

Peace Corps service is a vision quest, rich with gratifying experiences. Sometimes you have to let go a little, just to see which way the wind blows you.

One day in April, 2010, my Kyrgyz friend, Temirlan, came over to my host family's house in the village. The violent revolution that ousted then-president Kurman Bakiev had just turned Kyrgyzstan upside-down. On April 7th, thousands of people stormed the White House in Bishkek while snipers on the roof picked them off, one by one. By the end of the night, close to 90 people were dead, and Bakiev had fled the country.

I was eating breakfast with my host brothers when Temirlan stopped by. He was wearing a Baltimore Ravens jersey and aviator shades. He asked me if I could help him with something. I followed him outside.

"Have you ever slaughtered a sheep?" he asked.

"Uh, no."

"Well, today you and I are going to slaughter a sheep," he said, and he drove me his house. "In this country it is a great honor, actually. First, we sharpen the knives."

I looked over at his two sheep, in their pen. One was black, one was white, and one of them was about to realize its place in the world.

He chose the black one.

I sat on a small chair on the grass in the back yard and sharpened the knives with a file, while Temirlan placed a large ceramic bowl on the ground to catch the blood.

He walked the sheep over to me, wrestled it to the ground, tied all four of its legs together, and kneeled on top of it. The sheep didn't complain much. There wasn't much it could have done about it anyway.

We cupped our hands in front of our faces and said a short prayer, "*Omin*," and then Temirlan inserted the knife just below the base of the sheep's ears, to ensure the cleanest, most efficient kill. It sounded like cutting through leather, or carpet.

The blood spilled right into the bowl, and not a single drop hit the ground.

The body twitched and heaved for a minute or two, which I noticed with a disconnected kind of curiosity. It was a grisly site, but easy to justify, since I knew we would soon be eating the entire animal, and nothing was going to go to waste.

We turned the carcass on its back and Temirlan cut it open and began to systematically remove its organs. First, while I held the carcass open, he cut the esophagus from the stomach and tied a knot in it.

Then, he removed the heart, lungs, liver, and whatever else was inside, and dropped everything into a bowl to be washed. He cut off the tongue and dropped that into the bowl as well. His wife came over and helped him remove the stomach and intestines, because this was a very delicate process.

"If this explodes," Temirlan said, "there will be crap everywhere."

I took a step back.

"Good decision," he said.

But, he and his wife, Gulzada, showed expert care in removing the sheep's innards, and it was impressive how tidy this operation had been from the beginning.

A partially decapitated mammal with its guts removed and flies swarming around it did not come without moments of discomfort, but I took solace in the fact that I was assisting in an ancient ritual. In Central Asia, *besb barmak* ("five thumbs") is a delicacy that has sustained the families of nomadic people for thousands of years. The preparation of *besb barmak*, beginning with the slaughter, is a cultural identifier. Since the time of Ghengis Khan, it has been done at weddings, funerals, and at parties, to mark an important occasion, or simply to honor a guest.

Gulzada carried the stomach and intestines away to clean them. Off to the side, his dog was drinking the blood from the bowl. Temirlan then castrated the sheep, cut off all four of its legs at the knees, and decapitated it.

Now what remained was a slab of meat resembling food. Temirlan was happy with what he saw, and said that the meat looked really good.

Next, we carried the head and the four legs over to the side of the house. He handed me a blowtorch. For the next twenty minutes, I blowtorched and scraped all the hair off the sheep's head and legs.

Then, we threw the carcass into a huge pot of boiling water, drank some tea, and talked about life.

Temirlan left his job as a teacher to work for the Peace Corps, to teach the Kyrgyz language to PCVs like me. It had been a two-month gig. He didn't want to quit his job, but the principal at the school, told him he'd fire him if went to work for the Peace Corps for a couple months, so Temirlan just walked out.

Now, he was applying for a job as an interpreter at a gold mine a few miles away. The gold mine is owned by a Canadian company, but it is run by Kyrgyz people, so he is not optimistic about his chances of getting the job, even though his English is really good.

He felt that because Kyrgyz people were in charge, the hiring process was going to be corrupt.

We sat down at the table with Temirlan's grandmother, his aunt, his wife, and their two sons. Grandma could not stop talking about Taylor, Darkhan village's first PCV, my predecessor. I couldn't understand what she was saying, but recognized "Taylor."

"She keeps saying the same things, over and over," Temirlan pointed out. Gulzada smiled. "She loved him."

Soon, it was time for dinner. My plate arrived with the head of a sheep on it. It was black, from the blowtorch, and it still had its teeth. It was staring at me. I guessed I was supposed to eat it, but I wasn't sure.

Temirlan showed me how to cut pieces of meat off of it, and drop a piece on everyone's plate at the table, as tradition suggested. It was a sign of respect.

He took a big bite of intestine, which Gulzada had braided earlier, and offered me some. I tried it. It was horrible.

I looked down at the sheep head on my plate, knocked on the skull with my knife a couple times, wondered what to do next. The men at the table added meat shavings and chunks of fat into a large bowl of steaming noodles (*besh barmak*—five thumbs), and his grandmother made me eat dinner with my hands, as tradition suggests.

When you eat *besh barmak*, a sheep's eye is offered to someone with whom a Kyrgyz person wants to be friends. I examined the head and Temirlan taught me how to cut one of them out. He asked me to present it to him, and to say something in Kyrgyz about us being friends.

"Kozdooshoop jooroloo," he told me to say.

"Kozdooshoop jooroloo," I said.

He accepted the eye and replied in the traditional way, and then ate it.

Then he cut out the other eye, said the same words, and presented it to me. It was long and fatty and too big to swallow without chewing. I smiled, dropped it in my mouth, chewed a couple times, and swallowed the eye of the sheep that we had slaughtered, just hours before.

And with that, we became friends.