

Thanks so much for subscribing to *And So It Goes*, my weekly blog. As promised here are the “Seven Things I Wish I Knew Before I Joined the Peace Corps.”

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**SEVEN THINGS I WISH I KNEW
BEFORE I JOINED THE PEACE CORPS**

formerly

**FAN FAVORITES:
Bonus Scenes from A Peace Corps Memoir
Book I**

by
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Seven Things I Wish I Knew BEFORE I Joined the Peace Corps

Fan Favorites: Bonus Scenes from A Peace Corps Memoir

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*“If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion, and avoid the people,
you might better stay home.” James Michener*

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Number One

Cultural differences that enfolded pretty costumes and unusual music don't interest me nearly as much as those that make me shudder, make me yell out, "Oh no!"

The multi-colored costumes and exotic dances, music, and food of foreign lands are entertaining, of course. But I want to know what's underneath: like the underwater part of an iceberg.

"Why not?" I asked myself when offered a sausage made with the skin of a horse's penis. (Though some books state the sausage is made with the horse's intestine, I was informed rather proudly that it was the penis. Whichever, it was delicious.)

And so, rather than shuddering and turning away, I learned about a people, the Kazakh nomads, who—once upon a time—did not let anything go to waste.

And they are still rather good at that.

Number Two

"Flexibility, patience, and a sense of humor" weren't just characteristics that would help me survive my PC years; they were ones that also helped me get through the application process.

"Flexibility, patience, and a sense of humor characterize the successful Peace Corps volunteer," or PCV, as the recruiter actually said, using the acronym that would soon become part of our everyday vocabulary. In hindsight, I realize he may have been referring to the application process as much as to our actual service.

Surely, in dealing with the enormous bureaucracy that was the Peace Corps when we first applied in June of 2002 (over 7,000 volunteers in more than 70 countries) and maneuvering through the requisite paper trail of our fifty-five plus years—proof of our marriage and respective earlier divorces, myriad medical tests and retests, and documentation explaining how we expected to fulfill our ongoing financial obligations (like our monthly mortgage payment)—patience, flexibility, and a sense of humor were indeed key.

The Peace Corps does allow you to choose your region, as we'd read on their website, unless you want to go with a spouse. We learned this detail in August, two months after our online applications went off, when a young, energetic, recently returned Peace Corps volunteer interviewed us at the regional office on Varick Street in lower Manhattan in mid-August.

"Placements for married couples are more limited than those for singles," he explained diplomatically. "We must place you at a site that needs more than one volunteer."

Our options were further reduced by Woody's determination to teach English. It didn't matter to me. My resume was an eclectic mix of fundraiser, teaching fellow, and

psychotherapist—hardly the makings of a traditional volunteer—and I was curious to see what the Peace Corps would have me do.

But Woody had wanted to teach English since he was eighteen years old, and he looked to the Peace Corps when he retired with the expectation that he would mutate into either his talented prep school English teacher, or his college French teacher, a native speaker from Alsace.

He wanted, in short, to be the native speaker and resident authority on all things English (a.k.a. American) in the English department of whatever university the Peace Corps would place him.

Being married and teaching English meant we had to go to one of two regions: Asia or the former Soviet Union. Woody assumed it would be China (wishful thinking at work) and began to study Mandarin. I assumed it would be Bulgaria when a friend introduced me to that country's Peace Corps director, and I began an email correspondence with him. Obviously, neither Woody nor I had a clue where we'd go.

With our interview behind us, our fingerprints cleared by the FBI, and our documents in order, we received our official letter of “nomination” in November 2002. Now would begin the lengthiest phase—at least for us—obtaining our medical and dental clearance.

At our ages, our medical and dental histories were more extensive than the twenty-somethings who normally apply.

- We reconstructed and documented some thirty years of medical care.
- We had caps put on some back teeth.
- And, thanks to marking “yes” when the initial Peace Corps medical form asked, “Does kneeling, squatting, or sitting cross-legged cause you leg, muscle or joint pain to the point that you cannot do these activities?” I had six months of physical therapy to help me sit cross-legged.

All at our own expense.

Early on, I often said, “Perhaps we'll wake up one morning and find we've come to our senses.” But we never did; we just kept moving forward, one step at a time, up that metaphorical high dive, preparing for our next jump.

We never doubted we'd eventually pass these medical hurdles. We just didn't know when or where we'd be sent. What to do? With our Philadelphia home empty and on the market, we roosted in our cabin on Chincoteague Island, Virginia while we finalized some additional medical tests.

But what should have been a few months turned into seventeen when both of my sons, in separate calls, phoned to tell me their wives were pregnant, due on September 27th—both of them. I couldn't help but smile; they'd always been competitive, but this was ridiculous.

Woody and I put our Peace Corps application on temporary hold and settled more deeply into life on Chincoteague Island. Woody continued work on the eleven-foot sailboat he'd begun in our Philadelphia basement, transferring it to the front porch of our Virginia cabin, behind a curtain of plastic during the few winter months Chincoteague gets.

I didn't go back to work or begin any long-term projects. Instead, I discovered gardening in Virginia's sandy soil and delved into my family's genealogy, picking up where my grandmother had stopped twenty-five years earlier: with five generations of women and no men.

And I began to miss my former Philadelphia life with an intensity that caught me unawares. Buddhism teaches that our suffering comes from our attachments. Those two years preparing for our Peace Corps adventure brought me face to face with attachments I'd never recognized as such:

- books that I had had since high school,
- clothes I was sure I'd wear again "some day,"
- kitchen gadgets we thought we couldn't live without, and
- three hundred slides of my 1971 post-college trek through Europe, slides that hadn't seen a projector in twenty years.

The loss I grieved the most—until we gave away our dog—was the relatively new career I'd established as a Gestalt psychotherapist. More than a job, it had provided me an enormous degree of satisfaction after so many years in careers behind a desk, pushing papers, seeking "the big picture."

I relished the face-to-face contact with individuals who were eager to understand themselves better, as I had once been. I could offer them an ear, lend them a hand, even give them a boot once or twice.

Now that I was no longer the person others came to for help, who was I?

Now that I could no longer say, "I'm a psychotherapist," what was I?

I'd had a vision of myself as an eighty-something-year-old, doddering down the Victorian stairs of my Philadelphia twin to let my clients in. Along with my present-day career, I had to let that particular dream go, and with it my once carved-in-stone plans for my future.

I found temporary refuge from my grief in the adage, "Happiness is not having what we want, it's about wanting what we have."

So I focused on what I already had, what I would keep: good health (being verified by no less than the US government at the time), a husband who loved me and listened to me whenever I asked, new friends in Chincoteague, old friends in Philadelphia and Ohio, and family: my two sons and their growing families, and my mother.

My health and husband came with me. My friends and family, through the magic of technology, would never be far away.

Number Three

How does one really let go of those "things not meant for you?" My broken heart makes clear what's really important to me.

We knew we'd be able to come home whenever we wanted, theoretically. The Peace Corps does not want volunteers who don't want to be there. It's not the army, after all. In practical terms, though, it would be hard to come home early. The Chincoteague house would be rented to tourists for the duration. **If we came home early, where would we go?**

In my morning meditations overlooking the canal, I focused more and more on the grand adventure that lay before us. For Woody, who didn't share my sense of loss, this was easy. For me, it was essential. "Things I had given away" hung onto me fiercely, pulling me backwards into an overwhelming sense of unexpected grief.

I'd discovered three authors with a Buddhist bent: psychotherapists Mark Epstein, Charlotte Kasl, and John Welwood. And for the next year and a half, I spent an hour every morning reading their books, watching the ducks on our little canal, writing in my journal, and looking inward.

A Buddhist saying from one of these readings resonated for me: “In the end only three things matter. How fully you have lived. How deeply you have loved. **How well you have learned to let go of things not meant for you.**” It was an important lesson that came at the right time, as important lessons do.



A scene of the canal behind our little log house.

In the remaining few weeks, we made a feverish dash to learn what we could about a country that neither of us had heard of before. I began with the 125 people on my Contact List who had gotten my original, “We’re off to see the wizard,” two years before, and sent them another missive, “What do you know about Kazakhstan?” Of the twenty-five who responded that they’d been there recently, or knew someone who had. A colleague of Woody’s introduced us to her brother-in-law who, with his wife, had retired to Almaty! What luck. I wrote him right away and we began an extended email correspondence.

Next, we took Merlin, our rescued greyhound, and Molly, our stray Philadelphia street cat, to their respective foster homes in Maryland.

But, while Molly had found a great home, Merlin didn’t fare as well. After three weeks in his new home, it had become clear to all that the alpha dog already there was not going to accept Merlin. We were two weeks from departure.

We scrambled to find another foster home—someone willing to take a purebred greyhound, a former racer and registered champion, a canine of such majestic dignity that we never could take him anywhere without people stopping to tell us how magnificent he was.

“Yes, thank you,” we’d always say. But we already knew.

Who wouldn’t want to foster such a magnificent creature?

My family, for one. My mom couldn't take on the added responsibility for such a long time, and I knew that. And my sons now had babies and adult dogs, and we didn't want a repeat of the last foster home.

Then a former graduate student of Woody's back in Philadelphia and his wife stepped up. He'd heard of our situation through that grapevine that graduate students have and contacted Woody, offering to take Merlin.

I said good-bye and Woody drove him up.

A week later I called the couple. I wanted to thank them. I knew they'd love him, everyone did. And I knew he'd fit in fine, as there was no alpha dog in this home. I just wanted to hear it myself.

Instead, I learned there'd been a grave misunderstanding. The couple, the wife really, would take him only if they could keep him permanently.

In the world of rescued greyhounds, that meant a legal signing over of ownership, more than I'd bargained for back when I'd first agreed to go. Certainly more than I was prepared to decide so suddenly. I needed time. I recall handing the phone to Woody, saying, "I can't talk to them any longer."

Heartbroken, I cried for two days. I considered staying home. I lashed out in anger at this naive young woman who had told me she knew better what my dog needed. I sobbed and I wailed, but I never doubted Merlin would have a good home if I could just let him go.

And, though they did eventually return him to us when we got home, I left for Peace Corps knowing just how important it was that we'd be able to "make friends for America." I would be able to live that dream I'd had since high school. I was going to be a Peace Corps volunteer.



Merlin and me, as we say our good-bye.

Number Four

What does one do when a "free rider" tries to hitch a ride? You just say "no."

On the way to “making friends for America,” I spent my first day of Staging in a D.C. doctor’s office getting a home-grown tick cut out of my butt. I’d showered early that morning, before our friend Ken arrived to drive us into DC. And while rubbing the washcloth over my butt, discovered I’d picked up a hitchhiker while out gardening the day before. It was 7:30; we had to leave within the hour. There was no time to get to the doctor’s office and we’d already learned we were terrible at removing ticks. What to do?

I left the decision up to Peace Corps staff. Where would you like me to get this taken out?” I asked Rebecca, our blonde director of our weekend. She was, I though, barely able to vote, yet had an air of competency and control that was very becoming. At least it was to me who needed to be cared for just then. Off I went to some doctor’s office. It was in all about a three-hour hiatus.

The rest of our weekend that early June of 2004 was anticlimactic and somewhat predictable: addresses from various spokespersons, question-and-answer sessions, “get acquainted” exercises, and a final recommendation to repack and leave our nonessentials behind.

We sat through the former and complied dutifully with the latter, collecting our “nonessentials”—cooler weather clothes, a third of our medicines (we were to bring three months’ worth of our daily meds; after that Peace Corps would provide them), extra shoes—and mailing them to a friend to mail to us once we were settled. We had not yet learned the meaning of “nonessential.

We rode to Dulles International Airport together in a chartered bus. Our afternoon flight to Almaty had a three-hour layover in Frankfurt, Germany, with the forty-two of us milling about the airport trying to stay together. Landing in Almaty near midnight, local time, I remember the airport was brighter than I expected, and Woody’s beloved guitar did not arrive with the rest of our luggage. Someone with the airport tried unsuccessfully to track it down and Woody filled out many forms. I remember the late-night drive over narrow, pot-holed dark roads. And I definitely remember our arrival at a rather tired-looking former Soviet sanatorium where we were to stay for three days.



The sanatorium outside of Almaty, where we spent our first days in Kazakhstan.

The night we arrived at the sanatorium, forty-two of us with two years' worth of "essentials" apiece emptied out of the bus into the dark; the inside lights from the main house cast shadows on our luggage. Or maybe it was the moon; I was too tired to tell.

Even without Woody's guitar, our luggage was impressive. We had two massive suitcases on wheels, a mid-sized rolling duffel, two bags that fit over the larger two, and two small rolling carry-ons. We had Woody's camera bag and backpack, and my leather rucksack.

There were two flights of stairs between us and our room—no carts, no porters, no elevators. Two unidentified trainees swooped up our heavier bags and ran them up the steps before we had even wondered what to do. I never did learn which ones they were. Our group of volunteers was filled with people like that.

The demographics of our group mirrored that of Peace Corps worldwide. Of forty-two trainees, we were one of three married couples, one practically on their honeymoon. The average age was 28. I was the oldest woman at 55; Woody, at 65, missed being the oldest man by four years.

At the tired sanatorium, the unmarried volunteers slept in rooms of three to five people, with a bathroom down the hall. Our room had twin beds but it was ours alone. Our private bath had a humongous tub, long enough and deep enough for me to completely stretch out, immersed. One look at it and I decided a long soak after such a long day was in order.

While Woody fell quickly to sleep, I replaced the missing stopper with a plastic bag from my suitcase and sunk low in the water, my heel occasionally pushing it back into the drain as I regretted that my bottle of bubble bath had not made it onto my "essentials" list. If this was the sort of challenge I'd face as a Peace Corps volunteer, I was ready.



The majestic Tien Shan Mountains surrounded us that first weekend.

Number Five

My host mom would be younger than I was.

On our third day in Kazakhstan, we met our host family, with whom we'd live for the duration of the ten-week training period. I was looking forward to living with a local family. It would be, I believed, the start of the single most important aspect of my Peace Corps experience: meeting and getting to know the local people.

It was a choreographed event. The Peace Corps staff divided the forty-two of us into five groups, depending upon where we'd be living during the coming ten weeks. Woody and I would live in Esik, a large village fifty kilometers east of Almaty and the hub site of all collective trainee activity. So we and nine other trainees filed upstairs to the auditorium as directed.

We stood quietly against a side wall and saw headscarves for the first time as older, married village women, more traditional than the younger, urban Kazakhstani staff, arrived to claim their charges.

A short, round woman about my age broke through the crowd, looked straight at us, then down to the photos in her hand. Her face creased into a smile that revealed a gold-capped tooth, a common feature of "good dental care" throughout Kazakhstan. Her widening smile also revealed a missing front tooth.

She had an air of earth-mother self-confidence, and we hugged instinctively.

I proudly offered my "*D'rast v'witchya. Kak dila?*" (Hello, how are you?) I'd been practicing all morning, adding, "*Meenya zavoot, Janet.*" Her name was Hadija, but it was a full week before I could remember it, let alone the names of the rest of the family. My brain, I'd noticed, seemed to allow only so much "new" into it each day.



Woody and me, the day we met Hadija, our first "host mom."

I thought, if not my age alone, then certainly my education would minimize the stress of the cultural challenges ahead of me. Yeah, right! Fortunately, empathy is a universal phenomenon, crossing those multiple cultural differences that so overwhelmed me.

Even with my head telling me, *lighten up*, I walked home one afternoon with my gut screaming, *Run! Hide!* I was so very tired.

I ate supper in silence that night, relying on my husband Woody to carry the conversation for both of us. But my silent tears gave me away. Soniya noticed them immediately.

“*Mama!*” She cried out to Hadija, and suddenly their eyes were on me, followed by much chatter in Russian, which I didn’t follow, of course. Hadija spoke sharply to Soniya, usually so shy about her English, who translated, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine, really.” I tried to explain they had done nothing wrong. No one had done anything wrong. How to explain culture shock to these good people? How to tell them how strange their country was to me? How to explain I only wanted the newness to stop, for a while.

I tried, “I’m overwhelmed. Everything is so new,” but Soniya couldn’t translate.

I didn’t feel “homesick,” per se. I didn’t want to go home. I just wanted to cry. I wanted them to let me cry. Grandchildren were a universal, and I used mine. “I’m homesick for Bella, Mikah, and Elijah,” I said. That worked.

Soniya translated and I saw recognition in Hadija’s face. She said something to Soniya who again translated. “If you don’t stop crying, I will start to cry, too.”

Dead end.

Then it occurred to me that I needed something viscerally familiar: a bubble bath.

I hadn’t had a real bath since my late-night arrival at the sanatorium two weeks before, a luxurious affair in a tub long and deep enough to lie fully immersed. If only the plastic bag I’d had to use for a plug had worked better at holding the hot water in, it would have been perfect.

There was a bathtub in Hadija’s house, newer than the one at the sanatorium, and equally long; it even had its own stopper. But I hadn’t yet sat in it. Baths had consisted of quick sponge baths on Saturday nights in the steamy *banya* down the hall.

When Soniya added, “What can we do?” I knew what to say.

“May I have a bubble bath?” She stared at me with wide eyes. I grabbed Woody’s pocket dictionary ever at his elbow.

Engaged in conversation with Murcel, Woody hadn’t seen my little drama unfolding. Too lacking in energy to interrupt him to explain, I leafed through his small dictionary and dredged up enough Russian nouns to ask, “*Moj a buit. Ya bachoo vanna.*”

I’d asked for a bathtub rather than a soak in one, but it didn’t matter; they understood.

Hadija and her three daughters jumped up from the table, conferred briefly among themselves, and left the room. Soniya called back, “Get ready for your bath,” and smiled a conspiratorial smile.

In the bedroom, I collected my portable CD player, Nina Simone’s *A Single Woman*, a clean shift, and the magic potions I never leave home without, and walked to the *vanna*, just beyond the *banya*, at the end of one wing of the house.

In Russian, *banya* is the sauna room; *vanna*, the more traditional bathroom, is also a bathtub. Back then, I couldn’t hear the difference.

The *vanna* had a window that looked out to the front courtyard, a sink, a washing machine, a hot water heater on the wall, and a bathtub long enough for a stretched-out soak. The toilet, of course, was in the backyard. I’d coveted that tub for two weeks. But I’d had no idea what was involved.

When I walked in, I found Soniya and her older sister Takhmina tacking sheets over the doorless entry and the curtain-less window to give me privacy. Hadija and her oldest daughter Fatima hauled heavy pots of hot water from the kitchen sink to the tub.

I hadn't known the tub's faucet didn't work. But they seemed genuinely, eagerly invested in this new project. Their compassion was tangible.

I hadn't felt so cared for since this whole "Let's go in the Peace Corps" idea first arose.

I soaked low in the tub, unusually low given that they'd hauled in about six inches of water before the water heater had emptied. But the CD player worked its magic and I let out my gut-heaving sobs, safely concealed behind Nina Simone's powerful voice.

The old adage "crying clears away the sadness and creates a space for joy" never felt so right.

And my good cry, while simple, was priceless, as was my good bubble bath. In fact, I decided then there's no such thing as a bad bubble bath, no matter how shallow or tepid the water.

Number Seven

It took me traveling half way around the world, separated from everything I knew, to again feel the pride in identifying myself as, "An American.

This could be Kansas. It could be any of my familiar Great Plains states except there are no crops. I see nothing growing at all — no wheat, no soybeans, no corn — no life of any sort except the sporadic dots of old, neglected villages where we stop every so often to collect or discharge another few passengers. I step out of my little sleeping compartment, what the locals call a *koopay*, to make a cup of tea from the nearby *samovar*.

"You American?" A friendly voice interrupts my quest.

"Yes, I am an American. I am a Peace Corps Volunteer." He looks at me quizzically, so I add, "*Da. Ya Amerikanskaya. Toja volontyor Korpus Mira*" and smile. I'm actually speaking Russian. I welcome the conversation; my goal while here is to help the locals speak English.

Yes, I'm an American. I could tell him I'm also a writer, a psychotherapist, a grandmother, and a sociologist; but I don't. Nor do I tell him about the comfortable life I had back in Philadelphia, the one I expected would continue into my doddering old age, the one I'd given up to come here. I'd also left my little house on the eastern shore of Virginia, where just this past year I'd discovered the simple joys of gardening and the smell of salt in the air. I don't tell him any of these things.

"I speak English," he continues proudly. "I study Astana now." The capital, so new it's still under construction in the northern part of the country. *Astana* is also the Kazakh word for capital. "I study English. I be interpreter soon."

I say simply, "To know English today is very good."

"How you like Kazakhstan?" he asks me and I'm not sure how to answer him. I want to find the exotic here but so far I'm finding emptiness and neglect.

Everything I've read tells me the Kazakhs are still fearless warriors, though not easily provoked. Everything I've seen tells me they are a gentle people, eager to please.

In the distance I imagine daring horsemen playing polo with a headless goat carcass — a popular sport I've yet to see. The contrast between the exotic images of ancient Kazakh traditions and the pervasive neglect of the present is striking.

"It's a very big country," I offer, simply. The young man slips away and I continue toward that

cup of tea.

Yes, I'm an American, I'd told him. As are my grandchildren, sons, mother, and friends — all back in the United States with the decaffeinated coffee I'd prefer, while I'm here in Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in the world and a country but one I'd never even heard of four months ago, with tea.

I can now find it on a map (south of Russia and west of China).

I can spell it (one extraneous "h" and the rest phonetic).

KAZ akh stan

I can even pronounce it, sort of (the accent goes on the first syllable: KAZakhstan. It's the middle syllable that gets me — the *akh*. That "h" following the "k" turns the sound to one Americans make just before we spit).

Yes, I'm an American; one who grew up in the '60s wanting to be a Peace Corps Volunteer. Now I am one and, with my husband of less than five years, heading toward what I've been calling "the middle of nowhere" on a train that surely hasn't been renovated or repaired since the Soviet Union collapsed thirteen years ago.

What was I thinking?



With thanks to the CIA World Fact Book website.

LINKS

Do you want to read the rest of the story? My memoir, *At Home on the Kazakh Steppe: A Peace Corp Memoir*, from which these various scenes were first written, is available in paperback, eBook, or Large Print paperback from [Amazon](#). And please check with your local independent bookstore too. The owner can order them easily.

Occasionally, I make my books more widely available through other online sites. When that happens, you can find the links on [the Book page of my website, here](#):

There, you can also read the book's first chapter, see a slideshow of additional photos from Kazakhstan, and check out the latest reviews or event announcements.

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