



ARTFUSION

Spring 2012

The Peace Corps, a Mentor's Advice, and the Lessons Learned

by Professor Richard Harwood

Lesson 1: Work isn't work if you love what you do, even if it is a tough job.

The old slogan for the Peace Corps, "The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love," aptly describes the experience that many Peace Corps Volunteers bring home with them after their service overseas. This slogan has been retired and replaced by the slogan, "Life Is Calling. How Far Will You Go?" This too nicely applies to the Peace Corps experience, but I still prefer the older slogan.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I loved what I was doing, even when things weren't going so well. Actually, the toughest part about being a Peace Corp Volunteer isn't the work. If you have the proper training and education, you know how to do your job, and it really isn't any more difficult than the job you would do here in the United States.

What is tough about it is doing your job in a foreign culture, in a foreign language and frame of reference different than you are use to here in the United States. These differences make for some very interesting and frustrating days. One day you are flying high, everything is going well, your project is on track, life is looking pretty good, and you feel really good about yourself. The next day, your project comes to a screeching halt, the weather sucks, no one is cooperating, you don't understand why people are behaving the way they do, you question your own ability and skills, and you wonder what the hell you are doing in this far away land. The toughest part of the Peace Corps job, the part that can limit how far you can go, is dealing with that emotional rollercoaster. Add on top of that all the normal problems of living - buying food, doing laundry, cleaning the bathroom (or outhouse), being sick, the lack of money, missing a loved one - and the ride can get pretty rough at times.

How do many Peace Corps Volunteers survive? They love what they are doing - have a passion for what they do, sincerely wish to help the people with whom they are serving, and honestly want to help make the world a better place. Also, if they didn't have it before entering the Peace Corps, they learn to have a great deal of patience.

If Peace Corps Volunteers partially survive by loving what they are doing, why should that attitude be restricted to just their serving overseas? Why shouldn't it apply to you as well? Find a job that you will love. If you love what you do, it won't be work. That is often easier said than done. Which job?

Lesson 2: Create your perfect job.

I knew a retired dental surgeon, Dr. Arthur Metzger (just "Doc" to his friends), while I attended Pikes Peak

Community College in Colorado Springs, who became a good friend, and more importantly, a good mentor to me. During one of our many meetings and conversations, he asked me a question. He said that he didn't want an answer right away, that it was something that I needed to think about seriously and for a period of time. He then asked me, "If you could create your perfect job, what would it be?" I spent several months thinking about that question. What's the job for me? What do I want to do?

Lesson 3: Plan to get and work towards your perfect job.

The next time I saw Doc, I gave him my answer. He then said to me, "Now, start working towards getting that job." I then spent years working towards getting that job. I tried to make sure that everything I did would ultimately help me to get that job - part-time jobs, volunteer work, two years in the Peace Corps, education; things that would look good on a resume for such a position.

It took eight years, but I can honestly say that the job I have today, teaching geology, geography and astronomy here at Black Hawk College, is the job I created for myself all those years ago - not BHC specifically, but teaching at a community college. I love what I do - I like going to class and learning. More importantly, I like teaching, and I have been doing just that at BHC for the past eighteen years. And the best part is that the college pays me to do it! So create a job you would love to do, then figure out a way to make that job a reality.

Lesson 4: Be willing to work.

Jobs rarely are just handed to people out of the blue. You have to work at getting them and then be willing to work to keep them. Sadly, you often hear stories about people who had a really good paying job, lost that job, and are now unwilling to take a new job because it doesn't pay as much as the job they originally had. Frankly, I don't understand this attitude. If you want to work, be willing to work.

In the eight years it took me to find my perfect job, I had a number of part time jobs that didn't help me towards my goal - but what they did do was put food on the table and a roof over my head. With a Masters Degree in geology, doing janitorial work and cleaning toilets at a truck stop didn't help me to get a job as a college professor. Nor did stuffing boxes of merchandise to be shipped out from a mail order catalog warehouse.

But I was willing to do them, willing to work, because they were necessary for my survival and, ultimately, were just one or two steps along the path to my perfect job.

Lesson 5: School is work.

If you are reading this, chances are you are attending BHC, going to school, and you already know that it can be a lot of work. It is. But it doesn't have to be. If you love your work, it isn't work. If you love going to school, it isn't work.

If you don't love, or at least like going to class, if you don't love learning, don't! Please, save yourself the frustration and go do something else!

Find something you do love and go do it. Just find a way to make it pay. If that something that you love to do requires some education - be willing to work at that education. Take the classes you need - take an interest in those classes and the learning that goes with them. Work towards the degree - knowing that it is part of your plan to get at that which you love to do. Part of the reason I love my job is that I loved going to school. I wanted to be the perpetual college student - a lifetime of going to class. Guess what? That's what I'm still doing!

Lesson 6: Work isn't everything.

Be able to step away from work and leave it at work, or at least don't let work dominate your life. Again, sadly, you hear stories of people who are so immersed in their work that they don't have a life outside of work, or don't have enough time for much of a life outside of work. When I lived in New Jersey, I knew of people who lived in Pennsylvania and commuted to work every day to Manhattan in New York City. That meant a drive of three or four hours one way, depending on the traffic and the weather. They spent 6 to 8 hours a day in their cars commuting, 8 hours at work - that only leaves 8 hours at home and some of that time has to be spent sleeping. Maybe they found that drive to work worth it. I don't love my car enough to want to spend that much time in it every day. It certainly couldn't have left much time for much else. It doesn't sound worth it to me.

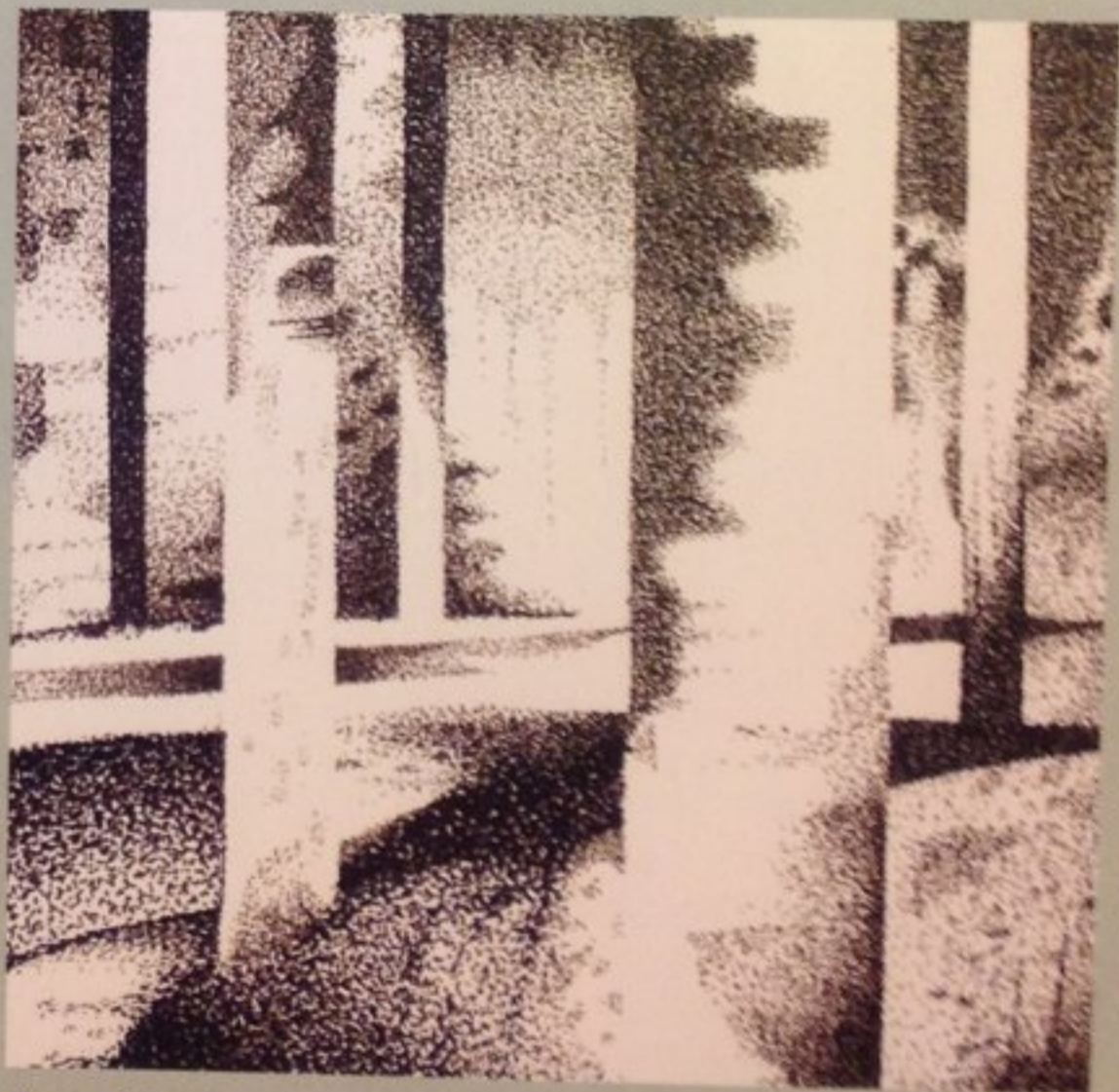
The point I want to make here is I think it is important to find time for other things in your life. Have other interests, other activities that you pursue outside and unrelated to work. Do things that help you to unwind, to relax, to enjoy life.

As a teacher it is almost impossible to avoid taking work home with me - grading exams and working on lectures often get done in the evening or on weekends.

But I always find time to do something other than work. At the very minimum, I spend at least half an hour a day walking the dog and another half hour reading something unrelated to work. It is important to me to find the time. I have several hobbies that keep me busy when I am not teaching - reading science fiction, woodworking, and home improvement. They take my mind off of work, relax me and make me feel good. It is amazing how refreshing and invigorating these activities can be: they can really recharge the batteries and actually make you a better worker. They all help me to be a better teacher.

Putting it all together...

So my advice about work is this: Create your perfect job. Plan how to find your perfect job and work towards it. Be patient. It may take you awhile before you get that perfect job. Love your job. Be willing to work at your job. But don't let your job be everything.



Aaron VanFossen