Engaged Learning and Peace Corps Service in Tanzania: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

The Peace Corps Masters International program offers students the opportunity to combine their Peace Corps service with their master's education. This article demonstrates how classroom learning strengthened the author's Peace Corps service in Tanzania, which in turn strengthened her master's thesis. Peace Corps supports an approach to community development that situates Volunteers closely with people in power, but this makes it difficult for them to gain the participation of the poor and marginalized. How can one strike a balance between effectiveness and cultural appropriateness? As an outsider, how do one's relationships with community members affect project processes and outcomes? This autoethnography investigates the first author's learning experience in undertaking community development in Tanzania's southern highlands. Although the conclusions are specific to the case reported here, the learning process applies to others who are beginning to contemplate how they might enter a community, assess its needs, and do good work.

Journal Entry, August 8, 2009
I wanted to come here to have the world break my heart and I wanted to help make some kind of positive change. I don't know how and why but that's what I wanted and I didn't know I would find so much brokenness—I didn't expect so much corruption. I don't want to change the world; I don't think it's ever what I wanted. My favorite poet wrote, "Show me how you offer to your people the stories and songs you want our children's children to remember and I will show you how I struggle not to change the world, but to love it" . . . and now I'm stuck—because my original understanding of development is dead to me.

Background

In retrospect, I have no idea why I chose to study international development. I didn't know what development was. I enjoyed my

international experiences in high school and college and wanted to make the world a better place, so I suppose it made sense. Peace Corps had recently started to partner with graduate schools to develop a program where students work on their degree and carry out their 2 years of Peace Corps service simultaneously. The idea was that students first get some extra training in school and then apply it during their Peace Corps service. Then they return and complete their degree. This was part of a concerted effort by Peace Corps to engage more fully with institutions of higher education *(Quigley, 2013)* and to attract skilled Volunteers *(Peace Corps, 2012)*. Being a graduate student would make me a better Volunteer and vice versa. Embedding my Peace Corps experience in my graduate school learning set the stage for me to conduct my Peace Corps service with the mindset of an action researcher. I chose Michigan State University (MSU) because at the time, the only interdisciplinary department that participated with Peace Corps Masters International was located there. I began my Master of Science degree in 2007 in the Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies.

Although I didn't appreciate it at the time, I learned that MSU is a good home for the Peace Corps Masters International (PCMI) program. It is one of the original land-grant colleges, which were established with the mission of engaging with the public to advance the common good *(Peters, 2005)*, and it still takes this mission seriously. At MSU, there is a strong culture of community engagement. A significant number of faculty collaborate with communities to pursue a shared learning agenda that will advance the goals of the academy and their partners *(Fear, Rosaen, Bawden, & Foster-Fishman, 2001)*. The university publishes a magazine called *The Engaged Scholar* focusing on its various collaborative partnerships with external constituents, and it offers a number of programs in which students can engage with communities not just in Michigan but worldwide (e.g., *Doberneck, 2009)*. PCMI would be different; I would go off to a community and a country to be determined later, but my coursework would prepare me to work with that community in an engaged manner, and the community would teach me things that would not be possible to learn in the classroom. In this form of engaged learning, the university is not the source of knowledge but a resource for accessing knowledge, and even my teachers would learn from my experience *(Clancy & Adamek, 2005)*.

There are many ways to think about international development. When I write, talk, and think about it, I'm mostly referring to capacity building, education, and income generation on the grass-

roots level. Once I started classes at MSU, I immediately began to see that international development had taken some wrong turns in the past and in many instances perpetuated imperialist tendencies *(Kovats-Bernat, 2002)*. It had been dominated by a top-down approach stemming from the ethnocentric assumption that what worked in economically advanced countries was "good" and should be replicated elsewhere *(Axinn & Axinn, 1997)*.

Planning and Executing My Research

As I began to think about my research, I knew that it would be closely intertwined with my service as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I was naturally drawn to the idea of participatory development as a way to link the two. Authors such as Chambers *(1997)* and Brokensha, Warren, and Werner *(1980)* wrote about moving away from the top-down approach and embracing local capacities, knowledge, and ideas. It also appeared, however, that participatory development was riddled with shortcomings. Cooke and Kothari *(2001)* and Cleaver *(2001)* wrote that this methodology actually can end up reinforcing existing power structures that further disempower the marginalized populations. Cooke and Kothari even went so far as to title their book *Participation: The New Tyranny?* I also began learning about feminist epistemology around the same time. Martin's *(1991)* article "The Egg and the Sperm" completely changed the way I thought about knowledge and truth. This article discusses how culture shapes science and how science consequently validates culture-based norms as "truth." I began to question everything that had been handed to me through my formal education. This depressed me as a young, idealistic student and practitioner and made me worry about the possible damage I could do as a Peace Corps Volunteer. However, I was still confident that, with the language training I would receive and the length of time I would be able to spend in a rural community, I would be able to handle it.

In my classes I learned about qualitative and action research. These methodologies represent an alternative paradigm to the hypothesis-testing methodology that dominates much of the social sciences. I gravitated toward these approaches; they felt like an extension of my worldview. I was particularly influenced by scholars such as Lincoln and Guba *(1985)*, who stated that the social world is something interpreted, not something literal, and Haraway *(1988)*, who wrote that knowledge is situated in a time and place. At the same time, I was strongly influenced by strands of the action research literature. Reason and Bradbury *(2008)* maintained that action research responds to practical, significant issues that con-

cern the "flourishing of human persons and their communities" *(p. 10)*. I wanted my work to draw on many different ways of knowing and to focus on opening new spaces for dialogue and collective action. Consistent with contemporary views of action research, I also wanted my research to be a living, emergent process that could not be predetermined.

I met Dr. Laurie Thorp during my first year in graduate school. After she visited my survey of methods class to present her autoethnographic work, I knew I wanted to do the same kind of research for my master's thesis. Autoethnography is an interpretive form of narrative research. Bochner and Ellis *(2002)* wrote that autoethnography is a form of writing that "make[s] the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right" *(p. 733)*. A writer's vulnerability, personal feelings, and emotions are all ways to illustrate their experiences as well as construct and share knowledge. In this methodology, the researcher is an integral part of the story he or she seeks to tell through self-reflection on the experience. Planning and writing my master's thesis as an autoethnography fostered reflective learning throughout my entire Peace Corps service as well as after it. I benefited from a flexible academic environment that allowed me to avoid the tension between the needs of the action researcher and the norms of traditional academic writing.

Halfway through spring semester, I learned that I had been placed in Tanzania and would be part of the Environmental Education and Sustainable Agriculture in Rural Communities (EESARC) program. From the Peace Corps Volunteer description booklet, I learned that EESARC aims to improve the quality of life of project stakeholders (women, youth, farmers, and community leaders) by increasing their capacity to address priority land degradation problems, pursue sustainable agriculture practices like permaculture, and use renewable natural resources sustainably. As a village-based extension facilitator, my role was to partner with the village communities to help them understand their situation to explore potential solutions.

I left for Tanzania with 48 other Peace Corps Volunteers the summer after my first year of graduate school. After 3 months of language and technical training, I was delivered to the village that would become my home for the next 2 years. Once I had settled into my new home in Tanzania as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I began to study myself and the people I lived with and worked among. I used participant observation, semistructured interviews, and observations and reflections on my work and life during my service. I collected data in the form of retrospective field notes (*Thorp,*

2006), interview notes, and personal journal entries. Participant observation first helped me become familiar with the social and ecological landscape of my village. It later became a way to monitor and reflect on shared challenges and areas of strength in my work and to critically reflect on myself and my actions. It was a tool I used to do better work as a volunteer, and the data that I gathered became raw material for my master's thesis.

Although I had thought a lot about my research during my first year at MSU, the focus for my thesis emerged only after I arrived in Tanzania and heard the common reflection that Volunteers only start projects that fall apart. Returned Volunteers would say, "I hope you guys don't expect to actually really change anything. You'll learn a lot about yourself, though." I wanted to know if this was true or if we could anticipate some kind of positive change.

My thesis questions emerged over time: How can community development workers create a balance that allows them to be culturally appropriate and effective in their work with all members of the community? As an outsider, how do one's relationships with community members affect the processes and outcomes of projects? Quite simply, I wanted to know how we could make our endeavors succeed and how we could work with those who needed it the most.

About a year and a half into my service, I developed a set of questions related to my work in the EESARC program to guide conversations in the form of semistructured interviews. EESARC goals, as previously mentioned, involve developing capacity through sustainable agriculture education and training to improve quality of life and to enable communities to work through their most pressing issues.

After obtaining approval from the MSU Human Research Protection Program, I interviewed 32 of the villagers I lived with, a mixture of people who were and were not involved in projects I worked on including farmers, teachers, and village leaders. I asked them for their impressions of Peace Corps and what things they understood to characterize the success and failure of programs and projects. I asked for their perspectives on the ways that the relationships Volunteers build with different community members affect their ability to positively influence the lives of the poorest people.

I began the analysis of my data after returning to MSU following my Peace Corps service. I used a narrative methodology to analyze my data: the stories from my interviews, field notes, and memories. Analysis was an ongoing activity that developed and

crystallized over time. It involved the process of writing, reading, and rereading journals and interview notes, then learning from emergent themes and connecting them to the literature *(Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005)*.

According to Bochner *(2000)*, the process of autoethnographic analysis involves the researcher emotionally recalling events of the past. This emotional recall allows the researcher to look back on specific, memorable episodes and to experience and express them through a type of writing that includes thoughts, events, dialogue, and the physical details of the particular event. This writing, according to Richardson *(2000)*, is a method of inquiry in and of itself. Through self-reflexive writing, the self can be examined within a scholarly framework. As we write, we construct ourselves and at the same time, the way we understand ourselves informs what we write, feel, and interpret and how we construct meaning *(Richardson, 1997, 2000)*. Through our personal, reflective writing we can share with the reader how our understanding emerged as we experienced and reflected upon events that unfolded (*Marshall & Mead, 2005*). Autoethnography facilitates portrayal of the learning process, complete with stumbling blocks, denial, Aha! moments, and minor victories.

Consistent with an action research approach, I had engaged villagers as well as other Peace Corps Volunteers in my inquiry into how to be effective in my community development work, particularly in my efforts to do useful work for the poor and marginalized. This engagement went beyond mere interviews; it was an important part of my work and my life in Tanzania. After returning to the university, I engaged my committee and some of my friends in efforts to turn my voluminous diary entries, field notes, and interview responses into a coherent story. Conversations throughout the year helped me interpret my life in the village. My friends and committee members read numerous drafts of my writing; their feedback helped me find my voice and understand my experience. In this way, I pursued the important process of gaining support from and being challenged by friends and colleagues to help me inquire deeply *(Bjørn & Boulus, 2011)*.

One of the things I had to consider in my research was validity. To say that the findings of narrative research are (or must be) valid is to argue that the findings are in fact (or must be) true and certain. Instead, as Richardson *(1997)* suggests, I prefer the term *crystallization*. Just as a crystal combines "symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes" *(p. 92)* and angles, an interpretive researcher combines field notes, observations, reflections,

and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of a culture and situation. Crystals grow and change over time, as does knowledge. Crystallization provides us with a deeper, more complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic.

I utilized some of the alternative criteria appropriate for judging the merits of alternative paradigm research. In this approach, we are looking for the "goodness" of my entire body of work—my experience as a practitioner and the way I have written and analyzed it. How will you know if what I'm saying is trustworthy and useful? Lather *(1986)* writes of catalytic validity and asks if the research process reenergizes participants in knowing their reality to better transform it. Were participants of the work in which I was involved able to take charge? Did they learn something meaningful? And is the story I am relaying to you catalytic—that is, does it inspire new thoughts or ideas? Has it engaged your thoughts and feelings and thus in some way pulled you in?

Wolcott *(1994)* writes that as researchers, we do not try to convince; we try to understand. What about the people I worked with in my village? Did they gain an understanding about their abilities and knowledge to do, create, and change? With my text, have I demonstrated a grounded understanding and perspective so that you are able to get a sense of my lived experience? Is it so abundant in concrete detail that you can feel and understand the partial truth of the narrative?

Critical subjectivity is one of the criteria I have come to understand as possibly the most important characteristic of autoethnographic research. Autoethnographers use the term *critical subjectivity* as opposed to naive subjectivity (*Carr & Kemmis, 1986*). Critical subjectivity involves self-reflexive attention "to the ground on which one is standing" *(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10)*. It means that we accept our subjective experience and understand that it influences how we make meaning but that, if subjectivity is naively exercised and not taken into account, it is open to all sorts of distortions *(Heron & Reason, 1997)* and possibilities for misdoings. Through critical subjectivity, a young practitioner fearful of unknowingly incorporating imperialist tendencies in her work can obtain a more sophisticated awareness of the process she is involved in. To put it quite simply: Was I critical about myself and the work I was doing? Has action been coupled with reflection?

Before the other Volunteers and I had left Washington, D.C., for Tanzania, one of the Peace Corps employees we had worked with stressed to us, "Celebrate your minor victories." We didn't

realize the importance of this piece of advice until we were in the field. As I read and reread my journals, I found that I had written over and over again the words "minor victory." Here we ask: In the work we did in my village and the work I did with my narrative, were small steps of progress made toward impossible goals? There is a whole world of unconstructed knowledge out there; it is infinite. Have I made useful connections or contributions?

My Story

It was our villages' responsibility to get us to our new homes. My village sent the head teacher from the primary school to pick me up in town. We strapped my belongings to the top of the bus and, after about a 1-hour ride, we were dropped off in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. Some students came to carry my belongings. They left me with nothing more to carry than my purse and my pineapple-sized puppy. We had a few kilometers to hike. It was on this walk that the head teacher presented me with my first major dilemma.

"Peace Corps puts on this seminar in a few months," he said.

"Yes, it's called In Service Training (IST)," I replied.

He went on, "Volunteers are supposed to take counterparts. Yes, and I always go with the Volunteer, we learn about OVCs (orphans and vulnerable children) and AIDS and how to start permaculture gardens and income generation projects."

"Oh, mmm—yeah," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

Over the next few weeks and months, this man and his family were extremely hospitable to me. In a way, I felt that I didn't know what I would do without them. However, I wanted to get to know other people, so I started getting out more. I began meeting interesting people every day: an elder who was a pretty amazing farmer, planters of trees, makers of remedies, herders of cows, raisers of chickens, keepers of bees, carriers of water. A group of small children paraded behind me everywhere I went, and I referred to them as my gaggle.

I continued to enjoy my friendship with the teacher and appreciated his help. He kept bringing up IST and saying that other villagers couldn't read or write and that they weren't smart enough to go. For several reasons, however, I wanted to bring someone else. Most important was that it would be easier to ignite the participation of the villagers if my counterpart was a villager. Teachers are not considered villagers because of their higher level of education

and the fact that they are usually from a different village, district, or region.

I remembered learning in the classroom about positionality *(Chambers, 1997; Eversole, 2003; White, 1996)*. It is a term most commonly used in anthropological and ethnographic research but is equally applicable in community development. Positionality is concerned with how the presence of the outsider affects the process being observed, or the process of community development. In this context, the head teacher held a great deal of power and by positioning myself so closely to him, I was making myself less available to those with less power in the community. I also had an inkling that he was more interested in the generous per diem that the Peace Corps gave our counterparts than the actual training. I was already beginning to see the seeds of conflict and that I wouldn't be able to avoid facing some of the challenges related to power that I had read about in classes.

As IST approached I decided to take a farmer named Paulo. I chose him because over my 3 months in the village, I had come to know him as a hard worker and a kind and honest spirit. Everyone seemed not only to know and respect him, but also to feel comfortable with him. He helped me with everything I did.

When we got back, one of the projects we wanted to focus on was the primary school garden. It wasn't easy working at the school and whenever I tried to do garden activities, the students were usually just handed over to me for their 20-minute tea break. This meant that during the one chance they would have all day to run to the river to get a drink of water, they had to work in the garden instead.

Some classes were easier to work with than others, and I particularly enjoyed working with the sixth graders. They worked quickly and competently. While we piled and mixed, they demanded, *tufundishe!*—teach us something! I taught them to put a stick in the middle of our compost pile to help monitor its well being. If it was warm, hot, or steamy it meant the compost was doing its job.

> *Journal Entry, January 23, 2009*
> Last week was an amazing week for one reason—the smiles on the faces of the sixth graders when we pulled our stick out of the compost pile. It was hot—minor victory!

Figure 1.The sixth graders pulling the stick out of the hot compost pile.

As Paulo and I worked with the more difficult classes, the teachers just sat apathetically in the office. I found it confusing that none of the teachers were helping me; I had good relationships with them and even visited their houses regularly. Twenty minutes wasn't long enough to do anything, but that was all they would give me. By the end of the week, we had one functioning compost pile and several piles that dried up and cooled down quickly.

Once we hit February, it was finally time to start tilling the soil. We started onion, green pepper, Chinese cabbage, and Swiss chard seedlings and double dug a few garden beds for corn and carrots. The sixth graders, Paulo, and I spent four of our morning hours under the hot sun. During the rainy season, the weather was nice when there was cloud cover, but when the sun came out we baked in its heat, and the boys had sweat dripping off their chins. I felt bad that they would all have to go home and wash their uniforms that night, which meant probably wearing them to school wet the next day. Paulo was a great help. Help isn't the right word; he did most of the work, and I tried not to mess anything up. He was a great teacher. I could tell that the students enjoyed being taught by him and that they respected him but were not afraid of him.

After we were done, the students explained to me that they would like to see the fruits of the labor when harvest time came. I asked what they thought usually happened to the veggies in the garden. "*Walimu wanachukua tu,*" they replied—the teachers just take them.

When I went to ask the teachers if the students who did the garden work would be able to take some of the vegetables home at harvest time, they just laughed at me. Four months later a different class was ordered to the garden to dig up our carrots. Each teacher took home a healthy bundle that evening.

> *Journal Entry, July 9th, 2009*
> Mama Flavy told me today that when I was ready to do the demo garden at the school in February, the head teacher had said he didn't want me to because Paulo was my counterpart. He sat with all the teachers and explained that I was not to do work at the school.

I wanted to continue working with the students. I wanted more days of smiles and hot compost sticks, so I had to organize them outside school. We planned an all-student compost competition. The students were to build compost piles at their houses. Once complete, they would bring me to their house to show me. This was a useful tool for me as I had yet to find many of the houses in the countryside. As a result, I met parents, and parents asked about compost. I baked cakes as rewards for the students, and they tried something new.

When trying to work with primary school students, I faced a few obstacles because of the poor relationship I had developed with the head teacher. The garden is one example, but there were many others. For instance, a chicken project at the school was highly contested. The teachers involved in the project and I ultimately rebelled and planned meetings with the animal extension people in the head teacher's absence.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer I had been told not to do these things; in fact, in training we were given a manual called *Culture Matters (Peace Corps, 1997)* that said that within the Peace Corps framework, Volunteers are expected to work in collaboration with key stakeholders like figures of authority and people in power. In our training we were told that this is because it is culturally appropriate for guests to work in cooperation with higher-up members of the social hierarchy.

As a human being, however, I didn't want to see any more grant money lost from a project that was created for the orphans and vulnerable children of our village. I also didn't want to see the chickens in our chicken project continue to be neglected. I had gained a clear understanding of the criticisms by Cooke and Kothari *(2001)*

and Cleaver *(2001)* that incautious participatory development can reinforce power structures and further disempower the poor, and I wanted no part of it.

Eventually I cut ties with the head teacher's household completely. This was very difficult, but it resulted in more positive and personal relationships with the students outside school. On the weekends we would have lock-ins at my house during which the girls would sew menstrual pads and ask me questions about their health. Some even confided in me about the sexual relationships teachers forced on them. These lock-ins were a minor victory for two reasons. One, because the students opened up to me, the crazy White girl who slept with her dog and two, because although these 12-year-old girls acknowledged the prevalence of rape in their culture, they were critical of it and thought it was wrong. From my perspective, given the cultural context, they were thinking radical thoughts. So, minor victory. But what kind of victory leaves you helpless and heartbroken?

Breaking off the relationship with the head teacher also resulted in closer relationships with the more marginalized populations in my village. Based on the literature I had read in classes, I had guessed this would happen. Community members told me that many of the poor feel shame, embarrassment, and fear at the prospect of attending villagewide events. It's therefore easy to see why so many people I interviewed emphasized how important it was to break this relationship if I wanted to gain the trust of the poor.

When the next Peace Corps conference came, I took the woman who eventually became my best friend. Mama Anna was the mother of one of the children in my gaggle. The first day we opened up to each other, she showed me scars her husband had given her. This put my life into perspective, as I had told her how I missed my boyfriend. She was one of the strongest women I had ever met. After the workshop, the head teacher's wife began spreading rumors that Mama Anna was giving me drugs. We were annoyed but kept moving forward with our minor victories.

Through Mama Anna, I felt I'd become exposed to a whole other world. She wasn't the worst off in the village, but she faced the same daily hardships as everyone else. She was well intentioned and well connected, and she was a regular villager whom others trusted. If they didn't feel comfortable coming to me, they would go to her first. They came to know us as a package deal. I even started sleeping at her house since her husband was usually with one of his other wives. Eventually, by essentially living with her, I gained

a raw understanding of the mundane cruelty of the unprivileged life. Through this new lens, I questioned everything. "*Mipango wa mungu*" (It's God's plans) was the response to everything from Mama Anna's husband testing positive for HIV to her 13-year-old cousin getting pregnant, and it made me wonder what I was doing there and how I could help. My relationship with Mama Anna gave me so much insight. To deromanticize the beauty of my new friendship, I could say this was what participatory researchers and ethnographers call building rapport and gaining trust.

When I asked one interviewee how Volunteers could better work with the poor, her response was a description of how an NGO came in and did a garden project 10 years prior. Interested villagers were divided into groups depending on their socioeconomic status. The interviewee said this worked well for them because "*Tulijusikia huru*" (We felt free). I found this interesting because of the several groups I worked with, the two that showed the most perseverance and willingness to change and experiment were a women's group consisting of some of the wealthiest women I knew and a group of people living with HIV/AIDS.

I spent 3 days a week with the group of people living with HIV/AIDS dying fabrics to make batik. The group actually started as a mixture of people from different backgrounds. We thought it would be helpful to have people of different abilities as the art requires a basic understanding of multiplication for measuring the fabrics and mixing the chemicals, and it requires the physical strength to haul massive amounts of water. We also wanted to create a group of people from different backgrounds and realities to reduce stigma and promote inclusion.

This plan ended up not working so well. There were a few prominent figures in the group who seemed to make others feel insignificant. Many of the group members approached me to suggest we move the location, saying, "*Tupo chini ya mtu moja*" (We're all below one person). All the group's supplies were kept in a room at one person's house, and the other group members were not allowed in. There was also distrust, and some thought others were stealing.

> *Journal Entry, August 17, 2010*
> Had a very fruitful, tense, loud, uncomfortable and long
> batik meeting yesterday. We need to revamp things.

After that meeting, because of honest words that were said, the more educated and well-off members of the group began to fade

away. In a socioeconomic sense, the group became more homogeneous than it had been because only the poor remained. The literature discusses this (e.g., *Fernandez, 1999*), and practitioner manuals suggest it—split groups up, women with women, poor with poor, ill with ill—but nothing addresses how to identify these groups. For an outsider, I truly think it's impossible to know. Eventually I came to understand that groups must self-identify. Over time, this is what happened naturally, even accidentally. Formerly quiet group members began to bring their ideas forward, because "*Tulijisikia huru*"—They felt free. Suddenly they were doing work creatively and independently.

The batik group had been having problems with the budget. We were making a kind of batik that required wax, a lot of chemicals, and math skills. A few members had heard of another method. We didn't know exactly how to do it, but we tried it out. And then we tried it again and again in different ways. Eventually it ended up looking great. At that point, the project was being run and managed entirely on the ideas of the group members.

> *Journal Entry, March 27, 2010*
> Today two bibis (grandmothers) taught me how to make their new style of batiks. It was especially great since the bibis used to just man the fire and do sidelines work. Now they're making stuff, they are the experts!

Figure 2. Bibis admiring their batik work.

With their profit they opened a bank account. In December 2010, after I had completed my service and returned to Michigan, I received a letter from one of them saying the group had recently taken out a loan.

What of the other group—the well-off women? I remember asking one of the members why they didn't fight and steal from each other like other groups I worked with (groups I haven't been able to expand on in this essay). Her response was simple: "*Tuna UPENDO*" (We have love).

At first I thought this was just an easy answer, a way to brush me off and not think critically, but as I continued to reflect on my experience once I returned home, I began to understand more the importance of love in community development. Freire *(1984)*, for example, wrote:

> Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love. *(p. 90)*

And I believe this to be true.

The centrality of love is also prevalent in strands of the action research literature, including human inquiry (*Reason, 1994*). Greenwood and Levin *(2007)* described the primary agenda of human inquiry as being to develop an

> approach to living based on experience and engagement, on love and respect for the integrity of persons; and on the willingness to rise above presuppositions, to look and to look again, to risk security in search for understanding and action that open possibilities for creative living. *(p. 211)*

Before I left Tanzania, I was asked to write up some pieces of advice for the incoming Volunteers. I wrote: "Love your village first and work will come more naturally later." Somewhere along the way, amid the corruption, the rape, the domestic violence, and the lies, I fell head over heels for some of the rich and most of the poor, and for the sixth graders, and for Mama Anna and Paulo—and for the gaggle of children that accompanied me through my every motion of every day. We were loving the world and changing it.

After the Fact

It is not history one is faced with, nor biography, but a confusion of histories, a swarm of biographies. There is order in it all of some sort, but it is the order of a squall or a street market: nothing metrical.

> It is necessary, then, to be satisfied with swirls, confluxions, and inconstant connections; clouds collecting, clouds dispersing. . . . What we can construct, if we keep notes and survive, are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings, after the fact. *(Geertz, 1995, p. 2)*

After Geertz's years of experience as an anthropologist in the field, he informs us that although we cannot draw concrete conclusions, what we can do is offer our stories and understandings about the way things are.

I do not offer my story as an answer to the difficulties one faces in the field. I only claim that some of the work I did was good given the criteria I outlined for myself. Through journaling, reflecting, observing, and asking questions, I learned a lot of useful but not foolproof things. I hope it is apparent that there were plenty of failures. In fact, about six months after I left my village, I received a letter in the mail from one of the batik group members. They wrote that the group was going well, and they had even opened a bank account. Minor victory, right? I thought we had been able to actually make something work. A phone call from Mama Flavy a week before I finished my thesis, however, informed me that the group had begun to fight. One of the members owed the group quite a bit of money and was refusing to pay. Humans are imperfect, and there are always problems when they try to work together in groups. I can at least be comforted in the memories of my conversations and interviews with a few of the group members who had told me that even if the group were to split up, they now had the knowledge, skills, and abilities to continue on their own. As my experience deepened my understanding, it has made me more realistic—a realistic optimist.

I learned a lot about community development from the villagers I lived with. They taught me basic and straightforward things: Work with homogeneous community groups because people will be more free; have the group come first and then the project; don't develop a project for a newly formed group; and consider water

before you consider anything else. They taught me more complicated things about life and love, too.

The point is that in theory, what to do is clearly articulated and straightforward but in practice, it's complicated and messy. It requires making hard decisions and sacrifices that have the potential to breed conflict and then accepting the consequences of those decisions. As a Volunteer, I consider myself lucky to have had the mindfulness bred by my coursework to recognize the problems that could come from aligning myself with authority figures in the village and how it could only worsen power inequities. This is what helped me break away from what my Peace Corps material had advised.

If I were to be a Peace Corps Volunteer again, I would offer myself two suggestions. My partial knowledge finds them important and yours may, too.

Reflection

One of the biggest lessons I took away from my experience was the importance of reflection. Reflection played an important role throughout the time I spent in the field as well as the time I spent back at MSU making sense of my experience. Over time as we reflect, we understand more, creating room to grow and change *(Mezirow, 1981; Schön, 1991)*. We need to reflect to become more effective practitioners *(Reason & Bradbury, 2008)*. Reflection is as strategic as it is personal.

Power dynamics are important to consider for practitioners who seek to be effective and reach the marginalized populations. Although power dynamics may never be fully understood by the outsider, understanding one's own positionality can put one on the track to at least a better understanding of the power dynamics.

Constant reflection can foster this process. Reflection and self-awareness enabled me to work through obstacles. It's not possible to know what other things I would have realized with more time and reflection. I hope that I have demonstrated how writing an autoethnography can facilitate reflective learning. It's more than a form of research; it's a process that allowed me to do work more mindfully and meaningfully.

Love

I thought I was "done" with development when I wrote in my journal that I essentially didn't believe in it anymore, that all I believed in was love. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to

come back to school and devote more thought and research to my experience. It was satisfying to find well-known scholars who also thought love was important and an essential aspect of generating positive change. I think the doubt I see in my journals reflects the moments where I used critical subjectivity to work through emotional, intellectual, and practical dilemmas.

I also learned that Volunteers almost always have some sort of lasting impact on their communities. Of course they are not transformational, but they are not meant to be. Empowerment cannot be bestowed upon an individual or group; it is something that must grow from within. Positive change, change that is not oppressive, cannot come in the absence of love. The moral practitioner must be embedded in a politics of love and caring, hope and forgiveness *(Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006).* "Love is a political principle through which we struggle to create mutually life-enhancing opportunities for all people" *(Darder & Miron, 2006, p. 150).*

The literature and classroom discussions prior to my service did not in themselves make me a good Volunteer. They planted the seeds of mindfulness and gave me the tools to be reflective and creative when challenges arose. Essential to my experience was building close relationships with community members from different populations, shifting agency in their direction regardless of the political implications, taking time to be a part of the community, loving those I worked among, and redefining my understanding of development before joining in and marching on.

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