

I didn't need to own dust anymore.

I had turned 50, become the mother of a high school graduate, and earned a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. I joined the Peace Corps and learned how to scratch the skin of the universe while helping a small West African island nation start a kindergarten program.

The first six months at my site I created *DO* lists of analytically identified tasks; tasks specifically chosen to create a desired effect once all had been checked off. I quickly discovered that at this new latitude *DO* lists were only amusing my host country peers.

A paradigm shift was evolving. It began with emphasis on the big picture, the ultimate vision, not the *DO* list tasks. Whatever the front burner vision was for the month - workshop themes, kindergarten visitations, resources- the materials for realizing these always seemed just beyond my grasp, held back by the invisible skin that separated my world of need from the world of resources. Skin, when scratched and poked in the same place repeatedly, will tear. I poked and scratched by talking to everyone about my vision-ideas; the baker, the garbage truck driver, my neighbors and the business owners of the small shops that lined my walk to work, perfecting the language of explanation. I would then visit the town's power base, infecting the mayor, the superintendent of schools, the head of social services, the director of women's programs with my big picture plans for taking the national kindergarten curriculum to the rurally-based, untrained masses.

A germ, when introduced into the body, is toyed with, ignored, and passively-aggressively jostled before the body deems it acceptable. I was the foreign entity dropped into the living organism of Assomada, Cape Verde. Their toying, ignoring, passive-aggressive behaviors taught me about difficult gifts. The address of my desk changed three times during the first six months of my service before finding a permanent home with the Presidente of the Camara (Mayor/ Governor). In the moment of the third transition I was dejected with rejection; I was questioning my work, my purpose, my nonexistent success rate. Then the gift in this difficult gift began to emerge. In moving three times I had tripled the base of my professional acquaintances-with-resources in just six short months. Difficult gifts do not always take on the desired format but they can bring about the desired effect. It became a quest to find the gift within every difficulty.

A pattern was emerging. I was selling the big picture idea to my community by giving away the *DO* list items to my host country peers to identify, complete and check off. The power of TEN was becoming a theme and a benchmark. Infusing ten different sources with a common focus was producing the desired effects. In moments of discouragement I would reassess progress only to discover I had not asked ten times yet. Then the energy needed to scratch just three more times was easy to find. Vital resources began to trickle in from the other side of the invisible sky-skin, matching themselves with identified needs, attracted to each other like polar opposites. Workshops were taking place. Transportation to kindergartens three mornings most weeks was materializing. Two Luxembourg grants totaling \$500,000 American dollars put chalk boards in every kindergarten, furniture in ten, repairs in others. It funded math manipulatives, consumable materials, a word processor and two more years of workshops utilizing a myriad of local, expert presenters. Tenerife built three kindergartens in Assomada's district of Santiago. A team of a dozen kindergarten teachers was trained in workshop presentation. The majority of my kindergarten teachers never saw wisdom come out of my mouth my third year of service because the team presented. We created, wrote and published a collection of 200 best practices; each of the individual lesson plans authored by the kindergarten teachers of Assomada, employing national curriculum objectives. Shortly before I left, the National Ministry of Education named a host country national Coordinator of Assomada Kindergartens, a position made equal in stature with the other curriculum coordinators of the different disciplines, and located with the others in the Superintendent's offices.

As a PEACE CORPS Volunteer I helped a small West African island nation begin a kindergarten program. The experience changed my relationship with gratitude forever. In 1996 I knew gratitude, intellectually. It was a noun that gathered dust on an internal vocabulary shelf. In 1999 I returned to the United States with gratitude as an action verb, singing, dancing, gurgling, laughing and skipping through all of my nows, strengthened every moment by the powerful mantra of *THANK YOU! Thank you, Assomada and Cape Verde. Thank you for all the difficult gifts.*¹⁰

No dust here.

Respectfully submitted by
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