

25. MOTIVATION STATEMENT

Peace Corps service presents major physical, emotional, and intellectual challenges. You have provided information on how you qualify for Peace Corps service elsewhere in the application. In the space below, please provide a statement (between 150-500 words) that includes:

- *Your reasons for wanting to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer; and*
- *How these reasons are related to your past experiences and life goals.*

Altruism

I am not going to save the world in two years. My application to the Peace Corps is not self-sacrifice. This idea is condescending to the third world, and from what I have read and seen, misapprehends the act of service. Nevertheless, choosing the Peace Corps does reflect certain values: that I would rather build communities than jet engines, that I would rather test myself than laser printers, that I would rather work for the poorest than the richest.

What will my relation to the ills of the world be? It will not be conqueror, but neither will I have it be passive observer. I would have it be worker. It is the effort that is important – to share my life, even for a short time, with disadvantage. Perhaps it is as valuable to the people I would help to see me willingly struggle alongside them, follow them, and learn from them, as any tangible contribution I could make.

In Guatemala, there is a man named Padre Greg, who didn't want to be a missionary. He stumbled into Guatemala, with no language, no preparation, and no mentor. The Mayans he was ostensibly there to help perceived his weakness and grew close to him, and on this weakness before them he has built a remarkable suite of social programs. He has devoted his extraordinary talents and entire life to making a small difference in a small town in a small Central American country, for a people he will never be a part of (“I will never be a Mayan”, he told me, “because I did not drink Mayan milk as a baby.”). He addresses need without pride, expends his enormous energy to fight small slivers of injustice, and seemed to me to be enormously happy. What is his relationship to the suffering around him? He is working. This is how I would have my altruism.

Studies

Graduate study is a certain intention of mine. But upon receiving my bachelor's degrees, I found that my heart wasn't in mechanics. So I got a job instead. Almost a year out of school, I think one reason for my hesitance was this: that as much as I enjoyed studying fluid mechanics, at the end of the day, I was making rockets. My paycheck was paid by people who bought rockets and ultimately, who used rockets, and without any guarantee to me for ends that I approved of. A summer job under such circumstances is one thing, but a lifetime is another.

What should I study, then? Economics would be a reasonable choice, as a discipline that would exercise my education in mathematics while providing more social relevance than engineering. However, if I were to go directly to graduate study as I am now – with very little practice exposure to economic decisions and reality – I am afraid I would get a perspective-less, ivory-tower education. Right now, less than texts, I need context. The Peace Corps would provide me with an opportunity not just to witness, but to live the consequences of economic decisions and give a future degree a *raison d'etre*.

Patriotism

I want to go abroad as an American. By this, I don't mean a defender of our foreign policy, a missionary of our culture, or a tool of imperialism of any kind. I want to be a flesh and blood face on an enormous, abstract America. And as an American, I want to learn the faces of the most distant third world to bring them back home with me.

In Russia, in cosmopolitan Moscow no less, I was often surprised by the widely held, shallow stereotypes of Americans. One young man lied to his parents when we spent time together; he had been forbidden to spend time with any American. American billboards and products splatter the landscape. Beavis and Butthead is enormously popular. But I found that I could change people's opinions by being myself, if given the opportunity. I could not excuse the billboards, but I could put a more complex face on America than our pop culture caricature. Without personal contact with Americans, America is too easily abstracted

Further, America cannot act responsibly toward the third world, as long as the third world is similarly faceless. Misunderstanding and misunderstood, America endangers itself. That the danger is tangible can no longer be denied. Civilians have been, and will be, murdered over anger towards an abstract America. I wish to act as a soldier in defense of my country – that is, the land, culture, and Americans that I know and love. I don't believe the war will be ended with rockets. I believe I can hasten its end with faces.

Will and the Stomach

My life before now has taken its broader strokes from my parents and peers – an engineering degree and stable technical career. I always chose my own path, but the banks were steep with expectations and precedents. With the Peace Corps, I want to send my life in a direction that is unprompted, beyond expectations, and entirely my own. I want to start being a precedent, rather than following them.

The truth: I don't know where the Peace Corps might take my life, any more than I can intellectually account for my strong visceral desire to serve. It is outside the rubric that was given to me – and this is a stirring thought.

One can write long, rational essays justifying service abroad, as one could for staying home. But in the end, I will let my guts decide, and my guts are unequivocal: they say go!