

Reflections from a Peace Corps Response Volunteer December 15, 2010

This morning my laptop wouldn't launch Internet Explorer. I brewed an extra coffee and wandered around my New Orleans apartment, looking for projects to fill the void. I arrived at musing about my Peace Corps experiences and how they continue to "inform" my life. A fellow Volunteer in Morocco told me that was the fourth goal of Peace Corps.

I just got back from six months in Morocco as a Peace Corps Response Volunteer. I was a Volunteer in Ukraine (2003-2005) and a staffer (PTO) in Romania (2006-2008). This time my return was like popping out of the time capsule in a science fiction movie. In one world, then another. I am continuing to "live poor" while I recover my financial affairs, if foregoing the commercial frenzy of Christmas counts. I will admit, I have hot water and a bathtub, a microwave and a seven year old Saturn. A friend says I might achieve "shabby chic."

In Morocco, I lived on the edge of a shantytown that lay between me and the state university where I worked at the Center for Community Consensus-Building and Sustainable Development. I walked through the shantytown every day, taking the shortcut through a dirt field of trash and impromptu soccer games, enclosed by shanties, a blacksmith and various farm animals that somehow survived the traffic alongside. It was a community of rural poor, wedged between two four-lane highways in a city rich in tourism, oil and suburban sprawl from Casablanca. Although I am by nature a shy person, I made a point of greeting my neighbors on my daily walks. They got used to me and we liked each other, although I did nothing to help them except buy my food and propane gas from their all-purpose *alimentaires*. They spoke Moroccan Arabic, which is an unwritten Arabic language laced with French. We communicated in fractured French.

I lived on the first floor of a three-storey cement house facing one of the highways. My landlady, Fahtia, lived with a large extended family of babies and odd characters who sometimes sat in circles on the two upper floors while Fahtia baked bread. My apartment was decorated in bright patterned ceramic tile and lined with couches that were really mattresses, with two low round tables in the center of the room. Very practical for sleeping and eating and, as I learned, socializing.

During Ramadan, I was invited to the evening breakfast with my colleague's extended family in Rabat. Her cousins lived in a familiar cement house with couches and round tables. There must have been twenty people there. The men sat apart, at a table close to the door, and they left for the mosque after the meal. The women prepared and served an enormous array of food, which had to be consumed between sunset and the evening prayer. I saw that I could not dally. When the men left, the women leaned back from their table, into the couches along the walls. The visit began, some stories crossing the room, others privately shared, with smiles and soft laughter. The hostess loosened her *hijab* and let it slide off her hair. Other women in the immediate family did as well, and throughout the evening they adjusted their *hijabs* whenever one of the men returned to the house, as they conducted their separate social activities. I felt that I was in a special world with these women. I understood the couches and tables, and perhaps the spirit in the room. The women were not wall flowers.

My colleague, Nabila, is twenty five. Her father died a few years ago and her mother continues to work as a social services administrator for the armed forces. Nabila took the veil two years ago. Her youngest sister hasn't decided yet. I think it will be all right with the family if she continues to be a spirited and hip young lady without a *hijab*. But maybe not. Nabila says choice is important, but she feels strongly about her decision—not out of political activism, but because, I believe, it gives her a sense of balance, or just, as she says, because she studied the Qur'an and decided it was right. One thing I know, she is a strong and patient woman who passed the sense of balance to me while I was there.

Nabila and I worked together at the Center, which was a partnership between the state university (Hassan II) and the High Atlas Foundation, which was started by Yossef Ben-Meir, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer from the nineties. After serving in a remote mountain village, Yossef went on to earn a PhD in Sociology from the University of New Mexico and returned to teach and continue working to improve the lives of mountain villagers. We spent many hours talking about participatory (democratic) development while Yossef served cashews and tajine or we walked in the town where he taught sociology. Yossef said that he liked living on the edge, trying to do something that is very messy and hard to do, and requires personal sacrifice. This is really the test, I think, and it is the reason I can adapt to “shabby chic” if I have to.

I wrote a manual on participatory development for the Center, facilitated a strategic plan for the foundation, and helped develop the partnership with Hassan II University. One day, when Yossef and I were reviewing a proposal he had written for an advanced degree program, I recognized the Peace Corps stamp on us both. We teach the same way, taking students into the community, throwing up flip charts on any available wall, and engaging students and communities in the process of learning by doing. Others do this too, of course, but not quite the way Peace Corps veterans do.

I don't know where the work I produced will lead, or how I will live in future years. But I am sure that we will always carry the impact we had on each other with us. I carry all of my Peace Corps experiences with me, as they continue to *inform* my view of the world.

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PCR/V Morocco, 2010
APCD/PTO Romania, 2006-2008
RPCV Ukraine, 2003-2005

Lillian currently lives in a transitioning New Orleans neighborhood, with her Romanian and Ukrainian cats, and is a board member of the Louisiana Peace Corps Association.