

# Heroes & Friends

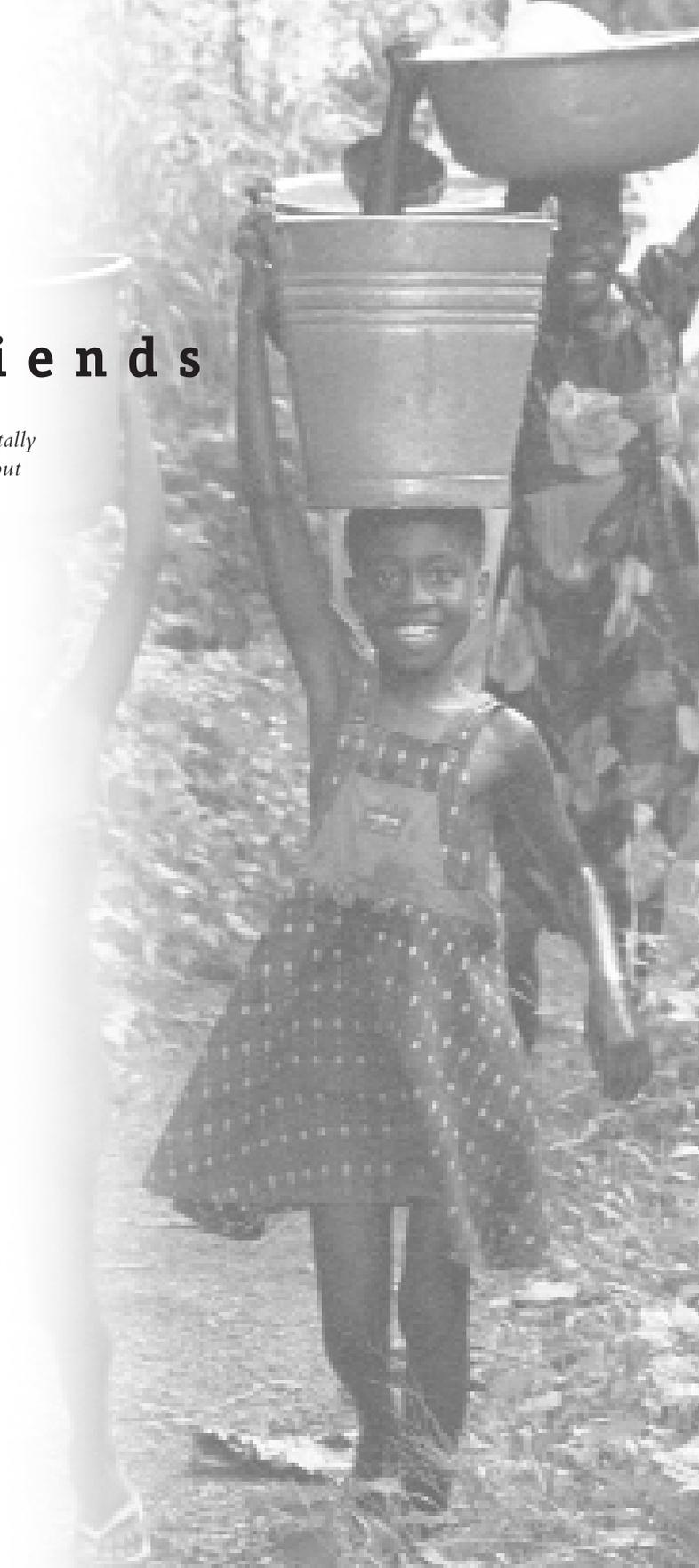
*For a moment we just kept gawking, Ilunga and I, mentally circling each other, both of us deciding whether to burst out laughing or to run for safety. In the end, we did neither.*

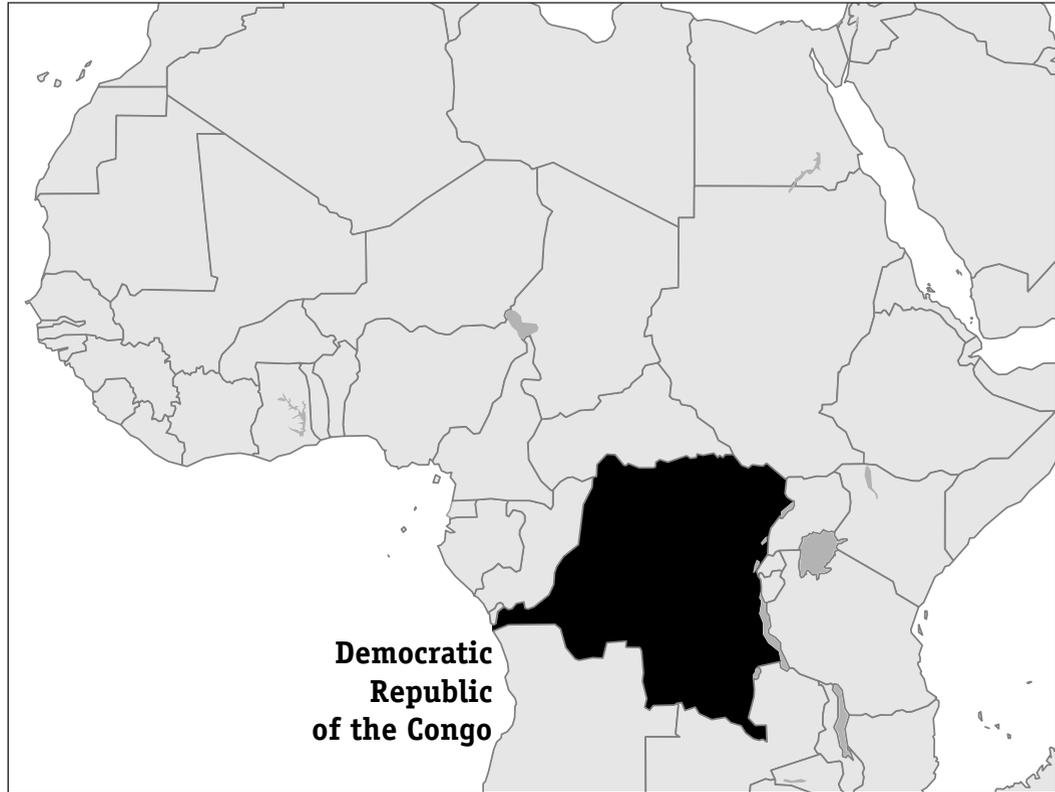
*We became friends.*

*“My name is Ilunga,” he said, extending his hand.*

*“My name is Michel,” I said, shaking it.*

From “I Had a Hero”





## About the Setting

### Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central Africa

“I Had a Hero” and “Ilunga’s Harvest” (see page 54) both take place in the remote chiefdom of Kalambayi in the heart of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire (and before that, the Belgian Congo). Lying on the Equator, almost in the middle of the continent of Africa, Congo has experienced ethnic strife and civil war since the late 1990s, with forces from neighboring countries integrally involved. Congo includes the Congo River Basin, which covers an area of almost 400,000 square miles. The author, Mike Tidwell, served in Kalambayi as a Peace Corps agriculture extension agent from 1985 to 1987. The Peace Corps has had a strong partnership with the people of Africa since its inception. Volunteers currently work in more than 20 African countries in the areas of education, health, business, agriculture, and the environment. (Note: Mike Tidwell was known in French-speaking Zaire as “Michel,” French for Michael.)

## I HAD A HERO

By *Mike Tidwell,*  
*Returned Peace Corps*  
*Volunteer, Zaire*  
*(now the Democratic*  
*Republic of the Congo)*

Equipped with a motorcycle from the United States Agency for International Development and administrative support from the Zairian Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, I set out to really show the people of Kalambayi something about fish culture. I was an extension agent for the government's *Projet Pisciculture Familiale*, or Family Fish Project.

Six days a week, I left my house around 7 a.m. and rode as much as 40 miles over unspeakably eroded dirt roads and down narrow paths. I visited villages and expounded the virtues of fish culture to anyone who would listen.... "No thanks. We've got enough work to do already." Around 6 o'clock, exhausted from equal parts of sun ... and foreign language, I'd return home.

It was after a few weeks of this ... that I met Ilunga Mbumba, chief of the village of Ntita Kalambayi. I was riding my Yamaha 125 Enduro through an uninhabited stretch of bush when he appeared from out of the 10-foot-tall grass along the trail, signaling for me to stop. Had he not waved, I'm pretty sure I would have stopped anyway. Ilunga had been out hunting antelope and he presented a sight worth inspecting. In one hand he carried a spear, in the other a crude machete. On his head was a kind of coonskin cap with a bushy tail hanging down in back. Around his neck was a string supporting a leather charm to ward off bad bush spirits. Two underfed mongrel dogs circled his bare feet, panting.

When I stopped and saw Ilunga for the first time, I saw a man living, it seemed to me, in another century. Inside the tall grass from which he had just stepped, the clock ran a thousand years slow, if it registered any time at all. Unable to help myself, I stared at him openly, taking him in from head to toe. He, meanwhile, stared back at me with the same wide-eyed incredulity. And no wonder. With my ghost-white skin and rumbling motorcycle, with my bulging safety goggles and orange riding gloves, with my bushy brown beard flowing out from under a banana-yellow crash helmet—with all this, I suppose I had a lot of nerve thinking of him as a museum piece.

For a moment we just kept gawking, Ilunga and I, mentally circling each other, both of us trying to decide whether to burst out laughing or to run for safety. In the end, we did neither. We became friends.

"My name is Ilunga," he said, extending his hand.

"My name is Michel," I said, shaking it.

We smiled at each other another moment before Ilunga got around to telling me he had heard my job was to teach people how to raise fish. It sounded like something worth trying, he said, and he wondered if I would come by his village to help him look for a pond site. I said I would and took down directions to his house.

... [The next day] into the bush we went, hunting for a pond site.

“The first thing we need,” I told Ilunga, “is water. Do you know a good spot where there’s a small stream or a spring?”

“Follow me,” he said.

Machetes in hand, we stomped and stumbled and hacked our way through the savanna grass for two hours before finding an acceptable site along a stream about a 20-minute walk from Ilunga’s village. Together, we paced off a pond and staked a water canal running between it and a point farther up the stream. Then, with a shovel I sold him on credit against his next corn harvest, Ilunga began a two-month journey through dark caverns of physical pain and overexertion. He began digging. No bulldozers here. The task of carving out a pond from the valley-bottom floor was left to the farmer himself.

There is no easy way to dig a fish pond with a shovel. You just have to do it. You have to place the tip to the ground, push the shovel in with your foot, pull up a load of dirt, and then throw the load 20 or 30 feet to the pond’s edge. Then you have to do it again—tip to the ground, push it in, pull it up, throw the dirt. After you do this about 50,000 times, you have an average-size 10-by-15-meter pond.

In many ways, the work is like a marathon. If you go too fast, you invite physical ruin. If you go too slow, you may never finish. You have to pace yourself. You have to dig a few hours each day, carefully spreading out the pain over time. But no matter what, you can’t take a break. You can’t stop. Not even for a week. To do so is to risk losing the rhythm of the fight and so become suddenly overwhelmed by the task at hand. Once the shovel enters the soil the first time, the work must continue every day—tip to the ground, push it in, pull it up, throw the dirt—again and again, meter by meter, 50,000 times, until the marathon is over.

But Ilunga, being a chief and all, wasn’t content with an average-size pond. He wanted one almost twice that size. He wanted a pond 15 by 20 meters. I told him he was crazy as we measured it out. I repeated the point with added conviction after watching him use his bare foot to drive the thin shovel blade into the ground.

“A pond this big is too much work for one person,” I said. “It’ll kill you.”

“See you next week,” he said.

“It’s too much, Ilunga.”

He started digging.

“Okay,” I said. “*Bonne chance.*”

I left him at the pond site and began heading toward the village, hearing every 10 seconds as I walked away the sound of a shovel-load of dirt hitting the ground after traveling 20 feet through the air.

For me, it was painful visiting Ilunga each week. This was the part of the fish culture process I had been dreading ever since arriving. I'd come to check on the pond's progress and find Ilunga grunting and shoveling and pitching dirt the same way I had left him the week before. I winced each time his foot pushed the shovel into the ground. I groaned inwardly at the sight of his clothes, ragged, full of yawning holes that revealed a glistening, overworked body. I calculated that to finish the pond he would have to move a total of 4,000 cubic feet of dirt. Guilt gnawed at me. This was no joke. He really was going to kill himself.

One week I couldn't stand it any longer. I found Ilunga at the pond site with his body covered with the usual mixture of dirt and sweat.

"Give me the shovel," I told him.

"Oh no, Michel," he said. "This work is too much for you."

"Give it to me," I repeated, a bit indignantly. "Take a rest."

He shrugged and handed me the shovel. I began digging. Okay, I thought, tip to the ground, push it in, pull it up, throw the dirt. I did it again. It wasn't nearly as hard as I had thought. Stroke after stroke, I kept going. About 20 minutes later, though, it got hot. I began wondering how, at 8:30 in the morning, the sun had suddenly reached noontime intensity. I paused to take off my shirt. Ilunga, thinking I was quitting, jumped up and reached for the shovel.

"No, no," I said. "I'm still digging. Sit down."

He shrugged again and said that since I was apparently serious about digging, he was going to go check on one of his fields. "Good idea," I said.

Shirtless, alone, I carried on. Tip to the ground, push it in, pull it up, throw the dirt. An hour passed. Tip to the ground, push it in, pull it up... throw... throw the... dammit, throw the dirt. My arms were signaling that they didn't like tossing dirt over such a great distance. It hurts, they said. Stop making us do it. But I couldn't stop. I had been digging a paltry hour and a half. I was determined to go on, to help Ilunga. How could I expect villagers to do work I was incapable of doing myself?

Sweat gathered on my forehead and streamed down my face as I contin-

ued, shoveling and shoveling. About 30 minutes passed and things started to get really ugly. My body buckled with fatigue. My back and shoulders joined my arms in screaming for an end to hostilities. I was no longer able to throw the dirt. Instead, I carried each load 20 feet and ignobly spooned it onto the dike. I was glad Ilunga wasn't around to see this. It was embarrassing. And God it was hot. The hottest day I could ever remember. Even occasional breezes rustling through the surrounding savanna grass didn't help. And then I looked at my hands. Both palms had become blistered. One was bleeding.

I took a short break and began digging again. The pain resumed, cracking out all over my body. Fifteen minutes later, my hands finally refused to grip the shovel. It fell to the ground. My back then refused to bend down to allow my arms the chance to refuse to pick it up. I was whipped. After just two hours of digging, I was incapable of doing any more. With a stiff, unnatural walk, I went over to the dike. Ilunga had just returned, and I collapsed next to him.

"I think I'll stop now," I managed, unable to hide my piteous state. "Take over if you want."

He did. He stood up, grabbed the shovel, and began working—smoothly, confidently, a man inured to hard work. Tip to the ground, push it in, pull it up, throw the dirt. Lying on my side, exhausted, I watched Ilunga. Then I looked hard at the spot where I had been digging. I had done nothing. The pond was essentially unchanged. I had moved perhaps 30 cubic feet of dirt. That meant 3,970 cubic feet for Ilunga.

After the brief digging experience, my weekly visits to the pond became even more painful and my awe of Ilunga grew. Day after day, four or five hours each day, he kept going. He kept digging his pond. He worked like a bull and never complained. Not once. Not when he hit a patch of gravel-size rocks that required a pickaxe and extra sweat. Not when, at the enormous pond's center, he had to throw each shovel-load twice to reach the dikes. And not when he became ill.

His hand was on fire one morning when I arrived and shook it.

"You're sick," I said.

"I know," he said and resumed digging.

"Then quit working and get some rest."

"I can't," came the reply. "I've got to finish this pond."

Several weeks later, Ilunga drove his shovel into the earth and threw its

load one last time. I never thought it would happen, but there it was: Ilunga's pond, huge, 15 by 20 meters, and completely finished. We hollowed out a bamboo inlet pipe and positioned it in the upper dike so canal water could enter the pond. Three days later, the pond was gloriously full of water. Using my motorcycle and two 10-liter carrying *bidons*, I transported stocking fish from another project post 20 miles to the south. When the last of the 300 tilapia fingerlings had entered the new pond, I turned to Ilunga and shook his hand over and over again. We ran around the banks hooting and hollering, laughing like children, watching the fish and marveling at what a wonderful thing a pond was. Where before there had been nothing, just grass and scrub trees, had come watery life.

To celebrate, I had brought a bottle of *tshitshampa*, the local home-brew, and Ilunga and I began pouring each other shots and slapping each other on the back and talking entirely too loud for two men sitting alone on a pond bank in the middle of the African bush. A warm glow spread from our stomachs to our limbs and soon, strongly our heads. Ilunga expressed his dream of digging three, no six, no 12 more fishponds, and I concluded that there was no biological reason why, if fed properly, tilapia couldn't grow to be the size of Land Rovers. At one point, we decided to assign names to all of Ilunga's fish. Straight-faced, signaling each other to be quiet, we crouched next to the water and began naming the first few fish that swam by. After four fish, though, we lost track of which fish had which names. This struck us as absolutely hilarious for some reason, and we fell on our backs and stamped our feet and laughed so hard we couldn't stand it.

Oh, sweet joy, the pond was finished. Ilunga had done it. He had taken my instructions and accomplished a considerable thing. And on that day when we finally stocked the pond, I knew that no man would ever command more respect from me than one who, to better feed his children, moves 4,000 cubic feet of dirt with a shovel.

I had a hero.

## 'I HAD A HERO' GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Bidons*: Containers

*Bonne chance*: French for "Good luck"

*Fingerlings*: Young fish

*Fish culture*: Raising of fish

*Incredulity*: Disbelief

*Indignantly*: Angrily

*Inured to*: Accustomed to

*Kalambayi*: A chiefdom in rural Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo)

*Machete*: A large knife used for cutting brush

*Paltry*: Small, measly, insignificant

*Projet Pisciculture Familiale*: The French name of the fish-raising project in Zaire. Due to earlier colonization by France, many people in the country speak French.

*Stocking fish*: A few small fish used for building a fish population

*Tilapia*: A kind of fish in Africa



## Overview

This lesson plan explores the meaning of the personal narrative “I Had a Hero,” by returned Peace Corps Volunteer Mike Tidwell. Tidwell is the author of a number of books, including *Amazon Stranger*, *In the Mountains of Heaven*, and *The Ponds of Kalambayi*, a book about his Peace Corps experience, which won the 1991 Paul Cowan Prize given by RPCV Writers and Readers. A former National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellow, Tidwell has written for *National Geographic Traveler*, *Washingtonian*, *American Heritage*, and *Readers Digest*. He is a frequent contributor to the *Washington Post*, where his writing has earned him three Lowell Thomas Awards, the highest prize in American travel journalism. Tidwell’s story “I Had a Hero” appeared in his memoir, *The Ponds of Kalambayi*, and also in *To Touch the World*, a collection of essays by Peace Corps writers, inspired by personal encounters in their service abroad.

“I Had a Hero” is a memoir about cross-cultural friendship and personal heroism. In it, Tidwell writes about his friendship with the African village chief Ilunga during his service from 1985 to 1987 in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), in central Africa. Like other Peace Corps Volunteers who have been moved to write about their friendships with people from other cultures, Tidwell discovered that his friendship with Ilunga caused him to confront important life issues and examine his prior assumptions about individuals in developing countries.

Tidwell met Ilunga when he was assigned by the Peace Corps to work in the chiefdom of Kalambayi, in rural Zaire, to teach villagers how to build and stock ponds for raising fish. The goal of the fish-raising project was to increase the amount of protein in the villagers’ diet, thereby reducing one of the causes of their malnutrition. When Tidwell taught the villagers how to move water from one place to another, build ponds, and stock them with fish, he worked with them to learn survival skills that they would be able to use for the rest of their lives.

We interviewed Tidwell, who provided us with insight into why he wrote “I Had a Hero”:

*I wrote this essay to honor Ilunga and the dozens of other village men and women I knew in Africa who every day work with tireless commitment to make the future of their children just a little bit better. To this day, all of those people are my heroes. I respect them as much as any people I've met before or since. I respect them twice as much now that I have my own child.... I sent Ilunga a copy of my book *The Ponds of Kalambayi*, from which “I Had a Hero” is adapted, but Ilunga speaks only Tshiluba, the local*

# READING AND RESPONDING TO *I HAD A HERO*

## 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.

*language, so he will never be able to read the original essay. Some day I hope to travel back to my Peace Corps site and sit down with Ilunga under a mango tree and translate the story for him, line by line. That would give me great pleasure.”*

**About the Setting**

To help your students understand the impact of the story, we’ve provided a bit more information on its setting, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC), formerly Zaire (and, before that, the Belgian Congo). Lying on the Equator, almost in the middle of the continent of Africa, the DROC has the third-largest population and the second-largest land area in sub-Saharan Africa. It includes the Congo River Basin, which encompasses an area of almost 400,000 square miles. In his introduction to *The Ponds of Kalambayi*, Tidwell describes the Congo River and the chiefdom of Kalambayi. We think his description is so evocative that we’ve included it as a separate worksheet to be photocopied for students (see page 87). We encourage you to read it to students or have them read it themselves.

**A Note to Teachers**

In the lesson on Day One, which recommends that students read Tidwell’s description, there are two concepts you can explore with students:

- The meaning of the word “traditional” as Tidwell has used it. Explain to students that the word traditional in this context refers to a place where life is the way it has been for many years. It is a place far from the flow of modern technology—where children grow up and do the same things their parents have done, where family ties are extremely important, and where habits and values rarely change. In the sense that Tidwell used the word traditional, it is the exact opposite of what we in the United States would construe as “modern.”
- The meaning of Tidwell’s statement: “What I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human.” As students are reading the story, ask them to look for the kinds of lessons the people of Kalambayi gave Tidwell on “what it means to be human.”

## Worksheet #1

## The Congo River Resource Sheet



Bending and arching, looking curiously confused, the Congo River makes its way through central Africa, crossing the Equator twice. It's an enormous river, dominating both geography and human life in Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of the Congo]. In his famous novella *The Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad wrote of the Congo:

*There was in (the world) one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on a map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land.*

Actually the Congo has several tails. A dozen major tributaries spill into its serpentine body. These tributaries are themselves fed by other rivers, each farther and farther lost in the depths of the land. One such branch, running through the grasslands of south-central Zaire, roughly a thousand miles east of the Congo's main body, is the Lubilashi River. On a map, the Lubilashi appears as an unremarkable ribbon meandering among the others. But on the ground it is wide and powerful; an impressive river. At one point along its banks live 20,000 people banded together in a chiefdom called Kalambayi. Like the river along which they live, the people of Kalambayi are lost, their lives barely touched by the probing hands of the 20th century. To this place I journeyed with my newly acquired duffel bag [as a Peace Corps Volunteer].



One way to understand what it means to be lost in sub-Saharan Africa is to visualize the continent in terms of concentric circles. The outermost circles, near the coasts, generally have the highest levels of economic development.... But as one moves inward geographically in Africa, one moves downward in income. On the way to the center of the continent, one passes through ever-tightening circles of poverty until, inside the final, smallest ring, one finds Kalambayi: a 400-square-mile patch of simple mud huts and barefoot people.... There are few places in the world where the people are as poor and the life as traditional.

For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase family protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human. There, at the center of the continent, they shared with me the ancient spirit of Africa's heart. They shared its hopes, its generosity. Above all, they shared its unbending will to survive in the face of adversities so severe I nearly lost my life more than once just passing through.



From the Introduction to Mike Tidwell's *The Ponds of Kalambayi*

*It always comes back to  
the same necessity: Go  
deep enough and there  
is a bedrock of truth,  
however hard.*

**May Sarton**  
Author

## DAY ONE

### Suggested Instructional Sequence

In this lesson plan, we present many ideas for reading and responding to “I Had a Hero.” In particular, we have differentiated the instructional activities to provide options for using “I Had a Hero” 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 unique 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 89.

### Purpose:

- To introduce students to the story “I Had a Hero.”
  - To stimulate individual and group reflection about the story’s meaning.
1. Provide students with a brief overview of the Peace Corps and some of its work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), using the information provided on pages 85 and 86. Explain to students that they will be reading “I Had a Hero,” a personal narrative by Mike Tidwell, a Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Zaire from 1985 to 1987.
  2. Show students a map of Africa and point out the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Explain that when a new government came into power in 1997, the country’s name was changed from Zaire. Provide students with a copy of the Congo River Resource Sheet (page 87) to give them a feel for the setting of the story, the rural chiefdom of Kalambayi.
  3. Explain that the two main characters in “I Had a Hero” are the author, Mike Tidwell, and Ilunga, the chief of the village of Ntita Kalambayi. Then read aloud the following passage from the book:

On the way to the center of the continent, one passes through ever-tightening circles of poverty until, inside the final, smallest ring, one finds Kalambayi: a 400-square-mile patch of simple mud huts and barefoot people.... There are few places in the world where the peo-

ple are as poor and the life as traditional.... For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase family protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human. There, at the center of the continent, they shared with me the ancient spirit of Africa's heart.

4. Suggest to students that, as they read "I Had a Hero," they look for examples of what Tidwell was referring to in #3 above. Refer students to the Glossary of Terms on page 21, and ask them to read "I Had a Hero."
5. *Journal Entry:* When students reach the end of the story, ask them to respond in their reader response journals to the following prompts:
  - What do you think is really important about this story?
  - What feelings did you have as you read it? Why?
6. Ask students to share their journal responses with a partner and then conduct a class discussion focusing on students' various interpretations of the story. Stimulate student dialogue by asking questions such as:
  - What do you think Tidwell wanted readers to be thinking about as they read "I Had a Hero"?
  - What lessons about "what it means to be human" do you think Tidwell learned from Ilunga?
7. *Journal Entry:* For homework, ask students to reread the story, underlining important parts, parts that made a strong impression on them, and parts that may have been confusing to them, in preparation for the next lesson. After they've reread the story, ask students to respond in their journals to these prompts:
  - What thoughts does this story bring to your mind about friendship?
  - What thoughts does this story bring to your mind about heroism?
8. Ask students to respond to these questions using examples from the text.

### Enduring Understandings:

- The potential for heroism lies within each of us.
- Friendships sometimes develop unexpectedly, in unlikely ways and places.
- Unlikely friendships can leave a lasting mark on us and influence our view of the world, ourselves, and others.

### Essential Questions:

- What does it take to be a hero?
- How can heroic individuals influence our lives?
- How can we become open to unexpected friendships? Why bother?
- What can this story teach us about the world, ourselves, and others?

### Materials:

Worksheet #1: The Congo River Resource Sheet. Worksheet #2: Comparison Matrix

### Assessments:

Journal entries, graphic organizers, dramatizations, written responses to the text.

## DAY TWO

### Purpose:

- To deepen students' understanding of the meaning of the story and help them respond to it in writing.
- To teach students a reading comprehension strategy.
- To have students relate an aspect of the story to their own lives.

### Part One

1. Have students share their underlinings from Day One with a partner. With another partner, have students share their journal responses. With a third partner, ask students to discuss the parts of the story that made a strong impression on them.
2. Ask if there was anything confusing about this story that the students would like to clear up. Then facilitate a class dialogue, comparing responses with the homework assignment: "What parts of the story did you underline? Why? What did this story say to you about friendship? About heroism?" During the discussion, ask students to support their opinions with examples from the text.
3. *Differentiating Instruction: Reading Comprehension.* This optional activity is for use with younger or less able readers. However, it can be useful to readers of any age. Explain to students that you are going to use the story of Tidwell and Ilunga to teach them a reading comprehension strategy they can use any time they want to remember what they have read. The strategy is to create detailed mental pictures of the information they are reading—almost like creating "a movie in their mind." Tell students that, after you model this strategy, you would like to hear their opinions about it.
4. It is a fairly well-accepted principle that if students have the ability to generate detailed mental images of information they are receiving, they can improve their comprehension of the information (Marzano et al., 1997; Marzano et al., 2001). Skilled readers may do this automatically. Less-skilled readers will benefit from being introduced to this strategy.
5. Ask students to close their eyes as you go through the significant incidents of the story, using the following sensory prompts to help students create detailed mental pictures in their minds:
  - Hear the sound of the author's motorcycle at the beginning of the story. Picture him wearing orange gloves, large goggles, and a yellow crash helmet—and suddenly seeing Ilunga emerge from the tall grass holding a spear and a machete and wearing a coonskin cap.
  - Picture this first meeting of Tidwell and Ilunga. How do you think each of them feels?

- Picture Ilunga digging the fishpond covered with dirt and sweat. Picture him putting the shovel into the earth time and time again, refusing to give up digging.
  - Picture the sweat running down Tidwell’s face as he helps Ilunga shovel. Imagine the pain each of them feels from the exertion of digging.
  - Feel the exhaustion Tidwell and Ilunga experience as they dig for hours in the hot sun. Silently reflect: Has there ever been a time when you felt this kind of exhaustion?
  - Picture the completed hole for the fishpond. Imagine the fishpond filled with water and fish. What does it look like? Sound like?
  - Picture Ilunga and Tidwell during their victory celebration, as they are “hooting and hollering” and laughing in joy—and as they, slightly drunk, begin to name the fish and predict how large they will grow. Silently reflect: How did Tidwell’s and Ilunga’s impressions of each other change from the beginning of the story to the end? Why?
6. In their Reading Response Journals, ask students to write about the mental image that was most significant to them. Then ask them to respond to the question: How did the author’s and Ilunga’s impressions of each other change from the beginning of the story to the end? Why?
7. Have students share their journal responses with a partner—someone with whom they haven’t shared their thoughts in a while. Then conduct a class discussion based on students’ journal responses.
8. Ask students what they think of visualization as a reading comprehension strategy. Did it help them find more meaning in the story? Understand it better? Why? Why not? Do they think this strategy will help them better remember the story in the future? Why? Why not? Would they modify this strategy in any way?
9. Mention to students that they can use this strategy on their own to help them remember anything they might have to read in any subject. Ask students if they have ever used visualization as a reading comprehension strategy. In what subjects might they try it? Relate a personal example, such as:
- When I’m reading a history book and know that I’ll need to remember important information, I sometimes try to create a movie in my mind of what I’m reading. Sometimes, I will even do this when I’m reading a science book. After a while, it seems to become automatic with me.

*To create one must be able to respond. Creativity is the ability to respond to all that goes on around us, to choose from the hundreds of possibilities of thought, feeling, action, and reaction and to put these together in a unique response, expression, or message that carries passion and meaning.*

**Clarissa Pinkola Estes**  
Psychologist

### Part Two

1. Draw students' attention to one of the enduring understandings we've identified for this story. Suggest to students that the potential for heroism lies within each of us. Ask whether they agree. Why or why not? Do they think anyone can be a hero?
2. Then ask
  - What exactly does it take to be a hero?
  - What are the qualities you associate with heroes?
3. As you are discussing these questions, write the qualities and characteristics students associate with heroes on an overhead transparency or chart paper.
4. Ask students to look back at the text and identify the qualities and characteristics that caused Tidwell to view Ilunga as a hero. Ask students to provide specific examples of heroic characteristics from the text.
  - Find out from students what they think impressed Tidwell so much about Ilunga that he was inspired to write a story about him after he returned home from serving in the Peace Corps.
5. *Written Response to Literature:* Ask students to write a vignette about someone who has inspired them by his or her heroism. Suggest to students that while their examples of heroes can be historical or public figures, they can also think of a heroic person "closer to home." In particular, suggest that they think about a friend, family member, or other person in their lives whom they consider heroic. As they write their vignette about this person, ask students to pay particular attention to describing the personal qualities and characteristics that made the person heroic to them. Then, ask them to describe how this person inspired them or influenced their lives.

## DAY THREE

**Purpose:**

- To help students probe the meaning of the story using a specific comprehension strategy.
  - To help students organize a written response to literature.
1. In groups of three, have students share and discuss the vignettes they have written. Explain that you would like each of the students to take five minutes to summarize their vignettes to the members of their small group and then to invite reactions from group members.
  2. Following the group discussions, ask students:
    - How were the heroic individuals each of you wrote about similar? How were they different?
    - What qualities and characteristics did the heroic individuals you wrote about possess?
    - How were these similar to or different from Ilunga's personal qualities and characteristics?
  3. As students relate the heroic qualities and characteristics they've come up with, add them to the list you began on Day Two on the chalkboard, an overhead transparency, or chart paper.
  4. *Differentiating Instruction: Reading Comprehension:* This optional activity is for use with younger or less able readers. However, it can be useful to readers of any age. Recent research has found that graphic and symbolic representations of similarities and differences enhance student understanding of content (Marzano et al., 2001; Hyerle, 1996).  
 Explain to students that you are going use the heroic characteristics they have generated to teach them another reading strategy they can use to increase their comprehension and level of thinking about a text. The strategy is to use a specific graphic organizer called a "Comparison Matrix" (see Worksheet #2).
  5. Show students a copy of the Comparison Matrix on an overhead projector. Explain that in this matrix, you'll be modeling for them how to compare the author and Ilunga with respect to the heroic characteristics they have generated.
  6. Provide students a copy of the Comparison Matrix on Worksheet #2.



Worksheet #2  
Comparison Matrix

Heroic Characteristics	Tidwell	Ilunga
<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>		

7. Walk students through the use of this strategy by saying something like: “Suppose you were to choose ‘desire to help others’ as a heroic characteristic. You’d begin by writing it in the first box in the first column.” Now ask students to work in pairs to add their own characteristics to the matrix—the characteristics that have the most meaning for them. After they have identified and written a different characteristic in each cell of the first column of the matrix, ask students, still working in pairs, to work row by row and write in the columns labeled “Tidwell” and “Ilunga” brief examples from the text of how each man did or did not exhibit each of the heroic characteristics.
8. Review with students the examples they identified. Ask what conclusions they can draw from this information.
9. *Written Response to Literature:* For homework, ask students to write a brief character sketch of Ilunga. Ask them to use the information they generated in their comparison matrices as an organizing structure for their writing. Ask students to select the lines or sentences from the text that they feel best illustrate Ilunga’s strength of character, and to include these textual examples in their character sketch. Give older, more experienced students the option of comparing Ilunga with the heroic individual they described in their vignette from the night before—or with a fictional hero or heroine. In this option, ask students to comment on what they think it means to have “strength of character.” Let students know that, in this assignment, you will be reading and responding to their writing.

*All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.*

**Ernest Hemingway**  
Author

### Purpose:

- To help students relate “I Had a Hero” to specific issues in their own lives.
  - To review the reading comprehension strategies used with this story.
1. Suggest to students that, just as in the case of Tidwell and Ilunga, friendships sometimes develop unexpectedly in unlikely ways and places. Friendships like these can sometimes influence the way we view the world, ourselves, and others. Ask students:
- In what ways do you think Tidwell and Ilunga may have changed as a result of their friendship?
  - In what ways did Tidwell and Ilunga’s friendship change the way they may have viewed the world, themselves, or others?
  - In what ways were Tidwell and Ilunga open to having an unexpected friendship develop?

### DAY FOUR

2. Ask students to think of a time when they developed an unexpected or unlikely friendship with someone very different from themselves. Ask them to do a five-minute “quick write” in their journals about this friendship and its impact on them.
3. Pursue the theme of “unlikely friendships” by asking students such questions as: How can we become more open to unexpected and unlikely friendships? Why would we want to bother? What if Tidwell had met Ilunga but had chosen not to befriend him—because Ilunga was so “different”? Why do we sometimes tend to avoid others who seem “different”? What if everyone in this school/this community/this country avoided getting to know people whom they perceived to be different?
4. *Journal Entry:* Ask students to respond in their journals to the following prompts:
  - What did I learn about friendship and heroism from reading and thinking about “I Had a Hero”?
  - What did this story teach me about the world, myself, and others?

**Choices and Explorations:**

“I Had a Hero” is rich with instructional possibilities. If time permits, have students complete one of these optional assignments:

- Working in teams of four, write a script for a dramatization of “I Had a Hero.” Then conduct your dramatization for the class.
- Imagine that you are a Peace Corps Volunteer writing about Ilunga in a journal you keep to record your Peace Corps experiences. Describe how your friendship with Ilunga has changed the way you view the world, yourself, and others. As you assume the role of Mike Tidwell, describe the reasons why you (Tidwell) consider Ilunga to be a hero.
- Assume the role of Ilunga and write a description of your impressions of the Peace Corps Volunteer Mike Tidwell—from the time you first saw him (arriving on a motorcycle in orange gloves, large bulging goggles, and a bright yellow crash helmet) until your victory celebration with him at the end of the story. Describe how your friendship with Tidwell has changed the way you view the world, yourself, and others.