

How Best to Invest Yourself

by Melissa Crane Draper

Written for and Published in INVEST YOURSELF 2010 Edition

What qualities are necessary to be an effective volunteer? Although my volunteer experience is primarily international, the advice I can offer is quite basic and useful to keep in mind wherever you are—whether volunteering down the street or a hemisphere away. These guiding principles have navigated me through some tricky—and equally rewarding—situations, from my native Santa Fe, New Mexico to the town of Mhaswad in western India, and the rural villages of the Tapacarí province in central Bolivia.

Three characteristics should guide you as you enter a new volunteer position. These principles are regular traits to some, and for others it may take a little digging. That's the beautiful flip side of the volunteer coin—not only are you contributing to a cause you believe in, but you can also learn a great deal about yourself in the process.

First, and this one rings as clearly as a freshly-hit gong in an ashram: be humble. No matter how many skills or experiences you think you are bringing to your host organization, remind yourself that you are new to that space and that the local context (the political, social or cultural nuances unique to that place) are going to be different from your own. In some instances, you may have far more formal education than some of the people you are working with. Keep in mind that formal education has its limits, especially in foreign and/or rural settings where local knowledge far outweighs any economic formula or business model. When you invest yourself remember that it may require that you divest yourself first. That may mean letting go of an attachment to the way you think things should work. Once you can do that, you are ready to fully engage in your new environment.

Second, be curious. Chances are, if you've opened this book you have some level of curiosity as well as a willingness to give to others—two key pillars of volunteerism. The key is to remain curious—about the local situation you are working in, about the people you interact with, and about how you can best merge your skills and experience with your host organization. Even when you think you know the ropes, keep that curiosity refreshed so you can keep learning and innovating with whatever tasks or work you may have.

Third, be willing to listen. This characteristic is closely linked to both humility and curiosity. The action of listening is an expression of humility. It is also a vehicle for curiosity. And it is the means by which you can learn about the complexities of that sometimes perplexing local context that defines the how-when-where and with-whom of your volunteer work.

I can still remember the hours I sat on the floor in a corner of a packed room every Sunday in a small town in Bolivia. I listened and watched as a meeting of the local household worker's union would unfold. I took in the way they spoke, how they addressed one another, how they brought up problems and dealt with differences. The local politics were charged, and being a foreigner amidst a gathering of Quechua and Aymara women was new for me. It was only after being a good observer and listener for several weeks that I felt I could become a participant.

So how do these qualities translate into action? We can think about it in two phases—the “before you go” and the “once you are there.”

Before you go, make sure you've done your homework. This is a part of the curiosity piece that is key to prepping you for your new environment. This might be informal research,

like having a conversation with someone connected to the organization (or a previous volunteer or intern) or it may be more formal, like taking a particular class—perhaps in a language, some topic related to your work, or even consult with CVSA about some on-the-job training in basic organizing skills you can gain in advance.

If you're going abroad, it's always good to be familiar with local history and geography. You can read up in your history book or on-line. Reading the local papers on-line gives a good sense of current events and pressing issues that may soon become a part of your volunteer reality. Especially for those volunteering in politically-charged environments, familiarize yourself with perspectives from all points in the spectrum by reading or talking to people who know about the issues. Novels based in your country of destination can sometimes be quite revealing, giving you a window into your new world about the life, culture and history of the place.

Once you're familiar with the larger context of your new setting, make sure you also have a sense of what your volunteer work will entail. This is all about expectations—yours and your host organization's. Do they know how long you're coming for? Have you committed to doing certain tasks or is it a come-and-we'll-see type of situation? Are you working with a specific task or team of people and are you expected to produce a final product? Do they know your skills (or limitations) with the local language? If possible, spell these out before you arrive, or at least soon upon your arrival. If expectations are off on either side (too high or too low) it can make for a difficult reckoning once you actually get to work.

Then when you actually are on-site, keep up the communication. Identify who supervises your work, whether formally or informally. Set up time to check in with that person periodically to ask for feedback and to offer feedback on what you're seeing or doing. That will open a healthy channel of communication through which you can deal with adjustments to expectations, or even challenges that may come up down the line.

In the village of Mhaswad in the drought-prone region of western India, my first challenge was the language. I felt like I had fallen out of the sky into my volunteer position with this local microfinance group in rural Maharashtra. Unlike my experience in Bolivia, where I had a chance to buckle down and spend three months learning Spanish intensively, I had just three months to work at this site in India—and not a single word of Marathi or Hindi to share with the women's group. Communication was difficult since I could only really speak with the head supervisor of the project. My relief—and a friend—came in the form of a young Indian student who had just started working for the organization. She was eager to practice her English and I was thirsting for a chance to communicate with the incredible women that surrounded me. She opened up that world to me, and I offered back impromptu English lessons and a friendship.

With this set of tools, you're ready to go. Watch, listen and be ready to share with and learn from your fellow volunteers and colleagues. Open yourself to the experience and celebrate your decision to be a committed volunteer.

Melissa Crane Draper has made volunteering a central part of her experience abroad over the past ten years. She is co-editor and an author of Dignity and Defiance: Stories from Bolivia's Challenge to Globalization (University of California, 2009).