

Paul D. Coverdell

worldwise  
schools



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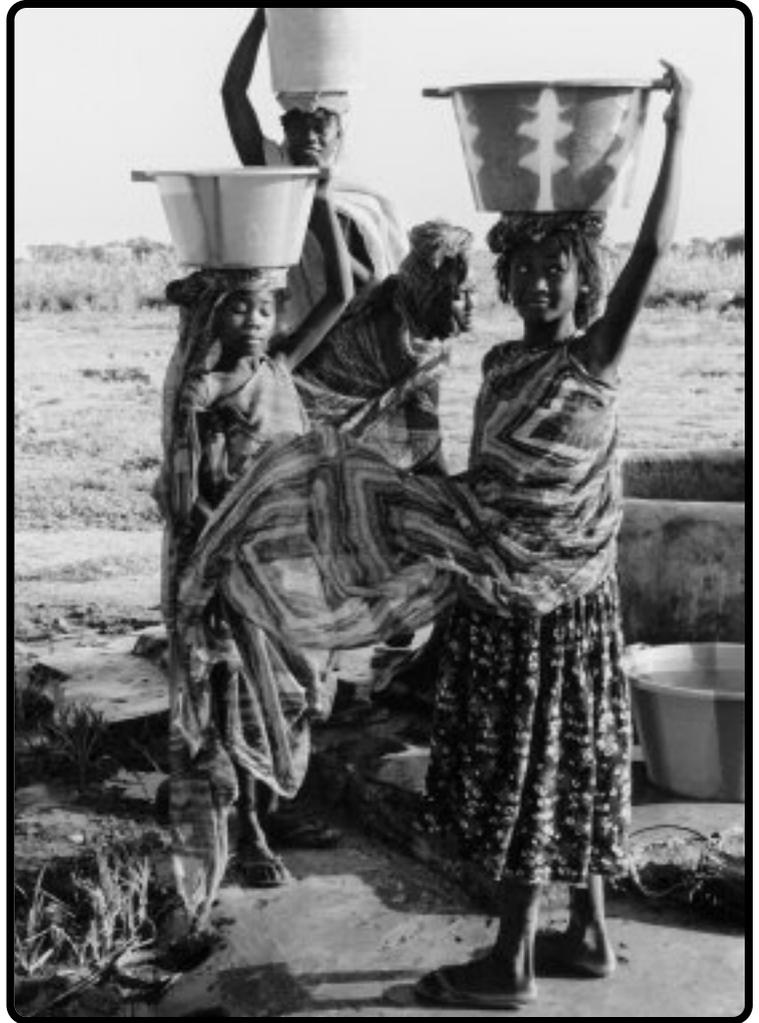
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Cover photograph: Kerry Zahn, Peace Corps Volunteer, Mauritania (1998–2000)

# Uncommon Journeys

Peace Corps  
Adventures  
Across Cultures



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Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools

*One of the most remarkable things about Peace Corps living is confronting the fluid nature of knowledge. Volunteers must daily confront what they once accepted as fact, reevaluating both their initial impressions of their new home and their former perceptions of American culture. What is real and what is not? What is true and what is a socially endorsed notion? It is a beautiful and sometimes frightening journey. There are no outposts, no lamps in the dark. But if you choose to venture out, the rewards are rich: a fuller understanding of yourself, your country, and your world.*

—Jordan Earl, Peace Corps Volunteer, Uzbekistan (2002–2004)

**UNCOMMON JOURNEYS: PEACE CORPS ADVENTURES ACROSS CULTURES**

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## PROLOGUE

### A STRAW FENCE THE HEIGHT OF A MAN

by Michael Varga

Peace Corps Volunteer, Chad (1977-1979)

Outside, the bitter December winds howl, but inside the library at Saint Albans School for boys in northwest Washington, D.C., we are thinking about heat, sun. About Africa. I ask the sixth graders what comes to mind when they think of that faraway continent.

“Elephants.” “Apartheid.” “Jungles and deserts.” “Hungry people.”

As part of National Geography Awareness Week, returned Peace Corps Volunteers are visiting local schools to share stories about their experiences. Saint Albans is a school for the affluent, for the sons of members of Congress and other capital power-brokers. The point of the exercise is to impress on the students the importance of learning about other places and peoples. But I want to leave these students with something more than a quick travelogue about sub-Saharan Africa.

“In the summer of 1977, a few weeks after graduating from college, I found myself in an ‘animal market’ outside the capital of Chad, N’djamena.”

I ask them what they think an “animal market” is. “Are the animals alive or dead?”

“Dead.”

“No. They’re alive. Why are they sold alive?”

One student says, because people are there to buy pets. Another volunteers it’s because there are no refrigerators in Chad, so there’s no way to store meat without it spoiling. I tell them animals are sold alive so that they may be killed just before they’re eaten.

After describing how the animal market is organized, with herds of cattle and camels and goats and sheep all huddled together under the blazing sun, beaten close together by the herders, I recount how a crazed bull suddenly breaks away from a herd and charges me. I tell them how I freeze, how the other Volunteers tug at me, trying to drag me away from imminent tragedy. I tell them how the bull lowers one horn, seeming to aim for the heart of my heart. I tell them how paralyzed I feel. And how at the last possible moment some of the stick-bearing herds-men run alongside the bull and beat its sides, forcing it to veer off.

“How do you think I felt at that moment?”

“Relieved.” “Lucky.” “Safe.” “Scared.”

“What do you think I wanted to do?”

“Pray.” “Get out of Africa!” “Come back home!”

“Right.”

Some of the other Volunteers advised me not to make more of the incident than it was. Sure, there had been danger, but I hadn't been killed, not even wounded. I had come to Chad to serve, and having come this far, how could I let a random incident deter me?

“A few months later I found myself in my village, the only Peace Corps Volunteer sent to this particularly remote corner of southern Chad where there were no other foreigners, no running water, no electricity. I was to teach English, French, and mathematics in

the village high school. How do you think the villagers looked at me?”

“They were happy to have a teacher.” “Like an intruder.” “Like a white man.”

“They thought of me as this symbol of America, a place they had heard scattered stories about, a place rich and powerful with plenty of food. And they all—all the villagers—kept asking me for things. For food. For money. For books. How do you think I felt after a while? Always being asked for things?”

“Bothered.” “Hassled.” “You wanted to be left alone.”

“That's right. So one day some of my students offered to build a fence around my compound. They said it would keep the goats from eating the grass in front of my hut. Grass was something to be protected, and here I was just letting any old goat eat it away! So I paid them to build it. A straw fence the height of a man.

“Now in Africa, many people carry things on their heads. So once my fence was built, when people passed in front of my compound I often saw nothing but whatever they were carrying on their heads. Bottles and jars and piles of wood bouncing along just above my fence. And the fence kept people away from my hut. Now there were very few requests for food and money and books. I was quite content, sitting in front of my hut, fenced off from the villagers, watching the things they carried bounce along.

“Then one day I saw a woman trying to kick down my straw fence. How do you think I felt?”

“Angry.” “You wanted to kick her.”

“I ran to where she was screaming at me through the fence. I told her to leave the fence alone, but she kept right on kicking it and pointing at the ground. She was speaking very fast, in Ngambaye, the local dialect. I couldn’t understand what she was saying but I could sense that she was warning me about something. What do you think she saw?”

“A snake?”

“That’s right. She had seen a snake crawl under my fence. And she wanted to warn me about it.”

“Was the snake poisonous?”

“We never found out. Chadians believe that all snakes are dangerous and should be killed. So we found the snake and smashed its head, and I invited her to have some tea with me. How do you think I felt about her now?”

“You were grateful.” “You were happy.” “You wanted to give her something.”

“Did she know me?”

“No.”

“And yet, look at this, boys: A woman who didn’t know me, who probably had heard stories about ‘that white man’ and how he had closed himself off from the village and didn’t want to share anything with anybody, takes the time to warn me about danger. Incredible!

“Before she left, she handed me a charm made of

some animal skins. She said it carried some ‘magic herbs’ inside. She told me it would keep the evil spirits away from me.”

I pull the charm out of my pocket and hand it to the boys to pass around, so they can stroke the animal fur. So they can touch something from Chad, from that woman’s hands.

“I wondered about it keeping away any evil spirits. But why do you think I still carry this charm?”

“To remember that woman.”

“But why do I want to remember her?”

“Because you regret not marrying her.” “Because she saved your life.”

“Do you think I rebuilt that fence?”

“No.”

“That’s right. I didn’t rebuild that fence. And I carry this charm as a reminder to me that it’s very easy—especially when people are making a lot of demands on you—to try to close yourself off, to fence them out, to keep what you have just for yourself. But I had gone to Chad to work, to serve, to help. This charm reminds me that it is in keeping yourself open to others, to those who need your help, who ask you for perhaps more than you think you can give, that we really find satisfaction. We always have to fight that urge to build a fence.”

“But didn’t you give the woman anything?” “Didn’t you give her some money?”

“No, I didn’t. After we finished the tea and she handed me the charm, she got up to leave. She asked if she could take the snake’s body with her. Of course I said, ‘Yes.’ Later that afternoon she came back to my hut and we ate the snake, savoring it. She assured me that all the venom had been drained and there was no danger in chewing the flesh.”

“What did it taste like?” “Why did you eat it?”

“She had made a sort of peanut stew, and there were pieces of the snake swimming in the sauce with the peanuts. It was very good. Why did I eat it? Because for one thing, I was hungry. There really wasn’t much to eat in Chad.

“But more importantly, I ate it because it sealed the lesson for me. Our sharing the snake tied us together. We had first shared the danger, a bad thing. But she had forced herself through the fence to help me. Now, sharing the snake as food—a good thing—we were sealing our link to each other. By not allowing fences to be built to separate us, we could both benefit—escaping danger and being nourished by the sharing. Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“Do you see her? Picture that fence tumbling down. Taste that peanut snake stew.”

“Yuch!” “Do we have to?”

“No, of course you don’t.”

“So, did you see her again?”

“For the rest of my two years in that village, I immersed myself in her life and the lives of as many Chadians as I could. So that, while I didn’t give the woman anything that day the snake came crawling and wound up being our supper, we shared the gamut of life’s experiences for the rest of my time while I was in the village.”

“But why didn’t you marry her? Wasn’t she pretty?”

“She belonged to Africa, to Chad. And frankly, she wasn’t interested in coming to America. But while we didn’t marry in the way we think of marriage, her spirit remains bound up within my own. I have never been the same man from that day forward. You see what peanut snake stew can do to you!

“But seriously, boys, her charm has remained with me and evil has kept its distance. And if you try real hard, if you picture fences, all kinds of fences, tumbling down, crumbling—I think you can feel her spirit here with us in the library today.”

*After his Peace Corps service, Michael Varga worked as a diplomat for the U.S. Foreign Service, primarily in the Middle East. His short story “Collapsing Into Zimbabwe” won first prize in the 1995 annual competition sponsored by the Toronto Star. He completed a novel in 2004. “A Straw Fence the Height of a Man” was first published in Notre Dame Magazine.*

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

*The ultimate aim of the quest ... is the wisdom and power to serve others.*

— Joseph Campbell

All of us take journeys in our lives—journeys that shape who we are. Whether we consciously choose our journeys or they are forced upon us, journeys can take two forms: external and internal.

External journeys may take us to exotic places and faraway lands. They may simply involve travel to a new community, a new town, a new city—or a move from one home to another, one school to another. Internal journeys, on the other hand, take us from one state of mind, one kind of understanding, to another. Internal journeys mark changes of a fundamental kind, causing us to relate to the world in new ways. They may result in changing the way we view ourselves; the way we see the world; or the way we think about people who are unlike us. The move from childhood to adolescence is an internal journey; it often significantly modifies what we think is important. We are different at the end of an internal journey from the way we were at the beginning.

For more than four decades, since the founding of the Peace Corps in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, Peace Corps Volunteers have embarked on both external and internal journeys. They have traveled to countries all over the globe in response to the call: “How far are you willing to go to make a difference?” This book contains stories of some of those journeys—journeys not only to other cultures, but also to greater self-understanding and deeper appreciation of people and cultures different from those in the United States.

In many ways, the journeys of Peace Corps Volunteers are both uncommon and heroic—heroic in the sense about which Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

*We have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And ... where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world....*

More than 170,000 Peace Corps Volunteers have made the choice to spend two years of their lives serving others in 137 countries. They have given up the comforts of home—and the reassurance of the known and familiar—and responded to President Kennedy’s challenge: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.... Ask not what America will do for you, but together what we can do for the freedom of man.”

### ***Uncommon Journeys* Brings the World Into the Classroom**

Never has it been more important for our students to look beyond the confines of their familiar worlds, to understand others different from themselves. With new waves of immigration, our schools and classrooms are more ethnically diverse than ever before. To strengthen appreciation of diversity, educators need to help students step into the shoes of others unlike themselves and see the world through their eyes.

*Uncommon Journeys* brings the world into the classroom through stories by Peace Corps Volunteers about their cross-cultural experiences—engaging stories about people and places the Volunteers will remember for life. When students read these stories, they will see the world through new eyes—through the eyes not of a tourist but

of a Peace Corps Volunteer who has lived and worked, hand in hand, with people in towns and villages and cities, from rural outposts to urban centers.

### **A Flexible Curriculum Resource**

*Uncommon Journeys* is a flexible resource for language arts and social studies teachers to use in grades 6–12. Each of the stories in the book is followed by a set of standards-based lessons. The lesson plans focus on two educational goals:

- To provide students with new perspectives on other cultures
- To increase students’ skills in reading comprehension, literary interpretation, and writing

Each set of lesson plans provides information about the author and the story setting, including a map showing the country in the geographical context of its surrounding regions. Each lesson has a summary of the English, social studies, and geography standards addressed. The lessons contain pre-reading activities to help students link their new learning with what they already know. At the heart of the lessons are opportunities for students to respond to the text through group dialogue, group activities, and extended written responses to the texts. Journal writing is emphasized to help students identify and explore questions the stories raise, and to think about how an author’s message relates to their own lives.

Instructional activities are differentiated to meet the needs of younger or less able readers and older or more advanced readers. Underlined words are defined in the margins of the pages where they appear. Taken together,

the stories and lesson plans give teachers everything they need to design active and engaging learning experiences for students of many ages and ability levels.

### **Literacy and Standards**

The lessons contain research-based reading comprehension strategies that students can use with a variety of texts. These strategies include creating detailed mental images, and developing comparisons, metaphors, and analogies. As students become familiar with these strategies, their comprehension will increase and they will begin using them on their own.

Standards for English, social studies, and geography are listed for each lesson and spelled out on pages 187–190.

### **Curriculum Framework: “Understanding by Design”**

The lesson plans in *Uncommon Journeys* employ an adaptation of the curriculum development framework known as Understanding by Design, developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McGighe (1998) and published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. This framework suggests that lesson plans be guided by “enduring understandings”—the big ideas that can be transferred across grade levels and subject areas—and “essential questions”—questions that cause students to think at higher levels and probe deeply into the concepts of a discipline.

Identifying enduring understandings and essential questions at the outset gives instructional activities greater focus and coherence. The enduring understandings suggested for each story represent the editorial team’s

thinking about the big ideas and important messages the authors were trying to express. You may wish to adapt them to meet the needs of your students and the requirements of your local curriculum.

### **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 Peace Corps mission is to promote peace and friendship by making available willing and qualified U.S. citizens to interested countries to achieve the following three goals:

- To help the people of interested countries in meeting their needs for trained men and women
- To help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the peoples served
- To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans

The first group of Volunteers arrived in Ghana in 1961. Today, there are more than 7,500 Volunteers serving.

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**

An innovative education program of the Peace Corps, the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools program seeks to engage students in the United States in inquiry about the world

- To broaden perspectives.
- To promote cultural awareness.
- To appreciate global connections.
- To encourage service.

Since the program's inception in 1989 at the initiative of late Peace Corps Director and U.S. Senator Paul D. Coverdell, more than 2 million students in all 50 states have communicated directly with Peace Corps Volunteers all over the world. Initially set up as a correspondence match program between Volunteers and U.S. classes, the Coverdell World Wise Schools program has expanded its scope by providing a broad range of resources for educators—including award-winning videos, teacher guides, classroom speakers, Peace Corps writings and accompanying lesson plans, and a website. For more information about Coverdell World Wise Schools, visit [www.peacecorps.gov/wws](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws). To download *Uncommon Journeys*, visit [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/journeys](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/journeys).

**Peace Corps Literature**

During the past 43 years, Peace Corps Volunteers have traveled thousands of miles to places where they lived and worked with the people of their host communities—eating the same food, speaking the same language,

living in the same environment, and adopting some of the cultural norms. For a great many, it was a defining experience. After Volunteers return home, they attempt to answer these questions: What happened? What did it all mean? For many, only the written word—the creative outlets of poetry, memoir, fiction—captures the nuances and grasps the complexities of their Peace Corps experience.

This volume offers just a few samples of what Peace Corps Volunteers have written after their return from service overseas.

## A Matter of Time and Fate

## THE MEANING OF TIME

by Kimberly Ross Camara

Peace Corps Volunteer, Guinea (1999–2002)

Upon arriving in my village, I needed to learn the greetings in the indigenous language, Malinke. Unfortunately this wasn't as simple as "Hello, how are you?" and responding "I'm fine," as we do in the United States. Among the Malinke people, it is proper to ask at least five questions when you greet someone. Simply yelling out "Hello!" and waving as you pass a friend would be considered rude, even if you did it because you were in a hurry. Instead, you must stop and shake hands. Then you ask, "How are you? ... How is your day going? ... How are you feeling? ... How are your family and friends? ... What's new?" Even if you know that the person will respond the same way every time (i.e., "Fine!"), it's still important to ask, because it shows that you care and that you are willing to take time out of your day to talk.

For Guineans, it's the act of greeting that counts more than what you are actually saying. It took me about four months to realize this and to get used to it. I had assumed that my neighbors would understand that I couldn't chat because I was running late or that I had an appointment to get to. Eventually, I understood that this was not the case. For

Guineans, social obligations are more important than any job-related responsibility.

It has been a challenge to accept the fact that meetings or scheduled events never start "on time." If a meeting is set for 8 o'clock, people begin arriving around 9 o'clock and the meeting actually starts at 10 o'clock. After this happened several times, I asked a friend if all Guineans were habitually late. Surprised, she told me, "We Guineans aren't late. You Americans are just early!" I had been acting



like a typical American by arriving 15 minutes before a scheduled appointment, whereas I should have been arriving an hour after the scheduled time, the Guinean way.

In the beginning, I failed to notice the true meaning of the term *inshallah*—meaning “God willing”—which people add to the end of certain sentences. For instance, someone might say, “See you at 4 o’clock, *inshallah!*” I now interpret this as, “I’ll try to be there at 4 o’clock, but if something comes up, I may arrive a bit later than that.” These words give people permission to come later than the scheduled time, so that they’ll be able to greet people along the way and take care of whatever other problems may arise.

And in Guinea, many other interruptions can and will arise. The first and foremost obstacle is the weather. In the rainy season, it faithfully pours every day, leaving knee-deep puddles of muddy water that form small lakes in the dirt roads. Plans are often delayed until the rain lets up a bit. In the dry season, the sun’s hot rays beat down and force people to take cover in the relatively cool shade of their homes between noon and 3 p.m. So it is common knowledge that any meeting scheduled during midday will have few attendees.

Difficulties with transportation also cause delays. Few Guineans own personal vehicles, so most people use public transportation, such as taxis, vans, buses, motorcycles, and dump trucks. There are no bus schedules or set times for departures and arrivals. Vehicles simply leave when they are full. In the United States, we’d consider a typical car “full” when it contained five people. But in Guinea, as many as eight adults plus a few children will pile into a car. Then about five people will ride on the roof of the car, holding onto the luggage rack. And that’s not all.

During each trip, a breakdown or an accident of some sort can be quite normal, even expected. When this happens, all of the passengers get out. Some will push the vehicle, as others cut off tree branches or

#### VOCABULARY

**Indigenous:** Native to

**Habitually:** Usually; normally; routinely

search for rubber bands and tin cans that may be used to repair the car. (It's amazing what Guineans can fix without any tools or special parts.) Often, these repair jobs can take up to five hours—or even more—but people rarely complain. They simply eat mangoes that they pick off the trees, talk to one another, and sleep along the side of the road.

In the United States, I never thought twice about how easy it was to leave my house 15 minutes before work and arrive on time almost every day. I remember getting upset when I had to wait in traffic for an extra half-hour because of a car accident, or becoming extremely upset when I got a flat tire, even though the AAA would come to repair it within 45 minutes. Now, I've learned to be very patient. I've also become more tolerant. I realize that I don't have control over certain things, and that sometimes I must accept my fate and not get upset about unexpected events and problems. Also, instead of letting misunderstandings complicate a situation, I take the extra effort to talk about it until all the confusion is cleared up. My Peace Corps experience has taught me that a problem is only as big as you make it.

## VOCABULARY

**Tolerant:** Open-minded; able to see both sides of an issue objectively

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'THE MEANING OF TIME'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Ross Camara served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guinea, West Africa, from 1999 to 2002, teaching English to high school students and educating the people in her community about HIV/AIDS prevention. While in Guinea, Camara participated in a program called CyberVolunteer, part of the Coverdell World Wise Schools program at the Peace Corps. She wrote e-mail letters about her life in Guinea to classrooms subscribing to a listserv. (To subscribe to the CyberVolunteer program, visit [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol).)

Camara's first letter, "A Typical Day for Kimberly in Kouroussa, Guinea, West Africa," provides a glimpse of what her life was like on a daily basis as a Volunteer in Guinea. You can read it on the Web in the archives at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol). It is an appropriate supplement for her selection in this volume.

#### ABOUT THE STORY

In "The Meaning of Time," Camara describes her adjustment to some of the cultural differences she experienced in Guinea. In particular, she provides insight into one of the fundamental ways that cultures differ—their concepts of time. Her story is an excellent companion piece to "Three Lessons" (see page 19) and "Soccer Until Dusk" (see page 80). Teaching the selections together will lead your students to see similarities in the way time is viewed in many developing countries.

### STANDARDS

**English Standard:** 2 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX  
(see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 6, 10  
(see page 189)

#### Enduring Understandings

- The concept of time differs among cultures.
- In some cultures, social obligations and relationships may be more important than work-related responsibilities.

#### Essential Questions

- How do our cultural values affect the way we choose to spend time?
- What can we learn from the way people in other cultures treat time?

#### Materials

Photocopies of story

#### Assessment Tools

Class discussions, journal entries, debate

**ABOUT THE SETTING**

Despite mineral wealth, Guinea is one of the poorest countries in the world. The tropical country's economy depends mostly on agriculture. Leading crops are coffee, bananas, palm kernels, and pineapples. There are rich deposits of iron ore, gold, and diamonds, but Guinea's underdeveloped infrastructure has not supported industrialization.

Guinea has four geographical regions: a coastal region, where the capital lies on a peninsula; a highland region of hills in the northwest; dry lowlands in the north; and hilly, forested areas in the east. Rainfall in the capital reaches 13 feet a year, but much of the rest of the country receives significantly less than that.

French domination from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century yielded to independence for Guinea in 1958. Although French is widely spoken, Malinke, Fula, and Susu are also commonly spoken.

Since the arrival of the initial group of Peace Corps Volunteers in 1963, about a thousand Volunteers have served in Guinea. The program today consists of about a hundred Volunteers working in four kinds of projects: secondary education, public health, natural resource management, and small enterprise development. In addition, a small number of third-year Volunteers work with international or local non-governmental organizations.

**LESSON 1****PURPOSE**

To identify and understand the significant cultural traits described by the author

1. Read Camara's letter aloud to the class or have the class read it themselves.
2. In the space of just two and a half pages, the author spotlights at least five important cultural traits that are true of life in Guinea. Ask students to analyze the text to identify these traits, writing them down in their journals. Students should identify the following traits from the text:
  - a. *Greetings cannot be hurried; social obligations are paramount.*
  - b. *Punctuality is unimportant.*
  - c. *What happens in everyday life is beyond the control of an individual person. (Inshallah, meaning "God willing" in Arabic, defers responsibility for things to Allah. Allah is the Muslim name for God.)*
  - d. *Climate, in the form of extreme heat or heavy rain, often affects people's routines.*
  - e. *People have to be highly resourceful in practical, everyday matters.*
3. In class discussion, address each trait, using the following paragraphs as discussion guides.
  - a. **Greetings.** Given the stated importance of unhurried greetings in Guinea, ask students whether there is anything akin to strict greet-

ing protocol in their own culture, in the United States. To help students realize that there is, in fact, an obligatory greeting protocol frequently followed in the States, ask volunteers to perform several mini-skits, in pairs, in front of the class, simulating two friends meeting and greeting on the street. Try to elicit from the students, in discussion after the skits, that there are physical greetings (handshakes, hugs, high-fives, grasping fists) and obligatory queries (“How’s it goin’?” “How are you doin’?” “What’s up?” “How’re things?”) that precede a conversation between friends. Students might also simulate telephone conversations, in which participants rarely launch into substantive conversation until polite queries are exchanged. Also try to elicit from students through discussion that the questions people often ask each other upon greeting are pro forma greetings to which they do not expect to get either full or necessarily truthful answers. (We don’t expect someone to answer the question “How are you?” with a litany of health issues; the polite answer, regardless of how many ailments one is experiencing, is “Fine,” or “Okay.”)

Ask students in what ways Guinean greeting protocols are similar to those in the United States. In what ways are they different? What might account for these differences? What cultural function do students think formal greeting protocols serve?

- b. Punctuality is unimportant.** Perhaps Camara summarized this trait best when she reported that being on time was actually being early—and that everyone else, who she thought was late, was on time. This trait of punctuality being of no concern is so deep-rooted that it will be addressed separately in the next lesson.
- c. *Inshallah*.** Much of the population of Guinea is Muslim. Muslims defer to the God of Islam, Allah, in all matters, so that they often add the term *inshallah*, or “God willing,” to statements. For a full discussion of the use of *inshallah*, see the next reading selection, “Three Lessons,” by Craig Storti, on page 19.
- d. Climate affects routine.** Ask students in what way the author found climate affecting people’s routines. [Rains caused delays on the roads; heat kept people inside midday.] Ask students if climate affects culture in the United States in similar ways. If it does not, why not? [Most roads in the United States are paved, so rain does not affect transportation as significantly as it does where it renders dirt roads impassable. Air-conditioning tends to ameliorate the effects of midday heat, so that office workers can work right through it.]
- e. People have to be resourceful.** The context in which the author made this observa-

## VOCABULARY

**Monochronic and Polychronic Time**

**Monochronic:** In monochronic cultures, time is a fixed commodity, and people are clock-driven. Often, the needs of people and relationships are secondary to the demands of time—schedules, deadlines, punctuality. In monochronic cultures, schedules are considered important, being late is viewed as rude or discourteous, and interruptions are seen as both annoying and inefficient. Individuals in these cultures believe that time is quantifiable, and a limited amount of it is available. They are often more task-oriented and value getting the job done quickly and efficiently over “taking time to smell the roses.”

**Polychronic:** In polychronic cultures, time is not a fixed commodity. It is fluid and can be adjusted to suit the needs of people. Plans frequently change, and being made to wait when arriving for a scheduled event is viewed as normal; it’s even expected. Individuals in these cultures act as if more time is always available; they are never too busy to stop what they are doing to talk with, greet, or help people. Individuals in these cultures value establishing and maintaining personal and social relationships above being “on time.”

**For more information on these concepts, see** [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/culturematters](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/culturematters).

tion was road transportation, and the need for drivers to fix their own vehicles with materials at hand. Ask students to speculate on why this is necessary. [The infrastructure of gasoline stations and tow trucks, along with automobile club membership that provides instant road assistance, does not exist in Guinea. Drivers in the “bush” are used to making jury-rigged repairs to get them to a garage for full service.]

4. Camara, in confronting these different cultural traits, concluded that she needed two specific traits of her own to adapt to life in Guinea. Ask students to identify these two traits from the text. [Patience and tolerance.] Explain to the class that these two traits are probably the two traits most widely exercised by Peace Corps Volunteers in adjusting to life in their host cultures. Discuss with the class whether they think patience and tolerance are useful in other kinds of adjustments in their own lives and in their own communities. Ask them to be specific.

## LESSON 2

## PURPOSE

To answer the questions:

- How do people of different cultures view time differently?
  - What can we learn from the way people in other cultures view and spend time?
1. Remind students that one basic way that cultures can differ is in their treatment of time. Cultural anthropologists term the two fundamentally different ways cultures view time as monochronic and polychronic. Create a continuum on the chalkboard similar to the one on the next page, with “monochronic” on one end and “polychronic” on the other.



Explain to students:

- The word monochronic can be divided into “mono” (one) and “chronic” (time). In monochronic cultures, punctuality is valued because time is viewed in just one way.
- The term polychronic can be divided into “poly” (many) and “chronic” (time). In polychronic cultures, punctuality is not important because time is viewed in many different ways.

Provide students with the descriptions of “monochronic” and “polychronic” cultures in the vocabulary box opposite.

2. Ask students where they think the culture of the United States might fall on the continuum you’ve drawn. Where would Guinean culture fall, in comparison? Ask whether any student is familiar with a culture that might be more time-conscious than the United States. [Possibly Switzerland or Germany, both well known for dedication to punctuality.]

Point out that while time may be viewed differently from one culture to another, views of time may also vary within cultures, based on the personal preferences of individuals. We know that a sense of time is cultural when a particular approach applies to a large group of people, or

to the majority of people in a particular culture. However, within any culture, there exists a range of individual preferences.

3. Ask students to jot down in their journals where they might fall on the time continuum. Then ask them to jot down where they think their parents might belong.

Now have students stand up and form a human continuum that ranges from monochronic to polychronic. Ask students to place themselves on the point on the continuum that best represents their personal view of time. Then have them rearrange themselves to represent where they think their parents might fall on the continuum. When students return to their seats conduct a class discussion on what the students observed about the continuum—and what criteria they used to place themselves on it.

4. Divide the class in half for a debate and, if possible, have the two sides sit facing each other. Assign one group to defend the stances: “Our lives should be run by a schedule” and “Faster is better.” Ask the other group to defend the statement: “Life shouldn’t be regulated by the clock. Let things happen as they will.” Allow the teams some class time to prepare their arguments. Remind them that reasoned arguments and persuasive evidence are much more effective in debates than mere opinions or emotional stances.

Assign a student moderator to manage the discussion between the two sides. Have a recorder

for each team write notes on the chalkboard of the points raised by his or her side.

When students have exhausted the arguments for and against each position, wrap up the discussion by pointing out that neither position is “right” or “wrong,” and that each may be appropriate for the culture in which it is operative. Try to elicit from students that what might “work” perfectly well in one culture could be highly dysfunctional for another. In the United States, for example, what would happen if trains, airplanes, schools, meetings, medical appointments, and other details of everyday life followed a concept of time that is dominant in Guinea? Likewise, how would Guinean culture fare if the concepts of time followed in the United States were suddenly imposed?

**5. Journal Activity.** Conclude the lesson by asking students to respond in their journals to the questions:

- Why is time viewed one way in Guinea and another in the United States?
- How did these difference come to be?

Follow up by having students discuss their journal responses in the next class period.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to work in small groups to write a script for a dramatization that focuses on Camara’s struggle to adjust to the cultural norms of Guinea. Then have them perform their dramatizations.
2. Have students research the basis for the worldwide conventional divisions of time: the 24-hour day; the 60-minute hour; the 60-second minute. What is the prime meridian, and why is it located in England?

# A Matter of Time and Fate

## THREE LESSONS

by Craig Storti

Peace Corps Volunteer, Morocco (1970–1972)

(Reprinted from *To Touch the World: The Peace Corps Experience*)

September. Sunset. The town of Safi, Morocco. I was washing dishes in my sink. From the minaret in the mosque three doors down came the evening prayer call, a song, actually, blaring out of the loudspeakers, stopping the faithful in their tracks, turning them toward the east, sending them to their knees. To my ears, the cadence, the rhythm, the tone were all wrong, about as musical as a burglar alarm. I remember my words as I turned to my roommate: “Even *they* can’t think that’s pretty.” I had been in Morocco four months.

Eight months later I was walking a friend to the bus station where she would catch the express to Casablanca. It was quiet, just before dawn, no horizon to speak of yet. No one else was about. From somewhere behind us, the muezzin’s prayer call floated out over the silence, was answered from a nearby quarter, and then came at us faintly from several miles off to the south. The beauty of the chant stayed my step; I had to be still and listen. And then I remembered what I had said in September.

It was then I grasped my first Peace Corps lesson: You can accommodate the strange, the unusual, even the very unpleasant and make some kind of peace with it. You are not irrevocably the way you started out. With a little luck, you can grow.

\*\*\*

Backpackers, hikers, and all manner of latter-day mountain men and women won’t think much of the following story, but consider that

## VOCABULARY

**Minaret:** [min-uh-RET] A tower that is part of a mosque, with a balcony used by a muezzin to call Muslims to prayer

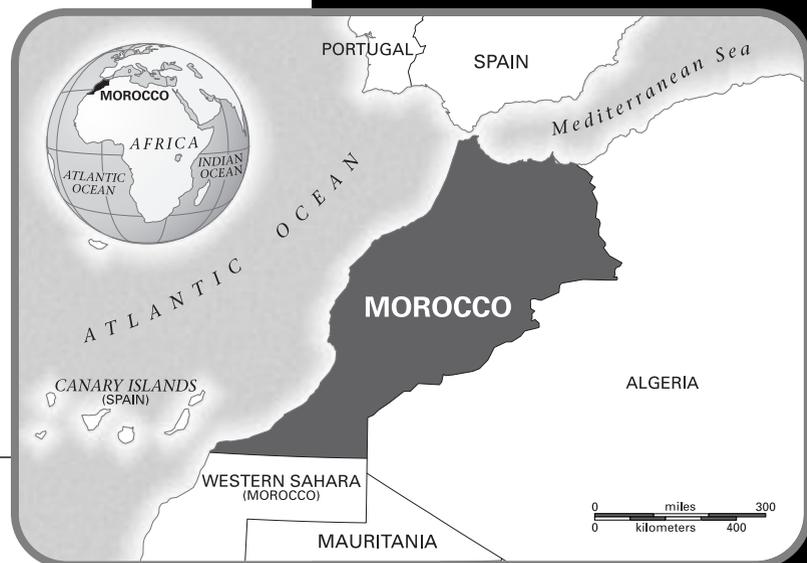
**Mosque:** [MAHSK] Muslim house of worship

**Prayer call:** A signal to Muslims to pray, issued by a muezzin

**Cadence:** A beat of sound; a rhythm

**Muezzin:** [myoo-EHZ-in] A crier who calls Muslims to prayer

**Irrevocably:** Unalterably; permanently; unable to be changed



it happened to a guy who, before his Peace Corps staging in Philadelphia, had always slept under a roof, in a bed, eschewed picnics, and never owned a sleeping bag. But who bought one at the same staging in Philadelphia (a cheap, cotton-lined number with green-hued scenes of deer in a forest, scenes that kept coming off on my underwear in the damp Safi spring).

In the spring of 1972, four of us rented a car and drove over the Tiz'n Tichka pass in the High Atlas Mountains down to the desert. We pulled up one night, just as the sun set behind the Jbel des Saghro in a place called Agdz. French tourists had filled the only hotel, but we could sleep on the floor of the cafe if we liked. I didn't like, but there was no choice.

The floor was cement, unrelentingly hard. I tried to lie in such a way that the greatest percentage of the softest parts of my body were between me and the cement, tried to become my own cushion. I thought I would never fall asleep, but I did.

And woke with the light. Not exactly refreshed and renewed but exhilarated all the same. I had slept on a cement floor! That was my second lesson, courtesy of the Corps: how to do without. In that instance, a bed. In others, a bath or a shower, hot water, a refrigerator. Peace Corps whittles away your list of necessities. And when you consider that these are the things you can't live without, that you live in fear of not having, that you would fight to keep—then you understand that you can only be as free as that last list is short.

\*\*\*

The scene is a cafe in Tangiers. Tomorrow is Saturday. I've just invited a Moroccan friend to a picnic at the beach. Will he come? "Perhaps," he says in English, translating from the Arabic, *inshallah*, which literally means "God willing." And I'm feeling hurt. What does he mean, "Perhaps"? Either he wants to come or he doesn't. It's up to him. And if he doesn't want to come, he only has to say so. He doesn't understand

why I'm upset. And I don't quite grasp "Perhaps." Our two cultures confront each other across the tea cups.

Only several years later did I understand. He would come, he meant, if Allah willed it. His wanting to come and his being able to come were not one and the same. In Morocco, unlike America, where there's a will there's not necessarily a way. So who was I to demand an answer to my question? And who was he to give one? When I understood this—and realized how strange he would find my ethic—I had learned my third lesson: I saw we can't confidently speak of truth, only truths, and I understood the power of culture. It was as if I had discovered a parallel universe, one founded upon a different auxiliary verb, on *may* rather than *will*. And where there was one different universe, might there not be others?

But the feeling wasn't at all what I expected; in embracing the possibility of countless other worldviews I should have loosened my grasp on my own. But instead I embraced it with renewed confidence, not in its rightness, of course, but appreciating anew the need to have a perspective—your own perspective—on the world in order to entertain the possibility of others.

## VOCABULARY

**Staging:** A three-day orientation session in the United States for new Peace Corps Volunteers before they leave for a country

**Eschew:** [es-CHOO] To avoid

**Unrelentingly:** Unyieldingly

**Auxiliary verb:** A verb used to help form the tense or condition of another verb. For example: *will* do, *have* done, *may* happen

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'THREE LESSONS'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Storti served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Safi, Morocco, from 1970 to 1972. He is the author of several books about cross-cultural understanding, including *The Art of Crossing Cultures; Old World, New World: Bridging Cultural Differences—Britain, France, Germany and the U.S.*; and *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide*. He also wrote the Peace Corps cross-cultural training workbook *Culture Matters* (available at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/culturematters](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/culturematters)). Storti is founder and director of the Washington, D.C., intercultural communication training and consulting firm Communicating Across Cultures.

#### ABOUT THE STORY

Each of this story's three sections focuses on a different lesson the author learned from serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco. Morocco's population is almost 99 percent Muslim. Religion permeates every aspect of the culture. In exploring some of the cultural features that shape the people of Morocco, Storti focuses on experiences that made him aware of how people of a different cultural background can view the world in fundamentally different ways. He describes his growing realization that his own perspectives and tastes, which he had always taken for granted as being fairly universal, don't necessarily prevail in another culture.

Students will find more meaning in this story if they understand the importance of prayer in Muslim culture—and that central to Islam is

the importance of the submission of one's will to the will of Allah. In submitting to the will of Allah, a Muslim expects to find peace. Moroccans and other Muslims commonly end statements with the term *inshallah*, meaning "God willing," because, for them, Allah controls their destiny.

Muslims pray five times a day. Prayers are said at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. Muslims are called to prayer by a muezzin, or crier, who chants from the tower of a mosque. The chant is often sung through a loudspeaker so that it can be heard throughout an entire town or a large part of a city. Although it is preferable to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere, such as in a field, an office, a factory, or a university. Muslim children are taught to pray when they are 6 or 7, and are expected to pray by the time they are 10.

Wherever they are, Muslims face Mecca to pray. Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, is the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed and the holiest place on Earth to Muslims. Facing Mecca creates a sense of unity among Muslims by providing a spiritual and social focus.

## ABOUT THE SETTING

Morocco, a monarchy on the northwest coast of Africa, has a population of some 30 million people, almost all of whom are Sunni Muslims of Arab, Berber, or mixed Arab-Berber ancestry. Arabic is the official language, though Berber is spoken in some areas, as well as French and Spanish. The chief cities all lie along the Atlantic or Mediterranean coasts: Rabat, the capital; Casablanca, to the south; and Tangiers, to the north.

Morocco is a land of contrasts—from the range of the High Atlas Mountains in the north, where the temperature may be extremely cold, to the Sahara in the south, where the temperature and humidity are characteristic of a hot desert.

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX  
(see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 6, 10  
(see page 189)

### Enduring Understandings

- Everyone has a culture. It shapes how we see the world, ourselves, and others.
- Living and serving in another culture can teach important life lessons—if one is open to learning.
- Living in another culture challenges us to understand the world from that culture's point of view.

### Essential Questions

- How do my cultural values and beliefs shape how I view individuals from other cultures?
- What can I gain from being open to learning from people who are different from me?

**Materials:** Photocopies of story, Resource Sheets 1 and 2

### Assessment Tools

Class discussion, journal entries, essay

## A Matter of Time and Fate

The Peace Corps has been active in Morocco since shortly after the agency began. More than 4,000 Volunteers have served in the country since 1963—working and living in both large metropolitan cities and the smallest traditional communities. Author Craig Storti served in the coastal city of Safi, some 150 miles south of Casablanca.

Largely dependent upon tourism, Morocco also exports citrus fruits and has a sizable bauxite mining industry.

The current monarch, King Mohammed VI, is working hard to improve the quality of life in rural areas, raise the social and economic status of women, and relieve poverty.

## LESSON 1

## PURPOSE

- To discover the three lessons Storti learned as a Volunteer and find out how he learned them
  - To reflect on the enduring understanding: “Living and serving in another culture can teach important life lessons—if one is open to learning”
1. Using information from the overview section, tell students about the author, the story, and the setting. If students do not know about the Peace Corps, provide a brief overview, using information from the introduction on pages 8 and 9.

Explain that Peace Corps Volunteers usually gain a broader worldview and a deeper understanding of other cultures as a result of their service.

2. Point out the location of Morocco on a map of Africa (see page 19).
3. Ask the students to read “Three Lessons.” Provide a copy of the graphic organizer on Resource Sheet 1 to guide their reading.
4. When students have finished reading the story, have them work in pairs to complete the graphic organizer.
5. Conduct a class discussion on the three lessons Storti learned. Consider addressing some or all of the following questions:
  - What *were* the three lessons Storti learned?
  - How did he learn each of them?
  - What does being “open to learning” mean?
  - When did Storti learn his third lesson—about the pervasive, or deep, meaning of *inshallah*? [It was several years after the incident.] Why did it take years to learn? What was it that Storti had to realize before he learned his third lesson?
  - Do the three lessons Storti learned have anything in common? If so, what is it? [Responses may vary, but for those who see a commonality, it may relate to having one’s eyes opened to new possibilities by exposure to someone else’s culture.]

RESOURCE SHEET 1		
Lesson Storti Learned From Experience	How He Learned It	Why Is This Lesson Important—for Storti, for Me, for Others?
1.		
2.		
3.		

- What did Storti gain from being open to learning from people who are different from him? What can I gain from the same kind of openness?

**6. Journal Activity.** Students will have concluded that the author learned about new tastes, new values, and new outlooks by being open to learning from people who were different from him. For homework, ask students to respond in their journals to the

prompt that follows. (Remind them that their entries will be subject to being read by others in the class.)

Describe a time when you were open to learning something that changed your view of your surroundings or changed your opinions about something important to you. If possible, describe an experience that also involved a person whose culture is different from the culture of your home community.

## A Matter of Time and Fate

## LESSON 2

## PURPOSE

To relate the author's lessons to students' lives

- 1. Journal Walk.** Have students open their journals to their homework responses from the night before. Ask the students to move around and quietly read the journal responses of six other students. (Masking tape arrows on the floor can help provide an orderly progression.) Give students six to eight minutes to circulate around the room, moving from journal to journal at equal intervals.
- Have students re-read the first lesson Storti learned (page 19) as he became accustomed to the sound of the muezzin's prayer call. Ask students to discuss with a partner a type of music they once disliked but now enjoy. What happened to change their minds? What happened to change Storti's mind? (Students can alternatively consider their changed taste in art, or a change in perception of a movie over a period of time.)

As a class, discuss Storti's account of his first lesson, about the muezzin's prayer call. These prompts may facilitate classroom conversation:

- How important is it to be able to get used to what may seem strange or unusual at first?
  - Why did Storti feel this was an important life lesson?
- As homework, ask students to make a list in their journals of 20 items in their bedrooms (including things in their closets and bureau drawers).  
  
The following day, in class, ask the students to put a plus sign next to the items in their lists that they think they absolutely need for survival and to be happy, and a minus sign next to those things they think they might prefer to keep but could do without. In small groups, have the students discuss their journal classifications. Have them try to identify specifically the criteria they used for deciding what they would absolutely keep and what they could do without.  
  
Then, in class discussion, ask the students to report what sorts of things are essential to them—and why—and what sorts of things are dispensable—and why. Now re-read Storti's second lesson aloud, about getting by with less, and then ask what Storti meant when he wrote, "Peace Corps whittles away your list of necessities.... Then you understand you can only be as free as that last list is short." Do students agree that it may be advantageous to have a short list of things they feel they can't live without? If so, why? If not, why not? If opinions differ widely, point out that materialism may be partly influenced by our culture, and partly by personal preference.
- What did Storti mean when he said: "You can accommodate the strange, the unusual.... You are not irrevocably the way you started out. With a little luck, you can grow"?

## LESSON 3

## PURPOSE

To learn: “Everyone has a culture. It influences how we see the world, ourselves, and others.”

1. Write on the chalkboard the expression so commonly heard in American culture: “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” Ask students whether they believe that if they want to do or achieve something strongly enough, there’s always a way to do or achieve it. If so, when have they experienced this? If not, why not?
2. Ask students to re-read the third lesson of Storti’s. Have students turn to the passage that begins, “Our two cultures confront each other across the tea cups.” Ask them to distinguish between the meaning of the word “perhaps” as Storti heard it and the way his friend meant it. How do they think the saying “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” developed in American culture? (To explain the differences in cultural beliefs, you may want to review with students the role of religion and the importance of prayer and submission to Allah in Muslim culture, explained in the overview.) What English language expression is similar to *inshallah*? [“God willing.”] Is it used in the same literal sense that it is used in Arabic? [Answers may vary here; some users in English mean it literally; others probably use it more freely to suggest that something is up to fate.]
3. Introduce students to the enduring understanding: “Everyone has a culture. It influences how we view the world, ourselves, and others.” Explain the concept of cultural differences—differences among deeply held beliefs about what is expected of us in behavior, thought, music, art, dress, and the like. Explain to students that one of the fundamental ways cultures differ is in people’s beliefs about the “locus of control.” In other words, where does control over one’s fate reside? Do individuals see themselves as actively in control of their lives, or is their fate seemingly determined by forces outside their control? Do students think that the locus of control has changed in the United States over the past few years? (For an explanation of the four fundamentals of culture, see the Peace Corps publication *Culture Matters* at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/culturematters](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/culturematters). For additional lesson plans on understanding culture, see the Peace Corps publication *Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Classroom Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding* at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/bridges](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/bridges).) Ask students how Storti’s cultural upbringing caused him to see things differently from the way his Moroccan friend saw them.
4. Ask students to turn to the sentence in the next-to-last paragraph of the story: “It was as if I had discovered a parallel universe, one founded upon a different auxiliary verb, on *may* rather than *will*.” Conduct a class discussion focused on the following questions: What is the difference, to Americans, between the sayings “You *may* reach your goals” and “You *will* reach your goals”?

## A Matter of Time and Fate

THREE LESSONS (CONTINUED)

5. Have students complete the graphic organizer below in class in preparation for writing a story about an important lesson they have learned in their lifetime. For homework, ask students to choose the one lesson of the three in the graphic organizer that they think is the best and write a draft of the story.

The next day, ask students to exchange with a partner the rough drafts of their own lesson learned. Ask the partners to write constructive observations and questions in the margins—in particular, comments and questions that will help their partners improve their story.

Provide students time in class to review their partners' feedback and revise their stories. Mention to students that if they get stuck—or want to make their writing better or their point more strongly—they can go back to Storti's story to see how he did this.

The class might appreciate your binding the stories together for class visitors to read.

## RESOURCE SHEET 2

	A Life Experience That Taught Me a Lesson	The Lesson I Learned	Why This Lesson Is Important to Me
1.			
2.			
3.			

## LESSON 4

## PURPOSE

To learn how to model the structure of one's own writing on the structure used by an effective author

*Lesson 4 focuses specifically on the development of students' writing skills—the writing of strong leads, in particular. For additional short writing lessons, see Fletcher and Portalupi (Bibliography, page 185).*

1. Remind students that Storti's story comprises three mini-stories, loosely linked, each with its own point.
2. Point out that as readers, students have a huge selection of things to choose from. So if a passage they pick up doesn't interest them right away, they can move on to something else. Therefore the lead—the first few words—of what they read is crucial to catching their attention. Writers use many different kinds of leads to capture attention. They may begin gently, soothingly. They may startle with an odd fact, an intriguing question, a disturbing detail, a clever expression, a funny quotation, or unexpected grammar. Ask students to look at Storti's lead. What is unusual about it? [Most obviously, it is only one word long. It has no stated verb. Everything else about it being September is simply understood. But there are no verbs in the second or third "sentences," either.] What is the effect of Storti's strategy? [Students might suggest that the author is painting a verbal picture, using words as mosaics.] Why does he do it? [It's punchy, direct, attention-grabbing.]
3. In Storti's second "lesson," ask students to focus on the sentence: "And woke with the light." Where is the subject? [It's in the previous paragraph.] What is the effect of this foreshortened sentence? Why did Storti use it? Do students think that it works? If so, why?
4. Ask students to look at the third lesson of Storti's, about the term *inshallah*. What is unusual about the lead: "The scene is a cafe in Tangiers. It is Saturday"? [Help students discover that the author has switched tenses. Whereas his first two lessons were written in the past tense, this one is suddenly in the present tense.] What is the effect of this strategy? [Does it make the scene more immediate? Does it startle or surprise the reader? Does it distinguish this lesson effectively from the other two? Could it relate to the fact that Storti learned this lesson only years after he learned the other two?]
5. Have students revise their composition from the previous lesson, concentrating on their lead sentence or sentences. The job of the students' leads should be to ensure that readers stay with the passage. Encourage the students to emulate Storti's strategies in writing an arresting lead. When the

students have completed their accounts, have them share their pieces in a class discussion, allowing them to critique each other's work constructively. Post the results on a bulletin board.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- **Interview and Essay Writing Project.** Have students write and illustrate an essay titled, "Three Lessons I Wish the Whole World Would Learn." As part of this project, invite students to interview several people they admire to find out what their three lessons might be. If, through this process, they discover lessons they admire, they can include those in their essay.
- Some students may wish to research Islam and report to the class on the Muslim religion.
- Ask some students to research the culture, history, and geography of Morocco and report their findings to the class.
- Refer students to a Moroccan folk tale, "Tislet and Isli," available on the Web at [www.peacecorps.gov/www/folktales](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/folktales). Those who choose to read it can report to the class on the geographical and cultural history it seems to explain.

## Standing Out in the Crowd

## THE TRAIN RIDE HOME

by Robin Solomon

Peace Corps Volunteer, Kazakhstan (2001–2003)

As my taxi slows to approach the train station, it attracts a crowd of young men who begin to run swiftly behind the car. Even before the taxi stops, they are opening the doors and the trunk to grab my bags. Since I'm traveling light, there aren't enough of my bags to satisfy the small crowd around the car. They begin to argue in sharp bursts of Kazakh as to who will carry my bags to the train. Hastily paying the cab driver, I jump from the car and wrench my bags free from the anxious porters. "*Ni nada!*" I repeat, over and over, "I don't need your help!" in answer to their insistent pleas. "*Devushka*, two-hundred *tenge*, girl, let me carry your bags!" In the end I resort to silence and take my bags myself into the train station. The frenzy of a Kazakhstani train trip has begun, and as I cross through the station doors and free myself from the porters, I have taken only the first small step in the 30-hour journey ahead of me.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I'm supposed to travel as the locals do, and in this country four times the size of Texas, the locals go by train, and so must I. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fairly well-developed air-travel industry also collapsed, and nothing has come about to replace it. So when the need to travel is upon me, I grin and bear it for days at a time riding the rails.

It's really a lucky opportunity, I think to myself, as I weave my way through the crowds in the station—the grandmothers in their shawls and *valinki* (winter boots), the young merchants with their enormous suitcases strapped to the backs of sweating porters, the teams of football players in matching jogging

## VOCABULARY

**Wrench:** To grab forcefully**Devushka:** Young girl (a term used by a stranger to address a young woman)**Tenge:** [*ten-GAY*] Local currency. Two hundred tenge equaled roughly US\$1.35.

suits, and everyone bundled up in layers topped with fur coats and hats. Traveling by train lets me see a great deal of this huge country, sparsely populated and filled with seemingly endless expanses of barren landscape. It's a wonder to behold, and a three-hour flight covering the same distance could never impress on me the vastness of Kazakhstan's uninhabited steppe.

Once past the customs officer who wanted to weigh my pack, I'm onto the platform, filled to capacity with train passengers buying last-minute supplies, families and friends waving tearful farewells to their relations sitting behind the windows of the train cars, merchants with their hobbled porters hefting unreal-sized suitcases onto the train, and people selling fruit, ice cream, beer, water, bread, fish, and anything else you can think of. My journey to my train car is delayed by people jumping in front of me, insisting I buy their apples or milk.

Having succumbed to the vendors, I arrive at my car with a bag of famous Almaty apples, two *lepyoshka* (flat bread), a bottle of water, and some juicy southern tomatoes. Assuredly handing my ticket to the conductor, I climb onto the train, and I'm immediately greeted by a wall of thick, hot humidity that results from 65 people in an airless rail car for long periods of time. I gasp one last breath of fresh air and push my way into the sweltering car to find my bench. I travel in sleeper cars, as I need to lie down for such a long journey, but I don't go first class, where the sleepers are separated into compartments of four. Instead, I ride in second class, with double the number of beds and triple the number of people, without the privacy of enclosed compartments. I usually choose an upper berth, as the lower sleepers are usually taken over by the people without tickets, who opt to sit on the feet of the ticketed passengers who unfortunately chose the lower berth. On the upper, I don't have to share my space with anybody, but it's pretty cramped.

Shortly after getting on the train, we pull out from the station. The families and friends are still on the platform waving, but the vendors

have already moved on to the next departing train. We roll out of Almaty and I settle into my bed for the journey. Outside the window, the city ends and the steppe stretches out on both sides. The stops along the way are few, but all as interesting as Almaty, filled with activity and bustle and, most important, fresh air.

Some small villages we roar through without stopping, and I can't help but wonder what life is like there, in a place with five buildings and nothing else for miles. I am reading a book by a Kyrgyz writer, Chingis Aitmatov\*, who writes of the Kazakh steppe: "The steppe is vast and man is small. The steppe takes no sides; it doesn't care if you are in trouble or if all is well with you, you have to take the steppe as it is.... Passengers look out from passing trains, shake their heads, and ask: 'God, how can people live here? Nothing but steppe and camels!'" As we pass the rolling hills around Chu, the red, rocky landscape around Lake Balkhash, the stretches of uninhabited plains before and after Karaganda, and the birch forests north of Astana, I wonder about life here, and the sedentary Russian settlers who established many of these cities along the train lines they built. The Kazakhs were nomads before the Russians established towns. Sometimes I think that the Kazakhs lived the way this land intended them to: It feels too harsh for permanent settlement. But modernity means staying in one place, even in the frightening emptiness of Kazakhstan's steppe.

On the train, apart from my own thoughts, I climb down from my bunk to squeeze onto the lower berths to drink tea, eat fish and meat, and share conversation with my traveling companions. They are always interested in my accent, and upon learning that I am far from home, they instinctively reach out to me with their Kazakhstani hospitality and offer me a boiled egg, a piece of candy, or some horse sausage. An old Kazakh grandmother hobbles to the wagon conductor to obtain a blanket for me, concerned that I will catch a cold, although I hardly think that's possible on the sweltering train. A funny Kyrgyz man prac-

\* *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, translated by John French

## VOCABULARY

**Steppe:** Grassland; plain; prairie

**Hobbled:** Hampered or hindered

**Hefting:** Lifting (a heavy weight)

**Succumb:** To give up; fall victim to

**Sweltering:** Extremely hot

**Hobble:** To walk unsteadily or with a limp

tices his English that he learned in school 30 years before. Two young Russian women traveling back home with cheap Central Asian goods tell me why I should come to Russia as soon as possible. After almost two years here, I've learned to enjoy this journey home to my site. The train, with all of its sweaty, noisy, and frustrating inconveniences, gives me an uninterrupted 30-hour reminder of the vastness of this land and the diversity of its people. The train reminds me why I want to be in Kazakhstan.

After 30 hours of traveling, the train pulls into Kokshetau. I know we're coming close because the birch trees line the tracks and there are still traces of snow on the ground. I see the hill that stands above my town, and I know that I'm home. Inevitably, some of my friends are at the station to greet me. They pull me out from among the bustle and crowd and hug me and welcome me back. In one shared breath, they buzz with news of the town since I've been away. I attempt to join the flow of words to tell the tale of my journey, but what I have to tell isn't news. Traveling in the train is something they know; it's an old story for them. For me, it's an experience limited to these two years. As I approach the end of my service, I know that there are only one or two more such trips ahead of me, and I can imagine that the train rides that I do a fair share of complaining about will be an aspect of life in Kazakhstan I miss the most.

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'THE TRAIN RIDE HOME'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Solomon served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan from 2001 to 2003. Her primary assignments focused on teaching English as a foreign language and training Kazakhstani teachers in new teaching methods. While in Kazakhstan, Solomon participated in the Coverdell World Wise Schools CyberVolunteer program, offered by the Peace Corps at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol). As part of this program, she wrote letters about her life in Kazakhstan, which were then posted on the Web and sent as e-mails to interested individuals and classrooms participating in the program in the United States.

Solomon's third letter, "The Train Ride Home," is included here because it provides keen insight into local culture and traveling overland in Kazakhstan.

The author's biography and her first two letters can be read and downloaded in the archive section of the CyberVolunteer website: [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol).

Solomon now is a Foreign Service officer at the U.S. State Department.

#### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 2,3,6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV  
(see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 4, 6,  
9, 10, 12 (see pages 189–190)

#### Enduring Understandings

- Living as local people do is an effective way to understand a culture different from one's own.
- Being open-minded and resourceful can help us cross cultures.

#### Essential Questions

- How can living as local people do in another culture help a visitor understand the people and their culture?
- In what ways can the ability to be open and resourceful help us cross cultures?

#### Materials

Photocopies of story, Resource Sheet 1

#### Assessment Tools

Class discussions, essay, original sentences

**ABOUT THE STORY**

Solomon tells about a cross-country journey by train in Kazakhstan from the capital, Almaty, in the south, to her host city of Kokshetau, in the northern part of the country. In vivid detail, she describes the crowds in the station and on the train, the stifling heat in the coach, the bustle, the generosity of the Kazakhstanis, the desolation of the landscape, and the endearing qualities of a journey that appears on the surface to be merely arduous.

Note about teaching: This lesson concentrates on the author's writing techniques; as such, it is ideal for language arts classes. However, social studies teachers who are teaching about the post-Soviet era will find in Solomon's letters rich primary-source material for students to investigate—along with related issues in John Deever's chapter about his Volunteer experiences in Ukraine (page 168).

**ABOUT THE SETTING**

Covering 1.1 million square miles, Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country in the world, about the size of Western Europe or half the size of the contiguous United States. Kazakhstan is a vast country of desert, steppe, and mountains in central Asia. About 17 million people live there in an area four times the size of Texas.

Kazakhstan was the second-largest republic of the Soviet Union. Upon the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., Kazakhstan declared its independence in December 1991. The first Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in the country in July 1993, and Volunteers have been there since, working with communities to make the transition from communism to a free-market economy. In collaboration with government ministries, local governments, and nongovernmental organizations, Peace Corps Volunteers in Kazakhstan work in four program areas: English education, economic development, environmental education, and public health.

In addition to their assigned tasks, Peace Corps Volunteers engage in cross-cultural exchanges that help Americans and Kazakhstanis better understand each other's history, languages, and cultures. Indeed, given Kazakhstan's isolation from the West when it was part of the Soviet Union, Peace Corps Volunteers often have been the first Americans that Kazakhstanis encounter. The first meetings between Peace Corps Volunteers and Kazakhstanis often provide an opportunity for Volunteers to break the stereotypes Kazakhstanis might have about Americans—and vice versa. Americans and Kazakhstanis can represent their respective countries in a more positive and realistic light than stereotypes usually do.

For further information about Kazakhstan, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

## LESSON 1

### PURPOSE

- To stimulate reflection about the enduring understanding, “Living as the local people do is an effective way to understand a culture different from one’s own.”
  - To discover the author’s techniques in describing people and events, in setting tone, and in establishing pace.
1. In preparation for reading Solomon’s story, provide students with information about the author and the setting from the overview above. In addition,

read to the class (or have them read) the information in Resource Sheet 1.

2. Have students read “The Train Ride Home.” Ask them to keep in mind Solomon’s statement, as they are reading: “This country teaches me on a daily basis, sometimes far more than I think I teach people here.”

When the students are finished, ask them what Solomon learned on this train ride. What do they think she taught her traveling companions, if she taught them anything? Who do they think learned more from the encounters on the train and in the station—Solomon or the local people? Why?

3. Solomon’s essay is a fast-reading, engaging account of a train ride in a country significantly different from the United States. Students will probably have a good sense of just how different the cultural environment is after reading the essay. Suggest to students that writing a text that appears simple and easy to read is often the most difficult to write, because it takes so much effort by the author to craft. Much like detectives, students will analyze the text to see how the author achieved her rich characterization of her Central Asian surroundings.
  - a. Have students examine the first paragraph and ask them what purposes it serves. How does it engage the reader? How does it set the scene? [Possible answers include: The lead sentence immediately pulls the reader into the action

## RESOURCE SHEET 1

**ROBIN SOLOMON TALKS ABOUT HER LIFE IN KAZAKHSTAN\***

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 girl's 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 this 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.

\* Excerpted from Solomon's biography, posted in the archive of the CyberVolunteer website at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol).

and sets the scene. The subject of the essay, i.e., a train ride across Kazakhstan, is identified. The reader gets the impression of the bustle and chaos that is characteristic of train stations in Kazakhstan. The quotations give the reader an idea of the independence and assertiveness of the author, along with making the text seem immediate and fresh.]

- b.** Ask the students to examine the second paragraph and identify three things they learn there. [Answers might include: The author is a Peace Corps Volunteer. Peace Corps policy calls for Volunteers to live and travel as the locals do. During the Soviet era, people traveled by air, using a decent network of airports. Air transportation in Kazakhstan has deteriorated.]

Now that the students have begun to analyze the text in detail, what conclusions can they draw about the author's strategy and style? In discussion with the class, try to elicit, among other things, that the author makes every word count; she provides facts and detailed descriptions to help the reader picture the scenes; she makes the story both active—through the details of her interactions with people—and personal—through quotations— attracting readers and holding their interest.

- 4.** The author has used other subtle strategies to convey information about the climate, the geography, and the nature of the people. In a class discussion or through journal entries, focus with

students on the following issues.

- a.** Ask students to identify specific details about the people on the platform and the passengers in the train that help them understand the culture. Also have them search for two or three details that let them know it's cold outside. [Winter boots, fur coats, snow on the ground.]
- b.** The author uses specific details to achieve the transition from the station to the steppe. Ask students to identify these. [Vendors leave, passengers wave, the author settles down, the scenery changes. All these cues are key to helping the reader sense the transition from the city to the steppe.]
- c.** In paragraph seven, which includes the quotation from the Kyrgyz writer Chingis Aitmatov, Solomon names at least four specific places the train passes through. Even if—or especially if—students do not look for these places on the map, what effect does naming them have on the flow and impact of the story? [Students might observe that it lends a sense of place as well as emphasizing the progress across the landscape.]
- d.** In the second-to-last paragraph, Solomon writes: "An old Kazakh grandmother hobbles to the wagon conductor to obtain a blanket for me, concerned that I will catch a cold, although I hardly think that's possible on the sweltering train." Does the author's treatment

## Standing Out in the Crowd

of the old woman reveal anything about the author's respect for the local population, or about her attitude toward strangers? Point out to students that while the author makes fun of the situation, she notably does not make fun of the old woman. After all, the author might have written: "How could I possibly have caught a cold in that intense heat?" or "Catch a cold?! What was she thinking?!"

In an interview, Solomon expanded on the issue of the heated train. "In Kazakhstan, cold is viewed as a killer, and people do everything they can to protect themselves from the cold. In the sweaty train car, the Kazakhstani perception was that it wasn't warm enough to keep you healthy. A slight draft coming in the window could be the end of you! Also, the simple fact that there were blankets available told people that they ought to cover up more, despite the heat, which was stifling to me. Volunteers would get dirty looks for cracking open bus windows (even in summer) or for wearing short-sleeved shirts around the house in winter." Ask students, in pairs, to reenact for the class the old woman's offering Solomon the blanket. Encourage them to invent various responses to compare with Solomon's. Ask them also to take into account the Kazakhstani veneration of age. Have some of the students play the role of someone Solomon's age offering a blanket, or even someone younger. In their role playing, how might students alter Solomon's reactions to

passengers of different ages offering her blankets?

- e. In the same paragraph, the author says that the other passengers reached out to her "upon learning that I am far from home." What is the difference in effect between Solomon writing that the others were hospitable because she was "American," and that they were hospitable because she was "far from home"? [Students might observe that Kazakhstani hospitality extends to anyone from another place, not just to someone from a well-recognized country.] Consider holding a class discussion to elicit from students what their own reactions might be to meeting someone with an accent or who evidently was "far from home." Would they share their brown-bagged food? Would they invite the stranger home for tea—as many did with Solomon? After students have offered their own reactions, let them know Solomon's observation after she returned to the United States: "Kazakhstani hospitality knocked me off my feet for the most part, as I was used to the more guarded American reaction to strangers."
- f. In the last paragraph, Solomon writes: "Inevitably, some of my friends are at the station to greet me." It is easy to gloss over that sentence and miss its implications. Ask the students to think about the sentence, and then discuss specifically why the author uses the word "inevitably." What does that tell students

about her life in Kokshetau? [Evidently, she has many friends, and they were eager enough to greet Solomon to come to the station and wait there for her arrival.] Are these friends fellow Peace Corps Volunteers or are they locals? How do we know? [A few sentences further, we learn that “traveling in the train is something they know; it’s an old story for them.”] Point out that the author didn’t tell readers outright; readers have to infer the answer from other information.

creature comforts? If she had not been open to seeing the good in cultural differences?

2. Ask students what it would take for them to adjust to life in another culture as well as Solomon did.
3. Review with students the specific strategies Solomon used in conveying a sense of place, of movement, of desolation, of kindness. You might want to list the strategies on the board as students recall them, and have the students make notes.
4. For homework, ask students to write a letter from the point of view of one of the Kazakhstanis who were fellow travelers on the train with the author. Point out that this will be the same trip but from a different perspective—that of a local person for whom the conditions were familiar. What might a local person observe about the foreign traveler in their midst? How will the thoughts and observations of a local person differ from those of a traveler for whom most of the experience is new and different? Encourage the students to be inventive and to employ many of the devices Solomon used in her writing. Students can use the list of strategies the class created in reviewing the letter.
5. The next day, have students divide into groups of four or five and read their letters to each other. Ask them to critique each other constructively, especially acknowledging effective use of the strategies they were asked to employ.

## LESSON 2

### PURPOSE

To help students realize that open-mindedness and flexibility can facilitate understanding between cultures

1. Read aloud the statement: “Being open-minded and flexible can facilitate understanding between cultures.” Discuss with the class:
  - In what ways was the author open-minded and flexible in her story? Remind students to support their opinions with examples from the text.
  - In what ways might Solomon’s train ride have been different if she had gone into the experience with a negative attitude rather than a positive one? If she had held on to the need for

## Standing Out in the Crowd

THE TRAIN RIDE HOME (CONTINUED)

## LESSON 3

## PURPOSE

- To understand the use of parallelism and balanced sentences
- To write balanced sentences and sentences using parallelism

1. Put the following sentences on the board and ask students to combine them grammatically into one correct sentence.

**A.** I went to the bank.

**B.** I drove to the mall.

**C.** I returned to my house.

Put the new sentence on the board. It will probably read, “I went to the bank, drove to the mall, and returned to my house.” Ask students to explain why someone would combine sentences in this way. [It’s more economical in the use of words; it’s less repetitious; it saves time; it creates a more sophisticated sentence.] Explain to them that using parallelism with a conjunction like *and* also shows that items are of the same weight or value.

2. Underline “went to the bank,” “drove to the mall,” and “returned to my house.” Ask students to identify the parts of speech in each phrase and mark them on the chalkboard. [Verb (past tense), preposition, article, noun.] Point out that because the phrases have the same grammatical

construction, they are called parallel, even though the words are not the same.

3. Repeat the process using Abraham Lincoln’s words from his Gettysburg Address—“government of the people, by the people, for the people”—so that students understand that parallelism may or may not include repetition of words. Define parallelism as the repetition of grammatical forms to achieve a desired effect in writing.

4. Read aloud the first paragraph of “The Train Ride Home” and ask students to find examples of parallelism in this paragraph. [“I resort to silence and take my bags”; “I cross through the station doors and free myself from the porters.” Both use similar verb phrases.]

Divide students into six groups. Assign each group a paragraph, from the second to the seventh. Ask each group to do a close reading of their paragraph to see if students can find other examples of parallelism. Have student groups for paragraphs two to six report to the class. For each example of parallelism, ask them to state the purpose, e.g., economy of words, clarity, managing a list.

5. Ask the group working with the seventh paragraph to list their examples of parallelism on the board. Be sure they include “The steppe is vast and man is small.”

Call students’ attention to this sentence. Review one purpose of parallelism—to organize ideas in

an economical manner—and ask students if they can see any other purpose in using it here. Try to elicit these effects: the poetic nature of the sentence, the effective contrast, the rhythm the writer achieves. Point out that writers may use parallelism for purposes other than economy.

6. Explain that when a parallel sentence combines contrasting ideas, it is called a balanced sentence; ask students to identify another balanced sentence, in paragraph seven. [... It doesn't care if you are in trouble or if all is well with you.] Point out that balanced sentences are often memorable. One example is John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech, in which he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Another example is in the opening of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Martin Luther King Jr. provided a good example when he hoped that his children would "not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."
7. When students are clear about what parallel and balanced sentences are, have them write original examples and share the results with the class.
8. Summarize the lesson by having students list reasons authors use parallel or balanced sentences.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Question for discussion, or a short paper or class presentation: If you were a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kazakhstan, what would be the most important thing about life in America that you would convey to your host family?
2. Have younger students work in groups to illustrate the main ideas in Solomon's story, using a large piece of chart paper and colored felt-tipped markers.

## Standing Out in the Crowd

### R U N N I N G

by Peter Hessler

Peace Corps Volunteer, China (1996–1998)

(Excerpted from Chapter Three in *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*)

In the mornings I often ran to the summit of Raise the Flag Mountain. As I ran, I studied the propaganda signs along the route, although at the beginning there wasn't much about them that was recognizable. There were three signs on the road out to the mountain, and to me they looked like this:

建设精神 Cultu 更新生育观念  
 控制 People Mouth 增长, 促进社会进步  
 教育 Is 立 Country 基础

I finished my runs back in the center of campus, not far from the teaching building, where a stone wall served as a backdrop for an inscription of three-foot-high characters:

教书育 People,  
 管理育 People,  
 服务育 People,  
 环境育 People

That was how Chinese appeared in my first few months. I arrived in Fuling able to recog-



nize about 40 characters, all of them simple: people, middle, country, above, below, long, man, woman. There hadn't been time for more; the Peace Corps had given us an intensive course during our two months of training in Chengdu, but the emphasis was on learning enough spoken Mandarin to function. We had to study written Chinese on our own, and until I got to Fuling I simply hadn't had enough time.

I came to Sichuan because I wanted to teach, but I also had two other motivations: I thought the experience would make me a better writer, and I wanted to learn Chinese. These were very clear goals, but the way to achieve them was much less obvious. I hoped the writing would take care of itself—I would keep my eyes open and take notes, and eventually, when I felt I was ready, I would start to write. But Chinese was a different matter altogether and I had never undertaken something like that before.

That was one reason I had decided to come to China with the Peace Corps, because I knew they would try to teach me the language. Their Chengdu training course had been excellent; the classes were small and the teachers experienced, and it had been easy to make progress. In Fuling, though, language study was my own affair. The Peace Corps would pay for tutors, but I had to find them myself, and I had to decide which textbooks I would use and how I would structure my studies. It was a daunting task—essentially, I had to figure out how to learn Chinese.

For the first few weeks, Dean Fu searched for tutors who could help Adam\* and me. He was as lost as we were—he had never known a foreigner who was trying to learn the language, and I suspected that secretly he felt the project was hopeless. *Waiguoren* couldn't learn Chinese—everyone in Fuling knew that. Our students found it hilarious that we even tried. They would ask me to speak a little Chinese, or write a character or two, and then they would laugh at my efforts. At first this didn't bother me, but quickly it became annoying. They thought I was

\*Adam Meier, Hessler's Peace Corps housemate and fellow-teacher

## VOCABULARY

***Waiguoren:*** [wɪ-GOOR-en] Chinese for foreigner, or someone from out of the country

dabbling in the language when in fact I was serious: I knew that studying Chinese was one of the most important things I could do in Fuling. So much depended on knowing the language—my friendships, my ability to function in the city, my understanding of the place.

I also wanted to learn Chinese out of stubbornness, because as a *waiguoren* you weren't expected to do that. Such low expectations had a long tradition; even as late as the early 1800s it had been illegal for a Chinese to teach the language to foreigners, and a number of Chinese were imprisoned and even executed for tutoring young Englishmen. This bit of history fascinated me: How many languages have been sacred and forbidden to outsiders? Certainly, those laws had been changed more than a century ago, but China was still ambivalent about opening to the outside world and language was still at the heart of this issue. In good conscience I could not live there for two years and not learn how to speak Chinese. To me, this was as important as fulfilling my obligations as a teacher.

But this need wasn't nearly as obvious to everybody else. Dean Fu took a long time finding tutors, and perhaps he was hoping that we'd forget about it. We didn't need Chinese to teach, after all, and we already knew enough to buy groceries and eat at local restaurants. That should be adequate, people figured. In some respects, we were seen as English-teaching machines, or perhaps farm animals—expensive and skittish draft horses that taught literature and culture. We were given cadres' apartments, and we had our own Changhong-brand color televisions with remote. Our bedrooms were air-conditioned. Each of us had a good kitchen and two beautiful balconies. Our students were obedient and respectful. It didn't matter that, even as we were given all of these things, the leaders also gave quiet instructions to our colleagues and students that they should avoid associating with us outside of class. *Waiguoren* were risky, especially with regard to politics, and in any case we didn't need close friends in the college. We could teach during the day and return to our comfortable cages at night, and, if we

needed friendship, we always had each other. They even gave us telephones so we could call Peace Corps Volunteers who lived in other parts of Sichuan.

Some of the more insightful students sensed that this did not make a full life. In his journal, Soddy wrote me a short note, politely addressed in the third person:

*Pete and Adam come to our college to teach our English without pay. We are thankful for this behavior. But we are worried about Pete and Adam's lives. For example: Pete and Adam know little Chinese, so they can't watch Chinese TV programmes. I think your lives are difficult. I want to know how you spend your spare time.*

It was a good question. My teaching and preparation time rarely took much more than 30 hours a week. I ran in the mornings, and sometimes I went for walks in the hills. Adam and I played basketball and threw the Frisbee. I wrote on my computer. I planned other diversions for the future—subjects I wanted to cover in class, possible travel destinations. Mostly, though, I knew that there was plenty of exploring to be done in the city, but at the beginning this was the hardest place of all to open up.

Downtown Fuling looked good from my balcony. Often I'd gaze across the Wu River at the maze of streets and stairways, listening to the distant hum of daily life, and I'd think about the mysteries that were hidden in the river town. I wanted to investigate all of it—I wanted to go down to the docks and watch the boats; I wanted to talk with the stick-stick soldiers; I wanted to explore the network of tangled staircases that ran through the old part of town. I longed to figure out how the city worked and what the people thought, especially since no foreigner had done this before. It wasn't like living in Beijing or Shanghai, where there were plenty of *waiguoren* who had discovered what the city had to offer. As far as foreigners were concerned, Fuling was our city—or it would be once we figured it out.

## VOCABULARY

**Ambivalent:** [am-BIV-uh-lent] Having mixed feelings about someone or something

**Skittish:** Easily excitable or made nervous

**Cadre:** a member of a small leadership group

**Stick-stick soldier:** A porter or laborer in China who carries heavy loads in freight yards or construction sites on short, bamboo poles (sticks) tied together with rope

But once I got there it didn't look so good. Partly this was because of the dirt and noise; the main city of Fuling was an unbelievably loud and polluted place. There wasn't as much heavy industry as in other parts of China, but there were a few good-sized factories that spewed smoke and dust into the air. The power plant on the banks of the Wu River burned coal, as did all of the countless small restaurants that lined the city's streets, and automobile emissions were poorly regulated. In winter the air was particularly dirty, but even in summer it was bad. If I went to town and blew my nose, the tissue was streaked with black grease. This made me think about how the air was affecting my lungs, and for a while I wondered what could be done about this. Finally I decided to stop looking at tissues after I blew my nose.

Noise was even more impressive. Most of it came from car horns, and it is difficult to explain how constant this sound was. I can start by saying: Drivers in Fuling honked a lot. There weren't a great number of cars, but there were enough, and they were always passing each other in a mad rush to get to wherever they were going. Most of them were cabs, and virtually every cabby in Fuling had rewired his horn so it was triggered by a contact point at the tip of the gearshift. They did this for convenience; because of the hills, drivers shifted gears frequently, and with their hand on the stick it was possible to touch the contact point ever so slightly and the horn would sound. They honked at other cars, and they honked at pedestrians. They honked whenever they passed somebody, or whenever they were being passed themselves. They honked when nobody was passing but somebody might be considering it, or when the road was empty and there was nobody to pass but the thought of passing or being passed had just passed through the driver's mind. Just like that, an unthinking reflex: The driver honked. They did it so often that they didn't even feel the contact point beneath their fingers, and the other drivers and pedestrians were so familiar with the sound that they essentially didn't hear it. Nobody reacted to horns anymore; they served no purpose. A honk in Fuling

was like the tree falling in the forest—for all intents and purposes it was silent.

But at the beginning Adam and I heard it. For the first few weeks we often complained about the honking and the noise, the same way we complained about blowing our noses and seeing the tissue turn black. But the simple truth was that you could do nothing about either the noise or the pollution, which meant that they could either become very important and very annoying, or they could become not important at all. For sanity's sake we took the second option, like the locals, and soon we learned to talk about other things.

I realized this in early November, when a college friend of mine named Scott Kramer came to visit. For five years he had lived in Manhattan, and yet the noise in Fuling absolutely stunned him; he heard every horn, every shout, every blurted announcement from every loudspeaker. When he left, we took a cab from the college to the docks, and Kramer, who worked on Wall Street and had a mathematical turn of mind, counted the honks as our driver sped through the city. It was a 15-minute ride and the driver touched his contact point 566 times. It came to 37 honks per minute.

If Kramer hadn't been counting, I wouldn't have noticed, and I realized that I had stopped hearing the horns long ago, just like everybody else in town. In fact, Kramer was the only person in the whole city who heard them, which explained why he was so overwhelmed. The entire city had been honking at him for a week.

For me it wasn't the same, and after a month or so the discomforts of Fuling weren't important enough to deter me from going into town. Despite the noise and the pollution, it was still a fascinating place, and I still wanted to explore its corners and learn its secrets. But the language was an enormous problem, and in the beginning it made the city frustrating and even frightening.

## VOCABULARY

**Blurt:** To speak suddenly, often without stopping to think first

Mandarin Chinese has a reputation as a difficult language—some experts say it takes four times as long to learn as Spanish or French—and its characters and tones are particularly challenging to a Westerner, because they are completely different from the way our languages are structured. In Sichuan, things are further complicated by the provincial dialect, which is distinct enough that a Chinese outsider has trouble understanding the locals in a place like Fuling. The variations between Mandarin and Sichuanese are significant: In addition to some differences in vocabulary, Sichuanese slurs the Mandarin reflexive sounds—*sh* becomes *s*, *zh* becomes *z*—and certain consonants are reversed, so that the average person in Sichuan confuses *n* and *l*, and *h* and *f*. A word like “Hunan” becomes “Fulan.” The Sichuanese tonal range is also shorter, and most significant, two of the four Mandarin tones are reversed in Sichuan. If Mandarin is your starting point, it seems that the entire language has been flattened and turned upside down.

In addition, Sichuan is an enormous province where lack of development, particularly with regard to road and rail links, has resulted in vast regional differences. The Chengdu dialect is distinct from that of Chongqing, which is also different from that of Leshan, and so on. The town of Fengdu is less than 30 miles downstream from Fuling, and yet occasionally the residents of these places have difficulty understanding each other. At a Fuling restaurant, if you want the dish known as *hundun* in Mandarin—translated in English as “wonton”—you have to ask for *chaoshou*, but if you go another 30 miles to Fengdu you’ll have to call it *baomian*. Or, more accurately, *baomin*, because the folks in Fengdu slur the *ian* sounds.

The result is a hell of a mess that I hadn’t expected. I came to China hoping to learn Chinese, but quickly I realized there was no such thing. “Chinese” was whatever it took to communicate with the person you happened to be talking with, and this changed dramatically depending on background and education level. Educated people usually could speak Mandarin, especially if they were from the younger

generation—the walls of our classrooms had enormous signs that commanded: “Use Mandarin!” But the vast majority of Fuling’s population was uneducated and functioned only in the dialect. It made going to town a frustrating experience, because even the simplest conversations were difficult, and it also made my goal of learning Chinese seem impossible: I couldn’t imagine learning both Mandarin and Sichuanese in two years. In fact, all I needed to do was improve my Mandarin, which would naturally enable me to handle the dialect, but in the early months I didn’t know that. It seemed that I was in hopelessly over my head, and every trip into town was a reminder of that failure.

And Fuling was a frightening place because the people had seen so few outsiders. If I ate at a restaurant or bought something from a store, a crowd would quickly gather, often as many as 30 people spilling out into the street. Most of the attention was innocent curiosity, but it made the embarrassment of my bad Chinese all the worse—I’d try to communicate with the owner, and people would laugh and talk among themselves, and in my nervousness I would speak even worse Mandarin. When I walked down the street, people constantly turned and shouted at me. Often they screamed *waiguoren* or *laowai*, both of which simply meant “foreigner.” Again, these phrases often weren’t intentionally insulting, but intentions mattered less and less with every day that these words were screamed at me. Another favorite was “hello,” a meaningless, mocking version of the word that was strung out into a long “hah-loooo!” This word was so closely associated with foreigners that sometimes the people used it instead of *waiguoren*—they’d say, “Look, here come two hellos!” And often in Fuling they shouted other less innocent terms—*yangguizi*, or “foreign devil”; *da bizi*, “big nose”—although it wasn’t until later that I understood what these phrases meant.

The stresses piled up every time I went into town: the confusion and embarrassment of the language, the shouts and stares, the mocking calls. It was even worse for Adam, who was tall and blond; at least I had



unintelligible, but the one in the center of campus had changed slightly:

Teaching 育 People, 管理育 People,  
服务育 People, Environment 育 People

Our tutors were Kong Ming and Liao Mei, and we came to know them as Teacher Kong and Teacher Liao. They taught in the Chinese department, and neither of them spoke any English. They had never known a *waiguoren* before. Dean Fu had been unable to find tutors who spoke English, and at last we told him it wasn't important. We wanted to get started and we knew that Chinese department teachers had good Mandarin.

Teacher Kong was a short man who wore glasses and smelled of Magnificent Sound cigarettes. He was 32 years old, and he taught ancient Chinese literature. By Chinese standards he was slightly fat, which meant that by American standards he was slightly thin. He smiled easily. He was from the countryside of Fengdu, which was famous for its ghosts—legend said that spirits went to Fengdu after death.

Teacher Liao was a very thin woman with long black hair and a reserved manner. She was 27 years old, and she taught modern Chinese. She smiled less than Teacher Kong. Our students, who also had some courses in the Chinese department, considered Teacher Liao to be one of their better instructors. She was from the central Sichuan city of Zigong, which was famous for its salt. Every city and small town in Sichuan claimed to be famous for something. Fuling was famous for the hot pickled mustard tuber that was cured along the banks of the rivers.

That was essentially everything we knew about Teachers Kong and Liao for months. We also knew about their Mandarin, which was very clear except for a slight Sichuanese tendency to confuse the *n* and *l* sounds. Other than that we knew nothing. To us they were like

Chinese-teaching machines, or perhaps farm animals—a sort of inexpensive and bored draft horse that corrected bad tones. And to them we were very stupid *waiguoren* from a country whose crude tongue had no tones at all.

My first tutorial with Teacher Liao was scheduled for two hours, but I lasted less than 60 minutes. I went home with my head reeling—had a human being ever compressed more wrongness into a single hour? Everything was wrong—tones, grammar, vocabulary, initial sounds. She would ask me a question and I would try to process the language to respond, but before I could speak she was answering it herself. She spoke clearly, of course, and it was also true that during that hour not a word of English had been spoken. That was what I wanted, after all—a Chinese tutor. But I couldn't imagine doing that for seven hours a week and maintaining my sanity, and I looked at the pathetic stack of flashcards on my desk and thought: This is hopeless.

For a solid month it looked that way. I was too self-absorbed to even imagine what it was like from the other side, but later I realized that it was even worse for my teachers. They weren't under threat of execution for teaching the sacred tones to a *waiguoren*—that law, at least, had been changed since Qing Dynasty days. But theirs wasn't an enviable job. First of all, we underpaid them. This wasn't intentional; Adam and I had been given wrong information about the standard rate for tutors. Teachers Kong and Liao, of course, were far too polite to set us straight, which meant that for the entire first year they worked for two-thirds of what they deserved. Even worse, though, they were underpaid for seven weekly hours of boredom and frustration. The lessons in the book were simple—taking a train, going to a restaurant—and yet I botched everything, and they had no idea how to steer me in the right direction. How do you teach somebody to speak Chinese? How do you take your knowledge of ancient poetry and use it to help a *waiguoren* master something as basic as the third tone?

We were all lost, and that failure seemed to be the extent of our relationship. Other Peace Corps Volunteers had tutors who spoke English, so at least they could chat together after class. They heard about their tutors' families; they ate dinner together; they became friends. My tutors didn't seem like real people—it was months before I learned that Teacher Liao was married and that Teacher Kong had a son. Here the language problem was compounded by the fact that at the beginning they were somewhat *cagey* and distant; they had never known a *waiguoren* before, and they weren't at all certain how to approach us.

Chinese teaching styles are also significantly different from Western methods, which made my tutorials even more frustrating. In China, a teacher is absolutely respected without question, and the teacher-student relationship tends to be formal. The teacher teaches and is right, and the student studies and is wrong. But this isn't our tradition in America, as my own students noticed. I encouraged informality in our classes, and if a student was wrong I pointed out what she had done right and praised her for making a good effort. To them, this praise was meaningless. What was the point of that? If a student was wrong, she needed to be corrected without any quibbling or softening—that was the Chinese way.

I couldn't teach like that, and it was even harder to play the role of a student. Actually, this became worse after my Chinese classes started to feel productive, which happened more quickly than I expected. The characters in my book's lessons had always been elusive, odd-shaped scratches of black that drifted in and out of my head, calling up arbitrary allusions that were misleading. They were pictures rather than words: I would look at 大 and think of Kmart, and the 27th radical—冫 reminded me of the letter B, or perhaps an ax hanging on a wall.

大 looked like a man doing jumping jacks. 点 was a marching spider carrying a flag across the page. I stared so long at those odd figures that I dreamed about them—they swarmed in my head and I awoke vaguely disturbed and missing home.

## VOCABULARY

**Cagey:** Shrewd; sneaky; crafty

But at a certain point it was as if some of the scratchings stood up straight and looked me in the eye, and the fanciful associations started slipping away. Suddenly they became words; they had meaning. Of course, it didn't happen all at once, and it was work that did it—I was studying madly in an effort to make the classes less miserable. But I was so busy that I hardly had time to realize that progress was being made.

One day after more than a month of classes, I read aloud a paragraph from my book, recognizing all of the characters smoothly except for one. I sat back and started to register the achievement: I was actually reading Chinese. The language was starting to make sense. But before this sense of satisfaction was half formed, Teacher Liao said, "Budui!"

It meant, literally, "Not correct." You could also translate it as no, wrong, nope, uh-uh. Flatly and clearly incorrect. There were many Chinese words that I didn't know, but I knew that one well.

A voice in my head whined: All the rest of them were right; isn't that worth something? But for Teacher Liao it didn't work like that. If one character was wrong it was simply *budui*.

"What's this word?" I asked, pointing at the character I had missed.

"Zhe—the *zhe* in *zhejiang*."

"Third tone?"

"Fourth tone."

I breathed deeply and read the section again, and this time I did it perfectly. That was a victory—I turned to Teacher Liao and my eyes said (or at least I imagined them saying): How do you like me now? But Teacher Liao's eyes were glazed with boredom and she said, "Read the next one." They were, after all, simple paragraphs. Any schoolchild could handle them.

It was the Chinese way. Success was expected and failure criticized and promptly corrected. You were right or you were *budui*; there was no

middle ground. As I became bolder with the language I started experimenting with new words and new structures, and this was good but it was also a risk. I would finish a series of sentences using vocabulary that I knew Teacher Liao didn't expect me to know, and I would swear that I could see her flinch with unwilling admiration. And yet she would say, "*Budui!*" and correct the part that was wrong.

I grew to hate *budui*: Its sound mocked me. There was a harshness to it; the *bu* was a rising tone and the *dui* dropped abruptly, building like my confidence and then collapsing all at once. And it bothered me all the more because I knew that Teacher Liao was only telling the truth: Virtually everything I did with the language was *budui*. I was an adult, and as an adult I should be able to accept criticism where it was needed. But that wasn't the American way; I was accustomed to having my ego soothed; I wanted to be praised for my effort. I didn't mind criticism as long as it was candy-coated. I was caught in the same trap that I had heard about from some of my Chinese-American friends, who as children went to school and became accustomed to the American system of gentle correction, only to return home and hear their Chinese-minded parents say, simply, *budui*. That single B on the report card matters much more than the string of A's that surrounds it. Keep working; you haven't achieved anything yet.

And so I studied. I was frustrated but I was also stubborn; I was determined to show Teacher Liao that I was *dui*. Virtually all of my spare time went to studying Chinese, and the stack of flashcards on my desk grew rapidly. By the first week in November I knew 300 characters. I had no clear idea what I was shooting for—I had a vague goal of reading a newspaper, which would require between two and three thousand. But mostly I knew that I needed more knowledge than I had, and I needed it quickly.

In the mornings I ran to the summit of Raise the Flag Mountain, charging hard up the steps, my lungs burning high above the Yangtze. The effort was satisfying—it was challenging but uncomplicated, and

at the finish I could look down on the city and see where I had gone. It was different from the work of learning Chinese, which had no clear endpoint and gave me more frustration than satisfaction.

There was a skill to running, and in some ways it was the only skill I had in Fuling. Everybody else seemed to have found something that he or she was good at: The owner of the dumpling restaurant made dumplings, the shoeshine woman shined shoes, the stick-stick soldiers carried loads on their leather shoulders. It was less clear what my purpose was—I was a teacher, and that job was satisfying and clearly defined, but it disappeared once I left campus. Most people in town only saw my failures, the inevitable misunderstandings and botched conversations.

And they always watched carefully. The attention was so intense that in public I often became clumsily self-conscious, which was exacerbated by my suddenly becoming bigger than average. In America I was considered small at five feet nine inches, but now for the first time in my life I stood out in crowds. I bumped my head on bus doorways; I squeezed awkwardly behind miniature restaurant tables. I was like Alice in Wonderland, eating the currant-seed cakes and finding her world turned upside down.

Mostly I longed to find something that I could do well. This was part of why the simple routines of city life fascinated me; I could watch a stick-stick soldier or a restaurant cook with incredible intensity, simply because these people were good at what they did. There was a touch of voyeurism in my attention, at least in the sense that I watched the people work with all the voyeur's impotent envy. There were many days when I would have liked nothing more than to have had a simple skill that I could do over and over again, as long as I did it well.

Running was repetitive in this way, and it was also an escape. If I ran on the roads, cars honked at me, people laughed and shouted, and sometimes a young man would try to impress his friends by chasing after me. But crowds couldn't gather around, and none of the young

## VOCABULARY

**Voyeurism:** [voy-ER-ihz-em] Watching other people, especially secretly

men followed for long. I ran alone, and in a crowded country that sort of solitude was worth something. There was nobody in the city who could catch me.

Usually I ran in the hills behind campus, following the small roads and footpaths that wound around Raise the Flag Mountain. I ran past old Daoist shrines, and atop the narrow walls of the rice paddies, and I followed the stone steps that led to the mountain's summit. I liked running past the ancient stone tombs that overlooked the rivers, and I liked seeing the peasants at work. On my runs I watched them harvest the rice crop, and thresh the yellow stalks, and I saw them plant the winter wheat and tend their vegetables. I first learned the agricultural patterns by watching the workers as I ran, and I studied the shape of the mountain by feeling it beneath my legs.

The peasants found it strange that I ran in the hills, and they always stared when I charged past, but they never shouted or laughed. As a rule they were the most polite people you could ever hope to meet, and in any case they had more important things to do with their energy than scream at a *waiguoren*. And perhaps they had an innate respect for physical effort, even when they didn't see the point.

The air in the countryside was often bad, because the Yangtze winds blew the city's pollution across the Wu River, and I knew that running did my health more harm than good. But it kept my mind steady, because the fields were quiet and peaceful and the activity felt the same as it always had. That old well-known feeling—the catch in my chest, the strain in my legs—connected all the places where I had lived, Missouri and Princeton and Oxford and Fuling. While I ran through the hills, my thoughts swung fluidly between these times and places; I remembered running along the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad pathway, and I recalled the rapeseed blooming gold on Boar's Hill, and the old shaded bridge of Prettybrook. As the months slipped past I realized that even these Sichuan hills, with their strange tombs and terraces, were starting to feel like home.

But still the signs on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain were foreign, and even as they slowly became familiar they reminded me how far I still had to go:

Build **精神** Culture, New Give Birth **观念**  
 Population Increase, **促进** Society **进步**  
 Education Is a Powerful Country's **基础**

During that semester there was a volatility to the written language; it constantly shifted in my eyes, and each day the shapes became something other than what they had been before. Spoken Chinese was also starting to settle in my ears, and soon I could make simple conversation with the owners of the restaurants where I ate. The same slow shift was also happening with regard to my tutors, who finally started to change from tone machines into real people.

As this happened, I began to sense an edge to Teacher Liao that I couldn't quite figure out. It wasn't simply her tendency to say *budui*; she seemed slightly uncomfortable around both Adam and me, and there were moments where I almost thought she disliked us (which, given that we didn't pay her enough, would have been understandable). Later, I would come to recognize other reasons for this discomfort, but during that first semester I only sensed that there were complications in our relationship.

★ ★ ★

... Classes were simpler with Teacher Kong, who alternated weeks with Teacher Liao. He was slightly less inclined to say *budui*, partly because he had a lazy streak, but also because the struggles of that semester were slowly teaching us to recognize each other as people. Eventually he would become my first real Chinese friend—the first friend who

saw me strictly in Chinese. And even in those early months, before we developed a true friendship, I could see his interest growing. He sometimes asked me about America, within the limits of my vocabulary, and I sensed there were many questions he would ask once he had the chance. Certainly I had a few of my own that were waiting for the language to catch up with my thoughts.

We had classes in my dining room, where the morning light was warm after the sun rose above the shoulder of Raise the Flag Mountain. We drank tea while we studied—jasmine flower tea, the tiny dried petals unfolding like blooming lilies on the surface of the hot water. Before he drank, Teacher Kong blew softly over the cup, so the loose leaves and flowers floated to the far side, and this was something else I learned in those classes. If he sipped a leaf by mistake, he turned and spat lightly on the floor. I learned that, too—I liked living in a cadre’s apartment and still being able to spit on the floor.

★ ★ ★

... [One day] I came back from a run and realized that the sign in the center of campus had become completely intelligible. This was a moment I had always looked forward to—from the beginning, I had seen that string of characters as a benchmark, and I traced my progress in the way those words became meaningful. And one day all of it finally made sense:

**Teaching Educates the People,  
Administration Educates the People,  
Service Educates the People,  
Environment Educates the People**

I stopped and took a long look. I read the sign again, waiting for the sense of achievement. But nothing was there—it was simply propaganda, the same sort of trite phrase that could be found in the students’ textbooks or on billboards all across the city. I would react the same

## VOCABULARY

**Propaganda:** Ideas or information spread specifically to promote one idea or point of view exclusively or to discredit another one

**Trite:** Unoriginal, stale

way when the other messages on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain came into focus:

**Construct a Spiritual Civilization,  
Replace the Old Concept of Giving Birth**

**Controlling Population Growth  
Promotes Social Development**

**Education Is the Foundation  
Upon Which a Powerful Nation Is Built**

All of it was the same old cant. Every time one of the signs became intelligible, I felt very little of the satisfaction that I had once imagined. Instead I heard Teacher Liao's voice in my head: Read the next one. You haven't achieved anything yet. And so I kept writing the characters over and over again at my desk, gazing out my window at the city.

★ ★ ★

... On the second day of January, the city of Fuling held a road race in the center of town. It was the Twenty-second Annual Long Race to Welcome Spring, and all of the city's schools and *danwei*, or work units, competed against each other. Two weeks before the race, Dean Fu asked if I would run on the college team....

"You must understand," he said, smiling uncomfortably. "There will be many peasants and uneducated people. They don't know anything about sportsmanship, and perhaps some of them will be rough. Also, in 21 years they have never had a foreigner in the long race. They welcome you to participate, but I think it will be different from in America."

I could see that Dean Fu thought it would be simpler if I didn't run, and I knew he was right.... All of the difficult parts of my life were already public; there wasn't any reason to seek out more crowds.

But there are no referees in running, and it is not a contact sport. There would be crowds but I figured that at least I would be moving. It couldn't be much different from a race in America—and even if it was, I was curious to see what it was like, at least once. I told Dean Fu that I wanted to participate.

He explained that every runner had to have a physical exam, and a week before the race I visited a doctor in the college infirmary. It was a low, tile-roofed building next to the croquet court, one of the old structures on campus that remained from the pre-Cultural Revolution days when the college had been a high school.

The doctor checked my pulse and blood pressure. After each test he smiled and told me that I was very healthy, and I thanked him. Then he led me to a side room where a dirty white box-shaped instrument hung on the wall. Dean Fu said, "Now you will have a chest X-ray."

I stopped at the entrance of the room. "I don't want to have a chest X-ray," I said.

"It's no problem," said Dean Fu, smiling. "It's very safe."

"I don't want a chest X-ray," I said again, and I looked at the dirty box and thought: Especially I don't want *this* chest X-ray. "Why is it necessary?"

"Everybody in the race must have one. To make sure they are healthy."

"Everybody?" I asked, and he nodded. I asked how many people would be running.

"More than two thousand and five hundred."

"And all of them must have a chest X-ray before they can run?"

"Yes," he said. "That is the rule. It is very safe."

It struck me as a ludicrous notion—that a city with a per capita income of about 40 American dollars a month would require a chest

## VOCABULARY

**Cant:** meaningless talk or communication

X-ray from each of the 2,500 participants in a four-kilometer road race. I had my suspicions about what was really happening: Some administrator in the college was probably worried about me dropping dead in the middle of the race, and they wanted to cover their tracks. It was always Dean Fu's job to convey such commands to the *waiguoren*, and occasionally he served as a filter as much as a translator. It was a lousy job and I always felt sorry for him when I sensed that this was happening, but there was nothing to do about it except to find a tactful solution.

We were at an impasse. Dean Fu could see that I was serious about refusing to have an X-ray, and I knew that he couldn't simply back down and say that the procedure wasn't in fact required. We stood there for a moment, the doctor watching expectantly. Finally I told Dean Fu that I would go to my apartment and call the Peace Corps office in Chengdu.

I tried to call but the medical officer wasn't in. I sat in my bedroom for 10 minutes, reading a book, and then I returned to the infirmary.

"I'm very sorry," I said, "but the Peace Corps told me I can't have a chest X-ray. I don't know what we can do about this."

"It's no problem," Dean Fu said. "I just talked to some of the people in charge of the race, and they said it is fine if you do not have an X-ray. They will give you an exception because you are a foreigner."

I thanked him and apologized for the hassle, and he apologized back. Both of us shook the doctor's hand. He walked us to the door smiling and waving as we left.

There was no scheduled time for the race to start. The runners assembled in a disorderly mob at the starting area, and at nine o'clock the cadres began their speeches. The race would begin whenever the speeches finished, and the officials droned on and on while the starting line repeatedly broke and surged. A small section would make a

false start and the rest of the crowd would react, and then the police would call everybody back. I tried to jog in place to stay warm, fighting with my elbows to keep position.

The starting line was spread across a massive construction site where a new public park was being built. The entire left side of the line headed directly toward a six-foot drop—a small, crumbling cliff. On the far right was a narrow dirt road that provided the only safe exit for the runners, but it was so close to the start—less than 40 yards—that it would be impossible for the crowd to funnel in such a short distance. And even for the runners who did make it safely, the course immediately took a 90-degree turn that would claim more victims.

Without question it was the most dangerous starting arrangement I had ever seen in a lifetime of racing. I was tempted to pull out, partly for my safety but mostly because I wanted to be able to watch the disaster from the perspective of a spectator. Rob Schmitz, another Peace Corps Volunteer, was visiting us that week, and he and Adam took their cameras and gleefully waited across the road.

The college team had staked out a spot on the right side of the line, directly in front of the exit. Most of them were physical education students, and usually we were the best team in the race, along with the Taiji medicine factory. All of us squeezed together, waiting for the start. It was a cool morning and the winter smog hung low over the city.

Five minutes passed, then 10. The cadres kept talking, and the police were having trouble holding everybody back. Either they were going to start the race or it was going to start itself, and finally one of the cadres must have realized this. He fired the gun.

It was China. Chaos, noise, adrenaline; fear and surprise and excitement; a mass of bodies, everybody yelling, horns sounding, the earth pounding; all of us running madly, arms outstretched to clear room; legs pumping, dashing, sprinting, trying to keep the back kick low to

avoid being tripped; some runners shouting as they stumbled over the cliff, others skidding around the first turn, dodging the few unfortunate ones who fell and skidded below the rush of legs. The seconds slid past, each moment an eternity of concentration and effort. We flew down the street in a wild, charging mob, hit the second turn, and headed west on Xinghua Road.

The course began to climb uphill. The scene was still shaky with adrenaline but I realized that the eternity of the start was over, and that I was no longer a part of the starting mob. After the beginning of a race there is always that moment of disengagement, when the euphoria of being part of something massive is over and you realize that you are alone, and you have your own race to run.

I slowed down. Suddenly I felt tired; the adrenaline evaporated and everything slipped into focus. I checked myself—no scrapes, no bruises; no memory of exactly how I made it safely off the line. I glanced around me. I was in the lead pack, a group of perhaps 50, and the others were also settling in after the rush of the start. We were climbing steadily now and the pace was slowing. I felt my legs come back to me, the numb excitement replaced by the rhythm of a long, hard run—steady steady steady steady, up on my toes as the hill steepened. Police cars rolled their lights in front of the pack. Far ahead, groups of school kids were trying to cheat, jumping into the race with a lead of a hundred yards, but the cops pulled them out as they drove past.

The entire first half was uphill, and by the time I took the lead, perhaps two minutes into the race, I could see that the others were finished. It was a varied field—college students and *danwei* workers and a few athletes who clearly could have been good runners with more training—but all of them were done. Quickly I slipped ahead.

To lead any big race is a strange feeling. People speak of the loneliness of running, but I've always felt that the sport is lonely only in the races, and especially when the pack breaks and you find yourself alone

in front. In the pack you usually feel some solidarity with the other athletes, even though you are still competing, but in front there are no illusions. That's when the race becomes a chase—one man against the rest of the field—and I've always felt that this is the loneliest feeling in the world. And it's even lonelier when you are the only foreigner in a field of more than 2,000, and all along the course spectators are calling out, "*Waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren.*" Out-of-country person, out-of-country person, out-of-country person.

I looked back. Behind me I could see the rest of the field—an endless stream of people, a black-haired mob. The main pace car had slowed and I was following a few strides behind its flashing lights. I looked back again, so I would remember the strangeness of the scene. The hill was steep now, climbing toward the pointed tower of the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs. The street was lined with spectators and I could hear the wave of surprise as I passed; they were talking excitedly and exclaiming with amazement: "*Waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren.*"

And I thought: Not today. If you're looking for people who are out of their country, out of place, out of step, out of shape, awkward, clumsy; if that's what you're looking for, look back there. Look for the ones who started too fast, or the men who have smoked too many Magnificent Sound cigarettes, or the people who are wearing too many clothes and are choking with heat and sweat. Don't look at me—I've done this for many years in many places, and always it has been exactly the same. There are no referees, no language barriers, no complicated rules of etiquette. All you do is run.

By the turnaround I had more than 30 seconds on the next runner, and I took it easy from there. The second half was all downhill, and because it was an out-and-back course I passed the rest of the field. The ones who weren't too exhausted joined in the chorus: "*Waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren.*" But it didn't bother me a bit, because for those four kilometers I felt completely at home.

For the victory I won two pairs of polyester sports uniforms, both too small, with the characters for Fuling City inscribed proudly on the chest. I also received a certificate testifying that “Comrade He Wei,” my Chinese name, had won the Twenty-second Annual Long Race to Welcome Spring. The race organizers awarded me 20 yuan, and the college gave me five for participating on its team. They also gave me one and a half yuan for undergoing the medical exam, which made me wonder how much I could have made if I had agreed to the chest X-ray. All told I cleared 26<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> yuan, which paid for two weeks of noodle lunches.

I was on the local TV news for the following week, and the next day’s paper featured a front-page story about the race. They reported that an American teacher from Missouri named H. Essler had participated, and there was a detailed description of the way I had warmed up before the start. They reported the excitement of the college representatives when I finished in first place, and they quoted one of the other top finishers, a young man from the medicine factory who said, “If this race had been right after my military training, I definitely would have beaten that foreigner.” The end of the article read:

*The competition also succeeded in establishing patriotism in sports. When our reporter asked, “What are your thoughts about a waiguoren finishing first?” a Trade School student named Xu Chengbo said: “To have a sports competition in a Chinese area and allow a waiguoren to take first place, I feel very ashamed. This gives us a wake-up call: Our students and adults need to improve the quality of their bodies, because if we improve our strength, we can be victorious!”... A Southwest Military School teacher said: “The waiguoren took the initiative, and that sort of spirit deserves to be studied. Only if we plunge into developing our bodies, and have more diligent and scientific training, will we see the day when we achieve the championship!”*

It wasn't exactly the reaction I had hoped for, although I wasn't surprised. There was a great deal of patriotism in Fuling, and sports always made these feelings particularly intense. ... Sometimes I wondered if it had been a bad idea to run in the race. A few of my Peace Corps friends thought that at least I shouldn't have tried to win. But I liked running races hard, just like many others in the competition, and I saw no reason to treat the people in Fuling like children. I wanted them to know that *waiguoren* were living in their city, and I wanted them to see that despite all my struggles with the language, there was at least one thing I could do well. If they reacted with shame, that was unfortunate, but perhaps when they grew to know me better it would be different. I figured it was a good sign that my certificate read, "Comrade He Wei."

A few days after the race, I had class with Teacher Liao, who beamed when we started the lesson.

"I saw on the department message board that you won the long race in Fuling!" she said. "I hadn't heard—why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not important," I said. "In fact, I didn't run very fast at all."

"Yes, you did!" she said, doubly pleased by my false modesty, which followed the appropriate Chinese custom. "That's a very big race—in all of Fuling City, you are the fastest person!"

"There are probably better athletes who didn't participate," I said. "And you know, Wang Junxia is still faster than me."

Wang Junxia was the Chinese woman distance runner who had recently won gold and silver medals in the Atlanta Olympics, and this reference made Teacher Liao even happier. She praised me again, and finally we settled down to a chapter on how to say goodbye. Either I did unusually well or she was in a particularly forgiving mood; on that day she hardly said *budui* at all.

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'RUNNING' (FROM *RIVER TOWN*)

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1994, two years after graduating from college, Peter Hessler traveled to China for the first time. Fascinated by the country, he applied to the Peace Corps in 1996 and asked to be assigned to China.

For two years he served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the remote city of Fuling, at the intersection of the Yangtze and Wu Rivers, in China's south-central Sichuan Province. Hessler and another Peace Corps Volunteer, his fellow-teacher Adam Meier, were the first Americans to live in Fuling since the 1949 Communist Revolution. Hessler taught English and American literature to students at Fuling Teachers College. Most of his students were from peasant homes, and after graduation, they planned to return to their hometowns to teach English in rural middle schools.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, Hessler kept a detailed journal of his experiences, with the goal of writing a book about China. The resulting book, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, won the 2001 Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize for Non-Fiction and the Paul Cowan Non-Fiction Award from PeaceCorpsWriters.org in 2002. Hessler lives in Beijing, where he writes for the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, and other publications.

## ABOUT THE STORY

“Running” is excerpted from Chapter Three of Peter Hessler’s memoir *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. Hessler describes his experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 1996 to 1998 in south-central China. He discusses his adjustment to life in China as a Peace Corps Volunteer and the challenges, in particular, of trying to understand and learn Chinese. Hessler describes his relationship with his Chinese language tutors and his determination to learn despite his discomfort with local teaching methods, which rely on criticism rather than praise. Hessler also addresses his participation in the Annual Long Race to Welcome Spring and how that challenge relates to his struggle to learn the language.

Dean Fu, in the story, is identified earlier in the memoir as Dean Fu Muyou, head of the English department at the college where Hessler taught.

## ABOUT THE SETTING

China, the fourth-largest country in the world in area (after Russia, Canada, and the United States) has a population of close to 1.3 billion. Beijing, the capital, has a population of more than 13 million; that is 5 million more than New York City and 9 million more than Los Angeles.

China is divided into 23 administrative provinces. It has one of the world’s longest rivers, the Yangtze, and it shares the world’s highest mountain range—the Himalayas—of which Mount Everest is a part. The climate ranges from desert to tropical to subarctic.

With one of the world’s oldest civilizations, China has a written history of more than 4,000 years. The country has had a long history of being wary of foreigners—and for much of its history it has been iso-

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX (see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 4, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14 (see pages 189–190)

### Enduring Understandings

- Learning the language of another culture helps in understanding that culture and in being accepted by the people.
- Cultures differ in their approaches to teaching and learning.
- Achieving one’s goals takes persistence and determination.

### Essential Questions

- What factors affect how hard it is to learn another language?
- Is learning another language worth the effort? Why, or why not?
- What does it feel like to be an outsider?
- What does it take “to belong”?

### Materials

Photocopies of story, Resource Sheet 1

### Assessment Tools

Class discussion, essays, news report, journals

lated from the outside world. To this day, the Chinese term for foreigner, *waiguoren*, has negative connotations in many places.

In 1993, the first Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in China to assist in a teacher-training project. Volunteers have taught at more than two dozen colleges and institutions across southwestern China. The primary goal of the English education project is to teach English to students at teacher-training colleges, who plan to become English teachers themselves upon graduation. To learn more about the work of Peace Corps Volunteers in China, go to the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

### ABOUT THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

A major portion of “Running” addresses how difficult it was for Hessler to learn Chinese—and his dogged determination to conquer the task. Students will better appreciate the author’s challenge if they understand the complexity of written and spoken Chinese.

The Chinese language encompasses seven major dialects. At the beginning of the 20th century, Mandarin Chinese, spoken in Beijing and its adjacent provinces, was mandated by the government to be China’s official spoken language. Seventy percent of China’s population speaks Mandarin Chinese. Other dialects, such as Cantonese and Shanghainese, are completely different spoken languages. Mandarin and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible. The

province of Sichuan, where Hessler lived, has its own dialect, Sichuanese, which was initially problematic for Hessler, since he had been trained in Mandarin Chinese.

Even without the issue of dialects, spoken Chinese is one of the most difficult languages for Westerners to learn. It is a tonal language, in which the tonal inflection of a word changes its meaning. Spoken Mandarin Chinese has four common tones, which can be applied to the same general sound to effect four different words and meanings.

Chinese also is difficult for Westerners because the written language is based not on an alphabet but on symbols, called characters. The Chinese language has more than 50,000 characters, most of which are known only to scholars. However, even reading a newspaper or a book requires a person to know between 3,000 and 5,000 characters.

About learning Chinese, Hessler wrote: “In good conscience I could not live there for two years and not learn how to speak Chinese. To me, this was as important as fulfilling my obligations as a teacher.”

## LESSON 1

### PURPOSE

- To examine the rigors involved in learning another language—particularly one as notoriously difficult as Chinese
- To compare aspects of Chinese culture, such as

teaching style and treatment of foreigners, with those in the United States

1. Have students skim the essay, recognizing that there are several sets of Chinese characters. Ask the students why they think the sets change in composition [from mostly Chinese characters to English words] through the course of the essay. Then have the class take Hessler's selection home to read overnight to be ready to work on it the next day. Although the story is the longest selection in this volume, students will profit from reading the piece straight through in order to balance the section on learning the language with the section on running.
2. Have students review the linguistic areas of China described by Hessler (see pages 49–51), and then ask one or two volunteers to come to a map at the front of the room to identify the areas of China in which Mandarin, Sechuan, and Shanghainese are spoken. On page 50, the author states that lack of development in road and rail transportation had resulted in vast regional differences in dialect. Ask students why that would be so. Even without the limitations imposed by rudimentary transportation, dialects can be remarkably distinct between adjacent, small regions. Can students identify such areas in the United States? [In New England, the Maine accent differs from that in New Hampshire, which, in turn, is distinct from dialects in Massachusetts. Even little Rhode Island has regional dialects distinct from those in neighboring states.]
3. Ask students what problems Hessler encountered in studying Chinese in Fuling. [The language has characters instead of an alphabet; the language is tonal; dialects differ from place to place; the teachers' philosophies were unsympathetic and unrewarding; local citizens made fun of his efforts in speaking the language.]
4. Ask why Hessler worked so diligently to learn the language, when he could get by with English and the little Chinese he already knew when he arrived. What are the author's incentives for learning the language?
5. What are the students' own experiences in learning a second or third language? How were their motivations similar to, or different from, Hessler's? Did their experience in being taught the language resemble Hessler's?
6. In class discussion, compare Hessler's experience learning Chinese with what the students imagine it must be like learning English. Students in your class from other cultures, who might actually be learning English as a second language, might add significantly to this discussion. What do students think might be the more difficult aspects of learning English? [Point out that, unlike English, Chinese is tonal and has characters rather than the English alphabet, and languages such as French, German, and Spanish have endings and forms that distinguish genders. Although English does not have those features, it is particularly difficult because it is often not pronounced as it is spelled, and similar spellings do not necessarily denote similar pronunciations. As an

## Standing Out in the Crowd

RUNNING (CONTINUED)

example, show students how “-ough” is pronounced differently in the words bough, cough, dough, rough, through, and hiccough. Also, there is a clever poem titled “The Chaos,” by Gerard Nolst Trenité, which illustrates extensively the vagaries of English pronunciation. The poem, which is likely to be popular among students, is available on the Web and can be located easily by searching for the alternate title “English Is Tough Stuff.”]

7. If you know a speaker of Chinese or speak Chinese yourself, introduce a lesson on Chinese language, especially tones and written characters. A speaker of Chinese could demonstrate tones and teach a few essential words.
8. Discuss with students how the local Chinese on the street treat the *waiguoren*, and why they act so rudely—from Hessler’s point of view. [Possibly because they have never seen a Westerner, and certainly a Westerner who speaks Chinese.] Do students think the people on the street consider their own behavior rude? How did Hessler respond to the pointing and shouting? How do the students think they themselves might have responded to being pointed at and shouted at?
9. Ask students how Hessler’s language teachers—Teacher Liao and Teacher Kong—differed from teachers he might have had in America. Do students think the Chinese teachers’ approach would work in the United States? Why, or why not?

## LESSON 2

## PURPOSE

To examine how the author’s penchant for running featured in his adjustment to the culture of Fuling and in his learning of the Chinese language

1. Identify students in the class who enjoy running as a sport or pastime, including any on the school track team. Ask them to think about and explain to the rest of the class why they run—the incentives, the sacrifices, the euphoria, the pain, the injuries, the rewards. See if you can elicit from the class some of the aspects of running that Hessler experienced: the personal satisfaction, the bolstering of self-confidence, the time for reflection, the privacy from the hubbub of daily routines, the sweetness of victory.
2. Ask the class what obstacles to racing Hessler faced. [Standing out in the crowd; dangers of large crowds on an unsafe course; consequences of possibly beating all the local competitors; the X-ray.] How does he address each issue?
3. How did the opening of the race strike the author? How was it different from those he had experienced in the United States? Why does he say about the start, “It was China”?
4. Why does the newspaper article about the race suggest that patriotism is an element of the competition? Do students think this is something peculiar to Chinese culture or does patriotism

feature in other sports? If students think that patriotism is common in sports, can they name sports and events in which patriotism has played a large role? [World Cup soccer; America's Cup sailing competition; Olympic events.]

5. Does the class think Hessler should have run the race? Should he have won, knowing how important winning was to the Chinese? Ask students to explain their opinions. What would the students have done in Hessler's place?
6. Have students write a short essay about a time they participated in a contest—any contest, for example, art, chess, writing, sports, spelling, math. Ask them to describe their motives; difficulties they had to overcome, including nervousness; their feelings before or during the competition; whether they won or lost; what difference, if any, the outcome made in their life.
7. Ask the class what difference there was for Hessler between his daily runs and the organized race in which he participated—on a personal level, in the community, in his relationship with Teacher Liao.
8. Much of the chapter called “Running” is actually devoted to the author's struggle to learn the Chinese language. Ask students to explain why Hessler chose to combine running and the challenge of studying the local language in the same chapter. What did running and studying have to do with each other for the author?

## LESSON 3

### PURPOSE

To examine the author's writing style and techniques to learn some effective strategies for description and for conveying mood

1. Have students take Hessler's selection home and study it in preparation for the next day's class. For homework, ask the students
  - To look for specific ways in which the author describes details of life in Fuling. Suggest that among other things to look for are how Hessler conveyed an idea of how dirty the air was and how noisy the automobile traffic was.
  - To identify particular ways in which the author measured progress in learning the language. [The propaganda signs slowly became comprehensible; his teachers began to change their attitude toward him; the characters on his pages took on meaning; his stack of flashcards grew ever thicker.]
  - To note how the author conveys his eventual adjustment to life in Fuling. [The scenes along his running route became familiar; he stopped noticing pollution and noise; he became friends with Teacher Kong.]
  - To find where the author foreshadows his victory in the race. [On page 59, he writes: “There was nobody in the city who could catch me.”]

## Standing Out in the Crowd

RUNNING (CONTINUED)

2. In a class discussion, ask students to offer observations about how Hessler achieved his vivid description of events and the atmosphere in Fuling. Note the students' points on the board.

Then have students write an essay of one page or less, incorporating quantitative and qualitative detail of observation in the style of Hessler. Although the class should be encouraged to write about whatever comes to mind, you might prompt students who have a hard time starting with the following topics: My Most Uncomfortable Day; Adjusting Wasn't Easy; Wow, Did I Ever Feel Different; The Day Everything Felt New. Ask them to limit their choice of topics to one they will be comfortable sharing with the class.

Allow students to trade papers and critique each other constructively before polishing their efforts. Have a few volunteers read their essays to the class, and post the essays on a bulletin board for students to read at their leisure.

- Would there have been an advantage in letting a Chinese person win?
- What would you have done in the race in Hessler's place?
- How did Hessler feel about winning the race?
- How did the Chinese press feel about Hessler's victory? How did his teachers feel?

2. Point out to students that every story can be interpreted from more than one perspective. Tell them you would like them to practice thinking about the story from an American person's perspective and from a Chinese person's perspective.

Ask students to act as newspaper reporters covering the story of Hessler's race for the next day's edition of their local newspapers. But before distributing press cards (and thereby identifying for students which perspective they will adopt), have them fill out the pre-writing graphic organizer on Resource Sheet 1, at right. In a class discussion, ask students for their ideas on first the American perspective and then the Chinese perspective. During the discussion, ask students to take notes in their graphic organizers in preparation for writing their individual articles. This pre-writing activity should assist them when they write their articles.

3. Randomly distribute copies of the press cards on the next spread—one to a student, thereby identifying which students will adopt which perspective.

## LESSON 4

### PURPOSE

To practice thinking about an issue from different perspectives

1. Begin by reviewing with the class their responses to the questions they have addressed previously:
  - Should Hessler have run the race?

**RESOURCE SHEET 1**

**PRE-WRITING GRAPHIC ORGANIZER**

*Directions: Brainstorm ideas as a class and write notes below for an article.*

**Important Things About the Race  
From an American Reporter's  
Perspective**

**Important Things About the Race  
From a Chinese Reporter's  
Perspective**

## Standing Out in the Crowd

RUNNING (CONTINUED)

4. Now ask the students to write up their articles on their own, as reporters from either America or China. As an aid, provide them with the checklist, below right, of writing criteria to incorporate in their compositions.

The articles will take some time to write. Depending on how much time you have, you may want to have students discuss their articles in another class period to examine how the American perspective compares with the Chinese perspective and to obtain feedback for revision and editing purposes.

5. **Concluding Journal Activity.** Ask students to respond to the following prompts:

- What were Hessler’s specific goals in going to China? [He states them early on.] How important do you think it is to set personal goals? Why?
- How far would you be willing to go to achieve your goals? As far as Hessler?
- What new perspective have you gained on life or on the world as a result of reading “Running”?

PRESS CARD

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Yangtze Gazette*

PRESS CARD

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*The American Chronicle***CHECKLIST FOR WRITERS  
OF ARTICLES ABOUT THE RACE**

- The article has a lead sentence that captures the reader’s attention (for example, a quote from one of the onlookers, a quote from Hessler, or a startling statistic).
- The article answers the questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why?
- The article contains quotations from a variety of people (for example, onlookers; Hessler’s teachers; the mayor of Fuling; Hessler’s roommate, Adam).
- Language is simple and direct, not flowery.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

1. Imagine that you are Hessler and write a letter home to a friend explaining your life in China as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Include both facts and feelings.
2. Write a poem or song capturing the essence of the story “Running.”
3. Working with a partner, create a script that can be used to dramatize for the class one of the events in “Running.”
4. Draw an 8-block cartoon depicting the events in “Running.”
5. **Service Learning**
  - Investigate the organizations in your community that help immigrants adjust to American life.
  - Check into the ways your school helps immigrants or new students feel accepted. What can students do to help?
  - Suggest that students join a walk or a run to raise money for a charity of their choice.

## Generations Apart

### SOCCER UNTIL DUSK

by Mark Brazaitis

Peace Corps Volunteer, Guatemala (1991–1993)

My father laughs when I tell him  
how in Santa Cruz Verapaz  
men quit work at noon, and after lunch  
play soccer until dusk.

My father is a reporter,  
follows senators around,  
sits in the White House press room;  
the president calls him by name.



In 30 years, he has written thousands of stories,  
small testaments to the lives of other men.  
Before he divorced my mother,  
before computers,  
he would go afternoons into the den,  
sit at his desk,  
and type deep into the night.  
I would fall asleep to the rhythmic thwack of keys,  
my bedtime song.  
From time to time he complained about working too hard,  
spoke of wanting an alternative to 12-hour days.  
In the months after the divorce, when our lives  
seemed to have been sliced open like fruits,  
spilling our secret juices,  
he saw Gandhi and thought of giving everything,  
house and car and savings, to my mother.

*(Continued on next page)*

## VOCABULARY

**Testaments:** tributes; statements about something's worth

**Gandhi:** a 1982 film about the life of Mohandas Gandhi, who used nonviolence to bring about the independence of India. Gandhi's philosophy stressed service to others and the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty. Gandhi lived a simple life with few material possessions.

When I tell my father about the men playing soccer,  
he follows his laugh with a stern look,  
as if to ask whether I think kicking off work after half a day  
and chasing a ball around a field  
is any way a man should spend his life.  
I don't argue; I never have.  
Instead, I remember how I followed Pablo  
and his father one afternoon to the stadium,  
sat in the concrete stands as the men huddled,  
picked sides.  
I could have played; I'd been invited.  
But soccer had never been my game,  
so I watched as the men ran up and down the field,  
their shirts off, their backs lit up by the sun,  
and listened to their curses and shouts  
as I would to a piece of exotic music,  
strange sounds from another world.

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'SOCCER UNTIL DUSK'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Brazaitis served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the small town of Santa Cruz Verapaz, Guatemala, from 1991 to 1993. In his essay “‘Magic’ Pablo,” Brazaitis described Santa Cruz Verapaz as a remote farming community, lacking many of the conveniences of the urban capital, Guatemala City. (To read “‘Magic’ Pablo” and accompanying lesson plans, see the Peace Corps publication *Voices From the Field* on the World Wise Schools website: [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/guides/voices](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/guides/voices).)

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, Brazaitis taught English to high school students and trained local farmers in the use of advanced agricultural techniques. The author of the widely acclaimed *The River of Lost Voices: Stories From Guatemala*, Brazaitis received the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award. He was a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow, and his stories, poems, and essays have appeared in the *Sun*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Shenandoah*, and other literary journals. His writing has also appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *Detroit Free Press*. Brazaitis teaches English at West Virginia University.

### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1,2 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV (see page 188)

**National Geography Standard:** 10 (see page 189)

#### Enduring Understanding

- The concept of time differs among cultures.

#### Essential Questions

- How does our culture influence the way we choose to spend time?
- Why do some people choose to work more than they have to?
- What makes a well-balanced life?
- What can be learned from the way people in other cultures view and spend time?

**Note:** This poem provides an apt comparison with the story “The Meaning of Time” (see page 10). Both pieces explore how culture influences the way people use time, and both provide contrasts between life in the United States and in other cultures. Just as the pace of life in Guinea is slow moving, so too is it in Santa Cruz Verapaz, Guatemala—the setting of “Soccer Until Dusk.” Generally speaking, in these cultures, taking enough time to greet people, to talk with them, or to help them is considered more important than rushing to be on time for a meeting or another event. And the efficient use of time, in general, is much less important there than in many industrialized cultures.

#### Materials

Photocopies of poem

#### Assessment Tools

Class discussions, journal entries, extended written responses to the poem

**ABOUT THE POEM**

In “Soccer Until Dusk,” Brazaitis reflects on the stark differences between the life his father chose and that of the men who gather after lunch each day in Santa Cruz Verapaz to play soccer all afternoon. Brazaitis describes his father as a White House reporter who finds it difficult to comprehend the relaxed work ethic that exists in the small Guatemalan village. The author compares his father’s ambitious career with his own fond remembrance of the leisurely afternoon soccer games he watched as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

**ABOUT THE SETTING**

Guatemala is the most populous of the Central American countries. Almost 14 million people live there in an area about the size of Tennessee. Guatemala has coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

More than half of Guatemalans are descendants of the Maya. Many are of mixed Spanish and other European descent. Although many live in rural areas, urbanization is steadily increasing as rural Guatemalans seeking employment move into cities. Nearly 1.5 million live in the capital, Guatemala City. Throughout the country, there is a contrast between the old and the new. In the capital, home to major television stations and newspapers, there are skyscrapers, supermarkets, and streets crowded with cars and buses. In contrast, Santa Cruz Verapaz, the rural town of 4,000 people where Brazaitis served as a Volunteer, had few modern conveniences.

The Peace Corps program in Guatemala, which began in 1963, is one of the agency’s oldest. Nearly 4,000 Volunteers have served in Guatemala. Volunteers are focusing their efforts on helping rural communities move from subsistence to small-scale commercial agriculture, manage and conserve natural resources, improve health and nutrition,

and increase off-farm incomes. To learn more about the work of the Peace Corps in Guatemala, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

## LESSON 1

### PURPOSE

- To help interpret the meaning of the poem “Soccer Until Dusk”
  - To explore the influence of culture on how people use time
1. A day or two before you address the poem, videotape a segment from a national news program featuring a journalist reporting from Washington, D.C., preferably from the White House. Show the video clip in the classroom and ask students how they think one would go about getting a job similar to this reporter’s. Ask whether they think they’d like a job like this.
  2. Using the information from the overview, introduce the author, the poem, and the setting. Have students locate Guatemala on a world map. If students have not heard of the Peace Corps, provide background information from pages 8 and 9.
  3. Have students read silently the first two pages of the poem. Then read the poem aloud to the same point. Discuss this section of the poem, addressing the following questions. Ask students to cite evidence from the text to support their opinions.
    - What are the positive aspects of the father’s job?
    - What clues does the poem give about the effect of a reporter’s job on the author’s parents’ marriage? On the father’s relationship with his son? On the father himself?
    - Why does the father work such long hours?
    - How does Brazaitis view his father’s job? What evidence do you see for your opinion?
    - Who was Gandhi?
    - Why does the movie about Gandhi affect the father? Do you think the father gave his possessions away as he considered doing?
  4. Have students read the rest of the poem silently. Then read it aloud to them, with cadence and feeling. Have the class discuss this section of the poem, using some or all of the following prompts:
    - Describe the soccer games that the men of Guatemala play in the afternoons.
    - Why does the father give Brazaitis “a stern look” when Brazaitis tells him about the games?
    - Why does Brazaitis call his surroundings “another world”? What world is he referring to?
    - If students have read “The Meaning of Time” (see

## Generations Apart

page 10), ask them how they think the culture of Santa Cruz Verapaz, described by Brazaitis, compares to the culture of Guinea, described by Kimberly Ross Camara.

- How do you think the men playing soccer view time?
5. Read aloud the following line from Kimberly Ross Camara's description of life in the United States compared with life in Guinea.

*In the U.S., life tends to be fast paced and always changing. Also, we Americans generally put work before play. Guinean customs and perspectives of the world are almost the complete opposite of ours. Life is slow moving and things rarely follow a set schedule.*

Ask students if they can think of reasons some cultures are more task-oriented and work-driven than others. Why do some people choose to work more than they have to? In some cultures, do people have a choice over how much time they spend working? Do people struggling to emerge from poverty and to provide for their families in the United States and other cultures have a choice over how much time they spend at work?

6. **Journal Activity.** Ask students to respond in their journals to the following questions:
- In focusing on work the way Brazaitis's father does, what is gained? What is lost?
  - In focusing on leisure time the way the men play-

ing soccer do, what is gained? What is lost?

- What do you think Brazaitis wanted you to be thinking about as he wrote this poem?
- How do you think he was feeling about his father? About Guatemala? About the soccer players?

Have students compare their journal responses in small groups. Then conduct a class discussion focused on these questions.

7. **Journal Activity.** For homework, ask students to select the two or three lines in the poem that had the strongest impact on them and to describe in their journals the thoughts, feelings, and questions these lines evoked. Model to the class what you'd like students to do by doing a "think-aloud" demonstration for the class. For example, tell the class you chose the lines, "I don't argue; I never have. / Instead, I remember how I followed Pablo / And his father one afternoon to the stadium." Then say to the class something like this:

*These lines make me wonder why Brazaitis doesn't tell his father he disagrees with him. They make me wonder whether Brazaitis thinks his father will never change. I wonder whether Brazaitis changed his attitude toward work as a result of the time he spent in Guatemala. What if his father had gone to Guatemala? I wonder if he would have changed his attitude toward work. This makes me ask myself: How do we know when we've worked hard enough? How do we know when we've played enough?*

## LESSON 2

### PURPOSE

To explore the kinds of choices students will make about their use of time

1. Begin by posing the following questions in class and holding a discussion with the students.
  - How would you define a workaholic?
  - Is Brazaitis's father a workaholic?
  - Do you think workaholics exist in all cultures, or is this an American phenomenon? How would you go about finding out the answer to this question?
  - Why might someone choose to live his or her life as a workaholic?
  - Do most Americans approve of people who seem to devote themselves to work over all else? Do you approve? If so, why? If not, why not?
  - Do you think the workers in Guatemala should work longer hours?
  - Why do the Guatemalan men in the poem choose to play soccer all afternoon?
  - Considering economic conditions that exist in Guatemala (and other developing countries), do you think these men have a choice about how much time they spend at work? What role could the unemployment rate in Guatemala play?
2. Ask the class to consider the statement: "We are shaped by the values of the culture in which we live." Have the class discuss in what ways this statement applies to the characters in Brazaitis's poem: the father; the soccer players; Brazaitis himself. In what ways does the statement apply to the students themselves?
3. **Journal Activity.** Ask students to free-write in their journals for several minutes on the following topic:
 

What makes a well-balanced life?
4. Have students form groups of five or six. Provide each group with a large piece of chart paper and felt-tipped colored markers. Ask students to make a pie chart in which they allocate sections of the pie to specific ways they think time might be spent for a well-balanced life. To get started, you can provide the students with this list: work, play, friendships, family life, physical fitness, service to others, self-improvement, relaxation, religion.
  - Before they begin drawing their pie charts, ask students to imagine that they are adults 15 years in the future. Have students debate with their group members the percentage of adult time that might be allocated to some of the items for a well-balanced life. Ask students to ensure they have reasons to support their choices.
  - Point out that since it may be difficult to reach agreement, they should try to work through their differences through both careful listening

## Generations Apart

and open-minded discussion. Assign group members roles, so that the discussion is not dominated by one or two vocal people. Roles can be discussion facilitator, mediator, summarizer, recorder, reporter.

When the groups have finished their charts, ask them to show their results to the rest of the class, explaining the reasoning behind their choices.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

1. Ask students to think about a person they know who has a full-time job. This can be someone they know personally or someone they have learned about through the media. Have them list 10 significant details about the person and the person's job. Then have them write a poem about that person, using "Soccer Until Dusk" as a model.
2. Students can learn more about Brazaitis's experience in Guatemala by reading his short story "Magic' Pablo" in the Peace Corps publication *Voices From the Field*. You can find this story and the lesson plans based on it at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/guides/voices](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/guides/voices). After students have read "Magic' Pablo," ask them to describe what more they have learned about the culture of

Guatemala. What more do they know about the author? Do they have more thoughts as to why the author might have chosen to write "Soccer Until Dusk"?

3. Use this poem as a starter for a research paper on future careers. The students should understand how the choice of a career affects other aspects of life. As part of their research, ask students to consider these questions:
  - What is most important to me?
  - What will make me happiest in life?
  - What personal values will influence my career choice?

## HELP! MY FATHER IS COMING!

by Jim Toner

Peace Corps Volunteer, Sri Lanka (1989–1991)

(Excerpted from Chapter One in *Serendib*)

I didn't invite him.

The idea was all my father's, my 74-year-old father who had never been outside America and who suddenly thought that Sri Lanka, where I was a Peace Corps Volunteer, would be a jolly place to visit. He didn't know where it was, though he'd heard of its former name, Ceylon. He didn't know about the hepatitis and typhoid shots he'd have to get. And he certainly didn't know [about] its two civil wars.

"You're coming?" I asked him over the phone. "Are you kidding?"

"Kidding? Sounds like a real adventure to me. Monkeys, parrots, all those monk fellows wandering around. Malone, he's been there. He tells me there's elephants strolling the boulevards like shoppers. Say Jimmy, should I bring a tie?"

"Dad, maybe you ought to—"

"And cobras! No cobras here in Cleveland, Jimmy. Now Malone, he tells me to bring over my Irish flute, conjure those little buggers right out of their holes. How about my Hush Puppies? Think I'll be needing them, or should I just go with the wingtips? I'm figuring a tie doesn't take up much space and well, whadya think, Jimmy?"

My wife, Cindy, sitting next to me in the Peace Corps office in the capital city of Colombo, jumped up and clapped. "He's coming? He's really coming?"



I held my hand over the receiver and told her again that I thought the idea was trouble, big trouble. “He’s old and he hates heat, and, God, what could I even say to the guy for—”

“Jimmy? Jimmy, are you still there? Listen, I know the Hush Puppies may not be the most practical choice. But they sure are comfortable as slippers, and my bunions, jeez, they’re acting up these days, and so ...”

And on he went. But I was barely listening. My head was filled with the preposterous image of my father on Sri Lankan soil. I reminded him about how genuinely bleak and violent this place really was: Sure, Dad, come on over and see two civil wars up close. Go get those typhoid shots and then come face-to-face with the malaria and the rabid dogs, the buses without brakes, the suffocating tropical heat. There are wooden beds waiting for your bony hips, Dad, and no English, and no toilet paper, and no forks—but enough snakes to fill up your nightmares. So come. Come where the cockroach is king. Come spend 700 uninterrupted hours with the last of your seven kids, the one you vaguely know and who vaguely knows you. For the first time in your life, leave America. Come, Dad. Come to the other side of the planet.

“Dad, I’m just a bit worried—”

“Jimmy, we’ve all got our problems. Jeez, I’m driving your mother nuts sitting around here all day, and with all this retirement money I thought about Florida. Florida, Sri Lanka—it doesn’t matter to your mother. She’s just tickled pink to be getting me out of her hair for a bit.”

“Save me, Jimmy. Save me now.” It was my mom.

“Hi, Mom. How’s life in Cleveland?”

“Jimmy, your father’s driving me nuts. Get this: He’s starting to vacuum. Can you imagine your father with a vacuum? And last night, get this: He decides to cook us dinner. First time in his life. So what does the nut make? Tomato soup. Straight from a can.”

“With crackers,” my dad said. “Cheese flavored.”

“Thinks he’s a chef now, the royal nut. Time to get him out of my hair before we both get shipped to the loony bin.”

My dad said, “Now listen, don’t you let me upset your life over there. You just keep on working and ... Hey, what is it you kids do over there, anyhow?”

I rolled my eyes. For the hundredth time over the course of the past two years I repeated, “Teachers, Dad. We’re *teachers!*”

“Jimmy, that’ll be some kind of a treat to see you kids up in a classroom. Say, you folks got computers over there? I understand they’re all the rage these days.”

“Computers? Dad, we don’t even have books or enough desks, and the goats keep eating the chalk. And most of the time the schools are shut down, anyway—you know, that little inconvenience of a civil war. You’ll be lucky to catch us in action at all.”

It was true. We had an official job title as Peace Corps Volunteers—“English teachers” to Sri Lankan adults preparing to become teachers.

“Hey, Dad,” I said, “we’re really *overjoyed* you’re coming here”—Cindy snorted at my lie—“but, you know, are you sure you’re up for all these bugs and heat and all that war stuff I’ve told you about?”

“Aw, heck, Malone tells me—you know Malone, Gus Malone, fella who works at the court? He’s been to that Sir Lanker place—”

“Sri, Dad. It’s ‘*Sri Lanka*.’ At least get that much straight.”

It was too late for me to deter him from coming to a place where he really didn’t belong, a place too primitive and too hazardous for anyone’s father. His was a world of the microwaved potato and the sanitized toilet bowl, of leather recliners and automatic garage-door openers, of air conditioning and cruise control. But maybe, just maybe, he

was tired of it all. Maybe he sensed that a lifetime of storm windows and neon-blue bug zappers had kept him disconnected from nature too long. Maybe in coming to Sri Lanka he was questioning whether all those protections had been necessary after all.

In a few minutes my dad would step through that customs door and be the responsibility of this teacher and rather dull boy for the next 700 hours. I turned that figure over in my head: *seven hundred* consecutive uninterrupted hours. That is a lot of time. I worried that if the snakes and heat and intestinal worms didn't get to him, then simple boredom with me might do him in.

## THE VISIT TO VIJAY'S

by Jim Toner

(Excerpted from Chapter Six in *Serendib*)

The path to Vijay's house was overrun with lemon grass as tall as our eyes. My father and I thrashed through it, unable to see two feet ahead of us until we reached a clearing. There we saw a Tamil family frozen at the impossible sight of us, two tall, white, hairy, blue-eyed men. All of them were crammed into two railroad boxcars called line houses. The British had installed them a century ago to shelter the thousands of southern Indians imported to pick tea. Today, the Sinhalese government did little to improve their situation. Jobs, roads, schools, houses, medicine—the Tamil tea picker living on the sides of these steep hills was sure to get nothing, especially during this heightened stage of civil war. They were the shadow people of Sri Lanka, the poorest and the least educated, the most isolated and the most ridiculed. Even the civil war wasn't interested in these ragged hills. In this and many ways, these Tamils regarded themselves as invisible to the outside world, so that whenever Cindy and I would greet them with wanacome (the Tamil version of ayubowan), they'd be astonished that we had noticed them at

all. I ached at their neglect, and I knew how much a greeting from my dad would mean to them, bearing the multiple status of old and white and male and American—plus he was a guest.

“Just try it, Dad. It’s easy: *Wanacome*.”

“No, no. Don’t start in with the language lessons now.”

“Just pretend you’re a barber back in Cleveland asking for a comb. ‘Hey, you *want a comb?*’ Get it? *Want a comb, wanacome*. Give it a try.”

“Listen, Jimmy. All I want to try now is a bed. I’m exhausted.”

The entire family stood mesmerized as we walked by. Out of respect for us they stayed inside their boxcars, their blue-black faces filling the windows and the open door. The only one left outside was a deformed girl sitting on the ground, rocking herself in the shadow of a tree. Suddenly a little boy sprinted out from the house toward us, offering a mango, until his father snatched him up in midair and spanked him all the way back inside.

From across the valley came the noon broadcast of the Muslim call to prayer. My dad, walking backward to keep an eye on the Tamil family, paid no attention to the music of the prayer. Instead he stepped square into a mound of cow dung and, until I redirected him, was nearly skewered on the horn of a water buffalo. A mongrel dog bared its fangs at him. A woman who was scraping up the dung to use as fuel threw a coconut shell at the dog, then bowed to my father and slid away into the tall lemon grass. My dad tipped his Indians cap at her, but the grass had already swallowed her up.

We saw Vijay’s five sisters before they saw us. They were sitting toboggan-style on their front porch, each searching for ticks in the other’s hair. My dad knew what they were up to.

“Say, Jim,” he said, tightening his baseball cap, “aren’t those hair bugs able to jump?”

## VOCABULARY

**Lemon grass:** A coarse, tall grass that smells like lemon and is often used in Southeast Asian cooking

**Tamil:** [TAM-uhl] A member of Sri Lanka’s largest minority ethnic group. Tamils make up about 18 percent of the population.

**Sinhalese:** [sin-ha-LEEZ] A member of the majority ethnic group of Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese make up about 74 percent of the population.

**Wanacome:** An important Tamil greeting in Sri Lanka, which means “the god in me welcomes the god in you”

**Ayubowan:** An important Sinhalese greeting

**Mesmerized:** Awestruck; spellbound; captivated

**Skewer:** To pierce with a long pin or object

“Yeah, but just short distances.”

“That’s the only distance I care about right now. From Delaware to Louisiana, I don’t care, but head to head, that’s suddenly my business.”

When we entered their yard all five girls darted inside. Vijay’s mother then shuffled out to greet us, wiping her hands on the skirt of her sari. Her five daughters followed closely behind, their eyes on the ground. A couple of hens squawked out of the way and ran into the house. I thought I heard a goat screeching inside one of the two outhouses.

Vijay emerged from indoors, smiling and enthusiastic, his arms spread wide. “Jim and Mr. Jim’s father! Oh, this is the greatest of honors to have you visit my house.”

We embraced. I could see up close that his 22-year-old face, black and hairless, was already wrinkled from the burden of being the eldest son in a family without a father. His family managed to live on his meager salary as a teacher, earned from three months teaching Sinhala to Peace Corps Volunteers, then nine months teaching every subject to tea plantation children. Though talented and bright, Vijay could reach no higher position in this country that based promotions more on race than on merit.

He introduced us to his family. They were all on their knees, bent at the waist, hands together in prayer. To them we were gods—not just demigods, but manifestations of real gods. As Vijay went down the line introducing his sisters to us, I instructed my dad to touch their heads lightly with his fingertips. He whispered to me that he would do no such thing.

“Dad, please. It’s their custom, and if you don’t they’ll see it as an insult.”

“Yeah, well, I’m in no hurry to make friends with those hair critters. Besides, whatever happened to the handshake?”

His uneasiness was a revelation to me. The slippery art of the introduc-

tion, which he had mastered as a Cleveland judge, now confounded him here in Sri Lanka. For years he had been the smooth one, and when I accompanied him to political rallies or funerals (especially funerals; the Irish can't get enough of those funerals), he would meet new people with grace and ease. He remembered names. He knew how to touch elbows, how to tilt at the waist, how to lilt his voice. "Clair! Clair Kennedy!" he'd say, his two hands gloving her one. "My oh my, Clair, your brother and me went back to the days at Cathedral Latin when ..." Eventually he'd get around to introducing me, panicked and blinking, overwhelmed as if Clair were delivering a baby on the spot. To Clair, whose name I had forgotten the moment I heard it, I would extend my limp, clammy hand, and look away.

Here on this hillside of tea, then, I rather liked my dad's distress. I wanted him to feel like slithering into the lemon grass.

Eventually, after more nudging from me, my dad touched the daughters' heads as if each were a hot stove. When he stood before the mother, she looked up into his eyes and, pressing her hands together beneath her chin, said, "*Wanacome*." My dad's hands came halfway together. His lips moved into some vague shape of "*wanacome*," though it could have likely been "want a hairbrush."

Vijay led us indoors, kicking a chicken out of his way. My father and I ducked our heads beneath the entrance and then stood in the four-room house, its walls and floor made of mud, its roof of asbestos sheeting.

He peeked his head into the dark rooms to scout the horrors awaiting him here, like whether his bed for the night would be made from a hollowed-out cow. All seemed fine for the moment. Then he saw a table of food covered with newspapers dotted with hundreds of flies. While backing away in disgust, he bumped his head into a bizarre decoration hanging from the ceiling. It was Vijay's art, an IV tube that he had twisted and knotted into the image of a fish. It too was black with flies, all rising when my father knocked the fish with his head. For a

## VOCABULARY

**Sari:** A style of dress—a long piece of cloth wrapped around the body and draped over the shoulder—worn by women in India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan

**Sinhala:** [sin-HAH-luh] The official language of Sri Lanka, spoken by the Sinhalese

**Tea plantation children:** Children whose parents work as tea-pickers (who earn little money)

**Demigod:** A godlike person

few seconds the flies buzzed madly around my dad's head like electrons, then settled back down on the fish.

"Holy God," he growled, swatting the air. "How did I end up in this stockyard at my age?"

Vijay led us into the kitchen to meet his grandmother. We peered in from the doorway, adjusting our eyes to the dimness and the smoke. In the far corner, lit by a small fire, squatted the grainy shape of an old woman. She was cutting vegetables in the Sri Lankan way: anchoring the knife on the ground between her splayed toes, blade side up, and swiftly moving the onion across the blade with her hands.

"Now that's a new one," my dad whispered to me. "Never thought you could use a knife like that, turned upside-down. Here I go a whole lifetime thinking there's only one way to cut an onion. Jimmy, remind me to tell your mother about this one."

The grandmother's toes made fresh imprints in the layer of cow dung spread thinly across the mud floor. She glanced up at us, the gold hoop in her nostril glinting in the firelight. My dad tipped his Indians cap to her. She stared at him, stared a little longer and a little more deeply, then turned her shoulder into the corner of the room and spat red betel juice into a tin can. She hid her mouth behind a flap of sari and resumed cutting.

I looked at her and my father. What was happening here in the doorway, between light and dark, between civilizations, between centuries? Though of the same age, what could this woman be to my dad: more mushroom than woman? More dung and darkness than a lady with wit and fire? In that moment when their eyes met, what secret language did they exchange?

"I have to sit," my dad said. A hen ran out from beneath the grandmother's sari, squawking. "I have to sit *now*. Better yet, can you find me a bed?"

Vijay, worried about his hospitality, asked if he could get my dad some water or tea. “Or food. Perhaps the sir needs some rice or *wadees* or—”

“Sleep. All I need is a little catnap, Vijoo.”

“Dad, it’s ‘Vijay.’”

“Vijay, Vijoo—whatever. All I know is that I’ve been put through the wringer all day, so just point me to the nearest bed and clear the way.”

En route to the bedroom my dad once again hit his head against the plastic fish, releasing the flies. Swatting and cursing he bumped into the table of food, jarring all those flies resting on the newspaper into orbit around his head. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” he cursed, beating the air. “May God in heaven give me strength.”

I closed the bedroom door behind him. Vijay motioned me over to the front window, where we stood watching his little sisters outside mimicking my dad, wildly swatting imaginary flies. They laughed so hard that they all fell down. “I’m sorry, Jim,” Vijay said, “if we disrespect your ... your ...” But he too started to giggle, then to laugh hysterically, and so did I, though I think my laughter came more from the pleasure of seeing these people full of joy in a time when joy was scarce.

Vijay and I sat and talked. While catching up on our lives we let our fingers entwine around each other’s in the custom of good Sri Lankan friends—strictly male to male, that is, or female to female. Eventually our discussion led to Ranji.

“I have seen her, Jim,” Vijay whispered. “For the last couple of weeks, every day we meet while her father is cutting rice.”

“Does he know? The father?”

“I’m sure he does but she doesn’t care.” For a year Vijay had been in love with a woman whose father had already chosen her mate. Vijay, too, had an arranged partner, though as the eldest son he first had to

## VOCABULARY

**Splay:** To spread apart

**Wadee:** A hamburger-sized clump of fried lentils or beans

**Betel:** The betel palm bears a fruit called the betel nut, which many people in Southeast Asia chew for its mild stimulant effect.

wait until all five sisters were married. If Vijay broke all the rules and did marry Ranji, both families would banish them, a consequence too grave in this small, religious society. He tightened his fingers around mine. "I must be with her, Jim. I must be with her or I die. I know it is not right for her, for my sisters, for our ..."

One of Vijay's sisters entered the room, kneeling at his feet for permission to leave the house. After he lightly touched her head, she backed out of the room without raising her eyes, her front always facing us.

"For that sister, for the others, I must wait," Vijay said. "But how many more years must I wait for my freedom? Ten? Fifteen? And then my wife is *chosen* for me. Do you see how I am trapped, Jim? Do you see how in my world Ranji is an impossibility but Ranji is all that I want?"

Another sister, barefoot and eyes down, drifted in with a tray of tea and *wadees*. Flies dotted her arms like freckles, and as she turned to leave, the scent of kitchen smoke and *wadee* grease rose off her sari.

"You in America have it right," Vijay said between sips of tea. "You are free to do what *you* want, not what your mother or your culture tells you to do. It is primitive, this system. Imagine: You meet Cindy and you love Cindy and then you *can't* marry her because your parents have a strange woman chosen for you, a woman you've *never* seen before. This is barbaric. Why does God put love inside of us if not to be used? Is it only for suffering that God makes me love Ranji and she love me?"

"But, Vijay, look how love fails in America." I explained what I had often told Sri Lankans, that America is not the love paradise Vijay may think it is, that it is a land of disillusionment and divorce and families spread thousands of miles apart. "Over here these arranged marriages seem to work. The partners stay together and love usually grows between them."

“It is a business arrangement, Jim. It gives me a business partner, not Ranji, the woman I love. It places business above love, and I cannot live that way. This is torture for me. This is not life for me.”

The highest suicide rate in Asia belongs to Sri Lanka, almost all because of this situation Vijay was in. These young, trapped lovers most often swallowed DDT, the pesticide banned in America but sold by American companies to Sri Lankan farmers.

“So, Jim, I must ask you again to help me get to America. You see that I have no future here. Find me a university, a job, any job. I will work in your McDonald’s. I’ll do anything.”

“You know I’ll never do that, Vijay.” He knew my stance on the immigration topic: I wouldn’t contribute to the “brain drain” of Sri Lanka’s brightest, even though I was badgered daily by desperate Sri Lankans and offered plenty of bribes. Personally, I wanted Vijay alongside me in America, hiking in Yosemite and shelling peanuts at a baseball game. But to do so would dishonor the Peace Corps and wound his sisters, his students, and his Tamil community at a time when they most needed him. I was there to celebrate and reinforce his culture, not to chip it away. “I’m doing you a favor by doing nothing, Vijay.”

“I know, I know. And I respect you and I know I belong here, with my people. But look at it this way: Who’s going to introduce *wadees* to America if I don’t come over? And who’s going to teach your father how to make fish out of IV tubes?”

My father! I suddenly remembered that I had a father in the next room. I rose to check on him, concerned that the flies might have nibbled through to his intestines while he slept. When I peered into his room, however, I saw that my dad had solved the fly problem for the Third World napper. He had covered himself from head to toe with newspapers like the food on the table.

## VOCABULARY

**brain drain:** the departure of experts from a country, often through emigration

“Vijay,” I whispered, “come here and see an American judge in all his glory. Call your sisters, too.”

Together the seven of us watched from the door, pinching our noses to keep from laughing at this body shrouded in newspaper. The paper crackled with the rising and falling of his breath. Gradually, his hand slid down from his stomach and dangled limp near the floor, his rosary still encircling his wrist. A couple of flies landed on his thumb.

“Holy God,” he moaned, flicking his fingers. He returned his hand to his chest and murmured some prayers in time with the clicking of his rosary.

We all snickered. But at this moment, seeing my dad on a hard wooden bed, his body wrapped in paper like meat from a butcher's, I couldn't help but love the old guy. In such weak, exposed moments I loved him the most. My pinched snicker nearly made the short leap to tears, and all I wanted to do was toss aside the newspaper and fan my father like a pharaoh, all day and all night.

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We returned to our chairs and soon heard my dad stirring. The newspaper rustled, the wood slats creaked, my dad pleaded to God, and soon he was standing before Vijay and me with his pants twisted to one side and his hair tousled high and wild. He wagged a finger at both of us.

“Think I didn't hear you in there, laughing at your old man like that?” His serious expression gave way to a laugh. “I wish I could've seen it myself, me, and a bedsheet made of the day's news. If you ask me it's a pretty clever fly repellent. Now, Jimmy, don't you be babbling about this back home or Malone, he'll get wind of it and it's yammer yammer yammer up and down the courthouse halls. I can hear that jackass now.”

I was glad he was in a good mood because we were about to eat, a cultural experience that was sure to set him back. My dad and I sat down at the table, the cane on the seat of our chairs creaking beneath our

weight. I didn't trust the frayed cane, so I sat on the wooden edge and left fate to deal with my dad.

No one ate with us. Vijay's mother and sisters would eat later in the kitchen squatting on inch-high benches; Vijay would follow us at the table. But for now the entire family had the single-minded duty of serving us. They brought in plates of curried vegetables in coconut milk, saffron rice with cashews and raisins, fish, fruit, avocados, and tea, all laid on a new tablecloth which I'm sure Vijay's mother had sewn just for our arrival. Once our plates were full, the entire family stood against the walls waiting for our next need.

My dad elbowed me. "Where are the forks?"

"Attached to your wrists."

"Wrists? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You use your fingers, Dad. Just pretend you're eating a hamburger or pizza. You wouldn't want a fork for a burger, would you?"

He looked at his plate. "This here is no juicy burger, believe you me. Malone, I remember him telling me all about this. Told me to bring my own fork wherever I went. 'Bring a dozen, John,' he said, 'or else you'll come home with food stuck under your nails for months.'" He lowered his eyes to the plate. "I just hope there's nothing moving in there. Malone told me all kinds of stories about microbes that turn into big eels once they get inside the human belly."

I wanted to slap him—nothing hard, just a light, friendly smack or two. I just couldn't understand how he could be so afraid of food. Here was the judge who stared down all those criminals in his Cleveland courtroom, those hatchet murderers eager to rip off his head. Then he'd go to lunch (every day a tuna sandwich from Wally the blind vendor) before returning to an afternoon docket of rapists and wife bashers. All these thugs covered before him, and yet now he trembled in front of a plate of rice.

“Take the plunge, Dad. It’s time for all good men to be courageous. Just gather the food at the tips of your fingers, like this, and—”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it,” he said, raising his hand. “I believe you’re forgetting something here, Jimmy.”

“What?”

“Does the word ‘grace’ ring a bell around here, as in ‘grace before meals’?” He cleared his throat, straightened his back, and adjusted his butt on the creaking cane. He shut his eyes tight. “Let us begin. Dear Jesus, we are gathered here before you ...”

This worried me. I was hungry, I was salivating, and this guy’s long-winded grace was going to keep all this exquisite food out of my mouth. He had done this before. I remembered all those Thanksgivings when the steam rising off the sliced turkey would disappear while my father prayed on and on and on.

“The good Lord has brought us safely from another continent to sit at this Sri Lankan table with my Jimmy. Our Lord has gathered us to give him thanks, and to thank Voojoo and his family for this wonderful food”—his eyes opened, as if hoping to find corn on the cob and steak and a pitcher of Ohio spring water, then he shut them tight—“food which the good Lord in all His mystery has seen fit to provide for us. In addition, let us pray ...”

He was just warming up. It would be a while before he would dismount from this horse—so familiar, so satisfying, so free of eels. But it was torturing me, and I thought of screaming a samurai scream and burying my mouth in the mountain of food on my plate. I glanced everywhere else to get my mind off the food, first up to see the house cat leaning down from the space between the roof and wall, then over to see Vijay and his sisters biting their lips not to laugh.

“Let us pray with all our fervent hearts for the poor people up here in the mountains of Sri Lanka who have little money and little houses

full of chickens and flies and hard wood beds and yet who provide us with food which the Lord in all His goodness ...”

The cat on the wall pawed downward. My stomach growled. The cane beneath my dad’s butt creaked. My stomach growled.

“Let us never forget what the Lord taught us about the least of thy brethren being the first in the Kingdom”—he sagged lower into the chair, and the cat leaned farther—“to stand alongside God who in all His majesty has made all things possible. Let us never forget”—lower, a gentle oozing, a popping of threads—“that Christ Jesus saw fit to—”

*Twang!* The cane gave way and my dad fell through and the cat jumped into a bowl of fish. Everybody froze. In that frozen moment I marveled that the stuff of bad slapstick could happen in real life. And in that moment I thought: My kingdom for a camera. Then the scene unfroze and the cat leaped into a corner, leaving curried paw prints on the new tablecloth. My father could see those prints quite well because his head had dropped to the level of the table. He wasn’t laughing. No one in that room was, least of all Vijay’s mother, who was so mortified that she shrunk into the corner with the cat. But from another room there was a high-pitched whoop, and there inside the doorway to the smoky kitchen squatted the grandmother on her haunches, rocking, laughing herself to tears, pointing at my father with her crooked brown finger.

My dad squirmed. “Get me out of here, Jimmy.”

I tried to pry him out of the chair but all that lifted was the entire apparatus, twanged chair and white rump now united like a mythological creature. Vijay’s mother shrunk farther into the corner, wringing her hands on the skirt of her sari.

“Oh God, Dad,” I said, “you look ridiculous. Wait’ll I tell Mom about this one. And Malone.”

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare whisper one word to Malone or I’m done for sure. Now get me out.”

“Sorry, can’t. You’re stuck in this chair for life, so may as well get used to it. Hey, look at the bright side: You’ll never have to stand on a Sri Lankan bus again.”

Word was already spreading throughout the tea estate of what had just happened. A few neighbors leaned through the open window, and I could see behind them a dozen more running up from the road. This was an event, maybe the event of their lifetimes, and no one was going to miss the chance to be an eyewitness. By now Vijay’s mother was in hiding; the grandmother was out in the open, howling in laughter; and I was suggesting to Vijay that he ought to charge admission.

“Like the baboon lady at a carnival side-show,” I said, then turned to my dad as he was inching his way out of the chair. “Not so fast, Dad. We’ve decided to wrap a cobra around your neck and have you juggle swords, just to make a few bucks. So settle back on down and be a sport, okay?”

“It’s not funny, Jimmy. And it’s starting to hurt.”

\* \* \*

We did free him, eventually, and all the eyewitnesses went home to spread the gospel of the Cane Chair Plunge. It wouldn’t take long for this story to reach the farthest edge of Sri Lanka.

We still had to eat. Vijay brought in a new chair for my dad, this one reinforced with enough two-by-fours to support an elephant. Then I taught him how to eat: mash together some of the curries and rice into a ball, twirl it tight, move it up to the tip of the fingers, keep your elbow high, then pop it like a marble with your thumb into your mouth. “See, Dad,” I demonstrated. “It’s neat and clean.”

But nothing he did was neat or clean. Rice kernels fell on his lap and on the floor, bouncing into corners for the chickens to fight over. Very little ended up in his mouth.

“Keep your elbow up higher, Dad, and pack the food tighter.”

He tried again. This time he flicked the food with his index finger, not his thumb, sending a missile of rice across the room. The chickens were upon it in seconds. The grandmother was watching all of this from the kitchen entrance, shaking her head.

“Use your thumb, Dad, your thumb. Not your pinky, your *thumb!*”

Finally, after more misfires that shot rice up to the ceiling, he got it: The ball of rice landed in his mouth, and from down on her haunches the grandmother applauded.

“Oh yes!” my dad gloated. “Looks like this old dog can still learn a few tricks.”

But on his own without my guiding hand he never really got it. He sprayed rice on the floor and in his lap and in my hair, and when the curry juices started dribbling down his chin, I thought, “My father, a baby in a high chair.” Yet I was worried about this baby who hadn’t eaten much since he arrived. I mashed a solid ball of food from my plate and held it up to his mouth.

“C’mon, Dad. You have to eat.”

He pushed my hand away. “I’ll be fine, Jimmy. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

★ ★ ★

After dinner my dad and I petted the cow and talked baseball, and when it was time for him to prepare for bed, I showed him to the out-house.

There were two of them, and it was very important to keep them straight. The smaller one was for the women of the house, but it also doubled as a cage for the goat, though no one ever explained why the goat had to be “outhoused” at night. Next to it stood the men’s room. Unlike the open-pit toilet in the women’s, ours had a porcelain, water-

sealed basin cemented into the ground straddled by a pair of large footprints. “This toilet comes from India,” Vijay boasted. “The first on the plantation.” In the corner stood a 55-gallon drum containing all the water for all the ablutions. I told my dad to scoop out a handful to brush his teeth.

“*That* water?” he said. “In my mouth? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Just swish it around a little and don’t drink it. Trust me. You’ll be fine.”

He had that look of someone who’s not sure if he’s the butt of a practical joke. I had seen it before in five-year-old Jackie Carlin, the neighborhood sucker, when he inspected an Oreo cookie from us older boys. Jackie would sniff and squish the Oreo, half-certain that we had laced the white inner cream with dish soap and cat food. He was right, but he usually shrugged and ate it anyway.

“If I do any swishing,” my dad said, “I’ll be on the pot all night. Malone warned me about this. ‘John, better to put a loaded gun to your head than drink a spot of that gutter water.’” In the neighboring outhouse the goat was getting restless, thumping his legs against the wall. “I’ll bet that damn goat is trying to tell me a thing or two.”

“Dad, I promise that you won’t get sick. I’ve been swishing this stuff for two years now and,” I lied, “I’ve never been sick.”

“Malone wouldn’t lie. That goat wouldn’t lie. You, I’m not so sure about.”

Eventually he dampened his toothbrush with a few sprinkles of water, brushed, then spat it all out a dozen times. “Oh good God in heaven,” he sighed wearily, “bless my poor belly tonight.”

With his teeth cleaned we turned to the toilet. At the mention of it he looked very old and very sad—sad that the human body couldn’t hold its own waste for a month, sad that there wasn’t a commode on which to sit for an hour and read the sports page. He moaned and said, “Just show me what to do and leave me a little privacy.”

## VOCABULARY

**Ablutions:** [ab-LOO-shuns] The washing of the body

“Okay. The trick is to put both feet on the prints, like this, and then squat all the way down like a grasshopper, or a catcher.”

“Yogi Berra I’m not, or that cricket fella—Timony? Bimony? Look, Jim, I’m 74 years old and if I get down like that you’ll need a crane to hoist me back up.”

“You’ll get the hang of it in no time.”

He stared down at the toilet. “Where does it all go? Are there pipes down there? Filtration plants?”

“Filtration plants! Are you putting me on?” Whenever I told Sri Lankans about the “modern advancements” in America—ATM machines, cable TV, funeral homes, poodles groomed to look like shrubbery—they thought I must be inventing it all. “I don’t know, Dad. I guess it just goes right into the ground beneath us.”

“Raw sewage straight into the soil? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not as gross as you make it sound. I guess it turns to manure down there, and, you know, nourishes the earth.”

“*Nourishes!* Hey, I don’t care if it turns to Lemon Pledge down there, it still is raw sewage going right into the ground and into rivers and eventually”—he looked at the 55-gallon drum—“into the water I just used to brush my teeth.”

While he spat out every atom of moisture from his mouth, I told him that some things were best left unexamined. “Now do your business and give a holler if you need me.”

★ ★ ★

Later that night my father and I slept in the same room on twin beds, our only cushion a thin grass mat over the wooden planks. On the table between us Vijay had dimmed the oil lamp down to a point. He reminded us to avoid the left outhouse during the night—“The goat

is sure to kick you”—and then tugged on my toes and wished us good night. I asked him where he was sleeping.

“In the next room, on the floor. I’m used to it.”

“Oh, don’t be a martyr. Come sleep here and I’ll sleep with my dad.”

“No, no, no. I like to be close to the earth. I’m not as soft as you Americans.”

My dad turned on his side. “Soft? Is this your idea of soft? Holy God, I feel like I’m sleeping on nails.”

Vijay closed the door on the way out. For a long time I stared at the point of light in the oil lamp, thinking too much. My dad never really fell asleep, moaning “Holy God!” every few minutes above the creak of his bed’s wood planks. Each “Holy God” pricked me in the organ that holds Catholic guilt in a child, especially when he sat up on the side of the bed, digging his knuckles into his eye sockets. “Holy Mother of God, pray for me.”

★ ★ ★

He woke up with the slightest of smiles and the slightest skip in his step.

Maybe the smile was from [a dream]. But more likely that smile reflected the start of a shift within my dad during the night. The flies, the harsh bed, the journey to the outhouse—to him these were horrors, and yet by being forced to face them all alone, maybe he was coming to realize that the horrors he’d been guarding against all this time were really thin as masks. Hey, he *could* do this Sri Lankan thing after all—and live! Perhaps a little unsanitary, perhaps a bit uncomfortable, but nothing lethal and nothing more frightening than one’s own shame. I’d like to think that the skip in his step that morning came from his having started to shed the weight of all the artillery he’d been lugging around to fight these phantom fears. Now he could skip, and now he could float. He could let go of that rope tying him back to his

Cleveland condominium and just float in this new land with hard beds (you get used to them) and outhouses (fresh air) and new toilet customs.

Over the next few days, bit by bit, I saw my father meet Sri Lanka. He mastered the art of finger eating and even asked for seconds. He studied the grandmother cleaning rice in the kitchen, at first standing over her blocking the doorway, later on his own haunches next to her by the fire, helping her pick out stones. He named the goat “Malone” and took it for long walks on a rope through the tea bushes. He asked the tea plantation manager how tea is dried, asked Vijay what it was like to grow up surrounded by tea, and, to my surprise, asked me if I missed America.

One day at my father’s request we walked three miles down a steep embankment to visit Vijay’s school. Since the school relied on the Sinhalese government for funding, it had nothing. No desks, no chalk, no books. The 68 children, all wearing perfectly pressed white uniforms, were clustered in the shadow of a tin overhang, sitting on handkerchiefs that they had spread with great care. Only Vijay taught. There was one other teacher, but he hadn’t shown up for 10 weeks because the government had stopped paying him. Vijay had also not been paid, though he went home each night with both arms full of potatoes and beans and chickens, an occasional rupee, an occasional statue of a Hindu god.

We watched him teach. In this bleak, overcrowded setting with every imaginable obstacle to teaching, Vijay found a way to teach. He drew world maps in the dirt. He taught math by subtracting and adding students standing in front of the class. He acted the part of an elephant in a student drama of the *Ramayana*. Finally, using a goat’s bladder stuffed with tea leaves as a soccer ball, he let students play soccer only after they correctly translated some English verbs.

My dad observed all of this very intently. “God bless that boy,” he said,

## VOCABULARY

**martyr:** [MAR-tur] a person who chooses to suffer (or die) for a cause

**rupee:** local money

**Ramayana:** an influential epic poem important in Indian culture

and said it in a way that indicated things inside of him were getting shook up. How minor must his own trials have now seemed when compared with the trials of these children, and to Vijay. “He’s a magician, that’s what he is. Out of nothing he creates so much. And look at those little girls over there, how much fun they’re having and learning at the same time.”

“He was trained by the Peace Corps,” I said. “A lot of what he’s doing is what I’m teaching my students up at Bandarawela. We improve their English, but mainly we teach them how to teach in primitive schools like this one. Vijay’s a natural teacher, but without the ideas Peace Corps gave him, I think he’d be overwhelmed.”

My dad nodded but had no reply. I tried to find in the slant of his head or the narrowing of his eyes some measure of validation for my work, but I found none. I told myself that it really didn’t matter. And I repeated that it didn’t matter, repeated it so often on our walk home up the mountain path—carrying Vijay’s booty of mangoes and bread, passing the tea-pickers spitting betel juice into the tea fields—that I nearly came to believe my own lie.

★ ★ ★

On our last night at Vijay’s house, the three of us walked at dusk to the Hindu temple, the center of the tea estate community. Vijay knew everybody on the walk: the family of five riding on a bike, the old lady toting a small tree on her head, every tea-picker, every child. Out of respect for the white men they all stood to the side as we passed, looking down at the ground.

We smelled the temple long before we reached it. A thick cloud of incense had spread out from the gates and across the tea fields. When we arrived at the temple, the incense partly obscured our view of the statues on the roof, an astonishing array of colorful Hindu gods that were dancing or sitting or balancing on one foot. My dad marveled at them.

“Look at the monkey face,” he said, “and the elephant. And that one with all those arms. Amazing, all this art in the middle of nowhere. Who paints these things, Vooji, and how often?”

Vijay answered these questions and more, patiently teaching my father about this new world of Hinduism. His curiosity surprised me. I had expected him to be repulsed by it all, to regard it as the kind of barbaric and pagan religion that Christianity ought to convert.

We placed our shoes outside the gate and entered the temple. The 50 or so Tamils didn’t know where to look, either down at the ground as they had been taught, or up at this mesmerizing sight of two white men with blue eyes and hair on their arms. To them this must have been a miracle, two Americans come to worship in their temple here on their forgotten plantation.

The Hindu priest approached. He stood before my father in just a loincloth, his face and body streaked with ash. For a moment these two opposites stood eye to eye—a nearly naked holy man facing a white man in wool pants holding a Gatorade bottle—and I wondered what sense either could possibly make of the other.

The priest bowed low to my father and chanted some prayers. When he arose, he laced around my dad’s neck a garland of brilliant red flowers. He then pressed his thumb into a bowl of golden dust and, reciting a prayer, dabbed a spot of yellow saffron on the center of my dad’s forehead.

Vijay said to my father, “The priest is telling you that you are a god in his temple, that the god inside you has met the god inside of him.”

My dad appeared moved by this. He pressed his hands together in front of the garland and, bowing to the priest, said, “*Wanacome*.”

The priest didn’t appear surprised, but the rest of the crowd froze. This one holy Tamil word, *wanacome*, this mere puff of air out of my dad’s

mouth, had now become as sacred as incense. It settled softly on the heads of these maligned people, settling over their black faces and splendid saris, over their hands callused from picking tea. For a moment their hard lives were full of majesty, full of peace. For a moment that contained eternity, the vast distance from black to white, from Hindu to Catholic, from tea-picker to judge, from Sri Lanka to America—all was ultimately no further than the utterance of a word.

★ ★ ★

Later that night my father and I went to sleep in our twin beds. Though he had washed his face with water from the drum, my dad went to bed with the saffron dot still centering his forehead. The garland of red flowers leaned against his Gatorade bottle.

The next morning we left Vijay's home. In an act that was not silly, my dad opened the left outhouse door and put his garland of flowers around the goat's neck. He said good-bye to the chickens and the cow, flicked the flies off the plastic fish just for fun, and pulled a strand of cane from the notorious chair and put it in his mouth, Huck Finn-style.

Outside, Vijay's sisters lined up on their knees. My father stood before each one, firmly touching each head with all his fingers. He accepted a packet of *wadees* from Vijay's mother and an embrace from Vijay before starting to leave.

*Sir.*

We turned around. There, standing in the doorway with her hands pressed together, was the grandmother. She raised her eyes from the ground and said through Vijay's translation, "Sir, you have honored my family by coming here. You are old, and I know it is not easy for the old to learn the new. You are a good and holy man. May Krishna bless your many lives."

My dad approached her. The wind uplifted some strands of gray hair not covered by his Indians cap; it uplifted some strands of her gray hair

not bound in a bun. These were the elders, standing in their own sacred circle. He bowed to her with his palms together, saying in a very familiar way, “*Wanacome.*” She shook his hands and then hugged him, crying, her head somewhere at the level of his navel. And then, in a gesture of either comedy or sanctity, my dad placed his Indians cap on her head. Vijay and I laughed, but from her reaction you’d think she’d just been crowned with a tiara of diamonds.

As we walked away she waved the cap up high, an old exuberant Tamil woman with rings in her nose, standing on the tips of her toes, waving an American baseball cap higher and higher until we turned a bend and were out of her sight forever.

## VOCABULARY

**Krishna:** An important god in the Hindu religion

**Sanctity:** Holiness

**READING AND RESPONDING TO  
'HELP! MY FATHER IS COMING!'  
AND 'THE VISIT TO VIJAY'S'**

**O V E R V I E W**

**A B O U T T H E A U T H O R**

Jim Toner and his wife served as Peace Corps Volunteers from 1989 to 1991. They lived in a remote village in Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, teaching English to adults who were in training to be teachers. The excerpts from Toner's memoir, *Serendib*, that constitute the entries here are an account of a visit by Toner's 74-year-old father to Sri Lanka during the couple's Peace Corps service. Toner currently teaches English at Columbia College, in Sonora, California.

**A B O U T T H E S T O R Y**

"Help! My Father Is Coming!" and "The Trip to Vijay's" are excerpted from Chapters One and Six, respectively, of Jim Toner's memoir, *Serendib*.

Toner's book is an engaging story of how a largely estranged father and son came to understand, accept, and respect each other under the most unlikely of circumstances. The curmudgeonly, elderly judge from Cleveland, Ohio, had never been out of the country and appeared ill-prepared to visit the rural parts of a land where he would be besieged by flies and all sorts of imagined crawling dangers, as well as no electricity or running water, no plumbing, and the ravages of a civil war. Nevertheless, he adjusts to cultural mores remarkably different from his own during the course of his monthlong visit.

## ABOUT THE SETTING

Serendib, or Serendip, is the name by which Sri Lanka was known centuries ago. The name is the source for the word “serendipity,” which means the accidental finding of something good. The country was subsequently named Ceylon. First under Portuguese influence in the 16th century, then under Dutch influence in the 17th century, the country became a British colony around the beginning of the 19th century. It gained independence in 1948.

Sri Lanka is an island about 270 miles from north to south, and 140 miles from east to west, some 18 miles off the southeast coast of India. Largely flat or with rolling hills, Sri Lanka has high mountains in the south-central region of the island. Its exports are mostly agricultural, consisting of tea, rubber, and coconuts.

Sri Lanka, with a current population of just under 20 million, experienced many years of conflict between the minority Hindu Tamils, of the north and east, and the majority Buddhist Sinhalese. The Tamils were fighting for independence. That long-standing struggle was exacerbated in the late 1980s by infighting among the Sinhalese. A cease fire and efforts at an enduring peace are under way today.

Greetings in Sri Lanka are an important ritual. Toner writes that when he encountered his father at the airport, “Before I knew what to do, before I knew if I should shake his hand or embrace him or hoist him onto my shoulders, I pressed my palms together beneath my chin and said, ‘*Ayubowan*, Dad.’ Cindy smoothed down his wild hair and explained that

## STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 3, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX (see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 4, 6, 10 (see page 189)

### Enduring Understandings

- Understanding and respecting the customs of another culture requires flexibility, compromise, sensitivity, and hard work.
- It is easy to make judgments about people and places that we later learn are inaccurate.

### Essential Questions

- How flexible do you think you would be in another culture?
- What can one gain from being open to people or customs that, at first, seem strange?
- What kinds of compromises might you have to make in order to fit in to life in another culture?
- What might happen when we make snap judgments about people or places?

### Materials

Photocopies of story, Resource Sheet 1, carousel brainstorming discussion guide

### Assessment Tools

Class discussions, journal entries, graphic organizer: comparison matrix, report or skit, personal narrative

## Generations Apart

THE VISIT TO VIJAY'S (CONTINUED)

*ayubowan* is the Sri Lankan welcome. ‘It means that the god in me is greeting the god in you,’ [she said].’ (*Ayubowan* is the greeting used by the majority Sinhalese population. The minority Tamils use the greeting *wanacome*.)

Vijay, who features in the second selection, is a native of Sri Lanka, a member of the minority Tamil population, and a close friend of the author’s.

Peace Corps programs in Sri Lanka have been active, on and off, since 1962. They have focused on English language improvement, agricultural and environmental projects, education and teacher training, and youth work projects.

## LESSON 1

## PURPOSE

- To explore the concept of crossing cultures
  - To examine how Americans may be viewed by people in another culture
1. Using information from the introduction to this book and the overview above, introduce students to the author, the Peace Corps, and the setting.
  2. When the author’s father left the familiar culture of the United States and entered the culture of Sri Lanka so unfamiliar to him, he experienced a phenomenon called crossing cultures.

- Ask students what they think the term “crossing cultures” means.
- Ask students whether they have ever traveled to a place in their city, state, or country—or outside their country—and noticed behaviors or customs that seemed unusual or different from what they were used to. If so, what was their reaction? What challenges did they encounter?

Clarify first that culture is the behaviors, customs, and beliefs that a group of people have in common. Culture is demonstrated in daily living patterns, traditions, values, worldview, styles of dress, attitudes toward education, beliefs about the responsibilities of children and the role of the family, as well as celebrations, music, art, and much more. To help students explore the meaning of culture and to build cross-cultural understanding, see *Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Classroom Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding* at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/bridges](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/bridges) (or available from the World Wise Schools program at 800.424.8580, x1450).

Explain that crossing cultures is the experience of going from one’s own culture into another that may be quite different in customs, language, behaviors, and beliefs. People in one culture often think someone from another culture is unusual because of these differences. However, people from the other culture may think the visitor is unusual for the same kinds of reasons.

3. Emphasize that Peace Corps Volunteers are

trained to cross cultures respectfully so that they are accepted in their host culture, and that misunderstandings are minimized.

**Note:** Students who have come to the United States from another culture can be an excellent resource for explaining these concepts. Invite them privately, ahead of class, to share their experiences if they are comfortable doing so.

4. Have students read “Help! My Father Is Coming!” When they have finished, ask them to predict what might happen to the author’s father in “The Visit to Vijay’s,” after the father’s arrival in Sri Lanka and when he’s accompanying his son in the rural countryside. Students should write their predictions on index cards. Then have the students share some of their predictions with the rest of the class. Ask the students to keep their predictions in mind as they read the rest of the story.
5. Have students read “The Visit to Vijay’s.” Have older students read the story in its entirety. Younger students may profit from reading it in sections, as follows:
  - a. From p. 92 to p. 97, ending with the sentence: “I think my laughter came more from the pleasure of seeing these people full of joy in a time when joy was scarce.”
  - b. From page 97 to page 100, ending with the phrase: “... all I wanted to do was toss aside the newspaper and fan my father like a pharaoh,

all day and all night.” See the end of this lesson plan for background information on Sri Lankan marital customs.

- c. From page 100 to page 105, ending with the sentence: “He pushed my hand away. ‘I’ll be fine, Jimmy. I’m sure I’ll be fine.’”
  - d. The remainder of the story.
- Dividing the story may help students take notes by providing a break from reading, and it will give you an opportunity to check for understanding.
6. When the students have finished reading the story, ask them to discuss the following questions in small groups. Then have a class discussion on students’ group observations.
    - How did Toner’s father view Vijay and his family? (Give examples from the text.)
    - How did Vijay and his family view Toner’s father? (Give examples from the text.)
  7. Discuss with students the idea that we take many journeys in our lives, and that these journeys can shape who we are. (See discourse about types of journeys in the Introduction, on page 6.)
  8. **Journal Activity.** For homework, have students respond in writing to one or more of the following prompts, in preparation for a class discussion in the next lesson.

### FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

## Generations Apart

THE VISIT TO VIJAY'S (CONTINUED)

- How did the story compare with the predictions you made on your index cards after you read the first section? On the back of your index cards, describe what surprised you about the story.
- Before the author's father traveled to Sri Lanka, what did he think the country would be like? What did he find it was really like?
- What surprised Toner most about his father's reaction to life in Sri Lanka?

**FOR OLDER STUDENTS**

- What did Toner want his readers to be thinking about as they read?
- What parts of the story made the deepest impression on you as you were reading? Why?
- Describe the external journey the father experienced in the story.
- Describe the internal journey he experienced. How did he change deep inside?
- What surprised Toner most about his father's reaction to life in Sri Lanka after his father had been there a while?

- Review the story and find the image that is most vivid to you. Describe the image and the reason it stands out so strongly in your mind.

**LESSON 2****PURPOSE**

- To analyze the story using a cooperative learning strategy
  - To analyze the change that the father experiences during the course of the story
  - To reach the enduring understanding, "It is easy to make judgments about people and places that we later learn are inaccurate."
1. Have students share their journal responses from the previous lesson with a partner. Then conduct a class discussion addressing these questions:
    - As you read this story, what did you learn about going from a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one?
    - What picture stands out most in your mind as you think back on the story?
    - After reading the first few pages of the story, were your predictions confirmed about how the father would manage? If not, what surprised you?

**2. Carousel Brainstorming.** This strategy (see below) is a useful and active way to elicit divergent viewpoints on a story's multiple meanings while allowing students to move around the room. Use the five quotations and accompanying questions from Resource Sheet 1 as the basis for this activity.

### **INSTRUCTIONS FOR CAROUSEL BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITY**

- Prior to class, photocopy the quotations in Resource Sheet 1, separate each quotation with its accompanying questions, as indicated by the solid lines, enlarge them on a copier, and paste each quotation and its accompanying questions on the top of a separate sheet of chart paper. Make sure the number of each quotation is large and easy to see.
- Post the five sheets of chart paper around the room, with ample space between them. Place extra sheets of paper, masking tape, and a felt-tipped marker on the floor below each sheet.
- Assign students numbers from 1 to 5. Ask them to move to the chart paper on which their number is written.
- Have students discuss their group's quotation and its accompanying questions. Each group should select a recorder to write down ideas they raise, using the felt-tipped marker you've provided.

Make sure students know they should help the recorder in summarizing the group's best ideas.

- Call time after a few minutes. Ask students to move to the next piece of chart paper, so that each group will be facing a new quotation.
- Repeat the process until all groups have discussed and responded to all questions—then have the groups move back to their original quotation and questions.
- After collecting markers, ask each group to read the responses of the other groups and to compare those responses with their initial answers.

## RESOURCE SHEET 1

## CAROUSEL BRAINSTORMING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Quotation:** *The grandmother ... glanced up at us, the gold hoop in her nostril glinting in the firelight. My dad tipped his Indians cap to her. She stared at him, stared a little longer and a little more deeply... I looked at her and my father. What was happening here in the doorway, between light and dark, between civilizations, between centuries?*

**Questions:** At the beginning of the visit to Vijay's, what was the relationship between the grandmother with the gold hoop in her nostril and Toner's father with his Cleveland Indians baseball cap? How did it change? What was it like at the end? What does the author mean by the phrase "between light and dark"?

- 2. Quotation:** *He woke up with the slightest of smiles and the slightest skip in his step. Maybe the smile was from [a dream]. But more likely that smile reflected the start of a shift within my dad during the night.... Over the next few days, bit by bit, I saw my father meet Sri Lanka.*

**Questions:** What was the shift the author saw taking place within his father? In what ways did his father "meet" Sri Lanka?

- 3. Quotation:** *To them this must have been a miracle, two Americans come to worship in their temple here on their forgotten plantation.*

*The Hindu priest approached. He stood before my father in just a loincloth.... For a moment these two opposites stood eye to eye—a nearly naked holy man facing a white man in wool pants holding a Gatorade bottle—and I wondered what sense either could possibly make of the other.*

**Questions:** What message is the author trying to convey in this passage? What does he want his readers to be thinking about? Aside from their outward appearance, how were the Hindu priest and the father different from each other? How were they similar to each other?

- 4.** *My dad ... pressed his hands together in front of the garland and, bowing to the priest, said, “Wanacome.” ... The rest of the crowd froze. This one holy Tamil word, wanacome ... had now become as sacred as incense.... For a moment that contained eternity, the vast distance from black to white, from Hindu to Catholic, from tea-picker to judge, from Sri Lanka to America—all was ultimately no further than the utterance of a word.*

**Questions:** What is the significance of this passage? Why did the crowd freeze? What did the father’s use of the greeting “Wanacome” mean to them? What is “the vast distance” the author refers to?

- 5.** *There, standing in the doorway ... was the grandmother. She raised her eyes from the ground and said through Vijay’s translation, “Sir, you have honored my family by coming here. You are old, and I know it is not easy for the old to learn the new. You are a good and holy man.... [My dad] bowed to her with his palms together, saying in a very familiar way, “Wanacome.” ... And then, in a gesture of either comedy or sanctity, my dad placed his Indians cap on her head. Vijay and I laughed, but from her reaction you’d think she’d just been crowned with a tiara of diamonds.*

**Questions:** What is the significance of this passage to Toner’s story? What change does it symbolize? Why was the grandmother so moved by the gift of the father’s Indians cap? What did giving the cap away symbolize for the father? How far had he come on his journey?

## Generations Apart

THE VISIT TO VIJAY'S (CONTINUED)

- 3. Journal Entry.** For homework, ask students to respond to one or more of the following prompts:
- As I think about the carousel brainstorming activity we just completed, here are some things that I came to realize about the story's meaning that I hadn't thought of before.
  - Explain whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: "It is easy to make judgments about people and places that we later learn are untrue." What judgments about Sri Lanka had Toner's father made that he later learned were untrue? What judgments did Toner make about his father that he later learned were not valid?
  - In this story, Toner's father experiences an external journey and an internal journey. What is the nature of the internal journey that he experienced?

Conduct a class discussion eliciting responses to the journal prompts.

- 2.** Suggest to students that crossing cultures is a complex process—one that can cause us to view ourselves and our own culture in new ways.
- Ask students if they think living in the culture of Sri Lanka changed Toner's father's view of the world.
  - Ask in what ways the father might have seen the culture of Cleveland, Ohio, in new ways when he returned to the United States.

Explain the concept of culture shock to students—the surprise and stress a person may feel upon entering another culture, encountering customs and values he or she had not expected. In the context of the question about Toner's father's return to Ohio, tell students that Peace Corps Volunteers—and others who live overseas—often are well prepared for the differences they encounter in other cultures, but do not expect to be surprised by cultural issues when they return home. Nevertheless, many Americans who live overseas, including Peace Corps Volunteers, do experience culture shock when they return home—confronted by customs and values at home that differ from those they had adjusted to in other countries.

- What do students think the father focused on in describing his experiences to his wife and his friend Malone?

## LESSON 3

**PURPOSE:**

- To examine the cultural differences between the United States and Sri Lanka using a comparison matrix
  - To compare students' perspectives on cultural differences
- 1.** Have students compare their journal responses from the previous lesson in small groups.

- Ask students to pretend they are Toner's father and write a short report on their experience in Sri Lanka. Alternatively, students can prepare a skit for the class, enacting Judge Toner's report to his wife.

### 3. Reading Comprehension Activity: Comparing Cultures

Suggest to students that the comparison matrix they will use might help them in gaining insights not only into Toner's writing, but also into reading other materials—and into their writing.

Provide students with a copy of the comparison matrix (Resource Sheet 2). A sample entry is included to show how the matrix can be used.

Point out that although the left-hand column has been filled in—the criteria on which the comparisons will be based—the students can add to them. Have students work in groups to complete the comparison matrix. When they have finished, have each group compare its matrix with another group's.

Then ask students what conclusions they have reached about the cultural similarities and differences between the United States and Sri Lanka. It is at this stage of using the comparison matrix that students may see for the first time how the cultures resemble each other despite obvious differences, or, to the contrary, how the cultures may appear similar in some respects but actually differ markedly.

- 4. Focus on One Cultural Trait.** In preparation for an activity on marriage customs, you may want to review (for yourself) the background information on arranged marriages (see box on page 125). Then conduct a class discussion on arranged marriages and those based on mutual choice. In the discussion, try to help students think about this concept: "It is easy to misinterpret customs in a cross-cultural setting. To avoid misunderstanding the behavior and beliefs of others, you have to try to see the world from their point of view as well as your own."

Have students re-read from mid-page 97 ("Vijay and I sat and talked.") through mid-page 99, ending with "I'm doing you a favor by doing nothing, Vijay." With the class:

- Discuss how Vijay feels about the tradition of an arranged marriage and about the contrasting freedom that Americans have. How does Toner view the American way? Do you agree that America is not a "love paradise" but a land of disillusionment and divorce? Evaluate this statement: "Romantic love tends to blind the partners to the realities about one another as persons."
- Brainstorm three reasons why parents in a traditional culture would feel that they are better able to choose a spouse for their child than their child could do for him- or herself. Try to think of three reasons a son or daughter might see some advantages in such an arrangement.

## RESOURCE SHEET 2

## COMPARISON MATRIX: CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

How do the cultures of the United States and Sri Lanka compare with respect to the factors below?

	Examples from the United States	Examples from Sri Lanka
<b>Hospitality to strangers</b>	<i>We might provide water and a snack, but would be wary of a stranger.</i>	<i>A stranger is welcomed and fed.</i>
<b>Respect shown to elders</b>		
<b>Behaviors at meals/ Food and eating</b>		
<b>Relationship between brothers and sisters</b>		
<b>Religion</b>		
<b>Marriage</b>		

**BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS ON ARRANGED MARRIAGES**

- In *Marriage East and West*, authors David and Vera Mace note that many women in cultures where arranged marriages are the norm believe that Western marriage customs can put girls or women in a humiliating position. They believe a girl or woman has to be constantly concerned with the pressure of looking pretty, calling attention to herself, and attracting a boy or man so that she will get married. They think that in the Western way, it is hard for a girl or woman to relax and be herself. A shy female who does not push herself forward might not be able to get married at all.

In addition, many women, the authors say, believe that Western customs can be very competitive, with girls or women fighting each other over boys or men. Finally, many girls in the traditional system believe it is unfair that in modern ways, the male seems to do all the choosing. Romantic love is viewed by some traditional societies as superficial, obscuring a true understanding of who the partner really is.

- From the traditional view, romance is seen as an untrustworthy factor in choosing a marriage partner and, for this reason, it should be eliminated completely. It is believed that parents are much more prepared, because of their age, experience, and concern for their children, to find suitable mates for them. It is therefore thought that the families of both parties are in the best position for doing the choosing. The differences between traditional and Western views can be summed up by saying that in the traditional way, you marry, then fall in love, while in the modern way, you fall in love, then marry.

## Generations Apart

THE VISIT TO VIJAY'S (CONTINUED)

- c. Discuss how your life would be different from the way you expect it to be if you knew that your parents would find a spouse for you.
  - d. Discuss recent American television programs on which contestants marry strangers chosen for them by the audience or by a competition. From what you have learned about modern and traditional marriages, do you believe these marriages have a chance for success?
- 5. Journal Activity.** Conclude this lesson by asking students to consider the following statement: “Understanding and respecting the customs of another culture requires flexibility, compromise, and hard work.” Then ask students to respond in their journals to the following questions:
- How flexible do you think you would be in adapting to the customs of another culture—such as the cultures in Sri Lanka? Do you think that if you had been in Toner’s father’s shoes, you would have been able to adapt as well as he did?
  - What did Toner’s father gain from being open and adaptable to learning from the Sri Lankan people and their cultures? What, if anything, did he have to compromise?
  - What are some ways that we can help students from other cultures in our own school adapt to American customs that might seem different to them? How can we give these students a sense of belonging?
- What kind of hospitality could we show students from other cultures that would compare with the hospitality Vijay’s family offered Toner’s father?

## LESSON 4

## PURPOSE

- To examine the ways a writer can capture and hold a reader’s attention
  - To write a short personal narrative using some of the techniques Toner used as a model
- 1.** Ask students how Toner captured and held their attention in his story. Give them time to examine the story and respond with detailed examples. Students will probably focus on the following techniques, among others:
- The lead sentence, “I didn’t invite him,” is short, punchy, and intriguing, all at the same time. Who wasn’t invited? Why not?
  - Liberal use of dialogue lends immediacy to the characters. Rather than describing his father, Toner lets his father talk, and we learn what he’s like from apparent first-hand experience.
  - Description is rich and vivid, and makes use of similes. For example, on page 92, Toner writes, “lemon grass as tall as our eyes.” That conveys information much more evocatively than saying the grass was more than five feet tall.

- Toner’s imagery is exact. Describing Vijay’s sisters sitting in a row, one behind the other, the author writes, simply, that they were “sitting toboggan-style.”
2. Discuss with students in what ways Toner’s writing is humorous. Can students identify some of the particular ways Toner achieved these effects? [Toner uses hyperbole and sarcasm to add humor to his story.] Ask students to select a scene they thought particularly funny in “The Visit to Vijay’s” and study it in depth. Have them note in the margins how Toner structured his writing—his description, his use of dialogue, for example. Have them underline places where Toner used hyperbole or sarcasm to make the scene even more humorous. Then allow the students to share their observations in a class discussion.
  3. Ask students to write a first draft of a brief personal narrative. Have them try to incorporate as many of the devices Toner used to capture and hold his readers’ attention. Point out that one way to become a better writer is to model one’s writing on the works of an author you admire.
  4. To provide students with further guidance in drafting their personal narratives, you might consult author Nancie Atwell’s checklist “Qualities of a Memoir That Works” (Atwell, 2002, page 100).
  5. For homework, have students draft their narratives. When they return to class, students should pair up and review one another’s papers. Remind them to use Toner’s techniques as criteria for their feedback.
  6. **Journal Activity.** Conclude the study of “The Visit to Vijay’s” by asking students to respond in their journals to the following prompts:
    - As a result of reading this story, I learned that when people from different cultures meet, ...
    - As a result of reading this story, this is what I became aware of about how good writers write:
    - Reading this story has made me want to know more about ...

## Giving and Receiving

## SHARING IN AFRICA

by Mike Tidwell

Peace Corps Volunteer, Zaire\* (1985–1987)

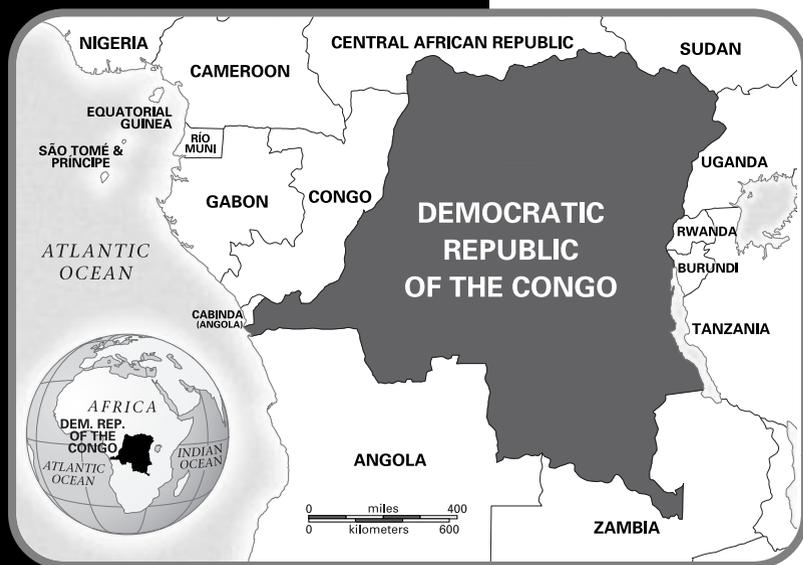
(Excerpted from Chapter Four in *The Ponds of Kalambayi*)

People in villages across Kalambayi were trying to kill me. They were feeding me too much. With little in the way of possessions, but driven by a congenital desire to share what they could, villagers gave me *fufu*—teeming, steaming metric tons of it.

*Fufu* was the doughy white substance served at every meal. Women made it by pouring corn and manioc flour into boiling water, stirring the mixture with wooden spoons, then lumping the gummy results into calabash bowls where it assumed a size, shape, and weight not unlike small bowling balls. It had little taste but filled you up and that was its purpose: to compensate for the dishearteningly small servings of manioc leaves or dried fish that came with it. Kayemba Lenga told me a funny fable about how Kalambayan ancestors stole the recipe for *fufu* from mosquitoes long ago. Now, in protest, the bothersome insects buzz one's ears every night. Not being overly fond of *fufu*, nor the recurring malaria protesting mosquitoes had already given me, I asked Kayemba half-jokingly if it wasn't possible to give the recipe back.

But it wasn't possible. *Fufu* was as much a part of the landscape as the grass and rivers. In every village, around every corner, it was there, waiting for me, widening my waistline. Without exception, the villagers I visited each day insisted I have some before moving on. As in most traditional societies, the giving was ungrudging and automatic—born of kindness—and saying “no” simply was out of the question.

\*now the Democratic Republic of the Congo



Here is how a fairly typical day goes for me:

I arrive at Bukasa's house at 8 a.m. and a bowl of *fufu* awaits me, releasing hot wisps into the morning air. "Come," he says. "Sit down. You need to eat before we go to the ponds." We eat and leave for work. At the ponds I meet Kayemba and Mulundu Ilunga, who cheerfully drag me back to their houses for large, back-to-back servings. I thank them afterward and leave for the next village, Bena Ngoyi. By the time I pull up to the huts it's 1 p.m.—lunchtime. Two more bowls of *fufu*. Sluggishly, my shirt buttons threatening to launch, I move on to Milamba for a quick look at a fish pond and a torturous sixth bowl. At the end of the day I'm transporting my bulk home under depressed tires when a man in Kalula flags me down. He wants to discuss digging a pond. We sit and talk, and when I rise to leave he tells me to wait. I panic. "No, seriously," I protest. "I'm not hungry. Really, no, please. Please don't." But he knows I'm just being polite. He has two wives and they *both* bring out *fufu*. I wash my hands. *Bon appétit*, he says.

This was something I hadn't counted on. I had expected a lot of challenges living in rural Africa, but being incapacitated by too much generosity, too much *fufu*, just wasn't one of them. And *fufu* wasn't the only thing weighing me down. Relentlessly, Kalambayans shared all their food, unloading on me whatever happened to be around when I rolled into view. They put oranges in my hands, peanuts in my pockets, stuffed sugarcane in my knapsack.

"It won't fit," I told Kayemba one day as he tried to tie an entire regime of bananas across my motorcycle handlebars. "I'll crash. Just give me five. That's enough."

"No, it's all right," he said. "I've got another regime in the house."

"I'll crash, Kayemba. Don't do it." I wasn't just being polite this time. He yielded and sulked for a moment until the absurdity of his attempt

## VOCABULARY

**Congenital:** Existing at the time of birth

**Manioc:** [MAN-ee-ahk] Also called cassava; a tropical plant with a starchy root used for making bread and tapioca

**Ungrudging:** Willing; generous

**Incapacitate:** To make unable or unfit

**Regime:** [ray-ZHEEM] French for a bunch, such as bananas (an entire bunch, as it grows on a banana tree)

**Absurdity:** Ridiculousness

caught up with him and we both laughed so hard tears welled in our eyes.

It was truly overwhelming, all this giving. The Kalambayans were some of the poorest people anywhere in the world, and yet they were by far the most generous I had ever met. Indeed, each time I thought I had been offered everything they had to share, something new was laid at my feet.

Barely three months after I moved into the Lulenga cotton warehouse, the village chief, Mbaya Tshiongo, appeared at my door dressed in his threadbare trench coat and ripped tennis shoes. He was a meek, doddering septuagenarian with whom my previous contact had been limited to conversations in the market where I told him repeatedly that, yes, everything was fine and, no, I didn't need anything. Now he had come to my house with something more dramatic on his mind. Standing at his side were his four eligible daughters, shy and fresh as daisies.

"*Michel*," he began, leathery half moons sagging under his eyes, "you live in my village and I am responsible for you. Take one of my daughters. You're alone. A wife will make your life better. Choose one and she will stay with you."

Half the people in the village were standing behind the chief waiting to see whom I would choose. Flattered and panicked in equal measure, my chest thumping, I fumbled for a way out of this with minimal loss of face. I walked up to the chief, put my arm around his shoulders and quietly guided him inside, where I explained things: "I can't accept, Chief. Really. They're beautiful women. But I'm fine by myself. I don't need a wife right now."

A cloud of perplexity crossed his face. He tried to reason with me. "But you *do* need a wife, Michel. Every man does. Look, I'll waive the dowry. You won't even have to pay me anything. Just take one." But I wouldn't budge. Standing to leave, the chief asked me to at least prom-

ise to let him know if I ever changed my mind. I said I would.

After the crowd dispersed and Chief Mbaya led his daughters, now wilted by rejection, back home, I was left alone in my house convinced there really were no limits to what these people would have me have. The intense desire to give moved me to admiration, especially because I knew villagers shared with each other with almost the same zeal they did with me, the visitor. It was a social habit lacking in my own culture and I was curious to know what it was, exactly, that produced it in Kalambayi.

Kazadi Manda, a lean, square-jawed fish farmer in Ntita Konyukua who had a mile-wide smile, provided part of the answer early one morning about a week later. We were sitting at his pond, tossing stones at toads and watching his tilapia eat a batch of papaya leaves spread across the liquid light of the pond's surface. His fish, like those of Chief Ilunga and the other new farmers, were coming along nicely, getting fat for the upcoming first harvests. After talking shop for a while, Kazadi and I turned our attention to other matters. I told him about Chief Mbaya coming to my house with his daughters.

"You're joking," he said. "He just walked up and said pick one and you refused?"

"Yes."

"But why? Why didn't you take one? It is a little strange that you live alone in that warehouse the way you do, don't you think? Nobody can understand it. Don't you want a wife?"

"Of course," I said. "Someday. If I can find the right person. But I barely know these women."

"So?"

"I can't marry a woman just like that. I have to be in love first and she has to be in love with me. It takes time."

## VOCABULARY

**Doddering:** Feeble

**Septuagenarian:** A person whose age is in the 70s

**Michel:** [*mih-SHEL*] French for the name Michael

**Perplexity:** Confusion; bewilderment

**Waive:** To give up a right to something

Kazadi didn't get it. The look of blank incomprehension on his face told me the relationship I was talking about didn't exist in his universe. He had no conception of the self, of the individual. Nor, by extension, did he fully understand the Western notion of romantic love between an individual man and woman.

"You don't get married for love," he told me. "You get married because you need a woman to cook your food and bear your children. Love is what you feel for your whole family. The happiness of your children and brothers and parents and grandparents—of all of them together—is what brings your own happiness. You can't get that by yourself or from a woman."

"So until I have a lot of children and a big group of relatives all around me I can never hope to be happy?" I said.

"That's right."

"Never?"

"Never."

Sitting at the pond, listening to Kazadi pass on this truth with the conviction of an inspired cleric, I began to better understand the fabric of life in Kalambayi. The family was indeed paramount. Kazadi was wed to his relatives. And because each village was nothing but a collection of several extended families, and because it was often difficult, due to their size, to tell where one family began and another left off, this concern for the group was extended in large measure to include all members of the village and, ultimately, all people. Everyone treated everyone else more or less like a relative, whether he was or not. Everyone was taken care of, even Kalambayi's strange, white, American visitor—me.

Kazadi and I talked a while longer before spreading a final bundle of papaya leaves across the pond. When we finished he told me he wanted to harvest some peanuts from his field a short distance away. I did-

n't have to be in the next village for another hour, so I offered to help. He led the way up the valley.

Kazadi and I moved through a stand of banana trees, then a cotton field, then a stretch of grass that left our pants wet with dew by the time we reached his small plot of peanuts. We walked to the distant-most corner of the field and went to work, pulling the plants from the ground with our hands. The soil was poor here, sandy as in most of Kalambayi, and the stems lifted easily. Working 15 feet apart, we placed the plants in separate piles, first shaking dirt from the dangling shells. When each pile had roughly 20 plants, I figured we had about as many as Kazadi could carry comfortably back to his family. But he kept going. I did the same.

A moment later he finally stopped and tied the piles together in a large bundle. I went down to the spring to wash my hands. When I walked back up the hill to my motorcycle, the entire bundle of peanuts was tied, to my surprise, above the rear fender. Kazadi was hoeing in a field a little farther up. He stopped to wave goodbye. "They're raw," he said, pointing to the peanuts, "so boil them first and add a little salt before you eat them."

Curiously, this habit of giving in Kalambayi didn't rub off on me. Even as I watched, and was moved by, the sacrifices villagers like Kazadi made to keep me stocked with produce and filled with *fufu*, I didn't do the same. I didn't reciprocate. I accepted the food and other gifts when I could, but the idea of spreading around my own wealth in the same free and automatic manner didn't take hold. I hadn't been sent to Kalambayi to become like the people exactly. I taught fish culture. I shared an expertise. That was enough.

So on the off chance that I was hungry at the end of the day, I didn't eat in my yard like most people, inviting passersby to join me. I took my tin of sardines and plate of fried rice and stayed inside behind a curtain pulled across the front door. I was glad to be alone and eating

## VOCABULARY

**Reciprocate:** To give or act in return

something other than *fufu*, glad to be listening to the BBC's "Globe Theatre" blessedly broadcast in English over my short-wave radio. If someone came while I was eating, a friend or fish farmer, I stood at the door and told him that, well, I was having dinner and could he please come back later. Lifelong experience at suburban dinner tables had taught me that mealtime visitors meant embarrassment. You made apologies and they went away or waited until you finished.

I didn't really care or really wasn't conscious of the fact that the villagers around me thought this habit was a little strange, a bit obscene, even for a visitor. Mbaya, my worker, didn't tell me. Nor did any of my neighbors. And no one said anything about the fact that I smoked whole cigarettes by myself, not passing a portion of each one to other men in my company as was the local habit. I just did these things. Just like I socked away my money, saving as much of my living allowance as I could for the beer and french fries it would buy on my next trip to Mbuji Mayi.

To be sure, I had made a lot of changes since arriving—adapting to strange foods, learning to bathe in cold rivers, surrendering my native tongue for two years. But my attachment to the word "mine" was strong and stubborn. Whatever the villagers did, I had my things, I needed my things, and I didn't give them away. So much was this attitude a measure of who I was and the Western culture that produced me that during my early months it simply never occurred to me to try to change.

I suppose it's no wonder then that I treated Mutoba Muenyi the way I did. She was a beggar—a haggard, unkempt, insane beggar who roamed pretty much aimlessly through the villages of Kalambayi, sleeping in other people's huts or in the cotton storage house. Mbaya told me she was the daughter of a nearby village chief and had been made crazy years ago by the curse of a disgruntled husband.

I did my utmost to avoid Mutoba on those occasions when she came

to Lulenga and stood under the cluster of palm trees in the center of the village, babbling nonsense in her high-pitched voice while gesturing for food and money. I avoided her because I've never handled beggars well. They intimidate me. I had moved through the streets of enough American cities to know that the usual response when confronted by a bedraggled panhandler is to hang on to your money and keep walking.

So when I turned to answer a tap on my shoulder one afternoon in the Lulenga market and saw Mutoba—clothes unwashed, teeth rotten, arms motioning toward the avocados I was buying—I ignored her. When she followed me through the market, creating a scene, I told her to stop and quickly made my way home, embarrassed by her presence. A few weeks later she appeared again, this time planting herself at my door, asking for money. Again I shooed her away. It wasn't until our third encounter that things began to change. Mutoba involved me in a small nightmare. She made me pay, in a sense, for all my previous behavior.

It happened in Lulenga, early one morning in June. The village was silent and still in the predawn darkness, everyone asleep, when Mutoba crept to my house, pressed her face inches from my door and started singing loudly. Her harsh voice woke me as if cymbals crashed above my bed. The song she sang was improvised, with lyrics telling how she was hungry and how I should give her something to eat.

Sleepy and annoyed, I lay in bed listening, cringing at the thought that half the village was doing the same thing. My clock said 5:45. "Sssshhhh," I hissed from my room, "be quiet. Go away. I don't have any food."

But the singing didn't stop. Not after five minutes. Not after 10. It went on and on, bludgeoning the morning quiet. Then something terrible happened. With mounting urgency, pushed on by the impurity of the local water, my body began signaling that it had something to con-

## VOCABULARY

**Haggard:** gaunt; tired looking

**Unkempt:** Untidy; messy

**Intimidate:** To make someone afraid

**Improvise:** To make up on the spur of the moment

**Bludgeon:** To strike, as if with a club

tribute to the backyard outhouse—now. Cursing, I got up, grabbed my flashlight and began looking for the padlock to my door. Because the outhouse was around back, I would have to lock the front door on my way out, preventing Mutoba from entering while I was away. But suddenly there was a problem. I couldn't find my padlock. With my bowels approaching critical mass and Mutoba's hideous singing continuing outside, I searched everywhere, finding nothing. I had misplaced the lock.

There was nothing left to do but go outside. I opened the door. There she was. My flashlight revealed Mutoba's bare feet, her startled eyes. She didn't move. She just kept singing as I shut the door behind me. I dared not go to the outhouse now, leaving this crazy woman unwatched by an unlocked door. I sprinted past her one hundred feet to the far end of the cotton warehouse. There, off to the side in a patch of knee-high grass next to a palm tree, I turned facing her and lowered myself to my haunches. All the while I kept my flashlight fixed warily on her at the doorstep. I squatted and Mutoba sang, each of us staring with equal shock at the spectacle before us.

And that's how most of the village found us. To my yard they came—mamas and papas and their children rubbing sleep from their eyes. They filed out of their houses to see what all the commotion was about. A minute or so after the performance started, just as the rising sun was providing rosy light by which to see, there were several dozen thunderstruck people gathered along the edges of my yard, watching the mad showdown between the crapping foreigner and the crowing bag lady.

I was beside myself with humiliation and anger by the time I finished and stood. I walked straight to Mutoba. With the crowd looking on, I yelled at her to leave immediately. She, in turn, yelled back, calling me a *muena tshitua* over and over again. It was a name I had never heard before. After a moment, she finally left. The crowd, guffawing and embarrassed by all the ugliness, walked away.

About 30 minutes later, while I was sitting inside my house still trying to figure out what had just happened, Mbaya came by. He already had heard about the affair with Mutoba, but insisted I recount the story in full. “You look a little ill,” he said when I had finished.

“I feel ill.”

Then I asked him a question: “What’s a *muena tshitua*?” The words had stuck in my mind since Mutoba spoke them. “She called me a *muena tshitua*. What’s that?”

Mbaya grew noticeably uncomfortable at this and heaved a forced laugh. “Oh it’s nothing,” he said. “You didn’t know.”

“Know what? What does it mean? What did she call me?”

Reluctantly, he told me. Mutoba had delivered one of the most serious charges one can make in Kalambayi. “A *muena tshitua*,” he said, “is someone who doesn’t share. She said you were stingy.”

There was a brief pause after this, a few seconds when Mbaya avoided my eyes and I folded my arms. Hanging in the silence and permeating Mbaya’s awkward manner seemed to be the suggestion that the *muena tshitua* label wasn’t such a bad fit, that perhaps Mutoba was right.

“But how could I give her anything?” I asked him, breaking the silence. She had come at an outrageous hour, singing like a wild soul and wresting me from sleep, I said. Running her off was the only thing I could have done.

But even to myself my argument sounded a bit feeble. There were no mitigating circumstances to explain my other encounters with her, nor my conspicuously selfish behavior in general.

When I finished, Mbaya responded cautiously. Like most Kalambayans, he was often hesitant to openly criticize or correct. He softened what he was about to tell me by stressing that he thought I was basically a great guy and I shouldn’t worry too much about what a deranged old

## VOCABULARY

**Permeating:** Penetrating; spreading through

**Mitigating:** Making less severe; moderating

woman told me. Then, delicately, he explained that I hadn't done the right thing that morning. It was all right to shoo Mutoba away, but the proper response was to give her a little food or whatever she needed first. That's what most people did.

He was right, of course. The same villagers who vigorously plied me with *fufu* and peanuts everywhere I went also took care of Mutoba. It wouldn't occur to them to do otherwise. She couldn't farm or provide for herself, so when her clothes became too torn, someone, somewhere, gave her new ones. When her filth became excessive, someone placed a piece of soap in her hand. The sense of familial generosity flowing through every village protected her.

But wrapped up in my own notions of privacy and propriety, trying to live in this culture without really being a part of it, I gave nothing to Mutoba. My problem, in a big sense, was greed. Not just greed toward the things I wanted to keep for myself, but toward this whole two-year trip abroad. I wanted to take as much from this African world as I could, to learn and experience, without surrendering any large part of myself, without making significant changes like replacing the faulty moral compass I had come out with with one that made more sense in this poor setting. Clearly, this resistance was bound to fail me. I had no desire to "go native," to become like a typical villager in every way. But to have any meaningful experience here, to leave with true friends and true insights, I had to let go of some strong habits. I had to rip something out in order to add something new.

This wasn't the message Mbaya had in mind, really, when he tried to educate me on that strange morning Mutoba Muenyi came to my house, but it's the one that started to sink in. His message, though not in as many words, was more simple: "You've been here long enough, Michel. It's time you stopped being such an appalling tightwad."

So, like learning to navigate bad roads and speak the local language, I had to learn to share in Kalambayi. I had to learn to put aside my

excessive concern for my own interests and to open up my house and cupboards to people who did the same for me. Needled with shame after my talk with Mbaya, I began with Mutoba. The next time she came to my house—this time knocking on a moonlit evening—I shuffled into the kitchen and brought back a papaya and some dried fish. On following visits, I gave whatever else I had on hand. Weeks went by and there were other changes. I stopped the awkward practice of blocking my door when friends and neighbors came at dinnertime. When they arrived, they entered and ate with me. There was always more rice or *fufu* in the kitchen I could eat later. Similarly, I stopped smoking whole cigarettes. I started passing half of each one I lit up to whatever men happened to be around me at the time.

And, eventually, I took the big step. A good part of my 70-dollar monthly salary started sneaking away from me. It found its way to my closest friends, people who began to represent something of my own extended family: five dollars to Kazadi Manda to buy malaria medicine for his daughter; three dollars to Mbaya's brother to pay school fees; 50 cents of dried fish to poorer farmers whose children I knew had eaten nothing but manioc leaves for weeks. Saving money for a row of cold beers in Mbuji Mayi gradually lost its importance.

As time passed, it grew easier and easier to let go of what I had. The reason was simple: I had a lot. Like most people who go overseas to do development work, I did so expecting to find out what it's like to be poor. But awakening to my surroundings after a few months, I discovered that that's not what happens. Instead you learn what it's like to be rich, to be fabulously, incomprehensibly, bloated with wealth. Into this jumble of backwater villages, where every man had a mud house, a hoe, and 10 kids, I came stomping and rattling with a motorcycle and cassette tapes and books to read and boots to wear and a bed to sleep on. I had two kerosene lamps and kerosene to put inside them. I had tools to fix my motorcycle and a 200-liter barrel of gasoline to make it run. I had a tin roof over my head. No one in Kalambayi could afford to share more than I.

## VOCABULARY

**Appalling:** Dismaying; shocking

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'SHARING IN AFRICA'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Tidwell served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the chiefdom of Kalambayi, in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), as an agriculture extension agent. His Peace Corps assignment, from 1985 to 1987, was to help the central African villagers increase their protein consumption by showing them how to build ponds and raise fish. Since that time, he has written several books, including a Peace Corps memoir, *The Ponds of Kalambayi: An African Sojourn*, which won the 1991 National Peace Corps Association's Paul Cowan Non-Fiction Award. "Sharing in Africa" is excerpted from Chapter Four of *The Ponds of Kalambayi*. His most recent book, published in 2003, is *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast*. Tidwell is executive director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, a grass-roots organization in Maryland and the Washington, D.C., region dedicated to fighting global warming.

#### ABOUT THE STORY

In "Sharing in Africa," Tidwell tells how he experienced the overwhelming generosity of the local villagers, who plied him repeatedly with offers of food—and even of wives. Despite the generosity that surrounded him, Tidwell describes how he could not bring himself to share his food, belongings, or living allowance, until an embarrassing encounter with a beggar helped him question his own cultural values. Students will appreciate Tidwell's insight and humor and his ability

both to analyze his reactions and to laugh at himself as he discovers the nature of true sharing.

Two other excerpts from *The Ponds of Kalambayi*, with lessons for the classroom, are available in the Peace Corps publication *Voices From the Field* (available from the Peace Corps or online at [www.peacecorps.gov/www/guides/voices](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/guides/voices)).

### ABOUT THE SETTING

“Sharing in Africa” takes place in the remote chiefdom of Kalambayi in the heart of Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (and before that, the Belgian Congo). Straddling the Equator, Congo has the third largest population, and the second largest land area, in sub-Saharan Africa. It includes the Congo River Basin, which encompasses an area of almost 400,000 square miles. Despite vast natural resources, including copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, and petroleum, Congo at the beginning of the millennium had a per capita annual income of \$82. Agriculture, the main occupation, includes cash crops such as coffee, palm oil, rubber, cotton, sugar, tea, and cocoa, as well as food crops such as cassava, plantains, and groundnuts—the term in Africa for peanuts.

In recent years, Congo has sustained brutal internal strife, with a lingering civil war producing high numbers of casualties, massive dislocation of the population, and starvation on a broad scale.

Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools

### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 3, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX (see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 4, 6, 10, 11, 13  
(see pages 189–190)

#### Enduring Understandings

- People of different cultures have different attitudes toward sharing.
- To understand people from other cultures—and to avoid misunderstandings—sometimes we have to try to see the world from their point of view as well as from our own.
- In some cultures, people believe the group is responsible for the well-being of each individual. In other cultures, people believe that individuals are primarily responsible for themselves.

#### Essential Questions

- What are attitudes toward sharing in the United States? How is sharing viewed in another culture you might be familiar with?
- How do we know when we’ve shared enough? How do we know when we’ve been generous enough?
- What, if anything, do we gain from trying to see the world from another person’s perspective?
- When is taking care of the individual more important than taking care of the group? When is taking care of the group more important than taking care of the individual?
- What does this story teach us about the challenges of serving as a volunteer in another culture?

**Materials:** Photocopies of story, Resource Sheet 1

#### Assessment Tools

Journal entries, graphic organizers, extended written responses to the text, personal narrative

## Giving and Receiving

**Suggestion for teaching the lessons:** Copy the story from this volume in three sections or download it from the website [www.peacecorps.gov/www/journeys](http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/journeys). The three sections:

1. To the end of the paragraph that starts: “It was truly overwhelming...” (page 130)
2. From “Barely three months” to the end of the paragraph that starts: “A moment later he finally stopped...” (page 133)
3. The remainder of the story.

## LESSON 1

## PURPOSE

- To examine how different cultures have different attitudes toward sharing
  - To question limits on sharing and if it is possible to be too generous
1. In preparation for reading the story, have students brainstorm a list of celebrations and holidays. List them on the board as students suggest them. Have students also come up with some foods associated with those days. Students may suggest items such as Valentine’s candy; Easter eggs; matzoh for Passover; Halloween candy; Thanksgiving turkey; Christmas candy canes and fruitcake. Ask students why particular foods are served on these holidays. Emphasize that this is part of culture—and that those who are part of a culture share in the cele-

brations. Explain that certain foods have symbolic meaning for different groups, and that food is part of tradition in social gatherings.

2. Ask students what they think is meant by the term “breaking bread.” Point out that in many cultures, eating together goes far beyond merely satisfying hunger; it provides reinforcement of the ties of family and friendship and involves the act of sharing. Suggest to students that this will be a theme in the story they will read.
3. To help students understand the context of the story, give them background on the author, Congo, and the Peace Corps, provided on the previous two pages. Point out the location of Congo on a map of Africa (see page 128). Then read them the following passage, which is excerpted from Tidwell’s introduction in *The Ponds of Kalambayi*.

## THE CONGO RIVER

*Bending and arching, looking curiously confused, the Congo River makes its way through central Africa, crossing the Equator twice. It’s an enormous river, dominating both geography and human life in Zaire. In his famous novella Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad wrote of the Congo: “There was in (the world) one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on a map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land.”*

*Actually, the Congo has several tails. A dozen major tributaries spill into its serpentine body. These tributaries are themselves fed by other rivers, each farther and farther lost in the depths of the land. One such branch, running through the grasslands of south-central Zaire roughly 1,000 miles east of the Congo's main body, is the Lubilashi River. On a map the Lubilashi appears as an unremarkable ribbon meandering among the others. But on the ground it is wide and powerful; an impressive river. At one point along its banks live 20,000 people banded together in a chiefdom called Kalambayi. Like the river along which they live, the people of Kalambayi are lost, their lives barely touched by the hands of the 20th century. To this place I journeyed with my newly acquired duffel bag as a Peace Corps Volunteer...*

*For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase family protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human. There, at the center of the continent, they shared with me the ancient spirit of Africa's heart. They shared its hopes, its generosity. Above all, they shared its unbending will to survive in the face of adversities so severe I nearly lost my life more than once just passing through.*

4. Ask students to read the first section of "Sharing in Africa." (Point out that the author is called Michel because French is widely spoken in

Congo.) Have them consider these questions to guide their reading:

- How does Tidwell feel about *fufu*?
- Why do the villagers offer it to him?
- Why does he keep eating it?
- What is the meaning of sharing food in Kalambayi?

5. Hold a class discussion addressing these points:

- What does Tidwell want us to understand about *fufu*—and about the local culture's values regarding sharing?
- Why doesn't Tidwell just refuse the food and explain that he is not hungry?
- What foods do we eat that are similar in texture to *fufu*? [Oatmeal, cornmeal mush, polenta, mashed potatoes.] What would it be like to eat this staple three or more times a day?
- What would a villager from Kalambayi think if you took him or her into a modern American supermarket?

6. **Comprehension Strategy.** Explain to students that in order to go deeper into the meaning of a story, readers sometimes take a paragraph or part of the story that seems important and study it in depth. They think about what the author means and how it relates to their own lives and their own thinking. By way of example, read aloud Tidwell's words:

## Giving and Receiving

*It was truly overwhelming, all this giving. The Kalambayans were some of the poorest people anywhere in the world, and yet they were by far the most generous I had ever met. Indeed, each time I thought I had been offered everything they had to share, something new was laid at my feet.*

**DISCUSSION WITH THE CLASS**

- Why did Tidwell encounter such incredible generosity?
  - How can we know when we've shared enough?
  - Is it ever possible to share too much?
  - What did Tidwell mean by his "being incapacitated by too much generosity"?
- 7. Journal assignment.** For homework, ask students to read the next section of the story, ending with the phrase "... so boil them first and add a little salt before you eat them." Have them highlight the sentences that have the most meaning for them, or write them in their journals, for discussion in the next day's class.
- 8. Optional Journal Activity.** For homework, have students write a journal entry as follows: Describe an occasion when someone was extremely generous to you, or you were extremely generous to someone else. What were the circumstances? How was the giver generous? Why? What difference did this make to the recipient? Who do you think got more pleasure—the giver or the receiver? Why? Try to use

concrete details, as Tidwell did, to make your narrative seem real to the reader.

**LESSON 2****PURPOSE**

- To examine differences between cultures
  - To see the same situation from different perspectives
  - To question what we gain from trying to see the world from the perspective of another person or culture
  - To understand the challenges Peace Corps Volunteers face when serving in a culture outside the United States
- 1.** Conduct a class discussion about the sentences (or paragraphs) from the second section of the story that students underlined in their homework—the parts they found most meaningful.
  - 2.** Discuss the incident in which the village chief, Mbaya Tshiongo, offers Tidwell one of his daughters in marriage. What options did Tidwell have? What would have been the consequences of each option?

To facilitate the students' answers and elicit a broad range of thoughtful responses, ask the students to pair up and use Resource Sheet 1, a graphic organizer that may help them analyze the incident and the attendant issues in the story.

- 3.** When the students have completed the sheets,

## RESOURCE SHEET 1

### **SORTING OUT PERSPECTIVES**

Directions: Use this graphic organizer to help analyze the story. With a partner, respond to each of the prompts in order, left to right, top to bottom.

<p><b>What did Tidwell think about the offer of a wife?</b></p>	<p><b>How did Mbaya Tshiongo view his offer of a wife to Tidwell?</b></p>
<p><b>How did Tidwell feel when he declined the offer?</b></p>	<p><b>How did Mbaya Tshiongo feel when Tidwell declined the offer?</b></p>
<p><b>Why did Tidwell feel the way he did about Mbaya Tshiongo's offer?</b></p>	<p><b>Why did Mbaya Tshiongo feel the way he did?</b></p>
<p><b>How effective was Tidwell's response ?</b></p>	<p><b>Do you think Mbaya Tshiongo thought this was a respectful response?</b></p>
<p><b>What cultural and professional issues did Tidwell have to consider in responding to Mbaya Tshiongo?</b></p>	<p><b>What cultural differences made it difficult for Mbaya Tshiongo to understand Tidwell?</b></p>

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debrief the class as a whole, inviting contributions from the resource sheets. What were the issues Tidwell had to consider as he tried to figure out what to do? What risks were involved for Tidwell? For the chief? For the Peace Corps program in Kalambayi? Why did Tidwell need the ability to see the world from the chief's perspective, as well as from his own?

Explain that Peace Corps Volunteers often face cultural situations they don't anticipate, and they need to be able to respond with respect and sensitivity. The problem they face is how to show respect for the cultural values of their hosts while not compromising their own values in the process. A critical skill for a Volunteer is the ability to see the world from another culture's perspective and respond appropriately.

4. Ask students what can be gained from trying to see the world from another person's perspective—and from another culture's perspective. Can students identify how this might benefit them on a personal level—as a Peace Corps Volunteer or even just as a traveler? Can they suggest how this kind of understanding could affect a country's foreign policy? Prompt students to think of a time when they've had to see the world from another person's point of view at home in their own country. This discussion can be concluded by providing students with the enduring understanding: "To avoid misunderstanding—and possibly offending—someone from another culture, we need to try to see the world from their point of view as well as from our own."

**About Graphic Organizers:** Ask students if the graphic organizer helped them gain a better understanding of one of the complex issues in the story. How might they adapt this graphic organizer for use in a different class in which they are presented with a complex issue? Let the students know that research has shown that graphic organizers aid appreciably in reader comprehension and retention.

5. **The Individual and the Community: Who Comes First?** In class discussion, ask students whether Kalambayans live under the principle of the group being responsible for individuals, or individuals being responsible for themselves. Students will observe that Tidwell lived in Kalambayi in a culture where people believe the group is responsible for the well-being of each individual. This created a challenge for him, since he had grown up in a culture where emphasis lies on the responsibility of individuals for themselves.

Ask students to jot down on paper examples in American culture of how individual responsibility for ourselves is valued. [Examples: the pioneering spirit of families settling territories new to them; the praise directed to individual achievement in business and in school; stardom of individuals in sports, movies, music; the tendency for nuclear families to disperse and for grown children "to make it on their own."]

Discuss the students' observations, then read aloud the following quotations from Tidwell:

*This concern for the group was extended in large measure to include all members of the village and, ultimately, all people. Everyone treated everyone else more or less like a relative, whether he was or not. Everyone was taken care of, even Kalambayi's strange, white, American visitor—me.*

*[This] was a social habit lacking in my own culture, and I was curious to know what it was, exactly, that produced it in Kalambayi.*

Draw the attention of the class to the second paragraph in particular. Ask students to speculate as to why the Kalambayans practice communal sharing so thoroughly, and in such contrast to the culture from which Tidwell came. Why might the complete sharing of material goods and food have evolved in the heart of the chiefdom of Kalamabayi and not in the American landscape? Further questions for discussion:

- In the United States, under what circumstances does taking care of the group take precedence over taking care of the individual?
- Do you think the villagers in Kalambayi would have characterized themselves as generous? Why or why not? (If Tidwell had said to them: “You are very generous people,” would they have agreed?)
- Tidwell wrote: “But to have any meaningful experience here, I had to let go of some strong habits.” What habits were those? Why did he have to let go of them to succeed as a Peace Corps Volunteer?

- 6. The Peace Corps Experience.** Read aloud to students the following, from Tidwell’s introduction to *The Ponds of Kalambayi*:

*For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase family protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human.*

Compare this quotation for the class to a comment from author and returned Peace Corps Volunteer Carrie Young, who served in Mali (page 161):

*Even though I tried to teach the villagers things that they didn't know about, they taught me so much more than I could have taught them—like how to care for one another, work as a community, and be happy with what I have no matter how great or small.*

(You might want to provide students with a small handout containing both quotations, so they can review and compare them.)

### DISCUSSION WITH STUDENTS

- Do you think Tidwell and Young expected to learn these life lessons—and to learn more than they taught—when they first went to their posts?
- Did Tidwell have to give up his own culture in order to fit in among the Kalambayans? If you think so, in what ways did he have to “give up”

## Giving and Receiving

his culture? If you think not, what did he do instead? How did he adjust?

Did the author entertain you? Did he employ a writing style you noticed and learned from?

3. Suggest to students that Tidwell’s story serves as a “mentor text”—literature that exemplifies elements of the writer’s craft that students can emulate. Students don’t just read a mentor text; they study it and write their own composition employing some of the same stylistic devices of the mentor author. You can have students return to Tidwell’s story repeatedly to tackle the following writing issues.

- How do you write an engaging lead? Do you start with a question? A short sentence about the setting? A mysterious line?
- How do you introduce a new character? Do you describe the character first, or do you have the character talk first? Or do you describe what others think about him or her?
- How do you use hyperbole to engage the reader or add humor? “Sharing in Africa” has many examples of hyperbole (“People in villages across Kalambayi were trying to kill me.” “Fufu ... a doughy white substance ... not unlike small bowling balls”). Have students find more examples of hyperbole and then think about what effect it has and how they could use hyperbole in their own writing.
- How do you handle transitions in time? How did Tidwell do this?

## LESSON 3

## PURPOSE

To show how richly written literature can be used as a mentor text, or model, for improving one’s own writing

1. Ask students to read the rest of Tidwell’s story. Then introduce them to the “So what?” rule of writing presented by educator Nancie Atwell. Here is her proposition:

*Good writing in every genre answers the question So what? Good writing has a purpose, a point, a reason it was written.... Sometimes the So what? is subtle and implicit. Sometimes it’s explicitly stated. But always a good reader finds something new to think about because a good writer has found something important to think about. [Lessons That Change Writers, page 40.]*

2. Tell students you’d like them to think about Tidwell’s story “Sharing in Africa” and then ask themselves: “So what?” Help students determine if they see a “So what?”—“a purpose, a point, a reason it was written.” Assist them with sample questions: How did Tidwell challenge you to think about your world? Your values? Did you learn something about another part of the world?

- How do you slow down the action at a critical moment? How did Tidwell do this?
  - How do you vary your sentence length to add interest? How did Tidwell do this?
4. Ask students to think of a time when they unexpectedly learned something that was important to them (a “So what?” time they will never forget) and to write a short personal narrative about it. Have them try to look for ways to make their writing engaging by imitating the way Tidwell held his readers’ interest in “Sharing in Africa.”
  5. Once students have a first draft, ask them to exchange papers with a partner for feedback, then to revise their texts, edit and proofread, and prepare the text for submission to their teacher.

### **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES: CHOICES AND EXPLORATIONS**

1. Students who wish to know more about life in a traditional African community can read Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*—a book on many middle school and high school reading lists. The themes that Tidwell introduces in his story are developed in Achebe’s novel: the role of family, the nature of marriage, the individual’s responsibility to the group. The contrast of these cultural traits with Western values in the novel invites comparison as well. Tidwell’s story provides an excellent introduction to the novel.
2. Have students select from the following options:
  - Working in small groups, develop a written script for the dramatization of sharing *fufu*, bananas, and other foods from one’s home. Make sure you illustrate the deeply held ethic that it is socially proper to share what you have. Perform this dramatization for a class of younger students. Each student in the group should be able to summarize the main ideas in the story and explain their significance.
  - Imagine that you are Mike Tidwell at the end of your two years of Peace Corps service. Write a letter to your replacement who is preparing to come to Kalambayi. In the letter, include a description of Kalambayan culture and how it differs from the culture of the United States, and provide advice and recommendations for success. Do you think it is possible to convey adequately in writing the importance of sharing in Kalambayan culture, or does one have to experience it to understand it fully?
  - Write a short essay addressing the question: How would life in our school be different today if everyone in our school shared the values of the people of Kalambayi?
  - Working with a partner, illustrate the most important events of “Sharing in Africa” on a large piece of chart paper, using felt-tipped markers in various colors. The drawing should serve as a visual summary of the story.

## Giving and Receiving

## THE SENEGALESE MIRACLE

by Leita Kaldi

Peace Corps Volunteer, Senegal (1993–1996)

I was one of 60 new Peace Corps trainees who landed at Dakar-Yoff Airport at midnight, excited and tired. As we stood jammed in the aisles, the plane door finally opened and the hot night air blasted through the cabin. The airport looked more like a hangar with a baggage conveyor belt winding through its middle. Peace Corps officials waited there to meet us, help us with baggage, and shepherd us through customs. Outside, wiry Senegalese porters loaded our bags onto the tops of two rickety buses, while clots of taxi drivers leaning against yellow, broken-down cars smoked hand-rolled cigarettes and spoke a language I'd never heard before. Beggars, black figures clad in rags, stood against the airport wall like a row of exclamation marks. Once the bags were tied down with ropes on top of the buses, apprenti, or drivers' helpers, ushered us into the vehicles, where we sat on metal benches covered in vinyl with bits of sponge peeking through the rips. In a roar of unmuffled engines, we were off.

Skirting the city of Dakar, we trundled down a dark country road, or so it seemed, until I learned that this road was, in fact, one of the country's few national routes. Low-hanging clouds hid the dark sky. All I could see from the window were shadows of queer baobab trees, massive, with clumps of leaves bursting from their thick limbs. The smells assailed me. They say that the way you react to the smells of Africa will determine whether you love or hate it. Among the odors I detected peanuts, mucky earth, an elusive scent of the sea, the occasional waft of night-blooming jasmine, the not unpleasant body odor of a young



Senegalese man sitting behind me, and, from somewhere, cinnamon. I found it all delicious; I loved it.

Bam! An explosion rocked the bus. The bus careened from one side of the road to the other. My heart in my throat, the thought flashed through my mind of an ignoble end to my adventure before it ever began. The driver wrestled with the steering wheel and after what seemed like a long roller-coaster ride, the bus coasted into a swale. A flat tire. We filed off the bus so the crew could jack it off the ground and change the tire.

As we milled around by the roadside, sticking close to each other, a full moon parted the curtain of clouds and flooded the sky with light. It illumined a nearby cement-block house with a pointed straw roof, in front of which a group of people squatted around a fire. Their faces shone in the blaze—angled cheekbones, chiseled noses, high-curved brows, white glints of eyes. One by one, the people rose and strolled toward us, men in flowing robes, women in wraparound skirts and long matching blouses or T-shirts that fell around their narrow hips. A tall, slim young man in a white boubou led the others. He greeted us in French. As the only person in our group who already spoke French, I approached him. He introduced himself as Mohammed Sy and said that he and his neighbors were amazed to see so many foreigners clustered in front of their compound. I explained who we were and why we were there. He had heard of Peace Corps. As we stood there waiting for the flat tire to be fixed, I translated his words for the other Volunteers who huddled around.

Mohammed expressed gratitude for the sacrifices he presumed we had made to come and help his country. He turned to a young woman behind him and spoke words incomprehensible to me, to which she responded by leaving the group and heading back to the house. A few minutes later she moved like a shadow through the darkness carrying a platter of small green oranges, which she proffered to us with a serious face. Her sober expression made me wonder if the fruit came from

## VOCABULARY

**Wiry:** Thin, lean, sinewy

**Apprenti:** [*uh-PRON-tee*] French for apprentices to the bus or truck driver, who collect the fares and assist passengers with luggage

**Baobab:** [*BAY-uh-bab*] A tree indigenous to semi-arid parts of Africa, which develops an enormously thick trunk and has a life span of perhaps a thousand years

**Ignoble:** not grand

**Swale:** a depression in the land

**Boubou:** [*BOO-boo*] A long, flowing robe that is traditional clothing in Senegal

**Proffer:** To offer; give

## Giving and Receiving

some vital store that would otherwise have fed her family or been sold in the roadside market.

Mohammed confirmed my suspicions when he told us something that, in time, would become a familiar phenomenon to us all, though at that moment it sounded like a mystery. Mohammed called it the miracle of Senegal.

“Like most Africans,” he explained in elegant French, “we are poor, but we believe in sharing. Whatever I have never belongs to me alone, but to my family and all my brothers and sisters who have less. You will find families of, say, 10, with only one person who works, who earns some money. That person will feed his entire family on his meager income and send as many children as possible to school. He will keep nothing for himself.”

Mohammed held up his hand to us, in a biblical posture. “But that is not the miracle,” he continued. “The miracle happens when others besides the immediate family come into the household—needy relatives, children whose parents cannot feed them. Then the same person with the same income feeds 20, instead of 10. And everyone eats. Everyone survives.” He laughed. “It’s a miracle, *n’est-ce pas?*”

The bus driver called to us; the tire was fixed. Everyone shook hands with Mohammed and we climbed back into the bus, setting off again into the night. Mohammed’s miracle echoed in my ears, not yet understood, but I would remember it countless times during the coming years until I too learned to share my bread, my space, my strength with people who had less. Where I was coming from, that would be a miracle in itself.

## VOCABULARY

***N’est-ce pas?*** [*ness PAH?*] French expression for “Isn’t that so?” Many Senegalese speak French because Senegal was a French colony.

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'THE SENEGALESE MIRACLE'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leita Kaldi joined the Peace Corps at the age of 55 and served as a Volunteer from 1993 to 1996 in the village of Fimela, in Senegal. Fimela is on the coast of Senegal, where the Sahara meets the Atlantic Ocean. Assigned to the small-enterprise development program, Kaldi helped start many projects, including small tourist markets in seven villages and a warehouse for storing harvested shellfish and grain.

In an unpublished manuscript, "Adventures of an Aging Coquette in the Peace Corps," Kaldi writes: "I lived like most Senegalese villagers, in a small cement-block house with a corrugated asbestos roof, no electricity, no water ... no problem. When it was very hot at night, I slept outdoors on a bamboo bed under a mosquito net. In the end, Peace Corps was not the toughest job I ever had, but it is the one I loved the most."

After her Peace Corps service, Kaldi (whose first name is pronounced LEE-tuh) lived in Haiti, working as the administrator of Albert Schweitzer Hospital. She was awarded the New Century Writers First Prize in 2001 for her story "Fear of Falling."

#### ABOUT THE STORY

"The Senegalese Miracle" describes Kaldi's arrival in Senegal and her first encounter with the local population. After deplaning and boarding a bus, the new Peace Corps Volunteers have occasion to encounter a Senegalese man and his family who offer them oranges and explain the "Senegalese miracle," a phenomenon entailing hospitality and gen-

### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 2, 3, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV (see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 10, 11, 13  
(see pages 189–190)

#### Enduring Understandings

- Attitudes toward sharing vary among different cultures.
- People offer hospitality in many ways, depending on the culture.

#### Essential Questions

- What value does our culture place on sharing? (Consider money, food, shelter, material goods.)
- How do we know when we've shared enough?
- How does our school or community treat new arrivals? What kind of hospitality do we show?
- How can I help to make new people in my school or community feel at home?
- How can I revise my writing to make my imagery more vivid?

#### Materials

Photocopies of story

#### Assessment Tools

Class discussions, journal entries, descriptive sentences, written responses to the text

# Giving and Receiving

erosity. The story gives students another view of themes raised by Mike Tidwell in “Sharing in Africa” (page 128), and makes an excellent companion piece.

## ABOUT THE SETTING

Because Senegal was a French colony, French is the official language in the country, but many local languages are also spoken. Like many of its West African neighbors, Senegal, which has a population of 9.2 million, ranks among the least developed countries in the world. Under its new industrial policy, the government is attempting to stimulate the economy through the reduction of bureaucracy and the privatization of state industries. Progress is being made, but many factors still hinder the country’s development. Desertification continues to affect agricultural production. Roughly 70 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture, but agriculture contributes less than 25 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. At present, many Senegalese do not have access to basic health care. To address these needs, Peace Corps Volunteers, more than 2,500 of whom have served in Senegal since 1963, focus their efforts in the areas of agriculture, business development, environment, and health.

For further information about Senegal, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

## LESSON 1

### PURPOSE

To reflect on the enduring understanding, “Attitudes toward sharing differ among different cultures.”

1. Show students a map of Senegal and, using information from the introduction above, provide information about the author and the setting. Point out that Americans can join the Peace Corps at any stage in their lives, not only in the early stages of their careers.
2. Have students read the story. Ask them to note the sentences or lines they liked the most while reading. When students have finished reading, ask them to describe in their journals the lines they highlighted, and why. Then have students respond in their journals to the following prompts:
  - What do you think the author wanted her readers to be thinking about?
  - What is Kaldi’s most important point?
3. Have students share their journal responses with a partner. Then conduct a class discussion on their responses, and also on the more literal questions that follow. Remind students to cite evidence from the text to support their answers:

- What are Kaldi's first impressions of Africa? How does she feel about being there?
  - What opportunity does the tire blowout give her?
  - Describe the people she meets while her group is waiting for the flat tire to be fixed. How do they greet her?
  - What thoughts does this story bring to mind about generosity? About hospitality?
4. If students have read "Sharing in Africa" (p. 128), ask them what connections they find between Kaldi's description of her first day in Senegal and Tidwell's description of life in the chiefdom of Kalambayi.
- Refer students to Tidwell's statement in "Sharing in Africa": "It was truly overwhelming, all this giving. The Kalambayans were some of the poorest people anywhere in the world, and yet they were by far the most generous I had ever met. Indeed, each time I thought I had been offered everything they had to share, something new was laid at my feet."
  - Have students compare the customs Tidwell describes in what was then Zaire with Kaldi's description of the customs in Senegal: "Like most Africans," Kaldi's brief host explained in elegant French, "we are poor, but we believe in sharing. Whatever I have never belongs to me alone, but to my family and all my brothers and sisters who have less."
- Then ask the class
- Why the poorest of people might be among the most generous.
  - How American culture compares with the cultures in the author's region of Senegal and in Kalambayi, in regard to sharing.
  - Why people in different cultures might have different attitudes toward sharing.
5. Read aloud the last paragraph of the story. Ask students to describe "the Senegalese miracle." What is the nature of that miracle?
6. Point out to students that, since this was Kaldi's story, she could have ended it any way she wanted. Ask them why they think she made the decision to end the story with the phrase: "Where I was coming from, that would be a miracle in itself."
7. **Journal Activity.** For homework, ask students to respond in their journals to the following questions:
- In general, how would you describe the attitude in the United States toward strangers?
  - Describe a time when you were a stranger in a place or situation. How were you treated?

## Giving and Receiving

## THE SENEGALESE MIRACLE (CONTINUED)

- Describe a time when you observed someone else who was a stranger in a new place or situation. How was that person treated?
- In what ways does your school welcome strangers and make them feel at home? What more could students do to help? What could you do to help?

**Optional Activity.** Have students write a brief narrative, about the length of Kaldi’s story, titled “The American Miracle.” In it, students should focus on an aspect of their own culture that seems, on careful reflection, to be remarkable. If students have difficulty getting started, suggest they think about some of the organizations they know about in their culture; or some of the basic necessities of life, such as fresh water, they can almost count on being available; or remarkable individuals they know or know about.

## LESSON 2

## PURPOSE

- To practice modeling writing after exemplary prose
  - To practice writing complex descriptive sentences
1. Explain to students that one trait of evocative writing is the appeal to our senses of sight,

sound, smell, taste, and touch. Ask students to re-read “The Senegalese Miracle” and underline as many sensory images as they can find in each of the five categories. Discuss students’ findings as a class. Lead students to see that Kaldi’s writing is vivid because it is filled with complex descriptive sentences, and that they can use these sentences as models for their own writing.

2. Read aloud the sentence that begins the fourth paragraph of the story: “As we milled around by the roadside, sticking close to each other, a full moon parted the curtain of clouds and flooded the sky with light.” Explain to the students how they can “chunk” this sentence so they can imitate it. Chunking simply means dividing a sentence into grammatical or meaningful sections (e.g., prepositional phrases, subject clauses).

Divide the sentence into chunks on the chalkboard: “As we milled around / by the roadside / sticking close to each other / a full moon / parted the curtain of clouds / and flooded the sky with light.” Discuss with students what differences in effect they see between that sentence and this one: “As we stood by the roadside, the moon came out.”

3. Now put together a complex descriptive sentence with the class, modeled after Kaldi’s sentence. Focus the new sentence on an entirely different topic: a mother and her small child waiting under a bridge for the rain to stop and the

sun to come out. Begin modeling by giving several starter phrases. For example, “While they lingered / under the stone bridge / holding their coats close around them /.... Ask students to look at Kaldi’s sentence and provide ideas for each subsequent phrase in the new sentence until the sentence is completed. One example for completing the sentence: “While they lingered / under the stone bridge / holding their coats close around them / a sudden deluge / poured from the sky / and covered the ground with tiny rivulets.”

4. Ask students to work with a partner to create yet another variation of the same sentence. Ask for volunteers to share their new sentences with the class.
5. Have students take out a piece of writing they are working on. Ask them to select two sentences that are rather short and not easy to visualize and turn them into complex descriptive sentences, based on Kaldi’s model. Tell them that the details

they add to their sentences should relate to the reader’s senses, with the goal of giving the reader the feeling of “being there.”

6. **Option for Younger Students.** Once younger readers have found examples of vivid images relating to the five senses in Kaldi’s story, give them art materials and ask them to sketch one of the scenes in Kaldi’s story. Remind students to be sure they use specific information from the text for their sketch, so that their drawing is accurate (e.g., the oranges are green, not orange).

When the students are finished, ask them to compare their sketches with those of a partner—and to explain to their partners which details from the text they used for their drawings. Ask students to look for accuracy in their partners’ drawings. Ask how drawing the scenes helped them understand what took place.

## Resilience Above All

## MUSIC IN THE FIELDS

by Carrie Young

Peace Corps Volunteer, Mali (2001–2002)

Mali, in West Africa, one of the world's poorest countries, has riches that remain a secret to many people of the Western world. These riches are the kind that we all seek, but few are lucky enough to find. They are the secrets to happiness, the keys to laughter and music. And these riches can be found on the most difficult of days, among those who live some of the most difficult lives on our planet.

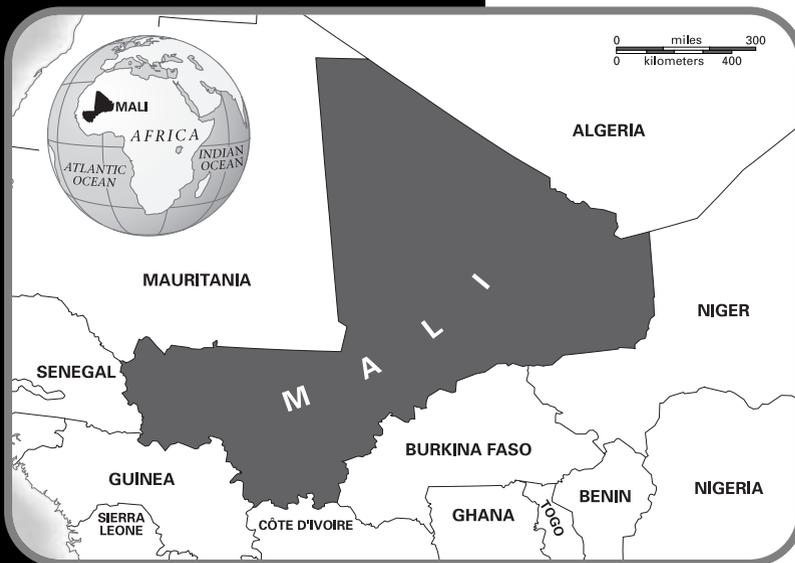
It is May in Mali, and the rains have not yet come. It is over 115 degrees Fahrenheit and my friend looks up at the sky. We have all been watching the sky for weeks. The spreading desert and the receding grasses in Mali are causing the rains to arrive later and later every year. My friend looks up once again and says to me with utter acceptance: "We think that it may be Allah's will that we die now."

The next day we watch and wait. Nothing matters at this point except that the rains come. Everyone is ready to begin plowing the fields, but nothing can be done until it rains. We continue to watch and wait.

The sun is a third of the way across the arc of the sky. The air is parched. The dusty, dry red earth of the fields is quiet.

A faint wind slips by me. I look up yet again toward the hills in the direction of the wind and I see a few clouds beginning to blow over them. There is a huge break in the tension of the village as the clouds move in.

The wind begins to blow strong. Bright fabrics blow out from the bodies of the women, dancing and slapping in the air. We all lean against the winds and head for cover, except



for the children, who run frantically toward the giant mango trees. Small mangoes fall from the upper branches and the kids race to collect them in their shirts.

Soon darkness covers us and the rain begins to fall, frantic from the wait. It feels as if the energy of the weeks before has built up in these clouds—as if they had been forced to hold their breath for weeks and now it has all broken loose. The wind blows branches out of the trees and the rain falls with the fury of a hurricane.

After about an hour, the rain calms and continues falling throughout the night.

The village will live.

The next day the men begin working acres of fields with steer and an antiquated plow. The women wake early to prepare lunch. It is made from the corn of the year before. They put the lunch in bowls and balance the bowls on their heads; most have a baby tied with a cloth to their back. They head for the fields. They will do this nearly every day for the next four to five months. Wake early, prepare lunch over a fire, and walk barefoot or in flip-flops to the fields with a child on their back.

When the fields are ready to plant, the men and women of the village will take a tool made of a wooden handle with a flattened piece of metal attached to the end and they will bend over the earth using only this simple tool for hours and hours every day.

Within this daily work to sustain life itself, there is a peace, a connection, and a tradition of laughter and music that makes the Malian culture one of happiness and richness.

There are five main family groups that make up my village. Mine is the Wattara family. Each Sunday all of the men in the family work in the same field together. They line up and work side by side, efficiently moving down the rows. The women prepare lunch, care for the chil-

## VOCABULARY

**Parched:** Dry, arid

**Frantically:** With great agitation and frenzy; madly; crazily

**Antiquated:** Extremely old; out of date

dren, and also labor in the fields on these days.

These Sundays are unique, however, for more than just the joint work effort. These are the days of the music in the fields. The music comes from the hands of those women who have helped to raise this village. The grandmothers, little old women who are as tough as diamonds, come out to the fields on these days; in their hands they hold instruments made of gourds and beans, leather and wood. With these simple instruments they create music that contains their souls. Music that feels of their laughter and their losses, the years of hard labor they have done in these same fields. Years of bending, years of calluses, pounding grains and corn, carrying babies, cooking over a fire, carrying water and wood. Years of being a little girl, a woman, and a now a grandmother.

These are the women who send out the laughter and the music in the fields. These are the women who hold the secrets of the village, the secrets that the world is desperately in search of. The secret of how to make music out of toil and how to laugh in the face of hardship and death.

These are the rich people of our world.

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'MUSIC IN THE FIELDS'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Young served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali, West Africa, in 2001 and 2002. As the only American in a small, rural farming village of 2,000 people, she initiated a number of projects to help the villagers lead healthier and more prosperous lives.

Teaching the villagers about health and the environment occupied much of Young's time. She introduced soybeans to the village and taught the people how to make soymilk—while also teaching them about nutrition. Young taught the village gardeners how to make use of the surplus supply of mangoes—by drying them and by making mango jam. With more than 400 students from her village, she collected plastic for recycling, and then taught a women's group how to weave the recycled plastic into coin purses they could sell at the local market. With a group of friends, Young made a music video about soybeans that aired on Mali's only television station.

After her service, Young recalled: "When I left my village, I felt like I was leaving family. And even though I tried to teach the villagers things that they didn't know about, they taught me so much more than I could have taught them—like how to care for one another, work as a community, and be happy with what I have no matter how great or small."

Young is a researcher in the art department of *National Geographic* magazine.

### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 2, 3, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX  
(see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 4, 7,  
10, 12, 14 (see pages 189–190)

#### Enduring Understandings

- Obtaining food and maintaining health is a constant challenge for some people.
- Richness can exist among those with few material goods.

#### Essential Questions

- What is hardship?
- In what ways can those with few "riches" also be rich?
- What role does music play in my culture?

#### Materials

Photocopies of story, Resource Sheet 1

#### Assessment Tools

Class discussions, journal entries, extended written responses to the text

**ABOUT THE STORY**

The author reflects on life in rural Mali as a Peace Corps Volunteer among hardscrabble farmers. She writes of the resilience of the Malian people in the face of a harsh and often arid environment, the role that music plays in Malian culture, and the richness she experienced in a culture without the material wealth of her own country. And she records her admiration for Malian women who, she believes, hold the secrets to happiness in our world.

**ABOUT THE SETTING**

The Republic of Mali, in West Africa, has a population of more than 11 million. Almost twice the size of Texas, Mali stretches from the Sahara in the north to Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire in the south. The capital, Bamako, lies along the Niger River in the southwestern part of the country.

A country dominated by ancient tribal cultures, Mali has three major ethnic groups—the Bambara, the Fulani, and the Berbers. Although French is the official language (a carry-over from when Mali was part of colonial French West Africa), several tribal languages are spoken locally, including Bambara, Fulani, Songhay, and Dogon. The majority of the population speaks Bambara.

In the 1300s, Mali encompassed an even vaster territory—much of West Africa—and dominated the gold trade across the Sahara. The city of Timbuktu, famous today for its remoteness, grew into a major cultural cen-

ter at that time. The French colonized Mali at the end of the 1800s. In 1960, Mali gained its independence from France and, today is an independent republic.

One of the poorest countries in the world, Mali has an annual per capita income of \$245 (U.S. equivalent). Only a tiny fraction of Mali's land is arable. The challenges of agriculture under these circumstances are exacerbated by frequent droughts. The country is not self-sufficient in food production, and hunger and malnutrition are widespread. Life expectancy is 46 years. Almost 90 percent of Mali's people are Muslim, and the culture of Islam permeates all aspects of daily life.

Unlike the United States, which generally experiences four seasons, Mali has two seasons—the dry and the rainy. As people have cut down trees for firewood and timber, and as livestock has grazed the withering grasses, the sands of the Sahara have spread farther and farther across land once fertile and vegetated, in a process called desertification. Desertification has affected not only the vegetation, but also the climate, creating shorter and shorter periods of rainfall.

Since 1971, almost 2,000 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Mali, working to improve food production, water availability, environmental conservation, small-business development, and health care.

For further information on the work of the Peace Corps in Mali, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

## LESSON 1

### PURPOSE

- To examine the concepts of wealth in Mali and in the United States
  - To consider the role of music in culture
1. Prior to the lesson, collect a sampling of magazine advertisements for men's and women's fashions, automobiles, gourmet food, health products, travel, exercise machines, jewelry, and real estate. Photocopy the ads for distribution among the students, or project them to the class after scanning them or photocopying them onto transparencies. Initiate a class discussion about what these ads represent. Try to direct the class to a discussion of values, and then, specifically wealth. Ask the class to define wealth: Is it the accumulation of money? Of goods? Can wealth be the accumulation of something non-material? [Students might suggest health, friends, food.] Is wealth defined by sufficiency, or does it require excess?
  2. Read aloud the first paragraph of "Music in the Fields." Ask the students whether they think wealth in the United States is necessarily the same as wealth in another country. Have them defend their answers with explanations as to why or why not. What kinds of riches is the author referring to?
  3. Review with the class the background information provided on pages 161 and 162 about author Carrie Young and the history and geography of Mali.
  4. Have the class read "Music in the Fields." It would be helpful for students to have individual copies of the manuscript so they can refer in detail to the text.
  5. Have students break into groups of five to discuss and answer the following questions. List the questions on the board; make a handout for each group; or read them one by one, at intervals of a few minutes.
    - a. What are riches in the area of Mali where the author lived? [There may be several kinds. Students might answer: food; the ability to laugh and to make music in the face of hardship and toil and death.]
    - b. What are the riches that the author says "remain a secret to many people of the Western world"? [The secrets to happiness; the keys to laughter and music.] Who is the guardian of the riches? [The grandmothers.]
    - c. Does the author reveal the secrets of the Malian people? If so, what are the secrets? If not, why do you think she would not reveal the secrets? [Young never really reveals exactly how the grandmothers master the skill of achieving happiness in the face of hardship. Whereas she clearly admires the Malians' pursuit of happiness and music, she does not make explicit how they achieve these goals. It's arguable that the special ability of the Malians to achieve happiness under duress remains a secret to the author as well.]

**R E S O U R C E   S H E E T   1**

**3 - 2 - 1 REFLECTION**

THREE things I learned about life in Mali from this story:

1.

2.

3.

TWO ways people can be rich besides having material wealth:

1.

2.

ONE main point the author was trying to make:

1.

- d. What effect does music have on the Malians in the field?

Ask the class to reconvene and discuss as a group their answers to these questions.

6. Point out to the class that as different as the author is from her host villagers in terms of language, art, music, schooling, and many other aspects of culture, there are also many similarities. Students might want to suggest a list of ways in which the cultures share characteristics.

Ask students to name the purposes music serves in their lives as you list them on the board. [Answers might include entertainment, religious services, patriotic observances, dancing, background “noise” such as in elevators and department stores, work rhythms (mining, historical chain gangs), marching.] Of these purposes, which do the students think apply to the Malians in the fields?

7. End the lesson by asking students to complete the “3-2-1 Activity” on Resource Sheet 1, at left.

## LESSON 2

### PURPOSE

To analyze the author’s style and use it as a model for writing

1. Remind students that a good way to improve their own writing is to model it after the writing of an author they admire. Suggest that Young’s story contains several elements of effective writing that they can use as models for their writing.
2. **Writing Strategy #1: Show, Don’t Tell.** Point out that Young’s descriptions are vivid because she uses a golden rule of writing: “Show, don’t tell.” Provide several examples of “Show, don’t tell” in Young’s work. Then ask students to find several additional examples. (Using a “Think-aloud” process is one way for you to highlight the “Show, don’t tell” skill, as in the example that follows:

*I’d like to take a close look at how Young describes the coming rain by showing, not telling. If I were telling about the rain coming, I could simply write “The rain was coming.” But this sounds flat and boring. Young’s description of the rain’s arrival is much more interesting. She shows her readers by painting a vivid picture. She writes: “A faint wind slips by me. I look up, yet again, toward the hills in the direction of the wind and I see a few clouds beginning to blow over them.... Soon darkness covers us and the rain begins to fall, frantic from the wait.... It feels as if [the clouds] had been forced to*

## Resilience Above All

*hold their breath for weeks and now it has all broken loose.” As I read these words, I feel I am right there with Carrie Young. I think I will try this technique in a piece of writing I am working on to see if I can make the writing vivid and interesting. I want my readers to feel they can actually see what I’m describing—like a movie in their minds.*

Ask students to re-read “Music in the Fields” and highlight images that create vivid pictures in their minds—places where Young “shows, not tells.” Have students in small groups compare the images they’ve highlighted. Some examples:

- To describe wind: “Bright fabrics blow out from the bodies of the women, dancing and slapping in the air.”
  - To describe heat and dryness: “The sun is a third of the way across the arc of the sky. The air is parched. The dusty, dry red earth of the fields is quiet.”
- 2. Writing Strategy #2: Personification.** One way to make inanimate things come alive is to attribute human characteristics to them. Young has employed this strategy, called personification, liberally in her descriptions of nature. Ask the students to examine the text in their hands and underline any nouns, adjectives, verbs, or phrases that assign human characteristics to aspects of

nature. [“Fabrics ... *dancing*”; “rain ... (is) *frantic*”; “clouds ... *hold their breath*”; “rain falls *with a fury*.”] In a class discussion, have the students report their findings, then ask them to make up a nonpersonified substitute for each example and read it aloud to see how different the effect is.

- 3. Writing Strategy #3: Using Present Tense.** Another means of making the story more immediate is the use of the present tense. Help students discover that the author has employed the present tense and ask them what effect that has upon the writing.
- 4.** Once students understand the way Young makes her writing dynamic using these strategies, have the students practice writing a paragraph of their own, emulating Young. For students who have trouble starting, you may suggest titles for the paragraphs, such as “The Hottest Day of the Summer,” “My Pet’s Close Call,” “There’s Nothing Better Than Chocolate,” “The Day the Hurricane Came Through.”
- 5.** Have students compare their writing with that of a partner. Ask partners to underline the phrases or sentences that create an especially vivid picture in their minds.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES****Options for Older Students  
or More Advanced Writers**

1. Have students research life in Mali and then write a short essay about how they would adapt to living there. What would be easy? What would be difficult? What attitudes and personality traits would help them adapt?
2. Have students think about how the story would be different had it been written by one of the Malian women. If you have not yet taught the concept of point of view in literature, help students understand this concept by drawing on examples from the story. Ask students to compare Young's point of view with what they would imagine might be the point of view of the Malian women. Ask students whether they think the Malian women would characterize themselves as rich, and whether the Malian women would agree with Young that they hold the secrets to happiness. Then have students rewrite the story from the point of view of a Malian grandmother.
3. Have students brainstorm in small groups what they believe to be the secrets to happiness. Then, have them write an essay, working individually, titled: "The Secrets to Happiness I Wish All Americans Would Remember."

4. Have students research and report on one of the following topics:
  - Desertification in Africa and its effects on populations (Sudan and Mali are good examples)
  - Cultural respect—even veneration—for the elderly in some cultures
  - Concepts of wealth in various societies (including dowries)

**Options for Younger Students  
or Less Accomplished Writers**

1. Ask students to write and illustrate a poem based on "Music in the Fields."
2. Have students ponder how music helped field-workers where Young worked in Mali. Then have them write a short composition on "How Music Might Help Workers in the United States," or "How Music Might Help Workers in Our School," or "The Role Music Plays in My Family."

## Resilience Above All

**MR. JOHN AND THE DAY OF KNOWLEDGE**

by John Deever

Peace Corps Volunteer, Ukraine (1993–1995)

(Excerpted from Chapter One in *Singing on the Heavy Side of the World*)

I can imagine how a high diver must feel standing at the tip of the board, poised on the balls of his feet. His toes hanging over the edge, he is finally in place, pausing to take one last breath before leaving solid certainty to twist off into the sky and fall, tumbling downward with as much grace and style as he can muster. That's how it feels: the first day of school. Even as a student, but more so as a teacher, at the beginning of a school year I have always been obsessed with the sensation that I'm about to fall and everyone is watching.

I had arrived, just two days before, in the central Ukrainian city of Zhitomir, following only a quick get-organized visit a month earlier and with little preparation for the first week of teaching. It would be my first morning at School 23 with students whom I would spend the next two years teaching English. I tried to squelch my quiet but nagging fear of failure.

Outside the front doors at least a hundred children milled around, waiting. The boys wore uniforms—brown or navy suits, some with a patch on the arm, all looking faded and worn.

Many of them had outgrown the trousers of their school uniforms since the year before; spindly legs poked out beneath their cuffs to reveal white socks. The girls wore brown skirts, brown long-sleeve blouses, and lacy pinafors, some with bows or puffs of lace atop their heads. The youngest looked like Shirley Temple dolls, but teenagers in the same garb looked like hotel maids in movies. In clumps these young women huddled,



chattered, and welcomed each other after a summer apart. Playful younger boys ran screaming through the crowd, chasing each other and bumping into other children, who screamed back.

Everywhere moved the blur of rustling flowers. Most children, who customarily brought teachers great bunches of bouquets to show their gratitude for being taught, held droopy yellow daffodils or stiff pink carnations. A few gripped white tulips or a trio of red roses in a cloud of baby's breath and fern, while others held heavy lavender camellias or the occasional dahlia. The solemn drabness of the children's uniforms was hidden in the splash of bright flower colors.

A teacher, visible only as a head and shoulders floating in a mass of children, herded the mob to the schoolyard out back. I slipped into the stream, hoping to see someone I knew. Many of them had heard about me, it seemed—little girls pointed and giggled, covering their smiles with their hands. I heard one boy whisper, "*Amerikanets!*" before scurrying into the crowd.

Then a mop-headed boy of maybe eight, bolder than the rest, stopped in front of me and planted his feet apart like a cowboy ready to draw. He held up his hand, waved it wildly, and shouted, "Khhhello!"

I smiled back and said, "Hello."

The children around him squealed with laughter, their eyes as wide as if a man from Mars had spoken. Frozen with panic, the boy stared me in the face a second—then hooted loon-like and dashed off.

September First, the Day of Knowledge, was a national holiday in the former Soviet Union. Now, beginning the second school year since Ukraine's declaration of independence, Soviet rituals had changed little. They had, however, taken on a new tint: The blue-and-yellow bars of the Ukrainian flag waved from the building of this highly regarded downtown school, which for decades had trained the province's communist officials and later their children.

## VOCABULARY

**Squelch:** To suppress; push down

**Spindly:** Long or tall and thin

**Pinafore:** Sleeveless clothing, like an apron, that young girls wear over a dress

**Amerikanets:** Ukrainian for "an American"

## Resilience Above All

MR. JOHN AND THE DAY OF KNOWLEDGE (CONTINUED)

The principal, a small, stern woman named Nina Volodimirivna, whose whole top row of teeth was pure gold, approached the podium. The mike whistled. In a bold, very loud voice, Nina Volodimirivna proudly welcomed parents, teachers, and children in sentences mostly incomprehensible to me, with my 10 weeks of rudimentary language training. I did recognize the Ukrainian words for “glory,” “studious,” and the “Great Nation of Ukraine.”

At the end of the speech the crowd applauded. “Kolya! Annya!” the principal ordered. “Come here.” It was time for the annual ritual Ringing of the First Bell, and from the crowd emerged a senior boy holding the hand of a first grader, a tiny girl of six. After a few more ceremonial words, Nina Volodimirivna handed the girl a large hand bell. The young man lifted her onto his shoulder and began to parade around in a space the crowd had made for them. From the loudspeaker above blared a Slavic-sounding march. Held atop the boy’s shoulder, the girl used both hands to ring her heavy bell while the crowd cheered.

I looked around for Svetlana Adamovna, my counterpart teacher. According to the official Peace Corps plan, we were to assess the school’s development needs together and come up with strategies for improving English education at School 23. On the first day of school, Svetlana Adamovna had told me, I would simply watch.

In the crowd I spotted her tall, white beehive of a hairdo. She carried a bundle of flowers bigger than most and was busy welcoming the parents and children. The children congratulated her by shouting, “*Z Prazdnikom*”—“greetings on the holiday”—before handing over more big bundles of flowers and dashing off. I greeted her likewise, and her clear blue eyes widened happily when she saw me. “I wish you Happy First Bell,” she pronounced in her high, birdlike voice. She was dressed neatly, the pleats in her long skirt carefully pressed, her tanned cheeks streaked with bright rouge. I was glad I had worn a suit and tie.

The ceremony was breaking up, and the children, a few still carrying flowers, pushed and shoved roughly, charging to their first class. When we got inside and out of the crush of small bodies, Svetlana Adamovna invited me to join her for the First Lesson.

The First Lesson had become something of a headache for teachers at this school, she explained. In the past, she said, the lesson covered a few school procedures, but focused mainly on the life of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov—Comrade Lenin, or “Grandpa Lenin,” as people now joked. The “Lenin lesson,” as Svetlana Adamovna called it, began the school year on a patriotic note: It gave students pride in their motherland. I didn’t interrupt, although I wondered which motherland she meant—the U.S.S.R. or Ukraine. I got the impression she felt somewhat lost without the traditional lesson she had taught on this day for more than 20 years. The way Svetlana Adamovna spoke of the Lenin lesson as promoting love of country, a sense of duty, and a commitment to work reminded me of the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance. She still had phonograph records dramatizing legendary episodes in the youth of Lenin, who, like George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, could not tell a lie. Now, Lenin would no longer do: In Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev, his statues had been toppled (although his grim statue still stood tall in Zhitomir’s central square).

For Ukrainian teachers, not only Lenin but many other Russian images, symbols, and patriotic ideas were now off-limits. The state law that mandated a political First Lesson had not been discarded with Ukrainian independence; only the object of idolatry had changed. Teachers were instructed to glorify the blue-and-yellow flag, the “Tryzub” or trident, and the “Greatness of the Ukrainian People”—nationalist symbols and ideas that, ironically, might have earned jail time 10 years earlier. In a revolution from below, such a moment might have been glorious, as the old power got what it deserved and new leaders were installed on the throne. But not many Zhitomirans had agitated for independence, which had brought them economic disaster.

## VOCABULARY

**Rudimentary:** Basic

**Idolatry:** Worship, usually of a false god

Svetlana Adamovna, at least, said as much. With a scowl of disgust she winced in scorn at the blue-and-yellow flag. “What greatness of the Ukrainian people?” she snorted. “I don’t see this anywhere around me.” She found it unbelievably strange and sad that the October Revolution of 1917, Red Square in Moscow, and Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (the first man in space) now belonged to the history of a foreign country. So much she had been proud of was Russian. I asked her naively what she planned to teach for the First Lesson instead.

“Oh, I’ll teach what I must,” she sighed. “What else can I do? I’ll play a record.”

I followed her to a room on the first floor, where her students were already in their seats. As we entered, they abruptly stood up at their desks. There must have been at least 40, all between the ages of eight and 10. I took an empty seat at the back, hoping to observe quietly, but the children’s eyes were on me.

When Svetlana Adamovna said “Good morning!” in precise Queen’s English, the children turned in their desks to face her. In the collective bark of a long-drilled army platoon, they answered loud and clear: “Good morning, Dear Teacher!” If she meant to startle me, it worked.

Svetlana Adamovna welcomed her class of fourth graders to the new school year. She already knew everyone, having taught them English the previous two years. In a sunny, energetic voice, she began asking questions about Ukraine, quizzing the children to see what facts they knew. Our capital is Kiev, they told her. The Dnieper River “washes its banks” someone added. The sarcophagus of Yaroslav the Wise is in St. Sophia’s cathedral, a boy volunteered. “Raise your hand,” Svetlana Adamovna reminded. The children sat up very straight, with arms crossed on their desks; when one wanted to speak, his or her right arm popped up perpendicular like a semaphore’s, trembling in eagerness to answer. Our country has 52 million people, a girl noted. The area of Ukraine is larger than France, said another. A boy said: Zhitomir is eleven hundred years old.

Svetlana Adamovna was an excellent teacher. On the first day of school, she subtly shepherded her class back to habits they had lost over the summer, giving reminders of how the game of school is played. Without any notes whatsoever, she let the children supply the material, then combined the knowledge in a few heads to add up to a lesson's worth for all. Without any explicitly scripted lecture—disdain-ing the subject even!—she directed discussion, generated questions, and conveyed information. I vowed to remember her method.

I also noted how obedient the children were. Maybe it was first-day excitement, I thought, hoping I was wrong. If they were used to that level of discipline, my life would be much easier.

When Svetlana Adamovna put on an old and well-used phonograph record, another Ukrainian march pranced happily along. It occurred to me that this music must have been officially approved in Soviet times (and therefore sanitized of real nationalism) or a teacher like Svetlana Adamovna would never have possessed it. The children listened with some interest at first, but their attention began to wander, and they started whispering, then talking, pointing toward me. Svetlana Adamovna noted the lapse and stopped the record. The period was only half over.

“Now, children,” she said in Ukrainian, “you have the special chance to practice your English. You are going to meet and talk to a real American.” Then she waved at me to come to the front of the room, switching to English to say, “This is our new teacher of English, Mr. John.”

Mr. John was to be my formal title. In Ukraine (and Russia) teachers must be addressed by first name and the patronymic form based on one's father's name: Svetlana Adamovna, Galena Vasilievna, Nina Volodimirivna. As elders and figures of authority, teachers were to be respected; both names had to be used at all times. When I told the staff that my patronymic would be “Davidovich” there were howls of

## VOCABULARY

**Queen's English:** Spoken English of the upper class in Great Britain

**Yaroslav the Wise:** Grand Prince of Kiev in the 11th century; a Ukrainian historical hero who strengthened the borders of his kingdom and made Kiev a center of culture and learning

**Semaphore:** A flag used for signaling

**Disdain:** To look down upon

**Sanitize:** To clean up or remove undesirable things

**Patronymic:** A Russian or Ukrainian person's name, based on the name of that person's father. For example, Svetlana Adamovna's father's name was Adam.

laughter. Too odd-sounding ... the name would seem funny to the children, they said. "John" would be too informal, and "Mr. Deever" was difficult for them to say. Thus we settled on "Mr. John." At first my new name sounded silly to me, especially when ninth graders said it, but later even my Ukrainian friends (who normally called me John) addressed me formally in front of my students by saying, "Mr. John, may I speak to you?" "Mr. John" lost its connotations of day care and became a title I held with pride. It conveyed some of my specialness there, and I liked that. Eventually I caught myself using it in class to refer to myself in the third person: "Mr. John doesn't like when you talk while he's talking," "Mr. John likes to hear all of you sing," or "Mr. John has a headache today."

On that first day of school, the pupils were thrilled to try out their English, never mind what my name was. Svetlana Adamovna encouraged them to ask me questions, reminding me to answer slowly and clearly. The first brave boy stood up by his desk and said, "What is your father?"

I momentarily thought this was a philosophical riddle before recognizing it as a question about professions. "A professor of mathematics at the university," I answered. He squinted in confusion, nodded, and sat down. Svetlana Adamovna translated, and then he smiled. "What is your mother?" another asked. "A teacher," I said. They all understood that.

A girl raised her hand and said, "What are you?" I told her I was a teacher, too, and it seemed such a playful question that I asked her back: "And what are you?"

She had already sat down. When she realized my question was directed to her, she stood back up and went pale with fright. She looked to Svetlana Adamovna in helpless panic.

"Irichka, you know this!" her teacher chided. "What ... are ... you? I am a ..."

“Pupil!” shouted a triumphant boy in the back. “Pupil,” Svetlana Adamovna repeated. Irichka stood back up and said, “I am a pupil.”

Many others raised their hands frantically; I called on another boy. He stood up and said loudly, “I am a pupil!” One after another, children stood up and pronounced this phrase, continually repeating that statement of identity for what seemed like 10 minutes. I kept pointing to outstretched, waving hands until Svetlana Adamovna cut off one last child who’d been waiting to say, “I am a pupil.” She urged the children to ask Mr. John *questions*.

Another boy, whose face had been squinched in concentration all this time, stood up. He said, “Do ... you ... have ... car?”

“A car,” Svetlana Adamovna reprimanded. “Do you have a car.” (She pronounced it “caahh” with no audible *r*.) The boy nodded and looked to me eagerly.

“I *did* have a car. I sold it before I came here.” Everyone (including Svetlana Adamovna) looked puzzled. I realized that, after my few weeks of language training, I knew enough words to form that sentence into Ukrainian. I repeated “I sold my car,” in Ukrainian. At the sound of my flat, American accent—but speaking their language—the children’s eyes grew even wider.

A boy in the back shouted out in Ukrainian, “What kind of car?”

I told him a pickup truck, forgetting to make him speak English. The room bubbled with excitement now. I understood a little of their language. What they really wanted was to ask me genuine questions in Ukrainian. But Svetlana Adamovna scolded them and reminded me as well that we were to speak only English.

A child asked, “Do you have a mother?” I smiled and said yes. Perhaps they’d forgotten our discussion of professions already. I called on a pale girl who’d been silent until then, who asked, “Do you have a father?” Yes, I said again, a little impatiently. Thanks to the car question, the

## VOCABULARY

**Connotations:** Associations, additional meanings, or overtones connected with a word

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class had remembered a new sentence structure: “Do you have a sister?” “Do you have a grandmother?” “Do you have a cat?” “Do you have a dog?” I smiled like a candidate for mayor and answered each question as sweetly as I could. Until the boy who asked about my car said, “Do ... you ... have ... girl?” Mischievously I formulated an untactful answer in my head. If I speak quickly, I thought, not a soul in the room will catch what I’m saying.

Fortunately, Svetlana Adamovna interrupted and changed the theme, suggesting they try “Do you like ... ?” Hands went up everywhere again, and I called on each in turn, giving everyone a chance to speak. The children, as if practicing a substitution drill, asked about every animal, food, and place they could think of. When I answered yes to “Do you like borsch?” they cackled with laughter. Irichka then asked, “Do you like Zhitomir?”

Yes, I answered, yes. I did like Zhitomir.

They hardly cared what I said, so long as Mr. John looked them in the eye and responded. They liked to be called on and to speak English words, and hearing me answer yes or no was enough. The act of speaking to and understanding a foreigner in a foreign language was a magical experience. By the time the bell rang (a whole 20 minutes later), I was exhausted but happy.

For that group of children that year, the First Lesson was not about Lenin, and not even much about Ukraine. Instead, they saw what independence had brought to their school: a person from America who could talk with them. A person who had come to stay for a while.

## VOCABULARY

**Borsch (or borscht):** Beet soup

## READING AND RESPONDING TO 'MR. JOHN AND THE DAY OF KNOWLEDGE'

### OVERVIEW

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Deever served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Zhitomir, Ukraine, from 1993 to 1995. "Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge" is excerpted from the first chapter of his memoir, *Singing on the Heavy Side of the World*, in which he describes his two years as a Volunteer teaching English as a foreign language in a Ukrainian elementary and secondary school.

Deever received a B.A. from Otterbein College and an M.A. from Ohio State University. His story "To Peel Potatoes" won the 1996 Peace Corps Experience Award given by RPCV Writers and Readers (the story is available at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories)). You can find many additional stories by other Peace Corps Volunteers online at [www.peacecorpswriters.org](http://www.peacecorpswriters.org).

### STANDARDS

**English Standards:** 1, 2, 3, 6 (see page 187)

**Social Studies Standards:** I, IV, IX (see page 188)

**National Geography Standards:** 6, 10 (see page 189)

#### Enduring Understandings

- Serving in another culture challenges one to understand the world from that culture's point of view.
- People of different cultures differ in their approaches to teaching and their attitudes toward learning.
- Political changes can have a profound effect on a country and its cultures.
- Language can bridge cultural differences, connecting individuals of different cultures.

#### Essential Questions

- How do our cultural values shape our attitudes toward teaching and learning?
- How does a change in political systems affect the life of a country and its people?
- Is it important to learn a foreign language? Why or why not? When might it be important? For whom?
- What are the challenges and rewards of serving in another culture?

#### Materials

Photocopies of story

#### Assessment Tools

Journal writing, class discussion, Venn diagram comparison, written responses to the text

## Resilience Above All

MR. JOHN AND THE DAY OF KNOWLEDGE (CONTINUED)

**ABOUT THE STORY**

In the prologue to his memoir, Deever explains why he characterizes Ukraine in his title as the heavy side of the world—for its diet, its industry, its weather, its economic and social conditions, even its humor. He ends with a paean to the resiliency of Ukrainians, who, despite all their burdens, keep on singing and surviving.

“Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge” details the author’s first day on the job at a school in newly independent Ukraine. His initial anxieties, the kinds of jitters shared by most new teachers, were complicated by his limited language proficiency (he had 10 weeks of language training before arriving at his Peace Corps posting) and the cultural differences to which he had to adapt. He gives the reader a description of September First, the “Day of Knowledge” in Ukraine, when students and teachers join to celebrate the re-opening of school. The second part of the story details his observations of a master teacher, Svetlana Adamovna, as she struggles to revise her annual pro-Lenin First Lesson in the wake of the new Ukrainian politics. To learn more about Peace Corps Volunteers in Ukraine, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

Students will find more meaning in this story if they understand the geographical, social, and political context of Ukraine. They should be able to locate Ukraine on a world map and understand Lenin’s role in the establishment of Russian communism and the

former Soviet Union. They should also be familiar with events surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Finally, they should understand the mission of the Peace Corps and the role of a Peace Corps Volunteer (see Introduction, pages 8 and 9, and the Peace Corps website: [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)).

**ABOUT THE SETTING**

Ukraine, a country of 233,000 square miles (somewhat smaller than Texas) with a population of almost 50 million, lies between Russia and Poland, just north of the Black Sea. Although its diverse ethnic population—Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Crimean Tatars—speak many languages, Ukrainian and Russian are the most common. The government has made the teaching of English a priority so that Ukraine may be better able to participate in the global economy.

Ukraine’s long history has been turbulent. In 1240 the Mongols, led by the grandson of Genghis Khan, attacked Kiev—today’s capital of Ukraine—and controlled the region for nearly two centuries. In the wake of Mongol domination, Ukraine was invaded and ruled by Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and others. A Cossack uprising in Ukraine led to the country’s liberation in 1648. Ukraine signed a treaty with Russia in 1654, which led to subjugation by the Russian Empire and ultimately by the Soviet Union. Stalin tried to stamp out Ukrainian nationalism in 1932 and 1933 by collecting grain and starving nearly 10

million Ukrainians, in what is known as the Great Famine. In 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine achieved independence.

Not all Ukrainians welcomed their independence from Russia. And at a time when the entire educational system was trying to implement Ukrainian as the language of instruction, there was also a growing demand from parents and students for increased instruction in English. Taken together, these factors placed incredible strain upon an already stretched educational system.

In response to Ukraine's educational initiatives, the Peace Corps launched its TEFL project (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in Ukraine in September 1993. Deever belonged to one of the first groups of Peace Corps Volunteers assigned to teach English in Ukraine. Today, about 80 Volunteers work in the TEFL project to expand and improve the quality of English instruction in schools and at teacher training institutions—and to assist in developing new English teaching materials for primary and secondary schools. Volunteers also work in the areas of small business development and environmental protection.

## LESSON 1

### PURPOSE

- To compare the first day of school in Ukraine with the first day of school in the United States

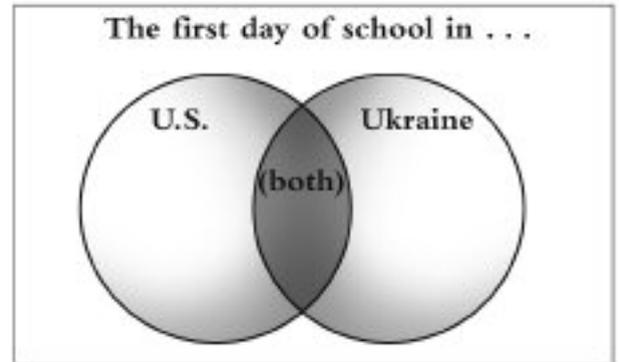
- To identify what challenges the author faced as a Peace Corps Volunteer

1. Using information from the overview, introduce students to the author, the story, and the setting.
2. **Journal Activity.** Ask students to respond in class, in their journals, to the following prompts:
  - How did you feel on the first day of school back in August (or September)?
  - Were you worried about anything? What were your positive feelings? Your negative feelings?
  - Did you feel this same way as a young child—on the first day of the first grade, for example? What did you look forward to then? What did you fear? What do you look forward to now?
3. As a class, discuss what the most common reactions to the first day of school are for students. What do students think the feelings are or would be for a brand-new teacher walking into their class?
4. Have students read the story—possibly for homework—and ask them to highlight phrases that make a strong impression on them, sentences they find confusing or that raise questions in their minds, and anything that surprises them.
5. Ask students to report and discuss what they highlighted. Then conduct a class discussion using the following prompts, while also addressing any questions the students had in their reading:

## Resilience Above All

MR. JOHN AND THE DAY OF KNOWLEDGE (CONTINUED)

- Did you find anything surprising? What questions did it raise for you?
  - What cultural traditions stand out on the first day of school in Ukraine? Why is the “First Day” capitalized? What is the students’ mood?
  - What do these details suggest about attitudes toward education in Ukraine? What might account for these attitudes?
  - Why was Svetlana Adamovna unenthusiastic about the First Lesson? What had changed compared with the First Lesson in previous years?
  - Who was Lenin? What did he do? Why had the lesson about him changed?
  - Svetlana Adamovna is required to use the First Lesson to inspire patriotism. Do U.S. schools have similar rituals? If so, what are some examples?
  - How can a change in political systems affect the life of a country and its people?
6. Have students work with a partner, using a Venn diagram (like the one illustrated here) or another graphic organizer, to compare the first day of school in Ukraine with their own first day of school. What are the similarities? The differences? Conduct a class discussion on students’ comparisons. Then ask them how Ukrainian students reacted to seeing Deever. What accounts for their reactions? How do your students think Deever feels about being there?



7. **Journal Activity.** For homework, ask students to respond in writing to one or more of the following prompts:

- Serving in another culture challenges a Peace Corps Volunteer to understand the world from that culture’s point of view. What challenges is Deever beginning to face in Ukraine?
- How difficult do you think it was for Deever to see the world from the perspective of Ukrainian teachers and students?
- After reading this selection, do you think Deever might have had second thoughts about his decision to volunteer to teach in Ukraine, or do you think he welcomed the challenge?

Remind students to support their opinions with evidence from the text.

## LESSON 2

### PURPOSE

- To evaluate the author's lead metaphor as an opening to the story
  - To identify vivid images and analyze why they are effective
1. Have students share their journal entries in a class discussion. Ask the class to address why seeing the world from another culture's point of view can be important.
  2. Read aloud the first paragraph of "Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge." Discuss with students why Deever thinks the first day of school is like a high dive. Examine further the comparison between the diver and the teacher or student on the first day of school:
    - What does the pool represent?
    - What would be the equivalent of a perfect 10 dive?
    - What would be the equivalent of a belly flop? A cannonball?
    - Who is the audience?

Encourage students to think of additional ways to extend the comparison.

Ask students to comment on how effective they think Deever's metaphor is for opening his story. Does it help Deever capture the reader's attention? If so, how? How would the story be different without it?

3. Remind students that enticing imagery appeals to the senses. Suggest that if an author is successful in his or her use of imagery, readers can close their eyes and form a strong mental image of what the author has described. Ask the students whether the diving image functions that way for them.
  - Ask students to review the first part of the story to look for images Deever has created (e.g., the older boy carrying the tiny first-grade girl on his shoulders as she rings the "First Bell"; Svetlana Adamovna's "tall, white beehive of a hairdo"; "the blur of rustling flowers ... droopy yellow daffodils or stiff pink carnations").
  - Now ask the class what makes these images vivid. [Answers might include: Some images use strong, concrete nouns; others vivid, active verbs; others richly descriptive adjectives; and still others, striking comparisons—similes or metaphors.] Ask students in a brief activity to write a few rich images for their classmates to imagine. To help them get started, suggest they think about scenes or experiences that they found exciting, surprising, alarming, magnificent, sad, or funny—or something in which

## Resilience Above All

MR. JOHN AND THE DAY OF KNOWLEDGE (CONTINUED)

they have been triumphant (e.g., the first time they rode a two-wheeler successfully; a time they overcame fright to accomplish something). Encourage them to be original, avoiding common or overused imagery. When everyone has a few images written, ask individuals to share some of their images with the rest of the class.

## LESSON 3

## PURPOSE

- To analyze the role language plays in bridging cultural differences
1. Before class, make large signs that say: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” Post each sign in a different corner of the room. Write the statement “Learning a foreign language is very important” on the chalkboard.

In class, ask students to move to the corner of the room that best expresses their opinion about this statement.

Students should discuss their reasons with the rest of their group. Give the students five minutes for discussion.

Hold a class discussion among the different groups to compare their reasons and see if the class can reach a consensus on the question of

whether learning another language is important. [Students might well conclude that the answer depends on circumstances, e.g., where one is living or what one’s occupation is. For someone who never travels out of the United States and is involved in strictly local employment, knowledge of a foreign language could make little difference. Even so, if an employer’s labor force is made up of immigrants who don’t speak English, it would be helpful for the employer to be able to speak the language of the employees. For anyone who travels, studies, or is involved in commerce beyond the borders of the United States, knowledge of one or more foreign languages can be extremely advantageous for many practical reasons that students should enumerate. Students might identify watching films in another language, communicating directly with people in other countries, being able to translate or interpret for others, reading signs while traveling, and simply having the courtesy of knowing the language of one’s hosts are just a few of the many advantages of knowing another language.]

2. In his second-to-last paragraph (page 176), Deever writes: “The act of speaking to and understanding a foreigner in a foreign language was a magical experience.” Discuss with the class:
  - Why did the Ukrainian students get such pleasure from hearing Mr. John speak their language? Did it affect their relationship with him? Did it affect their opinion of him? If so, why? How?

- Why did the Ukrainian students so enjoy speaking in English to Mr. John?
- Why is English taught widely in Ukraine? What particular advantage might English have over other foreign languages for a Ukrainian student? [Ask students if they know or can guess what language airline pilots use worldwide for communicating with control towers at airports. (English.) Most Internet pages and computer manuals are written in English. A great many academic papers at international conferences are prepared and read in English. Peace Corps Volunteers teach English or help local teachers teach English when requested to do so by host countries. This request is made across a wide spectrum of countries in which the Peace Corps serves today.]

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Ask students to select from the following:

- Describe in writing what you think Deever should do with his classes to help them learn about American culture. Construct a lesson plan that Deever might use for one of his classes. Include a warm-up activity, instruction, and practice. Try to balance instruction and fun.
- Students might enjoy reading the rest of Deever's book—*Singing on the Heavy Side of the World*—to learn more about his teaching experience with children in Ukraine.
- Write a journal entry about your own experiences in learning a foreign language. Why did you choose to study this language? How have you used it so far? How has it helped you so far? How do you think you might use it someday?

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## 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.

**S O C I A L S T U D I E S S T A N D A R D S \***

*National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)*

**NCSS THEME I: CULTURE**

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.

**NCSS 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 perception, attitudes, values, and beliefs on personal identity.

**NCSS 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.

## Standards

**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.

## Standards

- **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

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