

A Treasure Trove of Memories: Diving into Letters Written during My Peace Corps Service

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In July 1985, I embarked on an adventure that promised to be the “toughest job you’ll ever love.” I was deployed to Frogmore, South Carolina, for an eight-week training before additional in-country training in Tonga, Tanzania. Sworn in as a Peace Corps volunteer a few weeks later, I took a three-day, forty-two-hour Land Rover ride with three other volunteers and the luggage of a fourth volunteer who was flown to his site. We also had a Peace Corps driver who was to drive us to Sumbawanga, Rukwa Region, in the western part of Tanzania, and from there, we were to find our sites. We arrived late in the evening of the third day, and, since there was “no room at the inn,” we ended up on the floor of some sympathetic ex-pats until we could get to the volunteer’s house the next day.

Navigating each *duka* (shop) and open market for food, we managed to settle in before finding the regional agricultural officer, who was in charge of sending us to our respective locations. After many trips to the office over many weeks, we finally began to get answers. Leigh, a fifty-year-old farmer from Iowa, was sent to a regional farm near Chala (about fifty kilometers from Sumbawanga), and I was to be sent to a new district that was opening up in Nkansi District, a mere one hundred kilometers from Sumbawanga. I was to venture out with little more than a *pikipiki* (motorcycle) and best wishes. I didn’t realize that to reach Sumbawanga driving a *pikipiki* that far on sandy, rutted roads could take as long as six to eight hours, but I was up for the adventure. Shortly after I settled into my new site, three of the volunteers left. Ten months later, Leigh also would leave. I remained as the last of the five original volunteers in Rukwa Region and finished my two years of service. As a district livestock field officer and a district agricultural officer, I worked on three projects: a gardening project for nursing students at the local hospital, teaching (in both Swahili and English) human nutrition to the nursing students, and reintroducing poultry into the area.

Since that time, many students have come to my office because they heard me speak about the Peace Corps or because a professor directed them my way. They are interested in joining and want to know the ins and outs, and I don’t want them thinking it will be a breeze, so I am honest in my characterization of the experience. I share the good, the bad, and the ugly, and after about an hour of

listening to my stories and assurances that that if they want to do it, they will be able to (and that their worried parents can call me), students often tell me, “You really should write your stories.”

In January 2019, during my sabbatical, I had an opportunity to organize and review the many letters I had sent home and letters that had been sent to me by family and friends during my journey with the US Peace Corps from July 1985 to October 1987. Rereading letters from boxes that had not been opened in over thirty-four years brought back memories of experiences long forgotten. Many tears were shed, yet this also inspired me to write sixteen stories and three poems based on my service as a Peace Corps volunteer during that time.

THE BANDAGED HAND

The first story I want to share, “The Bandaged Hand,” is about a young man I met at a hospital in my town of Namanyere, Rukwa Region, Tanzania. By April of 1986, I was working at the mission hospital, teaching nursing students about gardening techniques and human nutrition, so it was not unusual to stop by the hospital on my *pikipiki*. The hospital consisted of various parts. Inside one building, corridors led to the surgery areas, the laboratory, the patient exam rooms, and some patient wards. Other patient wards were just under roof cover, and it was not uncommon to see chickens roaming through the open wards. If you were a patient, your family was expected to bring sheets for the bed and meals each day, as these were not part of the hospital’s role.

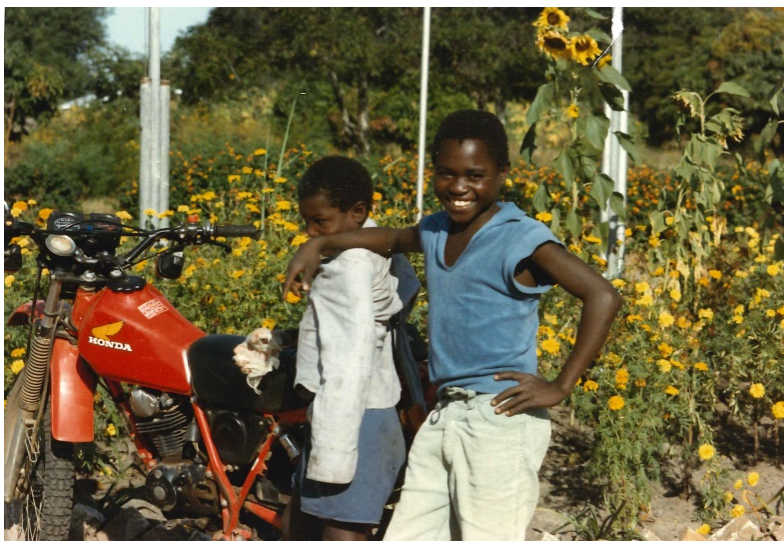


Figure 1. Two friends checking out my *pikipiki*. Photo credit: Kathleen M. Jones.

One day, my counterpart, Lutendula, and I had to make a stop at the hospital. When we pulled in, two little boys who had heard the motorcycle came running towards us with huge smiles (see Figure 1).

Like most children around the world, they were fascinated by vehicles, and here was a motorcycle! They wanted to touch it, climb on it, and, if they had had their druthers, take a ride on it. Although I didn't take them on a ride, I did let them climb on it, and they made revving sounds, pretending to drive it.

One boy, whom I will call Michael, had been a patient at the hospital for three weeks. Michael stood there with his right arm in a sling, the white gauze in sharp contrast to his dark, chocolate-colored skin. It was obvious that he had lost his fingers and thumb, but why? The boys asked all kinds of questions about the motorcycle, and I asked questions about Michael's hand. At first, he was reluctant to share, and his smile quickly disappeared, but Lutendula continued to ask in Swahili, growing more concerned as he listened. With great reluctance and a quivering voice, Michael shared in Swahili what had happened to him. Lutendula responded to Michael but refused to tell me what he had learned, saying only that it was too sad. I persisted, and he said it was a family issue.

I went to see the matron of the hospital who runs the nursing program, and she shared more. Michael had been staying with his *shangazi* (father's sister). One night, Michael was waiting for the meal to be served, and he was told not to touch anything. Traditionally, the man and the oldest boys are fed first, then the older girls. Typically, by the time the mother and youngest children sit down, the protein is long gone and the only thing left tends to be *ugali*, a stiff corn porridge. Some meat had been included in the meal that night, and, although he had been warned, Michael snatched a small piece of meat and ate it. To teach him a lesson, his *shangazi* took his hand and thrust it into the hot coals of the *kijiko* (charcoal stove), holding it there to teach him not to steal. His hand blistered and was not properly cared for, so, by the time he was brought to the hospital, his fingers and thumb had to be amputated due to gangrene that had set in. Now, he had only stubs for fingers. This same *shangazi* had been bringing him meals and caring for him at the hospital but had to travel to tell her brother what she had done, so now another aunt was caring for him.

I was shocked and sickened by this account and asked if the aunt would be arrested. "No," the matron explained, "this is a family matter, and the family will decide how to handle it." Most likely, since she was teaching him a "lesson," the aunt would not be arrested. I never saw anything like this again, but child abuse is an international crisis.

RECEIPT, PLEASE!

A couple of trips to the government store inspired my next story, "Receipt, Please!"

Being constantly stared at and pointed to for having a white face, freckled skin, and limp brown hair can be unnerving, but this is expected when you are stationed in a remote area of Tanzania. I was an oddball, an outsider who spoke a few words of Kiswahili and lived as poor as the people in my village.

As I settled into my life as a Peace Corps volunteer three months after arriving in this East African country, I adjusted also to being the village spectacle. Each afternoon, as I squatted down to cook some food in my outdoor kitchen, I realized that the light was being blocked. I would look up to see four or five Tanzanian women and a number of barefoot children at the windows and doorway, staring and giggling, speaking in the local, sing-song language Kifipa as I struggled to cook over charcoal. I was the circus clown, a spectacle to come see, this *mzungu* (white person) in her loose pants and t-shirt who had been sent to their village. I would smile and try to engage in conversation, usually to no avail. It was getting to be a lonely existence. To ensure some privacy, after a couple of weeks I moved my cooking into the house. Each day, as I exited my home, I waved to the small crowd gathered on the road to see the *mzungu* who had moved in.

After a couple of months, the staring lessened, and I decided I was staying in my new community. I had established an outdoor demonstration garden as part of my work as an agricultural field officer, and now I wanted to spruce up my house, which was pretty bare. I recalled my mom saying a house becomes a home when you hang curtains. The house I was living in had two large windows in front, with four horizontal bars sunk into the homemade bricks to provide “security.” No glass. No screening. Just four, half-inch thick metal bars. I had smaller windows, too, in the three rooms, and each needed some curtains. Although no curtain rods were to be had, with a couple of nails on either side and some string going across, I could improvise.

Fortunately, anytime something new was in town, word spread quickly, and someone had stopped by the office to report that the newly opened government store was selling material for sheets. I knew that if I hurried, I might be in time to purchase some, so I rushed home, measured the windows, and calculated that I could get by with four meters of material to make some nice curtains—with little ruffles at the top! With great excitement, I fired up my *pikipiki* and headed to the government store.

Armed with window measurements and shillings in my pocket, I eagerly entered the *duka*. Taking one step inside, I immediately faced a long countertop that ran the length of the store, approximately five meters. Under the countertop, showcased behind glass, were a number of items for sale. Additional items sat on shelves behind the counter, out of the reach of customers but within reach of the salesclerk. This was my first experience at this government store in Namanyere, but I had heard they also sold toilet paper when they got it in. The cost, the equivalent of a dollar a roll, was exorbitant, but it was a luxury I wished to have when I could, so I needed to understand the protocol for this store.

I waited patiently as the clerk, dressed in a tan leisure suit, finished with the only other customer. I eyed the bolts of fabric and could not believe my luck. They actually had two types of fabric: one was solid pink, the other a white print with small, colorful flowers. I recalculated in my head and decided that I could use both colors to add some variety to my home.

We began with the usual greetings:

“Habari za kazi?”

“Nzuri, na yako.”

“Kazi ni nzuri sana, asante.”

After a few more greetings, I proceeded with the negotiations. I was so excited as I asked for two meters of the pink and two meters of the floral print fabric.

“You need two and a half meters,” the Tanzanian clerk responded in his crisp, British-accented English.

“Um, no, I need only two meters of each, please,” I confidently responded.

“No, you need two and a half meters,” he persisted.

Considering my dwindling budget for such a luxury item (the cost was about one fourth of my month’s stipend), I smiled and repeated that I needed only two meters of each, emphasizing *mbili* (two) while I held up two fingers to emphasize my point.

He took a deep breath and peered at me suspiciously, asking, “What are you using it for?”

“Curtains,” I replied, thinking he was just being friendly by asking.

“Curtains?” he responded, “Well, you can’t have any then. This is for bedsheets only. Thank you for coming in.”

Horrified, I realized I was being “dismissed” from the government store. “Bedsheets? But I want to make curtains,” I replied, a bit deflated.

“Well, you cannot buy it for curtains. This material has been designated for bedsheets only,” he responded, looking down his nose at me.

“Oh!” I responded, ready to try again. “Well, I would like two meters of the white print and two meters of the pink.”

“What are you going to use it for?” he queried.

“Bedsheets,” I exclaimed.

“Well then, you will need two and a half meters. Would you like the pink or the print?”

“I’d like two and a half meters of the pink and two and a half meters of the white one with flowers,” I replied through clenched teeth, frustrated that I would now have to buy an extra meter of material.

“Why? What are you going to use it for?” he persisted.

“Bedsheets for my *two* beds,” I lied, exasperated and just wanting to get out of the store already.

“Oh, I will cut it for you,” he replied with a smile. As he cut it, he rambled on about the need to make sure things were used for their proper purpose. So, this is life in a socialist economy, I mused, as he wrapped up my material in brown paper, took my money, and wrote out the receipt. I was delighted that

no one else had seen this spectacle. I already stood out as the *mzungu* and didn't need the rumor mill working overtime about my lack of understanding regarding bedsheet material and the fact that I claimed to have *two* beds. I was already laughed at enough for other oddball antics that didn't make sense to me in this African country.

As I turned to walk out with my package under my arm and my receipt tucked in my pocket, the ever-efficient governmental clerk ran around the counter and blocked the door just as I took a step forward.

"Receipt, please!" he demanded, standing ramrod straight, like a soldier.

"What?" I responded incredulously.

"I must see your receipt and package to make sure they match up," the official-looking clerk responded.

I handed over the package and dug out the receipt so they could be inspected. He looked carefully at the receipt and then at the package and offered a nod of approval as he handed them back and stepped aside so I could exit. I walked out, chuckling under my breath while keeping an eye out for the camera, expecting an Alan Funt-like character to walk over and say, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*."

A month or two later, I had another opportunity to visit the government store. I had recently purchased a white, enamel-coated basin to wash my dishes and clothes in and to mix flour, eggs, yeast, and water to make bread. However, after a few weeks of tasting soap in my bread, I decided I deserved another basin. So, I walked into the still-empty government store and eyed the ever-efficient, tan-leisure-suit-clad government clerk, who immediately jumped to attention.

Once again, five minutes of traditional Swahili greetings ensued before we got down to business. I eyed up the display under the counter and could not believe my good fortune: there was a blue basin in addition to the white one on display. I decided to ask for one of each since I could use the blue one for making bread and the white ones for laundry and dishes. This was a bit of luxury, but I felt I deserved it. The clerk nodded and went to the back storage area and came out with one white basin, saying he was sorry, but they had only white and yellow basins in stock.

"Oh," I responded reasonably. "Well, I will take a yellow one and this blue one," pointing to the one in the showcase and thinking of my increasing good fortune at being able to distinguish among the three tasks.

"No, no." he replied in that crisp British-accented English, "We only have yellow and white basins. We do not have the blue ones in stock."

"Well, that's okay," I responded patiently. "I will take the blue one from the showcase and a yellow one from the stock room."

“What do you want them for?” he inquired suspiciously, his brows furrowed. “I recall you bought one a few weeks ago.”

“What are they sold for?” I asked, and, although I don’t recall his response, I enthusiastically replied that I was buying them as gifts for friends so they could use them for their prescribed purpose.

“Alright, then you can have a yellow one and a white one. We do not have any of the blue basins right now,” he responded.

“But why can’t I have the blue one from the showcase and a yellow one from the back?” I persisted, a bit frustratedly.

“If I give you the blue one, I would not have it on display to show people what we have available,” he replied, with a slight edge to his voice as his patience was wearing thin.

“But you don’t have any blue ones for sale,” I countered. “You could put a yellow one down there, and then they’ll know you have white and yellow ones.”

He just looked at me, sighed, and clucked his tongue in a “tsk, tsk, tsk” manner. Obviously, I was not understanding the requirements for presenting items for sale at a government store.

So I paid and waited as he finished writing out my receipt for one yellow and one white basin. I picked up my basins, and, before I could take a step, he was out from behind the counter, standing ramrod straight and blocking my exit: “Receipt, please! I need to make sure the items match your receipt.” I once again handed over the receipt and the basins. After giving his nod of approval, he stepped aside and handed me my purchases and receipt. I walked out, never to enter the government store again.

A SILENT CRY

“A Silent Cry” is a poem I wrote about a herd of elephants I saw in the Serengeti as I traveled back to my site in Namanyere with other foreigners working in Tanzania. One night, when we were staying with some researchers and sitting on the stoops of their trailers before going to bed, we watched a herd of elephants heading towards us as a fire was burning behind them.

A Silent Cry

Their ears flapping in the wind,
Trunks raised to catch the human scent,
Their backs to the poacher’s fire;
The moon rising behind them.
They are majestic.
They are in charge.

Graceful in their gray wrinkled skin.

Turning from our scent,
Avoiding the charge,
They move away from us,
And away from the poacher's fire.
They are majestic.
They are in charge.
Peaceful in their gray wrinkled skin.

Why would anyone want to hurt them?
Why do poachers seek them?
Their ivory tusks sought after,
An Asian aphrodisiac, a fortune to be had.
They are majestic.
They are in charge.
Ancient in their gray wrinkled skin.

He silently sets the fires
To drive them into the trap.
Earning a lot of money
Trying to keep his family alive.
They are majestic.
They were in charge.
Waiting in their gray wrinkled skin.

The poacher kills them, or maybe just stuns,
They are left to die as
The poacher hacks to their gums.
A year's salary, maybe two, for each tusk.
They were majestic.
They were in charge.
Now they are left to die,
Abandoned in their gray wrinkled skin,

A silent cry.

THEY CALL ME KATALINA

“*Mzungu! Mzungu!*” they shrieked, running away from me in sheer terror. Hiding behind their grass-thatched-roof houses, the children’s black skin glistened in the tropical sun as tears ran down their dirty faces. I had been walking through the village with my counterpart, Lutendula, as we were there to visit someone. Sobbing, the children peeked around the corner to see if I was coming any closer.

“*Mzungu kuchinja* (white people slaughter),” they shrieked as they pointed at me.

They knew “*mzungu kuchinja*” from stories grandmothers passed down to grandchildren, a legacy of the colonialist periods which had ended for Tanzania in 1961. Once again, my whiteness had struck fear in their hearts. Was it ever going to end?

“*Mzungu yuko wapi? Nina agopa wa wazungu!*” (Where is the white person? I am scared of white people!), I yelled back as I looked around, trying to sound just as fearful as they did. Lutendula started laughing and asked me when I had thought of that. The children peeked around the corners of their homes, still looking at me suspiciously.

“You are the white person,” they responded in Kiswahili, the official language of this East African nation.

“My name is not ‘white person’,” I countered in Swahili as I squatted on the sandy dirt that made a pathway through the village. Smiling, I looked at each child and nodded my head in encouragement. Then, continuing in Swahili, I told them, “My name is Katalina, and I work for *Kilimo* and *Mifugo*” (Agriculture and Livestock).

“You are not *mzungu*?” they queried, with smiles beginning to form as they continued to keep their distance.

“No, my name is Katalina.”

Slowly and timidly, they crept up to me, and I didn’t move for fear of scaring them again. Becoming braver, they came up to me as I sat on the hard-packed ground. The children began asking a lot of questions as they touched the light blonde hair on my arms and even tried their hand at corn-rowing my straight brown hair. Lutendula and I stayed right there, answering all their questions before moving on to the person we had come to visit.

This was the fourth month of my service, and my acceptance by the children in the village had begun. I found out later that their grandmothers, the family storytellers, gathered children at their feet and shared stories that go back to the tenth century, when slave trading began, as did a long history of colonial rule. Inevitably, if there were any type of uprising, the colonists came with an army and weapons and

slaughtered those causing the trouble. Lutendula later shared that many families in the village warned their children, “If you are not good, we will send you to the *mzungu*’s house.”

Throughout the region, I was known as the “white woman who lives by herself in Namanyere.” In Peace Corps tradition, I lived as the people did and ate what they ate. It was up to me to assimilate to their culture as I felt comfortable. But the loneliness I felt until I was finally accepted cannot be described. For many villagers, I was the first white person they had ever seen, and, for others, the first white person who had ever walked through their village and ate as they did.

A few months later, I was again walking through the village and a Tanzanian mother, about twenty-four years old, woke up her baby, who was slung over her back, moving him to the front. Pointing at me, she began yelling and crying to the baby, “*Mzungu, mzungu kuchinja.*” I tried greeting her in Swahili and Kifipa, a local tribal language. Yet, visibly shaking, she kept yelling at her child, trying to teach the child to be fearful of a white person. Then I heard it . . . the village children were giggling and laughing as they addressed her: “She is not *mzungu*. She is Katalina.” I just backed away, hoping the child who moments earlier had been peacefully sleeping on his mother’s back was not too traumatized by the whole scene.

A few months after that, as I was riding my *pikipiki* down to the marketplace, about five kilometers away, I was quite startled. My heart started beating fast, and I could feel sweat running down my face. I saw a *mzungu*. No one had told me a *mzungu* was coming to town, and, on the rare occasion that it did happen, I was expected to host them. Shocked and stunned by her appearance, I realized how the children must have felt that first time eight months ago when they saw me in their village. Her white skin really looked out of place in this barren area. I didn’t stop. I was actually scared.

I continued to the marketplace, my freckled skin as white as the day I arrived and decided to ask around. In Swahili, I greeted vendors and shopkeepers and asked, “Have you seen a *mzungu* around here? I think I saw one!”

Each person would look right into my blue eyes and freckled white face and respond, “No, Katalina, we have not seen a *mzungu* for a long time!” One person even suggested that it was the sun affecting my eyes. I just walked away, muttering, “I swear I saw a white person.”

I drove back up the road, and, sure enough, there she was: long blonde hair, skinny as a rail, walking beside a Tanzanian man. I stopped my *pikipiki*, took off my helmet, and shook out my short brown hair. I began greeting them, and the man responded amicably, but I thought it odd that the woman was not responding to my greetings. She just stood there, looking really white and scrawny. After a few minutes of greetings, I realized we were speaking in Swahili, so I asked her if she spoke English. With a British accent, she responded, “Oh, thank gawd.” I asked her why she was in Namanyere, which is not a tourist destination. She told me she was traveling, and someone had told her that if she went to

Namanyere, she could catch a ride to Lake Tanganyika. I laughed, explaining I had been here for a year and had yet to make it to the lake, the second largest on the continent and the longest freshwater lake in the world. Although it was only a hundred kilometers away, I had never asked about catching a ride there, but I knew our farmers often took corn down to trade for rice and promised I would try to find a ride for her.

Looking at me quizzically, she asked, “What did you say your name was?”

“They call me Katalina.”

“Oh,” she responded. “When I was walking up the road, all these children came out and were waving, shouting, and smiling, and saying something like, “*Habari* (how are you), Katalina!”

“Yeah, they thought you were me. All white people look the same to them,” I replied, standing there with my straight brown hair and sixty more pounds.

She stayed with me a few days, and I arranged a trip for her to Lake Tanganyika.

A couple of months after this, I was on a bus trip from Mbeya to Sumbawanga, about 300 miles that would take about fifteen hours to traverse. I boarded the forty-eight-passenger bus with the other ninety-six people traveling to Sumbawange. I was very lucky: I got a seat. Chickens also were on the trip, running through the bus and sometimes flying over the passengers when they couldn’t get through. With our luggage and a few goats precariously tied to the top of the bus, we were off. Little did I know the adventures that lay ahead.

We bumped and jostled along the sandy, rocky, unpaved road, swaying in place at times, but the bus was so tightly packed we didn’t fall out of our seats each time we hit a bump. About two hours into the trip, there was a loud *THUNK*, and we stopped. We had hit a cow. I needed to pee, and this was the perfect opportunity. I jumped off the bus as the driver was standing out front, arguing with the farmer whose cow lay dying. There was nothing I could do except relieve myself, so I found some bushes that would hide some of my white skin and squatted. This is the reality of living in the bush.

I re-boarded the bus, and forty-five minutes later it was bumpity bump again on the road, swaying and being lifted from our seats and thumped back down. I drifted off to sleep for the next few hours before being awakened to much commotion. Again, we were stopped. Not knowing why but knowing it would be at least a half hour, I looked outside and saw a *duka* close by. I walked into the *duka* and purchased a warm Pepsi (no refrigeration in this area, either) and a package of six vanilla cream cookies. I walked back outside and sat on the stoop to settle in and watch the men from the bus try to solve our latest problem: a flat tire. I sat there quietly, chuckling to myself as I watched the driver produce a car jack which fell about a half meter short of potentially lifting the bus. A couple of the men left and returned with a rock that was shoved under the side of the bus, and the jack was precariously placed on

top. This nearly did it, lifting the bus almost enough. Next came the machetes as the men dug up the hard-packed roadway to ease the tire off.

Some children were watching me. To them I was an oddity, the only white person on the bus. They weren't from my village, and they were giggling nervously and pointing at me. I was reminded of the children in my own village, who were initially scared of me so many months ago. I broke out the cookies and opened them up, offering them around. I greeted the children in Kiswahili, which elicited even more giggles. One little girl, who appeared to be alone, timidly came over, accepted a cookie, and sat down beside me. We struck up a conversation as the others listened. She was traveling with her father, one of the men working on the tire. As we conversed, she explained she was from the Arusha region (800 miles northeast of where we were then). Her mother had died a few weeks ago, and her father was taking her back to his tribal land, where she was going to live with her *shangazi*. We sat quietly after this, not knowing what to say but just munching our cookies as we watched the men, her father included, change the tire.

As they wrapped up the tire change, everyone re-boarded, and we were back on the road, leaving behind a small patch of ground more torn up than normal. Bumpity bump . . . chickens were still flying and squawking around us, and we were packed tighter than ever since more people had joined us. Exhausted from traveling most of the day, I fell into a deep sleep, only half awakening a few hours later. Something was wrong, but I couldn't put it together in my sleepy state. I found myself leaning about forty degrees to the right. In fact, the whole bus was leaning right and was about to tip over! Confusion and panic were setting in among the passengers. We had to get off the bus. People were shouting hysterically, encouraging us to move *haraka sana* (very quickly).

I disembarked, having to jump down about a meter and a half from the left entrance. After jumping, I went and gathered with the women and children at the back and, although it was pitch black out, my eyes adjusted and I realized that the bus had landed in a ditch and was tipping over. As the men jumped down, they went over and literally held up the bus so it would not topple over the cliff edge. We were in the middle of nowhere and stranded.

RrrrrmmmmMM! The engine revved and the men tried rocking and pushing the bus as the tires spun in the air. The bus didn't budge; it just leaned farther to the right. *RRRrrrrrrmmmmmm! Rrrrrmmmm!* The men pushed, trying again and again to dislodge it as the engine revved. More than once, it appeared that the bus was going to tip over and crush the men. Fear and panic welled up in me. If the bus toppled over, we were going to have to drag out the men underneath it.

Although the night was not cold, I began shivering. Standing there quietly and fervently praying, I felt a presence next to me. A hand reached up and clutched mine. I leaned down and picked up the little girl whose mother had died. Her father was over there, about to be crushed, and she had no one else to

turn to. I realized at that moment, as she trembled in my arms, that in the still night of darkness my skin color was the same as hers.

After a half hour or so, the men got the bus out of the ditch, and we continued on our journey to Sumbawanga. I watched as the little girl and her father boarded the bus. She smiled and waved at me, as did her father, but, after the end of the journey, I never saw my little friend again.

OVER THIRTY YEARS LATER

... a treasure trove of memories unearthed....

Today, seven four-inch binders house the letters that helped me reconstruct the events I have shared with you; my mother had asked me to write bigger and now, at my age, I understand why she had wanted me to (see Figure 2). I consider this collection a tribute to my two Peace Corps mentors Jim and Betty Diamond, who did two stints in the Peace Corps in Mali and Chad in the early 1970s and who encouraged me to follow in their footsteps. While I was in college, Jim and Betty shared many stories about their experiences in the Peace Corps and inspired me to join. Thankfully, they also reassured my parents that I would be fine.



Figure 2. The final binders of the organized letters. Photo credit: Kathleen M. Jones.

As Peace Corps volunteers, we were promised by our trainers that the Peace Corps would take care of three things: money, health care, and mail, but they failed me on all three. The Peace Corps could not figure out how to get my salary to me since I didn't have telegraph service in my area (much less a

bank). I had money stolen and survived three bouts of malaria. Also, my mail was often held up for various reasons, so it was sixteen weeks before I found out I had a nephew and another nine before I found out his name. Still, I learned a lot about myself and realized that I am a strong, resilient, and independent woman. I share all this with students considering joining the Peace Corps, so most of those who do end up joining do so with their eyes wide open.

Nonetheless, I have never regretted serving in the US Peace Corps, and it has never left my resumé. It was an experience of a lifetime, and I continue to welcome students into my office to discuss serving in the US Peace Corps as an opportunity for growth and tremendous job experience.