

Coming to Peace Corps  
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Jan. 20, 1961, I was strolling across campus at Southwestern University, a small liberal-arts school in Georgetown, TX, about to begin my last semester of undergrad, with plans to go to UT Law School in the fall. For no particular reason, I ventured into the Student Union and seeing folks gathered round the presidential inauguration in progress, decided to stay and watch. And then, Kennedy began to speak.

I had caught glimpses of Kennedy during the campaign but hadn't tuned into him that much. I was a fairly apolitical creature at the time (a young man's fancy tends to turn elsewhere), and to the degree that I thought about politics, I tended to lean more Republican than Democrat, probably more out of non-conformity than out of conviction. And then, Kennedy began to speak.

His speech, his intelligent speech, not just his elegant words but also the compelling cadence and Irish tenor of his voice, seemed to zap right into my emotional wiring, speaking to parts of me I didn't even know existed. A transcendent charmer he was, calling us beyond ourselves, challenging us to relate to the world in ways that sounded so right on. I just had to ask not...

Kennedy did not mention Peace Corps in his inaugural, but it soon entered my expanded consciousness. Over spring break, the National Student Association held a workshop on Peace Corps in D.C.; so I wrangled authorization from the SU Student Council and spent 3-4 days at American University, sorting through, evaluating, fleshing out different proposals with respect to Peace Corps. At the end of the conference, I filled out an application, sent it in, and in early June, got a telegram from Sargent Shriver to report to Rutgers for training to go to Colombia. I immediately looked up Colombia on the map, RSVPed in the affirmative, and that has made all the difference.

I will always honor the memory of JFK. If not for him, I would never have given myself over to strange people in strange lands, finding myself strangely at home. I would never have discovered, having no Latin blood in me, those parts of me that are, in fact, Latin. I would never have realized what texture there is to life, what moments there are for our own making. In sum, I would never have come to know those parts of myself, beyond myself.