

The Cure Is Care

by Sargent Shriver

The Peace Corps gave me the most memorable, continuing, morally unblemished, and uncompromised chance ever given any American to serve his country, his countrymen, and his fellow human beings worldwide, simultaneously, and at the grassroots level with the poor everywhere.

Never in war, and I have served in war; never in peace, and I have served in many places in peace, has anyone ever received, from a secular state, a greater opportunity for pure service.

I was privileged to be part of a great band of people. From among the Volunteers who served overseas when I was director have come senators, congressmen, directors of overseas programs both public and private, foreign service officers, bankers, congressional staff members, state government officials, city mayors, and on and on. The Peace Corps proved to be the best talent agency for public servants in this century of American history.

Despite this, can there be optimism now for the future of the Peace Corps?

The Peace Corps budget is only 3/100,000 of the Defense Department's. Its numbers are only 3/1,000 of the Armed Forces. One thousand men and women are enrolled to serve our needs in war for every three—repeat three—in the Peace Corps. Talk about David and Goliath! By any quantitative measure known to the Rand Corporation, the American Enterprise Institute, or Office of Management and Budget, the Peace Corps is almost inconsequential, irrelevant perhaps, a cipher in the great game of world politics and power.

Then why are we here—two thousand of us attending this anniversary celebration?

Are we grown men and women but still talking about juvenile things? Are we just on a nostalgia kick? Are we puerile romantics, idealists, flower children, merely tolerated by mature, realistic, worldly wise leaders? Are we just accepted because all human societies have their soft-headed dreamers, their physically crippled and mentally retarded, their psychologically immature? Aren't the draft and military service the best way to deal with

Peace Corps Volunteer types, past, present, and future? Wouldn't the draft teach Peace Corps people to shape up, learn about the real world, guarantee their passage from illusion to realism? Can we as a nation, in difficult economic times, spend taxpayers' dollars on such a whimsical, peripheral activity as a corps dedicated to peace?

Many experts today say no. They say we should not dissipate our national resources and strength. Government was not established, they say, to create, finance, or direct such activities. The "private sector" is the proper place for idealistic experiments. The Peace Corps has little or nothing to do, they say, with our Constitutional purposes to create a more perfect union, establish justice, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity. The Peace Corps, it is alleged, does not contribute to the defense of the United States. It does not protect the people from dangers abroad or at home. It's a misplaced, vestigial remainder of a messianic culture of the past. Good, perhaps, for Mormons, Mennonites, Quakers, left-wing Catholics, Pacifists, Evangelicals — but only a sideshow in an era controlled by the hard sciences, technology, finance, economics, and military matters. The threat is from without, not from within; from the U.S.S.R., not from ourselves. We're all right; they're all wrong; and we will prove it by our strength. The Peace Corps has little or no role in dealing with the real threat to America.

Thoughts like these may predominate in many places today, but the Peace Corps is always full of surprises, and happiness, and truth.

I experienced that joy and that truth all over again when I met again Beulah Bartlett and Blythe Monroe, two of our first PCVs to Ethiopia. Those two women were 68 and 66 when they volunteered for the Peace Corps, and yesterday they both received tumultuous applause for their work and their spirit. They inspired us all just by their presence on the platform.

After they left the stage, Beulah looked up at me and said, "You saved my life."

What a lovely thing for her to say, I thought. It was beautiful ...but, of course, it wasn't true!

I never saved Beulah's life. Beulah saved her own life by giving it away. She offered it to service. Her gift of herself to the poor and uneducated in Ethiopia gave her a new lease on a new life ...a life of service and peace.

The Peace Corps is thousands of human beings at peace—with themselves, with their fellow man, with the world. Why? Because they have saved their own lives. How? By giving themselves away!

We never own anything till we give it away. That's the heart of peace; that's the heart of the Peace Corps.

When will we learn that truth, here in our beloved U.S.A., the land of conspicuous consumption and wealth?

We must learn it ...without tragedy or suffering to teach it to us, if possible, because it has the power to save our lives just as it saved Beulah's.

I used the word power just then. I used it on purpose. I used it to emphasize the power of peace. It is peace that gives strength. It is peace that provides "the force"—an unconquerable, unsurpassable force—not arms, not bombs, not fear or threat of destruction. Those things just arouse resistance and resentment. They produce the opposite of what they intend. The alleged "power of arms" is a sham. The man with the pistol in his hand blazing away is the pitiful, fearful weakling afraid of another person, killing and marauding like a frustrated child because he's angry and hurt and alone and desperate, looking for love and finding only hatred and opposition. No, I never saved Beulah's life or Blythe's life. They saved themselves ...because they learned to give themselves away ...as the Declaration of Independence says in its last and most important words: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." Risking their lives, giving their fortunes, and themselves, the original American Revolutionaries found peace.

That's why I am less confused and more knowledgeable and realistic about peace than in 1960 when we began the Peace Corps. In the 1960s we thought it would be easy. We thought Congress would always increase our size and our budget, if we produced results.

We thought we could defeat poverty, enlighten the ignorant, eradicate disease, win over our enemies, given enough time,

given enough Volunteers. Now I know different, not better, but deeper. I know we still need money and Volunteers. I know the U.S.A. and the world needs the Peace Corps. But now I think we can achieve peace without eradicating poverty or ignorance or disease. The “power of peace” does not lie in the vain hope that we can change the human condition everywhere and for everyone. Our American faith in a technological fix for every problem is naive and irrelevant. Millions of people don’t want our technology, our culture, our values. They’ve heard promises about a materialistic heaven on earth from communists and capitalists. Great improvements in the materialistic conditions of life are promised by both. But neither system has ever produced anything but an imposed peace—which is peace only for the mighty, and not even pure peace for them. Look how rich men and Politburo members employ guards and guard dogs, TV monitors, and elaborate alarm systems to protect themselves and their possessions and positions. The leader of the free world, ironically, needs more protection than anyone, except the leader of the communist world.

Those men are not creating or enjoying peace; they are creating and enjoying power. Augustus Caesar, the greatest of Roman Emperors, built a Temple of Peace—but only after he had gained absolute power. He encouraged people to worship him, the state he had created, the armies that sustained them. Deus, Imperator, Rex-God, Emperor, Leader. Augustus had it all! But was it peace?

Jesus Christ said no. And the Christians had to go underground because they worshiped a different God. They threatened the stability of the kingdom of Augustus by declaring that another kingdom exists ...a kingdom where peace comes from below, from the ground up, not from the top down, from inside the hearts of human beings, not from the barrel of a gun no matter who’s holding it.

Many Peace Corps Volunteers have possessed this kind of power. They were at peace with themselves and with their work. That’s why the Peace Corps nurses in the Dominican Republic were asked to stay when the revolutionary slogans all said “Yankees Go Home.” That’s why no Peace Corps Volunteers were attacked or injured in the Panamanian uprisings against the U.S.A.

in 1964 or during the 1981 violence in El Salvador. That's why "terrorists" have not assaulted Peace Corps Volunteers even in remote locations in the underdeveloped world.

Certainly there have been accidents. Surely there will be deaths. PCVs could get killed just as the nuns were killed in El Salvador, just as priests, missionaries and others sometimes get killed—overseas or here at home. But the peace of the Peace Corps Volunteers is not something that can be taken from them, even by death. It's a peace they can give endlessly because giving it away does not diminish the supply.

Expressed differently, it's the quality of caring—caring for others, willingness, even eagerness, to teach the ignorant or bathe the dirty, nurse the leper, or serve as a farmer, lawyer, doctor, technician, nurses' aide in places where thousands, even millions, need what you have, in skills, yes, but most of all in human warmth.

No free market can ever replace free human services rendered by one free human being to another human being. A "good society" is the result of billions of such good acts. Government is good, not overreaching or intrusive, when government encourages, supports, and facilitates good, moral activity by the citizens. We are being swamped, night and day, with propaganda for selfishness, for excessive consumption, for killing, for domination of peoples, of nature, of history.

Is it too much to ask ourselves, we who believe in the Peace Corps, is it too much to ask ourselves?

Shouldn't we swing back into action? Shouldn't we volunteer again?

How should we begin? Exactly the way human beings always begin by organizing ourselves. Into what? Into "communities of caring."

In Latin America, basic caring communities have been started right in the villages. Those are caring communities—people caring for one another. That's what Peace Corps administrators meant in 1960 when we talked about community development—developing a sense of community spirit, community action at the grassroots or the rice roots. That's why Americans with only a bachelor's degree were sought after and sent abroad. We were looking for caring people, not just curing people, those able to cure a disease or a problem. Sure we wanted curing people, but only if

they were caring people, too.

In a phrase, the cure is care. Caring for others is the practice of peace! Caring becomes as important as curing. Caring produces the cure, not the reverse. Caring about nuclear war and its victims is the beginning of a cure for our obsession with war. Peace does not come through strength. Quite the opposite: Strength comes through peace. The practices of peace strengthen us for every vicissitude.

The task is immense!

Twenty years ago we called it “the towering task.” Well, my friends, in 1981, “the towering task” still towers before us; but, thank God, we still have the Corps of Peace—that body of human beings who know, and have known, that America’s destiny is not to be policeman of the world, monarch of the world, Caesar, Imperator, Rex, or Deus. But servant—servant of people, servant of peace, saviors of humanity.

It’s a big task. But it’s fun; it’s joy; it’s the true pursuit of happiness! May you all grow young in the achievement of it. Volunteer!!

from remarks at Howard University in 1981 at the 2nd National Conference of Former Peace Corps Volunteers