

Peace Corps Application Essays (March, 2008)

I. Motivation

Born in 1952, I grew up in a small Southern town with three older brothers in a traditional, lower-middle-class home. While neither of my parents attended college, they created an environment of open-minded curiosity and wonder. From infancy, I have been exposed to a diversity of strongly held views and opinions in a home filled with older brothers' college textbooks and challenging conversation on the issues of the world, the mysteries of physical life and spiritual ponderings of ultimate truth and one's proper place in God's creation. The Civil Rights movement, KKK lynchings, Vietnam, peaceful protests, young men in body bags, violent riots, assassinations of those bravely standing for truth and justice shaped my foundation. Beneath the hum of passionate, energized voices, the Biblical saying, "from him to whom much is given, much is expected," was a guiding mantra. It remains so today as I ponder my place in the world and how I might best use the gifts and talents with which I have been blessed. I've always had the greatest respect for the Peace Corps as an organization devoted to meaningful service to those in need, providing them the resources for bringing about long-term stability and well-being.

I was a father at 18 and had the challenges of making a living for my young family with only a high school education and some good mechanical and electrical skills. I had always been good with my hands even from a very early age, repairing my own bikes and building scooters with spare parts. I moved from being an electrician's helper to being a telephone lineman and then a skilled cable repairman. At 20, I bought a home and learned to garden organically, install a woodstove, refinish hardwood floors and cook healthy meals. In my 40s I established a solid business, learned to build my own website and work with a host of computer programs and associated hardware. I have been practicing mindfulness meditation for almost 20 years and in 2002, established a 501.c.3 to help share these powerful teachings with my community. I have a broad range of skills and am a good problem solver, practically with things and psychologically with people. I am confident that these skills will serve my host Peace Corps community well.

I have felt for the past few years that I am hiding out in my “safe life” in America. I realize that I have been turning a blind eye to much of the world’s suffering. My spiritual path has taken me to the point of committing my life to service in a more direct way than I have yet to experience. The Peace Corps represents an avenue of direct service that will allow me to share what I have learned and pass along some of my blessings. I also expect that the experience will support our settling into a foreign country when Jordan and I are ready to retire should such a time ever come.

II. Skills

Growing up and living in rural South Carolina (1952-1984), my exposure to diversity within our American culture ranged from the educated and otherwise privileged to the dirt-poor of the Appalachian foothills and those trapped in tiny cotton mill villages, white and blacks, rich and poor, co-existing in the turbulent times of the 60s and 70s. My 12 years as a telephone repairman (1972-1984) put me up close and personal with all classes and races. My exposure to the many struggles of the “underclasses” motivated me to begin volunteer work with a street minister that ultimately led to a 20-year career (1986-present) as a psychotherapist (Ph.D. in clinical psychology), working with individuals from every walk of life. In the leather chair comfort of my psychotherapy office, I have shared the intimate lives of high-powered executives with private jets, personal care staffs and a host of soul-deadening addictions. On stained and battered sofas in the inner-city homes of my AIDS patients, my intimates struggled with the demons of illness, poverty and hopelessness. I find that I am able to shape my manner, presentation and responses with whomever I am engaged while remaining centered and open to the flow of their pain or fear. These skills have served me well on my travels to foreign countries.

From the 6-week college trip to Spain in 1985 to the 2-week emersion with a local family in Mexico (2007) to a recent (2008) 3-week stay in a small village in Brazil, I have had rich in-depth cross-cultural experiences. I love the personal interactions with regular folks who are willing to engage openly. I have developed confidence in navigating through the challenges of another culture where I was forced to draw upon very basic communication

skills and a non-threatening manner while relying upon only a few words of broken Spanish or Portuguese. One trip stands out perhaps because it was the first time my wife Jordan and I were on our own in Mexico. In early 2006, in a rented car, with a few outdated maps and no clear idea of where we were headed, we landed in Monterray into the worse traffic either of us had ever experienced and found our way with no help of reasonable road signs, to our hotel on the other side of the city. Two days later we fled this still-too-Americanized place for the hills of Zacatecas, some 6 crazy highway hours away for 3 days then back up the other side of Mexico. Along the way, we were repeatedly pushed beyond our comfort and stress levels only to land in a place of calm relief and appreciation for those who helped us find our way.

I found repeatedly that my basic people skills were the most important resource in navigating through this adventure. The lack of language could be overcome by a warm smile and genuine openness and appreciation for whomever we encountered. I am looking forward to our next adventure.