

Fiesta of Sunset: Peace Corps Reflections

I am in the middle of final exams, trying to make sense of producer theory, market externalities, and wondering how the rise of China will alter the current international order. I am surrounded by impressive classmates who come from all corners of the globe and bring with them a myriad of experience. I live in New York City, a place of unsurpassed vibrancy and diversity. I still can't believe I got accepted to Columbia; my GPA as undergraduate was an unimpressive 2.94. I have plenty of work to do, but I cannot concentrate. I am returning to Guatemala for a wedding in less than three weeks.

Some of life's experiences are difficult to verbalize; those moments just linger on the periphery of conventional language. I know that my time in the Peace Corps may seem incomprehensible or esoteric to many people. For me poverty and illiteracy used to be distant, boring concepts—like Sanskrit, calculus, or dieting. I know that even fewer people will understand or care.

Spending two years in an indigenous village taught me that idealistic individuals can affect change. I have learned that dedication, honesty, hard work, and courage are the principles upon which that change can be created—no matter how farfetched or implausible those ideas might seem. I have witnessed incredible acts of altruism firsthand—both on the part of Americans and Guatemalans. But I have also seen the negative—waste, fraud, negligence, corruption, laziness, indifference, dishonesty, and more.

As a child, I grew up in a wealthy neighborhood of Dallas. I was spoiled. All my former classmates and I obviously took our socioeconomic situation for granted. We assumed that clean drinking water and a good school system were closer to the status quo than the exception. We knew we would all go to college after high school, because that was only natural. Even today, I can confidently assume that few of my former classmates have ever worked or volunteered in a developing country since we graduated nearly a decade ago.

Many Americans fail to understand how lucky they are. Most will acknowledge global inequality but do nothing to alleviate it. Others will speak about fighting poverty and economic disparities with their money. Any yes, money certainly is a necessary part of the equation. But few are willing to take a greater risk by giving a part of

themselves. That risk is never as daunting as it may at first appear. My story is a case in point. I was once a coward.

Several weeks ago I volunteered at Columbia's Career Fair for International Organizations. I sat at the Peace Corps table all day. I answered dozens of thoughtful questions and discussed my service working for a local NGO in Guatemala. I was happy to help; those fears and anxieties that potential Peace Corps applicants harbor were once my own. I still consider myself an intensely private person—usually afraid to share my innermost thoughts and feelings. Now I am motivated by another kind of fear. I feel compelled to share what I have learned and done. Because if I do not, I am afraid that it may soon be forgotten.

Those 27 months truly were the adventure of a lifetime. I made lasting friendships and helped some people, but I understand that I got more out of it than I could have ever put in. Most importantly, I will never let fear and doubt control my life again.

I am only one person and I am deeply flawed. I was a mean older brother. I could never commit to a relationship. I only picked the fights I knew I could win. I supported the invasion of Iraq. I even used to consider myself a Republican. But I am a human being and redemption is possible. I have chosen life. Recovery starts with acceptance. This is the end of one part, not the whole story. Maybe this is "the fiesta of sunset" that Neruda spoke of in *Clenched Soul*. My classmates and I are not finished. People do not study economic and political development at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) so that they can sit behind a desk and push papers for thirty years. I am surrounded by men and women of action, many of whom are professors at SIPA.

Though global poverty statistics vary, some things are clear. Billions of people live on less than two dollars per day. Malnutrition, illiteracy, gender inequality, and infant mortality are still prevalent in the developing world. And climate change isn't helping. There will be no shortage of problems to address when we graduate. "Everything passes, only the truth remains." Dostoyevsky was right. Maybe I should start drinking more vodka.