

U.S. Educators:

Integrating World Wise Schools Into Your Curriculum

When I first went to Korea as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1967, my world was configured by the grammar of English and I believed, without having ever thought about it, that everyone in the world saw “things” just as I did. As I started to learn Korean I began to see that language skewed actual reality around, and as I got better at it, I began to understand that it was possible to see everything differently.

Richard Wiley, Author (Peace Corps Volunteer, Korea, 1967–1969)

You and your students are about to embark on a cross-cultural adventure. Through correspondence with a Peace Corps Volunteer living in a community overseas, your students will learn about a people and place to which they might never before have been exposed. Think of the Volunteers as cultural liaisons. For two years they live in the same conditions, speak the same language, eat the same food, and respect the same cultural norms as their host country family and friends. This experience equips Volunteers with a grass-roots point of view and provides a wonderful learning opportunity for your students. Not only will your students learn about other cultures; they will also learn from them.

Peace Corps Volunteers often serve as role models for World Wise Schools students. Those who are new to your school or community may relate well to your Volunteer’s experience of adjusting to a new place, especially students from other countries who are in the process of adapting to a new culture. Your Volunteer may even be serving in or near the country from which some of your students come. Knowing that someone else is experiencing the same feelings and frustrations of cross-cultural adjustment may help to smooth their transition and make their peers more sensitive to the difficulties of assimilation.

Some students may have never heard of the Peace Corps, in which case their correspondence with a Volunteer will introduce them to exciting new career options. Exposing students to the work of Peace Corps Volunteers may also instill a community-service ethic and motivate them to volunteer in their local communities.

Your correspondence with a Peace Corps Volunteer and use of CWWS resources can provide a rich and timely supplement to your lessons in language arts, social studies, history, and environmental education. We encourage you to be creative in incorporating the program into all your classes, and hope that you will share your success stories with us.



'Essential Questions'

How Am I Connected to the World?

I can never again stir lumps of very cheap sugar into a cup of Irish breakfast tea without reflecting on the international relations of production and consumption that forced my old neighbor and friend, Bui ... at the age of 43 and following 15 pregnancies, to wrap a cloth around her head and shoulder a focie (sharp hoe) to work clearing sugar plantations for \$1.25 a day so that she could try to feed her children.

*Nancy Schepher-Hughes
Anthropologist
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Brazil, 1967–1969)*



“Navigators use maps to chart a course,” writes Heidi Hayes Jacobs in her book *Mapping the Big Picture: Integrating Curriculum and Assessment K–12*. “Although unforeseen events and variables affect their journey, they begin by making important choices about their route to avoid a meandering, rudderless voyage. In a similar fashion, teachers must make critical choices as they plot a course for their learners. Essential questions are an exceptional tool for clearly and precisely communicating the pivotal points of the curriculum.”

The CWWS staff worked with Jacobs to chart a course for Coverdell World Wise Schools for the 21st century. After much careful deliberation, the staff determined that the following questions drive the CWWS program. These questions may be helpful as you begin your own classroom “voyage” with a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Geography

- How does where you live influence how you live?
- How do changing environments change the lives of people?
- How do people change the environment?

Culture

- What is culture?
- How does culture influence the way you look at the world?
- Are there cultural universals that bind us together?
- How do cultures evolve, migrate, and survive?
- What is my perspective of the world?
- What shapes my perspective of the world?
- How do those perspectives shape and affect action?
- How big is my worldview?

Service Learning: Learning Through Service

- What makes a community?
- What does it mean to be a citizen of my community? Of the world?
- What does “the common good” mean and why does it matter?
- Why serve? What have I got to give? What have I received from the service of others?
- How far am I willing to go to make a difference?

Heidi Hayes Jacobs is the author of *Curriculum: Design and Implementation* and *Mapping the Big Picture: Integrating Curriculum and Assessment K-12* (both published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development). The staff of World Wise Schools met with Dr. Jacobs to discuss how World Wise Schools fits into the “big picture” of U.S. education.

At CWWS, we speak of the “match”—that is, linking a Peace Corps Volunteer to a U.S. classroom. But is it really a match? Is there a common ground that the Peace Corps and U.S. schools share?

HHJ: The Peace Corps is a complex and dynamic organization attracting people who have a calling. The same is true of U.S. schools. The Peace Corps demands much of its participants, and much is given back. The same can certainly be said of our schools. At the heart of the Peace Corps lies a notion of personal growth—something that teachers and students value deeply.

Is there a need in U.S. schools for what World Wise Schools has to offer—the experiences of Peace Corps Volunteers?

HHJ: Most every state has approved public school standards. Among the specific requirements of these standards is that students should become aware, informed, and responsible future members of the global community. The experiences of Peace Corps Volunteers provide a living, breathing example of this. The need for a genuine and personal international experience is real. As it now stands in many schools, the curriculum that addresses this standard tends to be superficial.

Superficial in what sense?

HHJ: Well, first of all, materials are not always available. And often, in the rush to touch upon these standards before the school year ends, a teacher might create a token curriculum unit about a specific community or culture. This type of “quick fix” can almost create stereotypes. It is as if students receive information about a place that seems distant and reduced. They’re bombarded with media coverage that is consistently from a U.S. pop culture view. They see films and television imagery that distort other places and peoples while either

mythologizing or vilifying Americans. The quick-fix approach to international standards coupled with the strong emphasis on U.S. history in the American school curriculum (which requires a tremendous amount of time) poses a problem. It is difficult to deal with the new demands for an informed generation about the very new world that awaits them in the 21st century.

In your book Mapping the Big Picture, you write that “an essential question is the heart of the curriculum. It is the essence of what you believe students should examine and know in the short time that they are with you.” With that said, if a teacher is designing a course or unit that addresses this international standard—and, possibly, also involves a correspondence with a Peace Corps Volunteer—what’s the essential question?

HHJ: For example, what does it mean to become a responsible citizen of my community? How can I become a responsible citizen of the United States and a citizen of the world? How do the media influence my view of peoples around the world?

Those questions reflect an interdisciplinary approach ... another theme within your work.

HHJ: The purpose of the essential questions is to create a cohesive learning experience, and the reason for designing an interdisciplinary curriculum is to create natural connections as opposed to forced—so the goals here are parallel. Many curriculums are plagued by a “potpourri” problem—a little of this, and a little of that—lacking a central focus. You don’t always know whether students understand a concept until they are able to apply it in another context. An interdisciplinary approach looks for common-sense linkages. It puts principles—whether it’s science, geography, or language arts—into a real-world context.

Peace Corps Volunteers probably know a thing or two about putting classroom principles into a real-world context.

HHJ: Yes, they do. And when a Volunteer is linked to a U.S. class through a correspondence match, the learning experience itself is going to be interdisciplinary—combining language arts and geography with health or environmental issues. These are natural connections.

Mapping the Big Picture

An Interview With
Heidi Hayes Jacobs

Best Practices

The Suriname Rain Forest Summit

by Megan Baker
NOVA School, Olympia, Washington

The Peace Corps' Coverdell World Wise Schools program provided the impetus and inspiration for my sixth graders to try their hands at solving a real environmental dilemma: how to set aside a piece of tropical rain forest in Suriname for use by multiple interests.

My middle school students and I were linked to Peace Corps Volunteers Tony Kaperick and Carole Yahner through CWWS. Tony and Carole were living and working in Djibte, Suriname, and we frequently exchanged letters. They also made time to write personal responses to all of my students' postcards, drawings, and questions.

As our correspondence evolved, Tony and Carole responded to my idea of tying our growing interest in Suriname to the sixth-grade geography curriculum. Specifically, I asked them how I could make the study of Latin America's rain forests come alive for my kids. How could I give it depth and ground it in reality?

Our Peace Corps partners responded enthusiastically, writing narratives that vividly described the competing interests at work trying to influence their community: loggers, miners, huge financial conglomerates, all promising gifts and wealth. The community was wary but had no access to information. "Please," Tony and Carole requested, "help your students see that this is a complex story of poverty, development, displacement, and competing interests."

Fueled by their insight, I designed an activity called the "Suriname Rain Forest Summit." I placed students in pairs and asked them to work together to decide the fate of a given area of rain forest, and the people who had interests in it: agricultural researchers; board members of a corporate export conglomerate; members of a small, sustainable business cooperative; representatives of the logging and wood products industries; and the Suriname national parks commissioner. Students' tasks included researching their designated roles, drawing a map of their plan for the huge tract of land, and writing and rehearsing an introductory presentation. This phase took at least a week.

Finally, all parties "met" in the capital of Paramaribo for the summit. As a representative of the Suriname government, I served only to call the meetings to order and keep discussion moving by asking questions. What I initially thought would be a one-day negotiation ended up taking four or five days. Students became very invested in the plans they had developed, and they needed time to present and clarify their work. In addition, the negotiation process became very intense, as competing interests worked together to reach a mutual preservation and land-use plan that satisfied the needs and wishes of most of the players.

What did my students get from this activity? Obviously, they honed their research and presentation skills. They also gained an understanding of the competing interest groups at work in the environment, and they learned that what might appear to be a simple issue of preservation versus development is in actuality very complex. Finally, they came away with an appreciation of the need for reasoned dialogue regarding the use and management of precious land: They had to listen to each other in order to arrive at a compromise.

Through our correspondence with Peace Corps Volunteers in Suriname, World Wise Schools provided us with the rich experience and the personal connection needed to make the "Suriname Rain Forest Summit" simulation come alive for my students in a classroom thousands of miles away.

National Education Standards

We know that teachers everywhere are grappling with the realities of helping students master state and local content standards. Thus, we have made an effort to identify the key content standards that the Coverdell World Wise Schools correspondence match can support in the areas of social studies, geography, cross-cultural understanding, service learning, language arts, and life skills. These standards are listed below. It is our hope that you will view the correspondence exchange with a Peace Corps Volunteer not as a luxury to be squeezed into an already overcrowded curriculum, but as a vehicle for addressing content standards for which you are already being held accountable.

National Geography Standards

I THE WORLD IN SPATIAL TERMS

Geography studies the relationships between people, places, and environments by mapping information about them into a spatial context.

The geographically informed person knows and understands

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools (e.g., charts and graphs), and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.
2. How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on the Earth's surface.

II PLACES AND REGIONS

The identities and lives of individuals and peoples are rooted in particular places and in those human constructs called regions.

The geographically informed person knows and understands

1. The physical and human characteristics of places.

III HUMAN SYSTEMS

People are central to geography in that human activities help shape Earth's surface, human settlements and structures are part of Earth's surface, and humans compete for control of Earth's surface.

The geographically informed person knows and understands

1. The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.
2. The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface.

IV ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

The physical environment is modified by human activities, largely as a consequence of the ways in which human societies value and use Earth's natural resources, and human activities are also influenced by Earth's physical features and processes.

The geographically informed person knows and understands

1. How human actions modify the physical environment.

A Word About Standards

I was having doubts about my abilities as a science teacher until I found a diagram in the back of one of my students' notebooks. The diagram changed my perspective. In her notebook, my student had drawn the unlikely comparison of an animal cell to her homestead in Swaziland. She had given the grandmother of the homestead the role of the nucleus. The mitochondrion, the organelle which supplied energy to the cell, was represented by the sisters.

I called her into the staff room and asked her to explain what she had drawn. She said that she had given the grandmother the role of the nucleus because the grandmother decodes when and how things get done.

As she continued, I began to see that she had indeed understood the intimate workings of the cell. I was proud of her. "But, Miss," she said, "I don't know why you're happy. I only did this from my own mind to help me understand this better."

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm so proud of you."

*Laura Stedman, Teacher
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Swaziland, 1994–1996)*

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Standards

CULTURE (NCSS Theme I)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can

1. Compare similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures meet human needs and concerns.
2. Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY (NCSS Theme IV)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity so that the learner can

1. Identify and describe ways regional, ethnic, and national cultures influence individuals' daily lives.
2. Identify and describe the influence of perception, attitudes, values, and beliefs on personal identity.

PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION (NCSS Theme VII)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services so that the learner can

1. Give examples that show how scarcity and choice govern our economic decisions.
2. Explain how the scarcity of productive resources (human, capital, technological, and natural resources) requires the development of economic systems to make decisions about how goods and services are to be produced and distributed.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS (NCSS Theme IX)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence so that the learner can

1. Explain how language, art, music, belief systems, and other cultural elements can facilitate global understanding or cause misunderstanding.
2. Explain conditions and motivations that contribute to conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among groups, societies, and nations.

CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES (NCSS Theme X)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic so that the learner can

1. Recognize and interpret how the “common good” can be strengthened through various forms of citizen action.
2. Examine strategies designed to strengthen the “common good,” which consider a range of options for citizen action.
3. Participate in activities to strengthen the “common good,” based upon careful evaluation of possible options for citizen action.



Behavioral Studies Standard

The learner understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.

Service-Learning Standards

The learner will be able to design an individual or group project that

1. Meets actual community needs.
2. Is coordinated in collaboration with a community.
3. Is integrated into the academic curriculum.
4. Facilitates active student reflection.
5. Uses academic skills and knowledge in real-world settings.
6. Helps develop a sense of caring for and about others.
7. Improves the quality of life for those served.

Language Arts Standards

1. The learner will be able to demonstrate competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
2. The learner will gather and use information for research purposes.
3. The learner will demonstrate competence in the general strategies of the reading process.
4. The learner will demonstrate competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of informational and literary texts.

Technology Standards

1. Technology Productivity Tools: The learner will use technology tools to enhance learning, increase productivity, and promote creativity.
2. Technology Research Tools: The learner will use technology to locate, evaluate, and collect information from a variety of sources. The learner will use technology tools to process data and report results.



In the mountains of Ethiopia, shortly after John F. Kennedy's death, I stopped my Land Rover to pick up an old man and give him a lift across the high plateau. On the side door, he read the Peace Corps name written in Amharic script as Yesalaam Guad. It meant Messenger of Peace.

I nodded and told him, yes, Yesalaam Guad. Kennedy's Peace Corps. He asked me then if I had known President Kennedy, and I told him how I had once shaken his hand on the White House lawn.

For a moment he looked out across the flat brown land at the distant acacia trees, and then he grinned and seized my hand and shook it, shouting "Yesalaam Guad. Yesalaam Guad." He was shaking the hand that had shaken the hand of John F. Kennedy.

We two, there on the highlands of Africa, as far away as one could possibly be from Washington and the White House, shared a moment, were connected by the death of a martyred president and his enduring legacy, the Peace Corps.

*John Coyne, Author and Editor
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Ethiopia, 1962–1964)*

The Correspondence Getting Started

No two matches are the same. Some classes write and receive 10 letters a year while others correspond less. It depends in large part upon the level of time and energy that you, your students, and your Peace Corps Volunteer put into it.

To get the most out of your exchange, help your students learn as much as possible about the country in which the Volunteer is serving. This will provide a broader context in which to place the first-person perspective of the correspondence and it will generate more interesting class discussions. Try to stimulate personal reflection and group discussion by asking students to compare life in the United States with life in your Volunteer's host country. Point out similarities as well as differences. Ask questions that challenge stereotypes. Also be sure to explain to your students that the Volunteer is sharing only a personal perspective of the country. Avoid making generalizations based solely on the Volunteer's correspondence.

Getting that first letter written and sent is the first important step in developing your correspondence exchange. Your Peace Corps Volunteer will be excited to hear from you, even if it is just to introduce yourself. This first letter does not have to be long. Look at it as an opportunity for you and the Volunteer to share background information and ideas for the direction of your correspondence. Include a brief description of your class, the degree to which you have or have not studied the particular geographic region, and themes you are interested in focusing on.

We encourage you to propose how often you and your students plan to write and, likewise, request the same information of your Volunteer. One of the important things to establish at the beginning of your correspondence is a mutual set of expectations, so be direct and honest with your Volunteer.

September 20, 1999

Dear Jeremy:

Greetings from your World Wise Schools class. I am Shawn Yarrow, and I teach math and economics to two classes of 10th graders, about 58 students in all. We are a small school in New Jersey. Are you familiar with New Jersey?

I've told my students we are going to correspond with a Peace Corps Volunteer in Moldova but haven't involved them too much yet. I wanted to first learn a bit about what you think this exchange should/could be.

Seeing as I teach math, I don't have a lot of information on Moldova at my fingertips. I've collected some general information on the country from some encyclopedias and plan to have my students search the Internet for more. What are the big imports and exports of Moldova? I have some lessons on imports and exports and think this would be a great tie-in.

If you could, also tell us a bit about how you shop and what things cost. Are there shopping malls like in the U.S.? There are also some lessons I have planned on supply and demand. Thinking back to 10th grade math, what else do you think makes sense?

Please tell me more about what you do and what it means to be a health education Peace Corps Volunteer. How often should we plan to hear from you? I was thinking of having my students work in groups and send a packet of four or five letters to you around the beginning of each month. Does that sound okay? Expect a letter soon as October 1st is approaching.

I look forward to hearing from you so we can plan a bit. I think there are a few different ways I can plug your letters into my curriculum. I hope to hear from you soon. Thanks in advance for helping to make my class more excited about math.

Talk to you soon,
Shawn Yarrow

First letter from:
Tatnuck Elementary School
c/o Shawn Yarrow
70 Pasnecoy Lane
Kearny, NJ 07032

The Volunteer with whom you will be corresponding is one of more than 7,000 currently serving Peace Corps Volunteers in more than 70 countries. Volunteers live in cities as well as rural villages, and they work in projects ranging from small enterprise development to English education and agroforestry. They come from all 50 states and represent the United States in all of its diversity.

When introducing students to your Volunteer, it is important that they understand that the Volunteer is one of several thousand U.S. citizens living and working in countries around the world.



Explain to your students that they will be exchanging letters and information with a Peace Corps Volunteer who is currently serving overseas, and that this exchange is part of the CWWS program. Ask your students what they know about the Peace Corps. Perhaps they have a relative or neighbor who is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer.

After telling your students the name of “their” Volunteer and the country in which he or she is serving, you may want to introduce journals or logs that the students can use throughout the year to record their exchange. An early assignment could be to have them write down their “predictions” about the Volunteer’s country and experiences. Where is it located? What language(s) do the citizens speak? How do they dress? What do they eat? Encourage students to use this journal to write down any thoughts they have about the overseas experience and work of the Volunteer throughout the correspondence exchange. You may want to use these journals for students to react to issues expressed in your Volunteer’s letters as well as discussions that come up within the class.

If you have enough information about the Volunteer’s country to provide a brief overview, discuss what you know and use maps to supplement your presentation. If you don’t have much background information, one of your students’ first assignments can be to do research on the country, using maps, encyclopedias, and the Internet. Then, have the students write a letter to the Peace Corps Volunteer to introduce themselves and to ask questions of the Volunteer.

The scene is a cafe in Tangiers, Morocco. Tomorrow is Sunday. I’ve just invited a Moroccan friend to a picnic at the beach. Will he come? “Perhaps,” he says in English, translating from the Arabic, inshallah, which literally means “God willing.” And I’m feeling hurt. What does he mean “perhaps”? Either he wants to come or he doesn’t. It’s up to him. He doesn’t understand why I’m so upset. Our two cultures confront each other across the teacups.

Only several years later do I understand. He would come, he meant, if Allah willed it. His wanting to come and his being able to come were not one and the same. In Morocco, unlike in America, where there’s a will, there’s not necessarily a way. So who was I to demand an answer to my question? And who was he to give one?

*Craig Storti, Author
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Morocco, 1970–1972)*

Tips for Mailing Items Overseas



A challenging aspect of your correspondence with a currently serving Peace Corps Volunteer will be simply sending and receiving mail successfully. Infrastructure and postal systems vary widely from country to country, which makes it impossible to guarantee how long a piece of mail will take to arrive at its destination. We encourage you to be flexible and to not lose heart if several weeks go by without a letter.

World Wise Schools will provide you with your Volunteer's name and a mailing address. Please note that this initial address is for the Peace Corps office in your Volunteer's country of service. It is not his or her local mailing address. The local mailing address, called the "site address," is where your Volunteer receives mail on a more regular basis. Once you get a letter from the Volunteer with a site address provided, please write it down in a safe place. World Wise Schools does not keep track of site addresses, so if you lose it we will only be able to provide you the in-country Peace Corps office address. We emphasize this point because it is not uncommon for Peace Corps Volunteers to go several weeks or even months between visits to the Peace Corps office.

The following are some useful tips to consider when sending mail internationally.

Airmail

Always write "airmail" on your envelope or package. Sending letters any way other than international airmail will greatly delay their arrival. Surface mail usually takes several weeks and in some instances up to a year. So play it safe and send it airmail.

Postage Costs

Ask your post office about how much it costs to send things to your Volunteer's country. Usually, a standard letter requires one international airmail stamp. However, if you and your students include photographs or several letters in one envelope, it will probably increase the postage cost. Using the correct amount of postage is crucial to getting your letter delivered to your Volunteer.

Import Taxes

Do not send a package without first asking your Volunteer for permission. The Volunteer may have to pay import taxes or travel a great distance to pick it up. If you send a package with the Volunteer's consent, also send a separate letter or postcard reporting that the package is on its way.

Postage Costs for the Volunteer

Volunteers are on limited budgets, so if there is something specific you wish to have sent to you that incurs a significant cost, consider organizing a fundraiser to help cover the expenditure.

Valuables

Never send money or anything else that is valuable through the mail.

Customs

International mail is sometimes opened by customs officials, so avoid language that might put the Volunteer in a compromising position.

Diplomatic Pouch

Sorry, but you cannot use the diplomatic pouch (offered to overseas embassy employees) to send items to your Volunteer.

U.S. Educators: Frequently Asked Questions

How much does it cost to participate in World Wise Schools?

Joining World Wise Schools is free. The only cost involved is the postage associated with your exchange if you choose to correspond with a Peace Corps Volunteer.

What do U.S. educators receive if they join the program?

Each year, enrolled educators receive a free copy of the latest resources produced by Coverdell World Wise Schools.

Is it possible to be matched to a Volunteer with e-mail?

Although access to the Internet is increasing in the countries where Volunteers serve, we cannot guarantee a Volunteer with e-mail. It is a good idea, however, to share your e-mail address with your Volunteer in case he or she gets access at some point or visits a friend who has access.

You might also consider joining the CyberVolunteer project. This project provides an opportunity to integrate the Peace Corps experience into your curriculum via technology by reading e-mails from a Volunteer each month. (See www.peacecorps.gov/wws/cybervol/.)

I will be changing schools next fall. What should I do about my CWWS match?

Please let us know if your postal or e-mail address has changed, or if you have retired, taken a sabbatical, or are no longer the principal educator corresponding with the Volunteer to whom you were matched. *If you can no longer continue corresponding with your Volunteer, please contact CWWS immediately so that we can find another teacher with whom your Volunteer can correspond.*

I haven't received any letters lately from my Volunteer. What should I do?

Problems with mail are not uncommon in many of the countries where Volunteers serve. Let us know if you are not receiving mail from your Volunteer. If a letter with the correct postage is returned to you, contact us. There may be a mail strike in your Volunteer's host country, or some other problem preventing the delivery of mail.

Just as you may find it hard to balance your teaching duties with participation in CWWS, Volunteers sometimes get overwhelmed with the responsibilities of their projects. We will let you know if your Volunteer can no longer participate in the CWWS exchange. If this happens, we will give you the opportunity to correspond with another Volunteer.

I am an educator who has chosen not to correspond with a Volunteer this year. Can I still be a member of World Wise Schools?

Yes! We realize that corresponding with a Volunteer is not feasible for every educator. If you prefer not to participate in the correspondence match, you can still take advantage of World Wise Schools' free education resources.

Waking Up, Stepping Out

by Steve Iams
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Nepal, 2003–2004;
China, 2005–)

I wake to chattering voices, a bus horn, bells ringing, an old man with a hacking cough, the squeak of a rusty latch opening across the hallway. A year ago, any of these noises would have been a disturbance, but now the morning ensemble is simply a part of my day. I push open the flaps in the mosquito net and step out into my bedroom. I stretch my arms upward to the ceiling and exhale a bearish yawn. It's six in the morning.

Meanwhile, the village has been up for several hours. At the tea shop two floors below my bedroom window, rush hour has arrived. When I walk downstairs to the ground floor, the shop's four tables are packed with village men dipping *sell roti*, a doughnut-like pastry, into their milk tea. Some of the men draw long breaths of cigarette smoke as their conversation hammers away above the shop's buzzing commotion. A rice-filled pressure-cooker whistles, spouting white steam like a miniature locomotive while the adjacent pot sizzles to life with the aroma of onions and garlic. Each customer has brought with him a silver bucket overflowing with milk, fresh from the barn. As the men pass time in the shop, the buckets await transfer to the street bazaars of Kathmandu, Nepal's frenetic capital city 10 miles down the road at the base of the valley.

In front of the shop, I sit down on a wooden bench between Janak, a short, amiable teacher at the school where I taught English last year, and Hajurbaa, my 104-year-old host grandfather. From the inside of the shop behind me, I hear someone calling my Nepali name, "Hare Krishna!" Gita, the shopkeeper, smiles and stretches her hand beyond the counter to hand me a cup of tea. "*Namaste!*" she says, and then "Good morning!" With this English phrase she lets out an excited giggle in anticipation of my approval. Over the course of my year in the village, Gita has been learning bits of English and practicing with me, although we rarely get past "Hello—How are you?—I'm fine" without her erupting into laughter. Gita is typical of many Nepali women in that she married young—in her case when she was 14—and never attended school. Now 30, she gave birth to her son when she was 16 and her daughter at 18. For the past eight years, she's worked alongside her husband at the tea shop, which opens before dawn and closes after dark. Since I arrived last year, I've never seen her take a day off, nor have I ever heard her complain about it.

Next to me, Hajurbaa asks a question I strain to comprehend, although with Hajurbaa I'm typically able to guess what he's asking. Our conversations tend to be an exercise in stating the obvious. When he sees me drinking tea, he'll ask, "Are you drinking tea?" "Yes! I'm drinking tea," I'll respond. It's a tacit agreement that helps to bridge our extremely wide lingual, cultural, and generational gap. Today he's wearing a light-blue *dowra surwal*, the traditional dress for Nepali men, a knee-length lightweight robe and pants with a matching cap. While I might be laughed at if I were to wear a *dowra surwal*, Hajurbaa wears the clothing naturally and gracefully. "Where are you going today, Hajurbaa?" I ask. I ask him this question every morning, and always get the same response. "Going? I'm 104 years old! I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay here."

A young boy stops his bicycle on the dirt road in front of us to deliver three copies of the daily newspaper. Janak gets a copy and buries himself in the front-page

headlines. The big news of the day is the king appointing a new prime minister, someone who, many people seem to agree, will fail to bring stability to the country's shaken political ground. Over the past seven years, the country has witnessed a deadly civil war responsible for more than 10,000 deaths, the massacre of the royal family in 2001, and the 2002 dismissal of parliament and suspension of elections. Very few people, including Janak, seem to be optimistic about the future of the country.

But Janak has other things on his mind. Today, like every other day for the past three months, he wears white clothing from head to toe in remembrance of his father, who passed away in early March. For the first 10 days after his father's death, Janak mourned his loss in the traditional Hindu way, by remaining at home in a corner of the house, draped in a white sheet. He shaved his mustache and his head, fasted all morning, and ate only rice and fruit in the evenings. One rainy morning I went to visit him. I wasn't allowed to touch him and had to sit on a chair several feet away from his makeshift grieving area. My instinct at the time was to reach out to him, to shake his hand or give him a hug, but this wasn't allowed. Janak needed this time to purge the grief from his body, after which time only the happy, warm memories of his father would remain.

Just above the tea shop, a group of women congregate at the base of the village *chaotara*, which translates in English to "resting tree." In rural Nepal, these giant trees mark the center of the village and provide a canopy of shade where the villagers relax and escape from the sun during the hot summer months. Today, as they wait for the bus to arrive, the women chat and stand over their *dokas*, handmade wooden baskets they're using to transport heaping loads of cucumbers and pumpkins for sale in Kathmandu. Among these women is Amma, my host mother. She wears a red sari with decorative gold trim; a sari is a long, flowing wrap worn by Nepali women. Amma is hauling nearly 50 pounds of pumpkins to Kathmandu, where she can earn about 20 cents a pound. If she can make 10 dollars today, she'll be happy; within a few weeks the markets will be flooded with pumpkins from all over the Kathmandu Valley and the going price for a pound of pumpkins could drop to 10 cents. When I ask if she'll bargain for a higher selling price, she lets out a hoarse cackle and waves off my suggestion. "I don't fix the price. What can I do?" she says with a smile.

Around 8 in the morning, the business of village life slows as people retreat to their homes for their morning meal. Steaming plates of rice, curried vegetables, and lentil soup await the men, women, girls, and boys of the village, many of whom have worked up an appetite in the surrounding fields, cultivating the soil for the coming rice season. The rituals and routine of village life—the work, the meals, even the conversation—are as unchanging as the seasons. The only thing that seems to be different here is me. But, after a year of living and working here, even I'm starting to fit in.



Steve Iams with his host-family sister Onju