

## NAVIGATING THE PEAKS AND VALLEYS OF TEACHING

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After 30 years in education, I decided to follow a lifelong dream to join the Peace Corps. I was assigned to teach mathematics (in French) in a small country in West Africa for two years. Reflecting on my life as a new Peace Corps volunteer, I offer here some parallels between that experience and the early days, months, and years of a teacher's entry into the teaching profession.

### **Cathy's African Adventure**

I can still remember the exhilaration of my trip to Burkina Faso—flying over the vast expanse of Africa on a clear day, touching down once in Bamako, Mali to see Malian families watching near the runway, and proceeding on our way to Ouagadougou. I could not believe I was experiencing this grand adventure! On the four-hour bus ride from Ouaga to Bobo, I could not stop leaning out of the window, waving and smiling at people amused by a busload of foreigners as we passed through their roadside villages. A few of the children returned my waves and called out to us.

We enthusiastically jumped into our training—a combination of language, cultural awareness, health care, safety lessons, and an introduction to the Burkinabé system of education. As one of the older volunteers, I was feeling pretty good that I carried some remnants of my high school French, some knowledge of other cultures gathered over the years, and a lot of experience with teaching. But I was operating in a very different environment than any I had experienced before. We had arrived at the end of the hot season, and the rains were overdue. Bobo is in the part of the country that can be humid, even after months without rain. As Peace Corps volunteers, we had no air conditioning, either at our training site or at the



homes of the families who hosted us during our training. Temperatures rarely fell below 90 degrees Fahrenheit, even at night. We slept on thin foam mattresses placed on simple wooden beds made by local builders unaccustomed to tall Americans (I'm 6'1"). Every night my roommate and I carefully tucked in our mosquito nets in the concrete-block room we shared. I found it hard to sleep in this unfamiliar place, but lack of sleep seemed a small price to pay in exchange for the adrenalin and adventure.

After a few more nights of tossing, turning, and sweating, however, sleep deprivation set in and my enthusiasm was rapidly decreasing. I found it increasingly hard to concentrate during our training sessions. On the fifth day, I had my first mini-meltdown. During a training session on dressing appropriately for school, I felt tears coming and had to leave the room. As I stood sobbing in the hallway, our Peace Corps nurse gently tried to find out what was wrong. I did not have to be coaxed to blurt out my tale of woe: "It's so hot and I can't concentrate and it's so hot and my bed is too short and it's so hot and I haven't slept in a week and it's so hot and I just don't know how I'm going to survive without sleep!"

Our nurse, Yemi, reassured me that I was not having a mid-life crisis or a nervous breakdown, but that my problems would probably work themselves out, especially if I could get some sleep. She accompanied me on a short walk to the house we were using for a medical building. There she took me to a back room with a fan circulating the cool air from the non-stop air conditioner (the first I had seen since my arrival). She tucked me into a bed that seemed almost long enough, and stated that I would be much better off with a long nap than with whatever topics the training was addressing that day. I slept like a baby until it was time for dinner.

Yemi's intervention marked a turning point. As a result of her care, when I returned to my host family home later that week, I was surprised to find a longer bed awaiting me in my room, as did two of my tall fellow volunteers. Things went along pretty smoothly for a while, although there were occasional and sometimes predictable ups and downs. My first trip to the market, with the obligatory negotiation over the



purchase of a pair of flip flops (arguing over what turned out to be about five cents); learning about the French educational system (a grading scale of 20); having clothes made by the local tailor (the fabric had telephones on it); experiencing the aroma of food from street vendors (fried caterpillars were the most challenging); and taking a field trip to the countryside (mangoes as far as you could see). Some days were better than others, and often I still reached that high of marveling at my good fortune to be living this dream.

One day well into our three months of training, I was immersed in conversation with several volunteers about the ups and downs of our training. To my surprise, nearly every one of them had a similar story of mood swings—ups and downs, peaks and valleys. We all experienced them in slightly different ways, and we noted how thankful we were that the cycles between the peaks and valleys (especially the valleys) were gradually stretching out. One of the volunteers had actually kept a ‘mood graph’ to record her ups and downs. We all noticed that that, over time, we were increasingly moving toward balance. It was reassuring to look back and notice improvements over time.

### **Peaks and Valleys in Teaching**

Perhaps entering the world of teaching is not quite as dramatic a change as going to the other side of the world and learning to live with a new lifestyle, language, culture, climate, and educational system. But becoming a teacher is a significant change from being a student, and in some ways, teaching carries with it the need to learn a new language and a new culture. A teacher is the person who creates the educational experience of students, for better or worse, and it can feel like a huge responsibility, which it should. (Maybe new teachers should keep journals or mood graphs to chronicle their adventure and notice their progress!)

Most teachers enter the profession full of idealism and optimism. They want to make a difference in students’ lives, and they believe they can. Yet, more than one new teacher has prepared for the first school year by getting their classrooms arranged, organizing students’ materials, and putting up inspirational bulletin boards, only to find themselves wondering



what to do next, how to start. When teachers actually face students during the first days of school—when they get past the thankfully predictable routines of bookkeeping, attendance, and logistics—teachers can find themselves feeling like they are constantly making it up as they go along, just one step ahead of their students, no matter how much they have planned in advance. What seem like great lesson plans rarely accommodate the realities of the classroom, nor can they provide answers to what a teacher should do given the unpredictable actions and responses of students.

When I started teaching, I gave myself three years to become a wonderful and effective teacher. I thought that was a reasonable amount of time to work through the inevitable challenges of embarking on a new path and to fine-tune my teaching techniques. To say that this was a naïve point of view is an understatement. The ups and downs of those first three years were substantial—emotionally, intellectually, and physically. By the end of my third year of teaching, I was able to make it until spring break before becoming totally overwhelmed by the frustrations I faced and my inadequacy to make a difference. I persevered, learning and improving every year I taught. I continue to learn and, I hope, improve every year I work in education. Teaching is a journey, and nowhere is the need greater for a commitment to our own lifelong learning. It is not possible to learn everything you need to know about effective teaching before you start your career. That task will last as long as you are teaching.

### **Ultimate Peaks: A Teacher's Legacy**

Several years ago, I had the honor of presenting several state awards, as well as Texas' Presidential Award for Mathematics Teaching at the state's annual mathematics conference luncheon. The recipient of the Presidential Award that year was a wonderful high school teacher. The event was a celebration of excellent teaching in general, with a handful of teachers recognized for their work. Letters from students, parents, and fellow teachers recounted the ways in which these outstanding teachers had improved the lives and futures of the students they taught.



Not long after the awards luncheon, the recipient of the award stopped me in the hallway to recount what had happened immediately after the ceremony concluded. As she had stepped down from the head table, she had felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see her former mathematics teacher and mentor. She was ecstatic to be able to tell her teacher that she was the reason she had chosen to become a mathematics teacher. As they were reminiscing, the award recipient felt a tap on her other shoulder. She turned to see a former student, who told her that she was the reason she had decided to become a mathematics teacher. A teacher's legacy may be something obvious right away, something we find out about in a year or two, or something that can pass from generation to generation.

### **Valleys Will Come...**

Not everyone in my Peace Corps group made it through the planned two years of service, and a few ended their two years without having had a positive experience. There were many reasons for both outcomes, including factors related to their particular assignment, factors related to the individual, and sometimes simply a mismatch of the individual to the assignment. Teaching is much the same way. Some people may need to find a different teaching environment in which they can thrive and some people may be better suited for another path. But it would be a mistake to decide you have chosen the wrong path simply because you encounter challenges, frustrations, and even apparently insurmountable challenges. When these inevitable valleys present themselves, it is important to remember the peaks as well. The ways in which you influence students will sometimes be obvious, but can often be invisible. Be assured that teachers do change lives. You will have to decide whether the peaks are worth the occasional valleys, whether the time between valleys is getting longer, and whether your teaching assignment is a good fit for your talents and philosophy (or whether you might need a small change of accommodations, like I found with my new bed). Only you can know whether you are moving in the right direction. The keys are your commitment to continuing to learn, implementing what

you learn, and being patient with your progress. Getting plenty of sleep doesn't hurt, either.

### **Enjoy the Journey**

If you are a new or early-career teacher (of any age), welcome to the most important profession on the planet. Over the years, you will experience amazing moments that will stay with you forever. You will have incredible influences on students that you may never hear about. And, if you are lucky, some day someone will tap you on the shoulder and let you know a small part of the influence you have had.