

Welcome to the Developing World, (Insert Do-Gooder's Name Here)

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“Ugh. Mom look at this photo Melody V. put up of her mission trip to Guatemala. I can’t stand people like her,” I mindlessly say to my mother over breakfast one morning.

*My mom looks at me in disbelief. “Excuse me?” she says, “People like her are trying to make a **difference** in this world.”*

“Is she actually trying to make a difference or is she using those children for a photo op?” I retort.

*My mother becomes flustered and launches into a debate about how I think charity work is awful and I shouldn’t be so hard on people who are out there **seriously** trying to make a difference, and how the liberal institution I attend has transformed my beautiful, optimistic mind into this pile of cynical mush. I remain silent, as this conversation has failed to come across as logical to my mom numerous times. I don’t blame her. Most people truly want to believe everyone who goes on these trips or signs up for the Peace Corps are honestly doing it for the benefit of others. Sadly, this is not the case as I’ve come to realize over the last couple of years. My question is: Why?*

There is a bustle of students passing in and out of the airy SIS atrium at American University. Some are running to class, some have their heads bent, texting or checking email; others walk with coffee in hand, engaged in a discussion with their friends. More often than not, these conversations are centered on one thing: the rest of the world. While this seems like it would be more than “one thing,” to these students, the world is their oyster, the one thing they care about, and the one thing they decided to spend \$60,000 a year to study, explore, discuss, and eventually, exploit. Yes, these students all have one thing in common: they wish to be the movers and shakers out in the “real world.” Ever since their heads were filled with the wise words of Gandhi, “Be the change you wish to see in the world,” droves of students flock to AU with high hopes that they’ll become the next Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, or David Gregory.

Little do they know their chances of winning the presidency, let alone finding a job, are slim. College graduates know they have been handed a pile of crap in regards to the job market, economy, environment, foreign relations, and beyond. There is no apparent hope for the future. Feeling hopeless, students decide they need to do something in order to realize this dream of making the world a better place. A majority of the time, they turn to institutions and organizations such as Teach for America, Greenpeace, or the Peace Corps to fill this void in their lives. Many are stunned when I interject into their conversations with my bold claims to check out the legitimacy of these organizations and their purposes for doing what they do.

Yes, mom, in fact, sending me to American University, in Washington D.C., our nation’s capital, did help me realize these notions were jaded, but just not in the way you’d think. American University is ranked as the second highest medium sized supplier of Peace Corps volunteers for the year 2015, falling behind Western Washington by only six volunteers. This hallowed and proud

service organization has been in business since March of 1961, sending its prodigies to over 140 countries to do good deeds. The Corps, which has been hailed as the saving grace of the developing world, appears at surface level to be all about those in need, when really most are no different from the thousands of voluntourists who have been flooding *Facebook* with tales and pictures of their adventures.

I looked around at my peers, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, eager to step out into the real world to make their impact, and I slowly begin to realize one thing similar in all of them: they boasted about wishing to better the world and make *their* impact on the world in *their* own way. They know where *they* wanted to help, how *they* plan on getting there, the classes *they* are taking, and what *they* want to major in so *they* can use *their* new skills to make *their* dreams a reality. When I first met these students, I wanted to ask each one how they had become so selfless, but soon realized they weren't actually empathetic. They possessed a purely self-centered notion to make change *they* saw fit. There is a lot of commentary about the "them," and not so much about the people they wish to help. In a group of students that appeared to be all about helping the other, they rarely mentioned, let alone thought about those in need.

I have brought this up to my peers on several different occasions. Each time, their stunned faces and blank stares answer my inquiry of their purposes for enlisting in the Peace Corps. They become taken back by my comments and cannot believe I would ever suggest such blasphemy about their valiant efforts. Still I wonder - if they truly are going into this service for the good of others, why not just say that? Why get so offended? I often believe this shock is due to the fact they probably haven't thought of this themselves. They somehow managed to suppress this notion in their minds, convince themselves they truly are in it for "the greater good," and I'm just this hyper-judgmental person who kicks babies and thinks charity work is the root of all evil. Robert L. Strauss had a similar experience when he wrote a *New York Times* Op-Ed questioning the legitimacy of many of the younger volunteers abroad. He received several letters to the editor, all responses from former Peace Corps volunteers, each viciously defending their experiences abroad. How could he be so quick to nonchalantly attack this great organization? He, the Peace Corps country director of Cameroon for six years, *clearly* did not have any idea about what the organization stood for or how it operated. Strauss was clearly in the wrong for voicing an opinion contrasting the norm.

Perhaps as historian Michael R. Hall stated in his article discussing the Peace Corps' effects domestically and internationally, "the Peace Corps symbolizes an ideal form of American altruism divorced from the mandate of direct political and economic benefit of the US, yet imbued with the best attributes of its national character." The Peace Corps has come to stand for America and her values as a whole: helping those in need. This institution has become a lens for the American people to view not only their country, but also themselves. Anyone who bad-mouths it does not share the same values as those in the Corps, and therefore is un-American.

After World War Two, Americans believed it was up to them to rebuild war torn Europe, as well as aid developing nations since the rest of the West was trying to support their own economies again. This shift in responsibility from the traditional powers of Great Britain and France to America brought a new vision of the world into view, a vision which has been held to high standards ever since. College graduates and dropouts alike flood to Peace Corps registration offices to enlist their service for whatever length of time needed, wherever needed.

Strauss argues many volunteers are not qualified or driven for a specific area of aid and apply simply to apply, giving themselves at least the impression they are making a difference. He states a reevaluation of member eligibility “would reveal that while volunteers generate good will for the United States, they do little or nothing to actually aid development in poor countries.” Some might argue this is just one man’s opinion, but it is also the opinion of a man who has directed and administered an entire country’s Peace Corps branch for six years. While it is all well and nice to listen to the returned volunteers boast tales of the lives they’ve impacted, hearing this negative opinion from a head honcho holds a little more weight in my book.

Like my mother, many people have asked me, if not us, then whom? Who is going to save the “poor Third World?” I often retort with the idea that the country might not need “saving” as many people like to claim. Many of the countries under scrutiny from Western “saviors” have either just recently received their independence from colonization or had a shift in governments that has allowed them to enter the free markets and expand their economies. They haven’t had the same amount of time as America has had to grow and develop. By sending in Peace Corps volunteers, their path to development is practically determined and then reinforced by the volunteers who are expected to share a polished image of America and her values.

For a good amount of the time, these countries have also been torn apart by a war the U.S.A. and other NATO nations may have started or prolonged. For example, after the United States military helped disperse the student protestors in Chile prior to the Pinochet era, it was added to the Peace Corps list of countries that needed “saving.” Afghanistan and Iran were recently added to the growing list of countries visited, both areas of recent conflict involving the U.S. military. Taking an educated guess, I can bet the two events aren’t mere coincidences.

There seems to be a pattern involving U.S. involved or perpetuated conflicts and the Peace Corps involvement, more than likely due to the fact one of the Peace Corps’ goals is to preserve other culture’s perceptions of America.

Many former volunteers, including Saral Waldorf, have suggested reorganizing the Peace Corps to choose either acting as an educational gauntlet for people of other cultures to learn about America and vice versa, or limit the eligibility of workers to trained professionals and assist with their placement in other countries. Their current goal of doing both has various flaws, mostly organizationally, but also philosophically. Though the Corps brags of being an independent organization, it truly is no more than an extension of U.S. diplomacy efforts through undertrained, unpaid, and more often than not, underqualified volunteers. This too has received harsh criticism from past volunteers, all stating that while they were under qualified, they did the best they could with what they were given.

This mindset reinforces the idea the Peace Corps are not only a representation of America’s values and image, but also a reflection of the volunteers themselves. It is time to move beyond the *me* narrative, and move towards the *them* narrative when it comes to service work. I don’t blame people who have this point of view, but I encourage them to truly investigate their motives and ask what they are looking to get out of the service they wish to do. If their answer has an “I” or “me” in it, I highly suggest staying home. Donating from your couch will have a more powerful impact than trying to aid the developing world with the wrong mindset.

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