

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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The film *The Green Berets*—directed by John Wayne and featuring the director himself as the hero who galvanizes a unit of special forces to defend an American firebase in Vietnam and kidnap a Viet Cong general—had been released just long enough to have reached the saturation point in terms of distribution even at outdoor cinemas in rural West Africa. I'm guessing that the attendant on the bus on which I was traveling in 1978 had seen it numerous times and embraced its code of lionheartedness in battle. He carried himself as a fine military specimen as he strode toward me in a green Girl Scout beret to collect my ticket. While fishing through a mission barrel for donated clothing, he must have mistaken its signature trefoil for military insignia. I still giggle, almost four decades later, as I recall the scene.

It strikes me that cognitive dissonance was at the heart of my experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Sénégal. During our *stage* at Lycée Kennedy in Dakar, I experienced a lot of it, beginning with the challenge of eating *thiebou jenn* (rice and fish) out of a communal bowl. All my life I had been eating from *my* plate with a knife, fork and spoon. It seemed strange to be eating suddenly from *our* bowl, stranger still to be using only one utensil, namely my right hand. Fortunately, I was right-handed, which made things less awkward, but it took a while to get the hang of using my hand as a sort of melon baller, for the proper etiquette was to shape the food into a ball before bringing it to the mouth. Through trial and error, I discovered how not to scald my hand (it was wise to start with the rice along the perimeter and give the fish and vegetables in the center time to cool). I grew to be wary of peppers, which tended toward the incandescent. I learned, too, that if I did bite into one by accident and experience difficulty breathing (as had already happened with another volunteer), all was not lost. A few bites from a banana would restore equanimity.

Sometimes the incongruity felt ironic and therefore politically loaded. The sacks of donated “U.S. Food Aid” peanuts I saw piled up alongside the Collège d'Enseignement Général where I taught in the small town of Fatick embarrassed me as an American citizen because I knew, as apparently U.S. A.I.D. did not, that Fatick was surrounded on all sides by peanut fields.

As much as Peace Corps Volunteers were considered at least *voluntarily* poor by fellow Americans, they were rich as Croesus on their small stipends in the eyes of Senegalese. As a TESOL volunteer, I was required to teach English according to a pedagogical system called CLAD (after the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar). I found it excruciating to reinforce the vocabulary in dialogues like the following from the cinquième-level textbook:

John – We’ve started to go down; we shall soon be there.  
Adu – Is that London already? What a quick flight!  
John – What are you standing up for?  
Adu—I’m getting ready to get off.  
John—You must sit down and fasten your seat-belt.  
Adu—What was that bump?  
John—We’ve touched the ground. We shan’t be long now.  
Adu—Can we get up, then?  
John—No, we’ve got to wait till the engines stop completely.

Here the rub stemmed from the gulf between the haves in the textbook and the have-nots sitting in front of me. The cost of a plane ticket from Dakar to London exceeded Sénégal’s per capita income. In the late 1970s, most Senegalese did not own phones or televisions or cars, let alone have the wherewithal to buy plane tickets. Fatick did have electricity, but the only homes that were wired for it were those of the Dutch doctors, the Belgian midwife, the Finnish missionary, the French nuns and priests, a few Senegalese in government posts, and, yes, the American Peace Corps Volunteers.

Sometimes *I* was the cause of the cognitive dissonance. Once, when I had to take the night bus from Fatick to Dakar to get a tooth fixed, the two-year-old girl sitting on her mother’s lap across from me cried the whole way. Her mother explained that she had never seen a *toubab* (i.e., white person). I knew, too, that as a caution against drowning, some mothers in Fatick told their children that there were *toubabs* in the Sine-Saloum River who would eat them.

With every passing week in Fatick, I found myself listening more intently to its thudding, like a heart's, both at dusk when the women were pounding millet close by and at midnight when the men, further away, were beating their tam-tams. I discovered myself staring up more searchingly at the sub-Saharan night sky; whenever the electricity went out, which was fairly frequently, the sky was like a pitch-black colander with starlight boring, instead of straining, through. It was as if I were being apprehended and interrogated by strange gods (perhaps the ones for whom the animists had left the offerings I had come upon a few times under baobab trees). I was twenty-three years old. Who was I? What was I doing with my life? What was I going to do? Could I even pretend to know?

You might say that the ultimate cognitive dissonance I experienced was the friction within between the old me and the new me. It is even clearer to me now than it was in 1979, when I landed back at JFK Airport wearing my fishbone necklace, that the Peace Corps radically changed me. At the same time, it is still difficult to say exactly how. It is not like I stepped over a line and became a smarter person or a more accomplished person or a person with a more reliable moral compass. In living in a poor Islamic country, I think I simply became more acutely aware of the distinctive Irish-Catholic, middle-class lens through which I looked at the world. This may sound like a small accomplishment, but it really isn't. It marks the beginning of the cultivation of a necessary humility in the face of the complex plurality of voices in the world. It is only in honoring that plurality that we can begin to imagine peace.

When Dr. Renae Duncan, MSU's acting provost, began to float the idea of instituting a Peace Corps Prep program on campus, I was naturally very enthusiastic. Others who served on the committee that got Peace Corps Prep up and running include faculty and staff members Michael Morgan, Sue Sroda, Reika Ebert, Peter Weber and Melanie McCallon Seib. It is our belief that many current Murray State students can benefit personally and professionally from a stint in the Peace Corps, and we hope that the Peace Corps Prep program (*see ad on our inside front cover*) will provide them with a vehicle for thinking about doing so. Special thanks go to Shawna Thomas of the Institute for International Studies for stepping up as our new Peace Corps Prep

director. We are grateful, too, to the many Returned Peace Corps Volunteers among our alumni and faculty who shared their stories in this issue.

Here is a standard anecdote concerning the acculturation of Peace Corps Volunteers. If a fly lands in a volunteer's cup of coffee in the first month in country, the volunteer will pour out the coffee and get a new cup. At the end of the first year, the volunteer will flick out the fly and keep drinking. At the end of the second, the volunteer will refuse to drink a cup of coffee without a fly in it.

In Sénégal, I too gradually became inured to inconveniences that I would have classified as untenable in an earlier life. Again one day, I was on a bus from Fatick to Dakar. A half hour out of Fatick, the bus blew a tire. The driver instructed us to get off. While we were waiting, the old men chewed kola nuts and spat them out by the side of the road. A vendor of monkey-bread popsicles plied his wares, with some success. Soon we were back aboard. Twenty minutes later, though, the spare tire also blew. This time, our driver did not instruct us to get off. Instead, he told us all to squeeze into the left side of the bus (the blown tire was on the right side). We cozied up, with a few of the young men appointed as straddlers. It was their job to shift quickly to the right whenever the bus started listing too far to the left (which it did, scarily often). At this remove, I can't remember the Wolof for *Whoa, baby!*, but I know that I heard it often in those forty miles. It was like we were at sea riding the rollicking waves together.

If I had been back in my old life, I would have been asking, "What is wrong with this picture? Doesn't this driver know that it's idiotic to drive a bus with a flat tire?" Instead, I found myself commending his strange resolve. At first, the forced intimacy had been daunting, but pretty soon we were all laughing so hard that a tedious and potentially dangerous situation had turned into a party. When we got to Thiès, where we could catch another bus to Dakar, our whooping and clapping drowned out the baaing of the goats on the roofs of the car rapides around us. I did not refuse henceforward to get on a bus unless it was impaired by a flat tire, but I did consider myself "arrived" as a Peace Corps Volunteer—and I have never forgotten the contagious, improvised joy of that bus ride.