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# Expect the Unexpected: An Autoethnography of Typhoon "Yolanda" (Haiyan)

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EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF  
TYPHOON “YOLANDA” (HAIYAN)

Ashley E. Conrad

51 Pages

August 2015

On November 8, 2014 one of the most powerful typhoons in recorded history made landfall in the Philippines, leaving the country in a declared state of national calamity (NPR 2013; BBC 2013). This research seeks to place in sociological context my experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer serving in the Philippines during the landfall of typhoon “Yolanda”. I utilized autoethnographic methods with a focus in personal narrative to analyze my experience.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF  
TYPHOON “YOLANDA” (HAIYAN)

ASHLEY E. CONRAD

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Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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2015

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF  
TYPHOON “YOLANDA” (HAIYAN)

ASHLEY E. CONRAD

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I would like to thank my family, friends and faculty at Illinois State University for supporting me through the Stevenson Center Masters International Program. It has been a long and rewarding journey– I couldn't have done it without you.

My thesis is dedicated to my dear friend, sister, and Peace Corps counterpart, Mary Grace Chavez Baguio. Mary Grace works for the Department of Social Welfare and Development in Sagay City Negros Occidental and was a major part of my Peace Corps service. She fights for the rights of youth in the Philippines and puts others before herself at all times. This is for you, Grace.

A.E.C.

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## CHAPTER I

### AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF TYPHOON “YOLDANDA” (HAIYAN)

#### PROLOGUE

She came and she went,  
Taking and replacing my heart,  
With one I did not recognize,  
And with emotions unnamed.

I found Strength in  
Patience,  
Hope, and  
Love for others.  
I found compassion for Myself.

I Lost all sense of Control,  
Became Humbled, Terrified, and  
Free  
To my Core.

## INTRODUCTION

On November 8, 2014 one of the most powerful typhoons recorded in history made landfall in the Philippines leaving the country in a declared state of national calamity (NPR 2013; BBC 2013). The typhoon resulted in 6,030 deaths, 28,689 injuries, and 1,061 missing persons on record making typhoon “Yolanda” (also known as Haiyan in the international community), “the deadliest natural disaster in the country’s history” (BBC 2013:1; NDRRMC 2014). The typhoon also displaced over 4 million individuals (890,895 families) and damaged over 1 million houses (partially damaged: 595,149 / totally damaged: 489,613) (NDRRMC 2014). Overall, the typhoon caused a total of PHP 89,598,068,634.88 (over 2 billion dollars) worth of damages in the infrastructure, productive, and social sectors (NDRRMC 2014).

This research seeks to analyze and place in sociological context my experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer serving in the Philippines during the landfall of typhoon “Yolanda” which severely damaged the infrastructure and livelihood of the community I lived in. I have utilized autoethnographic methods to portray my perceptions, experiences and conduct during and after the disaster. This personal account will pay close attention to my social position as an American volunteer living and working in a Filipino community for a year following the storm and will build upon existing literature to situate these events in a specific place, time and culture.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *Volunteering*

My role as an existing Peace Corps Volunteer during Typhoon Yolanda greatly impacted my experience and reaction to the storm. Volunteering is defined as, “any



activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson 2000:215). Wilson (2000:218) asserts, “many sociologists are skeptical of the existences of any identifiable drives, needs, or impulses that might inspire volunteerism.” He challenges these ideas because of the key role motives play in everyday life, especially in terms of public thinking about volunteerism which is often viewed as, “truly selfless and the most esteemed” (Wilson 2000; Cnaan, Handy, Wadsworth 1996:375). Volunteers are often motivated by their desire to improve their communities, aiding the less fortunate, and doing something for their country (Wilson 2000; Flanagan 1999).

Volunteer theories include human capital, exchange theory, and social resources as primary ways to explain why and how individuals participate in volunteer work. Individual-level behaviorist theories argue the decision to volunteer is based on the weighing of cost and benefits and is often determined by resources (Wilson 2000). Earlier theories also associate volunteering with status differentiation that often provides a person with prestige and respect (Wilson 2000; Smith 1994). Human capital in terms of the level of education an individual receives is the best predictor of volunteering because it, “heightens awareness of problems, increases empathy, and builds self confidence” (Wilson 2000: 219; McPherson & Rotolo 1996; Sundeen & Raskoff 1994; Brady, Verba, & Schlozman 1995; Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis 1998). While human capital helps in predicting who is more likely to volunteer, it does not divulge why they chose to do so (Wilson 2000).

Exchange theory asserts individuals “will not contribute goods and services to others unless they profit from the exchange” (Wilson 2000: 222; Smith 1982). However, criticisms of this theory claim that while volunteers might feel good about doing their

work, they may not do it because it makes them feel good, but rather because it is the right thing to do (Wilson 2000). Exchange theory also assumes most people act in self-interest while other theories argue some people help others regardless of the benefits they may receive from doing so, including praise and recognition (Wilson 2000; Hart, Atkins, & Ford 1996; Schervish & Havens 1997). Last, social networks, organizational memberships and prior volunteer experience all increase the likelihood of volunteering and help explain why individuals with higher socioeconomic status tend to volunteer more (Wilson 2000; Wilson & Musick 1997).

Commitment to volunteer work can be explained as, “an attachment to the volunteer role over time and as the commitment to a particular organization or task” (Wilson 2000:230). Highly committed volunteers who are less likely to drop out of their positions tend to be highly educated, identify personal development as the primary reason for their volunteer work as opposed to volunteering based on moral values, and are often more committed if friends and family support their work (Wilson 2000; Syder & Omoto 1992; Snyder, Omoto, & Crain 1999). Wilson (2000) also discusses the possible consequences of volunteering, one of which impacts the mental health of the volunteer. House, Landis, and Huberson (1988) assert volunteering is a way for individuals to become integrated into their community, yielding positive mental health effects which can be self-validating, decrease rates of depression, and boost self-esteem and self-confidence (Krause, Herzog, & Baker 1992; Mirowsky & Ross 1989; and Harlow & Cantor 1996). Facets of each theory relate to my volunteer experience and will be explored further in the reflection section of this research paper.

### *Disaster Research*

Recently, the study of disasters has become a topic of growing sociological interest (Tierney 2007; Cohen 2012). In the past, research exploring natural disasters has narrowly focused on the disaster zone, the people immediately within the disaster, and the management of the disaster's consequences and they have relied heavily on quantitative methods for analysis (Center for Interdisciplinary Research 2012; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). However, there is now a call for qualitative analysis of natural disasters in order to assess how communicative activities preceding, accompanying, and following a disastrous event provide insight into the course of a disaster (Center for Interdisciplinary Research 2012). This approach focuses on the extent to which natural disasters are socially produced through human transformation of coastal zones and constructed habitat and recognizes natural events are never disasters by themselves since natural events need the involvement of humans or their living spaces for it to be considered a disaster (Center for Interdisciplinary Research 2012; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Oliver-Smith 2002; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). I will be utilizing Numazaki's (2012:31) definition of disaster as a "sudden disruption and forced alteration of everyday life on a massive scale due to physical destruction caused by natural phenomenon or hazardous accident" in my research with an emphasis on the "disruption and alteration" of "everyday life" (Numazaki 2012:32).

My research pulls from three qualitative case studies, Nagai (2012), Numazaki (2012), and Cohen (2012), which utilize personal narrative and autoethnographic methods to conduct disaster research in SouthEast Asia. Nagai's (2012) account of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami that hit northeast Japan in March 2011

explores her role as a Japanese immigrant social worker who responded to the disaster through fundraising efforts and three months of volunteer work in Japan following the disaster. Her narrative highlights the experience of local and foreign volunteers while simultaneously integrating the perspective of the local community beneficiaries. Nagai's (2012) reflective research focused heavily on the needs of the volunteers and calls for further research investigating the role and needs of volunteers who respond to natural disasters in the future. My research will begin to fill this gap in the literature by exploring my perceptions and actions during my volunteer experience as a relief worker following a major natural disaster.

Naumazaki (2012) also focuses on the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011, but does so from the perspective of a native who experienced the disaster first hand. He focuses on the profound and prolonged impact of the disaster on himself as well as his family, relatives, friends, students and colleagues providing insight on what it means to be a "native-in-the-disaster-zone" (Naumazaki 2012:27). Naumazaki (2012) calls for future research to focus on the political economy of disaster with a focus on the role of history and culture on disaster response and relief. My research will respond to this request by investigating the impact Filipino culture has on the relief giving efforts following Typhoon "Yolanda".

Cohen (2012) compares his perceptions and conduct during the 2011 Bangkok Flood with those of his Tai community members. He does this from the perspective of a foreigner familiar with the culture of Thailand since he has conducted research in Thailand for the past 40 years, lived in Thailand since the early 2000s, and is married to a woman native to Thailand, providing him with prior insight and experience with the

population of study (Cohen 2012). Cohen (2012) reveals the significant impact a researcher's personal biography, past experience, and culture influence the research process and outcome. He specifically calls for future research to further explore the relationship of personal biography on the personal trajectory of individuals impacted by a natural disaster (Cohen 2012). My research will begin to fill this gap in the literature by providing a detailed discussion of the important role my personal biography, past experience, and understanding of the Filipino culture played in my experience of the natural disaster.

### *Autoethnography*

Autoethnography grew out of an era inspired by postmodernism which questioned the dominance of the traditional scientific method in social science research and claimed that it was possible to gain and share knowledge in many different ways (Wall 2006; Ellis et al. 2011). The "crisis of confidence" inspired by the postmodern era in the 1980s made it possible for critical theories to emerge and allowed for a wide range of research strategies to take hold in the social sciences (Wall 2006; Ellis et al. 2011). For example, Feminist scholarship promotes research that starts with one's personal experience (Ellis 2004; Wall 2006). This is questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm made way for other ways of knowing and created space for research aimed at making positive changes in the world through the sharing of personal stories and experiences (Wall 2006). This is where autoethnography began to creep into the social research dialogue.

Autoethnography emerged from a need to transform ethnographic research from its past tendencies of authoritatively entering a culture, capitalizing on cultural members, and recklessly leaving and writing about the culture for personal gain without considering

the impact the researcher's actions may have on the cultural members (Conquergood 1991; Ellis 2007; Ellis et al. 2011). Over time, scholars across many disciplines considered the possibility of social sciences migrating closer to literature than to physics by offering stories rather than theories that were deliberately value centered instead of attempting to be value-free (Bochner 1994; Ellis et al. 2011; Bochner 2012). "These researchers wanted to formulate systematic ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience...in order to empathize with people who are different from us" (Ellis et al. 2011:274). While some researchers still insist that social research can be conducted from a neutral, impersonal and objective stance, most realize these assumptions are not attainable (Ellis et al. 2011:274).

Autoethnography challenges rigid definitions of what constitutes useful research; it helps us to understand how our personal narrative influences the interpretations of what we study (Adams 2005; Woods 2009; Ellis et al. 2011).

"As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography" (Ellis et al. 2011). An author writes an autobiography by selectively assembling past experiences using hindsight and may interview others and/or review texts, photography, journals and recordings to help recall the events (Bruner 1993; Ellis et al. 2011). Oftentimes autobiographers write about "epiphanies" or significant moments in a person's life, times of crises forcing a person to analyze their lived experience, and events that alter the trajectory of one's life (Ellis 2004; Ellis et al. 2011). On the other hand, ethnographers study cultural practices, beliefs, values, and shared experiences in order for insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) to better understand the culture (Maso 2001). Ethnographers conduct their research using

participant observation, interviews, analyzing space and place, and/or analyzing artifacts such as clothing, architecture, texts, movies, and photographs (Ellis et al. 2011). When researchers decide to do autoethnography, they “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity,” then analyze these experiences (Ellis et al. 2011:276). In order to make a culture familiar to insiders and outsiders, autoethnographers can compare and contrast their personal experience by investigating existing research, interviewing cultural members, and or examining relevant cultural artifacts (Duncan 2004; Ellis 2004; Wall 2006; Ellis et al. 2011).

While there are many types of autoethnographic methods, most autoethnographies share the following distinctive features. First, they are written in a way that engages readers and uses conventions of storytelling such as character, scene, plot development and chronological or fragmented story progression (Ellis and Ellingson 2000; Ellis 2004; Ellis et al. 2011). Authors often use “showing” techniques, which bring, “readers into the scene,” in order to, “experience an experience” (Ellis 2004:142). They also use “thick descriptions” of a culture in order to facilitate understanding of cultural insiders and outsiders (Ellis 2004; Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnographers can use first-person, second-person, or third-person to portray their experience (Ellis 2004; Ellis et al. 2011). Last, autoethnography seeks to produce accessible texts in order to reach a wide, diverse audience that traditional research often disregards in hopes of making personal and social change possible for more people (Ellis 2004; Ellis et al 2011).

There are many forms and approaches to autoethnography including but not limited to: indigenous/native ethnographies, narrative ethnographies, reflexive dyadic interviews,

reflexive ethnographies, layered accounts, interactive interviews, community autoethnographies, co-constructed narratives, and personal narratives (Duncan 2004; Ellis 2004; Wall 2006; Ellis et al. 2011). I will utilize personal narrative as, “a means of knowing and a way of telling about the social world” (Bochner 2012). I have chosen to utilize my own personal narrative to explore this topic based on Laurel Richardson’s (1990:183) argument that, “Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives.” This methodology challenges the “canonical ways of doing research” (Ellis et al. 2011:273) and is a post-modern attempt to change the dichotomous relationship between researcher and the object(s) of research (Cohen 2012).

#### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

In July of 2012, I began my Peace Corps service in the Philippines working as a teacher and community organizer at a vocational school funded by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, a unit of the local government focused on empowering poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged populations by providing social services and protection (DSWD 2015). As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I received extensive in-country training on Filipino culture, the local language, and technical skills necessary to carry out my job as a Youth Development Facilitator. Before typhoon “Yolanda” made landfall, my responsibilities included teaching English, life-skills, conducting program design and management workshops and implementing an adolescent reproductive and sexual health program in our community. After the typhoon hit, my role as a volunteer changed drastically for the following months. This work focuses on the time period immediately following the storm.



Training and one year's worth of experience living and working in the Philippines aided in my cultural integration with my host family, coworkers, and community members before the typhoon made landfall. My community experience prior to the disaster also gave me a unique perspective as an "insider" and "outsider" in the Filipino community in which I was living, allowing me to be an "outsider" with a general understanding of the insider's perspective. My location upon the arrival of the storm also provided a rare opportunity for me to explore and navigate events related to the disaster without being evacuated from the area since my home was not badly damaged. This allowed me to assess the situation of individuals living in a severely affected area that was not the significant focus of media and relief giving initiatives. My narrative is written in the form of personal journal entries so the reader can understand my experience from a first-hand perspective. I have edited and expanded upon my personal diary from my volunteer time to portray a coherent narrative. The names of the people and places have been changed to respect privacy and protect identities. I refer to the name of the community I lived in as Summerville. Following the autoethnographic representation of my experience, I relate my experience back to the sociological literature and make recommendations for future disaster research followed by a chapter devoted to helping volunteers who may find themselves in similar situations in the future.

#### TYPHOON "YOLANDA" (HAIYAN)

November 7, 2013

10:00 pm

Yolanda, the Super Typhoon is heading our way. It should be here in full force tomorrow morning or early afternoon. It is recorded to be the largest typhoon on Earth

this year. At first I wasn't worried. The Philippines gets hit with multiple typhoons every year, and you get used to it. These storms usually die down and reduce in size once they have made their initial landfall, but the size and speed of this storm looks a little daunting. Last year, the world's biggest typhoon was smaller in size and speed and still killed almost 2,000 Filipinos. Hopefully we are more prepared as a country this time.

11:00 pm

I woke up to an eerie silence, about 10 minutes later the heavy storming started. I'm not sure why, but I am really nervous all of the sudden. Maybe my senses are heightened because it has been on the news constantly the past few days. I'm not sure what part of my feelings are real or just on high alert from all of the exposure. I will take a few breaths and try to relax. I'm sure everything will be fine, it's not supposed to hit until tomorrow afternoon anyways. I want to reach out to my mom, but I can never figure out how to get a hold of her with my phone.

November 8, 2013

12:23 am

I just spoke with my mom and I feel much better. I needed to express how concerned and affected I am by all of the natural disasters in this beautiful country. It is hard to hear about disasters every week and month from typhoons, earthquakes, tornados, flash flooding and mud slides that happen monthly or sometimes weekly. Usually, I do not struggle with coping with the news. I guess we all have a threshold. I feel a loss of control. The reality is I am not in control, I am afraid of the storm.

8:32 am

The storm has started to pick up and the sound of the wind is deafening. Watching

the rain, flying debris, falling trees and fruit is absolutely terrifying. Parts of our house sound like they are shaking loose but only our roof is leaking.

10:00 am

It sounds like the world is ending outside! Super Typhoon Yolanda is at her most destructive point. Trees are falling and houses are being blown away. Our neighbor's house just lost its roof and the bamboo wall was blown into the house. We have stopped talking to each other because we have to scream to be heard.

12:31 pm

Good news: the worst of the storm has passed. Bad news: there is so much damage. The wind and rain are still bad, but nothing compared to what they were an hour ago. It was so hard to watch houses literally fall apart right before my eyes. Gaping holes were ripped into walls, roofs were flying off, and trees were collapsing onto power lines. There was nothing we could do except sit, watch, hope and pray. Most of the coastal region of our city was evacuated before and during the strongest part of the storm. I am not looking forward to seeing all of the damage that has been done to the houses right along the coast. I was so worried about my friends and coworkers who live in unstable shelters. I was texting one of my coworkers the whole time checking on her and her kids. Their house is completely demolished but luckily they were able to transfer to their neighbor's house before it collapsed.

I am so lucky to have the support of my family here and in America. My mom and dad called multiple times checking in on me before the cell coverage went out. They both have many people praying for this country and me. I really hope there is something I can do to help with the repairs that will have to be made after all of this is over.

Everything is flat, except for the well-made concrete houses. Everything else is damaged to some degree.

Right now we don't have power, water or cell phone coverage; there is no way to know when they will become available again. This is worrisome since I have no way to communicate with others including family, friends and Peace Corps staff. The wind is getting bad again. Luckily I am in a safe place. Some of the neighbors have joined us since a tree demolished three houses near by and took down their homes. My whole body hurts from being so anxious for the past twelve or more hours. I can't wait to recuperate mentally and physically when this is over. I never imagined I would be experiencing something like this.

1:06 pm

The wind and rain are still very heavy. I just peeked outside to see a young boy dragging a piece of scrap metal down the road towards what used to be his house. The metal looked like a section of a roof. The boy was walking against the wind with the rain hitting his face relentlessly. I asked my host sister what he was doing. She replied, "maybe he needs that to build his house back up." Behind him were four adults running down the road with bread, rice, and water. They were bringing it to their friends and family members who are staying with them in their house since their houses were also ruined. Watching this seemed surreal.

My family and I are going to try and take a nap as usual after lunch. I'm not sure I can sleep since I still have a lot of adrenaline running through my veins. My body hurts. My ears are popping. My skin is so sensitive. I'm not sure if this is because of my nerves, the low pressure and weather, or if I am coming down with something. Maybe

I'll try some yoga to calm my nervous and achy body.

5:19 pm

It's over! No more rain and the frogs and birds are chirping, meaning Yolanda has passed. Around 3 pm it was safe enough for us to walk around the neighborhood and assess the damage. There were trees down everywhere, power lines tangled, trash and leaves blown all over the place, broken windows, glass, signs and houses. I am amazed at how many trees simply snapped in half or uprooted during the storm. The winds sounded scary from inside the house and the damage around town shows how strong it really was. Walking around town attempting to buy bread and noodles was sobering but good for me to experience. We ran into a couple of my friends helping on the rescue team. They were all very friendly and had big smiles on their faces; this is something I love about this culture. No matter what is happening, people are smiling and making jokes.

We stopped by City Hall and it was a complete mess. Glass was shattered everywhere and the floors were soaked with water from the storm. Luckily the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) workers were around collecting relief goods that will be distributed around the city for those in need. When we visited our relative's house, the kids were asleep. They had some roof and window damage and the wind demolished everything around their house. Everything was flat except their concrete walls. I had forgotten how loud wind and rain are on a tin roof.

6:22 pm

It is so quiet now. There is nothing left to do except sleep early tonight. The weather is cool and the earth is calm again.

November 9, 2013

7:00 pm

Today I took the bus to the capital city on our island. I really needed that time to recuperate and get in touch with my family. I cried the first time I spoke with my mom on the phone this afternoon. I was so relieved and happy to hear her voice. After a day to myself I have been able to reflect a little on the events before and after the storm and I feel much better. I spoke with Peace Corps staff and they were extremely supportive.

November 10, 2013

4:13 pm

Today Peace Corps consolidated all of the volunteers in the region to the capital city on the island. Many other volunteers were evacuated to the country's capital. The volunteers who were consolidated in Tacloban had to be airlifted out by the Philippine Air Force. Tacloban was the first place Yolanda made landfall and experienced the most damage. The things these volunteers and community members witnessed there were truly horrific. I feel fortunate that I did not have to face what they did during and after the storm. We just got news a few days ago that volunteers evacuated to Manila will be administratively separated back to America for the next 45 days until Peace Corps can find them new site placements. As of now, we are still consolidated in the island capital, but Peace Corps is sending staff to reevaluate our communities, so hopefully we can return soon.

## VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

November 14, 2013

It has been a little over a week now since the typhoon. The past four days I have been living, eating and breathing relief work. It is the first time in my life that I have experienced this type of devastation. It is the most tiring, dirty and rewarding work I have ever done. I have been traveling back and forth between the island capital and Summerville everyday. This is a 2-4 hour trip one-way.

The first day I worked with Susie, my counterpart, to survey the damage done in a costal barangay in my city. The amount of damage was overwhelming. There were countless houses completely destroyed because of fallen power lines, trees and debris. The families helped us find our way through the mess and introduced us to some of the families in the most need of financial support. We took pictures with each of them so that we could identify them when we came back with some relief goods that are coming Saturday. I was really impressed with Susie and the families that helped show us who was in the most need. This really is a grassroots effort. I could never do this on my own and I am so thankful for the coworkers and community members that are pitching in to help their friends, neighbors and community members. We also visited the local store and decided how we were going to budget our spending efforts. I never realized how much time and effort it takes to get a feeding program up and running.

The next day we bought and packaged the goods to be distributed to our students and community members living near the coast. Buying materials in bulk in this heat is truly exhausting. My host dad assisted us in bringing all of the goods to our house. My coworkers and host family helped pack up the care packages that were delivered the next

day. I was so happy to see everyone pitch in without me even asking; even the kids were getting involved.

The next day we delivered our packages and facilitated games and a feeding program with the children. Thankfully my host dad let us use his car again and his son (the Mayor's security guard) drove us around for the day. We successfully delivered packages to needy community members- this was so rewarding. Even though we had to trek through sugar cane fields, mud, sand and rubble, it was all worth it. I saw houses that were completely ripped in half, but when the recipients got their packages they were so thankful. I keep going back and forth between feeling really happy and really sad.

When we started delivering the packages in the community a pack of kids slowly started accumulating and going house to house with us. They were so excited to be a part of the effort and start the games later that afternoon. The smiles on the families' faces when they received their goods was absolutely priceless - especially compared to the way they looked just a few days before. Maybe they did not know if I would actually return with relief goods like we promised. After we delivered all of the packages, we took a break at the house of a family friend. There she cooked us lunch from the food we had just delivered to her house in the relief package. I am forever grateful for the hospitality of the Filipino people; however, I felt bad for eating the food we had just donated to her family. One of my coworkers quickly reminded me that to refuse an offer is an insult, so I ate with the rest of my coworkers. I think it was her way of thanking us for our effort.

After our quick snack, we moved forward with the games and feeding for the kids in the community. The kids were so adorable and excited while playing our games; I absolutely loved this precious time with them. We provided prizes for the participants;



their enthusiasm and creativity during these games was so inspiring. After the games, we gave a hot meal to the kids and their families. It felt good to see them smile and eat a full meal. Sometimes I forget that most of these kids are malnourished and that having a full meal is a true blessing. I was so tired when it was all over.

November 17, 2013

Today, I visited one of our island barangays with Susie and her sister who works in coordination with the Marine Reserve. We walked around the island to observe the damage and talk with the president of the fishery association in our city. He introduced us to the families in most need - those with the most ruined houses and destroyed boats. Today I really started taking in the destruction. It is the first time I started to feel that I might have hit my limit. I need to take a break and a day to myself. I do not think I am getting enough sleep and my emotions are starting to be affected. I am considering meeting with the trauma specialist in Manila. I am feeling a little more anxious than normal and think it would be beneficial to get some advice on how to manage my own emotions while helping on the ground with relief efforts. Part of me wants to sell all of my belongings back in America and donate everything to people in need. I am also angry that something like this can happen to such genuinely kind people. At the same time I am overwhelmed with love and gratitude for all of the support we, as a community, are receiving from everyone here and abroad.

I am really shocked and thankful for all of the kind words I am receiving from my community members, family, friends, past teachers and family friends. I had no idea this many people truly cared about me and my well being. It is so nice and I really need to take more time to take all of that love and energy in. I also need to take more time in to

focus on the positive things as well as the humor that is surrounding this whole situation. One of my favorite moments is when I was riding a bus down the highway. I was taking in all of the damage and then all of the sudden I saw a house with huge stuffed animals sitting on top of their roof. This image was so beautiful, cute and funny to me. Since many people do not have the nails to hold down their roofs, they put heavy things on top of it to hold it down. What a beautifully creative solution.

I also really appreciated a moment today when we were walking around the island and someone had found a way to blast their dance music through the use of a generator. Susie and I looked at each other simultaneously and started laughing. Even during times of destruction and devastation, Summerville still knows how to have a good time. I have also enjoyed the jokes Filipinos have used to lighten the mood. Today one man told me he was happy just to take a picture with me even if I could not give them any relief goods yelling out “Joke!” and giving me a high five in return. This made me laugh and smile. I really need to incorporate more humor and lighthearted fun into my personal perspective. Self-care is also important, especially during times of high stress and demanding work. I need to remind myself that I cannot solve everything and that every small act goes a long way.

I am also worried about stepping on people’s toes, especially my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers who also live in the surrounding areas. In the past there has been some jealousy and I am concerned that they are feeling left out of the relief efforts. I mentioned earlier in the week that I wanted to coordinate but no one followed up with the suggestion so I went ahead on my own. They have asked to meet with me tomorrow before a second meeting with Peace Corps staff members. I am curious as to what they

want to talk about. I'm not really sure how I should go about including them but I really need to give it more effort.

November 18, 2013

Two of my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers confronted me about the work I was doing in Summerville. They were mad that I had not included them in my relief efforts. They said community members have been asking them why they were not doing relief work on their own, comparing them to me. I feel angry and hurt. When they began verbally accusing me, I could not hold back the tears because I had not taken a moment to cry and release the emotions I had been feeling since seeing all the damage. Although my own house and belongings were not destroyed by the storm, seeing and talking with families who have lost everything has started affecting me. Maybe it is survival's guilt. I also think my emotions are exacerbated by the fact that I am exhausted from traveling back and forth every day between the capital city and our town in order to get a feeding program established in our city.

November 20, 2013

I am finally back in Summerville with my host family! I cannot express how happy I am to be back home. Today I delivered relief packages to my students at the vocational school I teach in. As soon as I returned home everyone started smiling and saying welcome back. It felt so good to be reunited and living again with my family. I really need to be around supportive, loving people right now. It was also wonderful to practice yoga in the peace and quiet of my own room while playing with my host sisters.

Today I spoke with the trauma specialist via telephone through the Peace Corps Office. It made me feel better to hear an outsider's opinion on everything. She provided

me with resources I could use to help with stress. I think resuming my routine and being back in Summerville is going to improve my emotional state, morale and energy level.

My meeting with Heart Anonymous, a religious organization wanting to provide relief goods, also went well yesterday. If all goes as planned, they will be delivering goods with us on Saturday on an island barangay we surveyed a few days ago. They will be matching the seventy packages we will be delivering - doubling the number of recipients on the island! We have a meeting tomorrow with our Department of Social Welfare and Development head; hopefully she will provide transportation to and from the island. I think there is some resistance on her part since we are providing more help in some cases than the local government. I am amazed at the politics involved in relief work.

November 21, 2013

Today we completed the delivery of relief packages to the rest of our students and started planning for our next event on Saturday. When the SMR staff came over to our center they began gossiping about a fellow Peace Corps Volunteer and his counterpart. I felt uncomfortable, but things started making more sense in terms of the confrontation between he and I earlier regarding the relief efforts. I am not sure how to address these issues and I do not want to get in the middle of anything that could be hurtful. I want for everything to be cordial - especially since we are working for the same cause. Tomorrow my coworkers and I will buy and package all of the goods for the next round of delivery.

November 23, 2013

Yesterday we bought and packaged all of the relief goods we delivered today. As usual, this took much longer than expected. Since none of the ATMs were working in

my city, we had to travel to the neighboring city to withdraw money. Next, we went to buy the materials for the crab cage we are donating to the fisherman. Unfortunately, the stores did not have most of the materials that were on the list. Then we proceeded to buy the rice and food goods. We ran into the same problem when buying the food and had to make adjustments accordingly.

After we packaged all of the goods, we delivered packages to close friends in a small barangay. It was extremely dark since there is still no power in that area. I loved the adventure. We had to trek through rough roads, swamps, sugar cane fields and mud to get to their houses. I almost fell many times - it was hilarious. When we finally finished delivering the packages we went to start the car but the battery was dead. Instead of finding someone to help jump us off, the ladies and I pushed the car while the driver tried to start it. Surprisingly, it worked!

The next day, we woke up early to get started. As usual, Susie was late. When we finally got to the port, it was raining and we discovered that there were other organizations giving relief items to the same island at the same time. I also met an American woman whose family is from the Philippines. She was donating lots of money to boat repairs on the island. She is interested in partnering with us in the future. It was hard to speak English so fast. Once we arrived, we had to wade through knee-deep water to reach the island.

One thing I was not prepared for was competing with other groups who were also giving to the area at the same time. I experienced feelings of ownership, frustration and jealousy. It was very difficult to manage all of the people and give simultaneously. Chaos would describe it perfectly. Many of the managers of the other organizations were

very rude to us when they found out we were also giving. There are many egos involved in this work. I hate to say it, and I am embarrassed to admit it, but I sometimes lose sight of why I am doing this.

All in all, our giving went well and the kids and families had a lot of fun. One of the things that set our feeding program apart from the others is our focus on the children. We provide games and food just for them after we have delivered the packages to their families. They really enjoy it and it does my heart good to see them enjoying themselves.

After we were finished with our giving, we ate lunch and rested for a bit while we waited for Heart Anonymous to arrive. It was very frustrating trying to coordinate with them since there was an extreme lack of communication. When they arrived, we helped them deliver their goods. They were very unorganized with their giving and had a lot of left over goods. When they left, they gave us permission to organize and distribute the rest of the materials. We worked with the local fishermen to move and deliver the rest of the packages. I really enjoyed working with them. At the end of our time on the island I did not want to leave; I had feelings of never wanting to leave the Philippines. Sometimes I experience waves of euphoria - I'm not sure why. Tomorrow I am going to another coastal barangay to survey for our next food-feeding event.

This evening, one of my coworkers stopped by with her two kids. I was so happy to see them. One thing I can say about all of this is that I am feeling more like a community member and not as much of an outsider. All of the surveying and giving has made me reach out to others that I never would have met otherwise. Although the typhoon caused so much damage, the aftermath of giving and socializing has been a true blessing for me.

November 24, 2013

7:00 pm

Today we went to a very small island barangay to survey damaged houses. We had to take a motorized boat to get there. We rode through the mangroves through a river that connects to the ocean. The ride was quick and beautiful. The small village was very rural with a few families of rice and fish farmers. We began by meeting with a Barangay Health Worker (BHW) and some of the families whose houses were totally and partially damaged. We explained why we were there and that we planned to deliver relief goods the following Saturday. They were happy that we were visiting them and planned to bring relief goods, but they were even happier when Susie told them I wanted to ride a Caribou (water buffalo). After our meeting, we ate fresh coconut with milk and they promptly prepared my Caribou ride. I rode around the area on a cart attached to the back of the Caribou while the whole town and their children watched me. It was a fun and bumpy ride. When we were finished, all of the kids hopped on and rode the Caribou with me.

After the Caribou ride, we began surveying houses. In the past, all of the houses have been relatively close together so it was not hard for us to make our way to everyone. However, this trip the houses were spread out amongst the rice fields. I was not prepared to be trekking through the high grass, water and rice fields to meet these families. Soon after we began our journey, I began to itch all over because of the high foliage and all of the mosquitos. When we made our way to the first few houses it was clear these people were struggling to survive before the Typhoon and even more so after. After walking for about an hour through the rice field under the scorching sun, I started to get irritated. I

did not understand why we were going all this way just to take pictures of families when we already had a list of people we would be delivering to on Saturday. Susie patiently reminded me that we were doing this to see and experience first hand the lives of the people we intended to help. After wandering through the grass, rice fields and different pathways, we finally stopped.

When we took our short break, I realized all of the sudden that I was not feeling well. I was weak, hot, tired, dizzy and confused. I did not want to say anything because I was embarrassed. Here I was trying to help people, and I did not want to ask for help myself. Thankfully, I was with a group of women who were able to take care of me. They fed me and gave me water and reassured me that everything was okay, although their faces were not telling the same story.

I began to panic because I could not imagine being able to make it back to the boat. We had traveled so far and I had no energy and a very limited supply of water. It was the middle of the day and we did not have a lot of shade. All of the Filipino women I was traveling with did their best to make me feel better and keep my spirits up. Once I began feeling less confused and more aware of my surroundings, they started making jokes, which really helped. The joking put things in perspective and made me smile with tears streaming down my face. I kept saying I was sorry and they kept reassuring me they were happy that I was trying so hard to help. They said no one had ever done what I was doing there before. On our 2-hour walk back to the boat, I draped myself with scarves and protected my skin with an umbrella. Once we returned, we ate native fish with freshly shucked rice. Luckily, the boat ride back home was quick and it was easy to catch a ride back to the city proper.



When I returned home my family could tell I was tired. I showered, rested, ate and now I am resting again. My host dad said a special prayer for me during dinner and he encouraged me to eat a lot so I could replenish my body after many days of hard work. They even fed me special shells to provide me with extra calcium. I am still feeling extremely tired and anxious but there is so much to be done and I really want to help however I can.

November 25, 2013

1:00 am

We are having another brownout in the middle of the night, meaning there is no electricity to run my electric fan. This is really bad timing because I am running a high fever and need to rest. I think this is all from the extreme exposure to the heat today. All I want to do is rest my body and mind but I cannot do either. I am truly at a loss. My anxiety is high and my body is weak. I know I can and will get through this, but right now I am really struggling. I do not understand how just yesterday I felt like I could live here forever, and now all I want to do is escape. I have taken medicine to help with the fever and now I am wrapping my body in a cool, wet blanket to bring my body temperature down. I've never been so uncomfortable in my whole life.

November 26, 2013

I am trying to find creative outlets to express some of my experiences I have not been able to fully feel or process; I feel so many things have been repressed. When I look back on the past few weeks, it appears as a blurry dream. I just flipped through some of my pictures immediately following the storm and it was as if I was seeing them for the first time. I feel removed from the photos. I feel I can truly see them now, like the lens

has been washed and waxed. I hope for clarity as my body recovers, begins to heal itself and puts things in perspective.

Strength

This is not my weakness, this is my strength.

I am who I am.

I am my being, my body, my brain.

I will navigate this river and use it to benefit myself and others in the process.

The wave of guilt and shame washes over me like a tidal wave,

But I will not break because I can swim.

I can use my body and my breath to save my mind.

This is not my weakness, this is my strength.

I will use the energy pumping through my veins to love myself more,

This is my inspiration, it is my pleasure, welcome home faithful one,

I am a trailblazer and a woman of power, love, and tranquility.

All because I have you, my soul, my everything.

You bring color to my world and passion beyond belief.

I did not have the words until now,

Thank you for providing me with such strong willpower and awareness.

I am forever grateful for your presence.

This is not my weakness, this is my strength.

November 27, 2013

Today a religious organization came to visit one of our coastal barangays to host relief efforts. They were giving away nice packages and money donations to families.

However, good intentions turned ugly. According to some community members, the giving was not focused on the families in most need. Some people whose houses were not severely damaged were receiving the goods and money while those in much need were getting nothing. It seems there can be a huge lack of fairness when distributing relief goods. There are a lot of politics that go on behind the scenes, which impacts which families receive assistance. For example, the politicians compiling the lists of families that need relief have the power to choose who receives help. In most situations they are likely to choose people they know, family members, and in some cases people who vote for them. Some of this is cultural, and some of it points to the corruption of the local government.

My coworkers, who all work for the local government, have not been paid their salary in months because of the recent election and the storm. The mayor has also announced there will be no Christmas Party (a really big deal in the Philippines) or Christmas bonus this year because they donated the money to Tacloban typhoon victims. This angers many since we have thousands of families in our community suffering from damaged infrastructure and livelihood projects. There is also no way to know if the money from these funds will actually be donated to those in need. I have asked why this is allowed to happen and everyone responds by telling me that the same family holds all of the important government positions in our providence so there is no one to complain to since they run everything. In other words, government accountability is limited or nonexistent. They are also afraid to voice their concerns as government workers because if those in power find out, they will not renew their work contract for the following year.

There is also a lot of international attention focused on corruption associated with

the relief efforts here in the Philippines. Billions of dollars have been donated to local agencies and the national government, but many Filipinos say they cannot feel or see the money. We want to know where this money is going. Susie explained it to me this way: one billion dollars is given to the president- and what is left of that is given to the mayor, what is left of that is given to the barangay captain, what is left of that is given to the barangay health workers. She insinuated that people take relief money and goods from each level until very little is left for the people in need.

Another issue I have been running into is ego and the branding of our efforts. The department head of our vocational school wants our school chapter name on a banner and printed t-shirts so the recipients know where the aid is coming from. This is a common problem throughout the cities where relief efforts are high. Everyone wants to look like the hero. Sometimes it feels like instead of focusing on helping the people and spending money where it would benefit people the most is overlooked, while more attention is focused on getting recognition.

November 29, 2013

Last night the vocational center where I work was broken into. Susie thinks someone was looking for the food goods we were distributing. When I asked my counterpart why they would do that she replied, "Maybe they were hungry." The simplicity of the answer humbled me. So many families were still without food.

Tomorrow is our last round of relief giving. We want to make the event special for our community so I will be performing a song in the local dialect called "Hawak Kamay." This means walking hand in hand. I feel nervous about performing, but I love the message of the song and want the relief recipients to know we are not just distributing

food, we are sharing our hearts and want to support them in any way we can.

November 30, 2013

Our last relief program was a huge success. We distributed goods at two separate neighborhoods, which made for a very long day. The community members in these two locations were the most far removed from the city proper and had not received any assistance from the local government or international aid agencies because they are remote and hard to reach. We invited one of my fellow Peace Corps volunteers in the relief giving early on to the events today. He enjoyed being included and kept reiterating how sorry he was for accusing me of excluding him from the process immediately following the storm. He also kept saying how amazed he was at how much work our team had accomplished. He was exhausted after just one day of relief work. At the end of our program I sang and we all cried. I am so thankful for this opportunity; now it is time to rest.

## LEAVING

December 4, 2013

After our last activity, I hit an emotional wall and fell into a deep hole. I think my mind and body have had enough. Today I traveled to the capital city on our island, but I cannot sleep and I do not want to eat. When I do eat, I cannot taste my food. I have tried pampering myself with massages but I cannot even enjoy the experience. I feel scared because the things that usually bring me so much joy are not helping me cope with the stress and fatigue. The one thing that has helped is watching movies because I can escape from my own reality. I contacted Peace Corps' medical staff to request a therapy session in Manila. They scheduled an appointment for me and I fly out tomorrow.

December 5, 2013

I am currently in Manila and had my first appointment with the therapist this afternoon. The cab ride took one hour one-way and was very stressful. I do not feel like myself and I desperately want to. I also visited the main Peace Corps office today and we scheduled a couple therapy appointments for the next few weeks. I am only allowed four appointments and I am limited in terms of how long I am allowed to stay in Manila before I am either medically separated from my service or must return to Summerville. The thought of moving back, surrounded by destruction, is overwhelming and I do not think I can do it.

December 6, 2013

I cannot make myself get out of bed. I have lost the will to live. I feel scared and lonely.

December 9, 2013

I have attended two of my therapy sessions and feel pressure to make progress. I have friends who have come to visit me but nothing seems to be lifting my spirits. I cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel.

December 15, 2013

I am beginning to feel a little more like myself and think it is time to try to return to my community. I am tired of spending all day alone in a huge, polluted city. Manila is a very stressful place to be and I do not think it is helping to be surrounded by loud noises and extreme poverty when I am trying to recover physically and mentally from my own trauma.

December 16, 2013

Tomorrow I return to my community. I am nervous but hopeful.

## RETURN

December 17, 2013

Today I returned home to Summerville. It is nice to be back but I am still struggling. Many of my coworkers and family thought I might never return. Regular classes at school have not yet resumed since the buildings are still damaged. Hopefully we will be able to open the vocational school where I work again soon and resume classes. I am craving a sense of normalcy.

December 19, 2013

The holidays are getting closer and my family will be visiting me in just a few days. I am excited to see them but a little stressed about welcoming them to my community when things are still in flux. I think it will be a good experience to see the reality of the situation, but I also do not want my community to feel they have to go above and beyond to accommodate them given the situation. I also have a New Years trip planned with some of my closest Peace Corps friends, which I am looking forward to most. I think having leisurely time away with people who can understand what I am dealing with is the best answer for me right now. My family back in the States and my Filipino family I am living with have both been extremely supportive, but it is hard for either one of them to directly relate to how I am feeling.

January 2, 2014

Today marks the last day of my vacation. The past two weeks have been full of fun and adventure. My mom's visit was mostly stressful, but the trip with my fellow Peace

Corps volunteers was just what I needed to repair and replenish my energy. We spent most of our time on the beach, playing in the waves and trying to surf. The culture in this area was relaxing, playful and full of soul. Being with good people, staying active, eating delicious food, soaking up the sun, and sleeping outdoors was the perfect medicine.

Overall, the wonderful people I am surrounded by humble me. I have been going through such a difficult time since the storm and the holidays. This time with my friends and family has reminded me how lucky and fortunate I am to be doing what I am doing at this point in my life. I am going to work hard at embracing a mind of gratitude and focusing on the present. So far the universe has done a good job at looking out for me and surrounding me with loving people to get me through this difficult time. I am forever grateful and I am looking forward to what the New Year has in store for my loved ones and me.

March 5, 2014

I just spent the last week helping organize a music and arts festival. This was the first time I have been able to fully and completely enjoy myself and not feel sadness or anxiety about the storm for a consecutive string of days. I feel totally rejuvenated. During the festival, I spent all of my time outside working hand in hand with local and international artists, musicians and media figures. The festival was on top of a beautiful mountain on a small indigenous island. The view of the neighboring islands and ocean was breathtaking. The festival highlighted the handicrafts and lifestyle of the indigenous people while bringing national and international musicians and visual artists to the stage. There was so much creative energy and love there. Humans just want to sing, dance and be with each other. I feel extremely lucky and back to my truest self.



June 5, 2015

It has been almost a year and a half since this journey began. It's hard to believe that I am finally able to put everything down on paper and share it with others publicly. I feel extremely vulnerable and worried that I am not telling my story in a way that readers can truly picture, feel and understand. On the other hand, I feel relief. Relief that I am finally able to reflect back on the countless stories and experiences I shared with my community members. During this process, there were times I burst into tears and sometimes laughter, reliving our experiences together. It has taken many months of reading and rereading my journal entries as well as flipping through old pictures and videos to decide what to include in this manuscript. Originally, my hope was to share my story with others in order raise awareness about some of the challenges associated with natural disasters and relief work. Now I feel this process has been more therapeutic for me personally above all else - for that I am eternally grateful.

## REFLECTIONS

After some reflection, I can identify six distinct phases of my typhoon experience. The first three phases lead up to and end with the food-feeding program, while the last three describe my recovery and healing process. The first distinct phase was the *build-up prior to the storm* by the media and local government agencies. While there was minimal preparation leading up to the storm, there was a lot of discussion around when and where it was going to make landfall. The second phase was my *personal experience and observations when the typhoon made landfall in our city*. This period was distinguished by my shock and first-time exposure of a major natural disaster in a foreign country. This was a life-changing event that has forever changed the lens through which I view the

world. The third phase is marked by my *instinctual response to help rebuild my community at all costs*. During this time I felt super-human in terms of how much time and energy I was willing to dedicate to building and implementing a citywide food-feeding program.

The second grouping of phases begins with the fourth, which crept in slowly, then peaked into an unforgettable *experience of extreme anxiety and depression*, which was later diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This is common for individuals who have gone through natural disasters and has marked the lowest point in my life. The fifth phase was my *recovery period following my time away from my community*. This phase includes the slow reintegration of myself back into my community after I left to see a therapist in Manila and ended with my experience at the Malasimbo Music and Arts festival where I was able to have consecutive days free of worry and concern. The final phase has been my *long-term recovery and healing from the events associated with the storm*. The telling and retelling of my personal story has been invaluable to the healing process; the act of writing and sharing this piece is also included in this phase.

When comparing my volunteer experience with those described in the sociological literature, I find many similarities with a few points of difference. My initial motivation to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer falls in line with Flanagan et al's (1999) assertions that many volunteer to improve communities, aide those in need, and to serve their country. These remain true for my volunteer service following the storm with an emphasis on helping those in most need following the disaster. I could also relate to the exchange theory of volunteering because I often weighed the cost and benefits of my relief work as a volunteer. I was constantly battling the will to move forward with the

work, despite my declining energy and health. Because I had such valuable social ties to the people I was serving, my desire to help outweighed my desire to take time to care for myself.

The concept of commitment to the volunteer role also correlated with my experience, which relates to what Snyder and Omoto (1992) asserted when they explain individuals volunteering for personal development reasons were more likely to stay and not drop out of their role when compared to individuals who volunteer based on their personal values. I chose to continue volunteering after I was burnt-out because I cared about my work, but also because I wanted to prove to myself that I could and I knew I would gain value from the work in the future. My commitment level was also solidified by the support of my friends and family back in the States, which correlates with high commitment from volunteers according to Snyder et al (1999).

Wilson (2000) also discusses the positive effects volunteering can have on one's mental health. While my experience recognizes the positive aspects volunteering has had on my personal outlook and lived experience, I also experienced the negative components volunteering can impart on one's health, especially in the context of extremely challenging circumstances following natural disasters. Durkheim (1951) discusses the role anomie can play in the mental health of individuals through the collective conscience or social order. Durkheim (1951) asserts when there is a disturbance in the collective order due to sudden growth or unexpected catastrophe, an increase in the likelihood of voluntary death, or suicide, occurs. He goes so far to say that, "no living thing can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means" (Durkheim 1951). Following Typhoon Yolanda, I felt uprooted from friends, family and

normal routines because of the destruction of my physical environment. What had originally been easy for me to achieve in my daily routine was no longer easy to access - i.e. food, water, shelter, adequate rest, and social support from fellow volunteers. Prior to the storm, the norms of inclusion were different. Navigating those relationships during a time of normlessness was extremely challenging and spurred feelings of hopelessness and isolation from my Peace Corps community. Conversely, putting forth effort to help families in need ultimately allowed me to feel more integrated and a part of the community as a whole.

In response to analyzing my own experiences, I would like to propose a call for more qualitative research, specifically autoethnography, to explore social experiences on a deeper, more individualized level. I believe personal narratives can and should be used to analyze the impact natural disasters or unexpected events have on communities, individuals, and individuals' perception of their community members and systems. While I have provided my own perspective on the events leading up to and following Typhoon Haiyan, it would be valuable to understand the local perspective of native Filipinos to understand their stories and compare their narratives to an outsider's perspective like my own. This type of research could be used to better prepare future volunteers serving in the Philippines or other natural disaster stricken areas. I would also like to see more research exploring the way in which organizations often times compete for their roles in relief efforts as well as reveal the disastrous consequences the lack of social connections or capital can have on the receiving of relief goods and services. These were two surprising points of contention in my research which need to be investigated in future disaster research to maintain equity in the process of relief efforts

following unexpected natural disasters.

## EPILOGUE

This is the time and the place you are supposed to be.

There is no other way, other than this way.

It's a lonely dark place.

It's a blissful warm place.

Hold on and embrace the energy,

The good, the bad, the heavy, the light.

It all means something.

Everything is everything.

Put your hands up, and your head down.

She will fill you, with her warm light.

Take it in,

Breathe it in.

Hold on,

It all passes too fast.

## CHAPTER II

### PEACE CORPS MANUAL: COPING WITH NATURAL DISASTERS

#### Introduction

The first chapter of this research project discussed my personal experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer living through a natural disaster that changed the course of my volunteer experience. This manual is designed to help current Peace Corps Volunteers living in the Philippines deal with natural disasters that may occur during their volunteer service. It is a compilation of what I believe to be the most useful information for future and current volunteers who may encounter natural disasters serving as a volunteer in the Philippines.

The manual is broken down into five sections:

1. Natural Disasters in the Philippines
2. How Natural Disasters Impact Your Peace Corps Service
3. Common Cultural Responses
4. How to Help Yourself and Your Community
5. Peace Corps' Administrative Role and Protocol

Each section highlights my personal experience and provides useful information for current and future volunteers. I hope this manual will be a valuable volunteer resource to prepare volunteers and ease feelings of stress that may arise when experiencing natural disasters, especially as a foreigner without the direct support of family and friends back home in the States. There was little to no discussion about self-care strategies that could

be implemented during and after natural disasters during my volunteer training. My hope is for this manual to be available to volunteers prior to their Peace Corp service to better prepare them with coping strategies in the case of natural disasters.

### Common Natural Disasters In The Philippines

During my volunteer service I experienced multiple typhoons (tropical cyclones), earthquakes, floods and periods of volcanic activity. My first experience was with flooding, but my most impactful experience was with typhoons, specifically Typhoon “Yolanda” (Haiyan), the strongest typhoon to make landfall in recorded history. I experienced multiple mild earthquakes and one severe earthquake. There were multiple periods of volcanic activity during my service, none of them directly impacting my community.

**Typhoons:** On average, 19 typhoons enter the Philippine Area of Responsibility annually (ESCAP/WMO, 2009). Typhoons are similar to hurricanes and cause the most damage with winds and flooding. Typhoons can result in storm surges, infrastructural destruction, loss of livelihood and displacement. After living in the Philippines for a couple of months, you may become accustomed to hearing about and experiencing typhoons; however, it is important to be aware of when and where the storms are expected to land because the strength of the storm can change at any time. With the warming of the ocean temperatures, typhoons are becoming more frequent and stronger than ever before.

**Earthquakes:** The Philippines is located along the Pacific Ring of Fire, causing the country to have frequent volcanic activity. As a result, there are high numbers of earthquakes due to the collision of major tectonic plates in the region. I was able to feel

the effects of multiple earthquakes during my service. My community was never severely affected by earthquakes when I lived there but I had co-volunteers who were directly impacted by damage as a result of one of the major earthquakes in the region. Hearing their stories and supporting them through their struggles was an important part of peer-to-peer volunteer support that is invaluable throughout service.

Floods: Floods are extremely common in the Philippines, partially because of the tropical climate and partially because of underdeveloped water management systems, especially in large cities. My first experience with natural disasters was with the flood that occurred during my Pre-Service Training (PST). I lived in a very rural barangay with a family who lived alongside a river. About two months into the training we experienced a strong typhoon that flooded the small rivers flowing through our barangay. Since we lived directly beside one of the rivers, our family's house became flooded and our rice fields were partially damaged by the storm. During this time I was temporarily evacuated from my host family's house and was placed in a nearby hotel with other volunteers in similar living situations. I experienced minor flooding throughout my service, but this was my first time experiencing a natural disaster in another country while living in a culture and family different than my own.

#### How Natural Disasters Might Impact Your Peace Corps Service

It is inevitable that your living and work conditions will be impacted by the frequent natural disasters in the county. The impact will depend on the nature of your assignment. If you are working with coastal resource management projects, natural disasters might put projects on hold or completely change your project plan or work schedule. If you are working as an educator in a school, you may miss many days of



class and your class schedule and teaching opportunities will vary accordingly.

Natural disasters can also create new opportunities for community work and outreach. While my experience with Typhoon Yolanda was extremely challenging and completely changed the trajectory of my work and living conditions, it was the primary facilitator of uniting myself with my coworkers, host family, and students. Having the shared experience of surviving a storm of a lifetime created a bond that was not previously there. Since Typhoon Yolanda caught the attention of the world, I received support from friends, family and strangers that I would not have received prior to the disaster. The Typhoon put the Philippines on the map for many who had never heard of or thought about the country or its people before. Perspective is also very important; times of natural disaster can be extremely challenging. Taking time for yourself and maintaining a positive attitude will be key to your own happiness and wellbeing.

#### Common Cultural Responses

Before my Peace Corps service I did not have exposure to natural disasters, especially not while living in a foreign country. Living in a foreign country presents challenges of its own in terms of culture and language. Adding the additional challenge of coping with while still navigating a culture that is different than your own can be stressful and confusing. Since Filipino people are very used to natural disasters, they have a very unique way of dealing with the trauma and the uprooting that can result from these situations. Here, we will discuss four primary aspects of the Filipino culture that will help you understand where your fellow community members are coming from and prepare you for your own appropriate response to tense situations.

**Humor:** It is very common for Filipinos to combat stressful situations through

humor. This is not only used in situations associated with natural disasters, it is used in any and every stressful or uncomfortable situation to help ease stress, tension, and fear. When I first moved to the Philippines I thought the timing of jokes dealing with highly stressful situations was inappropriate. With time I grew to appreciate this aspect of their culture and have adopted the practice of using humor to lighten the mood in stressful situations.

Religion: As with many cultures, religion can be used as a way to explain situations - disastrous or not. The majority of the Philippines are identified as Catholic. In the context of natural disasters, religion plays a large role. When speaking with community members about what caused the disasters, God or a higher power was often accredited. They also believed their higher power would be the one to deliver them from their hardship that came as a result of the destruction. Having the ability to be open to their belief system is of utmost importance, especially in times of disaster. Respecting their views and incorporating their beliefs and practices is integral to the success of relationships and possible programs you may want to start in your community in general and especially those in response to natural disasters.

Helping 'known' others: When planning and implementing disaster relief projects in my community, I noticed a pattern in how goods and services were delivered to families in need. The Filipino culture lends itself to helping others who are in your family or family's circle before helping those outside those groups. Without these groupings, people may not be able to provide for themselves. However, this can cause conflict when there is not an even distribution of goods and services. While people are trying to take care of their own, some groups inevitably get left out because of lack of resources or

social capital. Understanding how this works is important if you plan to help with the goods delivery process. Being able to track those family giving patterns will allow you to reach out to families and individuals left out of the normal giving efforts.

**Political Officials and Corruption:** One of the most striking challenges I faced while planning and participating in disaster relief work was the corruption among some of the political officials in terms of how they delivered goods and services to the people they represented. There were many instances where deliveries were delayed because of the need to brand or put logos on relief items so the recipients knew who was providing them with the goods. I even experienced situations where public officials were keeping donated items for themselves and reselling them for a profit instead of distributing them to families in need. These actions are not to be expected for every politician, however, it is more common than I expected based on conversations with my community members.

### How To Help Yourself And Your Community

If you ever experience a natural disaster and want to help your community as a result, there are three main concepts to consider: willpower, burnout, and self-care. The lack of awareness in any of these three areas may result in personal imbalance or unwanted consequences in your community. Passion and willpower will energize you to get things done and help your fellow Filipinos, burnout can occur if you overindulge yourself in the time and energy you put into your work or cause, and self-care is essential for the success of your own health and impact of your community projects.

**Finding Passion and Willpower:** Peace Corps Volunteers are often full of passion and willpower to make a change in the world. However, when natural disasters strike, it can be more challenging to find the energy and dedication to your work. Finding the

inner strength, time and energy to implement a project that could help your community, even in a small way, could be just what you need to feel more integrated into your community. Being strategic about who to include and determining what type of project might be most helpful are very important. Before you propel yourself into an idea, talk about it with people in your community to make sure it will be well received. Once you get the approval and gauge the excitement of the people you may reach, move forward with cultural sensitivity and openness to adjust and change as needed.

**Burnout:** Burnout occurs when you give 110% of yourself to a cause or effort and leave nothing for yourself. I experienced this after working non-stop on relief efforts for weeks following Typhoon Yolanda. I spent every waking moment planning and implementing relief efforts without giving myself time to process or digest what was happening around me. Not only did I exhaust myself through travel, planning and implementing continuous projects, I was doing it in extremely difficult living conditions. Building time in your schedule for activities that nurture your own wellbeing and happiness will help you deliver projects successfully in your community while preserving your own health.

**Bouncing Back and Self-Care:** Self-Care practices should be implemented throughout your daily life, but especially so during your Peace Corps service. Living in a foreign environment for an extended amount of time can be stressful on its own. If you add a natural disaster to the mix, even more self-care is needed. When I was participating in relief work I left little to no time for my own recovery. This was one of my biggest mistakes. Recovering from burnout can be a long and difficult process - but not impossible.

What self-care practices should you use to avoid or address feelings of burnout?

My suggestion is to start by making a list of activities that naturally bring you happiness and joy. For some this may be shopping for new clothes, for others it may be taking a long walk in the morning. The important thing is that these activities are stress free and replenish your energy level. Once you have a list, I suggest taking at least one hour a day to indulge in one or more of the self-care activities. It is important to develop and understand what these activities might be before getting into a situation where you desperately need them. Often times we forget or do not have the energy needed to identify what might make us feel better. Being proactive and creative in what might work for you is key. For me, the best form of self-care following the storm was through creative expression in the form of writing, painting, dancing, singing, drumming and practicing yoga and meditation. Those activities combined with time and adjustment to my new living situation helped me cope with feelings of anxiety and depression that crept up for the first time in my life following Typhoon Haiyan.

#### Peace Corps' Administrative Role and Protocol

Peace Corps staff is there to help you every step of the way in your service, especially during times of difficulty. Overall, I had a great experience with Peace Corps Staff during each of the natural disasters I experienced. They were the team responsible for evacuating me during the first flood and provided continual support following Typhoon Haiyan. Because of the high frequency of natural disasters, most staff members have experienced similar situations or know someone who has. The most important thing to remember when dealing with Peace Corps staff is the importance of asking for help or support if you need it. More times than not, you will find their willingness to help you

come up with solutions specific to your situation. However, there were many times in my service where I heard complaints from fellow volunteers about unequal treatment between volunteers. I did not find this to be true for myself and firmly believe that if you are willing to be open and honest with the staff, they will be more than willing to do the same for you.

During your Pre-Service Training, there will be discussion around specific consolidation and evacuation protocols, which are also outlined in Peace Corps documents. It is imperative that you fully understand those processes before you are put in a situation of high stress. In addition to those protocols, it is just as important to be able to come up with smart, safe solutions when the situation arises. Some situations are unexpected and you will need to be able to come up with safe solutions that might not be outlined in Peace Corps protocol. After Typhoon Haiyan, I was the first volunteer to leave my community and reach out to Peace Corps staff to inform them about the damage that occurred in my city. Our community was not supposed to be severely damaged but ended up being directly impacted by the storm. Because I took the extra step to find a way to contact Peace Corps staff, they were able to respond more quickly to our situation.

### Conclusion

I hope this brief sharing of my own experiences and ideas about navigating natural disasters during your Peace Corps service helps prepare you for challenges during your service. We are all in this together and share a common dedication to international development, global learning and cultural understanding. Facing natural disasters can be unnerving but with the appropriate training, approach and perspective you will move past the challenges with cultural sensitivity and confidence.

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