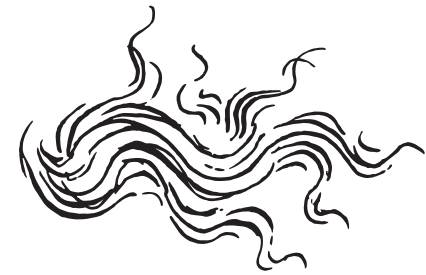


CULTURE AND POLITICS

# Liberties



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*Accept the truth from  
whoever utters it.*

MAIMONIDES

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JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN

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# *Memoirs of a White Savior*

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Last year, a student came to my office hours to discuss her post-graduation plans. She said she wanted to travel, teach, and write.

“How about joining the Peace Corps?” I suggested.

She grimaced. “The Peace Corps is problematic,” she said.

I replied the way I always do when a student uses that all-purpose put-down. “What’s the problem?” I asked.

“I don’t want to be a white savior,” she explained. “That’s pretty much the worst thing you can be.”

Indeed it is. The term “white savior” became commonplace in 2012, when the Nigerian-American writer and photogra-

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pher Teju Cole issued a series of tweets — later expanded into an article in *The Atlantic* — denouncing American do-gooder campaigns overseas, especially in Africa. His immediate target was the “KONY 2012” video of that year, a slickly produced film — by a white moviemaker — demanding the arrest of Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. But Cole’s larger goal was to indict the entire “White-Savior Industrial Complex,” as he called it, which allowed Westerners to imagine themselves as heroic protectors of defenseless Africans. Conveniently, Cole added, it also let them ignore the deep structural and historical inequities that had enriched the West at the expense of everybody else. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice,” Cole wrote. “It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.” Instead of assuming that they know what is best, he urged, Americans should ask other people what they want. And instead of engaging in feel-good volunteer projects that do not do any actual good, we should challenge “a system built on pillage” and “the money-driven villainy at the heart of American foreign policy.”

The Peace Corps is a volunteer agency as well as an agent of foreign policy. So it has also become a frequent punching bag on several popular Instagram accounts that have echoed — and amplified — Cole’s critique. No White Saviors (906,000 followers) denounces the Peace Corps as “imperialism in action”; at the parody account Barbie Savior (154,000 followers), you can thrill to the pseudo-adventures of a Peace-Corps-like doll who takes selfies with orphans, squats over a pit latrine, and invokes famous humanitarians. (“If you put an inspirational quote under your selfie, no one can see your narcissism — M. Gandhi.”) Never mind that Cole’s original posts mocked digital activism such as the KONY 2012 video, which featured “fresh-faced Americans using the power

of YouTube, Facebook, and pure enthusiasm to change the world,” as he observed. In the Age of the iPhone, apparently, the only answer to a misguided social-media campaign is another social-media campaign.

And now the campaign has spread into the Peace Corps itself, as my student noted. She alerted me to Decolonizing Peace Corps (9300 followers), which was started by three returned volunteers from Mozambique after the agency evacuated them — and the other 7300 volunteers around the world — amid the COVID pandemic in March 2020. Later that spring, following the police murder of George Floyd, the Mozambique trio circulated a petition urging the Peace Corps to reckon with its allegedly racist and colonialist roots. They sent it to No White Saviors, who told them a petition “wasn’t going to be enough”; what the volunteers needed was, yes, their own Instagram account. Decolonizing Peace Corps went live shortly after. Inspired by campaigns to abolish the police, it demanded the abolition of the Peace Corps. “When you look at the Peace Corps and you look at the police and you see the origins, you ask yourself, can this really be reformed?” one of the account’s founders asked. “How can you reform a system that was founded on neocolonialism and imperialism by a country built on genocide and slavery?” The question answers itself.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic continued to surge, No White Saviors stepped up its own attacks on the Peace Corps. Now that all the volunteers had come home, it wrote, the agency should permanently close up shop. “No more pretending inexperienced young people are actually useful in countries and cultures they are alien to,” No White Saviors wrote in 2021. “Instead you could pay skilled local volunteers to work more effectively. No more spending money on flights or evacuations, no need to teach language or culture.” Indeed,

a volunteer back from Nepal added, the worldwide evacuation was itself a “gross display of resource privileges.” She still couldn’t figure out why the Nepalese people in her community had wanted her there, “other than maybe for ‘cultural exchange.’” But, as her air-quotes indicated, that “is not a good enough reason to invest so many resources into mostly fresh out of college, inexperienced Americans.”

I served in the Peace Corps in Nepal, fresh out of college in 1983. My father was a Peace Corps director in India and Iran in the 1960s, when I was a child. The story of the Peace Corps is, in many ways, the story of my life. Now my student wanted to know: was it worth it? And for whom? In reply, I related an experience from my years in Nepal. It’s all about who gets saved, and from what, and why.



I was teaching one day when a kid bounded into my classroom, breathless from running. “John-Sir,” he panted, “your friend is in the valley!”

“Your friend” meant another white guy, a very rare sight in that part of Nepal. I taught at the top of a hill — we would call it a mountain, but in Nepal it was a hill — about two hundred and fifty miles west of Kathmandu. To get there, you took an overnight bus across the plains that bordered India and then walked north for three days. When I first arrived, some of the children thought I was a ghost. They had never seen someone so pale.

I peered down into the valley, shading my eyes against the sun. It was a picture-perfect, blue-sky afternoon in the Himalayas. And sure enough, there he was: another white guy. Everyone wanted to know what he was doing there.

So we cancelled the rest of the school day, and all of us — teachers, students, and curious hangers-on — started walking down the hill.

As we neared the valley, a villager approached me excitedly. He was holding a crudely printed pamphlet, which flapped in the mountain breeze. “John-Sir, your friend sold me this book!” he exclaimed. “Only five rupees!” Five rupees was what a man earned for chipping away all day at the tractor road, until it got washed away by the monsoon and you started all over again the next year. A woman got three rupees, and a child got one. It was a day’s wage. I took one look at the pamphlet and right away I knew what it was. There was a figure that looked like Greg Allman — long straight hair, close-cropped beard — nailed to a cross. And he was white, of course.

We found “my friend” standing on the top of a rock at the bottom of the hill, selling dozens of pamphlets and collecting a large stack of cash. I walked straight up to him, ready for a fight. “What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I’m saving these people for the Lord,” he said.

Saving! Of course he was. I told him that they already have a Lord — about twenty thousand Lords, in fact. He said that Hindus were thieves and murderers. Recognizing his accent as German, I asked him why his own church had rolled over and played dead for Hitler. He replied that the Holocaust was a tragedy, but mostly because of the gypsies who perished.

I told him to be fruitful and multiply, but not in those words.

He told me to fuck off, too. (So much for turning the other cheek, which was a pretty big deal to the white guy on the cross.) I told him that it was illegal to mission in Nepal, and that I would call the cop if he continued to sell the pamphlets. This was a total bluff, because “the cop” was a day’s walk away

and — based on my encounters with him — most likely drunk. But the missionary didn't know any of that, of course. So he hoisted his backpack, told me to fuck off yet again, and started climbing into the hills.

By this time, a great sea of humanity had gathered. Nobody knew what the missionary and I were saying, but they could tell it wasn't good. "John-Sir, you were angry with your friend," someone said, as the missionary walked away. "Why don't you like your friend?"

"He's a very bad man," I said. "He doesn't like your religion."

Then I heard one guy say, "Hey, John-Sir's friend said if I believe in his religion, I'll go to heaven and won't be reborn over and over again." And someone else said, "Hey, can I buy your book? I'll give you six rupees for it." "Run after John-Sir's friend," another guy said. "Maybe he has some books left over."

I cursed the missionary again, and then I cursed myself. Many years later I figured out why: we were both white saviors, in ways that still mortify me today. His saviorism was more direct and straightforward: Hindus were thieves and murderers, so he was saving them for his Lord. My own brand of saviorism was dressed up in the liberal multicultural dogmas of the era: I had to protect my villagers' fragile and endangered belief system from an evil Western interloper. But I knew what was best for them, every bit as much as the missionary did.

When you get on your high horse, you can disregard everything below you. There have been Christians on the sub-continent for nearly two millennia. But I didn't know — or care — about that. Nor did I care what the villagers thought about what the missionary was saying (and selling). I knew what was "indigenous" to their "culture," or so I imagined. And Christianity wasn't.

Most of all, I wanted to defend their "authenticity" against

inauthentic outsiders. That echoes the type of white savior that you can find on Instagram today, condemning white saviorism. The classic version of white saviorism assumes that people in other parts of the world would be just like us, if they only had a better upbringing. The Instagram critique of white saviorism reverses that formula, insisting that they do not — or must not — embrace or imitate anything we do and say. That prescription is saviorist in its own right, wrongly and patronizingly ignoring the same local autonomy and agency that it claims to uphold. No White Saviors tells Western do-gooders to take account of what other people want, but it dismisses those wants if they do not correspond to its idea of the good.

Eventually, the Peace Corps would save me from that kind of white saviorism, too — from the idea that people who seemed so different from me should forever stay the same. But to see how, as I told my student, we have to go back to the beginning.



My father met John F. Kennedy by happenstance in August 1956, on a beach in the French Riviera. It was the day after the Democratic convention, when Adlai Stevenson — nominated for the second time for president — let the delegates select his running mate. Kennedy was hoping to join the ticket, but he was edged out by the Tennessee anti-mob crusader Estes Kefauver. Kennedy flew out that night to France, where my dad encountered him the next morning. When he heard that my father was at Yale Law School, Kennedy urged him to come work for the federal government. Most of the other students would head off to white-shoe law firms on Wall Street and



elsewhere, Kennedy said. But my dad should go to Washington, JFK urged, because that's where the action was going to be.

I have told that story to my students many times, because it highlights the cavernous gap between Kennedy's time and our own. Today, across the political spectrum, "Washington" is a symbol of dysfunction and decay. It is where action — and idealism — go to die. But not then. My father did go to Washington, where he held several government jobs. He also volunteered for Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960. At a meet-and-greet, he waited on a long line to shake the candidate's hand. "Paul Zimmerman!" Kennedy exclaimed, to my dad's shock and delight. "I met you on a beach in France, right after the 1956 convention."

Kennedy proposed a new volunteer corps during a famously extemporized 2 a.m. campaign speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan in October 1960. Between that night and his inauguration, over twenty-five thousand Americans sent letters to Washington asking how they could join the agency. The Peace Corps sent its first volunteers out in August 1961, to Ghana. By the end of 1963, seven thousand volunteers — known around the world as "Kennedy's Kids" — were serving in forty-four countries. The agency received its largest weekly number of applications in the seven days after JFK's assassination.

My father signed on a few years after that. He made one phone call to the Peace Corps, which somehow patched him through to Bill Moyers. A fellow Texan and top aide to Lyndon Johnson, Moyers had been an assistant director of the Peace Corps under Sargent Shriver, the president's brother-in-law. My dad recalled that Moyers asked him a single question: where he went to law school. In the era of the best and the brightest, that was all you needed to know. Moyers told my father to walk over to the Peace Corps office, where he was

offered a job on the spot. His international "experience" was limited to two summer vacation jaunts in Europe, including the trip where he met Kennedy. But somehow, attending Yale Law School — and, I would imagine, working on a Kennedy campaign — qualified him to be the director of the Peace Corps in South India. He was thirty-two years old.

So off we went to Bangalore. My mother took my brother (almost seven) and me (four and a half) first, stopping along the way in Israel to visit relatives. My dad followed with my ten-month-old sister, whom he fed with a bottle on the long Pan Am flight. We camped at a hotel for a few weeks until my parents found a house on a lovely compound adjacent to Cubbon Park, the city's green oasis. When we got to Bangalore, in 1966, it had 1.4 million people. Today it is roughly ten times that size.

My memories of India are dim, obviously. But the family albums show scenes that would fit nicely on the No White Saviors Instagram account. Here I am, riding an elephant at what looks to be a birthday party. Here's my baby sister, in the arms of her Indian nanny. Here's the rest of our large household staff: cook, cleaner, security guard. Here's the whole family decked out in traditional Indian white cotton dhotis. The most remarkable photo shows my brother beaming next to Indira Gandhi, who towers a bit stiffly over him. Our family was visiting a volunteer somewhere on the countryside, and word spread that the prime minister was going to be disembarking at a nearby railway station. So we went down there to see if we could catch a glimpse of her. At such scenes, a child was customarily chosen to greet the arriving dignitary. The volunteer we were visiting held my brother aloft, urging officials to select him. Eventually young Jeffrey Zimmerman was ushered to the front of the crowd to hang a garland on

Mrs. Gandhi. Talk about white privilege! It doesn't get more privileged than that.

What were we doing in India, other than making it — to quote Teju Cole — a “backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism”? A few months before we arrived, Indira Gandhi met with Lyndon Johnson at the White House to discuss food shortages in India. Under its “Food for Peace” program, the United States agreed to send 3.5 million tons of wheat, corn, and other crops to India. Gandhi's government also partnered with the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations to bring new methods and products to Indian farmers. Many of the Peace Corps volunteers whom my father directed were engaged in programs to improve agricultural practices, too. I can't say I know what effect they had on farming, or whether local workers could have performed the Americans' jobs more effectively or efficiently. But here's what I do know: India kept requesting more and more Peace Corps volunteers, until the Bangladesh war in 1971 soured India-U.S. relations and led to their withdrawal.

That has been the pattern for sixty years: when the Peace Corps is asked to leave a country, it is for geopolitical reasons rather than programmatic ones. The people who actually host volunteers — school principals, health-clinic directors, and government officials — almost always want more of them, which isn't something you see mentioned very often by the critics of white saviors. If the volunteers are so clueless and useless — or, worse, if they are actively visiting harm on other countries — why would these countries continue to invite them? When the question is asked at all, on anti-savior social media, the most common answer is that non-white hosts have “internalized” white-saviorism themselves. “I will always carry the assumptions of villagers that I am better, smarter,

and work harder than my local counterparts,” a Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia wrote in 2019, before the pandemic brought everyone home. “Does my contribution have enough value to outweigh the perpetuation of the white savior complex on the local people?” Note the choice of words here: his very presence foists white-saviorism on his hosts, who are feeble and powerless to resist its seductive wiles. That patronizes “local people” in the guise of protecting them.

And here is something else I know: my parents forged deep and lasting human bonds in India. Their closest friends were the parents of an Indian kid I met at school. (It was a girls' school, which is a whole other story.) The anti-savior critics might dismiss that as mere “cultural exchange,” which doesn't do anything to change lives. They are wrong. At the Peace Corps' twenty-fifth anniversary march in Washington in 1986, a man accosted my father and declared, “I've been waiting two decades to talk to you.” My dad had a self-deprecating sense of humor — that is to say, he was Jewish — and he told me he half-expected that the guy would raise his middle finger and shout, “Fuck you!” Instead the man said that he had gotten sick during the first months of his Peace Corps service in South India. He made his way to Bangalore, presented himself at my dad's office, and announced that he wanted to go home. My father suggested that he go back to his village and give it one more try. He did just that, and he had lived there ever since. He married an Indian woman, had a bunch of kids, and worked in several different jobs in the health and education sectors. Perhaps he had once believed that he would save India, from disease or destitution or something else. Instead, he said, India saved him from the dull and altogether predictable life that awaited him back in the United States. America was his birthplace, but it wasn't his home. India was.



Our next stop was Teheran, where we arrived in January in 1969. It was flush with oil money and foreign workers, which gave the city a lively boomtown feel. Out in the countryside, a different set of changes were underway. The “White Revolution,” declared a few years earlier by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, redistributed land and sent health and literacy workers into rural areas. It also enfranchised and educated women, which outraged some Islamic religious leaders. So did the Shah’s development of secular courts and schools, which reduced the clergy’s power and influence in both realms.

Peace Corps volunteers participated deeply in all of these modernizing efforts. In the cities, they taught at universities, advised local governments, and worked in the arts; a handful of American professional musicians were even recruited by the Peace Corps as volunteers in Teheran’s symphony orchestra and opera. Rural volunteers taught in primary and secondary schools or served in health clinics, sometimes alongside teams of urban Iranians who were doing the same. The Peace Corps volunteers tended to be slightly older and more skilled than earlier cohorts, owing to political changes back home. In 1969, shortly after Richard Nixon entered the White House, a group of returned Peace Corps volunteers called for the abolition of the agency: as the war in Vietnam raged, they argued, the Peace Corps provided cover for American violence and imperialism around the world. (Ours is not the first college generation to look askance at the Peace Corps.) Nixon was only too happy to get rid of the agency, especially after volunteers briefly occupied its headquarters in 1970 to protest the bombing of Cambodia and the slaughter of antiwar protesters at Kent State. Nixon told his aide Lamar

Alexander — later the Secretary of Education and then a senator from Tennessee — to seek an appropriations cut in Congress as the first step towards zeroing out the Peace Corps. But Patrick Buchanan, another rising young GOP politico, warned Nixon that slashing the Peace Corps’ budget at that point would provoke a “real storm” among the “Kennedyites.” Buchanan instead suggested publicizing drug arrests and other overseas blunders by immature volunteers, who would eventually dig the agency’s grave.

No such luck. To the chagrin of Nixon and his cronies, the Peace Corps retained its strong bipartisan support in Washington. But it did shift its priorities towards older and more professionally prepared volunteers, to head off the charge that it was a haven for pot-smokers and draft-dodgers. (“Technically qualified” was a euphemism for “not liberal,” quipped Peace Corps evaluator Charlie Peters, who went on to a distinguished career in journalism.) Several married volunteers who worked for my father even brought children with them, which was unheard of before that time. Yet this was hardly a straightlaced crowd; if anything, antiwar protest and youth culture back home probably made them more radical in their politics — and more hippyish in their habits — than earlier volunteers. My mother tells a great story about taking a long trip with my dad to visit a group of volunteers up in Tabriz, in the northwestern part of Iran. Famished upon her arrival at their house, she noticed a tray of brownies and asked if she could have one. You won’t like them, the volunteers said; they’re old and stale. My mother, characteristically, would not take no for an answer. Biting into a brownie, she deemed it delicious. She ate another, and then another. Eventually, the terrified volunteers drew her aside and explained that the brownies were laced with marijuana.

They pleaded with her not to tell my dad, who didn't hear about it until many years later.

Nor were the volunteers mere mouthpieces for the Shah, whom they mocked privately as "George" (as in "George Bernard Shah"). For a variety of reasons, including his recognition of Israel, the Shah was a strong ally of the United States. But he was also a brutal dictator, torturing dissidents and muzzling the independent press. Back in the States, protesters imagined that the Peace Corps — like other parts of the foreign policy apparatus — was helping to prop up pro-American tyrants. Around the world, though, a much more complicated pattern emerged. As the historian Beatrice Wayne has shown, the Marxist revolutionaries who overthrew Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie often credited their changed political consciousness to the Peace Corps volunteers who taught them in the early 1960s, including the future senator Paul Tsongas. Most of the volunteers were middle-of-the-road liberals, not wild-eyed Marxists. But they led debates about Marx — and many other controversial matters — in their classrooms, which opened students' minds to new ways of thinking and acting. Likewise, Peace Corps volunteers in Iran subtly undermined the same regime that their government was supporting. Opponents of the Shah befriended several volunteers, who quietly cheered the campaign against him. And as enmity towards the United States mounted, fueled by the simmering Islamic revolution, the volunteers reminded Iranians that all Americans were not anti-Muslim bigots or stooges for the Shah.

But some of them were. The best decision my parents ever made was to send my brother and me to the Community School, which had been founded in the 1930s by American missionaries. It evolved into a thoroughly secular and cosmopolitan institution, patronized by families from

dozens of countries — including many Iranians. That made it very different from the Teheran American School, where most of the American military and corporate types sent their kids. They didn't speak any Farsi, and they called Iranians "ragheads." I played Little League with them at the U.S. army base in the heart of Teheran's Ugly American bubble, where they munched on hamburgers and made fun of the servants. Even as a nine-year-old, I knew that wasn't right.

Still, I was enormously proud of America. We were in Teheran for the Apollo 11 moon landing, a moment of huge American celebration — and, yes, American conceit — around the globe. And on United Nations Day, when everyone at Community School put on a short play about their country, we Americans staged the Thanksgiving story. We made a big Plymouth Rock out of papier-mâché, which we painted gray. I played Miles Standish, standing astride the Mayflower and shouting "Land ho!" as we approached the virgin wilderness. The folks over at No White Saviors would have a field day with this: it was a way to explain American power without addressing American conquest. A neat trick, if you can pull it off. But still I learned some important history lessons at U.N. Day. When I came home, I told my mother about the large Israeli delegation that marched under a blue Star of David. She laughed. The "Israelis," she explained, were Iraqi Jews who had fled the Baathist revolution. They didn't want to identify as Iraqis, which wouldn't go over well in Iran. So they were Israelis instead. Problem solved.

We were also in Iran for the epochal heavyweight boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. As a Muslim, Ali was a huge celebrity across the Middle East. One evening, when my parents were on the road, our cook asked me why Ali was American but didn't look like me. My Persian had

gotten pretty good by then, and I explained to him—as best I could—that Africans had been enslaved by white people and transported across the Atlantic. “Really?” he asked. “You did that?” Well, yes. Not me personally, I said, but people who resembled me. The cook frowned and his brow furrowed. If our real purpose was to burnish white superiority in the non-white world, we weren’t doing a very good job of it.



Neither of my siblings ever evinced any interest in joining the Peace Corps. My brother doesn’t have as fond memories of those years that I do. My parents were away a lot, and I think he felt responsible for us while they were gone. And my sister was too young to recall much of anything. But I can’t remember a time when I did not think that I would be a volunteer.

In 1983, when I graduated from college, I applied for exactly one job: the Peace Corps. The agency was weathering another round of assaults from another Republican administration. David Stockman, Ronald Reagan’s famously Scrooge-like budget director, recommended a big cut for the Peace Corps. Meanwhile, GOP apparatchiks at the Heritage Foundation charged that the agency had lost sight of its Cold War mission: to provide a “counterweight” to America’s Soviet foe. Indeed, the original Peace Corps charter in 1961 required volunteers to receive training in the “philosophy, strategy, tactics, and menace” of communism. To head off the Republican attacks — and, of course, to protect its appropriation — the agency reinstated anti-communist lessons for trainees. When my cohort met in West Virginia, before we left for Nepal, a Peace Corps staffer wrote the charter language about anti-communism on a whiteboard and said, “This is

what the law requires us to teach.” That seemed like something that might happen in a communist country, someone replied, and everybody laughed: the lesson was a joke, and we all got it. Maybe such instruction made sense when the agency was founded, but the Soviet Union was on its last legs by that point, and the entire exercise seemed anachronistic as well as propagandistic.

As in the Nixon years, meanwhile, the Peace Corps announced that it was recruiting volunteers who were “older and better-trained” (read: sober and politically moderate) rather than the presumably radical and irresponsible youngsters of the Kennedy-Kids prototype. I couldn’t find much evidence of that shift in my own group. We were still mostly “B.A.-generalists” (as the Peace Corps called us) coming straight from college, who didn’t know how to do much of anything. Out at my village, in the Pyuthan district of western Nepal, my closest Peace Corps neighbor was a woman who had earned an education degree and actually taught (imagine!) in an elementary school back in America. It took me three hours to walk to the house where she and her husband lived. On the weekends, I hiked over there and picked her brain. I still think she taught me more about teaching than anyone I have ever met.

But some of the work was intuitive, at least to an American. As a friend once told me, teaching is a lot like parenting: for the most part, you do it as it was done to you. In Nepal, most elementary-level teachers taught via repetitive chants. You knew you were approaching a school if you heard a chorus of kids singing in Nepali, “Two times two is four, two times four is eight, two times eight is sixteen,” and so on. English instruction happened in the same manner. The kids would say an English phrase and then its Nepali translation, over and over again: “This is a cat. *Yo biralo ho*. This is a dog. *Yo kukur ho*.”

That wasn't the way I learned, and it wasn't the way I taught. Writing with a rock on the charcoal-covered piece of wood that served as our blackboard, I drew a cat. Everyone said the Nepali word for it: *biralo*. I said, "This is a cat." Then, pointing to the board, I asked a kid, "What is it?" With a bit of coaxing, she said, "This is a cat."

Soon I had the kids drawing their own pictures on the board and asking each other — in English — to identify them. I wrote little plays for them to stage, in which Ram and Sita (the Jack and Jill of Nepal) discussed feeding water buffaloes, cooking rice, and other day-to-day activities in their lives. Eventually the students wrote their own dialogues, introducing new characters — Gopal, Durga, Soorya — and different topics: marriage, childrearing, and school itself. A student played John-Sir in one memorable exchange, donning a makeshift straw wig to mimic my Jew-fro. It brought the house down.

Was my way of teaching "better" than the standard Nepalese method? Call me a white savior, but I believe it was. And here is how I know: my students told me. Nothing I did was particularly creative or innovative; it just made sense to me. But to the students it was a revelation. They had never experienced a classroom that required them to engage and imagine in the ways mine did. Eventually my Peace Corps neighbor and I designed trainings in these methods for other teachers in the region. We held three week-long sessions, in different parts of the district, where teachers put on plays and wrote songs and — most of all — laughed and laughed and laughed some more, in big collective guffaws that echoed out of the schoolhouse and into the hills. Sometimes, I'm sure, they were laughing at the weird Americans and our goofy, smiley mix of informality and exuberance. ("Why are you

people always so happy?" a Nepalese friend once asked me.) But I also think they were having fun, and learning. I can't tell you what effect these trainings had on their own instruction, or on anything else that happened in Nepal. But I also can't tell you whether the history course I taught last semester at Penn will make any difference in the lives of my American students, either. At some level, all education is an act of faith. You throw a whole bunch of stuff at a wall — or, in Nepal, at a charcoaled piece of wood — and you hope that something sticks.

And you never know what will. About fifteen years after I left Nepal, I got a call from Akron, Ohio. "John-Sir?" a voice on the other end said. That could only mean one thing: it was one of my Nepalese students. He had passed the national school-leaving exam and had gotten a job teaching in another district, where there was a female Peace Corps volunteer. The first thing he said to her, she later told me, was "Hello, Miss. Do you know John Zimmerman?" You know the rest. They had fallen in love, married, and moved to Ohio to be near her family. My student happily recounted our classroom dialogues as well as the "Steal the Bacon" game (which I rendered, he said, as "Steal the Pig's Meat") that we played outside. But he also said he had hesitated to contact me, because he feared that I was still "angry" with him. "Angry?" I asked. "About what?" Near the end of a class, my student recounted, he stood up and started erasing the girls' blackboard before they had finished copying the evening homework assignment. (Girls and boys sat on separate sides of the classroom in Nepal, each with its own blackboard, so I wrote the assignment on both of them.) I screamed at him, he recalled, the only time the students had ever heard me do that. "You should be ashamed of yourself!" he remembered me yelling. "The girls have as much right to learn as you do!"

I'd love to know how No White Saviors would parse this little tale. At first glance, it is perfect fodder for their critique: heroic white dude rides into town, spreading truth — his truth, that is — to the benighted brown people. Who was I, they might ask, to police how the Nepalese thought or acted around gender? At the same time, though, I'm sure that many people asking that question fashion themselves feminists of some shape or form. If I had failed to censure my student for erasing the girls' blackboard, wouldn't I have been "complicit" — to quote another of our current platitudes — in sexism and misogyny? When I tell my American students this story, they often say that my real mistake was raising my voice; I should have spoken to the student afterwards, calmly explaining the error of his ways, instead of humiliating him in front of his peers. Perhaps so. But whatever means I used, was it OK — or even necessary — for me to correct him at all? If he actually believed that the girls were second-class citizens, who says he was wrong?

Here's my answer: the girls did. When my student started erasing their blackboard, he told me, they raised *their* voices in protest. Indeed, he said, that's what drew my attention to him in the first place. You can say that I was behaving like a white savior, and you might be right. But I don't see how you can condemn me for imposing my views of gender, without regard for local tradition, and then disregard the expressed wishes of the girls. That sets *you* up as the arbiter of what is really "traditional" in Nepal, even as it throws half of the country — its female half, of course — under the proverbial bus. It is imperial anti-imperialism, the saviorism of No White Saviors.



I fell victim to that, too, in my fateful meeting with the missionary. Unlike the blackboard incident in class, where the girls objected to my student's behavior, I didn't hear anyone complain about the missionary. The complaints were in my head, and I projected them onto Nepal. Perhaps that's inevitable, to some degree or another, when human beings from different parts of the world encounter each other. Every living person's perspective is partial. People in Nepal projected onto America, too, in ways that I found endlessly fascinating. Americans made lots of money, I was told, and they also had sex 24/7. How are you so rich, a guy once asked me with a straight face, when all you do is screw? I laughed, but it was no joke for female Peace Corps volunteers who had to fend off the men who believed it. Racial minorities and LGBTQ volunteers have faced special challenges, too. Taboos against dark skin run rampant around the globe, as does discrimination against gays; in several Peace Corps countries, indeed, same-sex love is illegal.

Should Peace Corps volunteers try to challenge that kind of prejudice, as best they can? I think so. And if that sounds like white-saviorism, I have news for you: the Peace Corps isn't as white anymore. In 1990, four years after I returned from Nepal, just seven percent of Peace Corps volunteers were racial minorities; by 2020, when volunteers around the world were evacuated, 34 percent were non-white. That doesn't mean that they will be perceived as such outside of America, of course. Back in the 1990s, I conducted oral histories with black Peace Corps volunteers who had served in Africa. Many of them were called anomalous nicknames like "black white" or "native foreigner," which acknowledged the black volunteers' connection to the continent while simultaneously underscoring their difference from it. Most of all, the volunteers learned how much difference a category like "black" could contain. Countries

such as Kenya and Nigeria were as diverse as the United States, volunteers discovered, containing dozens of different ethnic and language groups. And these people often hated each other, too, just like racists back in the States. “The color of the foot on my neck doesn’t matter, as long as there’s a foot on my neck,” one black ex-volunteer told me, describing the ethnic prejudices he observed in Africa. “Discrimination is discrimination.”

And love is love, as another black returned volunteer added. “I got an appreciation of where I came from, and the beauty of that,” he said. “Basically, we’re all the same.” Although it sounds hopelessly trite in these jaded times, love for our shared humanity, our universal commonality, is the only way to appreciate our differences and to communicate (literally: to make common) across them. Six decades after it was founded, the Peace Corps remains a foremost symbol of that ideal: love, respect, friendship, and cooperation across oceans and borders, cultures and races. So it will always be an easy target for politicians and ideologues who see it as either starry-eyed nonsense or blind propaganda. In 2017, the Trump Administration proposed slashing the Peace Corps’ budget by fifteen percent; two years later, Republicans in Congress introduced a measure to eliminate the agency’s appropriation altogether. Channeling his inner Donald Trump — or, perhaps, his subconscious Richard Nixon — co-sponsor Mark Walker (R-NC) said we should “put America first” by using the saved dollars to support disaster relief at home. The bill got 110 votes, all from the GOP, which wasn’t enough to get it through. By June of this year, as the pandemic abated, Peace Corps volunteers had returned to eleven countries. The agency is recruiting for about twenty other nations, too.

Who will hear that call, especially on our increasingly particularist and identity-inebriated campuses? Very few

people, I fear, if No White Saviors and their allies have their way. They use a different vocabulary than conservative critics, of course, sounding more like Noam Chomsky than Newt Gingrich: the agency is racist, neocolonialist, and so on. But the upshot is the same: the Peace Corps is a bad deal, so it’s time to bring everyone home for good. “If we actually solved the world’s problems, who would pay us?” a volunteer in Zambia asked in 2019, shortly before volunteers were evacuated worldwide. The Peace Corps is a junket, she said, wasting scarce resources that could be better spent in America. Congressman Walker couldn’t have put it better himself.

But that spectacularly misses the point. I have never met a volunteer who thought that they solved the world’s problems, and I’m very sure that I didn’t. I wanted to help, and to learn, and to live. That is all. The scorn and the distrust of our present-day politics—on both sides of the aisle—cannot refute or erase the simple desire for connection. I left Nepal feeling humbled, not privileged. I learned how many different ways there are to be human, and how difficult it is to connect across the differences. But I also learned that we can do it, by trial and — mostly — by error. I learned that universalism is real, that it can be verified by experience, and that difference is not the last word on human life; that one is made wiser by the people one teaches, even when the differences are colossal; that there is more to the human world than power relations, even as we work to make them more equitable; and most importantly, that we mock altruism at our peril. The greatest danger of our moment is not racism or sexism, ableism or cisgenderism. It is cynicism, which tricks us into believing that we cannot overcome the differences—and, yes, the prejudices—that separate us from each other.

When my service ended in Nepal, the teachers held a party for me at our school. The rice wine flowed, and everyone



recounted ridiculous things I had said when I first got there and didn't know any better. My favorite one: a teacher asked me to visit his house on the weekend, and I replied, in Nepali, "Yes, I'd like to meet your wife." That's what you might say in America, if a colleague invited you over, but nobody told me that the verb "to meet" in Nepal had another, earthier connotation. It was horrifying, humiliating, and altogether human: what used to be known as an honest mistake. "It doesn't matter," the teacher reassured me, patting my shoulder. And everyone urged me to "come back soon," a common Nepali farewell.

It wasn't soon, but I did come back. Twenty-five years later, in 2010, I returned to the village with my seventeen-year-old daughter. The tractor road was finally finished, so the three-day walk had been trimmed to about eight hours. The first guy I saw said, "Hey, John-Sir, where have you been?" Everywhere, I wanted to say. Nowhere. It doesn't matter. The school sponsored an impromptu "Welcome Home" reception, at which my daughter and I were pelted with flowers and doused in red tikka powder. I stood up to give a speech in my broken Nepali, which was slowly coming back to me. But I broke down in tears, overwhelmed by my good fortune to have loved — and been loved by — these good people. Was this sentimental? Sure. Was it condescending? Not for a second. Perhaps I had acted, in my worst moments, as their white savior — but they saved me too, from the rigid categories that we now deploy, loudly and dogmatically, to define and divide us. Black and white, Jew and Gentile, Nepalese and American: we are all different and we are all the same. Come back soon, John-Sir. Come back home.



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