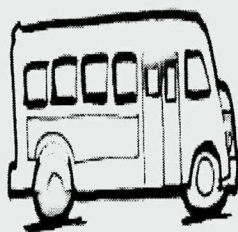


A Journey to a Small Planet

In this essay, the author recounts how international experiences helped to shape his view of the world and his professional career. Beginning with military service in Europe, his awareness that this is a small planet expanded out of Peace Corps service in Central America and, later, opportunities to develop scholarship in Gandhian thought in India. For thirty-five years, the author annually directed travel study seminars for social work students in different parts of the world.

by
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A Journey to a Small Planet

When I was a child growing up in an abandoned mining village in Northern Minnesota, the world seemed immense and mysterious. Never in my wildest imagination did I anticipate becoming a world traveler or even a local adventurer. Oh yes, Dr. Doolittle stories could trigger fantasies about Africa, as could Tarzan movies. Likewise, Father Damien and his leper colony on Molokai appealed to my hidden missionary impulse as a Catholic school-age boy. But the reality was that I remained pretty much confined to one spot throughout my growing up years. By graduation from college, the farthest I had traveled from home was just one hundred miles. Florida spring breaks and vacations were part of neither my social class nor my family culture.

How then was it possible that experiences in faraway places would become the genesis of my philosophy of life and the primary influence on my career as a social worker? As a social work educator, why for thirty-five straight years would I proceed to take stu-

dents overseas? Perhaps some of the experiences I am about to relate will provide an answer.

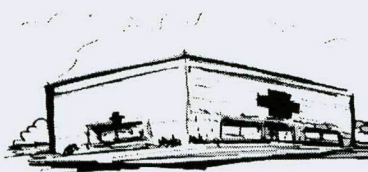
After graduation from a small Benedictine College near my home, I took a job at the local Montgomery Ward's store. This was during the last year of the Korean War, a war which was somewhat of an obscurity to most people my age. Yet, when I was drafted into the army I welcomed the escape.

By fall of the year of my graduation, I was on a bus to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, the site of our boot camp. The twelve weeks spent at boot camp (the second half in Camp Chafee, Arkansas) found me a reluctant student of military discipline and skills. It wasn't until after I left our debarkation post, Fort Ord, on a troop ship to Germany that overseas events would begin to influence my life.

On arrival at the port of Bremerhaven, we transferred to a troop train. I had been assigned to the 775th Field Artillery Battalion stationed in Swabish Hall. Our Battalion was located in a former Luftwaffe base. Bavaria, an 800-year-old city, was nestled

in a pastoral setting in the north. Soft rolling hills and verdant valleys interwoven with small farming villages surrounded our city. Coincidentally, less than 35 miles away in another Bavarian town, Swabish Gmund, my great grandparents had been peasant farmers.

My initial response to this first trip overseas was somewhat subdued. Yet I enjoyed the experience because I was challenged by the personalities with whom I was forced to live and others with whom I had chosen to share time. Lisa, my soon-to-be wife, was one of them. She was a special services worker for the US Army whom I met shortly after she had been transferred to Swabish Hall from Munich. Her compassionate nature and love of travel convinced me that she would be a perfect companion. Her constant



support and sense of adventure had much to do with my future international endeavors.

Lisa and I returned to St. Louis, Missouri, after our respective tours of duty, I to attend graduate school in social work on the GI Bill, she to take a social work job with the Red Cross. Within a year we were married and within two we were parents. The

babies kept coming, four in the next five years. The youngest would spend most of her first two years in Honduras, Central America.

We moved back to Minneapolis in 1961, where I directed an aftercare program for newly discharged mental hospital patients. After several years of getting this program established, I was admitted to the doctoral program in social work at the University of Minnesota. Shortly after completing my doctoral course work, I received an invitation to apply for the position of Peace Corps director in Honduras.

I eventually got the Peace Corps job in Honduras, but how and why remains a bit of mystery. Part of the explanation was probably that I had completed my M.S.W. at St. Louis University. As it turned out, St. Louis University was under contract by the Peace Corps to train and administer the first Peace Corps group for Honduras. As a Jesuit university, St. Louis University belonged to a Jesuit Province that supplied priests to the missions in northern Honduras and Belize.

The fact that the initial Honduras Peace Corps group was to consist of thirty public health nurses and community social workers also was a factor in my favor. My having an M.S.W. and having completed doctoral work in social work with a public health minor apparently fit the credentials the University was looking for in a director.

Apart from these academic credentials, there were few reasons why I should have been selected for the Peace Corps po-

sition. I couldn't speak Spanish with any fluency, I had never been south of the border, and I didn't know Honduras from Tartarstan or Reugania. Being just 29 years old, I was younger than half of my first Peace Corps group. Yet, for whatever reasons, Sargent Shriver, Director of the Peace Corps and the brother-in-law to President John Kennedy, gave me the final thumbs up on the job. I was elated. My wife was a little less excited about the idea, with three small babies and another about to be born.

Awakening in Honduras

By late summer of 1962, I had settled into my new offices in Honduras. Much to my surprise, my office was located next to the Honduran president's wife's office in the Casa Presidential (the Honduran White House). It is common in Latin nations that the wives of the heads of state often lead their government's social welfare program. Dona Alejandrina, wife of Dr. Ramon Villeda Morales, administered the Bienestar Social, a government social welfare organization to which at least half of our volunteers would be assigned.

It would be an understatement to say that my Peace Corps experience contributed only to my philosophy of life and subsequent career in social work. This international experience would chart the course for the remainder of my career. It assured that I would "think globally" as a social worker - something that would be reinforced by my scholarship on Gandhian thought.

Honduras, at the time of my arrival, was a typical underde-

veloped nation. This Central American state was locked in a tight race with Bolivia as the poorest nation in the southern hemisphere. Honduras had borne the brunt of over 100 revolutions in its last 125 years. Another revolution would occur a year after my arrival. Since the 17th century, Honduras had been a colonial holding that bounced between English and Spanish "ownership."

Honduras, in 1962, was still a walk through the Middle Ages. Modernization had yet to show its face. There were but a hundred miles of paved road in the country, only one working stop light, and no lights on any of its airstrips. Its national airlines,



SAHSA, stood for "stay at home stay alive" according to members of my Peace Corps group. Eighty-five percent of Hondura's population at the time was illiterate.

Despite its poverty and level of development, I fell in love with Honduras. It lacked the manicured, strip mall, commodity-driven ambience I had left and which I detested. In front of me were rugged mountains, untamed jungle, and what seemed like thousands of rivers without bridges. I wore out a new four-

wheel-drive jeep in less than a year. With every bounce on those washed-out mountain roads I was filled with a sense of being alive. The sights and smells of the wilderness were overwhelming. There was no falling asleep on a Honduran road, since often the loosely laid wooden bridges across Honduras's many rivers were missing. They were stolen for firewood.

When my Peace Corps contract ended, I was disinclined to leave. It was only in the interests of the greater good of my family that I reluctantly returned to Minnesota, my home state. I had a dissertation to complete, so I accepted a position with the University of Minnesota School of Social Work to make this task easier.

What exactly had I learned from my Peace Corps experience? My position as director had been to organize thirty volunteers scattered around the country. The group would grow to 150 by the time of my departure. My job was to support them in their assignment to build a network of public health clinics throughout the rural areas and barrio social work centers in the urban slums around the capital city of Tegucigalpa and the major cities on the North Coast. Later, when the community development volunteers arrived, we would penetrate even the more rural communities.

Traveling throughout Honduras aligned with the volunteers, I was introduced to the world of 20th century colonialism and given a lesson in its history and effect. Colonialism in Honduras was evident by the eco-



nomic interests and behaviors of the New Orleans-based and American-owned United and Standard Fruit Companies. Honduras had been made into a leading supplier of banana and coconut oil throughout the world. Prior to this exploitation, other predatory groups from the United States and elsewhere had stripped Honduras of gold, silver, and precious woods. More recently, the Japanese commercially exploited the fishing waters off the North Coast, while American agribusiness interests bought thousands of acres for cotton plantations in the south.

The dynamics of the situation appeared to me to be no different from 19th century colonialism. Governments were bought off and a middle class was helped into existence to serve the colonial culture, while the bulk of the population was left to witness the outflow of the limited wealth of their poor country.

The lesson I learned about capitalism at the international level was that it lacked any com-

mitment to justice and equity. It was violent and exploitive. Politically, I found myself pushed left. The popularized Marxist alternative, Stalin style, however, struck me as an equally brutish political economic system, exploitive in its own way. In fairness, I listened to the rationalizations of the global economic "developers," who argued that they were doing no more than helping to modernize the back wards of the world. Many in the international business community saw themselves as commercial missionaries, uplifting indigent peoples and democratizing their societies.

Having been through a bloody coup in Honduras, I understood confrontations and acts of violence in the America to which I returned. This understanding would permit me to play an influential role within the University of Minnesota, as institutions of higher education tried to cope with militant change. By its own choice the School of Social Work where I was employed was more or less outside the loop of this social action. The philosophy of the School's Administration at the time was that activism was unprofessional.

Despite the challenges of the Sixties at home, I missed Honduras. I began looking for a way to give to others in America the perspective I had gained in Honduras. When I reflected on how meaningful the Peace Corps experience had been for the volunteers, I decided that getting students overseas, especially into the third world, would be one of my missions as a Social Work educator. For the next thirty-five years, I annually conducted travel-study

seminars to Honduras/ Guatemala, shifting the seminar to Mexico in recent years. On each of these trips something new was learned. My eyes were always kept fresh from the insights of the students. On my very first travel study seminar to Honduras there was an eighteen-year-old sophomore by the name of Tom Gjelten, now a noted foreign correspondent for National Public Radio.

As some of the heaviest social action of the Sixties subsided, so did the opportunities for community social work. The macro side of social work seemed to be collapsing as society turned conservative. I feared that social work education would follow suit. In many ways it did. The profession swung back to clinical social work, often in private practice settings. In 1973, I was presented with the opportunity to apply for the directorship of the University of Iowa School of Social Work. I believed I could best challenge the conservative drift as an educator, especially if I were the director of a School. By August of that year I was on the job.

As Director of a School, I was now in a position to work with other internationalists in Social Work Education to promote internationalism and social development within the curriculum. Under the leadership of Jack Jones, a former student but now head of a School himself, a group formed and founded the Inter-University Consortium on International Social Development. I was fortunate to be a founding member of this group. The following year we started a new journal at Iowa with an international and third world slant, the *Social Development Is-*

sues journal. My goal was to help make our School and its curriculum become globally focused.

The Gandhian Connection

Networking with other internationalists produced many new friendships and led to some special opportunities. One chance happening that would impact my future came in 1978, my final year as Director of the School. It came through a call from Terry Hokenstad, then Dean of Social Work at Case Western Reserve. Terry wanted to know if I could host one of his visiting faculty members from India. I agreed. The man who showed up at the airport was an Indian social work educator by the name of Sugata Dasgupta. Dasgupta, prior to his exile by Indira Gandhi, was founder/director of the Jayaprakesh Institute of Social Change in Calcutta. The Institute was essentially a training program for social workers.

Dasgupta, a man in his late fifties, was stoutly built and frumpily dressed. Most noticeable, however, was his gentleness of spirit and broad smile. One sensed immediately that this was a man of peace. I brought him to my house where he stayed for a week, joining me at work and speaking to different groups on his special topic: the "No Poverty Society" theory. The more I listened to his ideas and got to know him, the more I was drawn to his theory. His basic thesis was that contemporary economic development was essentially a form of neo-colonialism, in which the West got richer and the poor of India (and other third world nations) got poorer.

By the end of Dasgupta's visit we had agreed to co-host an international seminar for social work faculty on the topic of the No Poverty Society. We intended to hold it the following summer at our school's new Social Development Institute in Patzcuaro, Mexico. Throughout the remainder of the year we kept in correspondence. Dasgupta had gone from Case Western Reserve to Australia, where he was popular among the social work community. Still in exile, he was unable to return to India.

Late in the year of 1978, I received a call from Dasgupta's son. He informed me that his father had had a massive heart attack in Australia and died. I was shocked at the news. My shock was even greater when his son informed me I had been named in his father's last will and testament. Dasgupta had left me his writings with a request that "I help to dispose of them." At the moment I had no idea what this meant. Nonetheless, I accepted his gift and arranged to go to Calcutta to receive his writings.

Having resigned as the school's director in fall of 1978, I had some open time before I was to begin a new assignment in the College of Medicine. In the company of a graduate student volunteer, I traveled to Calcutta with the intent of staying several months. In Calcutta I met with Dasgupta's widow and his daughter. They had organized the materials that Dasgupta had left for me. Mrs. Dasgupta explained that it was her husband's wish that I circulate his idea of the No Poverty Society in the United States. She also informed me that I could

remain in India for as long as I liked to work on her husband's writings. Arrangements had been made for me to stay at the Gujarat Vidyapith, a small university founded by Gandhi in the city of Ahmenabad.

My student and I went to Ahmenabad where we stayed for nearly three months. I would daily read and edit Dasgupta's writings and she would do library research in the marvelous Gandhi archive located at the University. In between we would join the students and faculty for their daily prayer and meditation session and participate in various faculty and college activities. It was then that I discovered Dasgupta's background as a Gandhian. For sixteen years he had headed the Gandhian Institute of Social Sciences in Banares. Meanwhile, my student was sharing her research on Gandhi. Most evenings we spent discussing Gandhian ideas and carving out an article we wanted to jointly write. We would eventually publish an article on a non-violent approach to management that would be published in *Gandhi Marg*, the official journal of the Gandhi Foundation. I would also go on to write a series of articles in various North American journals under Dasgupta's name.

This scholarship activity would leave its mark. I discovered Dasgupta to be an insightful critic of post-industrial colonialism, while I found Gandhi to be the source of this insight. Dasgupta served as my doorway to Gandhi, and Gandhi my doorway to reconstructing my views about life and visions about the future.

Gandhi was a definite radical in his criticism of western eco-

nomic development. He decried its material emphasis and the violence that accompanied it. To Gandhi, economics was ethics and should be a means to a spiritual life, not its substitute. Gandhi felt that one of the most important roles of the economy was to provide the opportunity for meaningful work. Such work he felt contributed to the development of self. I was especially impressed by Gandhi's theory of material simplicity and his arguments about how it promoted non-violence. Gandhi's stance on spiritual self development through service to others and the promotion of social justice was reminiscent to me of the language of social work. This unplanned connection to Gandhian thought would form the basis for much of my scholarship over the coming years.

The deeper my scholarship on Gandhian thought grew, the richer I felt his concepts to be. A subsequent trip to India three years later contributed to this enrichment in unexpected ways. This second trip I made to India came at the invitation of a group that sponsored an annual memorial lecture in Dasgupta's name. I was the invited speaker for the third annual event. Traveling with me was a faculty colleague and three students. Earlier, I had been at meetings in Finland with a research team of North Americans, Japanese, and Scandinavians. Our purpose was to explore the relationship of culture and ethics within our respective welfare systems.

From Gandhi to Mother Theresa
The day following my lec-

ture in Calcutta, my colleague, Professor Eleanor Anstey, suggested that we visit the Mother House of Mother Theresa. That morning we took leave of our musty lodgings in the Hotel Bliss (quite misnamed) and by trolley went into the downtown area. After several inquiries we managed to head in the direction of Mother Theresa's quarters. En route we had a strange experience. Before us on a busy street in a somewhat rundown area of the central city lay a naked woman. She lay on her back, frothing slightly at the mouth, while the sun beat brutally down on her body. The woman appeared to be alive, but in some sort of stupor. The locals were walking around her as if oblivious to her presence. My colleague and I hesitated and wondered what we should do. After a quick skirmish with our consciences, we decided to follow the guidance of the locals. We walked on by, as the song goes.

Not more than three blocks further, we spotted our destination. There stood a three-story, wood-framed, neatly trimmed building. Painted in blue and white, the same color as the habits of the Sisters of Mercy, the Mother House rested in marked contrast to the industrial buildings that surrounded it. After ringing the doorbell, a young English speaking novice invited us to come in. We explained the purpose of our visit. The young woman replied that she was uncertain whether Mother Theresa was in, but that we were welcome, in any case, to acquaint ourselves with the building. She suggested we might like to join the novitiates in

morning prayer in the chapel.

Eleanor and I explored a bit, then joined the young women in the chapel. As we knelt, my colleague nudged me and excitedly stammered, "There is Mother Theresa!" As I turned my head and spotted her, she noticed us. Although involved in a conversation with a young man, she managed to signal to us to wait for her. A few minutes later we were paying rapt attention to Mother Theresa's

of a large social and health services network around the world. Her eyes were penetrating and determined. Her countenance soft. In my world travels, I would discover again and again that same gentle look among the Sisters of Mercy.

As our conversation with Mother Theresa drew to a close, we presented her with our moral dilemma. What should we have done with the woman lying in the street. Without drawing a breath,



discussion of the work of her order and the unmet needs of the mission.

I was shocked to find Mother Theresa to be such a small woman. She could not have been much more than 5 foot and a few inches tall. Despite the short frame, she had the sturdiness of build of a peasant woman accustomed to hard work. I could more easily picture her harvesting grain in a field than serving as the CEO

she said emphatically, "You would take her into your arms and bring her here." Then she asked us where we had seen the woman, and, as soon as we replied, she ordered two of the novices to go pick her up. We spoke to her of our reasoning, our uncertainty about local customs. She smiled, and without apology stated, "I follow the culture of Christ and the principle of love thy neighbor." She then added with some humil-

ity, "We are such simple women, we need a simple guide-post for our lives--the love of God and those in need. We use our heart, not our head, in making these decisions."

This would not be the only occasion when I would be given lessons on life by the Sisters of Mercy. Seven years ago I had organized a very special travel seminar to Honduras. I called this my "thirty year retrospective" trip and invited several persons who had been on that very first study seminar to return with me and review the changes we had noted. Included in this group were several social work educators and the travel editor of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*.

It was on this visit that I became aware of a serious outbreak of AIDS on the North Coast of Honduras. One of the more devastated communities was the Garifuna village of San Juan de Tela, a village that we always had visited on these seminars. The members of the original group could not believe the changes that had occurred in the village, the AIDS outbreak notwithstanding. On our first acquaintance, San Juan appeared to be an ideal community. The men were subsistence fishermen, the women gardeners and caretakers of the children. They lived in traditional thatched roofed huts near the beaches of the Caribbean. They played soccer, had their own dance band, danced meringue, and ate lightly. They were tall and handsome, both the men and the women. Overall they seemed considerably healthier than the mestizo Honduran.

In talking with friends and

family in the village (my wife and I had helped raise for a few years one of the children from the village), we were told their story of colonial exploitation. The men had been forced to abandon fishing because they couldn't compete in their dugout canoes with the commercial Japanese trawlers. In pursuit of survival, they worked on the nearby banana plantations cutting bananas. When machine technology replaced the hand cutting, they accepted positions as sailors on the banana boats. In taking to the sea, they left their families for nearly a year at a time. The community behind them adjusted to living with their fathers absent. Sexual patterns for both men and women changed as well.

Within a few years, the banana boats became obsolete and were replaced by quicker and cheaper air transport. The Garifuna sailors were cut loose once again. But now the village was no longer home to them. It offered no alternative livelihood. So they took their cosmopolitanism (knowledge of the world, language competencies) and pursued their futures in the United States and Europe. Most left their families behind. They fulfilled their responsibilities by sending checks to partially abandoned wives, children, and elderly relatives. In thirty years, the village had transformed from a subsistence fishing village to a ghostly remittance-economy village. The checks were used to buy drugs as well as food. Sexual relations involved multiple partners, given the scarcity of men. Once the AIDS virus entered the village, it spread rapidly because of the al-

tered sexual patterns.

In the nearby city of San Pedro we discovered that the newest social welfare services were three hospices, all directed towards serving dying AIDS patients. One of these was run by the Sisters of Mercy. The Mother Superior, a young Costa Rican, showed us her facility. By Honduran standards it was a showplace. Once again I was impressed with the compassionate attitudes of these women of Mercy. What incredible social workers they were.

Recently I returned to Honduras to assist a student in a research project on AIDS. Together we revisited both the Garifuna village and the hospice. In the village, I found yet another chapter had been added to the tragic decline of the village. A five-hundred-bed resort hotel was being built by Japanese investors on their pristine beach. Drug trade and prostitution were already pandering to the vacationers. The AIDS epidemic in the village continued, unabated. A once spirited community was literally dying a not-so-slow death.

On our return to the Sisters of Mercy hospice for AIDS patients in San Pedro Sula, we were greeted by a new Mother Superior. The new Sister in charge was a spirited young woman from Italy, Sister Anna. Her eyes, face, and gentle smile combined to exude that look of spiritual health and unity, which seemed to characterize most of the Mother Theresa nuns. Sister Anna invited us to spend the day with her. She had us meet each of the twelve patients in her facility, sharing with us their stories. The ambience of the hospice defied the

notion that this was a house of dying people. It was clean, simple, and rich with living things--both plant and animals--and overflowing with a love of life. My student ended up volunteering to work a couple of days a week for the remainder of the summer. This experience would add an important dimension to her thesis research.

In conversation, the hospice nuns explained that the first case of AIDS in Honduras was not diagnosed until 1990, five years after its diagnosis in the United States. This fact made one question whether AIDS, too, was but another negative effect of colonialism, not unlike the syphilis and influenza spread among Native Americans by the invading European immigrant.

Revitalization of the Small Planet

The space of this essay does not permit a full review of my international experiences. I have chosen to share only those that seemed to have left the deepest imprint on my own thoughts. The Peace Corps, the writings of Gandhi, the relationship to Sugata Dasgupta, the contacts with Mother Theresa and her Sisters of Mercy, along with the sharing of these ventures with my students, are all contributors to my current philosophy of life. I have arrived at a view of the future based on neo-Gandhian perspectives, which I have attempted to apply to Social Work. Much of this thinking I have integrated into an unpublished paper titled: "Gandhian Thought, an Ethical Paradigm for Social Work."

I am especially indebted to Gandhi and Dasgupta for demonstrating to me that colonialism

is an inherent feature of capitalism, and as I have discovered, that the contemporary spread of global capitalism ("globalization") is no exception. Bernard Barber's book (1996) *Jihad vs Mc World* offers a penetrating analysis of this dynamic. Gandhi's ideas on non-violence and respect for planetary integrity could not be more timely for a world that will enter a new millennium battered and bruised from assaults to both human and physical environments.

Both Gandhi and Mother Theresa have shown me the importance of moving beyond a culture of consumption to an appreciation of the simple and efficient lifestyle, which is based on the foundations of compassion and trust. I believe the issues of the 21st century will not center on expanding production but will deal with a more just distribution. The issues will not focus on the pursuit of greater and more complex technology, but in finding more appropriate technology. It will challenge the assumption that one's quality of life rests in access to commodities. We then will be able to explore a more non-violent and humanistic way of life.

During the course of my international journey, my idea of the world has changed. What I once perceived as an immense world, I would now describe as a "small planet." I experience it as small only because resolved distances are amazingly "immediate." I can both feel the planet's fragility and empathize with its complexity. To draw an allusion, this small planet is somewhat of a familiar face to me, and I'd like to keep it alive for future generations to meet. Travel and interna-

tional experiences have been central components of my professional education. For as long as I am able, I plan to continue to take my students on their own journey of a small planet.

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