Voices from the Field: Using Peace Corps Literature

Cerylle A. Moffett

Returned Peace Corps Volunteers' personal narratives expand the boundaries of students' worldviews and increase their understanding of other cultures.

Ilunga is an African village chief who hunts antelope, carries a spear, and wears a leather charm around his neck to ward off evil spirits. He moved 4,000 cubic feet of dirt to dig a pond large enough to grow fish for an entire village to eat—in sweltering, sub-Saharan heat, armed only with a shovel and a fierce will to succeed. Although Ilunga may seem to Americans to be the stuff of which fiction is made, he is not. Ilunga lives in the small village of Ntita Kalambayi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire.


For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase family protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human. (Tidwell, 1990, p. 4)

In his story “I Had a Hero,” Tidwell describes his growing respect for and friendship with Ilunga, who is determined to dig a fish pond double the size of any that has ever been dug before. “Ilunga's Harvest,” which takes place five months later when Ilunga’s pond is ready to be harvested, describes the outcome of Ilunga's pond-digging efforts and the conflict that results as the values of two different cultures—Tidwell's and Ilunga's—collide. Much to Tidwell’s dismay, rather than keeping the fish—and the profit the fish could bring—for himself and his immediate family, Ilunga gives away more than half the fish in his pond to extended family members and friends.

Tidwell tells the chief:

You gave away too much, Ilunga. You can't keep doing this. You can't feed the whole village by yourself... You have to feed your own children and take care of your own immediate family. Let your brothers worry about their families. Let them dig ponds if they want to. (Coverdell World Wise Schools, 2001, p. 61–62)

Tidwell describes how his individualistic views clashed headlong with Ilunga’s communal values. What was for Tidwell an economic crisis was for Ilunga a “cultural imperative” (Coverdell World Wise Schools, 2001, p. 59).

Tidwell’s stories deal with issues of generosity, justice, individualism, and community, and with the complexity of cultural differences and their impact on human behavior. They also illustrate how the experience of moving from one culture to another caused Tidwell to question not just local culture but also his own.

Voices from the Field

Since 1961, more than 185,000 men and women have served in the Peace Corps in more than 130 countries, where they live and work in villages, cities, and towns that may never be tourist sites. Once there, they unpack their belongings. They settle down. They learn the language, discover the cultural norms, and begin doing their jobs. And they write.

John Coyne, editor of Living on the Edge: Fiction by Peace Corps Writers, says,

Many begin by writing letters home, like Paul Theroux did in 1964 from Malawi where he taught in a secondary school. Their Peace Corps experience becomes a source of material, a creative impulse. For many writers, it has become their literary territory. (Coyne, 1999, p. x)

“I Had a Hero” and “Ilunga’s Harvest” are two of nine personal narratives, poems, and short stories included in Voices from the Field: Reading and Writing about the World, Ourselves, and Others, a curriculum resource created by the staff of the Peace Corps’ Coverdell World Wise Schools (2001; see sidebar). The purpose of Voices is to broaden students’ perspectives on life in other cultures by exposing them to firsthand accounts written by returned Peace Corps Volunteers, many of whom are published authors.

Designed for use by teachers in grades 7–12, Voices is divided into two sections: Peace Corps stories and curriculum units. The first section contains nine Peace Corps texts around which the lesson plans in the curriculum section are organized. Representing a variety of genres—personal narratives, fiction, folktales, and poetry—and cultures in lands as diverse as Papua New Guinea and Niger in
West Africa, the texts are grouped into three themes: Heroes and Friends, Perspectives, and No Easy Answers.

The curriculum section has two separate but complementary units. The first, “Reading and Responding to Literature,” comprises lesson plans that help students find personal meaning in the content of the stories while broadening their perspectives about other cultures and strengthening their reading comprehension and skills in interpreting literature. The second, “A Reading and Writing Workshop,” uses the Peace Corps stories as a springboard for developing students' writing skills. The lesson plans in this unit focus on the Peace Corps authors' craft and the genre of the personal narrative. They culminate in students writing their own personal narratives.

**Essential Questions**

“I Had a Hero” and “Ilunga's Harvest,” like the other *Voices* stories, lend themselves to thought-provoking “enduring understandings” and “essential questions” (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998), key components of the *Voices* lesson plans. McTighe and Wiggins define an essential question as “a provocative question designed to engage student interest and guide inquiry into important ideas” (1999, p. 277). Essential questions in the lesson plans for Tidwell's stories include:

- What does it take to be a hero?
- How can heroic individuals influence our lives?
- How does our culture influence how we view the world, ourselves, and others?
- When is taking care of the individual more important than taking care of the group? When is taking care of the group more important than taking care of the individual?
- Why are some of life’s questions so hard?

**Reading and Writing About the World**

The stories in *Voices* bring the world into the classroom for students such as those in Annie Raney's 8th grade English class in Mattawoman Middle School, one of six schools in the Charles County, Maryland, School District that field-tested *Voices*. After Raney's students read “I Had a Hero,” they responded to a writing prompt from the corresponding lesson plan: What does it take to be a hero? What do you think impressed Mike so much about Ilunga that he was inspired to write a story about him when he returned home from the Peace Corps? One of Raney's students wrote,

> It takes bravery and passion to be a hero. You don't need superpowers. But you do need to be willing to risk your life for others, as Ilunga did... I think Ilunga's courage and will power not to stop digging, even when it got tough,
impressed Mike Tidwell. Ilunga kept on working in the sweltering sun until he reached his goal, even when he was tired and sick.

A student in Eileen Mattingly's 10th grade English class at Maurice J. McDonough High School in Pomfret, Maryland, responded to the same prompt:

Heroes are people who do selfless acts. They set goals and help others. They are courageous and determined. Ilunga was inspirational because he set hard goals and met them. He showed Mike that anything is possible. . . . He was courageous because he wouldn't stop digging, even though he was ill. . . . Even though Ilunga wasn't trying to be a hero (which, in a way, makes him even more of one), he was heroic by my standards.

After reading “Ilunga’s Harvest,” the lesson plans ask students to respond to one of two prompts. The first prompt reads: Write a letter to Ilunga describing the impact he had on you. What mark has he left on you? How have you changed as a result of “knowing” Ilunga? Here are two student responses to this prompt:

Dear Ilunga,

I am a friend of yours, but you do not know me. You have truly inspired me, and I just wanted to write you a letter to tell you what effect you've had on my life. Reading about you has taught me a different way of life that I will never forget. You taught me that being persistent and never giving up is an important way to live. You taught me how important it is to help others. . . . To me, you are a hero.

Dear Ilunga,

Your love for others has helped me change the way I view people I come in contact with on a daily basis. . . . It amazed me that through all your differences, and as foreign as you and Mike appeared to one another, you two were able to put these differences aside and become friends. This had a huge impact on the way I view those who, to me, seem foreign. Now, instead of laughing or running, I am coming to accept and learn from the people I encounter.

The second prompt reads: What lessons on “what it means to be human” did Mike learn from Ilunga? Here are two student responses to this prompt:

Mike... saw firsthand the generosity that people show each other when on the brink of death. When your survival is threatened . . . it is human nature to share what you have to help others. In America, where it's not typical to give anything back to the community if you make a profit, Mike had never
witnessed such an unselfish act. The [value of sharing] is so entrenched in the village culture that people expected Ilunga to give his surplus to his people.

When Mike said, “They shared with me the ancient spirit of Africa's heart,” he meant that the people of Kalambayi, especially Ilunga, showed him ways of life and ways of treating people that extend far beyond anything he had seen in America. To be human is not to complain when other people in your community ask you for help when they need it. . . . The survival of the village was more important to Ilunga than his individual needs. . . . These people, the poorest of the poor, seem more refined in their values of how people should behave toward one another than most people I've encountered.

The lesson plans for “Ilunga’s Harvest” suggest that students analyze, in discussion and in writing, the dilemmas that Ilunga’s culture presented for Tidwell. Alice Bailer, a reading and writing resource teacher at Thomas Stone High School in Waldorf, Maryland, summarized several students’ responses:

One student wrote, “Sometimes it’s more important to take care of the group than the individual.” Another analyzed Ilunga’s motives by saying that he was “right in one way, but wrong in another.” Still another wrote that answers to difficult questions might differ from culture to culture. In discussing this dilemma, students came to realize that the process of solving problems includes examining the gray areas of a situation, not just the black-and-white ones.

And Eileen Mattingly noted,

As I read over my students' responses to these stories, I realized that the stories caused many of them to wake up to the idea of poverty in developing countries on an emotional level. I'm sure they were aware of the difference in standard of living intellectually; now it became much more real to them. They came a step closer to thinking globally.

**Changing Perspectives One Student at a Time**

Commenting on the Peace Corps literature unit that she introduced to her students, Mattingly said,

Many of my students responded to the idea of friendship across the barrier of cultural differences. . . . This seems so valuable in today’s diverse and sometimes troubled classrooms.
Certainly the stories from *Voices from the Field* provide students with models of quality writing. The real power of using Peace Corps authors' personal narratives, however, lies in the fact that these firsthand accounts bring the world into the classroom, expanding the cultural and geographic boundaries of students' experience more powerfully than most other literature can. They help students understand that, despite cultural differences, certain values—selflessness, dignity, determination, friendship, heroism—unite all people, no matter where they may live, in a common bond of humanity.

**References**


**Author's note**: Participants in the Charles County School District field test of *Voices from the Field* included Barbara Graves, Linda Flanagan, Alice Bailer, Deborah Holder, Yolanda Hume, Eileen Mattingly, Rebekah Melnick, Amy Miller, Annie Raney, Sam Reddi, and Cindie Togni.

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