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# PERSPECTIVES

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## CORPS FORCES CULTURES TO MIX

*Current Peace Corps volunteers often find more difficulties than they expect*



If you are thinking it's time to get in touch with the altruism within, and intend to fertilize it by joining the Peace Corps to make your signature contribution to the less fortunate in worlds assigned different ordinal numbers than this one, forget about it. Others who were propelled to become volunteers with such motivations either quit, were asked to leave or were "psycho- / medi-vac-ed" (evacuated for psychological and/or medical reasons), usually within the first six months at their post. However, none of this applies to those who volunteered in the early to mid-1960s.

In their crewcuts, Jackie-'dos, Peter Pan collars, madras Bermuda shorts, penny loafers and hootenanny culture, they passionately embraced Kennedy's vision. Their naivete can be excused, their epic idealism commended and even envied. The world was a vastly different place then. They were the trailblazers, willing to live and work in places they had never heard of, where their peers could not boast about having been — places they couldn't read about in the "Lonely Planet" or look up on the Internet. This took some courage.

The other day, while sitting in Espresso Roma between classes, I heard a recent graduate telling two friends about her trip to East Africa. She had always dreamed of going to that region and had finally made it, only to be confronted with the great disparity between her imaginings of the place and its reality, the former

proving better, actually.

She was there for six months, and when she returned to the States, she experienced culture shock for three, finding herself spelling out to the barista how to make (like) chai step by step as she had found it necessary to do while abroad because (like) they simply didn't know how, having never heard of the stuff. Then, startled to realize she didn't need to be directive and catching herself before she enumerated all of the procedures to chai-making, she was instead embarrassed to find herself employing such accustomed behavior here in a cafe at home, of all places.

She summarized that it was all part of having to readjust to her birth culture. I began to question what students meant when they said they needed/wanted international experience, and, after the travelogue just overheard, I despaired for the country of destination, for the certainty that Freya Stark and her ilk had become extinct, and for our future.

Peace Corps still parades its pithy promise: "The toughest job you'll ever love." For the volunteers who make it, it is not about the job, never was. The "toughest job" is merely the vehicle. One joins for all sorts of reasons — escape, change or boredom often being the most active surface prods. But the most deep-seated and compelling reason is just to look around and see and then touch it, be touched by it and with grace, sometimes live it. It works changes on you, and the ones noticed initially are not the most important. The most important will grab you after your return. And suddenly, years later, in another place.

Peace Corps — "Learn to love your beer even with that fly." Peace Corps — "Challenge your sense of humor — learn to look at yourself as your host nationals do and

guffaw." Peace Corps — "Cultivate an appreciation for the art of life's fine little foibles and grand follies." Peace Corps — "Be glad to be of use to the host nationals who discipline their children by threatening them with you."



Peace Corps, Niger, West Africa: The spice man, as I thought of him though his name was Issoufou, sat on his speckled black and white goat-skin prayer mat with an array of goods piled around him in Maine-Soroa's market. I never did find out what the bark-like pieces were used for, but I learned that the light brown balls I initially mistook for animal droppings were called kooli-kooli, made from groundnuts (peanuts) and used to make spicy, mouth-watering sauces poured over millet dumplings.

The spice man was Hausa, and his full-moon face always broke into a broad smile when he saw me approach. We would exchange greetings in Hausa about health, household, work and weather. My favorite part of the litany was, "Ina gajiya?" How is your tiredness? And no matter what, even if on your death mat, the response had to be, "Babu gajiya." There is no tiredness.

I would kneel on the sand and carefully survey his goods. He knew what I had come for, as I always did, but I liked to prolong the process, having spent my week with 400 high school students. I'd ask him again what those barkish things were and a lengthy, detailed explanation followed. I would nod with relieved enlightenment, having followed very little. Then, while I continued studying his display, he'd mix in French and ask after my husband. I would respond that they, my three husbands, were in health, and I'd have to reiterate where each one lived.

Sometimes I forgot what I had said the week before so that when I mentioned that my senior husband was in Tchad, the spice man's brow wrinkled and he asked when

"mai-gida" (chief of the house) had moved there from Cameroon. Then he would giggle, slap my readied palm and lecture me about how bad it was having three husbands. After all, how was the baby to know who his father was, and worse, how was the father to know which baby was his? Despite, why was I still childless?

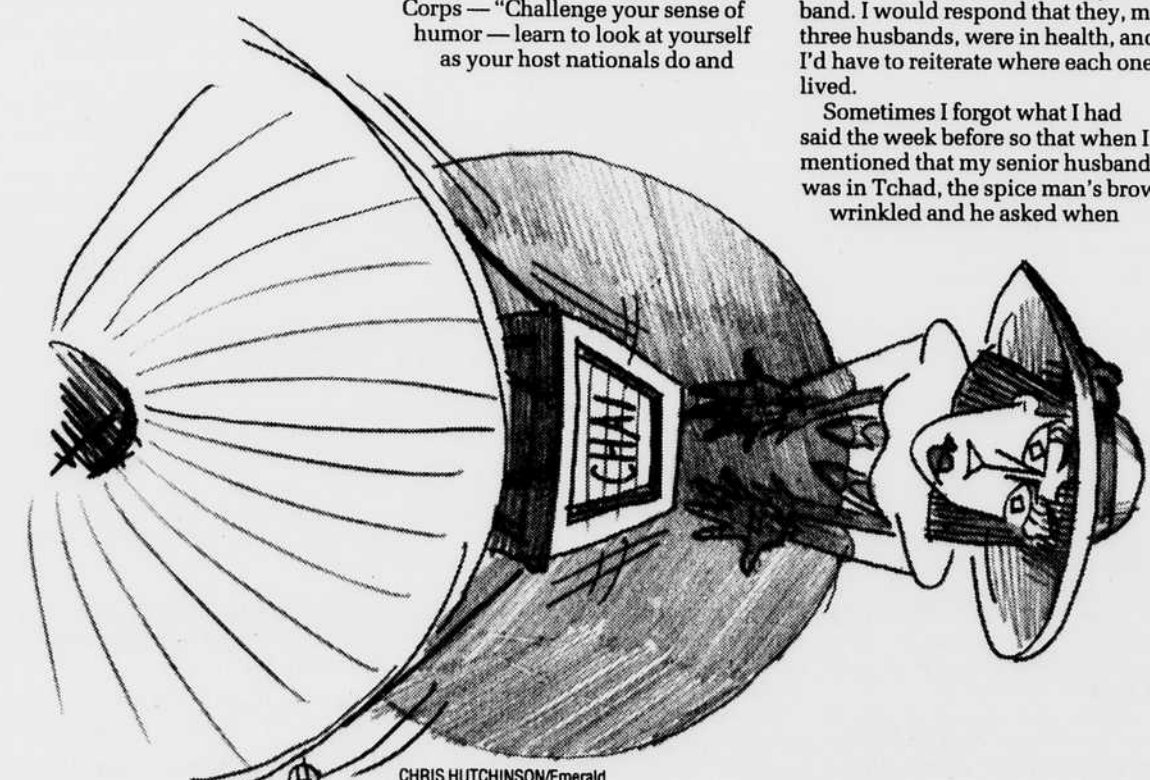
I would inquire about the spice man's wives, all three of them. They were happy, and inevitably he'd tell me that we should get together since my husbands were away, accompanied by a gesture of hands that was unmistakable. I'd shake my head, roll my eyes, sputter as if speechless and wag my forefinger back and forth. He would explode in delight and make the gesture again. I'd repeat the pantomime with more vigor and demand some garlic while staring at the ground. He wouldn't move until I glanced up and instantly, the gesture was thrust before me.

I'd heave an exasperated sigh of impatience and disgust and tell him, in limited vocabulary, that none of it was good and all of it impossible while he chuckled and rummaged through his mound of garlic, seeking the perfect cluster for me. I'd drop centimes in his palm as if leprous, stand up and wave a brisk, "Sai wata rana," (until the sun and moon) used when you will probably not see someone for a long time or wish not to see him again.

I would start off with the finality of a concluded transaction and after trudging some distance, he'd call, "Miss! Miss!" I was Maine-Soroa's only English teacher and the school's only non-African. I was The Miss. I would stop, turn slowly around and ask crisply what he wanted. He would grab at the air with his right hand as if trying to entrap a fly, the gesture of come here. With slumped shoulders and reluctant steps, I would return. The spice man had selected another large cluster of garlic and motioned with his head for me to open my bag. Then, we would shake hands and laugh. Every week on market day, we enacted this ritual.

Peace Corps — "Give yourself (for) two years, get life-long companions and a lifetime of pungent memories."

*Hannah Dillon is a columnist for the Emerald. Her work appears on alternate Fridays. Her views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.*



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

### Thumbs



**TO KENNETH STARR:** Though we have certainly found cause to criticize President Clinton in the past, we think "independent" counsel Starr is going too far. And we aren't the only ones; in recent weeks, even some GOP leaders have suggested Starr's apparent lack of objectivity destroys any credence his charges might otherwise have.

There are several reasons to suspect Starr's judgment might be clouded by political interests. Many of these were compiled in a chart on the major players in the Clinton investigation that appeared in the Feb. 23 Nation. According to the collection of writers and researchers who created the graphic, Starr has numerous ties to right-wing groups. In addition, he has received an appointment to chair a new department at Pepperdine University, a position created by donations from a passionate foe of Clinton who has also spent millions funding right-wing media "investigations" of the president. Worse, Starr's law firm, Kirkland & Ellis, was being sued by the Resolution Trust Corp., one of the groups later subject to investigation in connection with Whitewater, when Starr was assigned to look into the scandal. Finally, Starr has been accused of condoning numerous (and illegal) leaks of privileged information by his staff. So, if Starr is such a bad candidate for the job, how did he get the position in the first place? The answer, according to Nation writer Bruce Shapiro, is Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who appointed the unabashedly conservative three-judge panel that selects independent counsels, including Starr. Rehnquist, a Nixon nominee, has never made a secret of his political interests or his desire to see a similarly far-right judicial coalition.

Clinton may be the one accused of conspiratorial actions, but the biggest political machine appears to be the one, centered around Starr, that is out to get the president.

### CORRECTION

The yearly budget numbers were reversed in the "Programs Financing" graphic in the Feb. 26 edition of the Emerald. The numbers in the 1998-99 column should have run in the 1997-98 column, and vice versa. The Emerald regrets the error.