THE AMERICAN DREAM THROUGH THE WINDOW OF PEACE CORPS MEMOIRS

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This thesis focuses on whether and how Peace Corps volunteers attempt to impart the values of the American Dream to the communities where they serve. The American Dream is defined as a dual set of values. The material/conservative version of the Dream incorporates the idea that through hard work and determination, success will follow. The idealistic/liberal version of the Dream encompasses the ideas of liberty and equality. This thesis investigates whether volunteers experience similar frustrations in trying to impart the values of the Dream and what broader implications of the difficulties of development work would be revealed during this study.

To investigate this problem, the author reviews and analyzes three memoirs of Peace Corps volunteers. The author chooses the memoir as the vehicle for this study because it exposes the volunteer experience and the core beliefs of the volunteer in an expressive and pointed medium. The three selected memoirs chosen were Living Poor, drafted by Moritz Thomsen about his experience as a volunteer in Ecuador in the 1960s, The Ponds of Kalambayi, written by Mike Tidwell about his volunteer work in Congo
in the 1990s, and “The Narrowest Road,” my memoir about my Peace Corps experience in Belize from 2004 to 2006.

After a review of the three memoirs, the author determines that each of the volunteers attempts to impart the values of the American Dream. They all three face disillusionment as they encounter the challenges of trying to impart these values while doing development work in poor villages with different cultures. They face disillusionment as they struggle with an experience that is significantly different from the one they originally envision.

The volunteers do not achieve their originally planned version of the Dream as noted in the conclusion to this thesis. They fail to reach this vision due to the poverty in their villages, the cultural differences they encounter, and the lasting remnants of the colonialist past. The volunteers achieve some measure of success when they modify their version of the Dream and their development projects to be more sensitive to the cultural differences they face in their communities.
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I thank my parents for raising me with the love of education and instilling in me the desire to pursue a Liberal Studies degree. I dedicate this thesis to my beautiful wife and daughter who love and support me in everything I do and inspire me to always learn and try to live a better life.
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CHAPTER ONE

THE AMERICAN DREAM

“The American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.”¹ These are the words of President Bill Clinton in his 1993 speech to the Democratic Leadership Council. Clinton is referring to an idea that has made its way into the American ethos, the American persona, that is if you work hard and persevere in life, you will succeed. This thesis explores whether and how Peace Corps volunteers have attempted to impart this uniquely American value to the developing world in which they serve. Chapter One addresses definitions of the American Dream. It will do so by surveying the leading scholars who have studied this Dream and will ultimately pull together the core components to come up with a working definition of this concept. It will then assert that this Dream has been integrated into the persona of many Americans, including those who have served around the world as Peace Corps volunteers.

Although the idea of the “American Dream” is rooted in the early development of America, the actual term is of relatively recent origin. Historian James Truslow Adams coined the term the “American Dream” in Epic of America (1931), describing

the nation as a place “where toil would reap a sure reward” and glorifying the American frontier as the origin of the American Dream and most of the nation’s virtues and values. He believed that the frontier was a positive force as it had created that “American dream of a better, richer and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world.” Truslow continued by describing the American Dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”

Thus, Truslow believed the “greatest contribution” of America was to give all citizens, regardless of rank, the chance to achieve a better life. He saw this unlimited opportunity for Americans exemplified by the westward expansion in the nineteenth century. The west was a place where everyone, no matter where he or she started, could achieve a better and prosperous life. According to Truslow, America was a place without boundaries for those willing to work hard enough to be a recipient of its never ending opportunities. Although Truslow coined the term in the 1930s, the roots of these ideas behind the Dream lie much farther back in American history. Many commentators have explored this evolution of the American Dream. To come up with a working definition for the purpose of this thesis, it will be helpful to look at the works of three authors discussing this topic.

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First, James Guimond, in *American Photography and the American Dream*, describes the underlying foundation of the Dream as the sense that America is an exceptional or even a magical kind of place where anything is possible.\(^3\) Jennifer Hochschild, in *Facing up to the American Dream*, also defines the American Dream, but in the context of racial relations in America.\(^4\) Finally, the work of Wilber Caldwell, *Cynicism and the Evolution of America*, will be reviewed. Like Guimond and Hochschild, Caldwell attempts to define the American Dream and, in particular, focuses on the dual nature of the Dream to encompass idealistic and materialistic components.\(^5\) An analysis of these works will provide a working definition of the American Dream to be utilized for the remainder of the thesis.

James Guimond identifies as follows the transformative possibilities of America:

> What lies behind many versions of the Dream is the conception of America as a kind of magic environment or society that has the power to transform people’s lives, the idea that the United States is not merely a new world, but a different kind of world, a unique place where the limitations, boundaries and inequities that formerly confined the human race either do not exist or are about to disappear. This belief, often described as ‘exceptionalism,’ is based on the assumption that America can never be an ordinary nation or society.\(^6\)

Guimond also points to the early roots of the Dream well before Truslow coined the term. In 1630, John Winthrop led a group of Pilgrims to America. In what has

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\(^3\) Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, 12.


become known as his sermon on the *Arbella*, Winthrop espoused his vision for the new land that the settlers with him were about to inhabit. He said that this new country (America) is destined to be “a city set upon a hill,” whose inhabitants will lead lives of exceptional virtue, free from most of the tribulations and tragedies that have afflicted past history.\(^7\) Winthrop envisioned an idealized society that would be different from those of the past in Europe and that would offer new opportunities. As America became colonized, Winthrop’s ideas began to take hold.

To support this assertion, Guimond undertakes a brief analysis of the writings of Americans as the country approached its independence from Great Britain. As Americans began to envision this dramatic change, they started to contemplate what type of life they wanted to live in their country. From their writings, one can begin to clearly see this evolving idea of the American Dream.

Guimond comments on the letters of Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. In the 1770s, de Crevecoeur, a farmer in New York, wrote *Letters from an American Farmer* from the perspective of an imaginary Pennsylvania farmer about his idealized view of the colonies as a place of equality and prosperity. Crevecoeur discussed how immigrants coming to the new world would be transformed upon their arrival to America. He said that America changed the immigrant from “a servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a free man. . . .” He

\(^7\) Ibid.
concluded that an immigrant would not make this change by luck or “freaks of fortune” but by “the gradual operation of sobriety, honesty, and emigration.”

Thus, according to Guimond, Crevecoeur set out the character traits that would later become known as “The American Dream.” These traits included sobriety, honesty, and hard work. One would not find success in the new world by luck, but by determination and hard work, and the pay off would be the transformation from slave and servant to master and free man. This was the life that would await those that were willing to shake off the despotic yoke of Europe and avail themselves of the limitless opportunities in the new world.

Guimond also sees the evolving Dream as having two distinct components: that of a conservative and a liberal outlook. The conservative view of this American Dream encompasses the idea that anyone can make it in the world of endless opportunities for all that we call America. This idea can be seen throughout the nineteenth century as this version of the Dream became embedded in the American ethos and persona. Guimond discusses the speeches of then Congressman James Garfield in the nineteenth century which he sees as an apt description of this conservative view of what would later become known as the “American Dream.”

In a speech to students in 1869, Garfield said that students should not be concerned about poverty. He said that as follows:

. . . in the aristocracies of the old world, wealth and society are built up like the strata of the rock. . . . If a boy be born in the lowest stratum of life, it is almost impossible for him to rise . . . but in this country, it is not so. The strata of our

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8 Ibid., 13.
society resemble rather the ocean, where every drop . . . is free to mingle with all others, and may shine at last on the crest of the highest wave. This is the glory of our country.9

In another speech, Garfield also incorporated this idea of poor boys rising up from poverty into his version of the American Dream: “I never met a ragged boy of the street without feeling that I may owe him a salute, for I know not what possibilities may be buttoned up under his shabby coat.” Garfield continued that “among these boys are the great men of the future — the heroes of the next generation.”10 Garfield put out the possibility of unlimited hope for those fortunate enough to be present in America—a country with limitless possibilities, regardless of where one started in life.

In essence, according to Garfield, it is the person’s responsibility if he or she does not succeed in life because there are endless choices and opportunities. If a person fails, then the blame lies with that individual. In this conservative view of the American Dream, one could make it to the upper levels of American society through hard work and determination regardless of what socioeconomic level one was born into. In the end, Guimond defines this conservative view of the American Dream as one where people need to conform to unchanging sets of rules and principles that will guarantee one success in a capitalistic society.11

Guimond also looks to literature to understand the evolving idea of the conservative American Dream. During the nineteenth century, the stories by the writer

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid.
Horatio Alger became popular. Guimond believes that these works became the literary persona of the conservative view of the American Dream. In the Alger narratives, a poor boy pulls himself up by his bootstraps and succeeds in life through hard work and determination. Alger wrote stories about poor boys who became respectable citizens by working hard, doing good deeds, educating themselves, and following the advice they received from successful people. The main character in these works was a boy named Ragged Dick. In one narrative, a man tells him, “I hope, my lad, you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty in early life is no bar to a man’s advancement.”

This became known as “the rags to riches” myth and an essential component of the conservative view of the American Dream—the idea that great wealth is within the reach of everyone on American soil.

Thus, this conservative vision of the American Dream encompassed “devout faith” in education, the nation, and the work ethic. The Dream would become a reality and wealth would follow only if people conformed to certain sets of principles that would lead to success in a capitalist society. Under this conservative version of the Dream, success is defined as monetary and material wealth. America is seen as a place that is morally superior to other parts of the world where opportunity does not present itself to those willing to work hard, such as the hierarchical lands of Europe where many of the settlers of America had originated. People achieving financial success

12 Ibid., 74.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid.
firmly established that America was a land of unbridled opportunity for those that were willing to get their hands dirty and work for it.

Guimond contrasts the conservative version with a markedly different liberal version of the American Dream that contains more moral and idealistic components not necessarily connected only to monetary gains. This version of the Dream draws from the language of the Declaration of Independence and focuses more on the idea that America “should be” a land of opportunity and equality for every person. This is in contrast to the conservative version that views prosperity within reach as long as a person is willing to work hard and be diligent in his or her life. To elucidate this liberal view, Guimond quotes from a speech to the 1984 Democratic National Convention by Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman nominated for vice president. Speaking to a crowd made up of many Blacks and Hispanics, she said that America is “the land where dreams can come true for all of us. . . . Our faith that we can shape a better future is what the American dream is all about. . . . The rules are fair. If you work hard and play by the rules, you can earn your share of America’s blessings.” In the liberal version, there is more of an emphasis on leveling the playing field so that all people can get their share of prosperity as opposed to the instant wealth embodied in the rags-to-riches stories. In the liberal version, many interpret failure, inequality, and poverty as proof that the Dream is not working.15

In Guimond’s view, the liberal version of the American Dream is also personified by many others, such as Dr. Martin Luther King. In what has become

15 Ibid.
commonly known as the “I Have a Dream speech,” King spoke in 1963 to 200,000 people gathered at the mall in Washington, DC, to rally for civil rights. In memorable phrasing, he stated:

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal. . . . I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.16

In his view of the Dream, King sees America as a land with much potential, a land where people will have unlimited opportunities regardless of the color of their skin. It is a dream one step removed from the conservative view, where success only takes hard work and determination. In the liberal view, there are hurdles which must be crossed, barriers that must be taken down, before the American Dream is open to all. This is the distinction between the two Dreams even if they will, for some, eventually end in the same place.

Like Guimond, Jennifer Hochschild in her book, *Facing up to the American Dream*, also gives some useful insight into a definition of the American Dream. She believes that the American Dream has become a “central ideology of Americans.”17 By her definition, the American Dream is “not merely the right to get rich, but rather the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise—through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment

16 Ibid., 16.

17 Hochschild, *Facing up to the American Dream*, xi.
through success.” According to Hochschild, since the time of Andrew Jackson, “the American dream has been a defining characteristic of American culture, aspirations, and ostensibly, at least institutions against which all competitors must contend.”

Hochschild describes four tenets of the American Dream. First, everyone has access to the American Dream regardless of family background or personal history. Second, the American Dream contains reasonable anticipation although not promise, of success. Third, one can achieve success and the American Dream through actions and traits under one’s own control. Fourth, the reason people try to attain the American Dream and success is because true success is associated with virtue.

Hochschild also believes that the American Dream “consists of tenets about achieving success.” She believes that success can be measured in three ways. First, there is absolute success, which implies reaching a threshold of well-being where there is an opportunity to live life with decency and respect. To support this view, she quotes Bruce Springsteen who says, “I don’t think the American dream was that everybody was going to make . . . a billion dollars, but it was that everybody was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and some dignity and a chance for some self-respect.” Secondly, success can be relative; “here achieving the American dream consists of becoming better off than some comparison point, whether one’s childhood, people in the old country, one’s neighbors, a character from a book,

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 18.
20 Ibid., 1.
another race or gender—anything or anyone that one measures oneself against.” 21

Finally, according to Hochschild, success can be competitive where one achieves victory over someone else.

Thus, in her first tenet, Hochschild asserts that everyone may pursue these dreams. To support this theoretical observation, she cites a poll that indicates that two-thirds of the poor are certain that Americans like themselves “have a good chance of improving our standard of living.” 22 This is also evident in the remarks of Bill Clinton mentioned previously. The next tenet of the dream that Hochschild addresses is how does one do this? She quotes the speech of Robert Winthrop in 1856 at the inauguration of the statute of Benjamin Franklin as an indication of this tenet:

Behold him [a statute of Benjamin Franklin] . . . holding out to you an example of diligence, economy and virtue, and personifying the triumphant success which may await those who follow it! Behold him, ye that are humblest and poorest . . . lift up your heads and look at the image of a man who rose from nothing, who owed nothing to parentage or patronage, who enjoyed no advantages of early education, which are not open,—a hundredfold open—to yourselves, who performed the most menial services in the business in which his early life was employed, but who lived to stand before Kings, and died to leave a name which the world will never forget. 23

Hochschild notes how this idea is still pervasive in the modern era. She points to a Citicorp Bank advertisement which shows smiling faces of all nationalities with the caption, “The Will to Succeed is part of the American Spirit.” Hochschild believes that this demonstrates the American idea of rewarding people in the marketplace “according

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21 Ibid., 16.

22 Ibid., 19.

23 Ibid., 21.
to their talents and accomplishments rather than their needs, efforts or simple
existence.” She also cites a 1952 study that found that eighty-eight percent of
Americans agreed that there is plenty of opportunity in American society and anyone
that works hard can go as far as he wants. She contrasts this with the rest of the world
where many people believe that what you achieve in life depends largely on your family
background.24

In addition, Hochschild discusses her third tenet, which addresses why success
is worth pursuing. She believes that this is an important tenet of the Dream in “that the
pursuit of success warrants so much fervor because it is associated with virtue.”25 That
is, virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, and apparent success is not
real success without virtue. She notes how difficult this definition is to pinpoint, is ever
changing, and takes many paths. As she states, “. . . the global, amorphous vision of
establishing a city upon a hill, killing the great whale, striking a vein of gold, making
the world safe for democracy—or simply living a life of decency and dignity—
underlies all analyses of what success means or what practices will attain it.”26

Hochschild concludes that the American Dream has played an integral although
imperfect part in the development of America and the national psyche. As she says,
“Thus, the American Dream is an impressive ideology. It has for centuries lured people
to America and moved them around within it, and it has kept them striving in horrible

24 Ibid., 13.
25 Ibid., 23.
26 Ibid., 24.
conditions against impossible odds. Most Americans celebrate it unthinkingly, along with apple pie and motherhood; criticism typically is limited to imperfections in its applications. But like apple pie and motherhood, the American dream turns out upon closer examination to be less than perfect.” Thus, Hochschild sees the reality of the Dream, and it does not attain its idealized status.

In *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*, Wilber Caldwell also looks at the evolution of this concept of the American Dream. Like Guimond, he sees the dream as historically having a dual nature, which he classifies as an *idealistic* dream and a *materialistic* dream. Caldwell believes that “the epic of American history can be told as the ongoing struggle to reconcile these two faces of the American dream.”

Caldwell sees the idealistic dream as an aspiration for “liberty, justice, democracy, freedom, equality, and self realization,” while the material component is an aspiration for “wealth, material success and property.” Thus, he understands that the idealistic side of the Dream refers to lofty ideas of liberty and democracy while the materialistic side is pragmatic, representing real world ideas of security and property. Caldwell believes that when the two components come together, this is the complete American Dream. He calls this culmination of the two components the “American Dream of Progress.” As Caldwell states, “The junction of the ideal and material sides of the Dream is the birthplace of the American Dream of Progress. It is more than the

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27 Ibid., 25.

American Dream of Upward Mobility, more than the observable, measurable progress of economics, social elasticity, or politics. Rather, it is an idealized notion of progress that lies at the heart of our national Dream.”

Caldwell continues that “as the national experience unfolded, Americans came to believe that hard work, self-denial, endurance, initiative, thrift, patience, industry, sobriety, moderation, and self-discipline paved a road to a better life, and that this road was open to all Americans. . . . At its heart [the American dream of progress] is the notion that, with hard work, material and social progress are inevitable in America.”

Caldwell believes that the Dream is constantly evolving. He posits that the Dream gained a foothold in America with the arrival of the Puritans. As Caldwell states, “Puritanism contributed much to the evolving political, social, and economic design for the framework that was to later support the American dream.” Caldwell, like Truslow, believes that the Dream evolved from life on the frontier and wilderness. He believes that the wilderness molded “a new brand of individualism, whose self-reliant converts dreamed more liberal dreams.” Caldwell believes that these individualistic ideas led to the promotion of democracy. As he writes, “the new land and the harsh realities of the frontier forged a new uniquely American-spirit-the self-reliant assurances we call democratic individualism.” This was the origin of the idealistic side of the dream.

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29 Ibid., 41.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 59-61.
Under Caldwell’s theory, the American Dream has a material side that also began to develop with the Puritans. The Puritans came to the new world with a “robust work ethic” and a “healthy respect for thrift and the accumulation of wealth.” Thus, Caldwell believes the settlers brought with them a dream of liberty and a dream of property. As the colonial period progressed, America was made up of many people from many different countries, but Caldwell sees the growing “psychology of American individualism that would form the underpinning of the American Dream.”

Like Guimond, Caldwell also sees the writings of Hector St. John de Crevecoeur as the best example of this colonial period psychology. He notes that Crevecoeur discussed how immigrants coming to the new world would be transformed upon their arrival to America. As Crevecoeur wrote in his *Letters from an American Farmer*:

> ... everything tended to regenerate them, new laws, new mode of living, new social system; here they would become men; in Europe they were as so many useless plants ... withered and mowed down by want, hunger and war. By what invisible power has this surprising metamorphosis been performed? By that of the laws of their industry ... his country is that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence. ... Here the rewards of his industry follow in equal steps with the progress of his labor; his labor is founded on the basis of nature, self-reliance; can it want stronger allurement?  

Caldwell sees this as the nurturing of the infant American Dream that continued to grow as America progressed.

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32 Ibid., 61, 63.

According to Caldwell, the Dream continues to grow with the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. When Thomas Jefferson referred to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, he was simply giving voice to the American Dream.” In the 1800s with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the American Dream shifted again to its materialist side. As Caldwell says, “the new dream was material to its core, and it promised enormous wealth.” He believes that this expanded materialistic side would have a consequence, the marginalizing of the idealistic side of the Dream: “The machine age had changed the American dream forever. The old dream of freedom and democracy would linger, but the new material dream of personal wealth apart from the land had exacted an exorbitant price in the east.”

With the advent of advertising in the twentieth century, Caldwell observes the sale of a new revised dream to the American public with an emphasis once again on the material side. He concludes that cynicism in America today is the result of this shifting American Dream towards the materialistic side and greed. In summary, this writer believes that the early version of the Dream was “the agrarian vision of a hardy new breed of self-reliant individuals who embraced hard work and sacrifice. It was built on the notion that with work, self sufficiency, sobriety, thrift, initiative, moderation, and endurance, the riches of the new land would be placed at the feet of the dreamer.” The Dream promised material gain and also the path to a better more moral life. Thus, the Dream became bifurcated with the aspiration for material wealth and the

34 Ibid., 63, 69, 79.
complementary aspiration for liberty, democracy, equality, the common good, and a new morality.  

Caldwell believes the Dream lost its path as America changed from a rural to an industrial society. He believes the one side was plundered by the material side. He believes the Dream has become obsolete by the “Modern Condition.”

The discussion of these three writers brings out some common themes in the attempt to define the American Dream. It will be necessary to pull together these themes into one working definition to determine if Peace Corps volunteers impart the values of the American Dream, as defined in this thesis, to their respective communities. A review of the three writers shows that there is a unique American Dream with unique values. This includes the dichotomy between the liberal/idealistic version of the Dream and the conservative/materialistic version of the Dream. In addition, the writers discuss the idea of progress and exceptionalism, which will also be valuable in developing a working definition of what values are encompassed by the American Dream.

Both Caldwell and Guimond draw a distinction between the idealistic/liberal version and material/conservative versions of the dream. Although they use different terms, their ideas are essentially the same and can be combined as one version of the dream. The idealistic/liberal version of the dream as defined by these authors includes values such as liberty, justice, democracy, freedom, equality, and self realization. This version of the Dream contains more moral and idealistic components not only

necessarily connected to monetary gains. In addition, it draws from the language of the Declaration of Independence and focuses more on the idea that America “should be” a land of opportunity and equality for every person. As discussed earlier, in this liberal/idealistic view, there are hurdles which must be crossed, barriers that must be taken down, before the American Dream is open to all.

This is in contrast to the conservative/materialistic version that views opportunity and equality as a reality so long as a person is willing to work hard and be diligent in his or her life. This side of the American Dream, as defined by Caldwell and Guimond, includes values such as hard work, self-denial, endurance, initiative, thrift, patience, industry, sobriety, moderation, and self-discipline. If these attributes are adhered to, wealth, material success, and property will follow. In the end, Guimond defines this conservative view of the American Dream as one where people need to conform to unchanging sets of rules and principles that will guarantee one success in a capitalistic society.36 Thus, the first part of the definition will be the dual materialist/conservative and liberal/idealistic components.

The second part of the definition will consist of the terms “progress” and “success.” Caldwell and Hochschild discuss these terms in the context of defining the American Dream. As discussed previously, Caldwell defines “progress” as the culmination of the materialistic and idealistic version of the Dream. Hochschild also sees “success” as one of the primary tenets of the American Dream. She believes that

36 Guimond, 14.
the American Dream leads to the promise of success. She, however, in addition to the values discussed by Caldwell, incorporates virtue to the idea of success. Another aspect of Hochschild’s analysis that will be useful in this analysis is the idea that success can be *relative*: “achieving the American dream consists in becoming better off than some comparison point, whether one’s childhood, people in the old country, one’s neighbors, a character from a book, another race or gender—anything or anyone that one measures oneself against.” 37 Finally, according to Hochschild, success can be *competitive* where one achieves victory over someone else.

The final part of the working definition of the American Dream will be the concept of exceptionalism. This concept, as discussed by Guimond and other commentators, is a kind of magic environment or society that has the power to transform people’s lives, where the limitations, boundaries, and inequities that formerly confined the human race either do not exist or are about to disappear. Other commentators, such as Zachary Karabell, have defined exceptionalism as a version of utopia. Many Americans believe that “all [material and nonmaterial] needs can be satisfied, that we can have wealth and happiness, homes and spiritual fulfillment, comfort and community, sated appetites and satisfied souls. The only thing missing is how. Convinced that abundance is possible, we continually strive for it and are always looking for the means to achieve it.” 38

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37 Hochschild, *Facing up to the American Dream*, 16.

Karabell believes that what has remained constant in the American vision for the last four-hundred years is that utopia is possible. He describes in his book different stages that are ways of describing the utopian visions that have been featured during different eras in American history. The defining theme is always a quest for utopia and perfection.

To summarize, this thesis will attempt to look at Peace Corps memoirs and see if and how volunteers attempt to impart the unique values of America, as defined by the American Dream, to their respective communities. The values that will be explored are contained in the liberal/idealistic and conservative/materialistic components of the Dream. In addition, the values contained in the ideas of progress, success, and exceptionalism will also be analyzed. Finally, many of the commentators have addressed the fact that this American Dream has become part of the American persona and ethos and has subsequently become engrained in American culture. Raymond Williams has developed the idea of America’s “corporate culture” and discusses how this occurs among a group of people. According to Williams, this is “a common culture of meanings and values.”39 These meanings or values may change or disappear over time, but they “. . . [have] to include at least some versions of the past which make sense at some depth.”40 Williams calls this a society’s “contemporary corporate culture” in which values and social practices of some citizens are repeated and included while

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those of others are neglected.\textsuperscript{41} In regard to Williams’ analysis, Guimond states that this is a useful tool in regard to the American Dream as “some older versions—such as the rags-to-riches myth and certain phrases from the Declaration of Independence—have reappeared so often in the twentieth century that they seem to be permanent, or at least perennial, components of the Dream.”\textsuperscript{42}

Other commentators, such as Cal Jillson in \textit{Pursuing the American Dream}, note that the distinct American Dream took shape early in the nation’s experience and defined America through its growth and development. Jillson believes that the American Dream today remains central to the “national ethos and collective self image.”\textsuperscript{43} Another commentator, John Schwartz, has said the promise of the American Dream is that “everyone who steadfastly practices certain practical virtues will find a place at the table. . . . These virtues—self-control, discipline, effort, perseverance, and responsibility—stand at the core of our . . . idea of good character. . . . The notion that people do have a capacity to control their own destinies is an enormously strong, almost insistent feature of our American culture.”\textsuperscript{44} Thus, there seems to be a commonly accepted idea that these values that make up the American Dream have become ingrained in the American culture—the American ethos.

\textsuperscript{41} Williams cites the values of Native Americans, Blacks, and women as groups whose values and social practices have been excluded from the corporate culture.

\textsuperscript{42} Guimond, \textit{American Photography and the American Dream}, 12.

\textsuperscript{43} Cal Jillson, \textit{Pursuing the American Dream} (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004.), xii.

There is a distinctly American Dream. The television reporter, Dan Rather, wrote a book on America and interviewed many Americans. When speaking of the people he interviewed and their understanding of the American Dream, he said the people have a “sense of the dream’s presence, and importance” and understand that America has made their own dreams possible. This commonality, this interconnectedness between our own dreams and a national ethos of aspiration may be the dream’s most important contribution to the America of today and tomorrow.”45 Dan Rather concluded his analysis of the American Dream by saying, it is still the best foundation “on which to build the American future. As an idea, it is inherently inclusive, and it has the power to strike a chord in all of us. It defines us as a people, even as we add to its meaning with each new chapter in our national experience.”46 This thesis will now turn to whether Peace Corps volunteers try to impart these uniquely American values to the communities in which they serve, and if so, whether they achieve some measure of success. To shed light on this issue, the memoirs of several volunteers will be considered. Before looking at the memoirs, one must first determine if the memoir is a useful form to analyze this cross cultural exchange—that is, the transfer of this belief system.

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46 Ibid.
CHAPTER TWO

THE ART OF THE MEMOIR

These are the experiences and images I would prefer to remember above all others in Kalambayi. But they are fragments in my mind, cleaved into tiny pieces by the larger reality of want and failure, they lay scattered under memories of a moribund economy, of a cruel dictatorship and of people dying of easily cured diseases. What, in the end, was the real story of Kalambayi? What did Mbaya Bukasa’s life mean? Back in the States, behind a humming word processor in a room overlooking streets with sidewalks and houses with porch swings, I would try to answer these questions and a string of unhappy chapters would necessarily step forth.¹

Michael Tidwell, *The Ponds of Kalambayi*

These are the words of Peace Corps volunteer Mike Tidwell from his memoir, *The Ponds of Kalambayi*. Tidwell is discussing his thought process as he begins to write his memoir detailing his experiences as a volunteer in a small village named Kalambayi in the Congo in the early 1980s. He is referring to what he hopes to accomplish by writing his memoir, to tell the “real story” about his Peace Corps experience and describe what life in his village really meant. To address the issue of whether and how Peace Corps volunteers attempt to impart the values of the American Dream to their communities, this thesis will explore three memoirs, including that of Tidwell. Before discussing the substance of the three memoirs, this chapter will examine the art of the memoir in general, and in particular, the unique aspects of Peace Corps volunteers who have written about their volunteer experiences. This chapter concludes that the Peace Corps memoir is the best vehicle to study this cross cultural transfer of American values.

The memoir is a unique literary genre that has become more prominent in the last half of the twentieth century. In *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick attempts to define the genre of memoir writing and also discusses its recent evolution. Gornick believes that thirty years ago, a writer who wanted to tell a story would sit and write a novel. She has seen an evolution where that same writer is now more likely to write a memoir. Gornick believes that “modernism has run its course and left us stripped of the pleasures of narrative: a state of reading affairs that has grown oppressive.” This writer also thinks that novels “have driven the storytelling impulse underground.” However, as Gornick writes, even with her sense of the novel’s stifling of storytelling, “that impulse—to tell a tale rich in context, alive to situation, shot through with event and perspective—is as strong in human beings as the need to eat food and breathe air: it may be suppressed but it can never be destroyed.”

Thus, She believes this storytelling impulse has reemerged with a vengeance as memoir writing. Gornick believes that as the twentieth century continued, the power of voice dwindled in an age of mass culture where “millions of people consider themselves possessed of the right to assert a serious life.” Gornick defines a “serious life” as “a life one reflects on, a life one tries to make sense of and bear witness to.” She continues that this life is defined by a need to testify. Gornick believes that phenomena like the civil rights movement and the therapeutic culture have contributed to this need to testify. She notes that in the last forty years, there have been a large number of memoirs written by

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3 Ibid.
women, blacks, and gays. The increased acceptance of the telling of these stories has led to memoirs detailing the tragedies and traumas of ordinary people’s lives, whether it be alcoholism, domestic abuse, sexual disorder, or the premature death of children.⁴

Gornick defines a memoir as follows:

. . . a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom. Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened.⁵

Gornick also discusses the similarity of memoirists to writers of other literary genres: “The memoirist, like the poet and the novelist, must engage with the world, because engagement makes experience, experience makes wisdom, and finally, it’s the wisdom—or rather the movement towards it—that counts.”

To illustrate her ideas about the evolution of modern memoir writing, Gornick analyzes some early works. In Edmund Gosse’s early twentieth century memoir, Father and Son, Gosse details the story of his life and the relationship with his father. Gornick sees this work as the precursor of the modern memoir. In the work, Gosse writes about how he discovered that his father is not perfect and all knowing: “My Father, as a deity,
as a natural force of immense prestige, fell in my eyes to a human level. In the future, his statements about things in general need not be accepted implicitly.”

Gosse goes on to describe how he must look within to find himself and his truth:

Of all the thoughts which rushed upon my savage and undeveloped little brain at this crisis, the most curious was that I had found a companion and a confidant in myself. There was a secret in this world and it belonged to me and to somebody who lived in the same body with me. There were two of us, and we could talk with one another. It is difficult to define impressions so rudimentary but it is certain that it was in this dual form that the sense of my individuality now suddenly descended upon me, and it is equally certain that it was a great solace to me to find a sympathizer in my own breast.

Gosse’s father is oppressive, but Gosse finds a way not to be stifled and can explore his feelings from within. This is an important part of memoir writing as described by Gornick. As she writes, “the sympathy with which Gosse enters into the spirit of his father’s life is the great achievement of this book: it is the thing that allows him ultimately to enter himself.” In the memoir, Gosse defines himself. As Gornick states, “At the end of this memoir we do not know everything there is to know about Edmund Gosse, not by a long shot. . . . We know only one thing: we know what it was to be his father’s son. That is, we know the man who is recording the struggle and the value of the separating self: the man who is speaking.” For Gornick, this is the essence of memoir writing, finding the writer’s voice and describing a portion of a life.

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6 Ibid., 97.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 98.
9 Ibid., 100-101.
Gornick also discusses the 1970’s memoir of Geoffrey Wolff, *The Duke of Deception*, as emblematic of the evolution towards the modern memoir. In this memoir, Gornick believes that Wolff “. . . sets out to document what the narrator of every work of twentieth-century literature has been at pains to demonstrate—that the task is to become acquainted with the stranger who lives inside your own skin, the one who answers when your name is called.”  

10 This memoir is also about Wolff’s relationship with his father, who was a renowned scam artist. Gornick believes that the genius of this memoir lies in “. . . the rich, full gaze that the narrating son levels at the emotional extravagance of the singular parent.”  

11 Gornick continues, “But the genius of the memoir lies in its letting us see how much the narrator becomes his father rather than struggles to separate from his father.”  

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Gornick sees these two memoirists as persons as described below:

. . . record a steadily changing idea of the emergent self . . . But for each of them a flash of insight illuminating that idea grew out of the struggle to clarify one’s own formative experience; and in each case the strength and beauty of the writing lie in the power of concentration with which this insight is pursued, and made to become the writer’s organizing principle. That principle at work is what makes a memoir literature rather than testament.  

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In continuing her discussion of prominent works that display the vital characteristics of memoir writing, Gornick mentions the memoir of Loren Eisley. This noted anthropologist wrote the memoir, *All the Strange Hours*, shortly before his death.

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10 Ibid. 108.

11 Ibid., 113.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 117.
in 1977. In it, he details his life and in particular, his depression and struggle with connecting with people versus nature. Gornick notes that in this work, the sense of memoir writing shines through: “The book he actually wrote is remarkable because the writing welled up out of a place beyond the reach of conscious intent and it rescued him repeatedly from his own defensiveness.”\(^\text{14}\) In his descriptions of his depression, Eisley “. . . evokes the despairing antagonism of the time: a kind of starved, murderous haze that keeps drifting up from the middle of the socialized world.”\(^\text{15}\)

Gornick continues:

Eisley wants to romanticize his own solitary state—define existence itself as loneliness incarnate—but somewhere within himself—and this is the thing he cannot look directly at—he knows that the isolation is self-created. In this memoir the working habit he has developed of naming the thing accurately struggles with the need to poeticize what he can barely acknowledge. The struggle characterizes his persona, the narrator whose singular speaking voice gives *All the Strange Hours* both its integrity and its haunting quality.”\(^\text{16}\)

William Zinsser in his book, *Inventing the Truth*, also discusses the memoir genre. In his analysis of memoir writing, he states:

Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense—childhood for instance—or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn’t possible in autobiography; memoir is a window into life.”\(^\text{17}\)

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 129.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.

Thus, memoirs focus on a particularly relevant and meaningful chapter in a person’s life and open up a window for the reader to see and understand this experience.

Zinsser discusses how a memoir, by its nature, is a version of truth: “A memoir is a way for writers to sort out their memories and emotions and arrive at a version that they believe is true.” Like Gornick, Zinsser also believes that a good memoir encompasses a work of history, catching a distinctive moment in a person’s life along with society as a whole. Zinsser writes that when one reads a memoir, he or she is often touched by the commonality of the writer’s experience with his or her own. In this way, “memoir puts lives in perspective, not only for the writer, but for the rest of us.” In his work, Zinsser discusses the even broader implications of the writing of a memoir. He believes that in essence, one writes a memoir to validate his or her life and eventually, the writer of a memoir must become “the editor of his own life.”

Other writers have also discussed the art of the memoir. In Writing the Memoir, Judith Barrington has written a practical guide to drafting such a document. In this work, she discusses the practical considerations of attempting to write a memoir and also aptly describes the importance of this genre of writing: “And for all of us, engaging seriously with the truth challenges our society’s enormous untruthfulness—whether it comes from the family, which so often denies its own violence behind closed doors, or

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18 Ibid.
from national and international powers that deny their own violence and call it ‘peace
keeping.’”

Thus, Barrington sees memoir writing as an important truth seeking process.
Like Zinsser, Barrington also discusses how the writer selects one aspect of life to
explore in depth. “Rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both
tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in light of her current
knowledge.”

Barrington also describes the memoir as a hybrid of fiction and essay. She states
that there are elements of fiction in the re-creation of believable dialogue and the
switching back and forth between scene and summary and at the same time telling a
true story. Finally, like Zinsser, Barrington discusses the difference between
autobiography and memoir. She describes autobiography as a story of a life while the
memoir is a story from a life. According to Barrington, it is important for the memoir
writer to reflect on the experiences after the fact: “Your reader has to be both
entertained by the story itself and interested in how you now, looking back on it,
understand it.” Barrington concludes: “The memoirist need not necessarily know what
she thinks about her subject but she must be trying to find out; she may never arrive at a

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20 Ibid., 20.
21 Ibid., 21.
definitive verdict, but she must be willing to share her intellectual and emotional quest for answers."\(^{22}\)

Thus, according to these writers, the essence of memoir writing is the looking within oneself to find the true self, or, as Gornick says, to “become acquainted with the stranger who lives inside your own skin, the one who answers when your name is called.” The memoir writer is struggling to clarify a formative life experience, focus on a particularly relevant and meaningful chapter in his or her life, and open up a window for the reader to see and understand this experience. In this way, memoirs are the ultimate form of the truth seeking process and as Barrington says, the “intellectual and emotional quest for answers.”

These unique characteristics of memoir writing make it the best analytical tool to explore whether Peace Corps volunteers have attempted to impart the values of the American Dream to their communities. The two years in the Peace Corps, for many volunteers, is one of the seminal moments of their lives. The memoir is the best way to delve into one aspect of this volunteer experience, that is, the volunteer’s effort to impart the unique values contained in the American Dream to the communities where he or she served. As stated in Chapter One, the values of the American Dream have become ingrained in American culture and have developed into an inherent part of the American psyche. The memoir is the best tool to illuminate the true feelings of the volunteers as they discuss their development work and their relationship with the people in their communities. By analyzing the memoirs, the window to their feelings about the

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 22, 29.
unique American Dream values will be illuminated. It will also be helpful that the three memoir writers that will be reviewed wrote their memoirs after returning to the first world, the place where their understanding of the American Dream originated. They gained the perspective to write about their experiences upon their arrival back in America. Before briefly examining the history of Peace Corps memoirs, the evolution of the Peace Corps will be discussed.

The idea of the Peace Corps originated with Congressman Henry Reuss and Senator Hubert Humphrey in 1960 when they introduced legislation to create this organization. President John F. Kennedy’s brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, developed the format of volunteer corps and on March 1, 1960, Kennedy signed an Executive Order creating the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps vision was to send Americans to developing countries around the world to live and volunteer in communities for two years. The Peace Corps was born more in the idealism of volunteers rather than individual projects. The founders of the Peace Corps believed that legal segregation in the United States changed due to the changes in individual beliefs. Likewise, they believed that idealistic people could make the broader world a better place.²³

In the early 1960s, this idea of making the world a better place seemed to define America’s national purpose. Kennedy pledged that the Peace Corps would recruit from “every race and walk of life.” Thus, in establishing the Peace Corps, Kennedy seemed

²³ Ibid., 61-62.
to embody the liberal version of the Dream by seeking out African American volunteers and trying to prove that America could live up to its lofty national ideals.²⁴

The Peace Corps, as established, had three primary goals. The first was to help interested countries meet their needs for trained men and women. This is commonly referred to as “development work.” The second goal was to have the volunteers promote a better understanding of America in the communities where they lived. The third and final goal was to have the volunteers promote a better understanding of the country where they served upon completion of the volunteer service and their return to the United States.

This thesis focuses on all three Peace Corps goals. The intersection of the first and second goals of the Peace Corps—to help with development projects and at the same time promote a better understanding of America to the communities in which the volunteers served—will be seen in an analysis of the memoir writings. In particular, the memoirs will be examined to determine if and how volunteers attempt to impart the values of the American Dream to their communities. The Peace Corps volunteers that write memoirs are also working on the third goal of the Peace Corps by bringing their development experiences back to America by writing about their volunteer time.

This thesis has chosen three sample memoirs to explore the intersection of the American Dream values and Peace Corps service. The memoirs encompass three different decades and three different continents, but all display the common search of the memoir writers to find their inner truth and open up a window to their Peace Corps

²⁴ Ibid.
experience. When looking at the volunteers’ attempts to “become acquainted with the stranger who lives inside,” the values of the American Dream will be exposed.

There is a long and storied history of Peace Corps memoirs. Although, there are no published works related specifically to Peace Corps memoirs, John Coyne is considered the expert on this topic. Coyne is the editor of the” Peace Corps Writers” Web site and served as a volunteer in Ethiopia in the 1960s. His Web site discusses Peace Corps memoirs and also provides a forum for volunteer aspiring authors. The site currently lists hundreds of published works by returned Peace Corps volunteers.25

Coyne believes that the first true Peace Corps memoir was Christ Stopped at Eboli, by Carlo Levi.26 Although it was written in 1945 before the advent of the Peace Corps, Coyne believes it contains the framework of a Peace Corps memoir. The document details the experiences of Carlo Levi, an Italian doctor who was exiled to a small village in southern Italy in 1935.27

Levi spent one year in the village and as Coyne states, “presents a now familiar story, that of an innocent westerner trying to live in, and to help, a remote peasant community.”28 Levi writes about his efforts to use his skills as a doctor to help the


26 Ibid.

27 Levi was exiled for writing against the Fascist regime in power in 1935.

28 Ibid.
villagers while struggling with a lack of resources and the cultural differences of small village life. After spending a year in the village, Levi is told that he will be released from exile under an amnesty program. Levi struggles with whether he wants to leave and the villagers plead with him to stay. Finally, he decides to leave and writes his memoir upon his return to the first world.

Coyne believes that by not returning to Eboli, Levi’s memoir is better. As he writes, “Most memories should be left unchanged. Carlo Levi was smart enough to leave his memories unchanged by preserving them in prose, capturing his past forever in this memoir: true, touching and unblemished by time.”

Many volunteers have also tried to capture their Peace Corps memories in their memoirs. The first published memoir written by a Peace Corps volunteer was *To the Peace Corps with Love*, by Arnold Zeitlin. This work detailed the experiences of Zeitlin in Ghana in 1961 with the first group of volunteers. Zeitlin was a teacher in a secondary school and in his memoir, described his view of development work as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa in the early 1960s.

After Arnold Zeitlin, countless Peace Corps volunteers have written their memoirs to preserve their memory of their volunteer experience. Many of these volunteers have discussed their struggles as they tried to impart the values of America to the countries where they served. This thesis asserts that many of the values that volunteers try to impart are those contained in the American Dream. To support this

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29 Ibid.

assertion, this thesis will now explore three Peace Corps memoirs to delve into the question of whether these three volunteers attempted to impart the values of the American Dream to their communities and if so, what can be learned from their experiences.
CHAPTER THREE

THREE PEACE CORPS MEMOIRS

Along with everyone else I had been under the spell of Washington Peace Corps propaganda, which reports on the experiences of Volunteers in their different jobs. They are all reports of success—how volunteer W comes to the high, arid town of A and leaves it two years later with running water, a chlorination system and communal showers; how Volunteer X with a couple of shovels and a hoe doubles the income of village B by establishing a tomato-marketing co-op; how rambling Volunteer Y leaves behind him an endless string of latrines stretching from here to the far horizon, none of them ever used, if the truth were known, except for storing corn, but proudly exhibited by their owners as glistening symbols of status and the open mind.¹

These are the words of Moritz Thomsen as written in his Peace Corps memoir, Living Poor. Thomsen tells the story of his experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1960s in a small village in Ecuador named Rio Verde. This Peace Corps “propaganda” discussed by Thomsen is the embodiment of the conservative/materialistic version of the American Dream: a view of success where imparting the values of hard work and determination will lead to economic well being and security.

Hundreds of Peace Corps volunteers have recounted their volunteer experiences through the art of memoir writing and thereby opened a window into the meaning of their individual volunteer experiences. In particular, this thesis will look at the attempts of three volunteers in three different decades and in three very different countries, to impart the values of the American Dream to their communities. An analysis of

Thomsen’s memoir, the memoir written by Mike Tidwell about his experiences in Africa in the 1990s, *The Ponds of Kalambayi*, and the unpublished memoir of the thesis writer, “The Narrowest Road,” recounting the writer’s experiences as a volunteer in Belize from 2004-2006, demonstrate some commonalities in the volunteers experiences as they relate to imparting of the values of the American Dream. First, volunteers often begin their service with idealistic visions of the American Dream and the possibilities of imparting and using these values to begin to lift villagers out of the throes of poverty. Second, volunteers then attempt to impart these values as they try to help their communities through the implementation of development projects. Finally, volunteers often experience disillusionment as their vision of the American Dream is not reached as a result of their volunteer efforts in their communities.

**Moritz Thomsen, *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle***

This memoir is the recounting of Thomsen’s experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer in the small Ecuadorian village of Rio Verde in the 1960s. Thomsen was in one of the first Peace Corps volunteer groups, and an analysis of his memoir sheds light on the idea of volunteers trying to impart the values of the American Dream to the communities where they served. A *New York Times* review of Thomsen’s memoir states, “Horatio Algier would have never made it in Rio Verde. In Moritz Thomsen’s recounting of the complexities of his relationship with the people of that small
Ecuadorian town we learn why.”\textsuperscript{2} The \textit{New York Times} reviewer believes that the Algier “rags to riches” myth would be a difficult sell in Rio Verde. When looking at Thomson’s experiences, one begins to understand why.

Thomsen brings an idealized version of helping the developing world to Ecuador. He brings these ideas from the Peace Corps propaganda as well as from his own life experiences that give him his definition of success. In the beginning of his memoir, Thomsen writes of seeing a slide show of Ecuador during his Peace Corps training and he envisions the village where he would soon live. Thomsen writes, “It was going to be on a trail or on a lousy road, without lights or water, a sort of jungle Walden Pond, where life, reduced to its essentials, would reveal itself for what it really was. It was a romantic conception, because at that time, I thought that poor people were somehow better, more honest and more alive, than people with money, not realizing that the absence of money in a society built around it could be as corrupting as money itself.”\textsuperscript{3} As Thomsen works in his village, as he tries to impart his American Dream values, he learns about himself and the villagers he is serving. An analysis of his experience opens up the window to the American Dream as it is being imparted by one volunteer to a small village in Ecuador in the 1960s.

Thomsen describes the town upon his arrival:

Rio Verde was a town of about thirty houses, three of them cement and the rest bamboo. A proud little dock jutted out into the river; it was high and dry at low tide, and you reached it by walking through mud. A small hand pump stood in

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., cover.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 24.
the middle of a sandy street; it delivered brackish water that could only be used for washing. On a slope just above the town a new, bright blue schoolhouse assaulted the eyes. With the exception of the school and three or four houses, the whole town was no more than four feet above the sea at high tide . . . .4

Thomsen comes to the village with an idealized view that he will be successful, that he will make a difference, that he can help people out of poverty and help them find their version of the American Dream. When he initially arrives in the village, he meets an American that has been living among the locals for thirty years. This American has an opposing view of the possibility of imparting the values contained in the Dream. In his memoir, Thomsen recounts a conversation with this American man:

They’re a lazy shiftless bunch here on the coast, the worst in the whole country. I guess the worst in the whole world. The living is too easy. A piece of fish, a dish of rice, a platano, and their goddamned hammock, they don’t want anything else. You’re not going to change them; you’re not going to change anything. They’ll love you to your face, boy, but they’ll hate you to your back. You know what’s going to happen here the day after you leave when you go back to God’s country? I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. They’ll take all those nice chickens you’ve promised to get them, and they’ll have a big party, and they’ll eat the sons of bitches. Yessir, a month after you’ve gone, nobody will ever know you were here.5

This American expatriate is proposing to Thomsen that he will end up a failure. He will not be successful in instilling the values of the American Dream. The minute he leaves, the villagers will go from raising chickens, and pursuing the Horatio Alger “rags to riches” myth, and will instead eat the chickens and have nothing left for the future. Thomsen, however, is not deterred and spends the next two years trying to make a difference, trying to teach the villagers about the American model of success and the

4 Ibid., 45.
5 Ibid., 48-49. Thomsen’s original effort was to develop a chicken farming project.
possibility for a better, more prosperous life. He spends the next two years trying to impart the values of the American Dream.

Initially, some of Thomsen’s ideas are met with enthusiasm. One of Thomsen’s first ideas is a chicken cultivation project in the village. As he says, “With all the cheap corn and fish and a perfect climate, it seemed that the best way to dazzle the local people with the brilliance of the Peace Corps was to get some successful chicken projects going.”\(^6\) Many of the villagers signed on and started chicken projects. One man is very excited while discussing the prospects of starting this project. He says to Thomsen, “By June, God willing, I will have one hundred chickens. You know what I am going to buy when I am rich? He said beginning to laugh with delight at the idea, “A pair of shoes. Oh, my God. My God.”\(^7\) The prospect of wealth and the possibility of attaining it, the idea that anyone can achieve success, are being introduced by the American Peace Corps volunteer.

As Thomsen begins a variety of projects, he starts to realize that his idealized version of success may not become a reality. Thomsen comes up with an idea to make marmalade. He realizes that he can make a jar of marmalade for three sucres (about fifteen cents) while a jar in Quito\(^8\) would sell for fifteen sucres. He immediately does the American Dream calculations and realizes these poor villagers could pull themselves out of poverty with a profitable marmalade business. Thomsen gathers some

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\(^6\) Ibid., 75.

\(^7\) Ibid., 83.

\(^8\) Quito is the capital city of Ecuador.
villagers together and gives an inspiring motivational talk on the nutritional value of the marmalade along with the possibility of American style profits.

Later, he is talking to one villager who asks him to make some more marmalade. The ensuing conversation leads to the demise of this short lived plan. Thomsen responds to the request for more marmalade by asking the villager to make the next batch. The villager responds, “lemons are very scarce and dear.” Thomsen answers, “My God, it only takes two lemons.” The villager then answers, “But the price of lemons, a real fandango, pure gold, over a penny apiece.” Thomsen replies, “I can show you again how to make it, and you can show the women how to make it. I sat there visualizing all the women in town stirring up great pots of marmalade and stuffing the scrawny children with vitamins.”  

Finally, the villager responds, “Oh the people, the people aren’t accustomed to making marmalade.” This was an answer Thomsen often received when he came up with a new idea based on American ingenuity and expertise. Thomsen calls the response “the saddest and most infuriating expression . . . that frightened sentence they pulled out of their hats when you were talking about change or when you were trying to push some slightly new idea.”

Thomsen constantly faces this response when trying to impart the values of the American Dream. In the village of Rio Verde, there is very little meat. A villager tells Thomsen that he was able to buy a hog with some money and then sold the meat for a

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9 Ibid., 57.
10 Ibid., 55.
profit to all of the villagers. When Thomsen advises the man to follow the conservative version of the American Dream and try to buy more hogs on credit and then continue to sell the meat for a profit, he is met with the same response. The villager shakes his head and says, “No, the people aren’t accustomed to doing business that way.” Thomsen constantly meets this hesitation and resistance to the idea of the American style profit motive, the conservative American Dream idea that through hard work and determination, financial prosperity will follow. The villagers respond that they are not accustomed to this idea of success and would rather do business in the way in which they are accustomed.

At some point, Thomsen discusses his chicken project with the village chief. He explains that he would not sell the chief any chickens unless he first built a raised chicken house. Thomsen explains to the chief that he was not only in the business of selling chickens but also teaching better ways to raise them. The chief responds, “Do you seriously believe that as a complete stranger to this country you can come walking in here where we have been raising chickens all of our lives and tell us how to do it better?” Thomsen replies, “Yes, exactly, that’s the whole idea.”

As Thomsen spends time in the village, he begins to understand some of the reasons that the villagers are resistant to this American Dream model of success. He begins to understand that he is asking people to take significant risks that they are not used to taking. One of Thomsen’s good friends is a villager named Alexandro. Thomsen

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11 Ibid., 58.
12 Ibid., 89.
is constantly trying to coach him on the path to success, a path that can be defined by the values of the conservative American Dream; thrift, hard work, perseverance, and diligence. Thomsen tries to get his friend to begin to raise chickens for their eggs. Thomsen continually asks and his friend continually stalls. Thomsen writes, “He finally explained that he wanted to raise chickens, he had a real passion to raise chickens.” However, Alexandro explains to Thomsen that bamboo is too expensive for the pens and he did not know how he would raise enough money. As Thomsen says, “I was running into this problem with everyone in town; I was asking people to risk more than they had in a project that, if it failed, would complicate their lives.”

In addition to the lack of a risk culture, Thomsen also begins to see that his American Dream ideas are not taking hold due to a different definition of success and class boundaries. According to American standards, Thomsen’s friend Alexandro is living in abject poverty. He can barely afford to feed his family. According to Thomsen’s world view, he is in a desperate situation where he should do anything and take whatever job to lift himself and his family out of this poverty. Alexandro has a different perception of his place in life. As Thomsen writes:

It was a product of his own idea of himself, of how he saw himself in relation to the town. His father was the political lieutenant of the zone, a sort of combined sheriff, judge, prosecuting attorney and jailer. Alexandro hated his father, but at the same time, he felt himself to be one of the aristocratic families, and for this reason there were certain types of work that he could not consider. He would not work with a machete, for instance. “I am not a machete man,” he said with dignity when I asked him why he didn’t work with some of the younger guys as a day laborer. And when I asked him why he didn’t earn a little money ferrying

13 Ibid.
people across the river, he gave me a scornful look, as though I were impugning his manhood.\textsuperscript{14}

This is the antithesis of the “rags to riches” myth, the idea that one may be above hard work even while lagging in the throes of poverty.

Towards the end of his service, Thomsen decides to start a cooperative that will farm more permanent crops, like coconuts or oranges, that will eventually bring in a more steady and stable income for the village. He begins with an idealized version of success that he attempts to impart to the villagers. However, his limited success leads to disillusionment with the possibility of imparting the values of the American Dream. Nonetheless, he did not give up: “I was convinced that I must somehow reach the people of the town with the concept of cooperation, show them that if they would unite and become a force they could begin to dominate their poverty. . . . Until they felt that they existed outside themselves, until they shed the conviction that they were a forgotten and abandoned people, sentenced to the endless cycle of poverty, they would be nothing.”\textsuperscript{15} Here one sees Thomsen trying to impart some of the values contained in the liberal version of the Dream, the idea that all people are entitled to equality and opportunity and the chance to obtain their small piece of the American Dream.

As the members of the cooperative are trekking through the forest looking for a suitable piece of land, one of the villagers named Orestes says to Thomsen, “Whatever you say Don Martin, I know we’ll go along with whatever you think best. You know

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 179-180.
we’ve never worked together, and I don’t think we ever can, but maybe it’s time that we at least tried. But some day, some day, I want that paper in my hands that says I own a part of this.” He pounded his bare foot down hard on the ground and looked at me with real affection and began to laugh. “Ay caramba, to be the owner of my own land.”

At the first cooperative meeting, Thomsen talks about how the co-op will work and how each member will end up the owner of his own piece of property. As they try to clear the first acre for planting, Thomsen decides they should clear the brush. When the villagers tell him it not the custom to burn wet brush and he should have more respect for the customs of the village, he responds, “But that’s the only reason I am here, to destroy your crazy customs.” Thomsen is caught up in the euphoria of the American Dream. If he can just entice the villagers to work towards property ownership, their little slice of the American Dream, the end result will be the necessary destruction of “crazy” local customs.

The villagers that have become part of the coop work tirelessly to clear the area while the majority of the village looks on with disdain. Thomsen says, “Their labor was, in a very real sense, an expression of confidence in me, that naive gringo from Cuerpo de Paz who had said he could change their lives by (imagine it) planting corn on level

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16 Ibid., 183-184.

17 Ibid., 193.

18 Spanish for Peace Corps.
ground, where it would surely flood out, and by using a tractor.” Thomsen also describes the members of the co-op:

It was a group of poor people who had never been to a meeting before trying to learn how to act in a meeting. It was people who had never thought of working together before, who were in fact repelled by the idea, who had never thought they owed loyalty to anything larger than the family unit, being faced with a brand new set of values. Trying to understand and work within these absolutely foreign concepts was as difficult for them as calculus, for instance, to the high-school student who barely got through algebra.

As Thompson continues, “The aim of the co-op was to move a whole group of people out of poverty right into the middle of the middle class. . . .”

In the end, the co-op fields are attacked by worms and all the crops die. The co-op is a failure. Thomsen writes:

I had gathered a group of people who trusted me, and I had promised them that if they changed their stone-age agriculture, I could show them how to dominate their poverty. ‘To lick this poverty, you have to produce more than you can eat; you have to have production.” I kept telling them. But the corn was dying, all the work had been for nothing; it looked as though I had simply burdened my friends with thousands of hours of senseless labor that would yield them nothing.

Thomsen is becoming disillusioned with the Dream. The values have been instilled but they have led to failure. The people have started out wearing rags in search of the riches, but have still ended up wearing the same rags they have always worn. Thomson struggles to figure out why he is not successful in creating new visions of the American Dream in Rio Verde.

19 Ibid., 195.
20 Ibid., 199-200.
21 Ibid., 276.
As Thomsen nears the end of his two years of service, he begins to reflect on his attempts to better the lives of the villagers and his disillusionment in this quest is evident. He discusses the situation of his friend Ramon, who Thomsen has convinced to borrow money to raise pigs and chickens to improve his life:

But it was a new, a very trying and seemingly endless and thankless, way of living, this terrible tightrope-walk out of poverty. The old life—that existence when only his and Ester’s stomachs had to be quieted, a life without a future but without responsibilities and worries—lived nostalgically in his memory. The idea of borrowing money from me month after month and pouring it into the mouths of his animals filled him with a growing horror.  

Thomsen thinks about how he had pressured Ramon to start the chicken and hog projects. He contemplates about how he had “enflamed the mind” of Ramon with the thoughts of owning one hundred chickens. Thomsen is now becoming disillusioned with the promise of the Dream and beginning to question the values that he is trying to impart. As he spends more and more time trying to convince the villagers that the ideas of the Dream are the way to success and sees the hardships that ensue, he begins to question the value of his service.

As the projects continue to falter, some of the villagers begin to blame Thomsen for putting them in a precarious situation. A villager complains to Thomsen that he had to sell six chickens to pay for the feed of others. He tells Thomsen how he struggled to find someone who would not kill the chickens and that he had become attached to them. The villager says:

22 Ibid., 112.
It is not all my fault; it is your fault, too. I’ve got to say this, it is your fault, too, because I always had it in my mind that I could dominate about six chickens, and at the most a dozen—but seventy-three? My god. Before you came, you know, we were living in blindness, and now we can see, but the change is very hard, and the one thing I am learning is that perhaps the pain and suffering of not being poor are worse than that blind poverty we lived in before.\textsuperscript{23}

The villagers blame Thomsen for filling their heads with this Americanized version of a good life and success. They believe that living poor without hope is easier than living poor with the false promise of achieving wealth through the myth of the American Dream. The villagers are seeing some of the Dream’s imperfections as discussed in Chapter One by Hochschild.

Not of all of Thomsen’s projects were failures, and some villagers did achieve some measure of financial success from these projects. But even here, Thomsen faces disillusionment with his service. He thinks about how even these villagers who are starting to become financially secure are still missing the idea of making success sustainable. At the end of his memoir, Thomsen writes about a villager named Ramon. With a successful chicken project, Ramon had become the richest man in town. He was now the Rio Verde version of the Ragged Dick success story.\textsuperscript{24} How would Ramon deal with his successful personification of the American Dream? Thomsen writes, “But he [Ramon] was like every other man in the world too suddenly released from poverty. He began to blow his money. He bought new clothes—beautiful shimmering neon colored

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 124.

\textsuperscript{24} As discussed in Chapter One, Ragged Dick is the hero of the Horatio Algier stories and personifies the “Rags to Riches” myth.
pants, brassieres and panties for his wife, a switch-blade knife, a two-band radio."25

Thomsen tries to encourage Ramon to follow the Dream virtues of thrift, investment, and patience. “I had suggested rather obstinately that he use this money instead to hire workers to clear more jungle land, to plant more corn, and to think about two hundred chickens instead of one hundred, but he was consumed by the furious joy of being rich, and he didn’t want to think a whole year ahead.” Thomsen explains Ramon’s view of success: “What was the good of having money if you couldn’t be happier by having it, and if you couldn’t spend it royally? He was loaning money to all his friends, those outrageously poor fishermen from a little farther up the beach—of whom, a year before, Ramon had been the poorest.”26

Moritz Thomsen begins to understand the challenge of imparting these American Dream values to the desperately poor: “I had discovered that when I was forced by circumstances to eat the same thing a poor man eats for more than a couple of days, I ended up not only lazy, but probably flat on my back in bed. And I was not burdened by the debilitating effects, as everyone was there, of a body crawling with worms—stomach worms, hook worms, kidney worms.”27 He is starting to realize that poverty is complex and cannot be overcome merely with the imparting of the values of the American work ethic. He starts his service with the promise that the values

25 Ibid., 226.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 205.
embodied in the American dream will transport a poor Ecuadorian village to new heights. In the end, he is left disillusioned and questioning the worth of this philosophy.

In his memoir, Thomsen makes an effort to define the village of Rio Verde. “It was as though they had reacted so violently to the memory of their enslavement, which had ruined their culture, that now they couldn’t exist within the shadow of an outside discipline. It was indeed a shattered culture;—a town without lights or water, without decent houses, medicine, education, a town isolated from the rest of the world—and, most amazing of all, there were no plans to change anything.” 28 Moritz Thomsen comes to Rio Verde with lofty goals: to bring to the villagers American values that lead to success and prosperity, to lift the villagers from the throes of poverty. He is trying to instill the American Dream values of hard work, thrift, and discipline. In doing so, the villagers will go from living poor to living rich. But in the end, Thomsen believes that he has failed to lift the village up. His outside discipline was not wanted.

Finally, Thomsen recounts the words of a missionary he met in Rio Verde: “That’s why I left missionary work. I came to realize that I couldn’t be responsible for wrecking the lives of people with promises of paradise, making their whole lives miserable in the certainty of saving their souls. I came to realize that people had to find happiness within their own culture.” In the end, Thomsen faces disillusionment and learns that the villagers have to find happiness within their own culture and that the American Dream ideas do not necessarily fit that equation.

28 Ibid., 219.
Mike Tidwell, *The Ponds of Kalambayi*[^29]

The *Ponds of Kalambayi* is the memoir written by Mike Tidwell about his two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Congo in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. Although thirty years later and on a different continent, Tidwell’s experiences follow a similar path to that of Moritz Thomsen in *Living Poor*. An analysis of Tidwell’s memoir also portrays a volunteer that entered his Peace Corps assignment with an idealistic view of his ability to impart the values of the American Dream to his community. He also valiantly tried to teach these principles as he engaged in his development work. In the end, like Thomsen, Tidwell leaves disillusioned with this effort.

In 1991, Tidwell is sent to Lulenga, a village on a hill next to the Lubilashi River in Congo in Sub-Saharan Africa. Lulenga was one of thirty three villages that made up the chiefdom of Kalambayi. Tidwell describes the village:

> There were almost always a few dugout canoes being maneuvered across the river by men with long bamboo poles. The canoes carried people, goats and sacks of corn. Along the riverbanks, children fished with nets for clarias, a hard-to-catch catfish with outlandishly long whiskers and a body that can grow as large as a man. On both sides of the two-mile-wide valley, villagers tilled small farm plots. They used short-handled hoes and fought occasional battles with hippopotamuses that lifted themselves from the brown river at night to eat corn and manioc meant for humans.[^30]

Here in this village of five hundred people, Tidwell spent his two years as a Peace Corps volunteer.


[^30]: Ibid., 18.
Tidwell’s primary mission was to start tilapia farms in the surrounding villages and thereby teach the villagers how to maintain a sustainable source of nutrition for years after he left. A review of how Tidwell tries to accomplish this project sheds light on Peace Corp volunteers’ efforts to impart the values of the American Dream to the communities where they serve. Like Thomsen, Tidwell starts off his service with an idealistic vision of what he can accomplish. He then meets with difficulties and eventually reaches a point of disillusionment.

Tidwell sets out to teach the people of Kalambayi about fish culture. Initially, he begins to have success as the fish farming starts to take hold and many villagers commence stocking their ponds with fish. When it is time for the harvest, Tidwell comes up against an unexpected cultural barrier that will run counter to the vision of the American Dream that he is trying to impart.

In Kalambayi, there is a very strongly ingrained culture of giving, and poor villagers constantly bring Tidwell gifts of food and produce. However, Tidwell finds that he does not reciprocate. He writes,

Curiously, this habit of giving in Kalambayi didn’t rub off on me. Even as I watched, and was moved by, the sacrifices villagers made to keep me stocked with produce and filled with fufu, I didn’t do the same. I didn’t reciprocate. I accepted the food and other gifts when I could, but the idea of spreading around my own wealth in the same free and automatic manner didn’t take hold. I hadn’t been sent to Kalambayi to become like the people exactly. I taught fish culture. I shared an expertise. That was enough.\(^{31}\)

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 68.
The expertise that Tidwell is sharing is the idea of the American Dream: the idea that if you learn to raise fish, you can then sell fish, make a profit, restock your ponds, and have a business that will sustain you for your life.

Tidwell describes how at the end of the day, he does not eat a meal in his yard and offer others a portion of his food like the rest of the villagers. Instead, he eats inside his house and does not share and saves his living allowance so he can splurge on a meal on his next trip to the capital city.

As Tidwell writes, “To be sure, I had made a lot of changes since arriving—adapting to strange foods, learning to bathe in cold rivers, surrendering my native tongue for two years. But my attachment to the word ‘mine’ was strong and stubborn. Whatever the villagers did, I had my things, and I didn’t give them away. So much was this attitude a measure of who I was and the Western culture that produced me that during my early months it simply never occurred to me to try to change.” Tidwell is in effect showing the villagers a personification of the materialistic/conservative version of the American Dream by displaying this American idea of property ownership and saving for oneself to improve one’s life. Although he is not teaching these values, he is a living example for the villagers.

Tidwell shares an experience that exemplifies this cultural gap. A beggar approaches him several times in the market and he shoos her away on each occasion. Finally, she comes to his house late at night and starts singing loudly. Eventually,

32 Ibid., 69.
Tidwell has to use the outhouse but is afraid to leave the house unguarded with the beggar out front. So, Tidwell goes to relieve himself in the grass and writes, “I squatted and Mutoba sang, each of us staring with equal shock at the spectacle before us. And that’s how most of the village found us. . . . A minute or so after the performance started, just as the rising sun was providing rosy light by which to see, there were several dozen thunderstruck people gathered along the edges of my yard, watching the mad showdown between crapping foreigner and crowing bag lady.”33

Eventually, Tidwell walks over and yells at the woman to leave immediately. She yells back at him, “muena tshitua” over and over again. Later that day, Tidwell asks what this means and a villager tells him, “Mutoba had delivered one of the most serious charges one can make in Kalamabayi. A ‘muena tshitua’ is someone who doesn’t share. She said you were stingy.”34

Tidwell realizes that this woman survives through handouts from other poor villagers: “The sense of familial generosity flowing through every village protected her.” However, Tidwell did not reciprocate:

Wrapped up in my own notions of privacy and propriety, trying to live in this culture without really being a part of it, I gave nothing to Mutoba. My problem in a big sense, was greed, not just greed towards the things I wanted to keep for myself, but towards this whole two-year trip abroad. I wanted to take as much from this African world as I could, to learn and experience, without surrendering any large part of myself, without making significant changes like replacing the

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33 Ibid., 71.

34 Ibid., 72.
faulty moral compass I had come with one that made more sense in this poor setting.35

Is the “faulty moral compass” one that contains the idea of the American Dream? That is, to attain more wealth, one cannot give away half of everything one earns. To get ahead in the world, there must be some notion of property and ownership. Was Tidwell unconsciously promoting these virtues but now sees that this is not a fit in this community? Is Tidwell caught up with the idea of exceptionalism, that America is a sort of utopia which all should emulate?

Tidwell struggles with his “moral compass” and begins to modify his behavior. Eventually, on a personal level, he begins to share food and cigarettes and makes “loans” to feed children that he knows cannot be repaid:

As time passed, it grew easier and easier to let go of what I had. The reason was simple: I had a lot. Like most people who go overseas to do development work, I did so expecting to find out what it’s like to be poor. But awakening to my surroundings after a few months, I discovered that’s not what happens. Instead you learn what it’s like to be rich, to be fabulously, incomprehensibly, bloated with wealth. No one in Kalambayi could afford to share more than I.36

Tidwell learns about sharing on a personal level but has a harder time when it impacts on the supply and demand of fish farming. At Tidwell’s urging, the village chief, Llunga, is attempting to build fish farms. Tidwell comes to see Llunga one day and finds him lying in a wheel barrow, exhausted from a day of digging fish ponds.

“The imagery,” he recalls,

35 Ibid., 73.
36 Ibid., 74.
was potent, almost unbearable with its themes of hope and struggle and want all bound up in that exhausted face, those closed eyes, those dirty black limbs hanging down to the ground. God, how I had set Llunga’s soul ablaze with my talk of rising out of poverty, of beating back the worst aspects of village life with a few fish ponds. He had listened to me and followed every line of advice and now he lay knocked out in the hold of a donated wheelbarrow. Deciding it would be criminal to wake him, I walked away, praying like hell that all the promises I had made were true.37

Like Thomsen worried about how he had “enflamed the mind” of Ramon with the thoughts of owning one-hundred chickens, Tidwell is also worried that he has set Llunga’s “soul ablaze” with the promise of the American Dream. He prays that the promises of American style success will come true.

Finally, Tidwell writes about the harvest day. The chief has sunk all of his money into this fish project and has even scrounged on the street for scraps to feed the fish. On the day of the harvest, Tidwell was hoping for the culmination of the American Dream, and that hard work, determination, and perseverance would lead to wealth for the chief.

And the ponds yield hundreds of fish. Tidwell, the chief, and the chief’s brothers run into the pond to harvest the fish. Tidwell describes the scene as follows: “So engrossed was I in the harvest in fact, that I barely noticed the tops of the pond dikes were growing crowded with onlookers. By the time we finished capturing all the fish, people had surrounded the square pond bottom like spectators around a boxing ring. A

37Ibid., 80.
quarter of the men, women, and children in the village had come to see the harvest. I was impressed by their show of support for Llunga’s work.”38

But the people were there for more than support, as Tidwell explains. He grabs Llunga to congratulate him, and he sees something wrong in his eyes. At this point, villagers start to approach the chief and ask for fish: “It was all suddenly clear—the crowd, the well wishers, the brothers of Llunga who had never even seen the pond until that morning. They had come to divide up the harvest. A cultural imperative was playing itself out. It was time for Llunga to share his wealth. He stood by the buckets and started placing fish in the hands of every relative and friend who stepped forth. . . . He was just giving the harvest away.”39

Tidwell cannot believe what he is seeing.

Caked in mud, I sat on the grassy bank and watched an entire bucket of Tilapia disappear. Fury and frustration crashed through me with the force of a booming waterfall. All that work. All my visits. All the digging and battling kingfishers. All for what? For this? For a twenty-minute free-for-all giveaway? Didn’t these people realize the ponds were different? Llunga had worked hard to produce this harvest. He had tried to get ahead. Where were they when he dug his pond? Where were they when he heaved and hoed and dislodged from the earth 400 cubic feet of dirt?40

Tidwell has spent hours counseling the chief on the merits of the fish ponds and explaining that if he worked hard and persevered, he would have a bountiful harvest and make a lot of money. It all came true but now he was giving away the profits. Tidwell

38 Ibid., 83.

39 Ibid., 84.

40 Ibid., 84-85.
wants to stop what is happening, but he does not and in the end, Llunga even forces Tidwell to take some fish home with him.

Tidwell begins to question everything that he is doing and starts to reach a point of disillusionment. He writes that the problem is not the product as the fish ponds have been a success and generated a large amount of fish: “The problem, rather, was generosity. It was a habit of sharing so entrenched in the culture that it made me look to the project’s future with foreboding. What incentive did men like Llunga have to improve their lives—through fish culture or any other means—if so much of the gain immediately melted into a hundred empty hands? Why work harder? Why develop? Better just to farm enough to eat. Better to stay poor like the rest.”

Like Thomsen in Rio Verde, Tidwell is questioning whether the values of the American Dream can work in Kalambayi. If the gains of hard work and labor will be given away, what is the point? The whole point of the American Dream is for the individual to get ahead through hard work, determination, and perseverance. The chief follows all of these precepts, but only ends up with half of a harvest. Nowhere in Tidwell’s thought process is the idea that profits will be given away to the community.

Tidwell tells the chief that he did not agree with giving away the fish. The chief than asks Tidwell, “so what would you have done? Would you have refused fish to all those people? Tidwell responds, ‘Yes’ I said, and I meant it.” The chief then asks if Tidwell could have taken the fish and walked past all the women and children and gone

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41 Ibid., 86.
into his house and locked the door. Tidwell responds, “Don’t say it like that. You could have explained to them that the pond was your way of making money.” 42 Tidwell continues that Llunga needs to feed his own children and take care of his family, and he should let his brothers dig their own ponds.

Tidwell has been sharing some meals with villagers but sees the ponds as a different situation. As Tidwell says, “The ponds were different, and I had assumed the farmers had realized that. Raising fish was meant to create surplus wealth; to carry the farmers and their immediate families to a level where they had more for themselves—better clothes, extra income. That was the incentive upon which the project was built. It was the whole reason I was there.” 43 This is the embodiment of the conservative/materialistic version of the American Dream; the creation of surplus wealth. Work hard and develop a fish farm and wealth and success will follow. Tidwell see the fruition of this project as defined in this context as the sole reason for his volunteer experience. However, he is up against cultural differences, the idea of sharing all with one’s village, and he does not see the possibility of success as defined by his version of the successful American Dream.

Tidwell writes, “Stop the giving—that was the real, the final message I wanted to bring to Llunga and the other fish farmers. Stop the giving and the community-oriented attitude and you can escape the worst ravages of poverty. Build a pond and

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42 Ibid., 87.
43 Ibid.
make it yours. And when you harvest it, don’t give away the fish. Forget for now, the bigger society. Forget the extended family. Step back and start thinking like self-enriching entrepreneurs, like good little capitalists.” Tidwell want the farmers to understand his version of success which means reaping the fruits of one’s labor. The American Dream inherently assumes that the person who does the work will reap the benefits of the labor. Once that person is taken care of, he or she may still give charity, but the root of the Dream is attaining the benefits of one’s hard work.

Tidwell tries to explain to Llunga the errors of his way, but he eventually becomes disillusioned with the version of the American Dream that would not allow one to give away half the harvest, that would not call for helping hungry members of one’s village. Tidwell begins to see the wisdom in the system of sharing and writes, “It was a survival strategy; an unwritten agreement by the group that no one would be allowed to fall off the societal boat no matter how low provisions ran on board. No matter how bad the roads became or how much the national economy constricted, sharing and mutual aid meant everyone in each village stayed afloat.”

Tidwell realizes that, along with the traditional capitalist system, based on the values of the American Dream, there is room for a system of sharing. He realizes that the fish farmers survive even when they give away fifty percent of their harvest. Tidwell notes, “They might develop along western lines with time, but why push them? The local system worked. Everyone was taken care of. Everyone did stay afloat.

44Ibid.
Besides, there were plenty of myopic, self-enriching producers in the world—entrepreneurs and businesses guided by the sole principle of increasing their own wealth above else.” Tidwell starts to think about the effects of the system created by the beliefs in the American Dream. He analogizes that the current capitalist system, this “planetary boat, battered by breakneck production and consumption, was in ever-increasing danger of sinking, taking with it the ultimate extended family: the species.”46 Tidwell is becoming disillusioned with the ability of American ideals of productivity to solve the world’s problems. To the contrary, he is starting to believe they are the cause of the world’s problems.

As he says, “Sitting in my lamp lit cotton warehouse at night, listening to growing reports of global environmental degradation over my shortwave radio, the thought occurred to me more than once that, in several important respects, Kalambayi needed far less instruction from the West than the other way around.”47 Tidwell is adjusting his view of success. His original view was in line with Hochschild’s view of relative success where success is measured against people’s prosperity before Tidwell’s arrival and after the emerging fish ponds. This view changes as Tidwell’s “city upon a hill” has moved from one of increasing productivity to one of a community life saving net made possible by sharing.

46Ibid., 89.
47 Ibid.
Tidwell begins to realize the challenge and fallacy of attempting to impart this uniquely American value to a foreign and very different culture. As he writes:

In a Western industrialized country like the United States, good health is more or less a birthright for a large majority of the population. Clean living conditions, nutritious food and access to basic medical care mean that most people stay healthy most of the time. But in Kalambayi, as in much of Africa, good health is not a birthright. It falls instead somewhere between a wish and a struggle. At any given time you are almost as likely to be ill as well.48

Tidwell describes the men and women of Kalamabaiy returning from a day of work in the fields: “they moved as if in slow motion—faces drained, hoes at rest against bony shoulders, bodies limp and exhausted after just four or five hours at work. The poor diet and sickness endemic in each village bred chronic fatigue. Fatigue in turn, bred reduced food production. Reduced food production, in turn, bred poor diet and sickness, closing the circle. Strapped to this grisly merry-go-round, who had the energy to lift and throw fifty thousand shovelfuls of dirt?”49

In addition to the problem of health issues, Tidwell sees that the villagers are resigned to suffering and hardship in life. They have the attitude that a few fish ponds really cannot change their lives. There is also the perception that the people starting the fish ponds think they are better than everyone else in the village. As others ridicule the fish farmers, there is societal pressure to maintain the status quo and not branch out in new directions. Finally, many of the villagers think that the white man, Tidwell, will eventually take any fish they cultivate. This was the reality of their colonialist history, and they do not expect anything different from this Peace Corps volunteer.

48 Ibid., 26.
49 Ibid., 96.
As his service comes to a conclusion, Tidwell begins to question what he has accomplished: “I looked around after two years and was terrified by the fact that a majority of the people that I cared most about in the world had ten cents in their pocket on a good day and could expect to live, on average, no more than forty-five years. And what had I done for them really? What had I changed? . . . Even with their ponds, the men were poorer than anything I could call acceptable.” ⁵⁰

As Tidwell prepares to go back to America, he writes, “. . . I felt like de Tocqueville about to see America for the first time. The consumer culture, the elaborate needs, the sweaty scramble for profits—it all struck me as boring and threatening at the same time.” ⁵¹ As Tidwell prepares to leave on his final day in the village, he writes about letting his friend, Mbaya, ride his motorcycle before his departure.

I would keep moving through the world with the same speed and energy with which I had moved through villages in Kalamabayi on my motorcycle, kicking up dust and getting where I wanted to go. Yes, it summarized wonderfully my Western world, my motorcycle. It was expensive and complex and fast, and to the rider it offered mobility and choice unavailable to people shackled to the soil; unavailable to Mbaya, until now, until this brief moment. . . . His flight was short, just a few times around a sun-baked soccer field, but it would have to do. It would have to last him through a million strokes of a short-handled hoe spread over years and years of a hard lifetime. ⁵²

Tidwell leaves Kalambayi disillusioned with the American Dream, disillusioned with the way of life to which he will return.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 254-255.
⁵¹ Ibid., 268.
⁵² Ibid., 263.
Jeff Blumberg, “The Narrowest Road in the World”

“The Narrowest Road in the World” is the title of my unpublished memoir, which describes my experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Belize from 2004 to 2006. When I arrived in Belize, I brought with me an idealized version of success, that is, I came to Belize with what has been described previously in this thesis as the conservative version of the American Dream. On a personal level, I wanted to work hard as a volunteer and have a successful and productive two-year experience. Through the development of projects in my community, I also wanted to impart the American values that hard work and determination will ultimately lead to success and a better life. At the conclusion of my service, I faced disillusionment with the possibility of success, as defined within my version of the Dream. An analysis of a portion of my memoir, and in particular, my effort to develop a high school mock court project, sheds light on my attempt to impart these uniquely American values to high school students on the Placencia peninsula in southern Belize.

I spent two years with my wife in a small coastal village named Placencia on the tip of the southern peninsula in Belize. In my memoir, I described where I lived:

The village was made up of about five hundred people. There was a combination of ramshackle huts situated around an idyllic out cove of the Caribbean. The primary source of employment in Placencia was tourism. Small, locally owned cabanas lined the beach and tourist operators offered trips to the nearby cayes or islands for snorkeling trips as well as trips to nearby Mayan ruins. Within the village, there was a partially paved road and a sidewalk which ran the length of Placencia. According to village lore, the sidewalk had been recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the narrowest road in the world.53

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53 After a thorough Internet search, I was unable to find this referenced in the Guinness Book of World Records.
I also noted that on the other side of the village was Placencia Lagoon. Across this lagoon was Independence Village with a much larger population of close to three-thousand people that housed the local high school. Students from all of the surrounding villages attended Independence High School. It was in this high school that I attempted to impart my version of the American Dream.

I had come to the Peace Corps as an accomplished lawyer. With fifteen years of trial work and a wealth of life experiences, I could not imagine how these skills could not be of incredible value to this community. I racked my brain for a way to utilize my skills to be a good and productive volunteer and share some of my expertise with the villagers I lived with. When I looked at the legal system in Belize, I perceived a gaping hole and a desperate need for legal reform. There was only one free Legal Aid Attorney for the entire country. Almost all criminal defendants, except for the wealthy, were forced to represent themselves in an antiquated legal system. Corruption and police brutality ran rampant throughout the country. With these issues in mind, I decided to try to figure out a way to teach students about this flawed system and hopefully encourage some students to pursue a legal career in a community where the brightest students often aspired to be tour guide operators or restaurant owners. I was hoping to inspire some of these students to the greater possibilities beyond the insular community where they lived. I wanted to teach these students that with hard work and perseverance, they could achieve something of which they would be proud. These were the American Dream values that I was hoping to impart.
Eventually, as I described in my memoir, I came up with an idea: a high school mock court program. This is a program where high school students put on a mock criminal trial and learn about the workings of the criminal justice system. The students play the roles of witnesses, prosecutors, and defense attorneys. After months of training and hard work, they compete against other high school mock court teams with a real judge evaluating their performance. I wrote in my memoir about my thought process while coming up with this idea:

It finally hit me while I was running along the beach—a mock court competition. Why don’t I start a mock court competition at Independence High School? I could apply for a Peace Corps grant to start up a program among several of the high school classes. I can use the teachers as advisors and I can oversee the program. If things go according to plan this semester, maybe it could eventually be taken up by other high schools and I can really get something started. Maybe, if all goes well, I could do trainings for other high schools and start a country-wide mock court competition. This could be the perfect use of my legal skills and background.

I thought that I had found the perfect way to utilize my legal background, and with grandiose visions of the first country-wide high school mock court competition in the history of Belize, I applied for my $1000 Peace Corps grant to start the program.

After receiving the grant, I wrote in my memoir about putting my nose to the grindstone and developing a manual for the program with witness statements and exhibits that would be used for the competition. The case dealt with a fight and shooting at a local high school. A security guard had shot a student after a soccer game and was claiming he thought the student had a gun and had shot in self defense. There were issues of drug use, missing evidence, and all the ingredients for an “OJ” type trial.
While teaching the program, I also intended to incorporate the ideas of the liberal version of the American Dream. Students would learn about the presumption of innocence, the rights against self incrimination, and equality under the law. The students would work hard after school, learn their roles in the trial, and a successful mock court program would follow. Eventually, this idea would sweep the country, and my version of the American Dream, mock court style, would prove to be a resounding success. Unfortunately, like the experiences of Thomsen and Tidwell, my mock court project did not go exactly according to plan.

I started out coordinating with the Vice Principal and several teachers at the high school. To get to Independence High School, you must first cross the Placencia Lagoon in a small wooden boat.

The boat service connecting Placencia to Independence is called the “Hokey Pokey”. True to its name, you sit on the dock at Placencia Lagoon waiting and waiting for the scheduled departure. Upon its routinely late arrival, you notice a small wooden boat with several holes in the floor. The boat is captained by a guy named Carol who stands majestically in the back of his ship with sunglasses and a scowl. The boat holds about fifteen people and runs with a small outboard motor. The trip takes about twenty minutes and is beautiful with the possibility of seeing manatees and great blue herons as you glide along the still calm waters. It is, however, a fair weather trip. When the sky turns cloudy, the rain starts, and the sea gets rough, you protect yourself Hokey Pokey style. This meant taking a big blue tarp out and pulling it over all of the passengers’ heads. Everyone would shrink down under the tarp and hold on as the rain pounded overhead. You just hoped that Carol could still see as the tarp flapped in his face.

So with this sometimes reliable form of transportation, I took the Hokey Pokey over to Independence High School and met with the Vice Principal and several teachers.
The Vice Principal was a man named Omar. In my memoir, I described Omar as professional and always immaculately dressed. Omar spoke perfect English and was excited about the proposal. He called in two teachers who he wanted to help coordinate the program. The first was Clifton, who was also well dressed and in training to be the next Vice Principal. Clifton also thought the mock court program sounded like a great idea and expressed his support for the program. Finally, the other teacher at the meeting, Ms. Parham, listened attentively to the proposal and also nodded her head with encouragement. In my memoir, I recalled leaving the meeting thinking the team was in place and all that we needed were some motivated students and a few more teachers to help guide the students. We decided we would meet the next week with students from four separate classes. The idea was to have the two classes compete against each other with local judges serving as the deciders. Then, the two winners would have a final competition. I had visions of the entire community coming out to watch these students put on the final mock trial.

I wrote about my enthusiasm for the upcoming initial meeting:

On that fateful day of the initial mock court meeting, I arrived in the cafeteria to stifling heat and to my amazement, almost one hundred students. As I tried to peer through the streams of sweat pouring down my face, I began to think that my vision might become a reality. I tried to control the chaos and communicate over the din to separate the aspiring lawyers into four teams of twenty-five. I gave out as many copies of the manual as I had and gave an introduction to the students about what they were doing. We separated the teams into defense and prosecution and I emphasized how challenging this process would be. “This is really an honor for you to be here,” I told them. “It is only the most dedicated and outstanding students that will be able to do this program. A lot will be expected of you, but you will get a lot in return.” I then tried to dazzle them with the proposed problem and narrated the story of the case in my best opening statement fashion that I had developed in the trenches as a public defender. I
told them, “This won’t be easy. You will have to commit to two afternoons a week after school and if you want to be lawyers, you will have to work hard.” As I gazed into the eyes of these future Johnny Cochrans, I started to realize that I was being met with many blank stares, but decided to attribute this to dehydration and heat. It could not be possible that no one had the faintest idea what I was rambling on about.

So, undaunted, I prepared for the first session of the mock court program. As we gathered in the classroom for the first session of this historic project, I realized that the number of students had decreased by fifty percent with only four of the original eight teachers in attendance. As I began to talk, several students walked out to join an ongoing soccer game. I described in my memoir how the teachers sat in the back of the room with the look of prisoners undergoing a Chinese water torture. I separated the students into two teams and began to realize that there would be challenges, but I, like Ragged Dick, would persevere. I gave an overview of the program and set up the next meeting the following week.

With my enthusiasm mounting, I made the trip over to Independence on the Hokey Pokey only to be informed that all of the students had left early that day. This of course turned into an all day affair as I had to wait four hours for the next Hokey Pokey to return to Placencia. I then coordinated my next trip with Clifton for the following week. He assured me that he would organize the students and we would have a full hour for the program.

I wrote:

So in 100 degree heat, I schlepped my way back over to Independence for the next mock court meeting. I had hoped to ride my friend Mendez’s bike up the hill, but it has apparently been stolen once again. I then made the thirty minute walk up to the high school and killed time until the 2:30 class. At about 1:30, I
confirmed with Clifton that the class was still on. He said yes and pointed to a
classroom nearby. At 2:30, I headed to the classroom, but there were just
random students milling around that had no connection to the mock court
program. I then went in search of Clifton and saw him in the cafeteria. I thought
for a second that he had seen me, but it seemed as if he was trying to avoid me.
But, why would he do that? I asked again, “Clifton, where are we having the
meeting?” He again grunted and pointed to the same classroom. Thinking I must
be going crazy, I headed back to the classroom.

I continued to try to track down my aspiring lawyers:

On the way, I came across a few mock court students who informed me that no
one told them we were meeting today. I was now vacillating between laughter
and anger and made a conscious decision to err on the side of humor. Finally, I
tracked down the other teachers and we met to discuss the future of our mock
court project. Would it go the way of the Hindenburg? I told them that the
program would not work if I can only meet the students for 20 minutes.
(Although 20 minutes would have been a victory today.) Clifton admitted that
they have been very busy and have not shown much enthusiasm for the project. I
told them that it is up to them if they want to continue. They gave a slight
indication they do and we planned to meet next week. The only encouraging
sign was when Ms. Parham said, “Tank you for your enthusiasm,” at the end of
the meeting. I thought to myself, we will see what happens.

What happened was that the mock court program continued on life support. I
described in my memoir how my American Dream vision of engaged students, learning
about the criminal justice system through this dynamic program, was not happening. I
would make the trip to Independence to learn that the students were released early that
day. I then waited four hours for the next Hokey Pokey back to Placencia. Sometimes
there would be seven students, and other times two students. As the frustration began to
mount, my enthusiasm began to wane.

I wrote in my memoir:

The mock court or rather the court mockery continued. I decided to begin the
class on this day with the seven students that had showed up in the hot, humid
and stuffy classroom heat. As I wiped the sweat from my face, I noticed that
Ms. Parham already had her head in her hands and looked like she was about to keel over. Another student named Roberta seemed to be writing her opening statement in the five minutes before we started. I was constantly struck by the students perception that they could complete this program with the most minimal of effort. I constantly wondered how they could not perceive how much effort it took for me to come up with the manual and prepare for class. This was balanced by the fact that some of the students were incredibly talented.

In particular, Roberta was very bright and always seems engaged. She was a large girl with an oversized personality and a booming laugh. She seemed to control the class and carry the direction for the day. If Roberta was engaged, the others followed suit and participated. If Roberta was in a bad mood and did not want to participate, the class quickly turned sullen and non-communicative. On that particular day as Roberta wrote her opening statement, I wanted to tell her that even Johnny Cochran spent more than five minutes on his opening statement. But, she delivered the opening to us and it was not a bad effort considering. I started clapping after she finished but no one else joined in. I gave a few suggestions for improvement and we moved on to a talk about direct examination.

I had prepared a sample direct examination where I would play the prosecutor and Ms. Parham would play the witness. I was really surprised that Ms. Parham had a lot of difficulty reading her lines. I started re-evaluating what was going wrong. I was looking at these teachers through the eyes of the American educational system. In reality, many of these teachers were only high school educated. I started to realize that they only had slightly more education than the students they taught. I began to realize that I needed to take things slower and drastically lower my expectations.

As the program continued, I continued to struggle with my vision of the American Dream through the lens of the students. I wrote in my memoir how I had envisioned dedicated students, working hard after school and pushing themselves forward. I was trying to achieve my personal vision of success through their hard work and perseverance. In “The Narrowest Road,” I wrote about my struggles with these issues:

I remember thinking, ‘I am having a catharsis about the Mock Court. Maybe I should take a hint. I have pushed and pushed over the last few months with little result. One way to look at it is that I just need to keep pushing harder and eventually I will succeed. Another way is that this just might not be the right
time. It is the end of the school year and we are in the middle of a ‘revolution.’\textsuperscript{54} And maybe, they just might not want to do it right now. And, can you blame them? I am starting to think whether I would waltz into an American school with four weeks left and say ‘let’s start this program that you know nothing about, it will take a lot of time and by the way, why don’t you stick around for another three weeks after classes end in the sweltering summer heat to finish it off.”

So, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, I took a break for the summer with the plan to start up with renewed vigor in September. In my memoir, I narrated my feelings and observations as the program began anew:

I got ready for the re-emergence of the historic Belizean mock court project. The manuals were pristine and ready to be devoured by sixteen aspiring lawyers. The teachers had been prepped the week before and were to be enthusiastic counterparts in this historic endeavor. What happened? I showed up and of course the teachers were there with blank looks. Ms. Parham told me that she had invited all of Second Form to the meeting and we will see who is interested. Of course, the teachers had agreed that this would all be done before the meeting and I would see sixteen specially picked students ready to begin. I started having visions of one hundred kids and how would we pare down to sixteen. No worries. I should have known there were going to be problems when Clifton asked me, “so what we gonna do today?” I wanted to scream, “what do you think we are going to do today, start the damn program with the sixteen students that you were supposed to pick.” Instead, in my best Peace Corps voice, I informed him that we had to select the students before we could do much else.

I was starting to become disillusioned but steeled myself and entered the classroom. In my memoir, I recounted this first class after the break. Several of the students were returnees from the previous semester. As it was pre-Independence Day, there were all kinds of activities including soccer games, volleyball, and assorted other things that could draw the attention of an aspiring lawyer away from the mock court program. A few kids shuffled in, and Ms. Parham and Clifton sat in the back with bored

\textsuperscript{54} Belize was in a “revolution” Belizean style. There was dissatisfaction with the government that led to strikes and work stoppages, usually on Mondays and Fridays to allow for a four-day weekend.
stares. I began to realize that they had probably been told by Omar that they had to continue with the program. So, I started my presentation and tried to dramatically tell the story of the case and how important this process was. We would be determining whether an innocent man had been wrongfully accused and should be saved from prison, or whether a dangerous criminal needed to be behind bars. A few students appeared interested and others seemed to be eyeing the soccer game.

In my memoir, I continued:

I made it through the class and talked to several students. Danielle, a shy and quiet girl who always has a sparkle in her eyes, told me that she wanted to become a lawyer when she finished high school. I had a glimmer of hope. Roberta came up to me afterwards and asked, ‘We gwan do dis for de oter schools?’ I thought to myself, considering we have not done anything yet, and no one has learned any of the parts of the trial, I am not sure what we will do for the other schools. But, I appreciated the enthusiasm and took it as a vote of confidence. So, I thought to myself, that has to be what keeps me going. Maybe, one kid will benefit from this experience.

And so it would go. A week or two with a few students and we would make some progress, and then a setback the following week. I described one specific frustrating experience:

On one particularly sweltering October afternoon, I planned on showing a video of a tape of an American High School mock court competition. After weeks of coordination, I managed to find a TV and VCR. I carried the TV for what seemed like miles to the class room and hooked it up to the VCR as my students looked on with what I thought was anticipation for a riveting mock court presentation. I then began, without any luck, to turn on the TV. After trying for about ten minutes, a student informed me, ‘no electricity today.’ As I rode the Hokey Pokey back that afternoon, I thought to myself, ‘Is it worth it?’

55 This is the Creole version of “Are we going to do this for other schools?” Belizean Creole is a mixture of English, Spanish, and African dialects. Students are supposed to speak only English in school but would often revert to Creole.
But, in my best imitation of Ragged Dick, I continued with my nose to the grindstone and persevered:

I thought we had turned the corner. I had laid down the law during one of the classes. I told the teachers and the students together that this thing is not going to work unless they show up and spend some time on the material. I told them that I was not coming back again unless there were some changes. When I showed up again, there were about twelve students and three teachers. We discussed opening statements. I poured my heart into it and gave an opening for the defense and prosecution complete with all my usual trial antics. The students seemed very interested. Danielle said, “That was great.” Ms. Parham told me that she was really enjoying things.

However, from that high point, the roller-coaster went down again. I described how for the next class, only three students showed up. On our direct examination exercise, Roberta again tried to do a direct examination of a witness without any preparation. She tried to come up with questions while she looked at the witness statements for the first time. I explained to the class that I had been doing this for fourteen years and could never do a direct examination without some preparation. I wrote about my continuing struggle to understand how the students could believe that it was possible to succeed with the program with little or no preparation.

And then there would again be glimmers of hope; glimmers of hope that my American Dream was taking root in the souls of these aspiring lawyers.

On the following Wednesday, only two students showed up. I made a decision to just go with it and worked with the two on their direct examinations for an hour. They really started to get it. One girl named Ernella has clearly read the entire manual and is starting to understand everything. She lives in another village and is missing the school bus home to stay after school. She then has to pay and stay and wait for public transportation to get home. That is commitment when public transportation means a two hour ride on an old school bus that stops every ten feet, or so it seems.
In my memoir, I continued my description of the unpredictable mock court program. There would be several meetings and then a frustrating gap where no students would show up. As the end of the school year approached, I decided that we had to finish the project and reach some sort of closure. None of the students was completely prepared, but I decided that for my sanity, we needed to have a final mock court presentation.

As I walked into the classroom for what was to be the dramatic conclusion of this program, I realized that my star prosecutor Ernella appeared to be writing something. When I asked her about it, she said, “I da write mi opening.” I thought to myself, have they learned anything? But, apparently they did, and something happened. With my supportive wife watching, the students performed a mock court demonstration. There were opening statements, direct examinations, cross examinations, and closing arguments. It was not a work of art, but it was something. I struggled with the disparity of my original vision and what had happened in the classroom that day. Later, I thought about why it had not happened as it had appeared in my vision during my cathartic run on the beach.

Like Tidwell and Thomsen, I could not escape the inescapable. Poverty causes problems when one is trying to impart the values of the American Dream. I wrote about holding these students to the standard of an American student who had nothing more to do after school than engage in extracurricular activities and pad his or her college applications. I had envisioned them jumping at the chance to participate in this program: “The reality was that these kids had to work after school to make sure their families would have enough to eat. If they stayed after school, they might miss the school bus and have to take long dusty public transportation home. I was asking for more than these kids could give under the circumstances.”
In particular, I wrote about the situation of Daniella. She desperately wanted to become a lawyer. Unfortunately, she had to drop out of the program due to a heart condition. I found this out when I saw her mother in our village walking around with Daniella’s medical records. Daniella needed a medical procedure, but with no health insurance or the money to pay for it, her mother was reduced to walking around the village in search of funds with the medical records as evidence of her need. This was the reality of life, and mock court could not be at the top of the priority list. I began to realize that the desire was there, but the external factor of poverty made the realization of the program another story.

As I wrote: “I didn’t know how many times I needed to be hit over the head that this is not the United States. These kids have to work after school. They have to help their mothers make jonny cakes to sell in the afternoon.\textsuperscript{56} They have to wash laundry, take care of their younger brothers and sisters, often after a ninety minute bus ride to get back home. After school extracurricular activities cannot always be at the top of the priority list.” Like Tidwell and Thomsen, I began to realize the downward drag of poverty on the potential of the American Dream to lift one forward. I started to grasp the arrogance of this Americanized version of success where hard work and determination will lead to great results no matter what challenges one may face.

I realized that the less the kids produced, the more I pushed to compensate for what I perceived as their lack of effort. Certainly, some of the students could have

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\textsuperscript{56} Jonny cakes are hard biscuits made with coconut milk. They were called “journey cakes” originally since they could last through a several week journey at sea. Eventually, the Creole pronunciation became jonny cake.
worked harder, but I realized that my unrealistic view of a successful program was hindering the possibility of any success at all. It was only when I drastically altered my expectations to be in line with the cultural and economic situation in the villages where I worked, that I was able to achieve some version of a successful program. Tidwell had to change his version of a successful fish farming program to make it fit within the African culture of giving. Likewise, I had to modify my version of the successful mock court program to take into account the cultural and economic struggles of small villages in Belize. As I wrote in my conclusion about the mock court program: “The end result was a small presentation with students that had learned something about the criminal justice system and maybe, broadened their world view a little bit beyond the Placencia lagoon. If this was the case, it was a success. Maybe, just maybe, the narrowest road in the world had just gotten a little bit wider.”
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to study, by reviewing their memoirs, whether three Peace Corps volunteers attempted to impart the values of the American Dream to the communities where they served. In the three memoirs studied, it is evident that the volunteers did attempt to impart these values to their respective communities. The three volunteers also ended up somewhat disillusioned with their efforts. In their disillusionment, one can see the broader implications of trying to impart these American values to the developing world where they served.

Each volunteer attempted to impart the values of the American Dream as previously defined in Chapter One. In *Living Poor*, Moritz Thomsen detailed his experiences as a volunteer in the small Ecuadorian village of Rio Verde in the 1960s. In his efforts to create development projects, he constantly relied on the material/conservative values of the American Dream as described by Caldwell and Guimond in Chapter One. These included the values of hard work, self-denial, endurance, initiative, thrift, patience, industry and self-discipline. As discussed in Chapter Three, he implored the citizens of Rio Verde to work harder in their chicken cultivation project and the coop and encouraged them that financial and material success would soon follow.
Thomsen also tried to incorporate some of the values contained in the idealistic/liberal version of the dream. He promoted the ideas of equality and democracy as he set up a cooperative where all would have equal voting rights and equal opportunity to share in the future wealth of the cooperative. He was pushing the ideas that Rio Verde could be a land of opportunity and equality for all.

Finally, Thomsen tried to lead the village towards “progress” as defined by Caldwell. According to Caldwell, “progress” is the culmination of the materialist and idealistic components of the American Dream. Thomsen, by trying to incorporate both of these components of the Dream, tried to push Rio Verde towards a new place of continual progress. For Thomsen, progress was instilling the values of hard work and determination and also creating increased equality and opportunity for the villagers. In this way, through his development projects, Thomsen believed that he would leave the villagers in a better place than they were before his arrival. This is also consistent with Hochschild’s definition of relative success: “achieving the American Dream consists in becoming better off than some comparison point . . .”

Like Thomsen, as discussed in Chapter Three, Mike Tidwell also attempted to impart the values of the American Dream to the villagers of Kalambayi. While trying to start fish farming projects, Tidwell attempted to impart the values of the material/conservative Dream. He constantly encouraged the villagers to work harder and success would follow. He tried to incorporate the value that hard work would lead to profit, which in turn, would lead to increased financial rewards. He stressed the

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1 Hochschild, *Facing up to the American Dream*, 16.
capitalistic version of the Dream where personal property ownership is the key to success. Tidwell also incorporated Hochschild’s idea of the promise of success in the values of the American Dream. To Tidwell, success meant sustainable and growing fish farms that reinvested profits which would lead to even greater financial success.

In addition, Tidwell had in mind some of the ideas of Zachary Karabell as he defined exceptionalism in relation to the American Dream. As he pushed for the fish farms, Tidwell had in mind a euphoric utopia where anything was possible. The poorest person could start a fish farm and monetary and spiritual fulfillment would follow.

Finally, as discussed in my memoir, The “Narrowest Road,” I tried to instill my version of the American Dream into the minds of the high school mock court students in Independence Village, Belize. In developing a mock court project, I tried to advocate for both the conservative/materialist and idealistic/liberal values of the Dream. By trying to encourage the students to work hard on the project and understand how their hard work would lead to a successful mock court project, I was trying to instill the values of the American Dream. In my mind, I defined success as a mock court program and performance they could be proud of where they learned valuable new skills of public speaking and analytical thinking. I envisioned the students utilizing these new skills in the future as they reached beyond the narrowest road to seek broader and more academic careers.

At the same time, I tried to incorporate the values of the liberal/idealistic version of the Dream. I wanted the students to think about ideas of liberty and equality for all people as they delved into the workings of the criminal justice system. I hoped they
would begin to think about the injustice and inequality that existed within the Belizean criminal justice system. These were my hopes and aspirations as I embarked on the mock court program as a Peace Corps volunteer in Belize.

Why did all three of these volunteers, during different decades and in different countries, attempt to impart these similar American Dream values to the communities where they served? As discussed in Chapter One, the ideas and values of the American dream have become part of the American persona and ethos and thus have become ingrained in the psyche of each of these volunteers. As Raymond Williams asserted, there is a “contemporary corporate culture” in which values and practices of some citizens are repeated and included in their culture. Guimond and Dan Rather believe that these American Dream values have become engrained in American culture and are now part of the American persona. For these three volunteers, these American Dream values were instilled during a lifetime of reading American literature and hearing the speeches of politicians. While living a first world life in America, these values became engrained in their individual personas.

The Peace Corps training encouraged the volunteers to try to transfer and share these values with the villagers of their respective communities. As discussed in Chapter Three, the second goal of the Peace Corps is for the volunteer to try to bring the culture and values of America to the communities where he or she serves. As volunteers engage in development projects, it is logical that they would try to incorporate the values that lead to the American version of success. All volunteers are hoping to leave their community better off, as defined by them, at the end of their service.
Thus, all three volunteers tried to pass on these values to the communities where they served and all three eventually faced disillusionment with this endeavor. Moritz Thomsen saw his dream of a vibrant cooperative fulfilling the dreams of the villagers end as a dying corn field attacked by relentless worms. He saw his idea of local villagers generating pots of marmalade disappear in the mantra, “No the people are not accustomed to doing business that way.” In the end, he faced disillusionment with the possibility that these American Dream values could lift these villagers out of the systemic poverty of Rio Verde.

Thomsen began to realize that even after all of his efforts the village had not really changed significantly:

... one day the enormity of the obligation hit me. For the first time, I felt frightened; it seemed that in the first two years I had accomplished nothing, that is, it all had been por gusto. I thought of sad Rio Verde, lost and forgotten on this forgotten stretch of beach. It was just as screwed up now as it had been a year and a half earlier when I arrived. I woke up early one morning and lay there wide awake, impaled on those terrible 3:00 A.M. horrors, sinking deeper and deeper into depression.²

Thus, Thomsen was disillusioned that Rio Verde was not better off than the day he had arrived. He was disillusioned that he had not succeeded under Hochschild’s definition of relative success.

Like Thomsen, Tidwell also faced disillusionment with the potential of lifting the villagers of Kalambayi out of their abject poverty. He attempted to generate American style profit motives while developing fish farms in his community. Tidwell constantly struggled with the African custom of communal sharing which ran counter to

² Thomsen, *Living Poor*, 168.
these conservative/material American Dream values. His struggle with these competing ideologies left him disillusioned with the possibility of lifting villagers out of poverty with the American style work ethic: “They might develop along western lines with time, but why push them? The local system worked. Everyone was taken care of. Everyone did stay afloat. Besides, there were plenty of myopic, self-enriching producers in the world—entrepreneurs and businesses guided by the sole principle of increasing their own wealth above else.” Tidwell lost faith in the American Dream vision of success and saw the benefit of the local custom and culture of sharing.

Likewise, as I attempted to impart American Dream values through the implementation of my mock court project, I faced disillusionment with my version of the successful American Dream. As I struggled with the mock court project, I faced disillusionment with my vision of a successful program. I lost hope in a program where I had envisioned motivated teachers and students staying after class twice a week to work on their trial roles. I lost hope in a program which I had thought would spread to other schools and lead to a country wide mock court program. In the end, I became disillusioned in my ability to impart the values of the American Dream to a receptive group of students that would eventually make up my idea of a model Belizean mock court program.

Thus, all three of the studied volunteers attempted to impart these values as they worked on their development projects. Likewise, all three volunteers experienced disillusionment in this quest. What common features led to the disillusionment of these

3 Ibid., 89.
volunteers and what does this teach us about development work as a whole? All three
volunteers cited a common theme in their disillusionment—the frustration they faced
when extreme poverty stymied their efforts.

Moritz Thomsen gave a particularly apt description of poverty in his memoir
when he stated:

Living poor is like being sentenced to exist in a stormy sea in a battered canoe,
requiring all your strength simply to keep afloat; there is never any question of
reaching a destination. True poverty is a state of perpetual crisis, and one wave
just a little bigger or coming from an unexpected direction can and usually does
wreck things. Some benevolent ignorance denies a poor man the ability to see
the squalid sequence of his life, except very rarely; he views it rather as a
disconnected string of unfortunate sadnesses. Never having paddled on a calm
sea, he is unable to imagine one. I think if he could connect the chronic hunger,
the sickness, the death of his children, the almost unrelieved physical and
emotional tension into the pattern that his life inevitably takes he would kill
himself.4

Thomsen described poverty as an inescapable cycle where one could never reach their
bootstraps to pull him or herself up. As he tried to instill the values of the American
Dream, Thomsen was constantly pushed back by the inescapable reality of poverty in
Rio Verde.

Likewise, Tidwell faced the reality of poverty as he tried to instill in his village
an American Dream style work ethic and desire for profits. He began to realize the
practical effect of being hungry when faced with the daunting prospect of a full day’s
labor: “I had discovered that when I was forced by circumstances to eat the same thing a
poor man eats for more than a couple of days, I ended up not only lazy, but probably
flat on my back in bed. And I was not burdened by the debilitating effects, as everyone

4 Ibid., 173.
was there, of a body crawling with worms—stomach worms, hook worms, kidney worms." Tidwell discussed with the villagers the prospects of overflowing fish ponds if one was willing to put their nose to the grind stone and work hard. He began to face disillusionment as he realized that a hungry man could not be efficient and work to their true potential. He began to face disillusionment with his version of the American Dream as he watched the debilitating effects of hunger and poverty on the villagers.

I also observed the debilitating effects of poverty in the developing world during a trip to a banana plantation to do HIV outreach:

I watched the banana farm worker pull the bananas toward the first world. He strained as he pulled twenty huge bunches of bananas attached to a chain on his back. He trudged, one foot in front of the other, sweat pouring down his face with a resigned look. A look that said, with each step, I am one step closer to the end of the day and the $10 that will buy my family dinner and maybe a new pair of shoes for my daughter. With each step, I thought, one step closer to bananas for 69 cents a pound in a grocery store back home.

To me, that banana farm worker exemplified the debilitating effects of poverty. He would never get ahead, never be able to start his own business. Instead, he would scratch away for his meager existence, one step at a time, as he endured, so that we would have affordable bananas back in the United States.

As I watched that worker, as I watched Danielle’s mother walking the narrowest road in the world desperately seeking her personalized form of insurance for her daughter’s medical procedure, I also became disillusioned with the possibility of achieving my version of success. As I watched my students miss class to help with

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family work, I realized that my version of success had to be modified in the face of third world poverty.

All three volunteers also faced disillusionment with the Dream as they struggled with the cultural differences they faced within the developing world. Thomsen constantly was met with the answer, “we are not accustomed to doing things in this way.” He began to realize that sometimes the ideas of the American Dream might run counter to the villagers’ customs and practices. Similarly, Tidwell struggled with the conflict of American Style capitalism and profit seeking within an African culture of sharing and communal support. Finally, I struggled with a cultural difference where children are expected and needed to come directly home after school to help with the family maintenance. After school activities are often not part of this equation.

The remnants of the colonial past also played into the difficulty of imparting the values of the American Dream. Many of the villagers were hesitant to work with Tidwell because they thought he would end up taking all of the fish. The villagers were accustomed to Europeans coming into the village, using local labor, and taking away all of the profits. These ideas of colonialism were burned into the minds of the villagers and made the idea of the potential promise of the American Dream unrealistic and unbelievable.

Likewise, Thomsen believed that the colonial period had ruined the ability of the villagers to be receptive to the ideas of the American Dream: “It was as though they had reacted so violently to the memory of their enslavement, which had ruined their culture, that now they couldn’t exist within the shadow of an outside discipline. It was indeed a
shattered culture,—a town without lights or water, without decent houses, medicine, education, a town isolated from the rest of the world—and, most amazing of all, there were no plans to change anything.” Thomsen believed that the damage caused by colonialism, a system that in some way incorporated many of the conservative/materialistic values of the American Dream, ruined the chances for a volunteer to impart new values and ways of accomplishing change.

Elizabeth Hoffman in her work about the Peace Corps entitled, *All You Need is Love*, asks the question “Does it (The Peace Corps) exist mainly to enable one nation to live out its own values or to provoke other nations to change theirs?” This thesis asserts that Peace Corps volunteers, when trying to fulfill the first and second goals of bringing American values to other countries while doing development work, implicitly try to provoke others to change their values. That is, volunteers do try to bring their “American values” including those of the American Dream to the communities where they serve. They often face disillusionment in this quest due to the unrealistic expectations of the Dream in the context of challenges faced by the developing world.

This thesis does not conclude that the values of the American Dream are necessarily bad or counter-productive when doing development work. Rather, there are inherent limitations in the value of these ideas when immersed in developing world poverty or areas with the memory of the colonial past still fresh. There are limitations when arrogance and a utopian vision of America cloud the judgment of a volunteer that

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6 Thomsen, *Living Poor*, 219.

is trying to achieve certain projects. It was only when volunteers began to see the inherent limitations of the value of the Dream and took into consideration cultural differences, that the volunteers achieved a version of success that was a combination of his or her American Dream values and those of the community where they served. Although Thomsen’s memoir only reflects his frustration and pessimism at the conclusion of his volunteer service, Tidwell and I did have some optimism about the possibilities of the culturally sensitive American Dream values in development work.

It was only when Tidwell accepted the culture of sharing in his fish farming project that he could achieve some version of success. It was only when I modified my expectations for the mock court program to take into consideration the life difficulties that the students faced, that I could achieve some version of success. These were successful versions of a culturally sensitive American Dream and a re-defined version of success.

In the end, the three volunteers in this thesis tried to impart the values of the American Dream. However as Moritz Thomsen noted, there were limitations: “As Peace Corps Volunteers we come to give of ourselves, but we are almost all a part of the Puritan ethic, and we make rules and set limits as to what we will give and on what terms, and what is legitimate to ask of us.” All three volunteers tried to impose the values of the American Dream as they understood them, within the parameters of their life experiences. As they tried to impart these rigid, defined values, they met with disillusionment. It was only when they modified their vision of success that they achieved some measure of satisfaction with their development experience. The values
contained in the American Dream have at times led to exploitation of the developing world. At the same time, some of these values when modified culturally still can lead to valuable cross cultural exchanges for Peace Corps volunteers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


