

Sometimes the soundtrack of memories deep in my mind begins to play back the Sixties, with the echoes intercut by the incongruities of those years.

I hear the sounds of crowds cheering and cities burning; of laughing children and weeping widows; of nightrides, nightmares, and napalm; of falling barriers and new beginnings and animosities as old as Cain and Abel.

... But something survived those years that bullets could not stop. An idea survived, embodied in the Peace Corps Volunteers who are now 140,000 strong and still coming. This idea survived the flawed stewardship of those of us who were its first and amateur custodians. And it survives today. This is a testimony to the power of the idea.

Of the private man John Kennedy I knew little. I saw him rarely. Once, when the 1960 campaign was over and he was ending a post-election visit to the LBJ Ranch, he pulled me over into a corner to urge me to abandon my plans for graduate work at the University of Texas and to come to Washington as part of the New Frontier.

... So I remember John Kennedy not so much for what he was or what he wasn't but for what he empowered in me. We all edit history to give some form to the puzzle of our lives, and I cherish the memory of him for awakening me to a different story for myself. He placed my life in a larger narrative than I could ever have written. One test of a leader is knowing, as John Stuart Mill put it, that "the worth of the state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it." Preserving civilization is the work not of some miracle-working, superhuman personality, but of each one of us. The best leaders don't expect us just to pay our taxes and abdicate, they sign us up for civic duty and insist we sharpen our skills as citizens.

... In his public voice John Kennedy spoke to my generation of service and sharing; he called us to careers of discovery through lives open to others.

... The theologian Karl Barth was five years old when he first heard the music of Mozart. It would delight him all his life. In 1955 Barth addressed a letter to the long-deceased Mozart, thanking him for all the pleasure of the music—all the pleasure and discovery. "With an ear open to your musical dialectic," wrote Barth, "one can be young and become old, can work and rest, be content and sad; in short, one can live."

The music of discovery. It was for us not a trumpet but a bell, sounding in countless individual hearts that one clear note that said: "You matter. You can

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

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signify. You can make a difference.” Romantic? Yes, there was romance to it. But we were not then so callous toward romance. The best Volunteers waged hand-to-hand combat with cynicism, and won. They kept winning, until today the Peace Corps has earned a reputation (to quote the *Washington Post*) as one of the world’s most effective grass-roots development organizations.

It was said that the urge to join the Peace Corps was passion alone. Not so. Men and women, whatever their age, looked their lives over and chose to affirm. To affirm is the thing. And so they have—in quiet, self-effacing perseverance.

They come—these men and women—from a vein in American life as idealistic as the Declaration and as gritty as the Constitution. I was reminded of this the other day when I interviewed the octogenarian dean of American historians, Henry Steele Commager. Reviewing the critical chapters of our story, he said that great things were done by the generation that won independence and then formed our government. Great things were accomplished by the generation that saved the union and rid it of slavery. Great things were won by the generation that defeated the fascists of Europe and warlords of Japan and then organized the peace that followed. And—said Dr. Commager—there are still great things to be won ... here at home and in the world.

So there are. But if we are to reckon with the growing concentration and privilege of power; if from the lonely retreats of our separate realities we are to create a new consensus of shared values; if we are to exorcise the lingering poison of racism, reduce the extremes of poverty and wealth, and overcome the ignorance of our heritage, history, and world; if we are to find a sense of life’s wholeness and the holiness of one another; then from this deep vein which gave rise to the Peace Corps must come our power and light.

The idea? Herman Melville got it right. We Americans are not a narrow tribe of men. We are not a nation so much as a world. And these Volunteers have shown us how to be at home in the world.

... America has a rendezvous with what my late friend Joseph Campbell called “a mighty multicultural future.” But we are not alone.... We have Peace Corps guides—140,000 Volunteers who have advanced the trip. They have been to where our country is going. Out there in the world, as John F. Kennedy might say, is truly the new frontier.