

Introduction to “1964”

Of course, President John Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, and I lived through that day and the weekend that followed. No one who wasn't alive then can understand the idealism that President Kennedy --- the first American President born in the 20th Century --- had instilled in us with his youth and his call for unselfishness (“And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you --- ask what you can do for your country” – from his inaugural address).

His sudden, unexpected death hit many of us very hard. His death suggested that no one was safe, and brought home the realization that all life is tenuous and exposed to the vagaries of an unpredictable fate. I remember how much I suffered. I, a college senior at the time, went to spend time with my older sister, just because I didn't want to be alone with my thoughts and my feelings. We walked to a crowded department store called Korvette's (now defunct) not to shop but to be with other people.

Then, one week after President Kennedy's funeral, the head of the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver --- who was also President Kennedy's brother-in-law --- came to speak to us students about joining his organization and doing something significant: helping to make the world a better place by working and living with typical people from a third-world nation, letting them learn what a real American was like ... not a government worker but someone they could relate to.

I was hooked. I joined. I was assigned to be an English teacher (In fact, I became the entire English Department) in a small school in Port Loko, Sierra Leone, West Africa. After 10 weeks of training in Indiana, I, together with some 70+ others, flew to our two-year assignments.

One poem cannot do justice to this great life-changing experience; however, I just wanted to communicate on a basic level how I felt right after the assassination and how my teaching at Schlenker Secondary School in Port Loko was such a meaningful life-affirming experience for both my students and me. We ended up teaching each other. I taught them English Language and Literature and prepared them for GCE exams and for life; they taught me humility, the meaning of friendship, and the value of recognizing the worth of every individual I would teach in a career that has spanned more than five decades on two continents.