

Editor's Note

Elisa Carey's "The Journey Within" profiles her father's life-changing experiences in the Peace Corps in 1969. What kinds of thoughts come to your mind when you think of the Peace Corps? Do you know anyone who has volunteered? Would or will you?

The author incorporates many vivid details throughout her essay. For example, the audience learns that, "each piece of clothing had to be ironed because flies commonly lay their eggs in damp cloth and upon hatching, the larvae burrow into a person's skin, creating large boils." How do vivid details contribute to the style and structure of an essay? As you read, take note of the descriptions that stand out to you.

Look at Carey's use of direct quotations. How does she integrate this evidence into her essay? What is revealed about her father without her telling us?

The Journey Within

Elisa Carey

When many people think of the Peace Corps, they think only of what the volunteers give to the countries in which they serve. These volunteers each spend 24 months in a country doing various activities such as building schools, constructing waterways, or advancing AIDS awareness to improve the lives of many who could not do so themselves. The personal fulfillment and sense of accomplishment that come with helping others are typically seen outcomes in a volunteer. What many don't see, however, is how the experiences in their given country can change who they are as a person and who they become as leaders later in life.

In 1969, during the heat of the Vietnam War, with the draft in progress, my dad made the decision to apply for the Peace Corps. He explained, "Even though Peace Corps gave you a deferment from the draft, that wasn't a main motivation for me; in fact, I also started the process to enlist in the Navy." What he was looking for was an opportunity to make a difference in the world by doing something more meaningful than just protesting the war. It wasn't until he dropped out of college at the end of his third year that he really made up his mind. My dad knew that he needed to do something new with his life to break loose from the world that he grew up in, and this was the chance of a lifetime to do something real. High on his list of motivators was President John F. Kennedy; he stated, "The Kennedy spirit was still alive in many of us even through the Nixon years."

Despite the dean of students at Lehigh University's claims that my father would not be accepted to the Peace Corps without first graduating from college, he filled

out an application and sent it in. He heard back from the organization a few months later, a day that he remembers very clearly today. “I got a phone call on a Thursday morning, out of the blue, and the caller told me that if I wanted to join Peace Corps, they had a great assignment for me with a new construction team. But I would need to be in Washington, D. C., in ten days for four days of paperwork, medical exams, and shots, and then fly straight to Sierra Leone,” he recalled. The caller told him that he couldn’t give him much time to think about it since the departure was so soon. He called his dad for advice who in turn told him that it was something he really needed to think about and provided numerous reasons as to why he shouldn’t go. In response to this he hung up the phone and immediately called the recruiter back to confirm that he would be joining the construction team in Sierra Leone. Looking back it seems clear that if he had been allowed more time, he might have said no, since he is usually a deliberate decision maker. This life-changing experience was different. He said, “it was only after I hung up the phone that I pulled out the map of South America to see where Sierra Leone was. Oops, it was in Africa! So much for expectations.”

Just days after phone call came, he was packed and on a plane headed to West Africa. In a whirlwind of emotions, he describes feelings of excitement for the adventure, intense sadness of leaving his friends behind, and a bit of numbness as he was clueless to what the journey ahead was going to be like. He had a close knit group of friends, and because he was the first of them to head out on his own, it was a difficult time for them all.

It wasn’t until he had been in Africa for about four months that he began to have second thoughts about being there. It was spring in the U.S. and all of his friends were headed for graduation; he missed them terribly. On top of that, he was sick and beginning to miss home. In my dad’s time in Africa, he suffered some very serious diseases, including paratyphoid, pleurisy, dysentery, and malaria. He explained, “Being sick in a place where the nearest good medical help is a day’s drive away is difficult.” After thinking things over, he made his second big decision. He decided that if he was in Africa, he ought to be really living there rather than wishing that he was back home. It worked. With this new mindset, my dad came to the realization that if he took advantage of what life had to offer while in Africa, his experience would turn into one that he wouldn’t want to come to an end.

Because my father was interested in construction, this was the perfect project for him. Through his first year, he helped to develop roads, build schools, and the biggest project of them all, constructing and opening a new water system for a village. He lived in three different villages this first year and claims, “Life in the villages was tough. I longed for real milk, a hamburger, potato chips. I didn’t like outhouses.” The

villagers, however, were wonderful and played an important role in outshining the hardships of the environment.

Snakes and bugs overwhelmed this jungle area which made living difficult. For example, each piece of clothing had to be ironed because flies commonly lay their eggs in damp cloth and upon hatching, the larvae burrow into a person's skin, creating large boils. It was also imperative to be ever conscious of snakes. While most people would think to watch the ground, the greatest dangers were those that hung in trees or on the eaves of rooftops. The spitting cobra posed a big threat to locals because when it hung over the roof, it had the power to spit accurately into the victim's eyes from ten feet away, blinding them and turning them into helpless prey. Even with so many challenges presented by the environment, it wasn't all bad, and once adapted he came to see it as a wonderful place to live.

Even with help, everything took time. In his second year in Africa, my dad became a construction advisor to volunteers all over the country. Although Sierra Leone is only 1/6 the size of California, it took 2-3 days to drive across it because it lacked paved roads. During this year, however, he lived in a house in Freetown, the capital city, exposing him to a whole different facet of what Africa had to offer. He explained that life was slow-paced, and it was vital that he developed what he called a "tolerance for ambiguity." He also claimed, "people with specific expectations, who like things to be organized, really struggle in an environment like West Africa—or any developing country."

This experience taught him numerous life lessons, among these was to appreciate the little things. Growing up with a lifestyle of never having to go without, he learned how to live with only the necessities. In the dry season, there was never more than an gallon of water to bathe with after a tough day of manual labor and of this he said, "it was often swamp water which would cause the smallest scratch to become an infection." He said that still to this day, each time he takes a hot shower, he is thankful for the opportunity to do so and is sure never to take it for granted.

He also learned the power of a simple act of kindness. One particular incident occurred when he was a part of a team that worked through the night when the country switched over from driving on the left side of the road to driving on the right. He remembers, "a van pulled up about 3 a.m. in the middle of nowhere and the driver got out to give me a beer—from the senior engineer at the Ministry of Works. The driver used his teeth to take the top off the bottle and handed it to me and drove off." After recovering from the shock of seeing the man remove the bottle top with his teeth, my dad realized that this man had been sent from miles away by the senior engineer just to bring him a beer. This one action made all the difference in his feeling accepted as the "white guy."

Even in a place as desperately poor as Sierra Leone, the locals lived by the saying, “I fall down, but I get up again.” Through even the hardest of times, my father learned to have a positive attitude and to always press on through even the most difficult of hardships. He also gathered the importance of being able to walk into a room as the only white person, unable to understand anything that people were saying, and refuse to assume that they are talking and laughing about him. This experience taught him what it is like to be a minority in a place, and how it feels to be looked at differently from the rest.

After a difficult departure from the U. S. to Africa, my dad did not expect it to be so tough to then return home to America. He explains, “unlike when I went to Sierra Leone, I had very clear expectations about ‘home.’ But it wasn’t as comfortable as I expected. Waste, extravagance, rush, commercialism seemed so extreme. And American world perspective seemed . . . nonexistent.” While many of his friends returned overseas to serve again, he fought the urge to return as he finished his last year of college at Lehigh University. Though an English major, he explained that “[Volunteering] put me on a different path for the rest of my life. I know it led to greater independence, the opportunity to be who I wanted to be, not necessarily what I thought was expected of me.” Now the president of a non-profit housing organization in the Central Valley, it is clear that the Peace Corps had a huge influence on the direction of my father’s life.

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Works Cited

Carey, Peter. Personal interview. 29 January 2009.