

SMALLPOX STORY
AFGHANISTAN SUMMER 1968



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A SMALLPOX STORY

Driving in from the Kabul airport after a numbing flight from the States, the first things to strike me were the heat and the light. It was July, and the heat was dry. Clear, unwavering light illuminated the mountains surrounding the city, but at eye level, dust was everywhere. It lay in thick, shifting blankets on the dirt roads, and for the first time in my life, I thought about why it was nice to have pavement. Dust covered all forms of transport - the old clunkers of trucks and buses, the sweet-faced donkeys, the cranky camels. Even the birds were dusty. Afghanistan's color was beige.

In my first hours, I saw fat-tailed sheep being herded through the early-morning streets and soldiers holding hands. I saw young city girls wearing white head-scarves, black stockings, and black trenchcoats in the summer heat. Everyone was lean, except maybe the women. With them, you couldn't tell because they wore chaudries that covered them from the tops of their heads to their ankles. I wondered how the children frolicking around these ladies figured out which ones were their mothers, but they did.

I waited for the calls to prayer and finally heard them, and after a day, I also began to sort out some of the smells - cooking fires fueled by wood and dung, roasting meats, human waste.

Once the jet lag wore off, I also began to feel excitement. Excitement from all the different people in the bazaar and the things they had to sell. Excitement from believing that once I knew a little more about the place and the language, I would feel that I belonged here as much as any other new city.

I felt fear too. Fear of walking in the mucky streets in open-toed sandals. Fear of being purse-snatched. Fear of that ubiquitous beggar whose tongue flopped above the empty space where his jaw had once been. Fear of the sickish twinges in my gut that would be the precursors of diarrhea. Fear of being foreign. Fear of looking afraid.

The year was 1968, and I was in Afghanistan gathering information for a training program to prepare Peace Corps Volunteers to vaccinate people in Afghanistan against smallpox. For centuries, smallpox had swept through towns and villages all over the world leaving two out of every five of its victims dead and those who

lived blinded or, at best, marked for life with pitted scars all over their faces. In Afghanistan, as in 33 other countries at the time, smallpox was endemic.

In 1967, the Afghan government asked the Peace Corps to provide women Volunteers for the country's vaccination program. The American women would be teamed up with Afghan health workers, most of whom were men, to travel through the country, the Volunteers vaccinating women and children, their counterparts vaccinating the men. At the time, the government believed that village men would not allow strange men, health workers or not, to approach their women to vaccinate them; and there weren't enough Afghan women health workers to do the work.

My job in Afghanistan was to learn as much as I could about the life and work of the Volunteers who were already doing this work so that we could train a new group to continue the project. This story describes some of the things that I learned.

Hundreds of flies. Cocky bastards. Afraid to open my mouth to talk - they fly in. No one else is swatting them so I try to sit quietly. We are at a health center that includes a school where Afghan girls are being trained to be health workers. We are waiting for the center supervisor to come and tell us that we can go out to a nearby village and vaccinate.

The girls are young - ages 14 to 18. They giggle. One sits on the bench next to me, turns toward me, and looks me over - her face six inches from mine. From time to time, she feels my clothes. It is hard not to flinch.

I am so uncomfortable sitting there that I start to hate things. I hate the flies, I hate the girls, their inquisitive hands, their staring, their giggling. I hate the whole damn thing. I am glad that I have only two months to spend and not the two years that Peace Corps Volunteers commit to.

No vaccinator could go out to the field without obtaining permission from government authorities along the line - national, provincial, town, village. Formal permissions from provincial and town officials were embodied in a document called the "mactube". Vaccinators paid for mactubes with time, by waiting as long as it took, and, for the American vaccinators, by providing entertainment to whomever happened to be around.

Volunteers had to "learn how to do nothing", as the wise young

Afghan poet, Saddhudin, told me. Learn to hang around for a day to see an official who would decide where you would vaccinate, when, and with whom. Learn to do nothing the next day when permission granted was withdrawn and today's plan scrapped. Learn to wait three or four hours in a roadside teahouse for a ride to the next town, while the men eating there, and you the only woman, toss hard candy to you as they might throw peanuts to an animal in a zoo.

Volunteers learned to take the edge off the waiting by packing books in their knapsacks along with that more critical item, toilet paper. They learned how to sleep sitting up, to watch the people watching them, and talk with the people, almost always men, who gathered around these "haragies", or foreigners, wherever they were.

I have my camera out as we enter a community near Kabul, and the children lead me to an old man sitting on the ground. He has a goiter engulfing his neck and is dazed. A trickle of blood is coming out of his mouth. The children are laughing and ask me to take his picture.

A woman in a remote village in the north injured her leg. The wound became infected, and the woman was unable to cope silently with the pain. Because she was making so much noise, her neighbors moved her from her home to a bedless, windowless, doorless mud hut, set about 100 yards off from the rest of the houses. When we arrived on our vaccination rounds, we agreed to visit the woman to see if we could do anything. She was quiet as my Peace Corps mentor, Sharon, entered and hunkered down on the floor to look at the wound and talk with her. In the end, Sharon could only advise the relatives to bathe the wound and use clean rags to wrap it, knowing that these prescriptions alone were difficult: water, soap, and even rags were not easy to come by.

In another place, an old woman asked us to help her daughter. The younger woman sat on the floor warming her legs under a low, quilt-covered table placed over a pot of hot coals. She looked feverish. She was thin, had a harsh, dry cough, and probably was dying of tuberculosis as her mother said. The mother had done all that she could do and all that could be done. And we could do nothing but say we were sorry and leave.

Volunteers saw people with dysentery, acute respiratory infections, fevers of unknown origin, eye diseases from the kohl rubbed around children's eyes to make them beautiful, and skin

infections. They saw kids who had lost one or both feet after falling into hot ovens dug in the ground to bake the bread called nan, the people's major sustenance. It did seem the will of god, insh'allah, that anyone lasted their allotted span of 42 years.

Some made their way to a hospital - like the man who rode a donkey for three days to get to a place where someone could set his broken leg - but these were the strong and the lucky. Generally, people made it, or didn't, on their own. Medical attention was so rare outside the cities that it was virtually non-existent.

Stoicism was the norm; people who made a fuss about pain were either isolated or disciplined. Doctors were known to slap unanesthetized patients who made too much noise during surgery. Many people suffered in this demanding country, and it was impolite to draw attention to your own problems.

In some cases, the problem was one of not getting there sooner to prevent disease. When a father held up his blind and scarred daughter to show the team what last year's smallpox outbreak had done, vaccinators could assure themselves and the father that his other children were not likely to see smallpox again. In most situations, however, timing wasn't the problem, lack of resources and ability were. It took skill to explain this to relatives, emotional fortitude to say no.

How helpless and sad Volunteers felt. For the first time in their lives, they were in situations where life did not necessarily mean hope.

When the team arrives in a community, men, women, and children gather around to see the new people - especially the strange-looking ones dressed in tompons and perons (baggy trousers tied with a drawstring and a long tunic).

After getting themselves and their babies vaccinated in the compound in which they have gathered, the women hunker as close as they can get to the action. They squat shoulder to shoulder, because being physically close to your friends is nice and, besides, it is easier to discuss the foreign creatures that way.

A small group gathers around a dark, handsome fortune-teller sitting on the ground. The fortune-teller refuses to have a vaccination, for to puncture her skin would mean that the djinn in her body would have a way to escape and she would lose her powers.

In the best of circumstances, when a vaccination team arrived in a place, the mullek, or village chief, would round up all of the people in a central location and organize them in queues, men and women separate. It was usually easier to do the men because they would stand in line, roll their sleeves up, hold still while being vaccinated, and leave their sleeves up and refrain from touching the vaccination site until the vaccine dried.

Women, on the other hand, didn't always understand the concept of queuing. Like everything else, you have to learn to stand in line, but they had never been to school, to a post office or the movies (neither existed in rural Afghanistan), or any other place where they would see such a thing.

Some clients needed to be persuaded to accept a vaccination. Scientific explanations didn't work, but sometimes telling people that the team was sent by the government or was representing the King did.

For the most part, though, it seems that people submitted to the painless procedure because it was something different in their lives, or they wanted to show how brave they were, or they felt they could not refuse. One woman who wouldn't have any part of it, for example, changed her mind when the vaccinators turned down her invitation to take tea and got on their horses to leave. The shame of it was too much, and she capitulated. The vaccinators got off their horses, vaccinated her, and were served a lovely tea.

At another place, Sharon and I traded a vaccination for a tattoo, having been convinced by our prospect that, if we were going to make holes in her skin, it was only fair that she make holes in ours. I am very proud of my little tattoo, made with a sewing needle and thread moistened in water, then dipped in ashes from the fire, and drawn through the skin. The rubbing alcohol that we liberally splashed on our arms before and after the operation may have prevented infection, but it must have been our fate not to get tetanus or hepatitis or something.

In the end, almost everybody got vaccinated, except for the woman with the djinn, the women who chased me out of their rug-weaving room with screams of terror and six-foot long poles, and a few others.

A day's travel from Mazar-i-Sharif to the town of Acrapruk by jeep and lorry, through dry, barren, brown-gray hills. Along the way, sitting on a rug on the mudbrick platform outside a teahouse, drinking tea from glasses, talking with

the men, and watching trucks, donkeys loaded with wheat, and people on foot going by. A teen-aged boy sits with us for two hours, haltingly trying the English he has learned in the high school in the provincial capital. I talk to him as Sharon discusses something with the men in her excellent Farsi. As we are about to get in the jeep for the last leg of the journey, the boy runs next door to a little store and buys one piece of writing paper to give me as a parting gift - just the right thing from one educated person to another.

Talking with people on the road and in the villages was quite different from talking with townspeople.

Village men seemed comfortable with the Peace Corps vaccinators. They asked where the Volunteers were from, and a few people in the more isolated places wondered how long it would take to walk home. They asked about livestock and crops in America, the weather, and were most curious about American marriage customs, what these seemingly eligible young women were doing unmarried, and what on earth their parents could have been thinking to let their children go so far.

When the vaccinating was done for the day, men tended to monopolize the team, leaving women and children on the fringes, just beyond hearing range. To make up for this, Volunteers ate with the women rather than the men who ate first and best, but this was only after they were accepted as bona fide women. To do this, the more flat-chested Volunteers took their shoes and socks off and had their feet checked out.

The women, too, asked about marriage customs and, even more persistently, why the Volunteers weren't married. They wanted to know how Volunteers took care of their personal and hygienic needs while in the field. They admired the Volunteers' jewelry and asked to have it, usually in trade if an outright gift didn't seem to be forthcoming.

They were interested in families and liked looking at photographs. They didn't ask much about American houses or food, maybe thinking that ours were the same as theirs. They didn't ask about schools either; village girls didn't go to school.

Once Volunteers arrived in an area, people would come long distances to see them. One middle-aged woman walked for six hours, down from her mountain home, across the valley below, and up the next mountain where we were staying. She sat and talked for a few hours, got her vaccination, and began the trip back. I'm not sure how she knew that the team was there, but the country people were said to communicate from mountain to mountain by yodeling, like the Swiss.

Townsmen, on the other hand, were less interested. They stared at the uncovered faces of the Volunteers and ridiculed the bargains that Volunteers thought they were striking so successfully in the bazaar. Sometimes, "peshak", meaning cat, a euphemism for whore, would be shouted at foreign women by unseen men.

In cosmopolitan Kabul, a woman did not have to be foreign to encounter trouble. There was a terrible period when radical mullahs were said to be throwing acid on the black-stockinged legs of little girls as they went to school.

Generally, the more anonymous a Volunteer was, the more likely she was to be abused with name-calling, spitting, and goosing. In the places where she lived, she was the teacher of people's children or the nurse in the hospital and thus a valued member of the community. In villages, where she travelled as a vaccinator, she was too much of a real person in need of food, shelter, and friendship to be hassled.

We asked for eggs one day because the villagers had given us nan and tea for dinner the night before and that morning for breakfast, and now for lunch it was nan and tea again. An hour passed before we were told that there were no eggs. Later we learned that a little boy had been sent to nearby villages to find eggs for us, but no one had any.

That night, while we waited for the evening meal, which we intended to eat gratefully no matter what, we visited with the women. They dyed our hands with henna to mark the festive event, and we talked about America and Afghanistan and our lives and theirs. The sun went down and the moon came up, it was getting late, and we still hadn't eaten. Just as we were asking about the delay, the women brought us a large tin basin full of the soup they had been making for us. The soup was made of mutton and roghan (sheep fat), and nan was served as a utensil for eating it.

The soup tasted and smelled like the food that I had had in Lalme before being wretchedly sick, and the smell of the mutton and the sight of all that roghan made my tongue fly up. But I ate. I ate all that I could and then some. Sharon ate twice as much, but we still didn't make much of a dent in the soup.

Our hostesses were upset. They had killed a sheep for this meal to make up for our disappointment at lunch, and now we weren't eating it.

In the end, they took what we hadn't eaten and gave it to the children, who were wild with delight.

From time to time, the Peace Corps talked about sending their vaccinators out with canned field rations to avoid being a burden on the people. Although eating rations would also reduce the high rate of intestinal illness among these Volunteers, they rejected the idea. They didn't want to weigh down their knapsacks with canned goods. They didn't want to set themselves any more apart from the other vaccinators and the soldiers who often travelled with them. Most important, they believed that it would be insulting to the people to reject their hospitality, no matter how little was available. So most Volunteers learned to eat what they were given, just like their mothers had taught them.

Even so, the farther Volunteers were from familiar foods, the more fondly they were remembered. In the poorest villages, an egg to go with the nan and tea was a treat even if it was served floating in a sea of roghan. In towns juicy kebabs cooked barbeque fashion were available; and, in provincial capitals, you could find Cokes, even if they were warm. In Kabul, almost everything was available, even for a non-Moslem. Volunteers would crash the USAID snack bar and get cold beers and hamburgers - what bliss! - even though they could still not have pasteurized milk or ice cream, lettuce or other uncooked vegetables. You had to go to Peshawar in Pakistan or even farther afield for those things.

Some excellent meals were available on the road, though. In one town we stayed in the home of a sub-governor, the person who governed part of a province. He and his wife were educated people from Kabul, and I think that our presence cheered them enormously, especially the woman, who didn't like wearing the chaudri, which she would have to do in the town, and hence left their compound only rarely. She had the full figure and the clear, white complexion to show that she was a well-to-do city girl. And, best of all, she was a fantastic cook. She and her servants, one of them an orphan girl of ten who took care of the couple's children, worked all day slicing and chopping vegetables and meat and cooking them over wood fires.

We ate the magnificent meals on a mudbrick platform covered in thick carpets in the middle of the compound. The compound was full of trees and flowers, kept green by the deep stream that ran through it. It was one of the most beautiful and restful places I have ever been, an oasis. Sharon and I slept on that platform at night.

In Kabul you could get well-cooked meals too, and Westerners could get alcoholic beverages. The Government of Afghanistan had built a wine factory to take advantage of the grapes that were

being cultivated so successfully in some of the river valleys near Kabul. While these wines were intended for export, the government would sell it retail to non-Moslem foreigners. Although they tasted kind of raw, they were popular among Volunteers because they were cheap.

Not so, distilled liquors. These one bought, discreetly, from "robber barons", the shopkeepers who, it was said, bought it from house boys who stole it from the American and other embassy homes in which they worked. It was very neat; the embassy people would buy the stuff at their commissaries, which supplied it in quantity, tax-free and duty-free; then it found its way to the robber barons where people who didn't have access to a commissary could find it. Most Volunteers left it alone, if not on principle, on the grounds of expense: a bottle of scotch cost nearly as much as a Volunteer's monthly living allowance.

After 20 days of vaccinating in the hinterlands of northern Afghanistan with two male counterparts and a soldier, Beverly, a Volunteer, returns and tells us:

I slept outside every night but two. In one village, the men refused to give us any horses or donkeys for transport to the next settlement. I saw that they had animals, but they said that these belonged to men in the next village. I got mad then and asked the women whether the men from the next village also got them pregnant, since obviously there were no men here.... We got the horses.

I never went to the john during the day. Since there was no place to go except the bare hillsides, I just waited until dark.

I took two baths during the trip. Once I bathed in the river, the soldier standing guard for me.

Every night and morning, I sat on my tushak [a thin mattress] and did my routine - brushing my teeth, washing my face, putting hand cream on, etc. - with all of the men of the village standing around me watching.

I didn't mind not being able to hear or speak English, but being dirty drove me nuts.

I was living in a different world, a different century.

Beverly came down with hepatitis shortly after this trip and

never went out again.

She finished her tour in Afghanistan, although a few other Volunteers became so ill that they had to return to the States. Most stayed. They stayed because they were what people said they were - the few, the proud, the strong - or thought they should be. A few revelled in their wild reputations and, arriving back in Kabul after a vaccination trip, were like sailors in port. Others were more restrained but also proud of the job they were doing; but all, at one time or other got tired of the sickness, the heat, the cold, the dirt, the waiting, the staring. Why didn't people just quit and go home? As one Volunteer told me, "No one left because no one left."

I went back to the States after this trip and prepared a group of about 20 women to work as vaccinators. The last part of their training took place in-country in cold, snowy January. Based on this field experience, some of my group quit. Others took different jobs in Afghanistan, like teaching or nursing. Those who stayed with the program made vaccinating trips for awhile but then switched to other jobs when the Government and the World Health Organization learned that females were not needed to vaccinate women. These Volunteers monitored the work of other vaccinators, investigated suspect cases of smallpox, organized field offices, and did other administrative work.

Five years after the second group of Volunteers joined the vaccination program in Afghanistan, in 1974, WHO announced that Afghanistan had seen its last case of smallpox.

On 9 December 1979, the Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication declared that smallpox had been eradicated from the face of the earth. For the rest of their lives, the Volunteers who participated in the vaccination program could say that they had played a part in this. And for the rest of theirs, the Afghan people would know that, whatever other horror was waiting for them, they would never get smallpox
