



About the Setting

Poland, Eastern Europe

“The Extra Place” is by Susan Peters, a Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Poland from 1990 to 1992, in the heart of Eastern Europe. Poland’s capital, Warsaw, dating back to the Middle Ages, has a population of more than 1.6 million people. Active in Poland from 1990 to 2001, the Peace Corps worked to ease the country’s return to democracy after decades of Communist rule. More than 950 Peace Corps Volunteers served in communities throughout Poland in programs focusing on English education, environmental education, and small business development. Peace Corps Volunteer Cindy Bestland, who served in Poland from 1996 to 1998, reports that the Polish have a saying that they take to heart: “A guest in the house is God in the house.”

THE EXTRA PLACE

By Susan Peters,
Returned Peace Corps
Volunteer, Poland

I am talking with Kasia, a woman I met a couple of years ago. Kasia works for a Western firm, at a salary lower than that of an expatriate but still quite generous by Polish standards. She's a bit younger than I am, slender, with finely etched features, blue-gray eyes. There's a quiet voice, a certain reserve in her manner: what I think of as the "Polish aristocrat" look. We are in her office, drinking tea. She is amazed at the number of Americans, ex-Peace Corps and others, who have returned to Poland after a brief stay in the United States.

"But the same thing happened to me, years ago," she says thoughtfully. "I thought that the West would be wonderful, and then I lived there for a year; I started thinking about Poland, and something inside me wanted to come back. And you know, when I came back it seemed that Poland was perfect." She looks at me. "But now I think it is time for me to leave again."

"Is it because you've changed, or Poland has changed?"

"I think both." She pauses, glances out the window. Across the street, the renovations on the Sezam department store are under way, and the new McDonald's next to it is doing a brisk business.

"I will tell you about something that happened a few months ago. It was Wigilia—Christmas Eve—and my husband and I were in our apartment. We heard someone at the door. Not our apartment door, but the door to the outside, downstairs."

"On the *domophon*," I say. The existence of an intercom system in a building is a definite plus in security-conscious Warsaw.

"Yes, on the *domophon*. I asked who it was. We were not expecting anyone at just that time, but my husband's family—his mother, his brother and wife and children—were coming over later for dinner. My daughter was putting the plates on the table, and my husband was helping me with the dinner. I remember when I heard the *domophon*, I said to him: 'This is your mother, I know it, and she will be coming in the kitchen and telling me how to fix the dinner.'

"But it was a man, a stranger. He was a refugee from Yugoslavia, he said, and he was looking for someplace where he could spend the night. He had no money; he had no place to go. He didn't know anyone in Warsaw. Before I could say anything, my husband told him that we were sorry. We couldn't help him."

"That seems the reasonable thing to do," I tell her. "After all, you didn't know who it was."

She shakes her head. "You know, we have a tradition here, on Christmas, to set an extra place for the stranger who might come. I looked at our table

and I remembered the extra place. I wanted to ask the man in, and I told my husband, 'Let him in, it's Christmas.'

"'No,' he said, 'how do we know that this person does not have two others behind him with guns?'

"'Marek,' I said, 'it's Christmas! There is the extra place!' But he still said no. So we quarreled a little bit—yes, I quarreled with my husband on Christmas. I was angry, but I knew that he was right. And we didn't open the door.

"So I am thinking now that maybe I do not want to live in Poland for a while. I know that the old system was bad, but I think now that we are losing our soul, and that the problem we have in Poland is not just the inflation that people complain about. It is something else, and I don't know what to call it. But we are losing ... a part of ourselves."

She pauses. "I don't want to live in this country if we are so afraid that we do not even open our door on Christmas to a stranger. If we are so busy that we forget what it means, the extra place."

We sit for a moment, not speaking. What can I tell her? I remember last winter; I was living in an American city, in the Northeast, where an elderly woman locked herself out of her house and froze to death on her neighbor's porch. The neighbor was afraid to answer the knock on the door. I think about the millions of dollars in aid, the hundreds of advisors sent here to help the Poles change their system, and I wonder if we ever thought to warn them of the losses that come with the gains, of the extra places that are only empty plates.

READING AND RESPONDING TO *THE EXTRA PLACE*

Overview

We've designed this lesson plan to help you and your students explore the meaning of the story "The Extra Place," by returned Peace Corps Volunteer Susan Peters. Peters served as a Volunteer in Poland from 1990 to 1992—a time of unprecedented political, social, and economic change there. The free national elections that occurred in November 1989 marked the first time in 40 years that Poland was led by a non-Communist government. While the change to democracy in Poland was a welcome one, the transition was not easy. For 40 years, the Polish economy had been centrally planned by the Communist government. Then, in 1990, the new government began Poland's transition to a free-market economy. As with all transitions, there was a period of confusion and uncertainty as the Polish people dealt with the impact of these changes—including an initial period of high inflation and unemployment. Now Poland's economic growth rates are among the highest in Europe.

"The Extra Place" is included within the theme *No Easy Answers* because it deals with the complex issues of personal safety in a climate of social and personal change. In "The Extra Place," the way the main characters deal with the dilemma they are confronted with raises questions that have no easy answers.

The Peace Corps was active in Poland from 1990 until June 2001, working to ease the country's return to democracy. Peace Corps Volunteers worked in two specific areas: education and the environment. Volunteers taught English at secondary schools and teacher training colleges. They also assisted governmental agencies in heightening public awareness of environmental issues.

About the Setting

Poland is in the heart of Eastern Europe, bordered by Germany on the west, the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the south, and Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania on the east. Its capital, Warsaw, has a population of more than 1.6 million. An estimated 99 percent of the population age 15 and older can read and write. Ninety-five percent of Poles are Roman Catholic. Christmas Eve supper, called Wigilia (vee-GEEL-ya), is widely celebrated as one of the most important holiday meals for the Polish people. Wigilia involves many traditions, one of which is to leave one extra chair and a table setting for an unexpected or missing guest. Uneaten food is also left on the table for anyone who might come in. According to Peace Corps Volunteer Cindy Bestland, who served in Poland from 1996 to 1998, the Polish have a saying that they take to heart: "A guest in the house is God in the house."

Suggested Instructional Sequence

This lesson plan presents many ideas for reading and responding to “The Extra Place.” It provides options for using the story with younger or less able readers, as well as with older, more sophisticated and skillful readers. Our suggested lesson sequence is a flexible springboard for tailoring instruction to the needs of your students—and to your state or local curriculum standards.

We’ve also developed this lesson plan to address specific language arts and social studies standards using the *Understanding by Design* curriculum framework (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). The framework, based on “enduring understandings” and “essential questions,” is described in detail in Appendix A to this collection on page 174. You can find the enduring understandings and essential questions that we suggest for this story in the margin on page 156.

STANDARDS

National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association

- *Standard 1:* Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world.
- *Standard 2:* Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.
- *Standard 3:* Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.
- *Standard 5:* Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

National Council for the Social Studies

- *Theme 1: Culture.* Social studies programs should provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

DAY ONE Purpose:

- To introduce the story to students and have them reflect on its setting.
- To stimulate group discussion about the story’s meaning.

Enduring Understandings:

- Cultures and people change.
- Change can sometimes make us feel we are losing a part of ourselves and prompt questions that have no easy answers.
- Reading can help us see the world from many different perspectives and lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and others.

Essential Questions:

- How do you hold on to the good in the midst of change?
- What is it “to lose a part of yourself,” and how do you know it’s happening?
- How does reading help us expand our perspective on the world, ourselves, and others?

Grade Levels:

This lesson plan can be adapted for use with students in grades 6–12.

Assessments:

Group discussions, journal entries, oral reports, extended writing assignments.

1. Explain to students that the next selection they will read describes a story told to a Peace Corps Volunteer, Susan Peters, who served in Poland from 1990 to 1992. Provide students with the information about Poland on pages 154 and 155. Show them a map of Europe and point out Poland.

2. Present students with this scenario:

Imagine that your family is getting ready for a holiday celebration. Unexpectedly, a stranger knocks at your front door. You don’t know this person and are afraid to open the door, so you talk to the stranger through the intercom. You are impatient to get on with your holiday preparations as you ask the stranger what he wants. You discover the stranger is homeless. He is cold and hungry and has nowhere to stay. He wants your family to take him in. Would you open the door?

3. Have students discuss this question with a partner and then conduct a class discussion.

4. Have students read the story and ask them to highlight sentences or phrases that have particular meaning to them.

5. Then have students pair off anew to discuss the question above. Ask each pair to try to come to a consensus on what they think is significant about “The Extra Place”—and on one or two questions they think the story raises that have no easy answers. Give each pair a sheet of chart paper for use in summarizing their responses.

6. Give pairs 10 minutes to discuss the questions and record their responses on the chart paper. Ask each pair to select a reporter to present their responses, using the chart paper summary as a guide.

7. *Journal Entry:* For homework, ask students to tell the story of “The Extra Place” to an adult—or to a younger person—and to ask that person what made Kasia’s situation so difficult. What would the listener have done in her position?

DAY TWO

Purpose:

- To help students probe the meaning of the text.
- To help students connect the story with their own lives.

1. Ask students to return to their partners from the previous day and share their journal summaries from the last class. Then conduct a class discussion as follows:

2. Read this passage from “The Extra Place” to students:

So I am thinking now that maybe I do not want to live in Poland for a while. I know that the old system was bad, but I think now that we are losing our soul, and that the problem we have in Poland is not just the inflation that people complain about. It is something else, and I don't know what to call it. But we are losing ... a part of ourselves....

I don't want to live in this country if we are so afraid that we do not even open our door on Christmas to a stranger. If we are so busy that we forget what it means, the extra place.

3. Ask students what they think Kasia meant when she said “we are losing our soul ... a part of ourselves.” What exactly does it mean “to lose your soul ... to lose a part of yourself;” and how do you know it’s happening? What is the connection between change and “losing a part of yourself”?
4. Suggest to students that making the transition from childhood to adulthood represents a change in which a part of us is lost or left behind to make room for the new person we are becoming. Have students return to their partners to discuss how the story “The Extra Place” might help them think about changes they’re experiencing in their own lives.
5. After the partners have had some time for discussion, ask how we can hold on to the good in the midst of change. Give the students five minutes to discuss this question, and then have one from each pair summarize their responses.
6. *Journal Entry:* Ask students to respond in their journals to the following prompt: Describe a time in your life when, as a result of a change or an event that occurred, you felt as if you were “losing a part of yourself—or losing your soul.” For example, this might have been a situation where, because of peer pressure, you compromised your values. Or it could have been an event or change that had nothing to do with friends. It might have been moving to a new place, growing up and facing issues that you didn’t have to face as a child, seeing things in the media you didn’t agree with.

7. Give students at least 10 minutes for writing, and then ask them to share their thoughts with a partner. Then ask for volunteers to report their thoughts to the rest of the class.
8. For homework, ask students to return to their journal response in #6, write about it in more detail, and then respond to the question: Is change always accompanied by losing a part of yourself? Why or why not?

DAY THREE

Purpose:

- To give students the opportunity to think about and discuss a question the text raises that has no easy answers.
1. Conduct a class discussion about the journal responses to the questions: Is change always accompanied by losing a part of yourself? Why or why not?
 2. The night before the class, make large signs that say: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” Post each of the signs in a different corner of the room.
 3. Ask students to reread “The Extra Place” and then form groups of four. Ask each group to identify the most important question they think the story raises. Allow time for groups to discuss their question and possible answers.
 4. Suggest to students: “Some people might say (or perhaps a group has already said) that because it was Christmas and a Polish tradition to set an extra place at the table, Kasia and her husband should have invited the stranger to come in and share the meal with them. This is a difficult question to answer. I’d like to invite you to move to the corner of the room that best expresses your opinion on this issue: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly disagree.”
 5. Allow students time to move to their desired corner. Then have them select a partner and discuss the reasons they have taken this position on the issue—or, perhaps, more important, why it might have been hard to take a position.
 6. After students have had a chance to discuss with a partner the reasons for their position, ask them to discuss it with the rest of the students in their corner. Allow five minutes for discussion, after which a spokesperson from each corner is selected to summarize the reasons behind his or her group’s position.

7. *Journal Entry*: Following the group summaries, debrief the students by having them return to their seats and respond in their journals to the following prompts:

- As a result of this activity, what have you learned?
- As a result of reading and thinking about “The Extra Place,” what have you learned about the world, yourself, and others? What have you learned about change?

8. Ask students to complete their journal writing for homework. Tell them that you are looking forward to responding to what they have written about each of the above questions in a “dialogue journal” format. If students are not familiar with dialogue journaling, explain to them that it is an opportunity for them to express their thoughts to you, and for you to respond to them in writing with your reflections on what they have written.

The sole substitute for an experience which we have not ourselves lived through is art and literature.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn
Author

Choices and Explorations:

1. To reinforce the process of finding the more abstract patterns in a text (see pages 149–152), explain to students that, just as folk tales such as “The Talking Goat” have abstract patterns that underlie their structure, so does a story like “The Extra Place.” Explain that the more they practice finding the abstract patterns in a text, the easier it becomes. Then they can use this skill in this class—or in a social studies or history class—to make connections between two seemingly unrelated stories, incidents, or events, based on their abstract patterns. Explain that the ability to uncover abstract patterns and make connections can increase their ability to think at higher levels about what they are learning in any class. Provide students with the following example on Worksheet #10 on page 161.
2. Ask students to help you complete parts of the middle column and then to fill in the left-hand column with the literal facts from “The Extra Place.”
3. Then ask them what analogy they can develop in the right-hand column. What is something they have seen or read or experienced that follows the abstract pattern in the middle column, but that has nothing to do with Christmas or strangers at the door?

4. Have students work with a partner to come up with an analogy. Then ask for volunteers to share their analogies with the rest of the class. See how many different analogies you can elicit. Ask students what they think of the strategy of abstracting the pattern in a story. How might they use this strategy in another class? In another subject area?
5. Based on these analogies, or on their personal responses to “The Extra Place,” ask students to write a poem or draw a mind map or other graphic representation that illustrates the mental connections they have made.



Worksheet #10

The Abstract Pattern in 'The Extra Place'

Literal Elements	Abstract Pattern	New Literal Elements
  	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People are preparing for an enjoyable and important event. • Unexpectedly, they are interrupted by someone. • This person asks them to do something difficult. • The people are not sure how to respond or what to do. • Finally, they refuse the request. • Afterward, they feel uneasy about their decision.	