

Promise the Peace Corps kept

By Leo I. Higdon, Jr.

Reprinted from *The Post and Courier*, May 21, 2002

As commencement season is upon us again this year, an interesting piece of news is the fact that the Peace Corps is reporting record numbers of newly minted graduates are signing up. Regardless of whether it's the result of a slow economy or the aftereffects of Sept. 11, I couldn't be happier. I am a Peace Corps veteran and I never made a smarter career move.

My wife and I joined the Peace Corps in the '60s teaching school in Malawi, Africa, for two years. What I realize now more than 30 years later is that my MBA gave me my skills, but the Peace Corps gave me my soul. It also made my options unlimited, and through it I discovered that intersection of practicality and idealism that is so hard to find in the conventional workplace.

In the midst of long hours in remote surroundings and even expecting our first child, I could never have guessed that it would be there, in rural East Africa, that I would learn lessons that would prove indispensable in my career in both Wall Street and in higher education. Along with being trained in the concrete business demands of leadership, communication and innovation, we also learned the fundamental values for success: how to learn, listen and adapt.

Facing a classroom of young Malawians in a small hamlet steeped in centuries-old traditions, knowing the slightest cultural misstep could result in our being kicked out of town, has a way of focusing one's attention. (In fact, our Peace Corps predecessors in the village had run into problems, and been deported.) This was no neatly wrapped package of multiculturalism, no tidy Hollywood story of instant understanding. It was sink-or-swim, real work from the first day. We were willing to learn, and out of necessity we learned how to listen. We learned not just names and statistics, but cultural beliefs, practices and traditions. We learned to be opened-minded, and we quickly jettisoned our pre-existing notions about the people with whom we worked and lived. We realized even the first day that we could not be productive until we saw the world through the eyes of the people we were there to serve.

This lesson came back time and time again in my careers, and gave me the wherewithal to sensitively deal with people, while at the same time accomplishing goals.

In Malawi, there was no time to mull over differences; instead we were forced to pool our talents and work as a team. We learned to adapt, and before long a new world revealed itself to us. We could see how things we took for granted appeared to others who were not as fortunate. We saw our education through the eyes of those who never went to school; we saw our health through the eyes of those who didn't know what it was like to be well. (I recall that the kids in my classroom had lost many of their siblings to what to them was a "normal" infant mortality rate of nearly 50 percent!)

One of my jobs while in Malawi was to collect an oral history of sorts from residents in the countryside. This particular project involved reconstructing memories of a local revolutionary figure who led an aborted uprising in the area during World War I. What a curiosity I must have presented, and I quickly learned that you have to spend quite a bit of time with people establishing your credibility - talking about many, many things - before you can communicate at a significant level and get down to the business at hand.

This was a lesson I took with me later and used effectively on Wall Street and in higher education. Business is not often just about business, but about credibility and communicating.

While there we quickly discovered that the Malawian language often did not have corresponding vocabulary to describe some of the things we were trying to teach in school. This taught us that when dealing with people who speak another language, there is no universal tongue. It requires improvisation, and deft translating of terms to understanding the nuances of another person's language, and culture. This taught me later to understand the subtleties of language, and realize that not everyone in the world "thinks" in English. This is a wonderful asset in business when dealing internationally.

When I joined the Peace Corps, I had no idea how much of what I would learn there would help in building a successful career in business, or in leading a university. I still adhere to the principles I learned in remote East Africa. I have found that successful leaders, whether managing huge corporations or non-profits, must learn to place themselves in the shoes of others, listen and adapt. They must re-think conventional wisdom, and abandon biases. Two years there taught me as much about the skills of success as years in the boardrooms of New York.

So, I applaud those who are signing up. I'm confident they are probably enlisting for very good and idealistic reasons. But they don't yet realize the precious human skills they'll learn there. In a world where very little can be counted upon, they can count on the Peace Corps for that.

Copyright © 2002 Charleston.Net. All Rights Reserved. Lee Higdon wrote this article while president of the College of Charleston from 2001-2006.