Punching at Destiny: The Uneven Path Forward

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When I was a sophomore in high school, I was cast in a production of the musical play *Guys & Dolls*. I was Gambler #3, and I had only one line to deliver. During a game of craps, I was supposed to get into a tussle with Gambler #6, yell "You cheated!" and slug him. When we rehearsed the play, I was confident I could make it look like my fist was making contact with his face. The director had said that I was supposed to swing my arm as if to hit his face, but position my back so that the audience wouldn't see my hand sliding just beyond his right cheek.

But on opening night, full of adrenaline, stimulated by the sounds of the audience reacting with oohs and aahs, when it came time for my punch, I swung my fist and hit his cheek square-on, sending his body tumbling into the backdrop, making the painted street scene shake as though an earthquake had erupted. Gambler #6 was slow to rise, and the other gamblers helped him off-stage as Sky Masterson started to belt out a tune. All of us were supposed to circle around and hear Sky sing, but I was left on stage, the only gambler focused on "Luck Be a Lady Tonight!" The other gamblers eventually wandered back on-stage before the song ended, but after the play I could not apologize enough to Gambler #6. (Sorry, Tommy!)

That theatrical experience taught me how fun it was to have fictional characters come to life. How magical it was that something a writer created in his imagination had a life on stage! I found that fascinating. I served as the co-editor of my high school newspaper and thought journalism might be the way to sharpen my writing skills. So, when I earned a scholarship to Rider College (now Rider University) to study journalism, I thought my path was set.

I threw myself into my major, turning out news stories daily for the school newspaper. But I discovered I didn't much like that the slate was swept clean each day, starting again on a fresh story. I loved writing, but I wanted to produce something that had a longer shelf life. I switched my major to English, meeting the requirements to become a certified K-12 teacher. I knew I wanted to be a writer, but I also knew that many writers

slaved away over manuscripts that never found a publisher. Having my teaching certificate was a way to ensure income while my written works searched for an audience.

This was in the 1970s, and the Vietnam War was raging. The military draft was alarming to me. I could not see myself as a soldier. At that time, there were unofficial pronouncements that, rather than fleeing to Canada (as some did to escape the draft), a person might serve his country differently by joining the U.S. Peace Corps. I found that intriguing. I began to research how one became a Peace Corps Volunteer. However, in 1975, the military draft was abolished to make way for the all-volunteer military.

Although the threat of being sent to war passed (and the Vietnam War ended miserably in 1975 with a loss for the United States), I decided I liked the idea of serving abroad in the Peace Corps. I had studied French and felt comfortable learning how to function in a language other than English. Accordingly, in 1976, I completed the Peace Corps application, and as I finished up my student-teaching at Princeton High School, I learned that I had been accepted by the Peace Corps and was assigned to Morocco where I would teach high school English.

For the next month, I read all I could about Morocco, its history as a former French colony, and the challenging years of independence. I felt sure Morocco was my destiny, and I was committed to making the most of the experience. But a month before I was to leave, I received a letter from the Peace Corps advising me that too many volunteers were slated for Morocco and they would be contacting me about other possible countries of service. What? You can't change my destiny like that, can you?

At first, I was quite sad about this. I had spent hours consuming Moroccan history and improving my French speaking ability. But I knew from reading the novels of Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence that sometimes a quirk of fate can mean an entirely different outcome for a narrative, and I was intrigued to see how my story would unfold.

The Peace Corps offered me to serve in Uganda, Zaire, or Chad. I chose Chad since I knew the least about it. That may seem odd to choose the unknown country, but both Uganda and Zaire had been in the news in unsettling ways (Uganda because of the bizarre behavior of its president, Idi Amin; Zaire because of serious attacks on the government by rebels against President Mobutu Sese Seko).

In a saner moment, I might have been frightened about going overseas. I had never left the United States, and I was committing to going to Africa for two years! Wow! Was I so willing to leave my "comfort zone"? Didn't I pause to think how this might affect my parents? My siblings? I did. But I was young (twenty-one years old at college graduation), and

something inside me was telling me that my destiny required taking this step onto an unknowable journey.

I grew up in Philadelphia, in a working-class family, with a bunch of kids, my parents living paycheck to paycheck. In such a situation, I was never going to have the funds that some did to travel abroad. Trading a couple of years of service in the Peace Corps would buy me something I wasn't likely to get otherwise. Having a wider world experience seemed important for a budding writer. And although my mother wept uncontrollably when I left, my parents ultimately seemed to understand that this was important for me to do.

Of course, I knew when I was in Africa—especially in my remote village where I was the only foreigner living amongst 4,000 Chadians—that this was not a usual stop on the list of locations for budding writers. I knew about the Hemingway wannabes hanging out in Paris. But without money, Paris was a fantasy. Chad was a reality I believed I could tackle. And my becoming a writer was going to have to endure whatever hardships lay in the middle of Africa.

Chad seemed to have missed the twentieth century. People traveled everywhere on foot, the better-off few sometimes having an animal to mount. Herds of camel and goat grazed the sparse grasslands outside the few cities. Fields were divided into grave-sized plots tribes farmed by hand to produce meager harvests of cotton and peanuts. Despite the hard life, Chadians did not whine about what they didn't have. They knew other places enjoyed electricity and running water; they hoped one day Chad would, too. They celebrated their bonds in tribal rituals marked by singing in four-part harmonies.

Chad forced me to live on a very basic level. I had no running water or electricity, and I was in a difficult-to-reach village nestled in thick vegetation at the fringes of a tropical rainforest. It was hard.

In 1977, we didn't have cell phones or the internet. In my little village, when I would write a letter to my parents, I would have to allow three months for the letter to reach them. I had no phone conversations with my parents from the day I left until the day I returned. I was about as isolated as you can get.

My job was teaching at a village high school: English, French, and mathematics. Most of my classes had about eighty students. We had limited supplies and the other teachers—the Chadian teachers—were often on strike because they weren't getting paid by the Chadian government. When civil war broke out during my second year and all the Peace Corps Volunteers were evacuated, I was heartbroken to exit Chad suddenly.

But I remembered the times when officers from the American embassy came through my village, and I would offer my ideas for how the U.S. government could be doing so much more. I had all sorts of ideas for helping my village work more cooperatively, farm more efficiently, and assist the poor students who often went days without eating. I could tell by the way these diplomats looked at me, however, that they saw me merely as a young, scraggly Peace Corps volunteer without any credentials.

So, when I got back to the United States, I went to graduate school and earned a credential: a master's degree from the University of Notre Dame in development economics. Notre Dame gave me a fellowship for graduate school; I paid nothing for my tuition. I believe that my Peace Corps service is what convinced Notre Dame to be so generous with me.

On a whim, I took the Foreign Service exam and wound up passing. And just as I was finishing my master's degree, the State Department called with a job offer.

The State Department first sent me to Dubai, before most Americans had really heard of it. The rule was that every Foreign Service Officer—no matter what specialty you had (I was an economist)—had to do a tour as a Consular Officer, providing services for American citizens abroad, interviewing visa applicants, and whatever else the embassy determined in your job description.

The U.S. relationship with Iran was sundered in 1979 when diplomats were taken hostage at the American Embassy in Tehran. Dubai is just across the Persian Gulf from Iran, so the bulk of my work in Dubai was interviewing hundreds of Iranians every day who lined up outside the consulate. With no American embassy in Tehran, they had to apply elsewhere for a visa, and Dubai was nearby.

In addition, American oil companies were operating in the Persian Gulf, so there were plenty of American citizens who needed various services, like new passports or notarizations. Unfortunately, sometimes someone would die abroad, and you had to process the body for shipment back to the United States.

One of the events I remember most about my time in Dubai was when during the Iran-Iraq War—and the United States was supporting Iraq—Iranian navy vessels surrounded an American flag freighter in the Persian Gulf and took control of it and its crew. They held the crew for about eight hours and then let the vessel go. I was assigned by the Consul General to drive to the emirate where the vessel docked and interview the crew about how they had been treated by the Iranians.

I had to drive a few hours to get there, do the interviews, rush back to Dubai, and write up my report since Washington was eager to learn if

this was something bigger that might trigger a war with Iran. Fortunately, the crew told me that the Iranian navy personnel had been professional and courteous and there had been no mistreatment. War averted!

I got to do some political reporting in Dubai since I was having so much contact—through the visa interviews—with Iranians and this was a key way for the United States to understand what was happening inside Iran. (We didn't have diplomats in Iran.) I was able to report back to Washington on living conditions, university activities, and business investments inside the country.

After Dubai, I served in Syria, Morocco, and Canada. I also served in Washington as the desk officer for Lebanon.

In all of these assignments, through my solid foundation in studying the arts and sciences, I was able to reflect on the larger context of the war and peace issues that came across my desk. Literature has much to tell us about the way humans react to crises, whether personal or political. And that circuitous route to becoming a diplomat was triggered by my studying French in high school and feeling comfortable functioning in another language.

Once I saw the heart-wrenching poverty in Chad, I knew I would not be content only to craft poems and create art. I was going to have to be more involved in alleviating suffering as best I could. But what studying literature helped me to learn was that narratives hinge on inflection points. There are always many potential outcomes for a character confronting an apparent insurmountable obstacle. And it's best to prepare for that multiplicity: prepare for the best outcome, but also for the worst. More than likely, the eventual result will wind up being something in the middle. Learning to be imaginative in thinking through a range of scenarios helped me in crises I had to manage as a diplomat.

It seems ironic now to understand that I thought the Peace Corps would deliver my only chance to travel. I had to squeeze all the gusto from my time abroad in the Peace Corps because I believed it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I was so wrong, given the way my destiny has unfolded!

Now, afflicted with multiple health challenges (heart disease, AIDS, and cancer), I have the time to perceive the flow of my life as one where I grew in a sharper understanding of how I define my happiness: being of service to others is vital. I think the more we think less about what we want and rather what others need the happier we can be in our short time on this earth.

If I hadn't gone to the Peace Corps, I would have become a high school English teacher in New Jersey. That would have been a noble and

worthwhile destiny. But in my case, my uneven path led to a wider world as a diplomat. And a firm grasp of the pushes and pulls of human nature, gleaned from my studies of literature, has served me well.

I think it's crucial to be willing to leave a "comfort zone." Life is about exploring. An unchanging mindset of how to get from point A to point B may mean missing out on a richer experience that often arises out of the unknown, the unexpected, the unpredictable. I think back to how I slugged Tommy when I was supposed to fake it. Tommy forgave me, but I think that punch started me on a path as a citizen of the world armed with a liberal arts education that permitted me to thrive on a much bigger stage. (See further www.michaelvarga.com.)