

CHAPTER 11

I signed up with the Peace Corps as soon as I graduated from U.C. Berkeley. At first, the Peace Corps wanted to send me to the Dominican Republic. However, the U.S. had, in 1964, sent marines there in support of whichever pro-U.S. dictator was in power at the time. I didn't think that Dominicans would be all that happy to see any Americans around, so I asked to be sent somewhere else. They sent me to Peru. My time there became the two best and most broadening years of my life. I lived in a different culture, among different people (most of whom were shorter than me, which is not the case in the U.S.!), who were friendly and had no reason (at least at that time) to be suspicious of or hate the United States. They were pretty direct and open as people, too; they didn't have reputations, or jobs, or their futures, or personal images, to protect or to impress others with. They didn't need to. Unless they were white-collar people. These do need to protect and compete and impress. I'm not criticizing; I'm reporting. These are the things that get you to be white collar.

PERU

The titular head of the Peruvian Peace Corps headquarters office in Lima was Aquiles Lanao Flores, a man of impressive bearing and authority. He projected being, and was known to be, a person of importance, influence, connections, and power. We all knew that he had strong connections with the Peruvian military . . . but we were young and didn't know what to make of that other than whenever he walked into the office he did so with absolutely regal bearing of a type and force that would tempt one to stand up and salute. He just PROJECTED authority in such a way that I found it impossible to imagine anyone arguing with him. I've never seen anyone else who radiated authority like that. He certainly didn't act like the head of a negligibly small agency such as the Peace Corps. He acted as though his concerns lay elsewhere quite above his Peace Corps job. I have read that Adolf Hitler had the kind of magnetic power that would make it impossible for one to say no to him -- especially in a one-on-one meeting. I read an account of a man who had a meeting with Hitler, and his coming away from it with a sense of absolute willingness to doing anything Hitler asked of him, including laying down his life. Wow.

My own time in Peru consisted of spending a year each in the cities of Tarapoto and Iquitos. They are both on the Eastern side of the Andes, in the Amazon basin. That region was mostly featureless jungle, for more than a thousand miles out, and cities like these were few and comparatively isolated. In fact Brazil was then 99.8% Amazon forest, of an area ALMOST as large as that of the United States! There were no roads to connect Tarapoto and Iquitos to the coastal "modernized" urban centers on the Pacific Ocean side of the Andes (and I doubt that there's any overland access yet, although I have to tell you that about 1/2 of the Amazon forest has been cut down since I was there and replaced by farms producing products for export. And whatever tribes of people lived anywhere in there . . . they're gone. The ecologies of large parts of the Amazon basin have been killed off -- and along with them the patterns of rain, and water flow, and the decaying state of what used to be powerful rivers. One had to fly in to get to either Tarapoto or Iquitos, or fly out to reach "civilization". Otherwise Peru's modern urban life is on the Pacific-Ocean-side of the Andes.

I liked my two-year stint in Peru. It was a different culture, among different people, who were open and friendly. I got to do, see, and learn about a lot of things I never could have if I'd stayed here and

had a “normal” life. I learned a lot about how the world works, I’d seen prosperity in the U.S. -- and in the bigger Peruvian cities too -- but I got to see part of the abject misery, inequality, and desperation that visitors never get to see when they take a tour of a place. It was sobering. And it’s quite worse now. Before I went into the Peace Corps I didn’t see homeless people wandering around in American streets; now I see them and their abject tent-hovels everywhere. Even downtown. I’m not all that surprised at how many people despise the American government these days; it’s betrayed them massively.

TARAPOTO (ta—ra—poat’—o)

Tarapoto was a city of about 10,000 people. The work that I did in there had to do with the fact that Peru (well, at least some politicians and economists) had decided to make an effort to unify the country economically -- at least more unified than it had been -- by establishing agricultural and credit cooperatives that could be parts of networks. The legislation was called Plan #15260. So my job description in Tarapoto was to work in “cooperative education”, which meant that I’d go to isolated little towns up and down the Huallaga river and talk with the people there about the benefits of having Agricultural Co-operatives in order to foster trade and increase the volume of canned goods in these communities. I did this with energy and good will -- although not really knowing what I was doing-- together with the other two Peace Corps volunteers who were there . . . and who knew as much as I did about the work we were doing.

The three of us put together quite a nice two-day-long piece of village entertainment that everyone showed up for. And how not? We were something that they’d never seen before, what with our spiel, visual aids, posters, graphs, and whatnot. They’d never heard of a television set. They’d never seen a film. They had no newspapers. They didn’t have electricity. And, overall, we failed completely to make any difference to anything whatsoever.

In retrospect I’m glad that we didn’t make an impact of the kind that the head office would have given us some recognition for in the matter of facilitating the proliferation of co-ops. We had no sense at all of how that kind of “progress” would have upset the ecologies and economies of the affected communities. Agricultural co-ops would have helped to displace the fresh fruit and meat and fish and vegetables that were the only but plentiful kinds of local and regional (and inexpensive) foods in many areas . . . with imported, pre-packaged, and processed, canned and powdered and sugar-and-preservatives-laden goods . . . which would have been less healthy, and more costly (you’d have to factor in processing, advertising, packaging/ canning, and transportation), . . . and not needed. Also, the establishment of Credit Co-ops would have helped to fund such “progressive” but further disequilibrating and business- promoting efforts. If the American Indians had had a sense of how the arrival of European white man would destroy the functioning food/ land/ people/ tribal/ animal ecologies and structures that were in place they would have killed every White man they saw . . . instead of it soon happening the other way around. And they would have been right to.

Finally, about the Peruvian “cooperative education” experiment; it was designed to bring “modern prosperity” to those regions. That would have meant more business activities, opportunities, and money. That would have attracted businessmen and “investors” who would have speculatively bought up lands that would soon be worth more. Prices and rents everywhere would have risen. There would have been more jobs, of course; but workers who had previously been growing the food that they ate would be working long hours to afford the more costly food that was being delivered from somewhere else. Speculators would have taken a lot of land out of circulation until it was worth more, the reducing the available amount of living space, and creating a need for extra housing and banks and

higher rents for some corporate body that was a thousand miles away. That plan would have destroyed theregion. This is all basic classical Economics, and if you want to know more about what I just said I'll recommend that you read Progress and Poverty, by Henry George.

I think I was, and was seen to be, a pleasant and friendly fellow during my two years in Peru. My two fellow Peace Corps buddies in Tarapoto weren't into mixing with the populace very much. I, having grown up in Mexico, had no qualms or fears about mixing with not-quite-Caucasian people. I liked John Reeder, one of my companions; he was an attorney from Texas who was essentially taking a vacation from Texas – although nearing the end of his stay he was really pining to get back home again. Having felt a lot of loneliness and isolation myself, I felt for him. He told me, over time, a lot about how families in Texas, and Texas itself, functioned. It was interesting. The second fellow, Mark Muenze, was someone of a type I'd never seen or met before. He was full of riveting and grandstanding stories in which he emerged as someone clever, and in which the other character or characters weren't . . . but he never really revealed anything about who the person behind those stories (performances, really) was. I understood much later that he was carrying out an act.

He was not stupid. At one point there was a gathering of Peace Corps members to have a class in accounting. The teacher couldn't make it and Mark was asked to teach the class instead. And Mark knew his stuff! He was a good teacher, and very impressive in that way. After a while, though, I noticed that the details of his personal stories that highlighted his various exploits and adventures changed a bit with every telling. Mark was of German heritage and his father had been a policeman; I can imagine scenarios in which this young fellow was brought up in a rigidly run household in which he learned to do and think only things that were approved of . . . but nothing of anything outside of that allowed. Or else . . . and thus learning to be shaped into a seemingly charming and ingratiating fellow . . . who would fuck you over in one way or another if it were any advantage for him to do so. I saw him throw someone under the bus, as the saying goes, several times.

I felt that I understood Mark a few years later, when I was studying clinical psychology and I learned the meaning of the word "sociopath". Mark was a con man, a self-servingly calculating, manipulative, and smoothly convincing charmer, and someone who I never heard or saw express real caring, concern, or understanding for others. He was also a successful womanizer; he fucked his way across a lot of Peru – even when his girlfriend/fiancée from the United States was visiting him! I don't remember Mark ever having expressed any feeling of sympathy or real warmth for anything or anyone. His focus was always only on himself. I expect that he went on to do quite well for himself; and I wonder if he ever grew into a responsible adult.

I might also mention that in addition to all the things I did and didn't do, I was asked to teach English at the University of Tarapoto . . . which name sounds much more impressive and significant than that modest school was. But I can legitimately claim that I have taught at a University.

A MEMORABLY PATHOLOGICAL TEAM

I had one other experience in Tarapoto that I've never been able to forget. Tarapoto was a beautiful but out-of-the-way place. There was a slow flow of American (and other) tourists and sight-seers traveling through – but not many. A lot of them were interesting people. One such meeting was with an American mother-and-son team of gold-diggers who happened to be traveling through South America. I only ever had one conversation with them . . . but I've never had such a conversation with anyone else. They talked very openly, even excitedly and proudly, with a strong

flavor of scheming pride that they seemed to expect to be met with general approval and maybe even admiration by anyone they told this to -- as if they were showing off a plan by a legit business team -- of how they intended to have the son enter politics and ingratiate himself with the right people and do whatever was needed in order for him to ascend the pecking order and acquire (and wield) power and influence. They went through their routine with evident lack of concern or self-consciousness. They were merged as a team whose singleminded goal was the son's successful entry into politics no matter what. So that he (they) could be rich, famous, and influential partners in conspiratorial whoredom.

I may be sounding as though I'm overstating this, but I'm not. At no point in their story did values, social issues, any position that they supported or were against, or anything concerned with correcting, improving, strengthening, or serving . . . well, serving anything outside of themselves, really . . . get mentioned. They wanted political success (i.e., influence, position, and power over others). Period. I sort of want to vomit when I think of such con-men. The son was in his early-mid twenties and I sometimes wonder what this young guy's life wound up being like. He stood for nothing other than mindless conspiring with his mom.

IQUITOS (ik – ee' –tos)

After a year of doing Cooperative Education work in Tarapoto I was transferred to the city of Iquitos, which is the most Western port on the Amazon – at least as far as large cargo ships were concerned. I was one of four Peace Corps people there, which helped a lot, and I worked with the largest Credit Union in Peru (Nuestra Señora de Fatima), to foster cooperative functioning in that field and area. I failed at my job in Iquitos too -- by which I mean I did my best, but no one listened to me regarding any efforts to "improve" the enterprise. I did the work because I was assigned to do it. It was only later -- as was my experience in Tarapoto -- that I understood that establishing consumer cooperatives (at that time!) in order to form commercial networks between different geographic and regional areas would disrupt the lives of the people in those areas -- which had until that time been remote, independent, and functioning without markedly dividing the population between the haves and the have-nots. As things were, everybody had enough to eat and do, and they were doing o.k. without canned goods. Personally, I think that if I'd helped establish a cooperative or two their canned goods on their shelves would have rusted away. There was better-tasting fresh food everywhere; people ate the food that they grew. Also, I'd been assigned to Nuestra Señora de Fatima. No one there had asked for me, or wanted me. I sensed that. And after six months or so of resistance and being ignored I quit that job. Nobody there cared. But I was once again left looking for something to do.

I managed to stumble into some interesting projects, though. Iquitos was big enough to have a branch of the Lions' Club. They'd heard about this American in town (me) who might be useful to them in a project of going to all the businesses in town collecting donations so that the city's prison could have a new roof and new toilets. I guess they figured an American could raise at least as much money as anyone else . . . and it cost them nothing. I did that canvassing, and it allowed me to see a lot of the city as I did that. That canvassing also put me in repeated contact with the city prison; they let me in because the donation-collecting project that I was now the spearhead for had the goal of getting the prison a new roof and new toilets-- which eventually happened. I got to know the warden pretty well . . . and he eventually gave me the right to go in and come out of the prison any time I wanted, without going through I.D. checks and all of that. They just

let me in. It was very nice of him to do this . . . but it gives one an idea of how (comparatively) informal life was there.

THE IQUITOS PRISON

There was a police force there, but not much crime. There was not the level of social/economic disparity and inequality that exists almost everywhere today and that would support lots of crime. There weren't any tall buildings in Iquitos that stood next to hovels such as are seen in almost every "modern" city in the Western Hemisphere, and there wasn't the huge segregational chasm between the rich and the poor that is such a common feature of modern cities. A few of the prisoners had stolen things . . . and only one had killed someone . . . and was kept in a separate cell away from the rest of the prison population. But by far most of the men in that prison were there for statutory rape . . . which was called "honor sexual", which needs no translation. They had all had sex with their under-age-18 girlfriends, and had been caught by the girls' parents. Being a seriously Catholic country, the parents had reported the boyfriend and he was put in jail. Statutory rape was a crime, even though most of these fellows had been engaging in consensual sex, with no one forcing anything on anyone. A prison population of this kind was a surprise to me.

The prison had been built to hold about 100 inmates, but by the time I was there it was housing about 200. Yes, it was crowded. Even so, once a week they let wives and mothers in to see their men and to bring them whatever food they could. And even with such a relaxed "anti-escape guard" the prisoners did not try to escape. I mean, there really wasn't anywhere that they could escape to. One would expect that a city prison would house violent and thieving people. Certainly anyone in the United States would have expected that. But, as I said, Iquitos had a low crime rate; it was, despite its size, not yet modern enough to have a lot of inequality, and it therefore didn't have a lot of real crime.

I remember once going to one of the administrative/legal/records offices in Iquitos, in search of some paperwork for one of the inmates. When I entered the room I was struck by how there were three desks, some tables and file cabinets, shelves full of stuff . . . and an enormous mound of folders lying on the floor against one of the walls. This wasn't stacks of folders that were stacked vertically. This was an actual little mountain of them, and the pile was really big. There must have been at least a hundred files and folders lying there all jumbled up. They bespoke of what a relatively primitive office that was, where there were weren't enough file cabinets in which to organize and keep things.

I approached the main desk. The guy behind me asked what I wanted, and I told him that I needed to look at so-and-so's file to verify some piece of information. I was at that moment imagining how long it might take the fellow to find the file I was looking for, in that little mountain of documents. The guy walked over to the pile, leaned over it, took a folder out of it, came back, and handed it to me. It was the file I'd asked for. The entire thing took ten or twelve seconds. I have hardly ever been more surprised than I was in that moment. I've never forgotten it, and since then I've had a higher opinion of the efficacy of offices like that, which I'm sure there are plenty of all over the world.

PRISON-MADE CRAFTS PROJECTS

In the visits that I made to the prison I noticed that some of the prisoners made things out of wood. They would find an unused chunk of wood and carve, whittle, shape a little figurine out of it. Or a boat. Or an animal. Or they'd paint something. They certainly had time to engage in these artistic craft projects. They weren't doing anything else. There was no rehab program of any type. So they made things. And a lot of those things were really nice. None of the prisoners had ever had any art training, but they had little trouble carving and otherwise making toy-sized replicas of all kinds of things that they were familiar with.

What I just told you is that the prisoners had cutting tools with which to execute the work; no American prison would allow the prisoners anything sharp, no matter how small. American inmates make their shanks as well as they can, and attack others and defend themselves with them. As for me, having seen the results of these projects over time, I got the idea of organizing some kind of public exhibit for them; the things to be exhibited were worth showing off, and no one in the community knew that anything like this was going on in the prison.

So I organized a public exhibition of these things. I arranged for it to take place in the city library. Iquitos had a library right by the town's main square! (it also had a school system, regular schools, a bus system that covered the entire city, and even its own art school!). I took care of the arrangements of the displays, put up posters and had the event announced in the local newspaper, and had everything priced so that people could buy whatever they fancied. I gathered the money, kept track of what of whose stuff got sold, and then gave those moneys to the appropriate people. I didn't keep any of it. The project was a success, and it was the only thing of any size that I did in the Peace Corps that was 100% thought up and organized by me! I was pretty proud of it.

THE *AREA DE SALUD* (LOCAL/REGIONAL HEALTH) ORGANIZATION

Another thing I got involved in, in Iquitos, was to affiliate myself with the local medical community in helping to organize and carry out a series of educational/ tutorial visits, by a team of the appropriate people, that traveled to the various sections and areas of that city. Each visit lasted about half a day. People of those neighborhoods were invited, and they showed up in sufficient numbers to justify continuing these outreach programs. Actually, it was almost all women who showed up. We had educational lectures about nutrition, better baby-care by new mothers, and even birth control. Being a Catholic country --and women having more children than they really wanted because they had never heard of any form of birth control -- these lectures were well-attended and listened to.

And because it was/is a Catholic country, the church got an equal say in the matter. So that when our birth-control speaker (one of the few women doctors in the city) was done with describing the mechanisms of fertilization and birth in a way that could be matched up with menstrual cycles, so as to give women some say in the matter of getting pregnant, a priest got up and addressed the crowd as to what God wanted them to do, or not to do, so that he wouldn't get mad at them. Really. He didn't put it like that, but that's what he said. I noticed the rapt attention that the women paid to the lunar cycle/birth control presentation, and the rather bored look on their faces when the priest spoke. I don't know whether he or anyone else noticed that. Incidentally, the female doctor who gave

that talk was a Peruvian whose family had come to Peru some time in the past, from some Eastern European country: her name was Dr. Paulikovsky.

BROWN-ROOT-MORRISON-KNUDSEN

One of the things that was going on at all this same time was the government's plan to build roads that would connect those Amazonian communities to the outside world. The gigantic American Brown-Root-Morrison-Knudsen corporation had been given the task of making that happen. I don't know if that project ever got completed, but I do know that as they planned the routes of the roads, the company people bought the rights to the lands through which the road(s) would go . . . in the expectation that as businesses grew along those routes they'd be in a position to charge rents from anyone who wanted to be there for any reason. The Brown Root Morrison Knudsen workers all lived in a compound that had been built especially for them. In view of the fact that the roads project was going to take years, the (male) workers had brought their families there to live with them. Those compounds were actually little towns with their own stores, schools, facilities of all kinds, running water, and electricity. Most of those people stayed away from Iquitos itself, preferring to remain in their own little closed-off world, where English, and not Spanish, was spoken. It was the kind of thing that American corporations as well as the American military that was stationed in other countries commonly did, and still do.

THE RIOT

Life in Iquitos was mostly on the calm and quiet side. At one point, though, the government issued a decree that staples such as rice would increase in price. This was a blow to most people . . . and they protested. They didn't cause riots, and no one was armed and shooting guns off, but instead simply clogged the streets with protests, interfered with traffic, boycotted, etc.

The government responded by sending soldiers from the nearby military garrison out to quell the unrest. I don't think these troops were trained in this kind of thing. And they retaliated with force. For one thing, the soldiers weren't armed with guns that shot rubber bullets, or anything like that. They didn't even have any rifles. They were all armed with machine guns . . . which are much scarier than rifles can ever be. Martial law was also quickly declared; no one was supposed to be in the streets after certain hours. The military outpost, by the way, was a maritime **military** outpost whose job it was to go up and down the Amazon, looking for any problems they could find. They used hover-craft, which I once got a chance to ride on. Wow! A heavy craft skimming over water!

I've mentioned that Iquitos had a steady stream of interesting visitors, despite that it was in no way anything like a normal tourist destination. While there I met people like an American fellow who was touring South America (mostly) by motorcycle. He'd arrive in some exotic place, take a bunch of photographs (slides), have a good time, and leave. Then, when he went to the next town or city he'd rent a place in which to give a slide show of the places he'd been in. He was a dramatic presenter, and made the shows really interesting. And that's how he financed his trip, step by step. There were also young people from other Latin countries who were just traveling to get to see the rest of South America. They usually came in groups of two or three or four. I met a group like that at one

time. I learned that one of them was a chess player, and I invited him to play a game. I've never been so spectacularly set up and summarily defeated as he did in that game. It turned out that he was the Colombian national chess champion.

I also met two visitors who'd been friends in college in the U.S., and who were traveling around. One was American and the other was Peruvian. While in the U.S., the American fellow had shown the Peruvian fellow around the U.S., just to show him what the U.S. was like. Now, having graduated, the Peruvian fellow was returning the favor by showing the American what his country was like! Man, what an experience that must have been for both of them! There were a few "foreigners" in Iquitos who had farms of one type or another, and lived off them. One of them was this Russian fellow whom I met in town when he came in to buy supplies. We talked, and played chess, and I learned something about his very interesting life. (I mean, what person from the other side of the world would be interested in living in a corner of the world such as Iquitos was?)

I also ran into a few lost souls who were wandering around trying to find . . . themselves, I guess. I hope they did. At one point I met two Hell's Angels, who had decided to take a look at South America; they were nice guys. I also met a group of American High School kids from a school in Massachusetts; they were making a "field trip" to Iquitos – its sister city! One of the kids was an Afro-American kid with Afro-American frizzy hair. No one in Iquitos had ever seen such hair before; and the kid was surrounded by people whenever he went, who approached him and patted his head and hair, to feel this weird hair they'd never seen before. Wow.

Anyway, I was talking about the Peruvian military, and the police, dealing with the protests over raised prices for staples. The police rounded up as many of these out-of-country visitors and held them; these visitors had not done anything, but the authorities started announcing that they had been rounding up terrorists and subversives who had been fomenting discontent. It was a huge lie, but that's how governments cover their asses. No, nothing was their fault. It was all caused by foreign agitators. An astonishing explanation, that.

There was not only Martial law, but it was also deemed to be dangerous to have groups of people gathering. . . because they might have been plotting against the government. I hadn't been paying much attention to the protests. At least, not enough to worry about. I was living there and I was there for a legitimate reason and I wasn't stirring the people up against the government. But I did something thoughtless. I'd just gotten a frisbee a short time before, and I was out in one of the streets with a bunch of friends, throwing the frisbee around. A crowd gathered: frisbees had not been known about in Iquitos.

And as soon as the police found out about this dangerous crowd they came and busted it up and took me in (arrested me?) . . . for . . . I don't know . . . creating a crowd. I got taken in to the headquarters, where I saw that some of the out-of-country visitors who had been rounded up had been locked up in a closet (they didn't have regular jail cells), since the day before. I sat around for a while. It was fortunate that I had my Peace Corps identity card with me, because when they got around to questioning me I showed it to them and they figured out that my crime had been to throw a frisbee around in public, but nothing worse. So they let me go. I had an apple with me, and before I left I went over to the closet and gave it to the guys who were sequestered in it. They hadn't eaten anything since the day before. One apple wasn't really much, I think. But once the excitement settled down, the government quietly set prices for staples back to what they had been before, and things went back to how they'd been before.

MORE-OR-LESS COVERT AMERICAN MILITARY AND “SECURITY” PRESENCE

And speaking of the military, both of the cities I lived in – which were far away from where any of “the action” was -- had American military intelligence outposts. There was a platoon of four or five American soldiers in their own little camp a bit outside of Tarapoto. I was one of three American Peace Corps volunteers in Tarapoto, and the soldiers enjoyed our visits because we could speak English and play poker and chess and things like that. The soldiers were ostensibly there to do mapmaking/surveying projects. But they were actually there to report on anything that might have looked or sounded suspicious that might have been going on in the area. I suspected this, but I was too young to appreciate what all of that meant.

Now, still not knowing much about how security services operate, I know enough to wonder how those soldiers were expected to gather any data for reports; they spoke no Spanish and they never visited the town, and they lived in their camp some distance from town – where nothing could or would happen. And it was a genuine camp: their housing was a tent, and they must have had communications equipment. And they didn’t go on field and surveying trips to map out this or that stretch of the jungle. Finally, what the heck would our government care about the topography of an isolated patch of Amazon jungle that was far from anything, in a foreign country, and on endlessly flat and featureless geography . . . but that needed American soldiers to be stationed there? It seems to me that if they were really doing cartographic work as they said they did they could simply have looked at a Peruvian map of that region. One of those soldiers has stuck in my mind because all he could talk about was blowing things up; he was an explosives tech and he talked about all the ways in which he could blow up motorized convoys with various kinds of bombs. He really liked talking about the ones with explosion-delay triggers. One of the other soldiers told me that this fellow had been sent to Peru, rather than to Viet-Nam or some other war zone like it, because they thought if he had a chance to blow things up he’d go haywire. This guy really was obsessed with making things go boom.

In Iquitos, also, there was a C.I.A. outpost. It was pretending to be a medical research facility that was there to find plant life that would yield chemical extracts that could turn out to have medicinal uses. The Operator seemed like a good fellow. He was middle-aged . . . and I can only wonder how he felt being assigned to such an out-of-the way station, all by himself, without enough knowledge of Spanish. Or English, really. If there was anyone else who worked or collaborated with him, I never saw such a person. He was a career employee who had been sent out to the boondocks to stay out of the way. As he gave us the tour he kept on referring to the “axtracts” (with emphasis on the first “a”) that he and his team was searching for. That’s not how the word “extracts” is pronounced. I mean, what would you think of the competence of someone who claimed to be a presidential aide and who kept on referring to his work in the White House? There were an awful lot of electronic communications devices in that place, too; they took up a good part of one or two of the walls. They all had knobs and buttons and dials and such. I thought that for a fellow who worked in a facility for extracting medicinal substances out of plants, should have known how to pronounce the single most important word about what he was ostensibly doing.

In any event, for someone who couldn't say the word "extracts", he was certainly oversupplied with electronic radio/communication equipment that would have no application whatsoever toward examining the chemical makeup of anything. And I noticed that this was not a laboratory in any sense of the word, regardless of what anyone called that facility. There was no scientific equipment on the premises. You know: test tubes, chemical beakers and retorts, microscopes, refrigerated storage units, Petri dishes, Bunsen burners, distilling equipment, scales for weighing, notebooks for data, stores of plant materials (that were there to be examined for whatever beneficial chemical/ enzymatic/ medicinal they might be able to yield), books on chemistry and enzymes, reagents that would have been not only helpful but necessary to test the molecular contents and reactivity of plant samples when testing for their organic natures/ contents, flasks and jars and sample bottles to keep things in, centrifuges, spectrum and chemical analyzers, etc.. Yes, there was a lot of electronic equipment. If there was any equipment with which to carry out any chemical investigative work, I didn't see any at all. I mean, are you serious??? I have no doubt that he was in Iquitos to report on anything going on in and near that city that the C.I.A. might have any interest in. Wow. Is the CIA short of budget so that they can't buy laboratory props for their stations? Also, this was in the outlands of Peru, where English speakers were few and far between. And the fellow didn't speak Spanish! Or, at least not much, and not well. My dad had been at one point suggesting that I go into the army; I'm glad that he had never tried to pressure me into joining the CIA.

I had a thought, long after I came back from Peru, about the head of the Peruvian Peace Corps organization, Mr. Aquiles Lanao Flores. I've described him as someone of quietly but unmistakably impressive presence who had had a life that, until that job came along, included a serious career in the Peruvian military. When he walked into a room he radiated authority, as a king would. His bearing alone was impressive; I've never seen anyone with such a bearing of importance before the Peace Corps, nor after it. When he came into the headquarters (at times when I was there) he'd walk in, ignore everyone else (without even looking at them) and talk to someone in hushed tones, and then leave. He was Mr. Serious Authority personified. And my thought was that, along with the American soldiers outside of Tarapoto and the C.I.A. outpost in Iquitos, Mr. Flores had been hired by the U.S. Government for more than just to run a very small and not all that impressive or significant agency whose job it was to send (mostly) youngsters to different parts of Peru so that they could do good deeds. He would have been a liaison of one kind or another. And not a casual flunkie one, either. And even though this wasn't a hot topic of conversation we all knew that he certainly had not abandoned all his highly-placed contacts, connections, and associates in the Peruvian military. He would have been a good conduit in both directions. But I was young then, and I wouldn't have been able to put the pieces together like this.

All in all, I came back home from Peru feeling that I'd grown as a human being. The communities I had spent time in were not exactly modern; I saw a lot of little towns that were doing perfectly well that had no electricity or automobiles. The women had the best posture of any humans I've ever seen; they got that by learning to carry water jars and other things by balancing them on their heads. The food was fresh and healthy and without preservatives. There weren't any fat people in Tarapoto, or Iquitos either. The people I met were mostly easygoing and not up tight nor unfriendly; and I was on my own for the first time in my life where I could do things without anyone telling me what to do and how to do it, and even when to do it. And life was so informally paced that for two years I didn't need to wear a wristwatch nor carry any identification. I really did experience freedom of a kind I'd never known before. I cried when I left. And now, years after I've come back to this country, there are fat people with bad posture, and with blank or unhappy looks on their faces, everywhere I look. What I just said probably sounds like the start of a diatribe/lecture, it's merely an observation about how bad things feel in this country.

I think that one of the reasons that I had a good experience in Peru – besides that I’m a nice and friendly guy -- is that I “stood out” in a nice way: I was white-skinned . . . which is ALWAYS a clue/cue in non-white-skinned societies. And despite “blending in” as I did, I became aware of the fact that in Latin countries men feel very comfortable standing almost right-up-against another man’s body when they talk. Americans need more space between bodies; there’s a point where the other becomes too close for comfort. I had no trouble with Latin-American physical closeness . . . until I was just about to leave Peru to come back home. I then began to recover my American body-boundary mindset – unconsciously. So when one of my Peruvian friends whom I’d had no distance problem with came up to me, near the end of my stay, to say something . . . I was shocked to notice myself backing away from him, in the manner of a Gringo. He noticed it too; I’d never backed away from him like that. Wow. Those lessons are unconscious and deep.

And as far as returning to the U.S. after two years in a different culture such as Peru’s was concerned, though . . . I was surprised at how little pleasure it was for me to re-connect with my old friends and buddies back home. Not a single one of them asked a single question about what that two-year-long journey was like. Honest. They all ignored that, and talked about other things . . . and only the younger brother of one of them showed any curiosity about anything of my experiences in South America. I have a friend who had the same experience after coming back from two years in Ecuador.

My first day and night back in the States was, for me, extraordinarily surreal. Everything back home was exactly and seamlessly the same as it had been two years before, and my brain couldn’t absorb the fact that there was a two-year long gap/seam in the middle of that. I felt disconnected, and everything seemed hallucinogenically unreal. In any event, I came back from Peru in the late Spring. And by the Fall I was enrolled in the Latin-American Studies Graduate Program at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN AT MADISON

I arrived at the University of Wisconsin by driving there from San Diego; I was one of a group of newbies who arrived a few days before school started in order to go through orientation-week for new arrivals. That was helpful, because U.W.M. is a huge, complicated campus. The new students had come from all over the place, of course. I was pleasantly surprised that one of my companion newbies was a fellow whom I’d been in the Peace Corps with! He and I met a French Student (who was simpatico, and also a distant cousin to Charles de Gaulle), and the three of us got along and we soon decided to rent a three-bedroom apartment and live together. We met other newbies during orientation week too; I remember that one was a friendly fellow from Turkey who had traveled far from home to study engineering.

So . . . classes began . . . and we all became studious. We attended various student functions over the next few months -- surrounded of course by other students. Those gatherings were awful. No one talked about “real life”; EVERYONE talked about their classes and their professors and equally boring things. I remember that on one of those social occasions the word spread that there was a party going on a few blocks away, and it was open to anyone who wanted to go. I went. It was fantastic! It was alive! There were real people there having a good time! None of them were students! They were eating! Drinking! Talking! Laughing! There was music! I never

went back to zombie students' get-togethers, and I went to only a few academic gatherings after that. They felt claustrophobic.

Something weird happened at one of those events, toward the end of that first semester. It was the time of year when it was getting dark earlier and earlier; I was wandering around inside when I noticed that one person seemed to be lurking so as not to be seen, and following me. Whatever part of the room I was in, he lurked near me. I moved around, and he moved around with me. I was getting just a bit freaked out, so I went outside. My shadow followed me outside. I walked away. He followed me. I walked as fast as I could. My shadow followed me as fast as he could. I started to run. He started to run. And by then I was really freaked out. I ran faster and hid in a dark corner somewhere. He followed me . . . and he found me! I didn't know what to expect and I said "what do you want?". It turned out that he just wanted to talk! He was the Turkish fellow we'd met and chatted a bit with at the new-students' orientation! I think he remembered me from then, and that we'd had a bit of friendly conversation.

I asked him what was going on with him. And he told me a story that just broke my heart. He was completely friendless, isolated, and lonely -- and had been so since he arrived. He had not managed to have any friendships whatsoever. And he really missed his home. It probably didn't help that his English was not perfect, that he had darker skin than everyone else, that he dressed a bit differently, and that he'd come from a different culture, and didn't know how to make friends in American ways. I imagine that he spent all his time in a classroom and then in his dorm or apartment room -- silently. And I'm sure he missed Turkey's Mediterranean climate. In any event, he'd not managed to relate to anybody meaningfully and was achingly missing his friends back home -- along with his familiar foods, culture, ways, women, and humor. He'd decided he couldn't stand it any longer and was going back to where he could feel visible again. I felt for him; he was aching so much from deep loneliness that he was just desperate to have someone to talk with . . . and I could relate to that. He just wanted to talk! Oh . . . my . . . God. He had followed me around because I'd been nice to him months before! . . . and he remembered that . . . and I'm guessing that he hadn't had a decent conversation with anyone since then. I really felt for him.

From what I can remember, the U. of W. at Madison's student body included a few Afro-Americans (they were easy to spot) but almost no one of Latino or Asian or Middle-Eastern heritage or appearance. There may have been a few that I missed among the thousands and thousands of the student body -- but this poor guy had been looking for companionship for months and hadn't found anyone to relate to. His professors, like mine, certainly wouldn't have taken a personal interest in any of their students . . . with one exception that I'm aware of. One of my seminars consisted of only three people: me and a fellow female student, and the professor . . . and the professor was trying to put the make on the woman. Really.

Another of my professors was a dictatorial fellow with a pathological fear/hatred of women. He had the reputation of now wanting any of them in his classes, and if one got in he'd give her a hard time. Charming, that. Another was a hireling of the State Department and had stronger loyalties to that than he did to the school or its students. He thought that war was perfectly o.k. if someone misbehaved. He scared me.

Aside from that, I soon saw that grad school was not going to be a good fit for me in any way or level. I learned more about departmental and interdepartmental politics and jockeying for position than I was learning in my classes. It didn't help that that Winter was exquisitely dark and freezing. I'd just spent two years in Tropical Peru. The U.W. at Madison is right at the edge of Lake Mendota, which is quite large. Being from California, and Peru, I'd not really seen ice bigger than an ice cube; but Lake Mendota froze over completely. And cars would drive across the lake. On the

ice. And that's also when I learned that I have S.A.D. (Seasonal Affective Disorder) which is the feeling of paralyzing depressions during times of cold and darkness. I felt so low that Winter that I barely got out of bed for two weeks. I didn't know myself well enough then to understand that I was reliving the first year of my life, when I was left alone for long periods of cold and darkness. Not taking care of me worked for my mom. But there's no doubt that I had a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder.

My two housemates and I had rented a three-bedroom apartment in Madison, to live in. The landlord/ manager was a nice man named Lew Grieson. He collected rent and managed the place and we didn't really have any greater contact with him than that. We were surprised when he called us one evening to invite us to a party at his house; his son, who was in the army, had come home for the Christmas Holidays, and Mr. Grieson invited us to this get-together party! Not having a social life, we were happy to go. But we were surprised, when we got there, to find that there was no one there besides Mr. and Mrs. Grieson. No one. We were told that the son had gone out to buy some more beer and would be back momentarily. And he showed up some minutes later -- alone -- with some beer he'd bought. No other person was there, and the son was very drunk. And he had no look of happiness on his face at all. And as with the Turkish fellow I'd met, I got a sense of immense loneliness, alienation, and isolation in that household. A soldier who'd been yanked out of whatever horrible situation he'd just been in and sent home without switching-gears time would at the least have been disoriented -- just as I'd felt that suddenly returning home from Peru had been surreal and hallucinogenic. It had been like stepping through a portal into a different reality. The home itself felt like a vacuum, and it couldn't have helped that the only non-residents who were there were my housemates and me -- who happened to rent an apartment nearby, and whom the son had never ever met. We weren't exactly friends of the family. I was sad that Mr. Grieson had not been able to scrape any friendly soul besides us to share his son's homecoming with. Being in that house, in those circumstances, left me with a feeling of great emptiness and . . . well . . . not much more than that. There was no feeling of "family" there, which was a sensation I was already familiar with. We left soon after the son came home; the place didn't feel festive or happy or upbeat or anything at all like that.

I heard some months later that young Grieson had been killed in battle. I think it must have been a devastating blow to his parents; I had no sense that they had ANYTHING solid in their lives . . . except maybe their son . . . and he was dead. Even these many years later, I feel sadness for the Emptiness that I got a glimpse of in that family. I must say that I'd met a good handful of ordinary people during my two years in Peru who had simple lives and who were, if not happy, at least satisfied and comfortable in being in their own skin and being who and what they were. It's rare for me to see those in this country.

There was a PBS series titled "An American Family", back in the 1970s. A family (in Santa Barbara, for whatever that's worth) had agreed to allow cameramen into their home 24-7, to film a series about life in an American family. The family soon got used to the cameramen and spoke and acted freely as though they weren't there; they talked, insulted, played, and fought openly. The most memorable things about this family, at least for me, was their lack of cohesion as anything that might be called a family; they never talked about issues, or values, or conflicts, or how they felt about this or that, or what something meant to any of them. They didn't really talk with each other -- as my family hadn't talked. They gave no hint of having ever LISTENED to or HEARD one another. Neither did they laugh together, or do things together, or seem connected to themselves. That poor "family" was held together by looking like they were a family . . . but without anything of real substance. One unforgettable scene was that of the husband coming home from a sales trip. He arrived home, and his wife told him that she wanted a divorce. He replied that, well, he guessed he didn't need to unpack his bags. Whoa! What a brilliant retort! And that was it. No questions; no

discussion; no nothin'. The guy left the house. As I've been telling you, my early life was pretty empty; but I hear and see a surprising amount of the same in general American culture. There's something missing from the center of it.

In any event, after my first semester in Madison, I dropped out. I continued to not know what I wanted to do . . . but grad school certainly wasn't it. My parents were aghast when I dropped out of it. The thing about dropping out of anything and not knowing what I wanted to do was a serious burden for me. In this country – particularly in families that send their kids off to college -- you are supposed to decide on your path and follow it. And the earlier the better. But for me, every passing year became less and less tolerable because I was a year older and I wasn't on any career path. Part of the reason that I'd gone to grad school in the first place was that it gave deferments against being drafted into the army to fight in Viet-Nam, just as the Peace Corps had. I didn't want to go to war; I already had an idea of what that's really like. And dropping out of school made me eligible for the draft. But I could not reconcile two years' worth of life experience in Peru of being fairly self-reliant and independent . . . with then being an indentured servant in the confining and deadening academic regimen of Grad School. So, I dropped out. That was in the early Spring of 1969. That left me with an awful lot of free time, but no Plan B. Or even C or D.

I stayed in Madison and survived by playing flamenco guitar several nights a week in several restaurants and coffee houses. I was playing my guitar on stage in one of these one night and I saw one of my former professors, the man who had a pathological dislike of women, having dinner. He was sitting next to a fellow who was a city councilman. And they were talking. The city councilman looked like, and had the body language of, a not very bright mafia thug. Really. Gruff and curt. Not thoughtful. A brain that could only work in black or white and what's-in-it-for-me. The councilman and my former professor were near the stage and I heard them talking. The latter was oblivious of me, and he was trying to ingratiate himself to the councilman -- and being more obsequious than I'd ever seen him behave in the classroom. He was offering his services to the councilman at any time and in any way that the councilman may ever have needed. If that had been a stage play it would have made me think of how a whore might have offered her services. It honestly didn't help my opinion about academia and academics . . . but it did show me a little of how the world works. I think I'd always been subliminally alert to anyone who had a sense of integrity; and I hadn't found many yet. Well, the Peruvian ordinary folk: they had more integrity than the more educated ones who had career goals.

I also met some recruiters in that time period, who were looking for "smart and motivated young people" to work at the H.D. Singer Mental Health Facility in Rockford, Illinois -- which is an hour's drive toward Chicago, from Madison. It sounded interesting, and I approached them. I mentioned that I'd been in the Peace Corps, and was looking for something to do. I got interviewed shortly after that, and was offered a job at the Facility – to start in the Fall.

I'd gotten a notice to show up for my army physical, even while I was in grad school. I showed up for it, and I failed it on account of my eyesight being below the army's limit. I'd be useless, they told me; if I ever lost my glasses in combat I'd be killing our own guys. But I was o.k. with doing some kind of civilian alternative service that might be seen as patriotically useful . . . and working at the H.D. Singer Mental Health Facility sounded like it would allow me to do that. So I applied for, and got, a job there, starting in September. I was accepted in the Spring and the job would start in the Fall; and I had an empty Summer in front of me.

I went to Spain that Summer, to hone my flamenco guitar-playing skills. It turned out to be a very interesting Summer for me. For one thing, I bought two guitars while I was there. I then ran into two American female tourists who were vacationing together; they seemed nice, and they lived

not far from Madison. I told them that I had too many things to take back with me, and would they carry one of my guitars back to Wisconsin and have me pick it up at the end of the Summer? They agreed to. I can't imagine anything like that happening today.

Then, after I came back from Spain I recovered my guitar, thanked the ladies, and moved to Rockford to start my new job. I was going to be trained in Alcohol Rehabilitation work, and then to practice doing it. It's interesting that schools are schools no matter where they are; but if you're in the real world you find that the Midwest is not like being in California. And I crashed head-first into a cultural brick wall. It didn't help that within about three months, with the arrival of Winter, I came down with a pretty bad case of S.A.D. It hit me hard. I think the lonely Turkish fellow I mentioned had it too. I really hope he went back to a good life. If nothing else, I don't think Turkey has ice storms.