

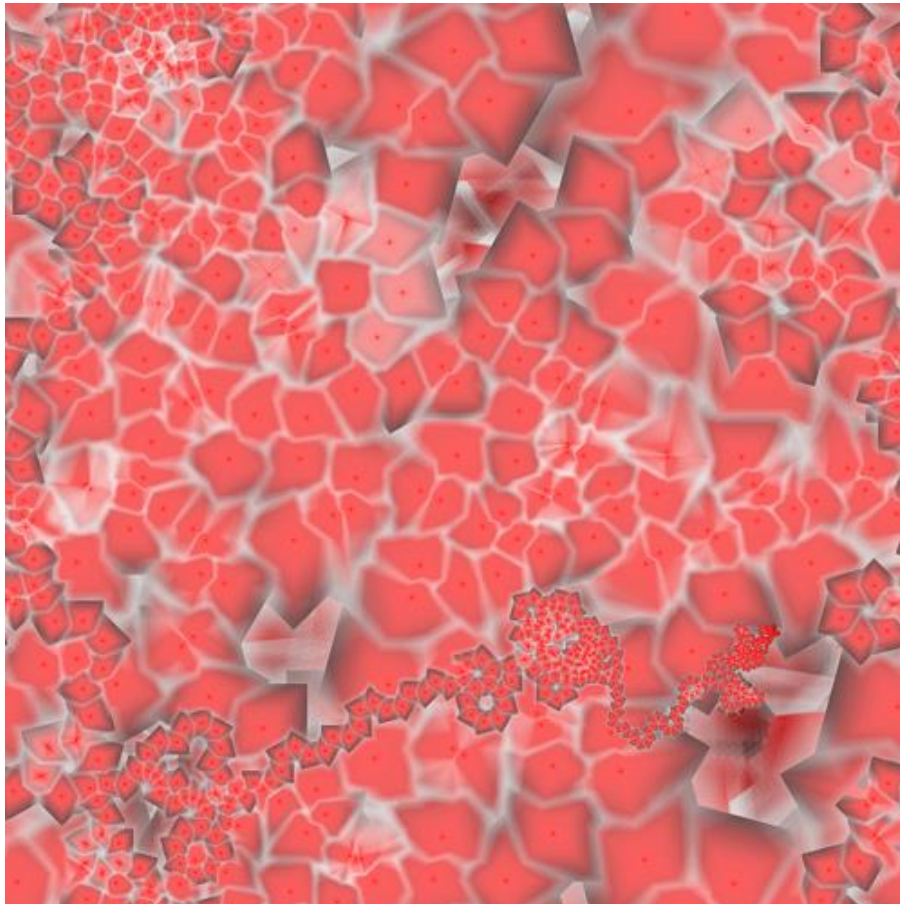
The Red Market

September 9, 2011

Whenever I'm on a date, and the woman asks me to tell her something about myself, my answer is always this: I'm a science-fiction geek. The night either goes downhill from there, or we end up in her apartment debating about the correct pronunciation of Klingon words and how *Solaris* is, or isn't, the best science-fiction film in the history of cinema.

Where does my unconditional love for sci-fi stem from? Maybe it began in third grade when I witnessed unidentifiable flying orbs dancing high up in the sky during recess. Perhaps it stems from going to a science magnet school that indoctrinated a lifelong love for anything related to science. Those are all valid answers, but I like to blame television.

I used to watch those old *Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* episodes in the cavernous living room of our old Brooklyn duplex. The TV screen would flicker like an eccentric mosquito zapper, filling in all the dark crevices of the room with photons, then the eerie music would creep in. At that point, I was already hooked like a trout with an IQ of zero.



Television can take you places where you've never been before, and could never go. For an escapist, the bright screen is this doorway to another dimension, and sci-fi shows provided the setting and scenarios for my fantasies. I love all kinds of twisted, mind-bending plots that left its residue on your brain long after you finished watching it. But the storylines that had always sparked my increasingly grotesque imagination were the ones in which people were kidnapped by a diabolical, soulless criminal organization, and their body parts subsequently cut out, then meticulously organized like offal in a Moroccan outdoor market.

As a kid, my aunt used to warn me not to stay out too late. They told me, with a straight face, that there were bad men who kidnap kids like me, take them to a farm out in some secluded area, slice them open, then sell the fresh organs to wealthy people who don't have the time to wait on the donor's list.

For a short while I actually believed it and a rush of dread shot to my head whenever I found myself alone in the middle of the street as the sunlight dwindled and the street lamps casted its dull orange net over me. Can you blame me? The adults told me these stories as if they were a fact of life—the way the world worked. It wasn't until later on that I realized this was just a campaign by adults to get me inside by dinner time and finally do my homework.

But is there any truth to such urban legends?

In December 2009, CNN published an article about the Israeli government admitting to harvesting organs in the 90s. Body parts, such as corneas and other organs, were taken from cadavers without permission from the families. This was supposedly done legally by the state, but even Dr. Yehuda Hiss, who was head of the state-run forensic institute that conducted the operations, himself acknowledged that such practices tiptoed on blurry legal boundaries.

At end of the Kosovo War, reports of kidnapping and organ theft circulated in the Balkans. Initially, a lot of these reports were denied by the accused—in this case, members of the Kosovo Liberation Army—and were considered propaganda, or simply rumors. Over a decade later, former members of the KLA who supposedly witnessed these acts finally gave detailed testimonies to U.N. investigators.

If you think this whole business is absurd, ask yourself this question: What's my most valuable property? You might say your house, your car, your cell phone, laptop, or even your prized Darth Vader paper mache mask. Well, how about your heart, your brain, your eyes, your skin?

Poets and philosophers say that we are the sum of our memories. That's great and all, but if you think about it, we're really just the sum total of meat, bones, guts and a splash of blood. We see ourselves as a single entity, but we're made up of various components, each one with its own important function. It's only when these components

work in synchronicity that we feel whole. Our body is our most valuable asset. It's yours and yours to keep, or at least until someone takes your left kidney.

Organs aren't the only parts of the body that are highly prized. The use of embryonic stem cells may be mired in controversy, but there have been cases that have shown its potential as a source of profit in the underground market.

From April 2009 through February 2010, Fredda Branyon of Scottsdale, Arizona, manufactured stem cell drugs unapproved by the Food and Drug Administration, then sold and delivered 183 vials of the stem cells to a buyer in Brownsville, Texas. The FBI found her manufacturing lab and was convicted for not possessing the license, nor the experience, to create the stem cell drugs. Her case is only one example, but I'm certain there are operations in other countries whose government doesn't have such strict regulations when it comes to bio-engineering procedures.

How far will someone go to have a new organ, a new life? The person in Texas who bought those stem cell drugs may or may have not known that the drugs were effective, but why take the risk? In any case, this is something that should be monitored more, like human trafficking and the illegal arms trade. In this global economy's current state, coupled with the increasing advancement of medical technology, the Red Market is something that could quickly evolve if not kept in check.

Stuck in the Middle (East)

September 14, 2011

When protesters stormed into the Israel Embassy in Cairo last Friday, it became increasingly obvious to the Israeli government that the few allies they have left in the Middle East are dwindling. Egypt has had good relations with Israel since they signed The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty on March 26, 1979. The treaty was a diplomatic band-aid after the Yom Kippur War. Egypt was the first Arab nation to extend a hand to Tel Aviv, which led to them being booted out of the Arab League. The late President Anwar Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin were both given the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts in establishing the treaty, but Sadat was later assassinated as a result. For all the oppression Hosni Mubarak has bestowed upon his own people, he had at least maintained the peaceful relations between his country and Israel. And now he's out the picture.

Israelis are not only worried about post-Mubarak Egypt, but the "Arab Spring" in general. There are concerns, both in Israel and in the U.S., that anti-Israeli Islamic fundamentalists will swoop in to perch themselves on newly vacant thrones. I had read a comment on a forum about how Al Qaeda, or less extreme entities like the Muslim Brotherhood, wouldn't dare hijack the Arab revolution and so far he's been correct, but you cannot deny that there are racist elements within some of the Middle Eastern countries. Those who are viciously anti-Israeli may be in the minority, but as we all know it only takes a minority with a great strategy to "capture hearts and minds" to put their own agenda into effect.

Take Hitler's Nazi Party, for example. Though there were anti-Semitic feelings in Germany at the time—mostly due to the pressures of job competition in a bad economy—no one ever thought of electing a leader who believed in systematically eradicating "the problem" (Jews) in order to elevate the nation back to its glory days. But that's what happened—though it wasn't much of an election but more of a gradual takeover through strong-arming and political assassinations.

I wouldn't say that this sort of thing will repeat itself (fingers crossed), and disregarding the fact that Iran's president fantasizes about wiping Israel off the map, which may or may not mean warfare, but if the protesters throughout the Spring have one thing in common, it's that they're inspired by a new sense of fierce nationality. Revolutions create an overwhelming sense of unity, because you suffered through the dictatorship together and, in the end, pushed the dictator out together. Storm the palace, wave the flag, hugs and kisses all around. The war-cry is, "For the people, by the people." And what if the majority of the people suddenly want to cut ties with Israel, or even take on a more aggressive approach towards them?

Turkey, another Tel Aviv ally, has also recently began voicing discontent over its relations with Israel, downshifting diplomatic and economic ties with the country. This all stemmed from Israel's refusal to apologize for raiding a flotilla last year, in which eight

Turks were killed. The UN said that, though excessive in force, the armed raid was legal. Turkey doesn't care about the legality, but just wants Israel to apologize. Replace the words 'Turkey' and 'Israel' with 'Mister' and 'Missus', and it'll sound like a marriage rapidly falling apart.

Oh, and who can forget about the Palestinian issue? The Palestinian Authority is looking to get a vote from the U.N.'s General Assembly on the possibility of statehood, specifically comprising the areas of Gaza Strip, West Bank and parts of Jerusalem. If passed, and it looks like it might, this will not officially give Palestinians their own country, but it will legitimize their fight for independence and maybe pressure Israel in withdrawing from occupied territories. China and France stated they would support the proposal. This will certainly be a milestone for the Palestinians if granted. After intifadas; suicide bombings; bloody counter-attacks by Israel; and a long track-record of broken promises, we've come to this point in the current chapter of the Palestinian-Israeli saga.

Last, but not least, but may also be the last of Israel's Arab allies: Jordan. King Abdullah had recently highlighted the fact that Israel is deep in the mud and that as Jordan and the Palestinians are on the rise, so are Israel's problems.

How can Israel mend ties and take themselves out from a vulnerable spot? Prime Minister Netanyahu can try to alleviate the problem by being more open to options presented to him by the international community. I like that he's malleable enough to at least consider a two-state solution, but he had set so many conditions in his proposal that it makes a book contract look like a piece of flash fiction. I get that he wants the Arab states, and especially the Palestinians, to recognize Israel as the Jewish state, but Israel has to see them as equals in the peace process negotiations. What happens when you instruct two architects with two different styles to design a house, but only give one of them the majority of the power in making decisions? Probably something Gaudi-esque, but with less pizzazz and eccentric charm.

Another thing that Israel can do is start fresh with the new government in Cairo and, in this case, Egypt has to show that it truly wants to maintain its peaceful relationship with its neighbor across the Sinai Peninsula, by securing the said peninsula and making sure extremists can't operate there. The embassy break-in was a response to the inadvertent killing of three Egyptian security officers after a firefight between Israeli forces and the terrorists who initiated the whole thing by killing eight Israelis in an attack. Weapons trafficking and the smuggling of terrorists in the Sinai have also increased since Mubarak was ousted. It is Cairo's responsibility to keep this happening since the Sinai Peninsula is their territory. If not, they'll expect a swift response from Israel militarily every time a terrorist attack was traced back to Egypt, which will only strain their relations even more.

In this long, winding road to harmonious relations between Israel and the Arab states, it's safe to say that the Arab Spring is sowing landmines along the way, even if unintentionally, despite the good things that the wave of revolutions stand for.

Alone Together

September 27, 2011

Dispatches from the Internet. How unique online communities are blooming in the age of global inter-connectivity.

A member describes her typical day: wake up; brush her teeth; yell at one of her eight cats for urinating on the couch; read three chapters from an Orson Scott Card novel; eat a bowl of salad; then spend nine hours silently cruising through forums and blogs on the Internet. She says she has no use, nor interest, for social networking sites.

Another member comments that his day is almost exactly the same, except his three perpetually-defecating parakeets in substitution for the cats, and that he only keeps a Facebook account to assure his family back in Oregon that he's still alive.



New York City, 2008. Photo by Michael Mira.

They're members of an online community where self-professed loners congregate and connect. In an age where overpopulation is a pressing issue, it would seem difficult to isolate yourself, limit the amount of your social interactions, yet the rise of the global population can actually play a role in motivating some people to withdraw themselves from society. Cities are becoming more dense. More people means more cars, more trash, and more voices spewing opinions (including my own) in different languages and accents. Mixed with the advertisements and media vying for your attention, all of this stimuli can be very overwhelming for individuals who are sensitive introverts.

Of course, this is just one of many reasons for being a loner. There are two types of loners: those who are loners by choice and those who are pariahs, or forced by society to live a solitary existence. Individuals who prefer to be loners have a variety of reasons for choosing to be lonesome. It ranges from misanthropy (those who are repelled by humanity) to those who simply enjoy being alone.

A classic example of those who withdraw from society is the religious hermit, shunning worldly pleasures to devote one's self to a life of spiritual pursuits. On the other hand, there are those who are vanquished from their social position, such as former dictators who become outcasts, not only in the country that gave them the boot, but in most of the world. I heard it's tough being a dictator these days. Just ask Qaddafi.

What I find interesting about these 'loner clubs' is that the members have a strong sense of community. When a member is depressed, others are quick to offer kind words and advice. Though they may be physically alone, huddled together on the Internet they form a kind of synthetic, virtual family. They are able to distance their actual selves from others by using screen names and avatars as proxies—Internet representatives. This allows for lower inhibition. Offline, these shy-types might not make great conversationalists, but when around like-minded people on forums they are articulate, witty and show great emotional depth.

The years between 2008 to 2011 have been a sort of renaissance period in the dark corners of the web. I have tallied at least 58 new websites catering to sub-cultures that might not be able to find a platform in more mainstream blogging or social networking sites. This recent crop of new web addresses range from the typical UFO enthusiast forum to the more personal 'anorexia anonymous' storyboard, complete with tragic confessionals that would make the most dedicated 90's Grunge enthusiast seem like a member of the Mickey Mouse Club.

But it was the loner clubs that had attracted me, because I was a bit of a loner myself during my senior year of high school. I could relate with some of the members on the website, especially the military brats and the kids of expats who had a hard time fitting in with their environment due to living in a foreign country.

Most of the members on the website are self-professed voluntary loners, and when I asked one of the members what attracted her to these type of websites, she said, "Even

though we're confined in our dark, cramp little rooms, and even though we're all alone—
at least here we're alone together.”

India Accuses Monsanto of “Biopiracy”

September 29, 2011

According to the news outlet *France24*, the Indian government had recently accused Monsanto, a multinational agricultural biotechnology corporation based in the U.S., of “biopiracy”. Officials claimed that Monsanto was stealing plants indigenous to India and re-engineering them to create modified versions. The products are then patented and sold under the Monsanto brand.

One of the plants that were specifically chosen to undergo bio-engineering treatment is a type of eggplant called *brinjal*, which is native to Indian soil and has about 2,500 different varieties. According to the report by *France24*, millions of Indian farmers grow this type of crop and that a modified version in competition with the original will threaten the livelihood of locals that depend on it. Monsanto has repeatedly tried to market its own version of brinjal under the name *Bt brinjal*. This, along with other questionable practices by Monsanto, motivated farmers and activists in the country to put pressure on the government to file a lawsuit against the company. The government agreed to do so. The case is pending at the moment.

Monsanto is not new to controversy. Monsanto’s bad track record in business ethics can be traced back to the 1960s when it paid contractors to dump toxic waste in the U.K., according to a *Guardian* report. A government agency stated that they found lingering effects of these toxic wastes even decades after they were discarded. In another report, a Monsanto subsidiary had been accused of using child labor in the cotton fields of Andhra Pradesh, India. In 2005, Monsanto was fined \$1.5 million for bribing officials in Indonesia. These are just a few examples from a pile of documented legal complaints against the company.

I contacted the office of a PR representative for Monsanto, but the secretary on the phone said that my request for an interview had been declined.

The Language Business

September 30, 2011

I looked at the grainy photo included in the ad. A plain-looking building made of earthen materials stood in the dead center of the frame. A tall man wearing a pristine white button down shirt smiled at the camera. Behind him was a small rag-tag army of schoolchildren. Most were smiling, some looked bored, and one was picking his nose with intense concentration. I sent a reply to the advertisement. I told him that I wanted to volunteer at his tiny, underfunded school. I'm technically not qualified to teach. I don't have a degree in English. I don't even have a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate—the piece of paper that says you were “professionally trained” in indoctrinating the English language upon your subjects—but I speak English and I speak it quite well when sober.

English is like the gold bar of languages: if you speak it, you can cash in your nouns, verbs, adjectives and “The cat kept clawing the car salesman from Kansas...remember, kids, you pronounce it *kan-zuhs*.”

The export of English is a multi-billion dollar industry. Japan alone employs more than 60,000 English teachers. There are platoons of English teachers being deployed overseas to train students in the language that will allow them to snag a good job; students like Raj in New Delhi—an IT specialist—who is getting ready to fly to Seattle to work for a software design firm. He tells me that he wouldn't have landed the job if the recruiter didn't have confidence in his English. Raj's parents had hired a private English tutor for him when he was 16 . Six years later, he has almost mastered the language, although he's still self-conscious about his accent.

Times are changing though. An American kid would probably benefit in learning Spanish and Mandarin just as an Indian student would benefit in learning English. The shifting of economic and, therefore, political tectonic plates is reshaping the landscape of international communication. Some schools in the U.S. are now teaching Mandarin along with Spanish, especially on the West Coast where there is a large and steadily-growing Asian population. It is both immigration trends and an expanding global market that is shaping the way we speak.

I asked my friend, a Spanish teacher at a local high school, if I have a better chance at finding a job as a Spanish instructor in the U.S. than landing a gig as an English teacher in South Korea. She told me that English is still the most desired language to be taught in schools abroad. It's probably true.

I remember we were forced to speak only English at a particular private high school I had attended in the Philippines. The teachers were actually instructed to write up students caught speaking the native language, Tagalog. It was an advantage for me, but I rebelled against it, because I felt that it was a totalitarian approach to teaching

English. If you want to foster a habit of speaking a lingua franca among students, you should do so in a holistic way, not through an enforcement-and-punishment system.

But like old empires, language trends are ephemeral in nature. During the height of the Roman Empire, Latin was considered the universal language. Even Arabic left its mark in the countries the Caliphate had covered, especially in North Africa and Central Asia where the people either still speak Arabic as their primary language or are fluent in it.

50 years from now, I wouldn't be surprised if the global community winds up speaking a kind of mixed-language, like the 'Singlish' that has evolved in the linguistic lab that is Singapore. With the rise of Brazil in South America as a major economic player in the world stage, you might as well add Portuguese to your list of languages-I-want-to-learn-this-year-but-will-probably-only-end-up-learning-creepy-sexual-innuendos.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to Tanzania to trade in my nouns for some goat milk.

iPathogen

October 7, 2011

I used to have a printed copy of the famous “Think Different” ad framed on my wall. It hung right above my work desk in my room. It was actually written by a couple of writers from an ad agency, but the vision was all Steve’s.

I honestly have never been tempted by Apple’s sleekly designed products, which were born in Steve’s cranium, but I genuinely believed in the revolution that was underneath all that shiny skin. I wasn’t interested in the coolness factor of his products, but in the potential that they held.

Ideas are like pathogens—such as viruses and bacteria—because it can spread rapidly from one person to the next. Ideas are highly contagious. We have seen its worst example in Nazi Germany during WWII, and we have seen its best during the 2000s when Steve Jobs, Sergey Brin, Larry Page, Steve Chen and Mark Zuckerberg formed a (super-cool) geek coalition that marched triumphantly towards the future and heralded a new era and, in the process, transformed the way we worked, the way we were entertained, the way we lived, but most importantly the way we think. They made it cool to be smart again. My other favorite ad slogan is IBM’s “let’s build a smarter planet” mantra. But the difference between IBM’s rhetoric and Apple’s is that Apple put their philosophy into action with gusto.

Ideas such as democracy, liberty and human rights seem so simple to us who live in nations that aren’t ruled by a dictatorship. It feels so natural, so right, yet these are dangerous ideas in many parts of the world. In a globe that is bound together in an electrical grid, how fast can these ideas travel? As fast as a revolution at the click of a button—which is to say: instantly.

When Steve Jobs resurrected Macintosh from its ashes with a new face and attitude, he knew what kind of world he wanted to live in, and he wanted to share that piece of *neo terra* with the rest of us. He understood connectivity and he understood that the Internet is the new Silk Road. But what will lubricate the flow of information and ideas? I’m sure he spent many nights pondering that question. After months of think tanking, he came out with the iMac G3. After that, he became bolder and—well, you know the rest of the story.

Whether you’re a fan of the products he designed or not, you have to give the icon his credit as one of the most brilliant visionaries of our time. So what exactly is his legacy? Revolutions in the Middle East and the now-nationwide Wall Street protests mobilized by iPhones, iPads and Mac Books; affordable tablets, which Apple had perfected, are now about to be available for poor students in India; and millions of filmmakers and multimedia journalists who thank Mr. Jobs for giving them the software to turn their vision into reality.

Steve Jobs's legacy is not a black turtleneck, a partially-bitten apple, nor the hip and sexy aesthetics of his products; His contribution to the world is that he pushed the first domino that went on to topple more dominoes until it revealed the big picture that illuminated our post-9/11 world and inspired people—rich, poor, Harvard-educated, or high school dropouts—to not only think beyond the walls of social and personal constraints, but to create what we envision, because it was possible if we had the right tools.

Steve Jobs gave you the spark and he gave you the tools. Now, go out there and use them for good.

Memories of Mexico

February 9, 2012

I remember the local bus stations, the restaurants I dined in and, more vividly, the faces of generous and hardworking people I had crossed paths with. What I don't remember are the scenes of carnage, the decapitated heads and soldiers patrolling the streets in diesel-belching vehicles.

It was the end of Spring Break, in 2008, when I had crossed the Texas-Mexico border on foot at three in the morning. The streets were desolate and quiet except for the faint banter of taxi drivers trying to hustle lone travelers like myself. One guy offered me a lift to the consulate for my tourist visa, even though it was still closed, for an above-average rate. I declined. Another guy offered me hookers. I declined that as well. As seedy as that sounds, it was actually a peaceful time along the border. Nowadays, those taxi drivers are probably not faring too well, because no one wants to be out and about when the Zetas, Sinaloa and other drug cartels are splattering the streets with blood in the most gruesome fashion.



Photo by Michael Mira. Bridge connecting Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico.

When the first major outbreaks of violence erupted in Mexican states along the border, they were generally limited to certain hot spots, or staked territories of different drug cartel factions, but after an arson attack at a casino last August, in Monterrey—a city which hosts many large companies and a relatively low crime rate—the illusion of safety was shattered.

It also doesn't help that corruption is rampant within the government, both local and federal levels. In fact, many citizens blamed the government—particularly President Felipe Calderón—for escalating the violence in the notorious War on Drugs. According to a report by the BBC, about 1,000 police officers in the state of Veracruz failed lie-detector tests. The average salary of men in uniform below the border are lower than their counterparts in the United States, making it enticing to bite on money baited by criminal organizations.

The government has also been criticized for exaggerating the facts when it came to the statistics it used in victory declarations, claiming that most casualties in armed scrimmages with the cartels are criminals. But the sobering figures actually show that civilians also make up a good percentage of casualties. They're trying to show the citizens and, more importantly, the United States, that their war against the cartels is effective.

This is not to take anything away from the armed forces of Mexico. I commend those who truly fight for their beautiful country's future and resist corruption, but they are outgunned and outfunded by the various cartels, and this makes it more difficult for them to do their job. There have been major victories, such as the arrest of Jose Antonio Torres, an affiliate of the Sinaloa, and the capture of Louis Jesus Sarabia Ramon, a leader of the deadly Zetas cartel. But just as with the Taliban, when one leader goes down, another is appointed as replacement almost immediately.

The other problem with arresting leaders is that this creates a vacuum within the organization and thus can spark a power struggle, which of course will lead to more violence.

No. This is not the Mexico I remember. It has only been three years since I've stepped foot on to Mexican soil, but the changes have been drastic. I remember the taco vendor near the Matamoros park. My stomach praised him like a god. I remember the hardworking man who gave me coins for a bus fare because I didn't have Mexican pesos yet; giving me, an American from the suburbs, his hard-earned money with a smile, just because it was the decent thing to do for a stranger. I remember the bartender in Barrio Antiquo who lavished me with stories and enough salsa to send me to gastronomy heaven.

That's the Mexico I remember—the kind, tough, lively people who are unfairly caught between the bullets.

A Cancer Called Corruption

June 6, 2016

British Prime Minister David Cameron listens to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on May 12, 2016, at Lancaster House in London, U.K., at the outset of the first plenary session of an anti-corruption summit meeting hosted by the British leader. [State Department photo/ Public Domain]

Its genesis is humble. A cancer cell in its infant stage will not show symptoms. Over time, they divide and multiply, growing exponentially at a rapid rate. They then begin to spread into every millimeter of your body. Carcinogenic elements of society form the same way.

When I was a teenager, I used to pass by a shabby 6-story hotel that was down the street from the Catholic high school I attended. Next to this hotel were a burger stand and a karaoke bar. On any given night, you could find blue-collar men drinking and singing in that small bar. Sitting next to the patrons were young women—the youngest ones looked to be only 18 years old or possibly younger—wearing mini skirts and tight blouses. Every few minutes, the “hostess” would pour beer into their customer’s glass whilst trying their best to laugh at their unfunny jokes.

An hour or so into the playful push-pull socializing, the man would whisper something into the girl’s ear. She would then glance across the room to an old lady, who looked like a motherly innkeeper. That woman was no sweater-knitting granny. She acted as a supervisor to these young hookers. In some instances, she might even be the pimp herself who runs the whole operation.

The management at the hotel, the karaoke bar, and even the tiny burger stand sandwiched between them, were all part of this cash cow complex. How can half a block in the middle of a busy city center operate something like this? The short answer: crooked officials.

They get a piece of the action, whether in monetary terms or by receiving free services, and sometimes both. That’s the nature of corruption. It starts out as a small isolated racket and then it grows to become an entire system. Money feeds corruption, but the dynamics is more complex than that. Money and power is a twin-valve engine of the machinery.

In 2008, corruption came into full view when the meltdown on Wall Street highlighted the connections between the banking system and Washington politics. While particular figures and companies were singled out in the media, such a micro view of the full picture made it difficult to comprehend the scope of it. The issue is beyond any individual and organization—the network itself is a tumor.

In places like the Philippines, Mexico, Pakistan and Russia, a lot of journalists are being silenced by the powerful few who don’t believe that the public has the right to be

informed about policies and practices that affect them. If freedom of the press itself is under attack, then what chance do the voiceless have against large conglomerates?

Cancer has a treatment. It's not totally effective and risks are still there, but it's available. Likewise, corruption can be fought. In this era of social media, anyone who cares about freedom and democracy ought to be more proactive in speaking out against corrupt practices. Activism can only go so far though. Beyond the words, there needs to be more participation in local government and on a national level.

The prescription for battling corruption is as simple as asking the right questions and never letting others silence you. In fact, you can start with a simple question: "How can we change this?"

Low-Income Hispanic Communities in Texas Struggle

October 18, 2016

According to current reports by the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Census Bureau, more than 30 of the 100 communities with the lowest per capita income in the United States are in the state of Texas. Communities such as Sullivan City and La Homa, along with many in South Dakota and North Dakota, have per capita income lower than the national average.

Most of these communities have a small population—Sullivan City is under 5,000 and La Homa is just under 12,000—which contributes to its economic vitality. U.S. Census statistics show that these areas have a predominantly Hispanic population, a group which have lower salary averages than other minority groups. Low income on an individual and household basis affects the whole regional economy. A 2010 report by the U.S. Census indicates that only less than one-fifth of the skilled laborers in the construction trade are composed of Hispanics.

One factor that adds to the problem is the public education system in many of these locales. Studies showing correlations between an individual's education level and economic opportunities is not new information, and Southwest Economy reports that native-born Hispanics in Texas are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to attain college education than those living in other states. With the national economy going through a turbulent ride on a daily basis, starting in 2008, job opportunities are becoming harder to find, even in Texas, which during the recession has actually created new jobs while the rest of the nation struggled.

Despite that, economist Pia Orrenius says that the median hourly earnings of Hispanics in Texas have been steady, if not stagnant, rather than declining. Hispanics in other states, however, such as California, earn an average of about \$0.80 more than their Texas counterparts due to the higher minimum wage in California.

With the uncertainty facing both national and global economies, those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are getting hit the hardest. As a heatwave rolls across the Southwest, some of the poorer communities along the Rio Grande Valley are feeling the burn moreso than others due to the drought that are affecting the farms and plantations many of the people work for—a sign, perhaps, of a rough road ahead.

FBI Taps the Public for Assistance in Capturing Fugitive

October 19, 2016

The FBI released a statement on Thursday, asking help from the public in finding Donna Joan Borup. Borup is wanted for “allegedly throwing an acidic substance into the eyes of Port Authority Police Officer Evan Goodstein,” said the press release posted by the FBI’s New York Field Office. The incident occurred during an anti-apartheid demonstration at JFK International Airport. The substance caused Officer Goodstein to become partially blind.

Borup was a member of the May 19th Communist Organization at the time of the assault. The May 19 Communist Organization, also known as M19CO, was a Marxist-Leninist group that “advocated the armed revolution and violent overthrow of the United States government,” explained the FBI.

M19CO originally acted as a support group for Weather Underground, a well-known radical group during the 1970s that conducted a string of bombings in the New York City area. The May 19 Communist Organization was active until 1985.

Borup was arrested for the assault and later released on bail pending a trial in May 1982. After Borup failed to appear for trial, an arrest warrant was issued on May 20th, that same year.

The FBI asks those along the East Coast, as it’s believed that Borup has family in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, to keep their eyes peeled and to contact authorities with any information regarding sightings or the case.

Asking for the public’s help is not a new technique, and the most famous example of this type of cooperation between authorities and the public was the recently-cancelled America’s Most Wanted, a television show on the Fox Television Network that displayed fugitives and a hotline for anonymous tips. The difference now is that press releases are automatically posted on the FBI’s Facebook and Twitter pages. People can even get press release updates through email or RSS feed. The ability to re-post information on blogs has also helped expand the social reach of government agencies.

A wanted poster featuring Borup—with both her old photo and one that shows how she might look at her current age—is currently on a billboard in Times Square.

Foreign Student Workers Protest Outside Hershey Plant

October 19, 2016

On Thursday afternoon, foreign student workers flooded the commercial district of Hershey, Pennsylvania—home of the Hershey Story museum and Hersheypark. The foreign students are in the United States legally through the federal J-1 visa, a summer work program that enables students from foreign universities to come to the United States to work. The idea behind the program is to allow students from around the world to experience life in the United States and to learn more about its culture.

The students who worked in a Hershey Co. packaging and distribution warehouse in Palmyra, however, claim that the wages—around \$8.35 an hour, most of which ended up paying off their housing costs—were not enough to repay the \$3,000 the students shelled out to participate in the program. Many feel that they were exploited.

The J-1 visa was first administered by the U.S. Information Agency to foster better relations between the United States and other countries. Since its purpose was to offer cultural information to students, the program did not fall under the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Many of the students weren't informed that they were going to work in a warehouse setting in Pennsylvania, and only found out after they had already arrived in the country. One student said that he had to pay for his trip from Florida—where he was told he had a job waiting for him only to be informed otherwise—to Pennsylvania.

A spokesperson for the Hershey Co. says that the plant is not managed by them, but by a division of German company Deutsche Post DHLA called Exel Logistics. Exel then turned to SHS Onsite Solutions, in Lemoyne, for staffing arrangements. An SHS Onsite spokesperson claimed that they connected with the Council for Educational Travel USA, in California, which recruited at least 370 of the students, and acts as their host. The company is listed as a J-1 sponsor by the U.S. State Department.

The two-day picket rally was organized by the New York-based Guestworker Alliance and even posted videos online containing interviews with the student workers. The students say they just want their money back and for the company to give the jobs to locals who are unemployed. Some of the locals, in turn, have treated them fairly, hoping to give the guests a positive view of American culture. Some commenters in online forums believe that too many American companies are implementing such questionable practices, rather than employing the citizens who live within proximity of these warehouses.

The U.S. State Department stated that it plans to send two senior officials to evaluate the situation.

Members of Opus Dei Face Slavery Charges

October 22, 2016

The ultra-secretive Catholic organization is perhaps popularly known through its fictional depiction in *The Da Vinci Code*, but the slavery charges that were slapped on some of its members in a Paris court, on Thursday, is definitely real. The plaintiff, Catherine Tissier, claimed that she was forced to work as a servant for no pay in return. She says that her labor consisted of cleaning and serving for 14 hours per day, every day of the week.

This recent case is the culmination of a nine-year investigation into the group's inner-workings. The defendants in the case are high-ranking officials from a school and religious retreat near Paris. The defendants deny the allegations and claimed that the plaintiff was paid fairly.

Opus Dei is backed by the Catholic Church and has an estimated 85,000 members worldwide. The group has received much criticism from the public due to their secretive nature and is accused of conspiratorial acts. More information about the group, through their own words, can be found at their [website](#).

Department of Defense to Return Facilities in Germany

October 22, 2016

Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that it will close several of its facilities in Germany and return them to their host-nation. This is part of a cost-cutting initiative taken by the U.S. European Command; shutting down “non-enduring sites” and installations throughout the continent.

Facilities that are being removed from the DoD’s property inventory include: the Oberweis Annex warehouse, which will save the federal government about \$1.24 million; communication sites at Pruem Air Station, Hahn Communication Station and ARFT radio relay station, which will vanquish over half a million dollars from the budget; an ammunition storage facility in Hochspeyer; and Bitburg Storage Annex No.2, which will save \$1.5 million.

U.S. Embassy to Zimbabwe Police: Stop Political Violence

October 24, 2016

On Friday, the U.S. embassy in Harare voiced its concern over the failings of Zimbabwe's police in reducing political violence in the country. Though it recognized the efforts of police officers, prosecutors and other court officials who have worked hard in eradicating corruption and crime, the U.S. embassy is becoming more worried about the officials who exercise political bias.

On September 23, four individuals were allegedly beaten to death by police officers after they were transported from their village by private security guards. There have also been reports by human rights groups that local activists are being harassed and targeted by officers, such as leaders of the group Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA). Extortion and intimidation tactics by politically aligned gangs also seem to be prevalent in Harare.

These reports and allegations have caused a stir within the U.S. embassy, who emphasized that such level of corruption will only perpetuate further violence in the country.

The Government of Zimbabwe has made a pledge to uphold and protect human rights and, to show its commitment, it is to appear before the Human Rights Council's Universal Period Review on October 13. The U.S. embassy states that it wishes for the government to fulfill these promises and show more effort in exercising human rights principles.

Aid & Politics in Africa

October 28, 2016

“The worst drought in 60 years has thrown some 13 million people across the Horn of Africa into crisis. In Somalia, ravaged by two decades of conflict, the consequences have been disastrous. We ask if aid in this region of the world has become politicised? And has Washington’s pre-occupation with terrorism in the Horn of Africa contributed to the deadly consequences of this disaster?”

–[Al Jazeera English](#)

The answer to the first question is, “Duh.”

Aid work in Africa has been tied to politics since the first time outside governments decided to step in. I think the grassroots Christian groups and other non-profit organizations (like Doctors Without Borders) do a better job at maintaining aid. OK, so there are some bible-thumping on the part of the Christian groups and the other NPOs tend to lean left, but this does not affect the fact that they are helping out in practical terms. When it’s a government involve, not just Washington in this example, the rice and anti-malaria kits come with diplomats. Famine should never be used as a pawn in a political chess game. The only benefit of a government body bringing aid is that they are backed up by millions of tax payer money and logistical resources.

Now, this goes deeper than that. In the book “Dead Aid”, which I read a while back and is a book worth checking out at your local library, the author, economist Dambisa Moyo, states that aid actually harms Africa more than it helps them. What you get (and this is obvious) is a system of dependence. Dependence on outsiders is what set Africa back to begin with, like colonialism for instance, in which they had no choice but to depend on their European colonizers. You see, food is politics. Famine is one of the best ways to gain power over a region politically.

On to the second question. Pirates, Muslim militants and warlords have been conducting a bloody orgy in the Horn for some time now. It doesn’t help that western-made guns end up there either. The U.S., I think, still remembers the Blackhawk incident in Somalia. But if top officials are found in the Horn, the U.S. will go there and destroy them. And it has been conducting operations there, even if just intelligence gathering.

So, what you have now is an imbalance of priorities. Do we go after terrorists or aid the civilians? There are really no one-way options here. It’s like a branch with an intricate set of twigs protruding out. You can’t have access to the civilians without dealing with the political elements of the country. In this case, before you can even bring aid you need to do some politicizing, which may contradict with my first argument, but in this

circumstance you have no choice but to give in to the push-pull mechanism of political bargaining.

The West is good at setting up sanctions and that may work well for countries like Iran and North Korea, because they're major players in the global stage, but a nation in the Horn won't flinch a nerve over threats of sanction. To them this is nothing new. When was the last time anyone had truly done anything in Africa that affected the region? Oh, right, Libya. But when it comes to sub-Saharan Africa, it's as if these government suits show a kind of guilt. *Oh dear, we made a mess of that continent. Let's just throw them money from afar.* Stepping into a sub-Saharan African country is like stepping back into your own crime scene.

Quelling terrorism anywhere is an important priority, but the local governments in that area need to step their game up as well. American/NATO operations are still in Af-Pak. We don't need another front. We just pulled our troops out of Iraq; Let's give them a rest. Washington should focus more on humanitarian efforts (with as less politics involved if possible) and diplomatic missions than military actions. This can be done by taking a more regulatory role, in that making sure aid money and supplies actually get into the hands of civilians and the non-profit organizations already working there. The U.S. and the EU needs to make sure that medicine and canned foods don't end up being filtered through local governments and are used for their personal profit. Helping with economic programs might also work. Tell the local government to either get with the program or face a larger crisis. If aid—medical, food and educational—isn't put to use properly, the country could sink deeper into a death pit. The links between terrorism and poverty has been well-studied in developing countries. I'd rather see people being fed than being blown up in a guerrilla war between western forces and militants.