

ADJUSTING OVERSEAS

A MESSAGE TO EACH PEACE CORPS TRAINEE

Now that you have begun your Peace Corps career, you must be thinking seriously about how it will be to live and work overseas. This pamphlet, I believe, will help you prepare realistically for this experience.

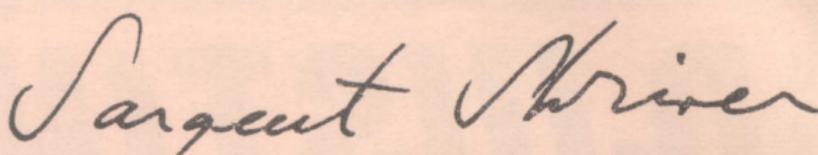
I hope that every Peace Corps Trainee and Volunteer will read this message carefully and thoughtfully. Also, you would be wise to keep this pamphlet among your papers to review now and then after you have arrived overseas.

This material discusses some of the reactions and feelings you are likely to have during your Peace Corps service. You should be prepared to recognize and accept these feelings as a normal part of being a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Face up to these reactions frankly and discuss them with your friends. In this way, you will be better able to deal with them. At the same time, you will be enriching your understanding of yourself as a person and of your experiences as a Volunteer.

The material in this pamphlet will be discussed further during the training program. I urge you to participate actively in these discussions. In addition, I hope you will let us know how we can improve this pamphlet — as well as all other aspects of the Peace Corps program.

Good Luck!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sargent Shriver". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

SARGENT SHRIVER
Director



ONE OF THE few predictions that one can safely make about your work as a member of the Peace Corps is that it will never be entirely predictable. It is immensely valuable to study the experience of other Peace Corps Volunteers — and as the work of the Corps progresses it is building up a body of experience that will serve to illuminate many of the problems that succeeding members will face. Nevertheless there is likely to be a time when you confront a situation, a challenge or a problem that is in a way wholly new, wholly unique and wholly your own.

Is there any way in which you can prepare yourself for this?

In one sense, no. There are no gimmicks, no tricks, no easy rules of thumb. There is no way of pre-solving the unexpected, of anticipating the surprising, of cataloguing the unique.

But in another sense it is possible to prepare oneself for these challenges. We do know something about the **kind** of situations you are likely to encounter and we do know something about human behavior and human feelings in situations that are new and strange and challenging. When in the midst of an unfamiliar situation one can spot a familiar element and sort out a recognizable reaction, the likelihood of functioning effectively is greatly increased. Also, psychologists have demonstrated that a healthy person does better in a difficult situation if he has prepared himself for it ahead of time by imagining how he will feel and by starting to adjust to his probable feelings of tension and frustration. This is like an athlete training for a race by exercising his muscles in advance.

It would seem worthwhile, then, to try to anticipate some of the areas of challenge and stress which are likely to arise in the course of your work and to delve

a bit into some of your possible reactions to and feelings about these difficult areas.

It is interesting to note, even on the basis of the still limited experience of the Peace Corps, that the average volunteer is well prepared to withstand physical hardships and to undergo physical discomfort when necessary. He has anticipated these discomforts and when he comes up against them he adapts with relative ease. What he may not have anticipated, however, are some of the discomforts that may arise within himself. These upset feelings are a mentally healthy reaction to difficulty, and are a sign that the individual is actively grappling with the complexities of the situation.

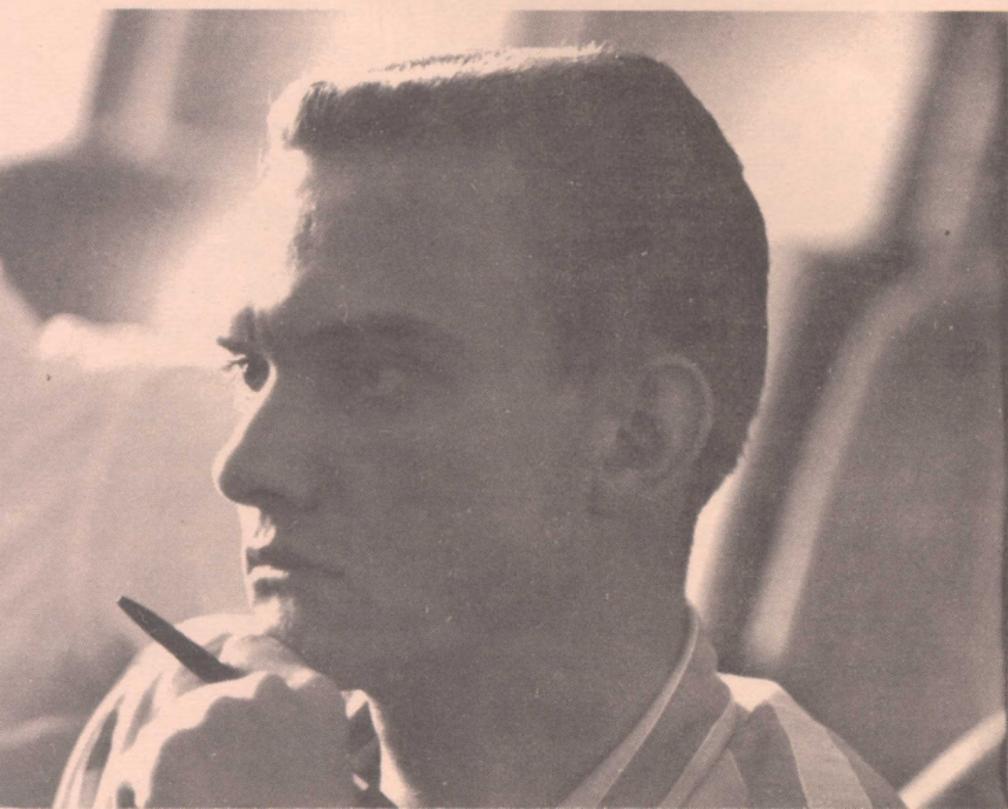
What are these discomforts and what are the kinds of situations that may produce some internal unease?

ISOLATION

The very name of the Peace Corps suggests that you are a **band** of volunteers out to do a job together. And in a sense, of course, you are. But this may obscure the fact and make it easy to forget that often the work of a Volunteer is a very solitary job, done in isolation from his fellow members with none of the support that one gets from working in a team. There are times when you may feel very much alone.

CONSTANT SCRUTINY

Paradoxically, although you may often feel "alone" you may also feel that you are **never** alone, that you are always on parade, always under scrutiny, always working, in that there is never a moment at which you are



not representing the Corps. Most of us are used to certain work and non-work patterns and there is a nice distinction between them. We work at a job and then go home and literally and figuratively take off our shoes. Or we spend a certain number of hours in a classroom — but then there is the retreat to privacy or relaxation. From the moment you come to the training camp and for the duration of your assignment you may seem to be living in a fishbowl. This will probably be stimulating to begin with but eventually it may become a burden.

YOUR TEAMMATES

While some of you may do your work overseas in groups and others may be working quite alone, for many the typical situation will be a team of two or three volunteers working together. This arrangement has many advantages; it also means, however, that you will be thrown into a fairly intense relationship with two or three people not entirely of your own choosing. Some of you may have encountered this kind of situation with a college roommate — but at school there is always the possibility of getting away from each other for periods of time. Overseas there may be no such possibility and the enforced intimacy — even with a most compatible partner — can be wearing on both of you.

HOMESICKNESS

There is nothing weak or shameful about homesickness. It is simply a fairly predictable reaction to separation from familiar surroundings, family, close friends and usual social contacts. It is not peculiar to the Peace Corps. You might be homesick on a first-class cruise around the world. Those of you who have been away to college or in the Army will know how dependent one becomes on mail call. And because you are far away, any trouble at home, the illness of a parent or the deterioration of a romance will assume added proportions and may impinge on your capacity to work.

STRANGENESS OF FOOD AND LIVING PATTERNS:

Ideally speaking, mealtime should be a time of relaxation. In a strange country mealtime may be a perpetually unsettling challenge. Dietary provisions in the country in which you are working may seem not only initially strange, but may be unpalatable or unhealthy. And yet, since eating in all cultures serves as an aspect of social relations, you may feel obligated to demonstrate your friendliness and willingness, to accept local customs by



eating food that you don't want to eat. At other times you may be able to refuse the food without offending your host. The decision you make in each case will probably be the result of a fine balancing of factors — the requirements of courtesy, a sense of the limits of your own tolerance of unaccustomed foods, and realistic health considerations. But the very fact that you may be called upon to make such decisions day after day, may in itself be a source of strain on you.

Not only food, but provisions for washing, sleeping and elimination will also, in many cases, be considerably different from those back home. Smells which may be repulsive to an American may be unnoticed or even pleasant to the local people, and vice versa. Sexual customs and rules of modesty in clothing may seem quite strange and sometimes acutely embarrassing. You may be surprised that your own tolerance of noise and dirt is very different from that of the local people and perhaps very different from what you yourself imagined it to be.

In all these aspects of daily life — aspects that are so simple and taken for granted at home — you may feel yourself pulled in opposite directions between your accustomed life and that of your hosts and you may find yourself involved in a series of minor frustrations. It is possible that you can come through a long day of wrestling with innumerable problems in a hot crowded classroom feeling exhilarated and happy — and yet be inexplicably upset because you have to wipe your mouth on your sleeve for want of a paper napkin.

“CULTURE SHOCK”

Your initial reaction to a new country is likely to be one of delight and curiosity. You look at it much as a tourist does and everything seems fascinating. But working in a country is quite different from visiting it. Gradually

— or perhaps suddenly — you are likely to become aware of the great differences that exist between yourself and the people you are working with. Everything may seem strange and incomprehensible and you may feel you can't "get through" to anyone.

Talking to one of the local people — talking in English or the local tongue — you may realize with something of a jolt that although you are using the same language you simply are not understanding each other. Words like "democratic" or "clean" or "soon" may have taken on different meanings. You are not really speaking the same language. (Your host may be having the same feeling.)

You may be shocked and appalled and most of all mystified that local persons who consider themselves democratic and who talk with obvious sincerity about their strivings for freedom and independence can, at the same time, treat their subordinates or women or members of another tribe in a manner that strikes you as being harshly authoritarian.

This sense of a breakdown in communication may be heightened, too, by the stereotyped perceptions that both the Volunteer and his host may have of each other. Suddenly you feel that he is not talking to **you**; he is talking to a certain imagined picture of an American that he has developed over the years. You in the same way may not be talking to **him** but rather to a preconceived image of him. These stereotypes may be either negative or positive; you may have undervalued or idealized each other. In either case the result is a failure to understand each other and a sense of frustration at that failure.

AUTHORITY RELATIONS

The lines of authority in a strange country and a new work situation are often difficult to untangle. At home one knows what one's relationship is to an employer or a teacher, an apprentice or a secretary. Whether the local person working beside you is your superior or your subordinate, whether he expects you to exercise authority or accept it, how authority is exercised, and what your allegiance is to the local people as differentiated from your allegiance to your superiors in the Peace Corps, are all perplexing and delicate questions. Sometimes the solving of them seems more difficult than the job at hand itself, and certainly more worrisome.

SLOW RESULTS

Americans are accustomed to results — and quick ones. One recent report, from a conference of Peace Corps

Volunteers overseas, notes that most of the Volunteers found that their hardest job was "to adapt their own energies and drive to the reality that their work can often seem humdrum and meaningless". Nothing seemed to be **happening**. Many of the Volunteers expressed their "own fear of insufficiency" as they contemplated the slow pace at which things moved.

The fact that the results of your work may not be forthcoming for a long time can lead to a feeling of general frustration — and you may make the mistake of thinking that it is **you** who have failed.

"WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?"

One of the most troubling aspects of your stay overseas may be that in the course of your experience you may come to feel that your entire set of values, your whole sense of who you are, your confidence in your own way of life is thrown into doubt.

Back home, the worthwhileness of the American way of life is taken for granted and rarely questioned. Now you may find yourself in a situation where your own motives and those of your country may be searchingly questioned. You may find yourself having to defend the image of the United States in the face of some highly intelligent and skillful probings. This can be pretty unsettling.

You can, on the one hand, let yourself be drawn into defending every aspect of American life and values up to the hilt. Or, on the other hand you can abjectly agree with every criticism you encounter. Either of these courses, it is safe to say, will do violence to your real feelings and convictions. You are not a complacent, materialistic American — or you would not be in the Peace Corps. Nor have you lost faith in your own way of life or you would not be trying to share some of its values and accomplishments with other people. It is easy enough to be clear about this now, in your own familiar setting, but it may be source of much confusion when you are uprooted from it.

The central questions you will have to face again and again, are whether you can maintain pride in the core of your American identity while adopting a way of life which adds a new dimension to it, and whether you can develop esteem for others who are different from you without having to underestimate or decry yourself or to give up your right to look around you in terms of the political, ethical and human standards and values that are important to you.

WHEN THINGS ARE UPSETTING

The common factor in all these situations and conditions of life that we have looked at briefly is that they can be more or less upsetting to the person who is involved in them. The "more or less" is very important. For the extent to which any particular person is affected by any one of these stressful situations can vary enormously. You may have a great need for privacy or very little need for it. You may be oblivious to dirt and fairly sensitive to hostility—or vice versa. You may be quite disturbed by a breakdown in communications and completely undisturbed by a radical change in living patterns. There is no particular virtue in being one kind of person or the other.

While it is entirely possible that you may sail through every kind of stressful situation without encountering any discomfort within yourself, it is also entirely possible that there will be times when the realistically difficult conditions under which you work and live will prove upsetting.

Suddenly things that were clear seem unclear. The direction to take seems obscured. You don't feel "in command" of a situation or a problem . . . and this can be very uncomfortable.

When this happens you may begin to wonder whether you are really up to the job, whether you yourself may have caused the trouble, whether it's really possible to accomplish anything, whether what you are doing is really worth while. You may feel unusually fatigued although you have been working no harder than usual, find yourself short tempered and irritable—and annoyed at yourself for being so.



Unfortunately there is no nice, easy set of rules to tell you how to overcome these feelings of discouragement and upset. Fortunately they are often likely to be short-lived and disappear with time. But somewhere between the nice set of rules (which doesn't exist) and leaving it to time (which doesn't always work) there are some observations that can be made that may prove helpful to you in coping with a trying period which may or may not arise for you personally in the course of your work overseas.

It is first of all useful to bear in mind that a sense of frustration and failure, of "not getting anything done" usually derives from the realities of the situation and not from your own inadequacy. It is expected that Peace Corps Volunteers will be working on difficult assignments. It is always a good idea to try to look for the ingredients of the difficulty in the situation itself, and to realize that it is a normal human characteristic to have feelings, and not a sign of personal weakness and immaturity.

It is often helpful to try to break up the problem or confusion into smaller, more manageable units and work at a problem one step at a time. Without losing sight of the big job, you can temporarily set a simpler goal and try to work at that.

Sometimes a sense of failure can simply be due to the fact that your initial hopes were too high and unrealistic. If you can step back for a moment and try to assess the problem freshly, taking a longer view, you may feel more positively about the headway you are actually making.

BREAKING THE "VICIOUS CIRCLE"

There is often a danger, when things are not going too well, that you will get into a vicious circle of discouragement, overwork and fatigue that leads to less efficient work, more fatigue and greater discouragement. It is particularly important, therefore, to try to get some rest during periods of confusion. Sometimes, instead of directing yourself straight at the problem you need to direct yourself to a way of temporarily getting some rest from it, of finding a place or a situation in which you can relax for a little while and recoup your strength before returning to the fray.

Even if it is not possible actually to rest or to get away for a few hours, it is wise to resist the tendency to "do something" to solve a problem. Sometimes the injunction, "Don't just do something, stand there," is more help than "riding off in all directions". A confusing sit-



uation may clarify itself if you give yourself the quietness of mind to see its elements.

One of the most helpful ways to clear up a beclouded matter is to talk it over with someone — a fellow Volunteer or a superior or a local person with whom you have a good relationship. Being able to say, “I’m upset about this and I don’t know which way to go” is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary it is a sign of confidence in yourself and in other people. Even when the problem is not an objective one of getting information but rather a matter of your personal reactions or a feeling of anger or helplessness about a relationship, talking it over with someone can help to straighten it out. The value of this has been officially recognized by the Peace Corps, which encourages Volunteers to seek support and counsel from each other and from the Peace Corps Representative, the Physician, and the other members of staff.

A bit of grumbling is often a good safety valve. There is no reason to feel that you can’t occasionally criticize or complain. After all, the Peace Corps is a new venture and there will be inevitable mistakes. It will be more useful, of course, if your gripes can take a constructive turn and offer suggestions and clues to the difficulties that can be passed along to the proper authorities.

RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCAL PEOPLE

When the source of your discomfort and confusion has to do with relationships with local people it is especially important to look for reasons rather than place blame, to try and see what causes, apart from personal ill will, could be responsible. You can easily fall into the trap of saying, “What’s the matter with **him**?” and just as easily into the contrary trap of concentrating on “What’s

the matter with **me**?" It may indeed be that one of you is behaving badly, but the chances are that there is nothing the matter with either of you. You are simply not understanding each other. There is always the possibility that you may have inadvertently stepped on someone's toes — and also the same possibility that he has inadvertently stepped on yours. You need to be alert to these possibilities and whenever you spot them try to bring them out into the open so that they don't further befuddle a problem. The very simple, sincere question, "Have I said something that offends you?" can keep a conversation, a situation, or a relationship from plummeting downhill.

Sensitivity to another person's set of values, customs and point of view is a two-way street. At the same time that you respect and are alert to the feelings and idiosyncrasies of another person you are entitled to ask that he also respect yours. You have not been invited to work overseas because your hosts want a carbon copy of themselves. You can accept the local people as friends without having to agree with all of their values and practices and without requiring that they agree with every American value and practice. It is not necessary to set up or be drawn into a debate about who is righter than whom, what is better than what.

What is most important is your basic and pervasive assumption that there is good will between yourself and your hosts. You would not be in their country if **they** did not want you to be there and had not requested your help. Nor would you be there if **you** did not choose to. You need to assume that any imperfections in this mutual confidence are usually the result of misunderstanding and cultural differences and can almost always be solved by tracking down the specifics of the misunderstanding.

In cases of clear disagreement with certain individuals over fundamental goals, you should see the conflict in perspective against the backdrop of the Peace Corps mission. Not everyone in the host country will welcome you. Some will be suspicious, and some overtly hostile. You should not expect that you won't get angry with them. On the other hand, you haven't come all the way from home to fight with these individuals, but to work with the many others who have, in all good faith, invited you to help them build a better life for themselves and their people.

This pamphlet was prepared by Gerald Caplan, M.D., and
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