landscape that has only in modern times been defined by borders. Even isolating all things strictly Uzbek is difficult: The culture has been changed historically by Greeks, Mongols, Turks, Persians, Arabs. Elements of Zoroastrianism survive. The Soviets have gone, and the numbers of Russians are diminishing, but the impact is still visible. Islam is quietly practiced. It would take many more than two years to decipher precisely what is what. Reminds me of how I feel when asked, “Tell me about America....”

This morning, I witnessed a peculiar event. Turning the key to enter my classroom at the philology faculty at the university, I heard what could only be the rustling of wings. The green light of the windows that open onto fresh tree growth showed a dove sitting on a desk, walking confusedly back and forth across the graffitied surface. Jittery, it had messed all over the desk and floor. And several other desks. And the bookcase. I eyed the slightly open window and headed toward the tan bird, intending to shoo it from the room and into the bright morning air. Instead, the thing began to flutter around the room in a loosely triangular pattern, freaking yet another bird into frightened, frenzied flight. So there were two.

With some students, I was able to usher the visitors out-of-doors, though not before several scolding coos from the affronted pair. We then began to wipe the desks and floor with wet rags, our only cleaning options in this run-down facility. One student, grinning, said, “They just wanted to learn English.” Another student, with a knowing wink, referred to the doves as “guests.” Students laughed.

### VOCABULARY

**Tashkent:** capital of Uzbekistan

**Tajik:** from the country of Tajikistan

**sundry:** various

**Zoroastrianism:** an old religious system with belief in the afterlife and a continuous struggle between good and evil

**decipher:** figure out

**philology:** the study of language and literature

**faculty:** a college building or department

**graffitied:** scribbled upon

**frenzied:** wild; frantic

**affronted:** insulted

*Mehmonlar*, or guests, in Uzbekistan are the focus of cultural hospitality. Perhaps the pinnacle of Uzbek social upbringing is the proper treatment of guests—and the elaborate etiquette of guest behavior. While the doves had certainly not been very thoughtful, they were, nonetheless, guests.

Those who heard the story throughout the day said, “You will be very lucky” or “very rich” or “happy.” It seems that the random defecations of birds herald good luck. There was some argument as to whether the droppings had to land precisely on the recipient for him or her to qualify for such blessings, but the general drift seemed to bode well for me, whose class the guests had chosen to visit for the weekend. There are, after all, many rooms at the faculty, all of them with windows, many of which are often left open.

\*\*\*

Later today, I received an object of singular beauty. Fragile, ephemeral, small, the egg was given to me by a Russian student. Yesterday was Orthodox Easter. The egg was an incredible shade of brown. The texture held the color as rice holds butter, seeming to become skin. Dark, like Ethiopian skin, or the skin around mournful eyes that always seems a shade darker than the cheek. And soft.

There, on one curving side, was the light shadow of tiny cilantro leaves. As if you could paint cream onto the surface of coffee. Unimposing and timid—the heartbeat of a chick.

A little much, you might say, if you did not see just how unbelievably aesthetically pleasing this little egg exactly *is*. And won't be. Because the egg is boiled. I must eat it, or it will begin to rot. I cannot save this egg, and a photograph would never convey it well in years hence. I must enjoy it *now*. Like spring. Like this place. Like this life.

The student said that Russians take small plants and stick them to the sides of eggs, dropping the eggs into stockings and pulling the material taut around the greenery. This is tied off and dropped into thick, brown dye. A

## VOCABULARY

***Mehmonlar*** (pronounced MECH-mon-lahr; the *ch* is guttural)

**pinnacle:** highest point

**defecations:** droppings

**herald:** to signal

**ephemeral:** lasting only a short time

**cilantro:** an herb used in food

**aesthetically:** visually, artistically

simple procedure that produces a design so enthraling that I have taken it out and stared at it all day.

\*\*\*

Pictures can't catch some of the most quintessential manifestations, in this world, of existence *in the very act of existing*. Gestures, expressions, movements, sounds elude even the finer technologies. This egg will pass into waste, and from there it will disappear from memory, unless I mark it down, etching the image in words, so that the words will mark the sensation of the instant when, smiling, she reached into her bag and produced her uncomplicated Easter gift. The doves, like the waste they left behind, were swept off and returned to *birdness*, where I will hardly distinguish them from the sundry other chirping and cooing inhabitants of the large shade trees outside the faculty. "Little noted nor long remembered," one might say. Yet there are these definitive moments, these charmed mornings of our lives, when the magic and elusive algorithm of *being* is revealed to us. Language and cognition often fail to express what we perceive, what we sense, in those moments. Another student said that Muslims here say "Happy Easter" to Orthodox Russians to be polite on their holiday. She said that she didn't know what to say in return, except "thank you." It seemed rude to say "same to you" or "and to you, as well," though these are the traditional responses to well-wishing in both Russian and Uzbek culture. I didn't ask if she knew which Uzbeks were devout and which were philosophically disinclined to practice religion after communism.

Together, some agnostics, some adherents of Russian Orthodoxy, a few Muslims, a couple of atheists, Koreans, Uzbeks, Russians, Georgians, and Greeks, ate Easter bread with a guy from that other amorphous anomaly, America. They discussed how quickly the newly arrived spring season would pass through our grasp. I looked around, contented. Today, we are generous disciples of pure joy. There will be no lines this morning delineating who will and who will not partake in the effervescent group atmosphere of buzzing, whirring, chattering, green-growing *living*.

Even the doves are invited.

## VOCABULARY

**enthraling:** extremely pleasing

**quintessential:** being a perfect example of

**manifestation:** a representation

**algorithm:** a method of solving a problem

**cognition:** thinking; awareness

**agnostics:** people who believe that there cannot be proof of the existence of a God

**adherents:** followers, believers

**amorphous:** shapeless

**anomaly (pronounced**

**uh-NOM-uh-lee:** something that is not normal or expected

**effervescent:** bubbly

## A YEAR

by Jordan Earl

Peace Corps Volunteer, Uzbekistan (2001–2004)

**Autumn**

Leaves draw into themselves and fall from still trees. Students list their ambitions. They walk in groups and pairs to and from the faculty building at a pace that suggests there is no destination, no point of origination. I have ideas. We are going somewhere.

**Winter**

The apartment has no heat. No lights. No hot water. No telephone. The elevator to the sixth floor is broken. I trudge up the steps in the dark, hoping not to trip on anything. Ice and snow under broken windows. Inside, I light a candle and watch breath in front of my face as I eat cold Korean salad with bread in blackness. Alone. Don't want to complain, because this is something I elected to do. The students were quiet again today, contrary and reticent, resisting my suggestions for discussion topics. We were cold. Is this self pity? I don't like it. It makes me feel petty. Pity is a polluted emotion in all forms and should be avoided. I stumble to the other room and sleep on mats on the floor, considering things like seasonal affective disorder and vitamin D and the sun's rays. My coastal Florida birth city, which I haven't seen in almost 15 years, has never seemed so far away. And it has never loomed so close in my mind. Bougainvillea, crotons, orchids, and palms. Lushness in green dreams of tiptoeing on sand, when we would leap barefoot from stifling car to beckoning waves. Waking to achy chill and the dull schedule of the day propped against the door whispering, "Just go back to sleep."

## VOCABULARY

**seasonal affective disorder:**

depression some people experience, often associated with short days of winter

**bougainvillea [pronounced**

**B00-gun-VILL-ee-uh]:** a tropical vine with colorful leaves

**croton:** a kind of large, tropical

## Spring

We emerge from oppressive gray days of perpetual cloud cover into rain that seems to want to punch life into the brown earth. From these pumelings issue bright blossoms on trees, unkempt grass around residential streets, and the sinus-clogging pollen of rebirth. Growth! Not wanting to over-dramatize, I still can't help feeling some days like a submarine that has broken surface, dripping and gleaming in the sun. I walk outside, breathing again. My students, too, speak on love and family and future with energy I have not seen. We bond and make weekend plans to hang out at city spots. The zoo, stuffed with more four-legged animals than I've seen the whole year in this country. Russian-dubbed Hollywood action movies shown from DVD on big screens before their American release dates. A Sufi mausoleum outside the city limits. I am told to bring a cloth to tie on one of the holy trees there. We murmur wishes.

## Summer

Grades in, tests given, assignments corrected, I send the students to their respective summers, armed with my e-mail address. "Write me if you have questions from your pupils." Most of them tutor on the side, a massive underground English-teaching market; supply meeting demand. They can say, "I received instruction from a native speaker." I hope it gets them a bit more than the going rate. The lazy heat makes me happy. I wake early to bright sun and want to be up and out. Midday is for walking slowly, baked and dusty. Evening in Tashkent is spent out-of-doors, sitting at cafes and following a million sidewalks to nowhere. Learn a handful of new Russian words. Read about crumbling architecture in central Asia. Occasionally, stopping midstep at an intersection: How quickly time passes. How far we have come. How little things change.

## VOCABULARY

**Sufi:** a Muslim follower of an old form of Islamic mysticism

**mausoleum:** a small building in which coffins are deposited rather than being buried

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

I grew up relatively well off, insulated in South Florida, attending private school with the children of TV stars and Palm Beach's wealthiest inhabitants. I knew little about the world until my parents retired early and moved to southern Appalachia, giving up their careers to pursue altruistic goals to help others. While they established their retreat in northeast Georgia, I got my first glimpses of the real world. I went to public high school, and as my parents' resources dwindled, the comfort that had seemed secure in my youth disappeared. We moved into a trailer. I rode the school bus, working nights at a fast-food joint until I had saved enough for a car. I came to respect the many factory workers and high-school dropouts around me, who gave up educations for jobs that barely fed their families. It was the best thing to happen to me. I often refer to that period, without irony, as my first Peace Corps experience. I learned a lot. Having seen both sides, I began to explore the complex area between two worlds, divided economically. How much was self-created by individuals and circumstances; how much imposed by controlling systems?

The answers are as complex as the questions. A few supportive teachers, and my encouraging parents, showed how to escape encroaching poverty through federal and state grants that paid for chunks of college education. These scholarships renewed hope, faith in our system; but how much of that assistance came through because of my upbringing, educational background, or one-time access to the tools of more affluent levels of society? I wanted to give back as well as receive; I volunteered often and chose a small college that required community service and labor from every student. Volunteering, I met many individuals deprived, for various reasons, of the same resources that had improved my surroundings. Did their situations result from bad choices, lack of access, or decisions by people at higher levels enjoying greater access to resources? There is no single answer. But I had found a direction for life and work. I wanted to avail myself of the great opportunities available to citizens in our nation. Simultaneously, I wanted my work to empower individuals living without those resources in

their endeavors to better their lives—in the same way that this country’s programs had empowered me.

### **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

One of the best of our country’s opportunities for its citizens is the Peace Corps. Through it, Volunteers obtain subsidized international experience with language immersion, valuable experience with global issues, and the chance to see with new perspective. Like my family’s move to the mountains, it can be an awakening from the insular, consumer-driven contemporary American world. To capitalize on the experience, I chose the Peace Corps Master’s International program, wherein one’s service doubles as an internship for graduate studies in education. Placed at the National University of Uzbekistan in Tashkent, I worked with the Foreign Philology Faculty to develop their English Department and attract resources for a language center. Most importantly, however, I worked with individuals. Driven, motivated, idealistic, hopeful, but lacking funds, many intelligent and creative people fall through the cracks of the world. My proudest achievements were small. For example, I suggested that an outstanding female student apply for scholarships to Indian universities, less competitive than America’s. She got a full ride.

One Volunteer can’t fix a country’s problems. Uzbekistan is as complicated and unfathomably multifaceted as the United States. Just as in our country, there are many who repeat the same mistakes or perpetuate the same problems as their forebears out of fear, laziness, or misunderstanding. But a Volunteer can be a strong influence on individuals who are looking for opportunities and access to resources. As my teachers pointed out possibilities, Volunteers can be catalysts in the lives of people the world over. The Peace Corps is a remarkable opportunity for American Volunteers and the individuals they encounter. I have been asked by many Americans whether the two-year commitment was worth it. To each of them I have replied, “Take the leap! Go.”

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:**

1, 2, 3, 6 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IV, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

4, 6, 8, 9, 10, (see page 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- Despite differences in background, people may get along because they share important values that can transcend their differences.
- Sometimes the most unexpected, unremarkable incidents can bring happiness and inspiration—if we recognize them and are open to the experience.
- It's important to grasp opportunities and make the most of every day.

**Essential Questions**

- What values do people share that transcend their cultural differences?
- What can we do to keep ourselves open to inspiration and appreciate beauty?
- What factors in our lives seem to make time pass by quickly? What can we do to try to make moments memorable?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of the stories for the whole class

## A DAY, AND A YEAR

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**OVERVIEW**

Students will closely examine an author's philosophical look at life through superficially mundane, but ultimately meaningful, anecdotes he describes as a teacher in Uzbekistan.

**OBJECTIVES**

After analyzing the letters, students should be able

- To closely analyze a literary passage in order to identify, then practice using, similes, allegory, and other types of symbolism in writing.
- To describe the climate and cultural aspects of life in Uzbekistan.

**GRADES:** 9–12**PROCEDURE FOR "A DAY"**

1. Distribute Jordan Earl's essay "A Day" to the class. Have students read it, and then use the following questions as guides for class discussion.
2. What is the author's point in his introductory paragraph? [Answers may address the idea that the cultural mosaic in Uzbekistan is so complex that it is difficult both to comprehend and to describe. Try to elicit from students that the reason for the complexity is a broad mix of cultures through the country's history, and a recent seismic change of leadership and governance.]
3. In the second paragraph, what is the effect of referring to the dove as "the thing," rather than "the bird" or "the dove"? Allow students time to contemplate this and identify the effect. They might try reading it all three ways. [Writing "the thing" somehow diminishes or dismisses the dove—at that point—as being initially unimportant and unremarkable.]



How does the author’s reference to the birds change in the next (the third) paragraph? [The birds first become “visitors,” then, with the suggestion of his students, “guests.” ]

The author has taken pains to develop what might have been a simple anecdote involving intrusive birds into something much larger: Yes, it was an amusing anecdote in the routine of his school day, but it also evolved into a kind of allegory where he was blessed with good luck and had the opportunity to offer hospitality to guests, in the best of Uzbek traditions. He also crafts his story through subtle mastery of language. Help students to discover both points through discussion.

4. In the second section, about the gift of the Easter egg: Of all colors, perhaps brown, often considered ordinary and drab, might seem the most difficult to describe. Yet Jordan Earl provides us with unusual similes—like rice holding butter, like Ethiopian skin, like the skin around mournful eyes. Inquire of the class whether these descriptions help them sense the color better than a more conventional description might. Ask them in a short writing exercise to describe a color of their choice, using original, non-clichéd, evocative similes. Have them share their descriptions with the class, constructively providing feedback to each other.
5. What does the author mean by “—the heartbeat of a chick”? [In essence, the design of the cilantro leaves was as delicate, as fragile, as a chick’s heartbeat.]
6. What is the author’s message in the third paragraph of the egg description, the paragraph beginning with “A little much, you might say ...”? [Although the author is specifically addressing the ephemeral, overwhelming beauty of a small object, his larger message might be said to be, “Enjoy the moment. It will pass, so make the most of what you have.” If students do not know the expression already, tell them of the sage phrase, “*Carpe diem*,” Latin for “Seize the day.”]
7. Ask students to reread the long paragraph on page 75 and suggest to them that the author’s message can be summarized by one sentence in the paragraph. Ask them to identify the sentence and to write a few lines to support their choice. [Arguably, the line is, “Yet there are these definitive moments, these charmed mornings of our lives, when the magic and elusive algorithm of *being* is revealed to us.” Suddenly, the story of the doves and of the egg take on a focus—that we can find inspiration in moments of beauty that uplift and sustain us.]
8. Have students reread the second-to-last paragraph, starting with “Together ...” What is the author saying, in mentioning all the different cultures to which he alluded in the introductory paragraph? What does this paragraph have to do with the doves and the egg? [One possible answer: Despite the many different cultural viewpoints represented in the classroom, two instances of beauty, of humor, of anecdotal pleasure transcend the differences and bring the disparate students together in a constructive way of living that they can share.]
9. Now that you have closely scrutinized Jordan’s essay called “A Day,” return to the introduction.

What does the introduction, which describes the vast differences among Uzbekistanis, have to do with the story of the doves and the egg? Give students time to look through the essay and give their thoughts. [If they're having trouble connecting the introductory paragraph with the episodes that follow, direct them to the penultimate paragraph, which suggests that, despite the many differences of background, there are aspects of this day that the entire group will experience together, in harmony.]

### PROCEDURE FOR "A YEAR"

1. Have students read Jordan Earl's essay "A Year," and use the following questions as a guide for classroom discussion.
2. The author's description of autumn is a mere three and a half lines. Ask students to examine that passage, think about it, and make notes about all that they see transpiring. Have them share their observations in class discussion. What is the author acknowledging and pointing out? [One possible answer: Transition is occurring—the falling of leaves marks the end of summer and the beginning of a new season; and students starting back to school are writing down their goals and ambitions—a new beginning. The students seem to be somewhat unambitious, moving without vigor, but the teacher has vision, hope, resolve to move ahead.]
3. Ask students to study the other three seasons to see what the author has focused on to capture the

mood of the season. In some cases, it will be obvious (temperature, color); in others, it will involve the kind of activities or thoughts that seem to go with the season. [Winter: cold, dark; students are quiet, contrary, reticent; Jordan dreams of Florida and flowers. Spring: rain, blossoms, grass, pollen; students talk of love, of family, of the future (and of hope); outdoor activities. Summer: vacation, heat, brightness.]

Have students write a synopsis of the seasons, focusing on characteristics of their choice to capture the mood, the appearance, the feelings of the different seasons—possibly as a homework assignment. In class discussion students can share their synopses, and compare them with Jordan Earl's. What similarities can they see in their descriptions? What differences?

4. What is the author getting at in the last two lines, where he writes: "Occasionally, stopping midstep at an intersection: How quickly time passes. How far we have come. How little things change"? [He acknowledges the contrast between time fleeting by and events being ordinary—and how things change yet remain similar.]

### EXTENSION ACTIVITY

For discussion: Jordan Earl's stories have parallel titles—"A Day" and "A Year." But they are different: The first is philosophical, the second focuses on change over time. Do the stories share any theme?

## Witnessing Change

## LOOKING BACK

by Carla Bachechi

Peace Corps Volunteer, Macedonia (2003–2005)

People here in Macedonia talk about the past a lot. They talk about how much better their lives used to be. They talk about a time when everyone had jobs and enough money for cars and vacations and new televisions. They talk about how they used to be able to travel wherever they wanted. They did not need a visa to go most places and could freely travel to Western Europe. Now they must have a visa to go almost anywhere, and there are few jobs and little money for vacations.

The experts say Macedonia is in a difficult time of transition. Macedonia, like the other former communist countries, is moving from a centrally run economy to a market-based economy in which the government may regulate, but does not control, the means of production. The government will no longer buy the crops or run the factories that gave people jobs. But did someone forget to explain this to the people?

There are relics of this faded past. The memories are not just a reverie about those glorious bygone days. There is evidence of their prosperity in the houses filled with furniture and china and television sets—all dating back to the 1970s. And there is evidence that they used to take vacations. The country is filled with huge and largely abandoned hotels. Many of these line Lake Prespa and Lake Ohrid and still have brochures printed 20 years ago at the front desk, showing crowds of people swimming and sunning themselves and eating under brightly colored umbrellas.

It is strange visiting these old resorts—stepping back in time. The hotels are usually on the outskirts of towns, along lakes, hidden in canyons, or high in the mountains. The buildings are stained by time, in need of paint, and are dated by designs that were modern and popular 30 years ago. They stand empty most of the time, and the sparse staff that mill around to serve the occasional guests do their best to keep the houseplants alive. The

## VOCABULARY

**reverie:** a kind of dreamy thinking;  
daydreaming

upholstery is stained and the bars and the shops are conspicuously empty. Only half the lights are ever turned on, and when you leave it feels like the whole place will fall back to sleep, awaiting a better day, when things will be like they used to be.

But time is not so forgiving, and going back is not an option. The hotels are what remain of a system that ceased functioning. The people blame the government. They say it is the government's fault because it is not providing jobs for the people anymore, and it is not buying the farmers' crops, and it has sold or closed most of the factories.

For many Macedonians, this time of transition seems more like a time of decay. They tell you they have been going through this transition for more than 10 years now and it is not getting any better. They say this with despair. It is hard to make an argument for democracy and free enterprise here. During this period of transition, the people have watched as the state enterprises were sold, factories were liquidated, and a few unscrupulous people grew rich. Corruption is rampant. When choosing between a system they don't understand and don't trust and the quick profits offered by the black market, many choose the black market.

Imagine Disneyland, empty except for a few employees in tattered uniforms. Imagine half of the rides shut down and only a few disheveled flowerbeds and overgrown lawns. Imagine all the shelves in a shop empty, except for maybe one teddy bear faded by the sun. Imagine remembering how much fun it was to visit when you were a child and being unable to fathom how you will ever be able to provide the same for your own children.

This is their past, their present, and their uncertain future.

## VOCABULARY

**disheveled:** messy; unkempt

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

I am a Peace Corps Volunteer in Macedonia. In my past life, before I transported myself into this alternate universe, I lived in San Francisco. I was an attorney. While a member of this profession, I mainly practiced in the area of real estate and corporate law. (My name is pronounced ba-KEH-kee.) I have three sisters, a niece, and a nephew. I grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. New Mexico, the state known as the Land of Enchantment, is blessed with mountains and 300-plus days of sunshine a year. In the 20-some years I lived there, I adopted a deep appreciation of both the mountains and the sunshine. I love to hike and ski and bike and swim. I also like to cook and I am learning to be creative with the available groceries in Macedonia. Big things I miss are sushi and red chili cheese enchiladas.

After I graduated from high school I moved to Washington, DC, to go to college. I studied international relations. This was the beginning of my own personal odyssey. Since then I have lived in Paris, Florence, New Orleans, Atlanta, and San Francisco. At this point I am afraid I have become an incurable wanderer. So need I mention my love for travel?

The Peace Corps was a dream of mine that never faded. So after many years of saying I wish I had joined the Peace Corps, I finally joined. Whether it is a sabbatical from my routine or the toughest job I will ever love, it is definitely an adventure and, *voilà*, here I am.

**MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

I am a municipal-development Volunteer in a small city in western Macedonia, only three kilometers from the Albanian border. My town is literally and figuratively at the end of the road. It is not easy to get here. In fact, there are only two roads to my town. Both wind through picture-perfect mountain canyons with stunning turquoise blue rivers rushing through them. Perfect for a great drive, except for the numerous potholes and the amazing amount of trash that lines the roads.

Most of the people here are ethnic Albanians and speak predominantly Albanian. However, there are also ethnic Macedonian, Roma, and Turkish communities. My town is rather unusual. It is by far the most ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia and is unfortunately often overlooked by the central government.

The description of my assignment that the Peace Corps sent me with my invitation to become a Volunteer reads, “This program provides assistance to municipality employees, NGO [nongovernmental organization] members, and other members of the Macedonian communities interested in developing their skills in project development, strategic planning, and resource acquisition; and in improving their day-to-day operational capacities.”

The up-close-and-personal translation of this is that I spend a lot of time trying to figure out what the municipality and the NGOs are trying to do and then I try either to help them do it or find someone else to help them do it. The municipalities here are like our state and city governments combined. The nongovernmental organizations are equivalent to what we would call nonprofit organizations in the United States. The main difference is that the NGOs here are funded by international aid money, while nonprofits in the United States are funded by government grants or private donations. So, in short, I try to help the municipality and the community find the resources they need to function effectively, whether it involves finding, for example, trained employees, a strategic plan, or computers.

One of the community projects I am involved in is a Junior Achievement class for high school students. This class covers basic economics and includes the creation of a fictional business. In addition, I am working with a youth group to improve the lakefront and publish a book of poems and essays by young Albanian writers.

This may sound like a lot of stuff—but in reality things here move much slower than in the United States. Meetings are often canceled and calendars are not regularly consulted. So I often end up with a lot of free time to fill with coffee drinking (a national pastime), chatting, reading, and writing essays.

## LOOKING BACK

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a state-controlled social system and look into the strains that occur in the transition of a state-controlled system to a democracy, such as that occurring in Macedonia.

#### OBJECTIVES

After reading the letter and participating in class activities students will be able

- To explain the difference between a communist and free-market economy.
- To describe the challenges facing Macedonia today, and explain the mood of the people that the author describes in her letter.

#### GRADES: 9–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Ask students to do some rudimentary research on the history of Macedonia for the last 40 years. Library or Internet sources should provide quick references for this purpose. Without going into too much detail, they should discover how the dissolution of Yugoslavia came about and some of the ethnic issues involving both Albania and Greece that Macedonians have faced.

Discuss with the class how a state-controlled economy under communism contrasts with a free-market economy under a democratic system

#### STANDARDS

##### English Standards:

1, 2, 3, 6 (see page 131)

##### Social Studies Standards:

I, IV (see page 132)

##### National Geography Standards:

6, 9, 10, (see page 133)

##### Enduring Understandings

- A new democracy doesn't ensure the immediate welfare of the populace.
- The transition from a state-controlled economy to a free-market economy can be unsettling and challenging.

##### Essential Questions

- What is it about a state-controlled economy, under communism, that can provide stability, predictability, and reasonable welfare for a populace?
- What are the risks in resisting change, and what are the risks in welcoming change?

##### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Map of Macedonia
- Research materials on the history of Macedonia

of government. Ask students to name possible advantages of each system, considering factors such as stability, well-being, security, and freedom of choice. What are some possible disadvantages of each system?

2. Have students read Carla Bachechi's letter. Discuss with the students how Carla's observations corroborate some of the points the class just discussed in #1, above. What are some of the things that Macedonians lost when they abandoned a state-controlled economy after independence in 1991? What are some of the things they gained?
3. On the surface, Carla's letter may seem simply like a descriptive account of a despondent mood that she encounters in Macedonia. But if students analyze the letter carefully, they might discover that the writer carefully crafted her observations to build her case. Have students break into groups of four or five to analyze the letter. Ask them to look for a specific structure and strategy the writer used to convey her points. Have them write down what they decipher in the form of an outline or rubric.

For example, students could suggest the following:

In the first paragraph, Carla dispassionately reports the national mood and establishes her theme: Macedonians look back at a better time; they had money, were free to travel without visas, and could take vacations.

She explains that "experts" call the present a period of transition, and she identifies both the system the

society has left behind, as well as the system the people are adapting to. She provides hard evidence for the change—the former wealth of household goods and the faded glory of the resort hotels—in her third and fourth paragraphs.

In paragraph 5, she states the facts about what has actually changed—the folding of the state enterprises, the closing of factories, the growth of corruption.

In the penultimate paragraph, she provides a hypothetical example from the United States, as if Disneyland were vacant and decrepit, so that readers can identify with her observations. The author ends by succinctly putting the problem in perspective.

4. Ask students who the experts are that Carla refers to but doesn't identify. (You might point out to students that it is commonly necessary for us to infer information—i.e., to take available evidence, in this case the reference to "experts," and rely on what else we know to figure out a reasonable conclusion.) [Suggestions as to who the experts are might include economists, political scientists, and journalists.]
5. Have students write a short essay about a change in their lives. Ask them to use the rubric or outline they built in analyzing Carla's letter as a guide, similarly stating the issue of their choice and building evidence for it in various, but specific, ways. When the essays are complete, ask for a few volunteers to read their work aloud, and solicit constructive criticism from the class.



**EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

Former Peace Corps Volunteer John Deever, who served in Ukraine shortly after it became independent, observed many traits in society in Ukraine that Carla sees in Macedonia. Have students read John's account, titled "Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge." You can download it free from the Peace Corps World Wise Schools website [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories) (search for "Deever"). In a class discussion, ask the students to compare the Ukrainian response to democracy that John Deever describes to the reactions Carla Bachechi describes in her letter.

## Witnessing Change

## JUST LIKE THE OLD DAYS

by Jonathan Phillips

Peace Corps Volunteer, Mongolia (2003–2005)

Take an imaginary trip with me for a moment. Think of where you live right now. Now imagine it a thousand years ago. That's long before there were big farms, tall skyscrapers, and modern houses. Go back to a time when there were no cars, no plumbing, and no electricity to make your life easier.

Now jump ahead in time to today. Have a look around.

Well, when I look around in the countryside of Mongolia, where I am a Peace Corps Volunteer, I don't have to imagine the past. I see the past every day. The lifestyle of the people and the land itself have remained mostly the same for well over a thousand years. The Mongolia that Marco Polo described some 800 years ago is pretty much unchanged, aside from the capital, Ulaanbaatar, which has grown into a bustling city of nearly a million people. But most Mongolians still live in white felt tents, called *gers*. That's the same way their ancestors lived in the time of Genghis Khan.

I recently visited a nomadic family—a family that moves around with the seasons. It almost seemed like a trip to another world. A Mongolian friend, Byamba, is driving his '69 Russian jeep across the steppe—which is a high plain of small, rolling mountains. We are approaching a big *ger*. I have no idea how he has found it, because to me, all *gers* look alike. And this one is way out, away from everything else. The *ger* we're approaching is the one where he grew up. However, his own family has moved away because the local river, where they fished, has dried up. The Gobi Desert is creeping farther north into Mongolia every year.

We get out of the car as the family comes out of the *ger*. Two adorable young girls come to meet us. They are wearing Mongolian *dels*, which are long robes with a sash tied around the waist as a belt. The girls have not

## VOCABULARY

***gers* (pronounced GERZ, with a hard g):**

circular tents made of thick felt, with a domed top

**Genghis Khan (pronounced**

**GENG-iss KON):** famed ruler who established the Mongolian Empire in the early 13th century

seen their Uncle Byamba in nearly a year. Judging from the way they look at me, they have never seen someone from another country before.

We approach the rest of the family and exchange greetings. A common greeting in summer is, “Are your animals fattening nicely?” Byamba’s brother assures me that the horses are fat, and they are also becoming fast. This means that his horses can race in the Naadam holiday that is coming up.

Byamba’s family is doing just fine. I know almost exactly what will happen, because meetings and behavior inside a *ger* always follow the same pattern. I know what people will say. I know what they will eat. I know what they will drink.

I stoop to enter the *ger*, and I see Emee, or Grandmother. She is sitting on a low bed on the right side of the tent. That’s the side that people consider most important. She is probably only 55 years old, but her deep wrinkles and hunched posture make her look much older. Living outside on the steppe has aged her quickly. But her toothy smile and her energy with her granddaughters make the room lively.

Byamba’s father died a few years ago. Today, Byamba’s brother, along with his wife and two kids, live in this *ger* with his mother. In Mongolia, families stick together closely. The arrangement in this *ger* is common. Usually one of the family’s children marries and stays with the aging parents. That person then takes over the family herd. Grandparents remain important in the family, and receive much respect. When they become sick or too old to perform their usual activities, the rest of the family takes care of them. I once explained the idea of nursing homes and retirement homes that we have in the United States for old people. My Mongolian friends could not understand such an idea.

I walk into the left side of the *ger*. That is the custom for guests. They give me a small wooden stool and tell me to sit. Within a minute they hand me a bowl of steaming hot milk-tea. Shortly after, we begin eating *borzag*, which is like a doughnut, but less sweet. We also eat bread with *uuram*, which is the cream skimmed off the top of fresh milk. When I first came

to Mongolia, I didn't like these foods. But now, I find them quite tasty.

Now the family looks at me. They ask Byamba questions: Who am I? Where am I from? Why did I come to Mongolia? Byamba remains silent as I answer the family's questions. At first they don't talk directly to me. They say their words to Byamba, because they don't think I will understand. It often takes Mongolians a moment to see that I can understand them, even though I am not Mongolian.

We finish up the snacks and conversation. Soon the family is commencing their work for the afternoon. Byamba's sister-in-law begins chopping meat and rolling out dough for dinner. Emee straps on a huge backpack and grabs a three-foot-long wooden fork. She is going out to collect dried animal droppings. She will burn this in the stove for cooking and for heating the *ger*. Byamba and the young girls take care of the goats. Byamba will comb their fur to get the soft hairs to make cashmere, which is a really soft kind of fabric that fetches quite a price. The girls milk a different group of goats. And I go with Byamba's brother on horseback to round up the live-stock that have wandered a few miles away to graze.

A newcomer to Mongolia quickly discovers that the hospitality in the countryside is the best in the world. I know that even if I were not with Byamba, this family would take care of me. They would treat me like family. The herder life in the countryside is difficult. People take care of strangers because they know a stranger would always take care of them.

The evening becomes chilly as the sun dips below the mountains after 10 o'clock. But inside, the *ger* is alive and warm in dim candlelight. We take turns singing Mongolian songs. After hours of telling stories, playing cards, and singing, the seven of us drift off to sleep. We are resting in our white felt tent, just as people here have been doing on this steppe for a thousand years.

## VOCABULARY

**commencing:** beginning; starting

**fetch:** get; obtain

**livestock:** farm animals

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

My name is Jonathan Phillips. I am from Bartlett, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. I graduated from Driscoll Catholic High School in 1998 and from the Milwaukee School of Engineering in 2001 with a degree in business and computer systems. Soccer has always been a passion in my life—I will continue to force it on my unfortunate Mongolian friends until they like it or I leave, whichever happens first. My immediate family all still reside in the Chicago area. My younger brother and sister, Hunter and Charlotte, are in middle school and high school respectively. They recently visited me in Mongolia!

**MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

I am a business and economic development Volunteer in a remote area of western Mongolia. My primary assignment is with the Economics University of Zavkhan, where I teach business, marketing, computer, and English classes. I also work with the teachers to update the curriculum and improve their methodologies. My main side project in the community is an ecotourism development project in which we hope to promote this beautiful, quiet corner of the world to spur local economic growth while encouraging responsible management of the environment.

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**  
I, IV, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**  
4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12 (see pages 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- Division of labor helps traditional families accomplish essential work.
- Housing among different cultures can differ markedly.
- Expressions of hospitality are an important feature of many cultures.

**Essential Questions**

- Why is hospitality among Mongolians considered so important?
- Why might hospitality be less of a focus in the United States than in Mongolia?
- Why is it that grandparents enjoy the respect and reverence they do in traditional societies?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Library books on families, such as *All Kinds of Families*, by Norma Simon; and *Free to Be ... a Family*, by Marlo Thomas
- Map of Mongolia or globe

## JUST LIKE THE OLD DAYS

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**OVERVIEW**

Students will examine and experience roles and customs of rural Mongolians through role-playing, and they will compare unfamiliar roles from Mongolia with everyday roles in the United States.

**OBJECTIVES**

After reading the letter and participating in class activities students will be able

- To chart their immediate family and their extended family, and show locations and amount of contact.
- To describe the importance of extended families in traditional societies.
- To demonstrate how a societal unit (a peer group) expresses hospitality to newcomers.
- To speculate on the impact technology might have on the traditional way of life in Mongolia.

**GRADES:** 3–8**PROCEDURE**

1. Define hospitality for the class. Ask them to imagine that a new student will be joining the class the next day. Divide the class into groups of three to five and ask each group to brainstorm all the things the class could do to welcome such a newcomer to the school. Suggest that they think of all the school settings where the newcomer would go during the course of the school day (e.g., cafeteria, playground, gym)

and how the person would be treated in those settings. Have each group prepare a short skit that dramatizes what might happen. After the students perform the skits, discuss what they have learned about hospitality at school.

2. Read aloud a book about families, such as *Free to Be ... a Family* or *All Kinds of Families*. Ask each of the students to prepare a family chart that shows everyone in their family they know, including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Ask the students to identify where each family unit lives and how often they see the people from those units. Explain that they will compare their information with information about a family in Mongolia they will read about next.
3. Distribute copies of Jonathan's letter to the class and use a globe or map to show the location of Mongolia. Suggest how long it would take to reach Mongolia by air or overland. Read the letter aloud with the class, or ask students to take turns reading portions of it. Point out that social scientists are interested in life in rural Mongolia today, because it helps them understand what life was like long ago, before the impact of modern technology.
4. Make a chart on the board or overhead that shows the people Jonathan described in the family unit in Mongolia. Ask the students to compare this family unit with their own. Emphasize the important role grandparents play in Mongolian culture and how they are treated with respect and cared for when they get older. Give the students time to share comparisons with their own families (e.g., do some children have grandparents living with them?).
5. Assign seven parts for the roles described in Jonathan's letter and have students reenact the scene in which Jonathan enters the *ger*, and the action in the remaining four paragraphs. Help the students see how Mongolians value hospitality, and how Jonathan appreciates their hospitality. Discuss the roles each person has in the family, and how the work is divided up according to age, gender, and ability. Draw parallels with farm communities in the United States and help the students see that this division of labor is an efficient way to get work accomplished.
6. Ask students to pretend they are going on a weekend camping trip without cars, plumbing, or electricity. Ask them to imagine what the experience would be like. What would they bring along? Have the students draw parallels to life at the *ger* Jonathan visited. Then ask how the trip would be different if they had modern conveniences.
7. Ask the students to take the role of social scientists and predict how life will change in rural Mongolia during the next 50 years. What kinds of changes can they expect, and why? Have them work on a picture and essay that show what life will be like at the *ger* where Byamba's family lives and in the surrounding countryside. (Will the *ger* still be there?) You can refer them to Jonathan's letter "What's Mongolia Really Like" (on the Web at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories)) for help in making their predictions.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

1. Have students find out more about the 13th-century Italian merchant Marco Polo, to whom Jonathan refers in his letter. Compare Marco Polo's writing and his role in sending information to Europe with Jonathan's writing and his role in sending information to U.S. students today.
2. Have students build a model of a *ger*, or white felt tent, that they would like to stay in if they lived in Mongolia today. They can find out details necessary for building a *ger* by researching how *gers* are constructed. A particularly helpful site is <http://mongolia.worldvision.org.nz/mongoliager.html>.
3. Mongolians are concerned that the Gobi Desert is creeping farther and farther north into their country every year. River levels are dropping and some rivers are drying up. Have students find out if other deserts, such as the Sahara, are also expanding, and how scientists explain such changes. Students should also research what scientists and local citizens are doing to combat the expansion of the deserts into formerly vegetated areas.
4. Ask students to work with classmates to find pictures in reference books or on the Internet of girls wearing *dels*. Have students make a *del*, or identify someone in your area who could bring one to school to show the class and talk about Mongolia.
5. Have students pretend they are the girls in the *ger* who haven't seen their Uncle Byamba in a year—and who have never seen a foreigner. Ask them to write a story called "The Day the U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer Came to Visit."
6. Jonathan finds that he now likes foods, such as *borzag* and bread with *uuram*, that he didn't like at first. Can students think of any foods they once did not like, but now favor? What made them change their minds? Sometimes we change our minds about other things that we don't like at first. Can the students think of some? [Students might suggest certain types of music, art, and games.]



## RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

by Jonathan Phillips

Peace Corps Volunteer, Mongolia (2003–2005)

For most of the 20th century, Mongolia was a socialist state under the strict shadow of the Soviet Union. When the Russian influence and aid ended abruptly in the early 1990s, Mongolia was left to start a market economy on its own from scratch. The adjustment has been slow and painful, but 15 years later, the economy has stabilized and is beginning to grow.

Much of the old bureaucracy, social structures, and norms remain, however. Certain things have been ingrained, and they are difficult to change. My experience with people in Mongolia concerning respect for authority is a prime example. Mongolians follow the orders of their bosses, teachers, and superiors with military precision. When people in authority give orders, what they say is law; there is no criticism. It's easy to see how such a disciplined people built an army that conquered most of the known world 800 years ago. But to someone coming from the United States, this subordination to authority seems more harmful than good in this day and age. As a teacher in an economics university here, I have found that getting students to speak up in class and to hold a discussion is often painfully difficult. Most of the classes my students have had have been lectures where they sit quietly and do not interact.

But in the example that follows, the Mongolian people amazed me—in a positive way—as they have in countless other situations. Recently I was asked to give a talk to a group of Mongolian young people about elections in America. One of my co-workers casually asked me nearly a week in advance to give the talk, an eternity in this culture of spontaneity. He didn't give me any more details than the time and place for the talk. Saturday morning finally rolled around and I made my way across town to the youth center with a work counterpart who could be my translator if I needed one. (My Mongolian vocabulary lacked the technical words for me to give the talk entirely in Mongolian, and few people here speak English.)

### VOCABULARY

**socialist:** style of ruling in which the government manages all services

**stabilized:** steadied

**ingrained:** deeply rooted

**subordination:** yielding to someone or something senior

**spontaneity (pronounced SPON-tuh-NAY-uh-tee):** immediacy; acting on the spot

I arrived at the old concrete youth center to banners and crowds of people standing outside. After registering and receiving a press packet of information, I learned I was actually at a liberal youth empowerment conference for 200 young people from all over the province. And apparently the definition of youth in Mongolia is anyone between the ages of 18 and 35. With credentials to wear around my neck, I began to realize this was more than an informal speech to grade-school students about elections. The conference program now listed:

10:00 a.m.—Professor Jonathan Phillips from the Economics University. “Issues of young people in America, differences between American and Mongolian youth, and how the Mongolian youth must assert itself in politics.”

Although I had ceased being surprised months before by anything that happened to me in Mongolia, the news was slightly alarming, because I realized I was ill-prepared. The word election was listed nowhere, even in the title of the program. And now I was “Professor Jonathan Phillips,” a lofty title I would never dream of attaching to my name here. I was usually just *Jon bagsha*, or Teacher Jon, to my students.

So my translator, Tsogbayar, and I regrouped and went over some new vocabulary I would need, with about 10 minutes before we were supposed to speak. We then stepped to the podium and winged it.

As I looked out at the audience, I recognized many of the smiling faces as students from my school. I smiled back, a little comforted, but secretly thought to myself, “Why didn’t you warn me about this?” I talked about issues young people in America faced and they seemed interested. I talked about some differences between American and Mongolian youth and they drifted a bit. I was speaking especially conservatively because I had learned that it was neither culturally appropriate nor my place as a Peace Corps Volunteer to stir up controversy, especially in the sphere of politics. I also considered it rather arrogant and in poor taste to talk up my America as something that was superior, which Mongolia should aspire to. Gradually my speech was getting boring.

## VOCABULARY

**credentials:** qualifications

**regrouped:** reorganized

**podium:** speaker’s platform

Annoyed with the disinterested faces, I switched gears and went into uncharted territory. I talked about Mongolian youth being overly passive. I was briefly interrupted by a smattering of agreeing claps. Those who had dozed off were back. I talked about how the system would never change unless people made themselves heard. Lots of clapping. I said authority needed to be challenged at times. Tsogbayar even pounded the lectern once during the translation. The audience erupted. The atmosphere was approaching that of a pep rally. Figuring I should wrap things up before a revolution started, I reminded people that they now lived in a democracy and it was their duty to be politically active, and then I quickly stepped down from the stage. An ovation followed that included loud, rhythmic clapping that is always used to show special approval or agreement. It's quite an ironic ending, because that coordinated clapping had always reminded me of old Mother Russia for some reason. Some of us in the Peace Corps even called it the "communist clap."

The conference went on to be hugely successful. Issues were debated, the audience asked questions, people criticized the system, ideas were brainstormed on how students would organize, and everyone left that evening feeling motivated. It was a delight to watch democracy in action. I know my speech had little to do with most of the discussions that day, but I felt especially satisfied because I felt I had helped to set the tone for open discussion.

Life here in Mongolia is in rapid transition. I'm fortunate to be involved in it and observe it firsthand. People are discovering more and more that they have a power to initiate change and decide their own futures, as they never had before. Democracy is becoming much more than the obscure, lifeless word it once was.

*For Jonathan's biography and Peace Corps site description, see page 93.*

## VOCABULARY

**transition:** change

## RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will examine how a Peace Corps Volunteer working in a culture steeped in submissiveness encourages local young people to challenge authority and participate in their governance.

#### OBJECTIVES

After reading the letter and participating in class activities students will be able

- To describe a process that can be used to make decisions for a group, such as a class meeting or town meeting.
- To explain how popular participation benefits democratic governance in school and society.
- To draw parallels between participation in the classroom community and participation in the local community.
- To cite and define three examples of respect for authority in school and in the larger community.
- To cite and define three examples of thinking for oneself in school and in the larger community.

**GRADES:** 9–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Introduce the lesson by explaining that the class will learn about Mongolia, a country trying to build a new democracy. If you can, show an excerpt from the video *Alice in Wonderland*, or read from the book,

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IV, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

4, 6, 10, 12 (see pages 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- The democratic form of government depends on citizens' participation in political activity.
- The ability to persuade others is a powerful tool to create social change.

**Essential Questions**

- How does one balance respect for authority with thinking for oneself in a democratic society?
- Does participation in rule making and lawmaking promote the obeying of rules and laws?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Video or book *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll (Optional)

highlighting the section in which the Queen of Hearts responds to any question with “Off with their heads!” Ask the students if this section doesn’t seem ridiculous—deliberately—and inquire what the author might have intended to show. [If students do not note the satire, explain that Lewis Carroll is satirizing authority figures, especially monarchs, who are unable to respond to challenges to their authority in a reasonable way, but instead use the raw power at their disposal to maintain order.] Discuss the reaction of the subjects to the queen’s rule.

2. Explain that the class is now going to participate in an activity that will demonstrate another way to govern and encourage cooperation with rules and laws. Hold a class meeting to decide on a new class rule or project. Encourage everyone to participate in an equal, respectful fashion. After the meeting, ask the students why this method encourages cooperation. Tell them that encouraging participation in democratic governance is the theme of the letter “Respect for Authority,” by Jonathan Phillips.
3. Have the students read the first two paragraphs of Jonathan’s letter. Point out Mongolia’s location on a globe or map, as well as the location of the former Soviet Union. Discuss with the students why Jonathan used the expression “under the shadow of” the Soviet Union. Explain briefly the concepts “socialist state” and “market economy.” Review the two paragraphs. Point out the central theme: “But to me, coming from America, this subordination to authority seems more harmful than good in this day and age.” Ask how this attitude might affect Jonathan’s teaching, and why he might feel so strongly about it.
4. Point out that, as with most opinions, there is another side to the issue. Write the statement, “The school’s role should be to help students learn to respect authority.” Do the students agree with this opinion for their own school? Why or why not? Tell them they will be considering both options—thinking for oneself and blind obedience—and what their school experience teaches them, when they finish Jonathan’s letter.
5. Read the beginning of the third paragraph: “But in the example that follows, the Mongolian people amazed me—in a positive way—as they have in countless other situations.” This sentence is the theme for the rest of the piece. Ask the students to read the next four paragraphs and trace Jonathan’s emotions as he prepares to give his talk. Help clarify two expressions as they read—“culture of spontaneity” and “... I was ill-prepared.”
6. The next two paragraphs are Jonathan’s account of giving his speech. Help the students understand the passage: “I was speaking especially conservatively because I had learned that it was neither culturally appropriate nor my place as a Peace Corps Volunteer to stir up controversy, especially in the sphere of politics. I also considered it rather arrogant and in poor taste to talk up my America as some-

thing that was superior, which Mongolia should aspire to.” Trace the author’s emotions as he gives the speech. Use a chalkboard or overhead to show his emotional ups and downs and how he uses audience reaction to determine what he will say next. Students may also benefit from and enjoy examining the artful way Jonathan conveys the building of interest as he proceeds with his talk—e.g., the interjections of clapping, the pounding on the lectern—to convey the growing enthusiasm as it occurs.

7. Record on the chalkboard or overhead the four points Jonathan uses to conclude his speech: youth being overly passive; the system would never change unless people made themselves heard; authority needs to be challenged at times; and people who live in a democracy have a duty to be politically active. Point out to the students that these points form the basis of a persuasive speech. Note that persuasive speeches have been an important part of history. (Can students name any particularly persuasive speakers, such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and John F. Kennedy?)
8. Do a coordinated clap together, and see if students can explain the irony Jonathan refers to in the letter concerning this kind of clapping.
9. Refer to the two opinions from the beginning of the reading: “Subordination to authority seems more harmful than good in this day and age,” and “The school’s role is to help students learn to respect authority.” Give three examples from your

school practices that support each opinion. Discuss if it is possible for schools to teach both concepts in a meaningful way.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Jonathan wrote: “Although I had ceased being surprised months before by anything that happened to me in Mongolia, the news was slightly alarming, because I realized I was ill-prepared.” This sentence implies that Jonathan had faced many surprises in Mongolia. Brainstorm a list of other surprises you think he might have faced in Mongolia. Use his biography, a reference source on Mongolia, and his other letter, “Just Like the Old Days” (page 90), to help you.
2. Hold a meeting to decide on a class project that will help your classroom, school, or community. Get everyone’s input, and use everyone’s labor in executing the plan. Evaluate the success of the project.

## REDUCE, RE-USE, RECYCLE

by Nina Porzucki

Peace Corps Volunteer, Romania (2002–2004)

Romania has turned me into a pack rat. Not that I didn't collect things in the past. Once I cried for three hours when my father made me throw away a childhood collection of wrapping paper and bows that filled up my closet. Living in Romania has reawakened this pack rat impulse inside me. Here, every food item I buy is not judged by its caloric content or nutritional value, but by its Tupperware potential. My eyes glisten at the thought of empty water bottles lying useless in the trash. My heart skips a beat when I mistakenly get an extra plastic bag at the market. Every container is useful in ways that I had never envisioned. Juice bottles make perfect milk containers when you buy milk in a bag. Three-liter bottles are great jugs. An empty yogurt cup makes an excellent glass, tomato-sauce jars make great mugs, and sour cream "buckets" are quite the prize because they come complete with lids perfect for leftovers. Everything has a use and nothing is wasted.

Romanians are extremely resourceful. As my friend Mirela says, "We have to be." When you make an average of a hundred dollars a month, you learn to stretch your money till the last leu. (The *leu* is the official Romanian currency.) Before the fall of the Iron Curtain and the onslaught of capitalism and creative packaging, Romanian recycling was not a mere choice but a necessity. Who knew when and what the shortages would be? Survival meant collecting. A roll of toilet paper was worth its weight in gold when none was to be found for months in the market. Plastic bags, foodstuffs, jars, buttons, thread, material—everything was useful when nothing else was available. Recycling thus evolved as a necessity, not a choice. Plastic bags still remain golden items; they cost extra at the grocery stores.

### VOCABULARY

**pack rat:** a rodent that collects scraps; thus, a term used for describing a person who saves almost everything

**caloric:** relating to the heat energy that food produces

**glisten:** to gleam

**leu (pronounced LEH-oo)**

**Iron Curtain:** an imaginary barrier that referred to the boundary of former communist countries

**onslaught (pronounced AWN-slawt):** fast approach

Though informal, or personal, recycling is integral to the Romanian lifestyle today, organized recycling has only recently come back into vogue. For years, recycling was anything but voluntary. Under the regime of Ceaușescu—the former communist dictator who ran the country from the mid '60s till Romania's revolution in 1989—recycling was mandatory. Children were required to bring a quota of paper from home to school to be recycled. Forced recycling left a bad taste in the mouths of many Romanians. So bitter was this taste that after the fall of communism, *not* recycling became an act of asserting one's freedom. It is hard to fathom just how controlling the state of communism must have been, when freedom boiled down to the right to do what you wished with your own trash.

The question is, how do you disassociate memories of a formerly oppressive act—recycling by decree—from the importance of the act itself? How do you get people to recycle of their own volition, not because they have to, but because it's the right thing to do? The answer is kids!

Since being here, I have thought a lot more about the things that I throw away. In fact, my trash haunts me. I dream about the mountain of waste that I have nonchalantly tossed: plastic bottles, glass jars, soda cans, paper towels, foam plates, mounds and mounds of formerly useful things sitting stagnant in the ground, waiting uncounted years to decompose. I feel sick.

I discussed my guilty conscience with my students. They too confessed to feeling guilty about the amount of paper that lay wasting in school trash cans failing to be recycled. We talked and talked and finally decided to do something about our garbage guilt together. We formed a coalition called the Green Marshals and initiated a recycling competition between classes. The Green Marshals' leader, Mihaela, made contact with a company outside of town that offered to pay us for the paper. We gave each class a cardboard recycling box that we salvaged from market garbage bins.

## VOCABULARY

**disassociate:** separate

**volition:** choice

**nonchalantly:** without concern

**stagnant:** not moving; inactive



Thus the project began, and it was a big hit. The winning class recycled over a hundred kilos [220 pounds] of paper in under two months, but more important, we got people to think about what they were throwing away. The kids were pleased, and together we hope to continue the good recycling karma this school year. “The best thing,” Mihaela explained, “is changing the way people think.” Romania has definitely changed the way I think about trash. Truly I have learned that one person’s trash may be another person’s treasure.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

*Salut! Ce mai faceti?* (Hello! How are you?) My name is Nina Porzucki. But my students usually yell out my name, NEEEEEEENNNNNAAAA-NNNNEEEEEEEENNA like an ambulance siren rushing down the hallway. For the past year, I have been teaching at a high school in Ramnicu Valcea, Romania. Valcea (VOOL-CHA), as I fondly call it, is a medium-sized town tucked into the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. The town has two rivers running through it—the mighty Olt and the baby Olanesti—a philharmonic orchestra, an art museum, the Pizzeria Okay (the place to be seen), and my luxury from home: McDonald’s.

Before coming to Valcea, I graduated from the University of California-Santa Barbara, where I majored in Spanish and global studies. I studied in Spain my junior year of college, and it was then that I caught the travel bug. I knew that I wanted to live abroad again. I applied to the Peace Corps, thinking that I would work in Latin America, and somehow I got placed in Eastern Europe. Although most Romanians don’t speak Spanish, Romanian, like Spanish, is a Romance language—both languages have the same Latin-based origin. So, knowing Spanish has really helped me to understand Romanian. After one full year here, I can’t imagine myself serving anywhere else.

### **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT**

What a year it's been! My primary assignment is teaching ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade English at Colegiul National Alexandru Lahovari, a local high school. However, the most rewarding experience so far has been planning summer camps.

At the beginning of July, I led a leadership camp with some other Volunteers and fellow Romanian teachers in the heart of Transylvania. We talked about leadership, hiked, and played Ultimate Frisbee, baseball, and Capture the Flag. We taught the kids to tie-dye and we even ended up tie-dying a Volunteer's shorts as a prank. It was great, but the best part of the week was coming home and meeting with my kids to discuss a leadership project they had developed in camp to start in Valcea. Their energy is what makes my Peace Corps experience worth it.

## REDUCE, RE-USE, RECYCLE

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

When students read and analyze this letter from Romania, they will appreciate the importance—and the complexity—of the issue of recycling.

#### OBJECTIVES

After studying the letter and engaging in different activities, students should be able to explain how or why

- Reusing items is key to people living in countries with a shortage of products.
- Cultural change often starts among younger generations.
- The issue of recycling is universal, and every person can play a part in it.
- The formerly oppressive regimes in Romania made people reluctant to participate in activities associated with the past, even if these activities would contribute to the greater good.
- A recycling program can benefit the students and community.

**GRADES:** 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. One week before you plan to teach this lesson, bring to class a plastic-foam cup or burger box, a clean disposable diaper, a newspaper, and a plastic soda bottle. Ask students what all these things have in common. [They are considered disposable.] Assign students to keep a daily journal

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IV (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

6, 9, 10, 12, 14 (see pages 133)

**Enduring Understandings**

- In countries where consumer goods are in short supply, people learn to do more with less.
- Reducing waste and recycling can have important consequences for the environment.

**Essential Questions**

- How does a lack of consumer goods affect the lives of people?
- In what ways are recycling and reducing waste important?

**Materials**

- Photocopies of story for the whole class
- Map of Romania
- Plastic-foam cup or burger box, disposable diaper, newspaper, plastic soda bottle, plastic-foam “peanuts” used for shipping

listing all the trash that they and their family generate for one week. Remind them periodically during the week and have them bring their lists with them on the appropriate day.

2. Locate Romania on a map. Explain to students that Romania is a country with a long and complex history. For more than 20 years, the country was ruled by a dictator named Nicolae Ceaușescu (pronounced chow-SHESS-ko), who was overthrown in 1989. When he was overthrown, the country started to build a free society. The United States tried to help; one way was by sending Peace Corps Volunteers into the country, beginning in 1991.

If students do not know what the Peace Corps is, give them some background information. Then introduce them to Nina Porzucki (see page 105).

3. Distribute Nina's letter. Ask students to read it, identify a problem that bothered her, and determine how she went about solving the problem. After students have had ample time to read the letter, discuss the story with them.
4. Use the following questions as a guide for classroom discussion. What do the three words of the title mean? How do they relate to Nina's problem? What details does she give that tell you how and why she and the Romanian people practice "personal recycling"? Why do some Romanians resist recycling programs? How does Nina find a solution to this issue? What does Nina mean when she says, "One person's trash may be another person's treasure"? What is the larger implication of this statement?

5. Put an unfilled chart like the first one on the facing page on the board or on an overhead projector. Provide examples of plastic-foam items (e.g., "peanuts" for packaging, coffee cups, egg cartons, meat trays) and paper (e.g., telephone books, newspapers, junk mail, student essays).

Have students analyze their lists of home trash, figuring out the rough percentages that plastic foam and paper constitute. Then ask the students to estimate the percentages of landfill waste that these items constitute, based on what they found in their own trash inventory, and fill in the chart. Use the data in the right-hand chart to compare with the students' estimates.\*

6. Ask students what could be done to reduce some of this waste. Have them look at their own lists and come up with some suggestions. What could they do as individuals? What could the school do? Their families? The community? Manufacturers? Put three columns on the board or overhead, labeled Reduce, Re-Use, and Recycle. List students' ideas as they suggest them.
7. Assign students to research what kinds of recycling programs are available in their school and local neighborhoods. What incentives might encourage people to recycle more?

\*The data were reported on National Public Radio by Bill Hammack, a chemical engineer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, based on research conducted at the University of Arizona.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

1. If your class is interested in undertaking a service-learning project, Coverdell World Wise Schools has a full student service-learning unit available on its website ([www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/servicelearning](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/servicelearning)).
2. Art teachers can use this essay as a starting point for making a poster on recycling.

Product	% of Landfill
Plastic foam	
Disposable diapers	
Plastic products	
Paper products	
Other	

Product	% of Landfill
Plastic foam	1%
Disposable diapers	2%
Plastic products	15%
Paper products	40%
Other	42%

# The Challenges of Service

## CHIGGERS AND OTHER CHALLENGES

by Joan Heberger

Peace Corps Volunteer, Honduras (2002–2004)

One of my biggest work challenges has been my involvement in the small coffee-growing community of Las Quebradas (the Streams) to develop a proposal for a water system. Of the communities in our county, Quebradas is the farthest from town, isolated by a long, rutted dirt road. The 22 families use water from hose pipes placed between their houses and various streams, most of which are contaminated in the winter and dry in the rainless summer. I began this project when I was fairly new in town. Because of my initial eagerness and desire to “deliver,” I did not investigate all the options and understand the social and political environment.

Almost a year ago, I visited the community for the first time to examine the town’s potential water source. I explained to the residents that I could help them by providing a topographical study of the land and a design, proposal, and budget for a water system. Over the next few months, I began this process, which involved walking about 10 hours a day in mountainous terrain, looking for a semi-level route back to the houses. Sometimes I was terrified with the responsibility of designing this water system, as I am not an engineer. A nearby Peace Corps engineer helped me in the beginning of the process, but because of the timing and his other commitments, I ended up doing the survey without his presence, which was another mistake. I was mentally and physically exhausted, and I kept getting chiggers! For those of you unfamiliar with warm, moist woody environments, chiggers are minuscule red mites that dig into your skin and give you itchy red bumps.

While the engineer and I investigated the terrain, we realized that there was another water project in the construction phase close to Quebradas, but on the other side of the county line. From what we could see, this project could easily serve the needs of the 82 people of Quebradas, without

### VOCABULARY

**contaminated:** unclean

**potential:** possible

**terrain:** the lay of the land

the huge expenses of money and time that were needed to build their own private system. From the water tank of the other system, you can see the straight downhill route the pipes would take to arrive at the houses of Quebradas, as opposed to the longer, complicated route from the chosen water source. The other project is a big one that serves six other communities, it draws from a clean water source, and best of all, SANAA, the national water utility, contributed the construction supervision and materials. It seemed like the perfect solution!

Investigating further, I started to feel that no one in Quebradas wanted me to talk to the people over the county line. I realized that Quebradas did not participate in this joint project because there are rivalries between it and one of the other communities. As I tried to understand the rivalries, I became more confused when I learned that people in the other county are practically all relatives of the people in Quebradas—uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins. To me, it is very sad that they can't work together in a situation like this.

I spent another month trying to contact SANAA for their advice and support. I had no luck. I could not figure out whom to talk to; sometimes they just didn't answer the phone. Finally I asked for help from our mayor and was amazed at how quickly he was able to get us an appointment with the SANAA engineer in charge. The SANAA engineer informed us that there were enough materials and water to share the system with Quebradas, but that the decision must be made by the other communities. So I began the struggle of contacting the other communities and persuading them to reconsider these supposed rivalries and work together. Another month passed without success, and when the mayor in the neighboring county told me the people did not want to collaborate, I finally gave up on what I still feel is a technically better solution.

Since then, I have finished the land survey and the proposal for a private system for Quebradas. It is far too expensive for them, and I am not sure that they will be able to find outside funding. One lesson I learned from this challenging experience is that I do not want to be involved in another

er water-system design unless someone from my town is committed to learning the process. During each phase, I invited people I thought capable of the work to come along, learn what I was doing, and be able to continue this work when I am gone. But no one came, and they remain dependent on outside help.

What have I learned? I have learned to take it slow, that understanding the people, their needs, and their cultural and political relationships is more important than finding a technical solution. I resolved that I will not work on any more projects without a way to teach someone what I am doing. I learned that it is important to involve community leaders from the very beginning, and that chiggers are not deterred by insect repellent. And perhaps most important, I am still learning to have more patience, because working in Honduras (and anywhere!) requires patience.



## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

In Honduras, my name is pronounced Jo-AHN, Yo-HAN-nah, Jo-AHN-ee, or any other combination of similar sounds. The English pronunciation of my name, Joan, now sounds odd to me. Living in another culture has changed not just the way I pronounce my name, but also the way I identify myself. People in the United States tend to describe themselves based on their work and where they live, but people in Honduras describe themselves based on their families, their roots, their beliefs.

I am 28 and have smile wrinkles around my eyes. I practice yoga, at least a little bit, every day. I love to dance, and luckily, I love the always-playing *merengue* music. I prefer pie to cake, windows open instead of air-conditioning. I grew up in rural South Carolina making mud pies, playing in creeks, and selling pumpkins from the garden in the fall. I studied English and Spanish at the University of South Carolina and enjoyed a year as an exchange student in Leeds, England.

After graduating, I moved to San Francisco, California, and worked as an AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteer and for a nonprofit organization called CompuMentor, providing technology support to schools and other nonprofit organizations. I am blessed with two parents, two sisters, one nephew, one niece, and one fat cat named Ms. Kitty.

## MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT

I live in a mid-sized town in the middle of a coffee-producing region. How big is mid-sized? That depends on whom you ask, but my best guess is that there are about 7,000 people in town, and 8,000 more in the outlying rural communities, or *aldeas*. Because coffee-farming was lucrative five or six years ago, my town is wealthy, compared with many other Honduran towns. In town, almost everyone has electricity and running water, and many also have telephones and cable TV. My town borders Celaque National Park, which is the home of Honduras's tallest peak. I am assigned as a water and sanitation technician and educator and spend my time teaching kids to wash their hands and chastising friends and strangers for throwing trash in the river. I have worked to plan a water system and form an environmental club, and I help a youth group that educates about HIV and AIDS risks.

## CHIGGERS AND OTHER CHALLENGES

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will discover that providing assistance in another culture can be challenging in ways totally unanticipated, and that success is often dependent upon perseverance as well as patience.

#### OBJECTIVE

After studying the letter and engaging in discussion, students should be able to explain why cross-cultural communication and understanding can be difficult, frustrating, and time-consuming.

#### GRADES: 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Peace Corps Volunteers often have to adjust to unfamiliar physical conditions (no electricity, no running water, no heat, annoying insects, tropical diseases, and the like)—while at the same time adjusting to a language and culture they may not be familiar with. Ask students to read Joan Heberger’s letter “Chiggers and Other Challenges,” and to look for clues as to what the author’s biggest challenge was. [Was it designing a water system? Arranging agreements between communities? Obtaining help from the local water facility?] Then, in class discussion, ask students to identify what they think Joan’s greatest challenge was, providing evidence from the story for their choice. [Answers will most likely vary. Chiggers were a nuisance and a physical challenge, but probably did not outweigh the frustrations Joan encountered in trying to implement the water project. Students might focus on Joan’s

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**

I, IV, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**

4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13 (see pages 133)

#### Enduring Understandings

- To understand those in another culture, it is often important to look at things from their point of view, in addition to your own.
- To work effectively in a culture other than your own requires patience.

#### Essential Questions

- Why do people in different cultures look at things in different ways?
- Why is it important to exercise patience in working in another culture?

#### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class

frustration in not persuading the neighboring community to share its water, which seemed like the most economical and sensible approach to her. What was the obstacle preventing that solution? Or they might focus on the challenge of surveying and organizing the water project when she didn't feel entirely qualified to be doing that work.]

2. One of the lessons Joan learned was, in her words, "that understanding the people, their needs, and their cultural and political relationships is more important than finding a technical solution." After all, she found an efficient solution that was technically feasible—tapping into the neighboring system that was being built—but she could not implement it because of social and political conflicts among the communities involved. Have students group themselves in pairs to discuss examples of current-day issues or problems around the world that are hampered by social or political obstacles. Ask them to make notes and then, in class discussion, to report their observations. [Students might focus on ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Fiji. In each case, there have been conflicts based on animosity between socially defined or ethnic groups.] In the discussion, ask the class to address what strategies can be followed to defuse conflict and promote compromise. Can they think of strategies they might have followed in Joan Heberger's situation to get the neighboring community to share its water resources?]
3. The author identifies the need for patience as "perhaps most important" among the lessons she learned. In fact, if one had to pick one lesson learned by almost all Peace Corps Volunteers, it is probably the need for patience in doing development work. Why is patience so important for someone working in another culture? Lead a class discussion and list factors as students suggest them. [Frequently, what seems obvious to a person in one culture may not be at all clear to someone in another culture. There may be many reasons for this. (1) Sometimes, language is a barrier that makes effective communication time-consuming. (2) The sense of time and urgency may be very different from one culture to another. (For a perfect example, students might enjoy reading Peace Corps Volunteer Kimberly Ross's essay "The Meaning of Time" in the Peace Corps publication *Uncommon Journeys*, available online at [www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/journeys](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/journeys).) (3) A strategy that seems efficient and obvious to one person may, for reasons that may seem completely irrelevant or even irrational, strike another person as totally unacceptable—as students found out through Joan Heberger's experience.]

For exercises that demonstrate to students the need for understanding others' points of view, see the Peace Corps World Wise Schools publication *Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Classroom Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding*, lessons 8–10. The lessons are online at [www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/bridges](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/bridges).

## The Challenges of Service

## A LIFE OF SACRIFICE AND HARDSHIP?

by Robin Solomon

Peace Corps Volunteer, Kazakhstan (2001–2003)

Most of my friends who graduated from college with me moved to New York or stayed in Washington, DC, to work at entry-level jobs and share a cramped apartment with enough roommates to cover the rent. They share an impression of my Peace Corps service in Kazakhstan as a noble sacrifice of a good job in a big city in favor of a tough job in a land of hardship. I beg to differ. Sometimes I joke to myself that I am living better in Kokshetau than I would in America as a recent college graduate. For example, my best friend pays half of her salary for a tiny room in Brooklyn. I sent her a gift of a woven tablecloth, and when she replied with thanks, she added that she didn't have room in her apartment for a table to put it on, but she thought that it would look nice on the wall.

While Kokshetau doesn't offer all of the conveniences of New York or Washington, I'm not suffering here. I live in a spacious two-room apartment with a good-sized kitchen and a walk-in closet. There's even a balcony (although it hangs too precariously for me to feel comfortable lounging there). I have so much extra space that I deliberately take things out of my walk-in closet and place them in stacks throughout the apartment to make it look less empty. There's also very creative furniture. I don't have a bed, but I made myself something resembling a bed using an old door, some useless speakers, and a couple of mattresses. Two broken old televisions function quite well as tables, cardboard boxes make fabulous shelves, and stacks of pillows covered with a blanket pass for a chair. It's rather charming, I think.

My apartment has its drawbacks, of course. My Peace Corps-issued space heater is constantly on throughout the winter, when the drafts sneak in

## VOCABULARY

**noble:** having moral qualities or high ideals

**sacrifice:** the act of giving up something important to you

**precariously:** riskily, dangerously

around the edges of the window frame. (I stuffed the cracks with cotton and tape to avoid such drafts, but I may need to try the potato-starch recipe for window-stuffing, as I've heard it's more effective.) When my neighbors don't pay their electricity bill, I work by candlelight. One week, the neighbors to the left were late with their payment, and the neighbors to the right were on time, but since I'm in the middle, my payment didn't matter. The neighbors to the left lost their electricity until they paid. With them, the entire left half of my apartment was out. Water is at times an issue as well. It alternately leaks and erupts from the pipes, depending on which neighbors, above or below me, clogged their drain.

My apartment building is a testament to the sometimes awkward transition Kazakhstan is going through from being part of the former Soviet Union. My building, with about 70 apartments, used to be owned by the government, as were most city buildings. Now, the building isn't really owned by anyone, although you could consider the current tenants the owners. This lack of ownership becomes most problematic when there are buildingwide concerns, like a leaking roof. It's an interesting study in community motivation to see someone in the building finally declaring "Enough!" and attempting to organize a group effort to replace the roof.

My medium-sized town boasts countless cafes, plenty of shopping centers, and a large bazaar, with fruits and vegetables and meats and cheese wheels all ready to be bargained for. Where can you find such a bazaar in New York City?

And we have nightclubs. There are two of them. One is called Harley-Davidson and has an unconvincing plastic motorcycle as the dance floor centerpiece. Soon, there will be a bowling alley. In other cities bowling alleys have taken off as social hotspots and hangouts for only the coolest people in town. You can bet I'll be there.

We even have 24-hour convenience stores! I know this, because I live directly above one of them, and I am the nightly witness to its stream of

## VOCABULARY

**testament:** statement, evidence

**transition:** a change from one form or condition to another

**motivation:** drive, reason for taking action

**bazaar:** an outdoor market

customers. Maybe it's not exactly like the American Walgreen's, glowing with lights and inviting sliding doors into the wee hours of the morning, but if you need something in those hours of the morning, and you can bang on the door loud and hard enough to wake up the staff sleeping inside, the store works at any hour. Judging from the extremely insistent banging that regularly wakes me up at night, the store does fairly good business.

I live in the center of town, within walking distance of my school, my secondary project, and all my friends. On the days when there is a *buran*—an unforgiving wind that sweeps through the city from the steppe—or on days when the temperature is flirting around the minus 30 range, or on days when I just don't want to walk, I can take any one of the local buses, which serve virtually all the areas I need to go in town. Some buses are nicer than others; some are actually quite new, while others reek of exhaust and have icy floors. If I ask nicely, the bus drivers will even let me out in between stops. No driver in Washington ever did that for me!

At school, although the heat sometimes doesn't work, I enjoy the basic comforts one needs to exist in an academic setting. This isn't a one-room schoolhouse by any means. It is a good-sized building with spacious classrooms and plenty of desks and chairs. We have regular faculty meetings, and the school organizes interesting concerts and programs for the students. My director and supervisor are extremely supportive of me, and they make many efforts to make sure I'm content in their school and community.

Life in Kokshetau is far from boring. I have enough friends to keep me occupied when I'm not working. There is a family that insists I eat with them once a week, the mother scolding me for losing too much weight as she scoops a large spoon of butter onto my plate of *variniki*—boiled dumplings usually stuffed with potatoes, cheese, cabbage, or meat. "Eat!" I'm told. There is a family in a nearby village who invites me weekly for a

## VOCABULARY

**Walgreen's:** a drug store chain in the United States

**steppe:** a vast plain with few trees

*banya*, or a Russian steam bath that I take far too much delight in, and that I will miss when I return to America. My supervisor invites me to her apartment every week as well, where she generously offers me the use of her washing machine, a rare treasure in Kokshetau that makes my life much easier (and gets my clothes much cleaner than my rudimentary attempts at washing my clothes in the bathtub). In addition to these friends, I have enough site mates to keep me from missing America too much. We get together regularly to cook pizza or hamburgers, watch a movie in English, or just hang out.

All in all, life here is not bad at all. The winter is frustratingly long and bitter, yes. Sometimes I can't shower when I want to because the water is shut off, this is true. But, compared with life at home, my life is not shockingly different, nor is it filled with sacrifice, in terms of creature comforts. Kazakhstan is a developed country far from the impoverished image many of my friends have of this place. Its major challenge is trying to take the development of the Soviet Union and maintain it under a different system. People are working very hard at this transition, as I witness with the ongoing saga of my building's leaky roof. My neighbors in their frustration often declare that Kazakhstan is a miserable place that will never achieve the prosperity of America. I never hesitate to tell them, "My life in Kazakhstan stands up proudly in the face of my life in America, and in many ways, Kazakhstan offers more."

## VOCABULARY

**rudimentary:** basic; crude; simple

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Hello from Kazakhstan! My name is Robin Solomon, and I am from Houston, Texas. Since I graduated from high school in Houston, my life has taken me farther and farther away from home. In 1997, I told my parents, brother, and large extended family that I planned to attend Georgetown University in Washington, DC. “Washington, DC?” they asked incredulously. “What do you want to go all the way up there for?” I explained that it was my first choice among universities, where I could study international relations and learn to live in the fast-paced political environment in Washington. The family finally agreed, and I took off for the East Coast.

But that wasn’t enough for me. In 1999, I announced that I wanted to spend my junior year of university abroad in Paris. “What? Washington isn’t far enough away from Texas for you?” my family asked. I laughed and insisted that Texas would always be my home, but my studies and personal interests were leading me to Paris to improve my French and experience life immersed in another culture. With reluctance, the family nodded in consent, and I left for a year in Europe. During that year, I certainly improved my French and experienced another culture, but living in Paris also gave me a taste for travel and learning about foreign languages and cultures that wouldn’t leave me alone. I knew that I would live abroad again.

As graduation from Georgetown approached, I realized that I wasn’t ready to return to Houston, and the travel bug was biting me hard. The Peace Corps, which I had become familiar with during an internship at their headquarters, attracted me because it combined the adventure of living in a foreign culture with the humanitarian goal of serving a community. Without much hesitation, I made the decision to join the Peace Corps and spend two years in Kazakhstan, a large country south of Russia that used to be part of the Soviet Union. “Kazakh-what?!?” my relatives exclaimed, throwing up their hands in resignation. “Well, that’s it. You’re never coming back to Texas again.” I left Texas in 2001 with promises of an eventual return.



## MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT

Now, I live in Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, a city in the north of the country, near the Russian border. I write letters home to Texas describing my work in this town of about 130,000 people, where I work as an English teacher and jack-of-all-trades. The educational system of Kazakhstan has a lot to be proud of, but I work with English teachers on improving the quality and breadth of instruction. In my own classroom and through teacher-training seminars, I show people how to teach English, health, leadership, and more, trying to give young people tools to improve their lives and the future of their country. Besides teaching, I lead a girls club, work with the English library in the city, volunteer in an orphanage, and organize summer camps, among many other things. One of my most important jobs is being “the American,” who is a constant source of information and support for people in Kokshetau who have ideas to improve their community.

And what do I write home about this country? Kazakhstan is a fascinating place of contrasts and bitter history. The country and its people lost a great deal when the Soviet Union ended in 1991, and since then, they have struggled to build a prosperous nation from the meager remains of the great Russian empire. Russians and Kazakhs live peacefully side by side with numerous other ethnicities, speaking many different languages and practicing different religions, such as Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Together, everyone battles the harsh, cold winters, and it gives people a solidarity and toughness with which they live their daily lives. History has been hard on this country, where nomads were forced to live in cities, exiles were sent to suffer, and farmers were challenged to grow wheat on land that won't support agriculture. This country teaches me on a daily basis, sometimes far more than I think I teach people here.

Living in this country, I think often about home and what it means to me. I know that before I return to Texas to live, there is a whole world still to explore. Washington, DC, Paris, and Kokshetau are not quite enough for me. But try telling that to my family back in Houston!

## A LIFE OF SACRIFICE AND HARDSHIP? TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

### OVERVIEW

Students will evaluate the challenges of a Peace Corps Volunteer's urban life in Kazakhstan in a place where friends at home thought she was making a tremendous sacrifice and living in hardship.

### OBJECTIVES

After studying the letter and engaging in discussion and a writing exercise, students should understand that

- Generalizing, particularly on the basis of incomplete information, may lead to invalid pronouncements.
- People living in a culture different from their own, without some of the luxuries of home, may be perfectly comfortable and happy without them.

### GRADES: 6–12

### PROCEDURE

1. Discuss with students the significance of the question mark in the title of Robin Solomon's letter. What is the difference in meaning between the title with a question mark and without one? What do students expect the message of the letter will be?
2. Ask students whether they are familiar with any Peace Corps Volunteer's service. In class discussion, ask the students who have some knowledge of the Peace Corps to describe what they know about Peace Corps service. Explain that much of early Peace Corps service in the 1960s was performed in developing countries, often in isolated

### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3 (see page 131)

**Social Studies Standards:**  
I, IX (see page 132)

**National Geography Standards:**  
4, 6, 9, 10, 12 (see page 133)

#### Enduring Understandings

- A person living in an unfamiliar culture without the luxuries and comforts of home may be perfectly happily adjusted.
- Making generalizations can easily lead to invalid pronouncements or conclusions.

#### Essential Questions

- How do people adjust to living in a culture very different from their own?
- What are the risks of generalizing, rather than being specific?

#### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class

areas without running water, electricity, or easy access to food—but that, today, although many Volunteers still serve in isolated places, many also serve in urban areas in South America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe in conditions unlike those of the early days of the Peace Corps.

3. Provide copies of Robin Solomon’s letter to the class and ask them to read it, either in class or for homework. Then use the following questions as a guide for class discussion and activities.
4. The author makes clear right away that she doesn’t think life in Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, is either hard or a sacrifice. (Did students anticipate this?) But she does not simply require the reader to trust her judgment. She provides a great many details to bolster her stance—balancing the things that are, in fact, inconveniences with the many factors that she enjoys. Ask students to work in pairs to review the letter, making notes for class discussion as to exactly what details Robin chooses to focus on to illustrate her argument that life there is good to her. [On the positive side, she has lots of space, she has made the furniture she needs, there are lots of cafes and shopping centers, there’s a large bazaar with produce she likes, there are nightclubs, a 24-hour convenience store below, good transportation with friendly drivers, supportive colleagues, lots of friends, and excellent hospitality. On the negative side, her apartment has cold drafts, the electricity and water occasionally shut off, the heat at school sometimes fails, and the winter is long and bitter.]
5. Ask students to think of an event, occasion, or experience that was either truly appealing or decidedly bad, and to write a one-page description of that time. The students should include details, the way Robin did, that illustrate why they feel as they do about the event and provide the reader details necessary for understanding and really sensing the reasons for the author’s feelings. Ask the students to make notes before writing. Have them share their essays with the class and provide each other constructive criticism as to how effective their style was, and ways in which they might strengthen their writing.
6. Some of the messages in Robin’s letter are not explicit. In the paragraph beginning with “And we have nightclubs,” what can one infer about foreign influence in Kazakhstan? [In view of the Harley-Davidson, it’s safe to assume an admiration for some things from the United States.]

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Have a few students report to the class on the principles of a socialist economy to which Robin alludes in her paragraph about the previously state-owned apartment house in which she lives, and that now no one owns. How does such an economy differ from a capitalist system?
2. Work with the class through Lesson #7, which cautions against generalizations, in the Peace Corps World Wise Schools book *Building Bridges*, available online at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/bridges](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/bridges).

## The Challenges of Service

### LESSONS LEARNED BY A NEW TEACHER

by Christian Deitch

Peace Corps Volunteer, Kyrgyz Republic (2000–2001)

Teaching never seemed that difficult when I was a student. My parents were teachers when I was growing up, and they always did most of their work at school—rarely bringing home lesson plans or papers to grade. So I assumed that most teachers got by on personality, and lesson planning was just something for the ones who weren't very good. I thought that I'd be able to walk into my classroom in the Kyrgyz Republic and in three weeks have my kids speaking conversational English. Boy, was I wrong.

I found out quickly that teaching isn't 99 percent personality, but 99 percent of a thousand little things that come only with hard work, patience, dedication, planning, and flexibility. My first challenge involved getting all of my students to come to class at the same time. The Kyrgyz Republic inherited the Soviet school system: As the students get older, attendance becomes less and less important. In my classes with 16- and 17-year-olds, it was not unusual to have five students come to class on Tuesday and have five different students come to class on Thursday. It took me weeks just to learn who all my students were. With the younger classes, I had the exact opposite problem. The younger students, 11- and 12-year-olds, were so excited about taking a class with me that many of them would skip their other classes just to sit in the room. When we ran out of chairs, they would squeeze themselves two to a chair—35 students in a room meant for a class of 18.

After my first week of teaching as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I had to admit to myself that I needed to be strict. I realized that I would never get anywhere if half of my students were attending only every other lesson, and the other half were jostling for chair space. By my second week, I was taking head counts at the door and reporting tardy students to the director of my school. I felt so much like ... my parents.

#### VOCABULARY

**Kyrgyz** (pronounced KEER-gee-z)

**dedication:** commitment

**jostling:** pushing; shoving

The attendance problem settled soon after that, as both my students and I realized that no one was going to learn English by simply sitting in the same room with me. The school where I teach has four other English teachers, and all teach English in Russian and Kyrgyz, not in English. But since my language skills were limited at the time, my students would have to learn English in English.

Right now that makes a lot of sense. How else would you teach a language but in the language? In practice it's somewhat more complicated. In my first months as a Volunteer, I stayed up nights looking up terms like "noun," "verb," and "past tense" in my Russian dictionary, then copying them onto the board the next day and showing the students how to use them. I was surprised to find that the languages my students speak are worlds away from English, so I had to teach them not only a new language, but also a new way of thinking about communication.

Here's an example. To express possession in English we have a single verb that does it all—"to have." "To have" is a great phrase because it makes possession seem like an action, like other verbs—we run, we eat, we have. It never occurred to me that possession could be expressed in any other way; but that was before I learned the Russian and Kyrgyz languages. In Russian, the way to say, "I have something" is "*U menya yest*": *By me there is*. In Kyrgyz, it's much the same—"*Mende bar*": *On me there is*. It took my students weeks to understand that when you own something, it isn't by you and it isn't on you—you are the subject, and it is the object. *You have it*.

Teaching English to my students and observing their progress taught me how challenging the language is to master. I became adept at planning lessons and understanding the abilities of my students. By the end of the year, my students were understanding and applying the lessons I taught and speaking in basic sentences. They weren't as fluent in English as I had expected them to be, but at least we had found a good middle ground. The students' interest in learning English, combined with my own convictions as their teacher, created a common bond between us. Teaching transformed from a job I wasn't sure I could do to a job with daily rewards.

## VOCABULARY

**adept:** able; good at

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

My name is Christian Deitch and I'm 22 years old. I was born and raised in Matteson, Illinois, a town about 30 miles south of Chicago. I have two siblings—an older brother, Matt, and a younger sister, Allison. Both my parents are 7th- and 8th-grade teachers. I graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign last year, and have lived in the Kyrgyz Republic since June 2000.

### **MY PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENT\***

I am a TEFL Volunteer (*Teaching English as a Foreign Language*) at Chingiz Aitmatov School. The students I teach are diverse: Kyrgyz, Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkish, Kurdish, and Azerbaijani. I teach 12- to 17-year-old students 18 hours a week in a classroom setting, and I also have a series of English clubs for my most enthusiastic students for an additional 15 hours each week.

I live in a village of about 5,000 people in the far northwest corner of the Kyrgyz Republic, on the border with Kazakhstan. The Kyrgyz Republic was once a part of the Soviet Union, and my village, Amanbaev, was the site of a large *kal-hoz*, or collective farm. Because the Soviet government needed many different people to work on the collective farms, my village is diverse, reflecting the numerous nationalities that lived throughout the Soviet Union.

*\*Christian served in his community until the Peace Corps program there was suspended in October 2001. Volunteers began to re-enter the Kyrgyz Republic in March 2002.*

TEFL Volunteers can spend their spare time working on secondary projects, in addition to their teaching. I am working on several secondary projects right now. One of them entails organizing recordings of Kyrgyz folk music and putting them online in a Kyrgyz music Web page. When it goes online this winter, anyone anywhere on Earth will be able to download and listen to MP3s of Kyrgyz folk music. Additionally, I am putting together a series of lesson plans called the Talas Democracy Project. It's a tutorial in American history and democracy for high-level students. I'll be finishing that up this month. Together with the other Volunteers in Talas Oblast—my province—I will teach our students about the finer points of American history and government.

## LESSONS LEARNED BY A NEW TEACHER

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

#### OVERVIEW

Students will discover just how difficult it can be to teach (and learn) a foreign language—and how the intricacies of a language can be more complex and daunting than anticipated.

#### OBJECTIVES

After studying the letter and engaging in discussion, students should understand that

- Teaching is a demanding profession that involves much more than might meet the eye of students on first reflection.
- Both learning and teaching a foreign language require hard work, patience, and perseverance.

#### GRADES: 6–12

#### PROCEDURE

1. Distribute copies of Christian Deitch's letter to the students and have them read it silently in class or for homework—or, alternatively, since the letter is short, have them read it aloud in class.
2. In a class discussion, ask students to think carefully about the letter and identify what lessons the author learned. [Some might say the letter is about the difficulties encountered in teaching in a former Soviet culture; others might observe that Christian discovered how difficult it is both to teach English and to learn it as a foreign language. Still others might note that he learned that teachers learn about themselves and their subject matter at the same time as they teach others. Christian

#### STANDARDS

##### English Standards:

1, 2, 3, 6 (see page 131)

##### Social Studies Standards:

I, IV, IX (see page 132)

##### National Geography Standards:

6, 9, 10 (see page 133)

##### Enduring Understandings

- Teaching (and learning) requires patience, hard work, and flexibility.
- Different languages offer different ways of viewing and conceiving of the world.

##### Essential Questions

- What does it take to be an effective teacher?
- In what ways can a language affect how a native speaker of the language perceives the world?

##### Materials

- Photocopies of story for the whole class



learned that language structure differs significantly between English and other languages. He also learned, simply, that teaching, in general, is a complex and difficult task anywhere.]

3. The author observes that his students have been learning English in classes that use Russian and Kyrgyz, but that because of his limited ability in those languages, he must teach in English. Ask students what difference it might make for someone to learn a foreign language (English—or Spanish, French, or Arabic, for example) in a class where only that language was spoken, rather than in a class where the person’s native language was also spoken. [So-called immersion classes force students to use the language they are learning and, in the process, presumably learn it faster. In addition, if the teacher of a foreign language is a native speaker of that language, it is likely that the students will learn to speak with a better command of pronunciation and with less of an accent from their own native tongue. (It is not uncommon for Peace Corps Volunteers to encounter a local person who speaks English quite competently but cannot understand the Volunteer’s spoken English because the local person had never before heard an American dialect.)]
4. Ask students what they think of teaching as a profession: Is it hard? Easy? Fun? Rewarding? Point out to them that they spend a great deal of time with teachers, but that they see only a part of what a teacher does—and not the parts that take place after school and at home, including over the weekends.

The author writes, “So I assumed that most teachers

got by on personality, and lesson planning was just something for the ones who weren’t very good.” Ask students for their reaction to the statement. (Do they find it arrogant? Presumptuous? Ignorant?) Why did the author indict himself with something so preposterous? Lead students to realize that the author was setting himself up to immediately be proven dead wrong. In fact, Christian comes to appreciate fully the challenges and complexities required of effective teaching. Help students see that the author was speaking tongue-in-cheek, actually putting himself down in a humorous way.

5. Christian Deitch discovered that the languages spoken by his students were “worlds away from English,” and he had both to learn their languages—Russian and Kyrgyz—and to figure out how to convey the structures of English. To simulate the foreignness of a language, present to students a number of English idioms. Explain that idioms are expressions whose meanings are not conveyed literally by the words that make them up. The meanings of the expressions simply have to be learned; there is nothing necessarily logical or literal about them.

Examples of idioms:

- “... as all get-out” [= a great deal. As in, “I’m pleased as all get-out.”]
- “I enjoyed myself” [= I had a good time]
- “to catch on” [= to understand; to be accepted]
- “go off” [= go on, as with an alarm]
- “fat chance” [= not much of a chance]
- “a pretty penny” [= a high price]
- “a leg up” [= an advantage]
- “hold your horses” [= wait]

- “mind your p’s and q’s” [= behave yourself; watch the details]
- “I could care less” [= I could not care less]
- “Is that not so? [= Is that so?]
- “peanuts” [= almost nothing. As in, “She works for peanuts.”]
- “in a nutshell” [= briefly]
- “in a stew” [= upset about]
- “hit the books” [= study]
- “Break a leg!” [= Good luck!]
- “cool one’s heels [= wait and calm down]
- “cost an arm and a leg” [= cost a lot]

Ask students for the literal meaning of each expression, followed by the meaning of the idiom itself. Remind the students that the idiom does not carry the literal meaning of the words that make it up. Have them use each idiom in a sentence. Ask the students to suggest how the idiom came into being. (Various websites carry explanations of them.) See if the students can come up with other idioms.

The challenge of learning the meanings of idioms and the kinds of difficulties that Christian Deitch’s students experienced in learning English are not the same kinds of linguistic challenges; nevertheless, this exercise should give the students a sense of how difficult the learning of another language can be, if they have not already discovered that on their own.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Have students read “Cross-Cultural Dialogue” (see [www.peacecorps.gov/www/stories](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/stories)), a wrenching and entertaining account that recalls the experiences of newly arrived Peace Corps Volunteer teacher Roz Wollmering in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa. Then, in a class discussion, ask the class to compare Christian Deitch’s experience with that of Roz Wollmering. How were the experiences similar? How were they different? What accounts for the similarities and differences?
2. The author focuses on the verb “to have,” pointing out that it means “to own.” Ask students what other meanings and functions the important and useful verb has. [(1) When used with an infinitive, it means “must,” as in, “I have to go. (2) As an auxiliary verb, it indicates tense or time, as in “I have gone there many times,” or “I would have done it.” (3) To perform, as in “I don’t want to have an argument.” A dictionary will provide many other different shades of meaning for “have.”]

## National Standards

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS\***

*National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association*

**Standard 1.** Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

**Standard 2.** Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.

**Standard 3.** Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound–letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

**Standard 6.** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

*\*Only the standards relevant to this volume are listed. You can see the full list of standards on the website of the National Council of Teachers of English, at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).*

## SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS\*

*National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)*

### **THEME I: CULTURE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can

- Compare similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures meet human needs and concerns.
- Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

### **THEME IV: INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity so that the learner can

- Identify and describe ways in which regional, ethnic, and national cultures influence individuals' daily lives.
- Identify and describe the influence of perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs on personal identity.

### **THEME IX: GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence so that the learner can

- Explain how language, art, music, belief systems, and other cultural elements can facilitate global understanding or cause misunderstanding.

*\*Only the standards relevant to this volume are listed. You can see the full list of standards on the website of the National Council for the Social Studies, at [www.ncss.org](http://www.ncss.org).*

## NATIONAL GEOGRAPHY STANDARDS\*

*American Geographical Society, Association of American Geographers, National Geographic Society, National Council for Geographic Education*

### ESSENTIAL ELEMENT II: PLACES AND REGIONS

The geographically informed person knows and understands

- **Standard 4:** The physical and human characteristics of places
- **Standard 6:** How culture and experience influence people's perception of places and regions

### ESSENTIAL ELEMENT III: PHYSICAL SYSTEMS

The geographically informed person knows and understands

- **Standard 7:** The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface
- **Standard 8:** The characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface

### ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IV: HUMAN SYSTEMS

The geographically informed person knows and understands

- **Standard 9:** The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface
- **Standard 10:** The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics

*\*Only the standards relevant to this volume are listed. You can see the full list of standards on the website of the National Council for Geographic Education, at [www.ncge.org](http://www.ncge.org).*

- **Standard 11:** The patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface
- **Standard 12:** The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement
- **Standard 13:** How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface

**ESSENTIAL ELEMENT V: ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY**

The geographically informed person knows and understands

- **Standard 14:** How human actions modify the physical environment

## AUTHOR UPDATES

What have the Peace Corps Volunteer authors done since they wrote the letters in this book?

**BARBARA ARRINGTON:** Upon her return from Peace Corps service in South Africa, Barbara Arrington volunteered for Habitat for Humanity of Northeast Georgia as an AmeriCorps-Vista Volunteer. She now works in Virginia as a youth specialist with an affordable housing organization.

**CARLA BACHECHI:** After the Peace Corps, Carla remained in Macedonia and joined the American Bar Association's Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative program in Skopje, the capital. She served as the acting country director of the program until May 2006. Four months later, she joined the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Service Officer and is serving at the U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal.

**CHRISTIAN DEITCH** concluded his service in September 2001, following suspension of the program in the Kyrgyz Republic (see note, page 126). After completing a master's degree in public policy at the University of Chicago in 2005, he joined the U.S. Foreign Service. Currently, Christian is a consular officer in Krakow, Poland, and will transfer to Sudan in 2008 to begin work as a political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Khartoum.

**JORDAN EARL:** After completing service in 2004, Jordan returned to the United States to write the thesis for his master's in TESOL (*Teachers of English to*

*Speakers of Other Languages*). He is now an English language fellow with the Georgetown University/U.S. Department of State program, starting the first English program at ISERI—the Islamic Institute of Religious Research and Higher Studies in Nouakchott, Mauritania.

**ANGELA (RICH) GEORGE:** After completing her service, Angela returned to Wisconsin and entered a teaching apprenticeship program at the Milwaukee Teacher's Educators Center. She worked on her master's in curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and is now in her fourth year of teaching bilingual sixth graders at Mitchell School in Milwaukee. Since the Peace Corps, she has achieved her first degree black belt in *tae kwon do* and still writes stories about her experiences. She resides in Milwaukee with her husband, Ken, and Gabby, her Dominican dog.

**JOAN HEBERGER:** After completing her Peace Corps assignment, Joan returned home to Greer, South Carolina. She taught Spanish and ESOL (*English for Speakers of Others Languages*) while completing a teacher-training course in her true passion, yoga. She currently teaches yoga and fitness, does personal training, and manages a fitness center. In her free time, she enjoys camping, walking, and spending time with her family.

**ALLISON HOWARD:** After her Peace Corps service in South Africa, Allison studied for her master's degree in international development at Columbia University's School of International Affairs. With an eye on work in international development, she specialized in economic and political development.

**STEVE IAMS:** After leaving Nepal, Steve continued his service with the Peace Corps in China, where he taught English at a university in Sichuan Province. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in teaching English as a second language at the School for International Training in Vermont.

**ELIZABETH (VERNON) KELLEY** returned to the Seattle area after completing her Peace Corps service. She worked as a tutor and an aide in special-education classrooms before beginning Seattle University's master-in-teaching program. After graduation in 2007, she plans to teach elementary school. Elizabeth married an old friend in August 2006.

**FRED KOEHLER:** Since returning to Polk County, Florida in 2004, Fred has been enjoying a career in the communications industry. He writes, designs, illustrates, takes photos, and edits video professionally and in volunteer roles. His own first novel is complete, and he's working on getting it published.

**THALIA KWOK** is still serving at her post in China as this volume goes to press.

**RICHARD LUPINSKY JR:** Following his Peace Corps service, Richard traveled to China and Thailand. After returning home, he worked in innumerable occupations in both Pennsylvania and California while contemplating his future. Richard now spends much of his time espousing the moral virtues of naturalism and secular humanism. He begins law school in the fall of 2007.

**JONATHAN PHILLIPS** returned to school upon finishing Peace Corps service in Mongolia. He is scheduled to graduate in June 2007 with a master's degree in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Since returning, he has also spent time on Capitol Hill advocating for federal climate change legislation for the Pew Center on Global Climate Change.

**NINA PORZUCKI:** After Peace Corps service, Nina wrote for a travel website and, more recently, was a production assistant on a documentary about autism that premiered at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival. She is studying creative writing at the New School in New York City.

**ROBIN SOLOMON** joined the Peace Corps staff in Washington for a year, following her two years in Kazakhstan, and now works as a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State. She served her first tour in Moscow and will serve in Adana, Turkey, for her second tour. She finds her Peace Corps experience invaluable in her current career.

**JANE TROXELL** has journeyed back to South America only once, visiting another former Peace Corps Volunteer then working in Peru. She discovered that many Peruvians share the Paraguayans' sense of humor, and was high-fiving the taxi driver before they even left the airport parking lot. The former business-development Volunteer now works as a mortgage banker.