BOB BAYLES

Readers Write

IDEALISM

When my Peace Corps recruiter told me I'd be a perfect candidate to teach English in Africa, I told her I wanted to build the schools, not teach in them. I wanted to get my hands dirty and sweat a bit.

She placed me in the teaching program in Cameroon.

Classroom protocol was very formal. My high-school students rose from their desks when I entered the room and stood when responding to my questions. At first they seemed to like me. They would linger after class to ask me grammar questions or stop me in the market to talk about my tastes in music and clothes. But then someone in class began to mimic my voice when my back was turned. Every day for a week, an exaggerated, high-pitched version of my voice returned my words a beat after I had spoken them.

On Friday I snapped. I spun around from the board and grabbed the first student I saw by the lapels of his school uniform. He stood, and I heard the rip of cloth, so tight was my grip.

"Wolwe," I said, "who has been mimicking my voice?"

"I cannot say, Miss."

"Are you afraid of getting your friend in trouble?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Would *you* take the punishment for your friend?"

"Yes, Miss."

So I released my grip and went to my grade book, trying to look calm as I flipped through the pages.

"I see you got a fifteen on last week's test. Not bad. Now it's a zero."

"Please, Miss. Please."

"I said you have a zero. Now just shut up, boy."

And there it was. So easy. So natural. Not only had I swiftly and severely punished Wolwe; I'd let the ghosts of my plantation-owner ancestors rise up in me and slap that label on a young black man. *Boy.* It was in my blood, the way I spat that word. *Boy.* There was nothing awkward about it; my voice didn't catch or quiver or hesitate. *Boy.* I said it just like a character in a Richard Wright novel, lines I had read and reread and underlined until I'd felt the nausea churning inside me, and I'd vowed that someday, somehow I would make a difference in the world.

Mary Beth Simmons
West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania

IN THE LATE SEVENTIES I WAS A MEMber of the Clamshell Alliance, which sought to halt construction on a new nuclear reactor in Seabrook, New Hampshire. Once a week we met in "affinity groups," where all our decisions were made by consensus. Often these meetings went on into the small hours, as there was always someone — usually Ken — who would block consensus, making us start over again until everyone was happy.

One time my father drove me into Boston, where I was to spend the night on a crowded church-basement floor with other Clamshell members. Before dawn my fellow activists and I would board school buses and ride to the plant construction site. We planned to scale chain-link fences around the site and get ourselves arrested by the state police. My job, to my father's relief, involved tossing a rug over the barbed wire and assisting climbers up ladders.

On our way to the church, I explained to my father the idea of consensus: how each member had a voice, and how we would rework any plan until everyone was comfortable with it.

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard of," he said. "What you people need is a foreman." My father had a foreman, a guy who told him and the rest of his work crew what to do. "With a foreman you know where you stand," he added, "and if you don't do what you're told, you're standing in the unemployment line. Otherwise how would anything get done?"

I couldn't understand how my father tolerated someone ordering him around all day. Yet he liked his foreman and even drank with him after they cashed their checks on Fridays. I dismissed my father's willingness to follow orders as just another example of the internalized oppression of the working class.

By 3 A.M. I was longing for a foreman to shut everyone up and put us to bed. Every time we were about to settle a last-minute issue, someone would block consensus, and we would have to start over. I found myself concocting various tortures for those unwilling to let anything pass, especially Ken, who each time managed to find some detail that prevented him from casting his lot with the rest of us. I hated his guts.

At 4 A.M., groggy and ill-tempered, we boarded the buses, having decided almost nothing.

Later that day, my father came to pick me up. I flung my sleeping bag into the rear of his station wagon, climbed in, and laid my head back on the seat. I didn't mention the night of consensus building. All I wanted to do was sleep.

Dennis Donoghue
Rowley, Massachusetts

IN THE SIXTIES, MY HUSBAND, A FULL-blooded Arizona Navajo, and I, a white woman from the plains of Colorado, quit our jobs. Together we were going to live according to the old ways of the Navajos on the northern part of the reservation in Apache County, Arizona. Although my husband knew more than I did about what was in store, neither he nor I was fully aware of the indignities and privations of traditional Native life.

We lived with my husband's family and clan members in a cluster of hogans more than a hundred miles from water, which we hauled in by horse and wagon once a month. These meager stores allowed each of us only about two cups of water a day. The wastewater was carried to the growing plants. There was often no soap. I washed my face, my short hair, and my private areas and called it good. Washing the rest of the body was saved for the rare times we went to a trading post, where we could take a shower for a dime. Going to the bathroom involved digging a hole in the sand and burying our waste. The privy patch was the bane of my existence. I never adjusted to squatting in full view of the others.

We shared our hogan with sixteen other people. Navajos respect each other's privacy, but with so many sharing such a small space, real privacy was impossible. Everyone turned a deaf ear to married couples. We slept on sheepskins on the dirt floor. At dawn the skins were shaken, aired for a bit in the sun, and then rolled up and placed out of the way, for the sleeping area was also the working and living area.

READERS WRITE *asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.*

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, *107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.*

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Lessons	January 1	*June 2004*
Stepfamilies	February 1	*July 2004*
Hard Work	March 1	*August 2004*
Fitting In	April 1	*September 2004*
Weddings	May 1	*October 2004*
Coming Clean	June 1	*November 2004*

In summer we cooked outside on an old wood-burning stove and over small, intense fires in the sand. We had to gather and dry dung, brush, and dead cedar boughs for fuel. There were no regular meals. In the old Navajo way, one ate when one was hungry, which for the women meant feeding people around the clock.

In good times, when everyone did their assigned jobs of herding and working in the stunted garden, we had the luxury of butchering a goat every other day. Men reaped the best, meatiest parts; the women got the long, skinny ribs, which we roasted over hot coals without salt or seasonings. Even in good times, we cracked the bones to suck the marrow. When times were really bad, we lived on canned milk, fry bread in lard, and canned tomatoes. I dreamed of sauerkraut, bratwurst, fried chicken, potatoes in sour cream, and glorious salads made from cucumbers and every kind of greens.

When I found myself pregnant, anemic, and sick with TB, my husband and I packed up our dreams and left.

J.E. James
Kirk, Colorado

WHEN I WAS NINETEEN, I THOUGHT I could save the planet. Raised on anarchist punk rock, I set out to fight injustice and make the world a better place.

In a national forest near Eugene, Oregon, I climbed to a plywood tree stand two hundred feet up an ancient Douglas fir. (Julia Butterfly Hill had already been sitting in a redwood for more than four months.) For forty-five days I called the tree stand home. When I came down, another took my place.

The forest action grew, and I took many more turns up in the trees. I did my fair share of blocking bulldozers, and even had the opportunity to meet with some congresspeople.

After two years of struggle, though, I was fed up and frustrated with the system. I'd witnessed countless cases of police brutality, lying officials, and broken hearts as more and more forests were destroyed. I decided it was time for underground action. A friend and I planned to set fire to three SUVs in a protest designed to raise awareness about global warming. We succeeded in our mission, and no one was hurt.

That was three years ago. I've been in prison ever since. I'm doing twenty-two years for my idealism.

I've had a lot of time to think about the choices I made, and I'm proud of them. Maybe I didn't change the world, but from the letters I get, I know I helped open some people's eyes.

We managed to save that old-growth forest, too.

Jeffrey Luers
Salem, Oregon

WHEN I GOT TO HIGH SCHOOL, I started feeling depressed. My two best friends both called suicide-prevention hotlines on my behalf. But I wasn't suicidal; I was simply awakened to the brutality, indignity, and inequity in the world. I felt as if I were the only one in ninth grade who cared about anything besides lipstick, school lunch, and petty disputes. My friends were sympathetic, but things just didn't *affect* them the way they did me.

It wasn't until I discovered macrobiotics at the age of twenty that I developed a zeal for living. Finally there was something positive and practical I could do. I spoke passionately about my discovery to friends, family, and even strangers. "It means 'living the great life,'" I would say. I believed we could save the world by creating healthy human beings.

I ate organic foods from fifty-pound bags. I moved to the country and planted a garden. I dropped out of college to become an apprentice at a macrobiotic healing center. I stopped going to bars, brought my own food to social gatherings, and berated friends for visiting doctors when they could easily cure themselves of whatever ailed them.

By my midtwenties, I didn't have any close friends anymore. My two best friends from high school had grown distant, and I'd not been able to make any new ones, no matter how many homemade-sushi parties I threw. I went to cooking classes and macrobiotic lectures, but I had no one I could call when I wanted to talk about something personal. If this was the "great life," it sure felt lonely.

I'm now twenty-eight and married. My husband and I eat a relaxed macrobiotic diet. We go out to eat frequently and no longer bring our own brown rice when people invite us over for dinner. My social life is on the mend.

Hardest to repair are my friendships with the two women who once called suicide-prevention hotlines for me. While I was saving the world one bite at a time, they felt judged. One of them is now a public defender, the other an air-quality expert. They were never unaffected by the injustice in the world; they just had less-visible — and probably more constructive — ways of coping with it.

We live in different states now, and the two of them frequently visit each other on holidays. My wish is that someday they will want to come see me.

Name Withheld

FEBRUARY 1989 WAS A BITTERLY COLD month at Baker Correctional Institution in north Florida. It was also Black History Month, and a solid week of nightly programs were planned at the prison's makeshift auditorium. I didn't go the first three nights, but Galen, a black friend of mine, invited me to the Thursday-night meeting. I decided to go and take a friend nicknamed Swamp Thing.

Swamp Thing and I had both been at Baker less than six months, and we were two of only a couple of dozen white faces at a meeting of about four hundred. A black church group had come to give a presentation about Martin Luther King Jr. They emphasized that the civil-rights battles were won by black *and* white people marching and working side by side. Their message was good for my soul. Despite racial prejudices on both sides in prison, I still believed that black and white men could treat each other as brothers.

The program concluded, and we lined up outside the auditorium in the freezing wind beneath the starry sky and the blazing perimeter lights. When the shift captain gave the OK, we all started running back to our dorms to get out of the cold. That's when somebody hit me from behind.

I fell to the sidewalk, but I was up and running again in a moment. I didn't realize I'd been hit until I felt the right side

of my face.

When I caught up to Swamp Thing at the door to our dormitory, I told him what had happened.

"Sorry, Wood," he said. "I shouldn't have run off and left you behind. I know how these niggers are."

I told him I was OK, just shaken up. I didn't even know who had hit me.

In our dorm, seventy men slept on double bunks in one large room. We took our places on our racks for count. As the guards counted us in silence, I rubbed my sore cheek, feeling stupid for having gone, and self-conscious that I had been singled out among the whites who'd attended. When the guards left, the black inmates began to hold court.

"You all see Wood get punched tonight? He hit the ground like a sack of taters!"

The dorm exploded in laughter.

"Bet that ol' white boy will never go to a black-history meeting again!"

I looked up, my face hot. Every black man in the dorm was looking my way. None of the white inmates wanted to get involved — they all thought I was a fool for having gone. Galen frowned and shook his head at me.

"What was that silly fool cracker thinking?" another black inmate said. "What he do? Get a personal invitation?"

"That's right!" Galen snapped. "I invited him. I thought this was gonna be a fucking civilized group tonight."

Another black inmate spoke up: "Man, a cracker going to black history. That's like me going to a fucking Ku Klux Klan meeting!"

"No!" I said. "It's not the same." I was the quiet one in the dorm, but now here I was, running my mouth when I shouldn't. "Martin Luther King was about everybody, not just blacks. He was about unity, not separation."

"What do you know about the black man's troubles, cracker?" an inmate named Death Row said. "You got it all fucked up. Years gone by since King got killed, and the white man still steps on a nigger's neck. You ever hear of Malcolm X? You ever hear of Nat Turner or Marcus Garvey? Nelson Mandela's been locked up in jail twenty-five years 'cause white men are scared of him."

"You gonna live in the past?" I yelled. "You can't fix the problem by piling more problems on top of it."

"You keep on being stupid," Death Row growled, "and you're gonna get hurt again."

"Squash that shit now," Galen snapped. "The man's got heart, and all you fools got is big mouths."

The guards came back for a recount, and silence returned to the dorm. I was starting to realize that racial battle lines had been drawn long before I'd shown up there. I was a fool to hold on to my anachronistic view of racial harmony when all we really had was an uneasy truce between enemies. Galen was my friend, but I had no rap about brotherhood for any other black man. As far as I was concerned, the next night's black-history program could be an all-African American affair.

The next morning I went to automotive class at a large garage behind a high fence, erected to keep inmates from stealing tools. I was taking apart an old VW engine block when a fellow student tapped me on the shoulder. "Wood, you got a phone call," he said, meaning another inmate wanted to see me.

I stepped out of the garage and went to the fence. An old black man waited on the other side. Had he been asking for someone else?

"I'm Wood," I said.

The man smiled. "You coming back to black history tonight? It's the last one, you know."

"I don't think so," I said. I felt the anger rising in me.

"My name's Willie," he said. "I saw what happened last night. I can't tell you who hit you, but I want to say I'm sorry it happened. The sorry-ass punk is a racist and a coward, and he doesn't understand what King or the civil-rights marches were about. I hope you realize most of us don't feel like that."

I nodded, more out of politeness than agreement.

"I hope you'll reconsider and come tonight," Willie said. "Black history belongs as much to you as to me." He smiled and left, and I went back to my engine block.

I got eight more "phone calls" that day, all of them from black inmates who had never talked to me before. All told me pretty much the same thing: they wouldn't say who'd slugged me, but they emphasized that his thinking was not theirs.

I didn't get too much work done that day. Something was going on inside me: my old beliefs and values were coming back. At the 5 P.M. count, I informed Swamp Thing that I was going to black history that night, and nobody was going to tell me otherwise. Swamp Thing thought I was nuts, but he said he'd go with me to watch my back.

After count and before chow call, Death Row stepped up to me. "Cracker, I hear you're going to black history tonight. Is that true?"

"Yes," I said, standing my ground but worried all the same.

Death Row bent closer, almost sneering. "I had figured you learned your lesson last night."

"I guess I didn't," I said.

"You're the craziest fool I ever met, you know that?"

I didn't say anything.

"All right, if you're gonna go, I'll walk with you, and if your shithead tries anything, I'll break something on him."

I was floored. I thanked him and let him know it wasn't necessary.

Before the meeting, four more black inmates offered to watch my back. Swamp Thing and I went to black history that night. We returned to the dorm without a problem.

David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida

(end of excerpt)