

Gaining Perspective...Volume 3

TWO YEARS IN THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO

(A BRIEF WINTER BREAK IN COLORADO)

BY CHARLIE KOLB



Resting my head against the window of the crowded third class carriage, I could feel the rhythm of the train wheels as they clattered against the rails. I glanced at the other Peace Corps Volunteer dozed quietly in the seat across from me and I raised my head to look out at the scenery flashing past. The countryside between Fes and Casablanca was green and lush; olive groves marched up and down hillsides and smooth brown fields stretched to the horizon. The day before, spent in the old city, or medina, of Fes had been cold. But not nearly as cold as my village in the Atlas that I had left behind several days before. I knew I would not see it again for over a month; I was going home.

It was interesting to sit and sip coffee in a café above the rooftops of the medina, watching as colorfully dressed people bustled past on the street below and as flocks of pigeons flew back and forth alighting on the moss-covered minarets of mosques that stood sentry above the labyrinth of streets and alleyways. Children were chasing each other past the cigarette sellers and clothing merchants; armed with water balloons, they shrieked battle cries as they hurtled by. Occasionally, a dark splash of water on the dry cobbles underfoot attested to at least one balloon finding its target. I spent the next morning sitting in a café watching the world pass through the Bab Boujaloud, or Tannery Gate, with its great tiled archway gleaming in the winter sunlight. People walked back and forth, to and from, and everywhere was music, laughter, conversation; hallmarks of a vibrant, living city.

The flight from Casablanca was painless and easy. Travel here consists mainly of waiting. I met my father at the top of an escalator in the Frankfurt airport. We had not seen each other in ten months and the last glimpse of me was my back vanishing through the gate at the Durango Airport and boarding my flight to Africa. We flew the rest of the way to Durango together in adjacent seats. I slept off and on and looked out the window as we chased the sun over the top of the world. I saw the glassy waters of Hudson Bay and the treeless barrens of Canada ribbed with limestone rubbed smooth and shining by a shifting sheet of ice.

I knew that we had crossed over into the States when I saw the gargantuan reservoirs strung out along the Missouri River like the segments of a parasitic worm. I watched the sun set behind the dark line of the Indian Peaks as we landed in Denver. Before long I was shuffling across the cold tarmac through a curtain of gently falling snow, through the glass doors of the terminal and into the waiting arms of my family. I was home.

In the past ten months of life in Morocco, I've lamented the disconnect from the place that will always be home for me—the Colorado Plateau. I have felt a constant pull back here, even on the best of days in Morocco, and this trip has weighed heavily on my mind for some months now.

Several days later I found myself sitting at the top of a hill on my family's land; it was late at night and the stars filled the sky with an icy radiance. All was silent and the long ridges of the pinyon-juniper forest gleamed with fresh snow. I sat there just breathing, enjoying the sensations of a place so familiar. The smells of pine and snow, of woodsmoke and cold; in the valley spread out below me, the coyotes began to howl and yip at the stars. I closed my eyes and listened to their song until it faded away and was swallowed once again by the silence.

On another evening I sat across from my brother on that same finger of land as we burned a smudge stick of sage between us. I used my hand to wash the smoke over my head and down my back as I had been taught by a Navajo friend and mentor years before. As we sat there in the dark beneath the dancing stars, I asked whether he had ever heard the story of Coyote and Rattlesnake. He had not, and I settled in to tell him. In the story, Coyote agrees to intervene on the behalf of Rattlesnake to the great spirit Akasitah. Together they talk of men and their impact upon the land, and Akasitah brushes away

Coyote's concerns by saying telling him that men are like a rock that falls from a mountainside. It makes a lot of noise and causes much destruction as it rolls downward. But ultimately it will roll out into the desert losing speed and momentum until finally it stops and is rendered harmless by the elements. "It will become nothing more than a stone, plants will grow upon it, and you can sleep on it at night. Such will be the fate of man," Akasitah tells Coyote before he vanishes.

Though I believe what Akasitah said, it is difficult to see when our stone will quit rolling and why. I sometimes fear that only our extinction will stop our destructive behaviors; but what if we could slow or stop it ourselves? In many ways, this is what environmental work means to me. The planet may grow and change on its own, and ultimately it will outlast us. The environmental movement, at its core, attempts not to save the planet, but the human race as a whole. The more we can understand and cooperate with our surroundings, becoming a part of the ecology rather than acting as if we are above it, the longer we may just hang on to our place in this world. I face this every day in Morocco, determining how a culture can survive in a place that becomes more difficult and dangerous with every passing year. Looking out at the thick forests on the mountains around my town, smelling the clean air, and looking at the fresh tracks of rabbit, deer, and fox in the fresh snow, I appreciate how fortunate we are as a nation to have such incredible wild places all around us. Functioning ecosystems and breathtaking natural beauty is everywhere we turn here, and only now do I begin to realize how rare an opportunity we have as Americans; there can be no better place in the world to develop a new way of living.


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The next week was bone chillingly cold. The mercury sat in the bulb of the thermometer like a hibernating toad and the newspaper reported temperatures as low as -20 degrees Fahrenheit. Water vapor contained in the air drifted slowly through the midday sunlight as tiny crystals, winking and gleaming between the trees and in the oak opening around the house. The woodstove roared all day long and still the cold seeped in. The stove, the Christmas tree in the corner, the dishes that sit in the kitchen cabinet or the tools that hang in the barn—all are reminders of Christmases past and the years I have spent in this place.

Everything I see here is so familiar and yet I feel as though I am viewing it through a different lens that colors everything in a more vibrant and vivid palette. Many things that I once took for granted, I now relish. The feel of a cold beer in my hand, or of hot water running down my spine in a shower, now seems incredible and sublime. The joy of spoken English and reliable communication, heated buildings, and punctual transport, all of this seems incredible; a gift.



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Another day, sometime later, I stood at an overlook at Mesa Verde and gazed down into the Mancos Valley. The fields lay silent and white far below and a wave of clouds swept over the wall of the La Plata Mountains. Fingers of snow trailed from the dark underside of the wave and drifted slowly downward into so many places that I knew. I remembered that this overlook was where I went when I fell into my first job as a Ranger here, my first park of five. I looked down into the valley, digesting the news and trying to make sense of it all. Since then, I have gone to that overlook whenever I need to reflect and contemplate. I thought of how the clock was slowly ticking and how I would soon be back in my village. In a few weeks, it will feel as if it were all a dream, which is how it feels to be here at all.

I stand here with a foot in each reality, the old and the new, trying to make sense of each. Sometimes, as I walk down the streets of Durango, it feels as if I am viewing everything through a thick sheet of glass; that my surroundings are a display of some kind and not real at all. I find myself speaking very little about Morocco, unless pressed; talk of my other reality doesn't feel like it belongs here. It seems out of place and unnatural. My time here is a strange kind of limbo, and while I enjoy being with my family and friends, I don't




feel like I belong here either. I am not finished with Morocco yet, and it is not finished with me. I don't attempt to reconcile these two opposing worlds because I am not yet at a point that I need to. I have sixteen months remaining in my village in the Atlas; I will deal with it after that.

Toward the end of my time in the Southwest, I drove slowly through the little town of Bluff, Utah; a place to which I would love to eventually relocate permanently. Every tree and building was familiar, though the cottonwoods were bare and the fields were fallow, the red and white cliffs still rose blazing about the muddy San Juan, and ravens still called from the power poles overhead. Later, sitting in my favorite café, I listened to the mingled conversations in English and Navajo at nearby tables. It is a place where I always feel strongly connected to the Southwest and can clearly hear its heartbeat.

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I drove through the notch into Comb Wash and looked northward at the stately march of the monocline toward the Abajo Mountains and at the canyons of Cedar Mesa emptied into the stream that lay frozen at my feet. I could smell the strong scent of sage and chamisa, along with the smoky smell of Tamarisk and the flinty aroma of wet sand. All around me were the tracks of animals that had sought water in the wash; every place will



**LYNN
WINTER!**

**LIFETIME
BACKBONE MEMBER**

tell you a story if you look long enough. I closed my eyes and thought of the myriad of experiences I had had in this place; they flashed past in my mind's eye vibrant and full of life—a series of moments crystallized and preserved to remind me of who I am and where I come from. In these memories I am standing at the top of the Moki Dugway looking at the red lands that stretch away into infinity, or maybe at the bottom of nameless canyon listening to the cascading song of the Canyon Wren as a sun-dagger slowly climbs the opposite wall. Be it the dry and blasted expanses of the red deserts or the nodding summer flowers and shining snowfields high in the summer mountains. Every moment spent immersed in this place reminds me of the ever-strengthening bond that ties me to it. Though I return to Morocco, I feel that I am more a part of the southwest than ever before and, when I return again, it will be to stay.

A second farewell to my family and friends, another goodbye to the mountains and the desert beneath their blanket of fresh snow, stepping back into my current life after a snapshot of the life I had left behind almost a year ago. Once again I am alone and left to my own thoughts and devices. After 12 hours in the air, I am in another limbo, and I write as I sit in a coffee shop in Frankfurt, waiting for my connection to Casablanca. I rode the train from the airport, watching the bare winter-forest flash past, trying not to nod off from the jet lag seeping into my bones. Later I watched the flooded River Rhine rush beneath the old stone bridges and listened to the church bells as they rang from innumerable steeples and spires throughout the city. I found myself comfortable in this city and, though a language barrier is still present, I did not notice it. Navigating the unknown becomes easier and easier and I look forward to my return to my village in the Atlas.

“The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views or opinions of the U.S. Government”

CHARLIE KOLB is almost a native Coloradan, and has worked as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service, but will be working with the Peace Corps until 2012. The Zephyr looks forward to sharing-regular reports from Charlie. You can also follow him via his blogs:

<http://charlieofmorocco.blogspot.com>
<http://wind-water-stone.blogspot.com>

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