Dear Future IYFDer,

Being on the other side of my 2-year service in the Peace Corps, I can honestly say the experience has shaped my life both in specific, defining ways and in ways I am still sorting out. A placement in Azerbaijan came as a surprise to me after my interview with Peace Corps had confirmed I would be serving in Eastern Europe. I expected to be placed somewhere less close to what I formerly knew as the Middle East. What I found in my time there is that Azerbaijan fits neither into Eastern Europe, Central Asia, nor the Middle East, but is a mix of all these regions, taking bits and pieces from each area. Azerbaijan is unlike any place I have ever been and in many ways an anomaly. The capital boasts modern design while the most of the regions outside fall way behind in living standards. Living life in the regions of Azerbaijan is an opportunity and risk I took, never regretted, and yavash yavash (little by little) became one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

The likelihood of you being placed in Azerbaijan is slim to none, but this common theme of having unmet expectations and facing disappointments, fears, and trials will be standard. What also will be standard is finding that you can, through the support of community members, the Peace Corps community, friends, family, and your inner strength you never knew you had, overcome these trials. You will be surprised to see the capacity you hold within yourself to withstand difficulty, your extreme highs and lows, and how you come out of it a changed individual. Your Peace Corps service will leave an indelible mark on you indefinitely.

I think you will find that although people will tell you to have no expectations, you cannot help this and you will enter your cross cultural experience with expectations. Some of these expectations will be met, others exceeded, while others are simply incapable of being reached. This is all part of the bigger plan. Each day is filled with joys and disappointments, but I chose to focus on the joys of life there: the smell of freshly baked pastries on my walk home from work, the endless invites for tea and to guest in my community, the love I have for my host family and counterpart’s family, and the inspirational and generous members of my community I have grown to love so dearly.

Remember to have perseverance paired with humility. Never allow yourself to believe that the highs you achieve are accomplished alone and neither are the lows incapable of recovery. In other words, have grace for others and for yourself. Live with balance and know how to take care of yourself. This is the best advice I can give you as a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer. Establish early on that taking care of yourself is a priority you must hold and one which must be taken seriously. It is easy to go one of two ways: lose yourself in being full engrossed and integrated into your community or to disassociate from the culture in response to difficulties. Again, the message of finding balance and middle ground is one to keep as a mantra. Find a mantra and put it up on your wall to keep
yourself encouraged and grounded during difficult times. My mantra was: “keep on loving, keep on serving, and keep on keeping on.”

Encountering and having exposure to humanity at it’s most raw form will at times silence you and other times enable you to action. More times than I can count I felt humbled by people’s unconditional love, generosity, and hospitality that outweighed tenfold the frustrations and difficulties of living and working abroad. Never before and never again will you so intimately have relationships with people in such unreached corners of the world. There is an Azeri proverb that says “dama dama göl olar, axa axa sel olar” which means drop by drop makes a lake, but flowing water makes a flood. Be patient with yourself and with your community and remember that you are adding drops little by little to create opportunities for development in your country of service. Real and sustainable change happens slowly, so practice grace in all that you do.

Best of luck,

Sarah Wittmann

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