"TEACHERS WITHOUT BORDERS GIVES ME HOPE."
—JANE GOODALL

I WANT TO MEET THE KING OF AMERICA

MY ENCOUNTERS WITH REMARKABLE TEACHERS AND THE POWER OF HUMAN AGENCY

DR. FRED MEDNICK, FOUNDER
For my parents, both teachers
For Rosalie, Alanna, and Lora
For Dr. Sunita Gandhi, my mentor
For Dr. Jane Goodall, my friend and hero
Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
How many clouds float past them with impunity;
how many desert sand shifts from one land to another;
how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil
in provocative hops!
...
Only what is human can truly be foreign.
The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.

—MARIA WISŁAWA ANNA SZYMBORSKA, Psalm (1976)
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Dear Reader

Heads of development organizations and college professors can’t simply walk past podiums and live mics. They have to say what’s on their minds. They lecture. Let me be clear: lectures are not evil. Add water to condensed information and you have something. It’s the droning and sanctimony that does me in, my own included. When I notice a lecture coming on, I remind myself of a quip loosely attributed to Lyndon Johnson. It goes something like this (and I paraphrase here): speeches are a lot like pissing down your leg. It may feel hot to you at first, but it gets cold (and old) quickly.

I consider myself a working-class academic—fingernails dirty, brain filled with ideas about making the world a better place. I know enough to keep lectures to a minimum and tell stories. Lots of stories. Though they can get out of hand, too, a personal, authentic story taps into our collective story by wending its way from the heart to the head to the hands. Stories about dreamers wrestling cynics. David versus Goliath stories. Stories about mobilizing classrooms, communities, even entire countries to restore justice at long last after having been subjected to knees on necks for generations. Stories spark conversations, and conversations lead to transformation.

James Orbinski, past international president of Médecins San Frontières (Doctors Without Borders/MSF), feels the same way. In the first chapter of his award-winning book, “An Imperfect Offering,” Orbinski speaks of moments “bigger than the smallness of time itself,” of a sense of urgency resonating inside the human story.

Because stories are first-hand or second-hand crafted memories, they can be, well, slippery. Just when you think you’ve got them firmly in hand, they tumble and bounce out of reach like marbles down a long flight of stairs. You try to gather them up, but several have a mind of their own, rolling away to join all their distant cousins—loose change, puzzle pieces, Bic pens, pacifiers—at some
strange objec d’reunion to which you were invited but have, alas, lost the directions.

It’s not easy to get it right. The history department might say that I play too fast and Wikipedia with my facts. I hope I have not done so. If I’m wrong, call me out. I could come back with the excuse that all memory is revisionist history, but that would raise too many eyebrows. The brain scientists might say I’m trolling around on the wrong hippocampus.

The hard-hearted on the left are likely to give me the stink eye and a speech about reductionism, cultural appropriation, white privilege. Some will sneer at my guileless, even over-inflated correlation between education and development (That last one would sting a bit.). Still others question my integrity or call me a hypocrite. The chapter about a day from hell in Nigeria might serve up ample evidence, I have to admit. I own up to the cringeworthy stuff there. But, then again, it was only one day. Now that I think of it, the stories from Afghanistan might piss them off, too.

The cold-hearted on the right will probably dismiss Nigeria and Afghanistan as shithole countries anyway and not care less. Besides, if this book is shelved in the social issues section, they will have already made up their minds not to pick it up.

It would be asking too much to ask you to accept a blanket apology for my lightweight scholarship. I only ask to save your Talmudic nit-picking for the end. Then, if so moved, let it fly. I’ll listen the whole time.

The teachers I describe in this book have helped fill in my cerebral ellipses. They tell me that my recollections are “pretty accurate.” Not exactly a ringing endorsement or a peer-reviewed seal of approval, but even if my memory isn’t pure, they can attest to purity of motive. Again, I only ask that you cut me a little slack.

Let me wrap all this up by throwing down a Toni Morrison card. The Nobel Prize winner once described memory as a “willed creation.” You wouldn’t compare her work to filling in blanks just to be cute, like Mad-Libs, would you? As far as I am concerned, whatever Toni Morrison says, goes.
Herein, then, lies my reportage. The “willed creation” parts are secondary to the central truths of what happened.

Sometimes, though, every detail comes rushing back, supported by notes and photographs. Racing through pools of rainwater in Nigeria on a pitted, unlight road from Port Harcourt to Calabar before the bandits descend. The arm of a mannequin in the middle of the street in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, just two weeks after our classes in science teaching had concluded. The stoic shock in the voice of a colleague nine time-zones away after having seen the aftermath of ethnic cleansing. Those intimidating guards watching my every move in Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s office during a series of conversations about Islam and development. That gleefully mischievous Afghan girl peeking through the bars of the White House fence, then turning to us to ask if she could meet the King of America.

They stories that follow have shaped Teachers Without Borders and they have shaped me. I hope they stick with you. There is humility, presence, steadfastness, and possibility here...and a few lectures. One last thing: I promise to stay in touch.

Let’s get started, shall we?
Introduction

The world can be a real cesspool, but I’m convinced it’s filled with generous people. Some of the most generous of all—the ones that carry the world on their shoulders—teach. Changemakers in everyone’s backyard. On a global scale, teachers are a development army. They have always been there. We may have not been paying attention.

When I ask teachers to describe why they chose the profession and what has kept them at it, they invariably blush or fidget as if I had just asked if they had flossed that day. Some appreciate having been asked. They say they don’t deserve such acclamation or that they really have not done enough to make a difference. Others find the question somewhat annoying or intrusive. I remain uncomfortably silent. Most steer me to someone else. “You should really talk to (fill in the blank). Now there’s a hero.”

I press on and remind myself that these teachers would never give up on their students, so I can’t give up on them after just a measly pushback. We teachers find ways to nudge the taciturn to talk. Sometimes I wait them out. Someone has to fill in the uncomfortable silence. I tend to loosen them up with small talk or a mix of flattery, guile, and feigned disappointment. “You really are quite humble...just like the best of them.”

I once asked a bigwig at the United Nations to define the word teacher. Without skipping a beat, he offered this: “A teacher is anyone with valuable information to share.” The simplicity of his response belies its elegance and depth. Let me diagram this sentence. Anyone includes those who have not been trained in the scope and sequence of formal preparation, but who nonetheless can teach what they know. Village elders, for instance. I include stories about a fork-lift operator and a cab driver. Valuable does not describe a commodity—precious, high-priced, and upscale, but a service—beneficial, productive, and effective. The two words—valuable information—are dance partners, especially in a world of fake news, where valuable should stand next to verifiable. Sharing
implies a conversation, not a broadcast. Valuable information to share is the essence of the teaching profession.

Here is my addition to that U.N. official’s succinct definition of a teacher. For me, the great ones seem to share an intestinal fortitude, resilience, consistency, intelligence, implacable confidence, and moral courage to put children first. They orchestrate learning and clear away obstacles so that children can climb each stair of their accomplishments with enough confidence to imagine their own futures. They do so because they recognize that students should be at the center. While some teachers are entertaining, the finest teachers amongst us do not necessarily see the need to perform or dazzle. The world does not need a teachers’ version of “America’s Got Talent: Teachers’ Edition.” I tire of the movie and cartoon versions. The creepy or inspiring or over sexualized or incompetent teacher. Ferris Bueller’s economics teacher, Professor Snape, Ms. Frizzle, Walter White. Many are odd, flawed, ornery, forgetful, even too damn cheery.

I glaze over when the subject comes up about whether teachers are born or made. We don’t get to choose teachers to train any more than teachers get to choose their students. Many of the extraordinary ones seem pretty ordinary. They simply show up, even in what has become a terribly wrong place at the right time, to serve.

They show up for sixty children crowded into Quonset huts without desks, books, or water—the air a stagnant, heavy mix of soot, lime, petrol, and sweat. They show up in spite of those in power without a modicum of decency to provide books, paper, or basic supplies one would find in a classroom. They show up in odd places to collect up discarded bicycle parts, toys, and plastic bottles so that they may teach arithmetic, physics, engineering, and art. They show up, though they have no classroom or school with a roof at all, for their students under a tree or in a cave to help children scratch out addition and subtraction answers in the sand. They show up, at their own risk, to shelter children from angry teenagers with assault weapons. Separatist groups tanked up on liquid courage, generic Viagra, and backyard bennies. Mercenaries ransacking classrooms to establish firing positions, store a cache of arms, or erect polling booths for sham elections.
On good days, legions of teachers have shown up to teach about climate change when a once-in-a-century floods crops and washes away homes. They show up to build classrooms that serve as homey laboratories of democracy—places designed around restorative justice and inclusion. They talk about race, the diversity of family, the fluidity of gender. They teach about how to protect oneself from spreading a deadly virus, even when crowds with weapons tell them it’s all a hoax.

Teachers show up at the very moment when urgency demands agency. It’s our turn to show up for them.
Addled Child

I BECAME a teacher the hard way—by suffering as a student.

The word “addled” never appeared on our fourth-grade vocabulary list, but its meaning was explicitly clear when my teacher impaled me with that word. “Mr. Mednick! You are an addled child!” To this day, I remain mystified by the logic of using the formal salutation of one’s last name to humiliate a child. Hit squarely between the eyes, I went down. Incidents like these fragments. I fish them out to this very day.

I should have known better than to cross her invisible chalk-line, but I was too busy practicing my Buddy Rich pencil paradiddles against the side of my chair. Too distracted to notice the Hawaiian Punch-colored blotch spreading across her neck. Too busy being busy to spot her eyes narrow like Clint Eastwood in A Fistful of Dollars.

She must have exhausted all the discipline strategies from her spiral-bound Tips for Teachers binder perched on the edge of her desk. (#1) “Review behavioral expectations” (#2) “Offer help strategies” (#3) “Make eye contact” (#4) “Speak after class” (#5) “Rearrange seating” (#6) “Redirect attention.” Just before she unleashed her word javelin, she had been standing the farthest diagonal between two points in a square classroom, applying her best B.F. Skinner tactic (#7): “extinguish negative behavior by not reinforcing it.” Translated from my version of an Eduspeak-English, English-Eduspeak dictionary: she was ignoring me.

But I should have known, having already been chastised the last few days for following instructions she had never given or answering a question she had never asked. I must have driven right through the universal sign for stop, stop, stop—arm straight, palm up, like our crossing guard or a trapped pantomimist on Ed Sullivan. Tonight, it would be tip #8: “inform (and enlist) the parents.”
Some context: my teacher had been asking for a show of hands to see who understood the steps for an arithmetic problem on the board. Even back then, I thought this teaching technique was suspect. Public voting may work at, say, your local town hall meeting to approve extra funding for Shakespeare in the Park. But for nine-year-old kids learning arithmetic? The stakes are too high. If most of us raised our hands, why would one or two honest ones risk their peers’ ridicule and expose their weakness? If a dozen raised their hands, but two dozen of us remained silent, would she take that as enough feedback to teach the lesson again or in a different way? Probably not. What if she asked us to work in a small group to help each student who needs help learn from a peer? Or asked for students to teach the lesson, rather than compete for the recognition of already knowing the answer? Spoiler alert: I witnessed a great approach in a village outside of Ahmedabad, India, but try to restrain yourselves from skipping ahead.

A few days earlier, dismayed by a bloodbath of marks on my homework, I was bound to turn the unfamiliar into the familiar, decipher the logic of fractions, do something right. In class, I thought my time had come, right here, right now to prove myself worthy and win her over. A nod or even a genuine smile in my general direction, perhaps? I waved both arms as if I were trying to flag down a distant cousin at a crowded train station. The more she ignored me, (as she had done with stinging regularity), the more agitated I got. Apparently, I was wrapped in my chair-desk, half-standing, as if I were trying to wriggle my way out of a Halloween costume forced upon me by bullies.

In prior phone calls, my parents had explained that eczema was responsible for transforming a cheerful toddler into the rash-consumed, squirming menace this teacher had observed. My body felt like sandpaper. I had been sawing, chafing, and churning my limbs against the iron legs of my school desk or filing my knuckles and my elbows on the indentation for pencils. Once in a while, when I noticed blood on my shirt, I would sit as still as I could, resisting the impulse to scratch through the pain. But not this time. I had painted my own red target.

She seemed to shout the words, “addled child,” startling my classmates. I dropped back in my seat in that way E. Annie Proulx describes as “a heaving sludge of ice under fog where air blurred into water.” Others might be
snickering, but I could not hear it. If my peers were staring at me, I did not notice them. If the secondhand on the clock over the chalkboard still ticked inexorably forward, time stood still. To this day, whenever I hear the word, “addled,” I can still feel my pulse in my ears.

She did not enlist rule #4 (“speak after class”). By 3:05, I had already reached the alley behind the school where no one could see me and raced home. I stripped off my school bag, reached under the doormat for the key, and stepped into the cool sanctuary of the living room.

The zipper was open. My pencils and erasers must have spilled out somewhere en route. They could easily be replaced. I plunged my hand into the bag to fish around for a talisman as consoling and palliative as any child’s stuffed animal—a ruler made of ash, stenciled in red with “Rulers of Baseball” at the top in that distinctive cursive sports script, the last “l” sweeping under the letters, followed by a list of the great ones: Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics, Cy Young of the Boston Pilgrims, Willie (Say Hey Kid) of the San Francisco Giants, Hammerin’ Hank Aaron of the Atlanta Braves, and my hero: Sandy Koufax. On the other side, the usual picket fence of inch-lengths as predictable as summer. It was gone. I couldn’t bring myself to retrace my steps. I dared not be seen.

The screen door wheezed shut behind me. I could hear boys shouting outside on their Schwinn’s, baseball cards sputtering in their spokes. I would not be joining them. I climbed on the armrest of our turquoise couch to pull down the Webster’s and search for “addled.” Crawling my fingers up the spine, I slipped on the plastic slipcover. The tome fell from my hands, bouncing on the cushions and crashing onto a glass coffee table. The glass did not shatter, but the book freed itself from its mesh binding. I accordioned the sides back together, fingered the indented divot for the letter “A,” drawing my finger down the page. I stopped at “adder” and read the definition. Did my teacher say I was an adder: (n)—a poisonous snake? This would be an insult enough, but a snake-child made little sense. I didn’t slither or bite. I continued down the column until I reached addled. “Addled,” from the Old English, adel, to make or become confused, fuzzy, disoriented. When used as an adjective: (of an egg) or rotten. That’s me.
When my mother returned home after work, she found me slumped on the couch. She noticed a slipcover on the floor, the coffee table slightly skewed, the dictionary not flush with the growing number of World Books, even though I was careful to use both hands to push it back in slowly like a dentist setting a missing tooth. She felt my forehead. I remained silent.

Calls home usually came when we were doing the dishes. This evening would be no exception. Standing atop the yellow pages next to my mother, I wiped my hands on my pants and prepared to slink away. Through ring two, she read my expression and dried her hands on a dish towel in slow motion, settled her shoulders during ring three, and snatched the receiver from its cradle in the middle of ring four.

I backed away to a corner of the kitchen, toeing the curl where the linoleum met the wall, surprised that she didn’t dismiss me and tell me to go to my room.

Imagine, dear reader, split-screen dueling kitchens, each with a Formica table and matching Naugahyde chairs in a kitchen wallpapered with sunflowers and daisies or a faded farm scene, turquoise or black Bakelite rotary phone attached to the wall. Each contestant is seated at the table, the curly cord from the receiver stretched to its limit. Who judges? Who will go too far? Emerge victorious? Hang up first?

In one frame, a teacher with an itemized list, delivering the news, eyeing her fingernails. In the other frame, the mother, also a teacher, and her addled child lurking nearby.

“Hello?” My mother was accustomed to wading through the disingenuous greeting and attempt at small talk until my teacher got to the list of my latest misdemeanors, each delivered with just enough forensic detail to make this quick and render useless any defense. She nodded. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. She opened her mouth and closed it again.

Like clockwork, my teacher had transitioned to a stream of hackneyed and duplicitous words of advice in order to soften the blow: I should apply myself, check my homework before turning it in, and curb my obstreperous behavior. She must have added those anemic and bewildering words of advice about not
wasting my potential and not being my own worst enemy. My mother rolled her eyes and neck bobbed, but still had not responded.

While my mother is planning her response, I owe you, dear reader, my mother’s thinking process. Was not applying himself a thinly coded way of saying my son is dull? On the contrary, he did check and recheck his homework. His squirrely behavior was not directed against others, but a desperate plea to be acknowledged and given a chance. How do you know about his potential if you shut down his motivation to learn? As for the worst-enemy trope, how does one negotiate a peace treaty with oneself? What sets him off? Shall he surrender? Why should learning be compared to war?

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a psychologist and co-founder of Head Start once wrote: "Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her." I wasn’t asking for unconditional love. I simply wanted to be seen. She was my own worst enemy. Surely my mother would recognize this.

Regardless of what happened on that call, there would be consequences. The signs were easy to read. If my mother bobbed her head like a dashboard hula girl (check), it was blah, blah, blah, but I could safely assume there would be no transistor radio for a month, which meant no Dodger games, even under my pillow. If she rolled her eyes, a lighter sentence would be in order: Dodger games only with proof of homework completed and checked, chores done. If my mother cocked her head, puzzled at what she was hearing or simply not convinced, I would get a lecture. If she felt impugned as a parent, she would straighten up and purse her lips. I might even be spared entirely. Either way, she always hung up the phone slowly to heighten the suspense. I would summon the courage to appear and face the music. There was never anger or belt to the backside. Punishment would fit my crimes, I suppose. Either way, my eczema would roar back, like clockwork, perhaps my body’s somatic appeal for pity and clemency.

Forgive me. Just writing this I get nervous. I was jumping ahead just now. We’re not there yet. To sum up: one split-screen half is talking, the other half listening. I, frankly, found this riveting. Was this, indeed, a surrender? Or could she be planning something? Did she think my teacher’s approach was tedious,
overbearing, spiteful? Would she throw down the eczema card again? Agree with her, but convince my teacher that this would best be handled at home? The odds were not in my favor.

Did she roll her eyes? Did she also cock her head? My mother speaks! “May I ask what the class was working on that caused my son to behave the way you describe?” By dissecting the content of the lesson and its form of pedagogy, did she dare to expose flaws? This was a teacher-to-teacher, insider to insider approach. She would never go so far as to shift responsibility from me entirely, but neither would she concede that my teacher was blameless. By introducing a larger context—a rigid and unforgiving classroom climate, perhaps, and a reminder that adults must act with equanimity and balance toward all children, even the squirrely ones, she might temper my teacher’s predilection for character assassination. Out it came: “He’s a good boy. He reads all the time. He thinks. He’s very curious. Sometimes too curious. It’s just that he doesn’t do well when he feels intimidated.” Atticus Finch in mom form!

Who could argue with the notion that frightened kids feel scrambled and act out? It was both understated and irrefutable. “When he feels intimidated” was not so much an admission of guilt, but an accusation. My mother had watched me labor over that very homework assignment. I knew the answer and how I had arrived at them. This was observation versus observation. True, I was a twitchy, grating, unnerving pain in the ass, but I was trying. Making progress, too.

Close to sixty years hence, I imagine thought bubbles from the split screen:

Teacher: “I have concerns,” followed by offenses 1-3: apply himself...check homework...potential...worst enemy...” Teacher thought bubble: Kids like yours make me consider early retirement.

Mother: “Which assignment? What, specifically, was going on?” Mom thought bubble: Maybe you should have retired last year.

Teacher: “In the middle of my lesson...” Teacher thought bubble: Maybe your kid has shit for brains.
**Mother:** (nodding, readying her comeback) Mom thought bubble: Maybe you should cut my kid some slack, asshole.

The call ended. I don’t remember who hung up first. It may have been a draw. My mother motioned me over and pressed me against her pleated skirt, a smell of dishwater soap, rubber gloves, chicken, broccoli. She seemed taller, looking down at her son doing his best to tamp down the urge to cry and scratch the crook of his arm, his lower lip, his knees.

No Dodger games, more chores, homework completed before going anywhere. I knew it was coming. Koufax was pitching that night, but my sentence was relatively short. I didn’t have the energy to bargain for extra chores, if only I could listen to the game. Affirmed yet deflated, I handed over my transistor radio and went to bed early.

True, I was a walking, talking, itchy, niacin rush with a faulty on-off switch instead of a dimmer. My mother knew it and did her best. The teacher didn’t care. It is challenging to teach kids with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. But it is far more challenging to be that kid. There was no neurodivergent sensibility back then, no personalization of instruction. Just winners and losers. Teacher: 1, Son: 0.

I knew how to get to the answer for that problem on the board, but it did not matter. I wanted to be known and acknowledged, not known about and labeled. For most children, this distinction is so significant that they are willing to go to extraordinary lengths—for better or worse—to be seen before they can see, to be understood before they can understand, to feel free from fear before being free to learn. Surely there must be another way to teach. Or another way to learn. I was simply a flawed, feckless fuckup.

The word spear stopped, replaced by the slow burn of neglect and, most likely, a few disparaging notes for my file. Expectations were low and I sunk to meet them. Over time, school felt unjust, unkind, embarrassing, even conspiratorial. I could not help myself from staring outside my classroom window, gripped by an irresistible desire to be elsewhere.
I continued to struggle. The familiar felt unfamiliar. Every question at the back of a chapter became a knot of impossible complexity. Mathematics was a foreign code without a legend for reference. My on-off switch turned off. Suffering in silence, squeaked by. By junior high, the eczema was gone and I even managed to get serviceable grades. But I simply lost interest.

In high school, two-inch American history textbooks favored disconnected, bite-sized memorizables and minutiae I could easily have looked up in the World Book encyclopedia or glean from “The College Bowl” quiz show. A set chronology left little room for interpretation. If there were intimations, there was only the what, not the why or how. If I were the teacher, I would teach this course differently. At the very least, maybe I would find right-wing and left-wing history textbooks and ask the students to find the truth and tell me how they got there. Or maybe I would start with contemporary news and work backward to see where contemporary problems come from.

It was 1969. The Civil Rights Act was only a year old. I had questions and I wanted answers. Why did it take so long to vote it in? Why was there so much discrimination in housing, and why so much in the north, when I had read that all the problems were in the south? Why did Sirhan Sirhan shoot Bobby Kennedy in my own city of L.A.? How did war go from hot to cold to hot again? Why does everyone think the Apollo space missions are so important? Why were 14 black athletes kicked off the University of Wyoming football team just for wearing black armbands? Why were members of the Black Panthers shot in their beds by Chicago policemen? Was the “arc of the moral universe” truly bending “toward justice?” or a dream deferred, a dream suppressed, a systemic and protracted nightmare?

But I knew better than to offer suggestions on teaching. I would craft my own education. I propped my textbook on my desk to hide Bernard Malamud’s The Natural or Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita or Karl Marx’s The Communist Manifesto—subjects far more attractive to an alienated adolescent: baseball (familiar, comforting), sex (confusing, tingly), and revolution (brewing, angry). Anything but the monotony of nonsense spooned out in class.
My grades continued to slip. What does a teenage boy do when it is getting impossible to catch up? The answer is to find an excuse or a cause. School was the enemy, though I had not noticed that my teachers began to loosen up and get more interesting. If my grades were the same whether I applied myself or not, then clearly I was the oppressed and school the oppressor.

If my future was a world of manual labor, now was as good a time as any to start. I found work in a bagel factory—an abbreviated swing shift on weekdays, graveyard shift on weekends. I would organize the workers. Training in bagel-making took a half hour. Someone mixes the dough, a machine shapes the bagels, and a worker spaces them out on a floured, rotating plate. I was to ring one bagel per finger, gently, and slip them into a vat of steaming, bubbling water, stir for five minutes with a soggy baseball bat, remove them with a butterfly net, and splay them out on another floured plate for inserting into ovens set to 425°.

After hours of standing over a swirl of moist, hot steam from the cauldron and a wall of stifling air from the ovens, prickly bumps formed on my arms and spread to my chest and shoulders like a Moscato wine-spill. I thought I had long outgrown my eczema, I was back to squirming, rubbing, chafing, burning. Once, the boss commanded me to step away from my double toil and trouble and strip off my shirt. Rather than toss me a damp towel, he thumbed open an orange box of Arm & Hammer Baking Soda and shook it above my head, like fairy dust, to ease the hives. My sweat turned to a white paste that seemed to bake into my skin. Men in tank-tops operating the dough-stirring machine began to chuckle. I rushed to the bathroom, tore away my apron, filled Dixie cups with cool water, and doused the back of my neck. I glanced at the ghost in the mirror. I speed-cranked the window to get some fresh air. Unable to live in my own skin, incompetent at school, even worse at work, I decided to go to college right then and there. I hung up my apron, walked out of the bagel factory, cold-showered off my papier-mâché skin, and broke the good news to my parents. I barely got in.

Only then did the world open. It only took one teacher. Dorothy Overly’s Literature and Politics course was an intellectual powder-keg and she held the match. She paced. She wore iridescent, flowered moo-moos. She smoked
Chesterfields through a black plastic cigarette holder she claimed to have found in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. She cried when she read poems, described every inch of Picasso’s Guernica, asked questions that spawned more questions, and told stories. Lots of stories. “Stories allow us to be known,” she said. “Without them, we’re just plumbing.”

In the middle of one of her musings about a poem or an evocative passage, she would simply stop abruptly as if she had forgotten her keys or a word on the tip of her tongue. This deliberate, intoxicating, palpable silence left room for the words to waft above us like her smoke halos heading for the ceiling lights. We were a diverse group—autoworkers at a GM plant willing to drive two hours each way to expand their options; immigrants with passing TOEFL scores, determined not to break their momentum; retired folks auditing the course; and kids like me, attempting to build back a sense of worth. For the most part, we all entered her course with the distinct impression that we were at the periphery of learning, nibbling at the edges. She was there as both a steward of, and model for thinking out loud. Learning was no longer reduced to the mechanics of teacher transmission and student assimilation. No winners or losers there.

In the last half-hour of the final class session, I was not reading anything else. My mind was not elsewhere. I was not looking outside my window. I was not squirming or chafing or drumming with pencils. I was listening intently. She took a puff and then I heard my name. I flushed. She announced that my paper was insightful and alive and asked my permission to read a few paragraphs aloud. She did not wait for my response before she went ahead. She said she believed it was honest and clear. Clear, I beamed, is the opposite of addled. Public acknowledgment is a thrill for anyone, but for me—that moment was singularly epiphanic. My paper, the source of her last session? Who, me, with something to share? For a moment, I vanquished my own worst enemies. I forgive my elementary school teacher. I forgave myself. True, one moment of affirmation is hardly an antidote for public humiliation, but it was a salve for my thin or pocked skin.

I wanted to be that kind of teacher.
Chairman Mao: Thriller, Killer

AFTER I had been teaching for four years, I convinced my wife to spend a year together at Henan University in Kaifeng, China, teaching English. She was up for the adventure. Most of our belongings fit neatly into a broom closet. It was 1984.

The idea for Teachers Without Borders may very well have been sparked by the experience. Why China? Thank you for asking! To explain, I have to go back further, to 1968, to be exact. That’s when my infatuation with Mao Zedong began. Simply put, I thought Mao was cool. He was The Great Helmsman—avuncular, visionary, larger than life. I was 14 and impressionable.

My parents were ideological New York lefties, the kind that eventually drift off to a cushier life in the suburbs once the hit nice weather in Southern California. “Never anti-communists,” they used to say. “Just ex-communists.” They would never, however, get rid of their books and magazines.

But at 14, politics was not foremost in my mind. I was leafing through my parents’ coffee-table books with a singularly developmental, rather than ideological, purpose. I was going through my parents’ coffee-table art books searching for a painting I had seen on a trip with my parents to New York and the Metropolitan Museum of Art years earlier. It was Paul Gauguin’s “Two Tahitian Women” (1899). One woman is completely topless, carrying a bowl of red mango blossoms as if that’s what she always does...and the other with one breast exposed—both women serene and comfortable in their own skin. Clueless to any larger sense of how such a painting objectifies the “exotic” and “erotic,” I was imprinted with that image. I imagine my mother must have nudged me to move along.

Since I didn’t have the guts to ask anyone in school for, say, an old Playboy and the local library did not let us check out National Geographics, modern art would have to do. Thumbing past Mondrian blotches and Picasso’s portraits of...
women with misplaced noses and eyes, I came up empty, so I turned to the bookshelves.


All the steamy stuff I was looking for was on those shelves—D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and John O’Hara—but if it didn’t have pictures, I wasn’t interested. I spied a bundle of rolled-up, outsized magazines shoved behind other books. That showed promise. I assumed they were from my sister who, at the time, was dating a commie with a sports car. They could even belong (dare I say it) to my parents. I untied the kite-string on the outside chance I might stumble onto some bona fide smut. After all, leftists have libidos, too. Let me to interject a little research here. Charles Fourier, the utopian socialist has made a loose, albeit suspect, connection between sex and socialism (social activism as turn-on?), but that’s not my point.

I struck out again. This was a bundle of oversized copies of socialist magazines, hardly material for the tingling sensation I was seeking. Nevertheless, they caught my eye. It is impossible to remember which issue diverted my attention from the carnal to the political, but thanks to eBay and archive.org, I have picked an issue of China Reconstructs (July 1968), Vol. XVII. No. 71 by way of illustration. You’ll have to trust me on this one.

This issue even had a foldout, though the wrong kind, filling two horizontal pages of a painting titled: “Advancing from Victory to Victory” (painter unknown, of course, because only masses mattered in China back then.). Let’s

1For the curious and easily distractible, more Maophilia can be found at: https://massline.org/PekingReview. Who can resist pearls like: “Use Mao Tse-Tung’s Thought to Open the Gate to “The Enigma of Life”? ” (#1, January 1, 1967) or the slightly confusing “Earnestly Implement the Principle of “Supporting the Left, but Not Any Particular Faction” “ (#5, February 2, 1968). “On the Re-Education of Intellectuals” includes this chilling statement: “The great leader Chairman Mao teaches us throughout the whole course of the socialist revolution and socialist construction, the remolding of the intellectuals is a question of major significance” (#38, September 20).
place this piece in the Socialist-Realist Surrealism camp, as paradoxical as that may sound. It depicts the Chairman standing erect above wispy clouds in his characteristic Zhongshan suit, red ribbons on each collar. A dark winter coat is draped over his right arm. He holds his wool cap bearing an impeccably-stitched red star in his right hand. In his left hand, he dangles a cigarette. Apparently, China’s heavenly messenger was a smoker. Below those ethereal clouds, one can make out a green pagoda peeking out from rolling hills and vast farmland stretching to the horizon in various shades of red. You read that right. Even the sky takes on a pinkish color. In China heaven, one might surmise, the vegetables are red, too. Mao is not looking down, but across, this vista—surely contemplating yet another victory.

China Reconstructs was a propaganda goldmine. Articles left no room for doubt: “Chairman Mao Tse-Tung Celebrates May Day with the Capital’s Revolutionary Masses.” “Study Classes Prove Their Worth.” China would show the world they had inventions, big machines, big plans.

I loved the inventions. Each machine was accompanied by a romantic quotation from Chairman Mao or excerpt from a party communiqué. In a section titled Machine Industry Progress, the “High-Precision Universal Cylindrical Grinder” must have been inspired by “On what basis should our policy rest? It should rest on our own strength and that means regeneration through one’s efforts.” Maybe it’s just me, but I am not certain that these words conjure up a high-precision universal cylindrical grinder. Engineers must developed the “Automatic Oil-fired Boiler” after reflecting upon these words: “It is people, not things, that are decisive.” Frankly, I would think an oil-fired boiler would epitomize decisiveness, but who am I to argue?
Indulge me, dear reader, one more article and caption (my personal favorite) for the “New Electric Sheep-Shearer.” The sales pitch is a solemn, steely pep talk: “The Chinese people have high aspirations, they have ability, and they will certainly catch up with and surpass the advanced world in the not too distant future.” Perhaps the sheep-shearer ran into some wooly snags with this reminder that the Chinese people should not get overzealous: “It is sheer fantasy to imagine that the cause of socialism is all plain sailing and easy success...” Did you catch that? Sheer fantasy gets me every time. Could this be some kind of authorial wink and subterfuge that slipped past the hypervigilant, literally-minded, censorship police? I hope they didn’t catch it post production and send the writer to a re-education camp.

China was a perfect cocktail of adolescent angst, moral outrage, unimpeachable clarity, branding, and belonging. Curiosity leaves lots of room to get sucked in.

Thousands and thousands of miles away, a modern workers’ revolution was unfolding. Underdogs rising up against oppressors and everyone on the same page. All that progress and breathtaking resilience in the face of war, famine, and disease. Ruddy workers and cheery children yearning and earning in the same direction, warmed under the same eastern (reddish) sun.

China had the Yangtze River—that majestic, ancient scroll unfurling 6,418 kilometers from glaciers high in the Tibetan Plateau to the East China Sea in Shanghai, past spectacular gorges, feeding vast farmland producing a surfeit of wheat and rice along the way. What did I see outside my window? The Los Angeles river, once described in LA Magazine as a “post-apocalyptic concrete-lined ditch,” chosen as a perfect location for All Quiet on the Western Front because it looked like a ‘no-man’s land.’ And what could be better for a drag-racing scene from Grease than a dried-up river bed bounded by tract homes like mine, a few orange groves, and parking lots? Where I lived, nothing at all peaked above the clouds. In fact, we couldn’t tell the difference between clouds and smog.

Neither were there cheery farmworkers toiling with smiles on their faces. Just the opposite. Filipino farmworkers were at the height of a resistance movement, later taken up by Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers (UFW) against
exploitative management. Earlier that year, Chavez had fasted for 25 days to show the world what it took to bring iceberg lettuce, California table grapes, and Gallo wine to the local consumer: punishing child labor, unsanitary working conditions, substandard health care, below-subsistence pay, and toxic pesticides raining on laborers and sprayed on both Mexican and Filipino farm workers on a picket line. Californian farmworkers were exhausted, yet they kept up the fight, shouting "huelga!," strike in Spanish, or "welga!" in Tagalog. To support the strikers, my parents and friends boycotted iceberg lettuce or table grapes. Decades later, long after the strike had been settled, I couldn’t get myself to buy them. By comparison, the hand touched-up photographs of Chinese farmworkers looked ruddy and satisfied. They were thrilled to be farmworkers.

The contrast could not be more stark. At a smoky left-wing bookstore where employees and guest speakers looked as if they slept in their clothes, I bought a Mao button striated with sunrays and a pocket-sized, red-vinyl book of "Quotations from Chairman Mao." If I had a lot of questions, these folks had quick answers. Mao had transformed the most populous country on earth from despair to happiness. I wanted to go from despair to happiness, too. There was a crowd of Los Angelenos that thought the same way.

I gobbled up pamphlets about Mao’s rise to power. How he formed separate columns to confuse his enemies and then appealed to youth to enlist in “The Long March” to save the country, and they did, traversing thousands of li over treacherous terrain, crossing river after river, enduring bombs and starvation, and fending off random attacks by both Nationalists and Japanese invaders from the north. “Revolution,” Mao Zedong wrote, “is not a dinner party.” Damn straight, I said to myself, unaware then that 7 of 10 soldiers were reported to have died in that struggle. I read Edgar Snow’s Red Star Over China (an American!), a hagiographic ode to Chairman Mao’s march to reclaim the country. Today, it sounds like a movie trailer voiceover:

“Adventure, exploration, discovery, human courage and cowardice, ecstasy and triumph, suffering, sacrifice, and loyalty, and then through it all, like a flame, an undimmed ardor, and undying hope and amazing revolutionary optimism of those thousands of youths who would not admit defeat by man or nature or God or death — all this and more seemed embodied in the history of an odyssey unequaled in modern times.”
Undying hope. Revolutionary optimism. An unequalled odyssey. Damn straight. I was in.

I read about how Mao introduced reforms regarding women’s rights and urged women to join the workforce on an equal basis with their male counterparts. It was Mao Zedong who coined the phrase: “Women hold up half the sky.” The Marriage Law outlawed prostitution and concubinage. Women could initiate a divorce. In an attempt to address tuberculous, cholera, polio, malaria, hookworm, and smallpox, Mao initiated mass vaccination campaigns and sanitation projects. Barefoot doctors fanned out across the countryside, administering to the people and promoting proper hygiene techniques. Life-expectancy rose. The opium trade and addictions came to a screeching halt.

This was progress. The guy thought of everything.

From victory to victory.

In 1956, a few years after Josef Stalin died, Chairman Mao launches the “Hundred Flowers Campaign,” a policy designed to “let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend,” in order to stimulate creativity and constructive critique.

Open-minded, too!

New ideas (read: correct ideas) can only flourish, Mao maintained, when old ideas are exposed. This was to be a nation of whistleblowers. Look within (“self-criticism”); look around at friends, family, anyone acting, well, non-revolutionary (“criticism”). Examine your bourgeois impulses and report other “spiritually polluted” people that exhibited them. Purify the ranks, the playbook said. Tell us what we are doing wrong. Express your concerns. Hang your posters. Students and intellectuals were encouraged to criticize previous campaigns, counter-revolutionary actions, even party members who expect preferential treatment. Let the people smoke them out! So clever! So transparent and accountable! Did I read anywhere that this was a tactic of identifying enemies? No I did not. Would I believe it if I saw it in print? No, I would not.

Frustrated by the Soviet Union’s hubris, industrialist chest-thumping, elbowing out any nation in their way to assume the mantle of communist leadership,
meddling in China’s affairs, cozying up to western nations, and disregarding China’s unique role as an emerging socialist power, Mao is convinced that Russia was not only ideologically flabby, but imperialist, even a military threat to China itself. While he would wait to 1961 to call the USSR a bunch of “revisionist traitors,” Mao seems to have already made up his mind. China may not have Russia’s resources, but they had an inexhaustible supply of cheap labor and a mobilization strategy. China would not just catch up to Russia. China would be a shining red star—USSR 2.0, their way...and better.

Everything I read affirmed my belief in Mao. “The Great Leap Forward” (1958-1962) was designed to accelerate China’s status from an agriculturally-based economy to one that could also be an industrial powerhouse. Nothing I read would give me reason to think there was anything egregiously wrong about what unfolded. I was a history student unaware that I was trapped in an insidious red bubble.

“The Great Leap Forward” was an unmitigated economic and social development disaster. Irrigation projects lacked critical infrastructure and engineering, resulting in drastic water conservation programs. Failed crop experiments based upon a “new biology” developed in the Soviet Union rejected Mendelian genetics and natural selection in favor of exaggerated claims about seed growth, density, and yield. Its chief proponent, Trofim Lysenko, impressed Communist Party officials by denouncing biologists as “fly-lovers and people haters” who held conspiratorial theories about those who might question his motives. Backyard furnaces cobbled together from scrap metal and available wood produced meager outputs, even in the face of more efficient, coal-burning methods. More villagers were enlisted to work in industry, leaving fields untended, even during the harvest. Crops died of thirst.

What you don’t reap sows destruction. Distracted by its great leap into a wannabe industrial unknown, locusts swarmed. Meanwhile, people continued to succumb to tuberculosis, cholera, polio, malaria, hookworm, and smallpox. Vaccinations couldn’t possibly keep up. Leaders popularized the call to kill the carriers of disease: mosquitoes, rodents, flies, and, for good measure, the sparrows that feasted on grain and rice. One propaganda poster shows a knife from nowhere dissecting a mosquito that has landed on a fly, atop a sparrow
ready to claw open a rat, belly up. In other posters, children wield fly swatters. Villagers clutch poison spray canisters and small pitchforks or gather around a tree aiming rifles at sparrows. The net result: a carnival for locusts, compounded by more famine and drought. The “Great Leap Forward” has been more accurately called “The Great Famine.” Recent declassified documents reveal Mao’s callous indifference to torture, execution, children buried alive, desperation, cannibalism. Some reports estimate casualties at 45 million.

In 1966, at 72, a photograph of Mao circulates widely—the Chairman, hale and hearty, swimming in the Yangtze River, ready to launch his new campaign, “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” Enter Chairman Mao’s little red book of quotations—compulsory reading. He purges rivals in the party or any conspiratorial agents who might threaten his place at the top and his campaign to rid the country of “capitalist influences and bourgeois thinking.” The Cultural Revolution channels adolescent rebelliousness into rabid zealotry. Youth chapters of the Red Guards serve as paramilitary units charged with upholding “class struggle” and waging a crusade against counterrevolutionaries or anything associated with the “Four Olds:” old ideas, old customs, old culture, and old habits. Cultural and religious sites are desecrated and decimated. Schools close. Teachers, intellectuals, and wearers of western clothes are beaten. Up to sixteen million youth are sent to “re-education” camps for hard labor and indoctrination. The Cultural Revolution, about which I was starstruck, was an occult attraction to an ideology responsible for the death of 1.5 million Chinese people until Mao Zedong’s own death in 1976.

I didn’t know about all that then. I didn’t want to know. I was a sucker for the double punch of a cult of personality and what Edward Said has called “the epidemic of Orientalism.”

In college I realized I had been sold a bill of goods. I, too, am an ex-communist, not an anti-communist. And yet, I still hold onto my kitschy Mao tchotchkes—reminders, perhaps, that tidy solutions to large-scale problems are almost always destined for disaster and that saviors are dangerous.

By the 1980s, surely China had seen the light. Mao was gone. His horrors were exposed. Intellectuals were no longer subjects of ideological derision, but
commendable “mental workers,” instrumental for China’s development. Educational institutions dismantled during the Cultural Revolution were reinstated and rebuilt. Perpetuators of the Cultural Revolution had been arrested.

“The Four Modernizations” focused on agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense. Originally conceived during the “Great Leap Forward,” the “Four Modernizations” had even been incorporated into the party constitution. The argument went something like this: we invented paper, gunpowder, the printing press, and the compass, so we’ve always been about modernization. But the earlier version Mao conceived was lost in the blur of class struggle rhetoric. Modernization involves sacrifice and global agreements. Back then, China was hardly in the mood.

But in the 1980s, a new version was well underway. It felt balanced. China would be counted in the family of nations. Burned before, I searched for more objective reporting to see if this, too, was yet another propaganda campaign masking more execrable horrors. I didn’t see it.

Why not experience China first hand? The Ministry of Education had recently embarked upon a campaign to import English speakers. We signed up. My wife’s assignment was to teach a course for undergraduates entitled: English Speaking and Listening. My assignment: American and British Literature and Essays for graduate students of English, a required course in the teaching certificate program.

Our official job title could not be more flattering: “Foreign Expert.” To this day, this undeserved badge of honor remains on my résumé. We were experts simply because we were foreigners and fluent in our native tongue. To our students and the university administration, however, we were a walking, talking encyclopedia.

That perception was put to the test within weeks of our arrival when we were asked to “give a lecture.” I asked for a few more specifics. Our interpreter looked pained and answered curtly: “About American history and culture.”

I found my way to a library/storage room smelling of damp linen and cabbage and came across an American history textbook from the 1960s. There was no
check-out system, so I jotted down the Table of Contents on index cards to get the chronology right. I hadn’t taken an American history course since eleventh grade. This book hadn’t reached the Vietnam war. I made a mental note to use the Vietnamese name: “The American war in Vietnam.” I would be friend, not foe.

We did not get clear answers about a focus time-frame, for whom, or the size of the audience. We had to be prepared for any eventuality. We were ushered into a cavernous auditorium filled to capacity. I imagined the invitation. “Come see the Americans talk.” Bats careened from rafter to rafter as if taking turns to test our powers of concentration. The audience did not notice. The settled in. Professors put out their cigarettes by wetting fingers with phlegm and punching them or grinding them with their standard-issue black shoes.

After introductions and polite applause, the Dean puffed and tapped the microphone, reached into his pocket to pull out his own index card to read the question aloud: “Could you describe American history?” Sure, I said to myself, mumbling under my breath: “How much time do you have?” I patted my jacket pocket to make sure the cards were there. My wife smiled, holding out her palm to indicate that it was my show.

I had been employing a some mnemonic techniques to rely less on the cards. I started with Mount Rushmore just to impress them. Huge carving of notables into a mountain in South Dakota: We just love Rushmore: We (Washington) just (Jefferson) love (Lincoln) Rushmore (Roosevelt).

I peered out into the audience to check for understanding, as teachers naturally tend to do. So far so good. Lots of practice mumbling. What did it matter, in the end, what I said? paraded out more greatest hits, each one accompanied by a one-line description: The Louisiana Purchase: The United States buys a huge parcel of land from France, doubling our size. Some heads down—scribbling, scribbling, scribbling—others sounding out “Louisiana Purchase.”

I was way behind. Besides, I was parroting the same way I was taught). The room began to heat up. I started to race. Gold was discovered in California. One liner. The Civil War. One liner. The Emancipation Proclamation. One liner, and so forth, rattling off chapter headings: The 13th Amendment. The Klan. Jim
Crow. Industrialization. Transportation: the Transcontinental Railroad, the Wright Brothers, the Model T. Communication: the telegraph, the telephone. I needed a teleprompter.

No human being can absorb this absurd parade of unfamiliar and decontextualized historical references about a country they’ll unlikely see. But I was in too deep, so on I went: World War I. The 19th Amendment and the right of women to vote. The Great Depression. World War II – one liners all. I hadn’t even caught up with the textbook and at least 20 minutes had passed. If this were the Academy Awards, the orchestra would have drowned out anything I might have been saying or long ago cut to a commercial.

I sidestepped the Korean War (or as the North Koreans call it, the “Fatherland Liberation War;” and South Koreans call “Six-Two-Five” or yook yee oh (육이오) representing June 25th—the day North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel dividing the country. Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas declaring segregation unconstitutional. Rosa Parks refusing to move from her place on the bus in 1955. Four students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College attempting to order coffee at the “whites only” Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., 1960. Next, assassinations: John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy. Malcolm X, Martin Luther King. I skipped the Cuban Missile crisis and caught up to “The American War in Vietnam.”

I was certain that the history part of this lecture was long gone, having drifted up toward those bats’ nests. This was history pronunciation. I slowed down, articulating each sound, exaggerating mouth movements, showing my teeth. Neeeeeeel Armstrong. Roe vs. Wade. Apple. Three Mile Island. I got as far as “ET. Extra Terrestrial.” My one liner: “It’s a movie about a nice alien and his human friend, Elliot.” I wanted to shout: “We are nice aliens, too!” This time, I gestured to the Dean to intervene.

“Thank you for your question,” I said, and then blurted out: “Congratulations to China and Hu Haifeng upon winning the gold medal in the 50-meter pistol event at the Olympics!”
I walked off the stage to thunderous applause, clearly not for the lecture, but for simply acknowledging China’s re-entry into the Olympics after a 32-year hiatus.

As if on cue, the bats whizzed about, acrobatic and eerie. I sat down and held out my hand, gesturing to my wife to take her turn.

Next question: “Why in America are poor people fat and rich people are thin?”

The bats returned to their bat homes.

My wife responded succinctly and clearly. The poor lack access to fresh food, she said. Fatty, processed food is less expensive; the demands of work leave little time and money for exercise. The wealthy idolize thinness and have the time to work at it. The media glorifies a new American image of slimness as perfection while pushing a lower standard to the poor.

Imagine the tables turned and the Chinese were asked to describe their history. They had close to 3,000 years on us. The Song Dynasty would be a perfect Jeopardy theme. CITIES. For $200: From 960 AD to 1127 AD, the most important capital of the Song Dynasty (“What is Kaifeng?”). INVENTIONS. For $400: This Bi Sheng (990–1051) innovation used clay to revolutionize printing (“What is movable type?”) For $600: Substance powering a fire-sputtering lance (“What is gunpowder?”). For $800: Profitable china that revolutionized trade (“What is porcelain?”).

Paper money and banknotes. The teeth and gears for chain drives like those that power bicycles and distribute mechanical power from one place to another. The division of labor. Rice and sorghum variations and advanced irrigation technologies. Expanded canals and waterways. The compass. Building codes. Columbo owes a debt of gratitude to the Song Dynasty for having introduced forensic science. Though somewhat of a stretch, the Princeton Review is a modern version of the Chinese test-prep industry developed to prepare the elite for civil service exams. A thousand years ago, Kaifeng was one of the largest trading cities in the world.

We had several questions of our own, but were afraid to ask them. We had always been puzzled about the serendipity of the Ministry’s decision to place us, both Jews, in a city once the home to a small Jewish community, possibly of
Persian origin. Jews had purportedly followed the Silk Road, offered the emperor uniquely dyed cotton fabrics (an early incarnation of the schmatte business), and were permitted to settle in Kaifeng and take on a choice of seven official family names. A small Jewish community built a kosher butchering facility, a synagogue, and a study hall. “Mullahs” managed the synagogue. Jews intermarried, wore pigtails, bound their daughters’ feet, circumcised their male children, observed the Sabbath, and carried on the tradition of not eating pork or shrimp—long known as staples of Chinese food. Did they expect us to live up to these traditions? We drummed up the courage to ask about the Jews of Kaifeng and were given an opportunity to meet a community of elders. Today, a tiny number of Chinese Jews remain in Kaifeng, several tracing their lineage to those same names. Did they know we were Jewish? We still don’t know.

The Dean was intent on impressing upon us that China was open now and culturally inclusive. One evening, he showed up at our apartment unannounced without knocking, opened the door (apparently he had a key), and ushered inside a group of Uyghur students from Ürümqi, a city in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region straddling Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. They were far from home (Ürümqi is also known as the world’s major inland city), but here they were, streaming in, hair expertly braided under feather caps, their wrists and dresses bejeweled, standing in formation. Three young men huddled near the door. The Dean broke an awkward silence by informing us that the car with instruments could not spin itself out of a snowbank. They would have to dance without music. Or try ours.

I chose Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” for the beat, over the Talking Heads “Speaking in Tongues” (too culturally obtuse), “Purple Rain” (not ready to explain), or “Born in the USA” (too patriotic). They listened stoically to the first verse (“It’s close to midnight, and something’s evil lurking from the dark. Under the moonlight...”). Their backs were rigid. Then, on cue, they began to nod their heads from side to side in sync with the music as if they had practiced it. A lead dancer twirled about, joined by the others who linked arms, threading themselves through a barn-dance figure-eight pattern—far east style.

That this is thriller, thriller night
‘Cause I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try
Thriller, thriller night
So let me hold you tight and share a
Killer, diller, chiller, thriller here tonight

I hoped they would not ask us to define a chiller, thriller night or about dead people dancing. I imagined a New York Times journalist taking a snapshot to be captioned: “Ürümqi Dancers Entertain Foreign Experts, 1984.” I was convinced. Change was afoot in China. They would never have allowed this music even a few years ago.

During our afternoon strolls in Kaifeng, the socialist billboards about the “Four Modernizations” and proper behavior had begun to peel and curl at the corners. Once determined soldiers and cheery workers painted with confident primary colors now looked afflicted with a kind of psoriatic pentimento—a shoulder missing here, a blue sky turned gray there, a rash where tractor wheels should be. In a poster titled: “Treat customers politely, be enthusiastic and attentive, engage in trade in a cultured way,” a restaurant worker held a plate of chicken in one hand, but her other hand was missing the thumb and two other fingers. In another poster titled: “I’m enthusiastic and fair, I hope to see you every day,” a woman balances one end of a scale with a string attached to a rod and a mesh bag of persimmons hanging from a hook. In the middle, another string connects to a weight. She balances the opposite side of the rod with her wrist, giving the whole transaction a feeling of suspended animation. Was she tipping the scales?

Change is a relative concept and we were not about to define it for them.

Officials opened and read our incoming and outgoing mail and borrowed our cassette tapes “to practice English,” returning most in a manila folder, many without their cases. We caught on quickly (thank them, say nothing). Interact with “assigned” friends only (don’t get too chummy). Our letters? (no parody, no sarcasm). On field trips carefully orchestrated to show us what they wanted us to see—happy villagers, plump children, bountiful crops, we knew just what to do (smile, express gratitude, and amazement). Speak judiciously (there is no such thing as a secret here). It was change on their terms.

At 5:00 am each morning, loudspeakers squawked a scratched copy of “The East is Red” from a 45 rpm. I wondered what song was on the “B” side. The
song was composed by a farmer about the glory of seeing a sunrise. Party officials later appropriated it as a kind of muezzin’s call extolling the glory and potential of a communist China. The song was followed by a volley of piercing commands: “Comrades, clear the snow from steps to avoid injury!” On cue, out came snow shovels. “Comrades, it is now time for exercise!” Outside our window, students stretched and marched in place to the soundtrack of “Chairman Mao’s Four-Minute Physical Fitness Plan,” then swarmed “en masse” around the track. Everything was a collective activity: exercising, reading, writing, studying, and—as I soon came to understand—urinating.

There was an order to the evening, too. Electricity to classrooms was shut off each evening at 10:00 pm. Not missing a beat, student monitors would distribute candles, and when those melted down to their waxy nubs, students swept the floor and huddled under streetlights, marching in place to keep warm. Well after midnight, they shuffled off to their dormitories for a few hours’ sleep before the loudspeakers woke them the following morning.

After having observed all this, along with constant reminders to rest, we were ready to teach.

The interpreter presented me with a textbook comprised of ripped-off and poorly duplicated stories, essays, or parts of manuals—basically, anything left behind by tourists in Beijing or Shanghai copied and scaled for the masses. Curation was another word for collecting what they could get. Perhaps we were hired to help students transition between rote, traditional learning and more interactive pedagogy. Maybe there was room for exceptions and the colloquial. Most people around the world pick up English from American or British radio and television. Our job would be to nudge it along just a bit.

There was no need to do the painstaking work of creating a lesson plan; the fun activity to get everyone ready and assess prior knowledge; setting learning objectives; creating activities that build upon prior learning; designing formative assessments; connecting lessons to future learning. Nah. All instructions were spelled out in the teacher’s guide. Just speak, correct students, and explain. This is not about creativity.
In a sobering orientation meeting, a Language Department official laid out appropriate “classroom protocols,” immediately deflating our “let-us-at-'em-we-can-work-with-anything” spirit. Inspect the chalkboard to see if has been sponged clean and alert the classroom monitor should this chore not be completed before class. When we enter and step onto a raised platform, that same class monitor shall command the students to rise. The students are to sit down only when we grasp the lectern. Should we ask a question and single out a student to answer it, we are to expect that the student shall rise, respond, and be seated again only when told to do so. Students are to keep their questions to a minimum. We were the delivery mechanism for the teacher’s guide. Simply explain and sound out every word, parse and diagram every sentence, then ask individuals or the class in unison to do the same. Rinse and repeat. If there was time, perhaps a little dialogue might be in order. Any questions?

After several such meetings, my wife and I sagged back against our couch and brainstormed our vapid compromises. We would introduce innovation slowly, only after we toed the party line. Behave. Americans are too enamored by choice—the cereal aisle of the supermarket, the cineplex, paint color samples. Here, choice might be dangerous. We reminded ourselves that this was their culture and not ours. My wife admonished me to tone down my natural impulse to play. A lesson plan is not always what you want, but what these authorities think they need. Your job is not to entertain, but to teach. Forget games, fieldtrips, fun.

Yellowed and worn, my teacher’s guide was proof enough. Diagrams and arrows looked like a coach’s whiteboard. Pages dense with underlines for subjects, squiggly lines for action or linking verbs, circles for predicates, lines separating objects, boxes for subject complements, marginalia.

*** CHAPTER ONE ***

Chapter 1, “How to Paint a Room,” was evidence of the slog that lay ahead. I entered my classroom, glanced at the chalkboard—sponge marks drying, giving it a woody appearance—greeted the class, grasped the lectern, waited for students to settle onto benches, and glanced at the shade of pale institutional
green I saw everywhere, somewhere between celery and pistachio. Yes—a paint job was in order, and yes—it would be that color, no other choice possible.

The explication of the title alone took at least fifteen minutes: interrogative adverb + transitive verb + noun. Party officials looked both pleased and bored. I sped things up. After an hour, I made it through two paragraphs. During breaks, two male students, one on each elbow, would inform me: “Laoshī (Old Teacher) Fred,” even though I was only thirty at the time, or “Tóngzhī (Comrade) Fred,” a wry implication that I was some kind of political fellow traveler, “it is time for us to urinate.” Peeing by the clock was a new one for me, but off we went like line dancers who’ve lost their way back from the hoedown, walking three across to the pissing trough. Urination, I learned, was a group exercise.

By the end of the third day, I was already behind schedule and did not see how to quicken the pace, except to keep recitations to a minimum. The students knew I had to follow the rules, but I sensed that they had hoped for something more...American. Could I experiment here and, in so doing, pick up the pace? After all, wasn’t the goal to reach their objectives? Yet again, I was losing my mind. Can’t I spice this up just a little? I urged students to work through the exercises faster because I had hinted about something special I had planned for them. The party officials did not seem to notice.

The students complied and I, in turn, took a leap of faith, tossing aside rules and classroom protocols, deciding instead to employ a technique about which I had no real experience other than my high-school Spanish II course in which the teacher used the Total Physical Response (TPR) system for teaching words, sounds, and images.

TPR connects language acquisition with gestures, props, and other physical movements so that commands are connected to an action. Movement and experience leave traces that associate objects or concepts with meaning. It is not a particularly new concept. The concept of “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand” is largely attributed to Xunzi, a Confucian who emphasized the transformative power of education to shape the self. In 1693, John Locke wrote: "Learning to read could be a more enjoyable
experience if there were "dice and playthings with the letters on them, to teach children the alphabet by playing." John Dewey is known best by his concept of "learning by doing." Parents use TPR instinctively. They toss a ball to a child and say "ball," expecting the child to mimic the action and toss the ball back.

TPR is a flexible and deliberate practice of synthesizing commands, actions, and associations until they become a habit, like muscle memory. This just might work! Students were accustomed to responding on cue, so we were half the way there. Every morning, the student monitors had been modeling the method right in front of me. “Stand up,” and students stood up. “Sit down” and they sat. I would give TPR a try. “How to Paint a Room” would be a group project. We would use whole sentences as prompts to move things along.

We would all be painters. I arrived at class before the students and labeled everything in the classroom I could connect with vocabulary in the chapter. When students entered, the classroom monitor saw a note tacked to the chalkboard, reading “chalkboard.” I told him not to remove it. At first, the students looked to the class monitor for instructions. His poker face was enough for me. I grasped the lectern. They sat down. Whatever happens, I am responsible.

“Dress prepared to work.” I stepped into imaginary overalls and fingered our way into invisible gloves, then gestured to them to do the same. So far, so good. “Protect the floor from paint with newspapers, tarps, or plastic sheeting, then tape the perimeter.” Plastic sheeting and perimeter needed work, and I realized that I could alternate between TPR and the method the Dean expected and no one would know I was plotting some kind of pedagogical insurgency. If they hired us to teach them how to speak English, surely they can might pick up some pointers about how Westerners teach.

I reached into my briefcase for a newspaper and spread out the front page of a two-week old copy of The China Daily on the floor. China’s thirty-two medals at the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Economic reforms. Presidential visits to Beijing. The Politburo paint police in the back were craning their necks, watching the students ready themselves to spruce up the place. Down on their knees, students distributed more pages to cover the floor. "Use painter’s tape to
mask off areas that should not be painted, such as window and door frames.”
Students responded by thumbing along the blackboard frame and windows.

Two students unfolded an imaginary ladder without waiting for a command, but at least they were reading ahead. “Unfold a ladder, making certain that the hinges are straight.” I added: “Like a capital letter A.”

I eyed the four communist party officials posted to the back of my class. They looked sullen. I lost my bearings for a moment. It is not easy to teach when you want to bolt. They might pounce at any moment, each one firmly grasping an elbow in a more aggressive way than my comrade urinators, sequester me in a little room, and—under the glare of a dangling light bulb—bark at me to “speak and teach English as instructed and nobody will get hurt.” I would apologize and explain that TPR has pedagogical value under the right circumstances, and that this was a one-time effort to catch up. In retrospect, they probably wanted to learn English themselves.

No rear-guard rush to the podium, so I continued. “Carefully open each paint can with the tool provided.” A small trash doubled as a paint can. One student rocked a pencil back and forth between the ring and lid but proclaimed it was stuck. Another came to her aid by mimicking the use of pliers to pry it open. Giggles. This improvisation could spiral out of control. I had to remind students to stick with the script.

“Stir the paint with a wooden stick until the binder and pigments are even and smooth and the color matches the dap on the lid of the can.” A lot of vocabulary there, so things slowed down.

“Fill your paint tray carefully.” Students looked around for a paint tray prop. One opened a book and placed it, pages down, on the floor. Chills went up my spine. I return to my nightmare tribunal for my unlawful act of permitting students to engage in bibliographic defilement, surely an egregious act of capitalist pedagogy. I picked up the book and placed it gingerly on a desk before a party official had a chance to rise, indignant, and order that I be taken from the room. A student picked up the cues to use a dustpan—one hand palm up, the other making a sweeping motion.
I continued: “Dip your rollers in the paint and use short back and forth motions to introduce paint to the roller.” I heard one student whisper to another: “Hello paint. My name is Zhang. I’d like to introduce you to my friend, the roller.”

I ignored the comment, fully aware that the act of not reinforcing certain behaviors in order to extinguish them never worked on me. I thought I had given the class a look that should be read as “cute, but cool it.” Clearly facial expressions are not universal. I had figuratively painted myself in a corner, but there was no turning back. Curiosity breeds curiosity.

“Roll back and forth so that the roller is saturated with paint, but not dripping.” Awkward sentence, I thought. What is doing the rolling? The students, however, understood. Pleased that we had caught up, I had more arrows in my quiver. We could keep going this way or pull back. I chose to keep going. “Use a brush to paint slightly up to half the width of the tape.” Students followed the instructions, squeezing out imaginary washcloths soaking in imaginary dank water, delicately wiping away imaginary excess paint perilously close to surfaces that should not be painted. The room was alive. A teacher walked by and peered inside, then scurried away.

An overzealous student moved a bench to reach the spot where the wall met the ceiling. The classroom monitor rose abruptly and motioned him to put it back. I sprang into action with a teacher’s best trick—distraction. “Reach as high as you can before using the ladder!” The students looked at me and then at their books to find the sentence I had just said and understood the sudden improvisation. I continued: “That spot is beyond my reach,” pointing my own imaginary roller to a spot on the wall. “I need help!” I said. Giggles. In the back, a party official nudged his comrade and reached toward the ceiling.

Body language might not be universal either. A party official reaching toward the ceiling might be about painting or hanging me from a fixture up there. This was getting out of hand and I decided to pull it back. “Everyone, sit down!” It was terse, peremptory, disciplinary. Satisfied that my experiment in Simon Says: The Painter’s Edition can speed things up, I would need to use it judiciously the following day when this insufferable chapter would be coming to a close: about checking our work by testing different surfaces to see if the
paint had dried; closing paint cans with a rubber mallet; lifting the blue painter’s tape slowly to keep straight the line between painted and unpainted surfaces, and cleaning up.

TPR was fun, memorable, kinesthetic, but I had reservations. Had I been marginalizing the shy ones? What happens when we come to more abstract concepts? Can I keep getting away with this?

I flipped through the next chapter and noticed and noticed that the pages were slanted and the last word of each justified line was cut off like a particularly perverse and maddening form of Mad Libs, leaving it up to me to fill in the blanks. There were also no teacher notations, arrows, or private notes. Prepared for the slog ahead, I got out my dictionary and sharpened a pencil. I didn’t bother reading it through until the night before. Big mistake.

*** CHAPTER TWO ***

Chapter Two was a selection from Jacqueline Susann’s debut blockbuster, “Valley of the Dolls.” No more TPR for damn sure. Far too many zippers unzipped, blouses unbuttoned, and bras released to act this out. To illustrate:

“A musical is like a sexual desert—unless you’re a fag. Dickie is having a ball with all those chorus boys—it’s like a smorgasbord. The leading man is straight—handsome, too—but he has a wife who looks like his mother, and she sits around and watches him every second. The guy who plays opposite Terry King is bald without his rug.”

Sexual desert. Fag. Having a ball. Chorus boys. Smorgasbord. Rug. Put yourself in my shoes and teach this to English language learners in a country that installs thought cops in row 36. I could not exactly distribute speaking or acting parts. I explained something about how the chapter contained several American idioms with words that have many different meanings, and that “we don’t have time to explain each one.” The students shot each other puzzled looks. I was stern, cold, efficient. The back-row tribunal shifted in their seats. I provided vague definitions of “having a ball,” “smorgasbord,” and “rug.” I provided no context to the story. I skipped whole sentences. No one pointed out my omissions.
For four days, the air in the room felt unusually still, deflated, as if we were passengers on a bus with a flat tire. Determined to bury this chapter, it was back to drill and kill. I was not about to sacrifice my career or Sino-American relations by introducing bourgeois decadence to a culture that has demanded prudish subservience for millennia. Change suddenly screeched to a halt. With these odds, Chapter Three could be about playing cricket, Macbeth, cake-mixes, or swinging. It was a roll of the dice and I am not a gambling man.

The students, however, knew more than they let on. As they gathered their books and filed out on the day we concluded the chapter, a student waited until the party officials had left and were well out of earshot. With an unsettling confidence, she made certain I made eye contact and launched her question: “We heard about Michael Jackson in a soda commercial. Why did his hair catch fire?” Some students leaned in to hear my answer. I could only say, “It did?”

A cluster of students caught up as I picked up my pace and peppered me with more questions: “How do you get the virus that causes AIDS?” “What is AIDS?” “What is crack cocaine?” “How can there be famine in an African country less populated than China?” “Why did a musician write a song named ‘Psycho-Killer’?” “Why did a company [Apple] name itself after a fruit?” “Why are homosexuals called fags?” I thanked them for their questions and stepped inside our apartment. I hadn’t mentioned any of this in my talk about American history. Where was this coming from?

If I were to collude with them and provide answers, I would give them tacit permission to ask more questions. A snitch among them might report an overly inquisitive classmate or me. How long could I hold out? Would they attribute extra importance to those questions I avoided entirely? What other questions lay beneath these?

Chairman Mao had been gone only six years prior. I once asked about Chairman Mao’s legacy and got a somewhat steely, clinical answer. “Mao? A few years ago, he was 100% good. Now he’s 70% good, 30% bad.” Imagine if historical figures were seen in percentages, like Vegas odds.

Change was afoot, but what might it mean? Could they reconcile Jacqueline Susann and socialism? As far as we knew, we were an integral part of China’s
momentous change enterprise. And they were only getting started. They wanted to show us what change really looked like.

On our first visit to Shanghai, the streets were thick with bicyclists trilling bells punctuated by buses, trucks, and official cars honking to part crowds. Traffic controllers were sequestered in lighthouses, waving flags outside their tiny windows. Construction workers staggered under the weight of two baskets fastened to a bamboo pole—each basket filled with gravel and dirt to unload in front of a small army of men shoveling and raking. Precarious-looking scaffolding. Laundry still hung between trees, between stores, in alleys, across walkways, yet above them posters of plump, smiling children clutching their contented mothers gazing at a washing machine and dryer. Lines of preschoolers held each other’s hands, each with a slit in the bottom for timed bathroom breaks in the gutter. Little boys sported Red Army kerchiefs. Men in undershirts played cards, smoking.

At the Peace Hotel on Shanghai’s famous Bund, a wide commercial street following the curve of the Huangpu River, we found a quiet table to sip a drink with ice we could trust and inquire about its famous jazz band.

It has always been viewed as an emerging, cosmopolitan city. Today it is an unabashed glass and steel tribute to Ayn Rand. At the Lake of Illusions’ nighttime light-show extravaganza housed at the Happy Valley Amusement Park, industrial lasers and projectors beam an electric storm of dizzying geometric shapes, twisting and spinning to a score that sounded like a mashup of something Wagnerian and Star Wars. Scenes shift to constellations of dancers and gymnasts—holographic and expressionless. Fountains reflect colors careening from building to building. A multimedia tower rises above all of it, a giant phallus anchored cinematically by two eyeballs, an eerie nod to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s billboard advertising the oculist T.J. Eckleburg. Phones everywhere.

In 1984, meat hung from windows and chickens from handlebars. In China’s major cities and in malls today, bicycles hang in windows and chickens are raised, butchered, and wrapped up out of view. Back then, a nap was sacrosanct. Shopkeepers shuttered their metal gates and curled up in the bank or lay head
back on a lawn chair. Today, the loss of revenue from such a custom would be unthinkable. China is open for business.

Orville Schell’s To Get Rich is Glorious: China in the 1980s was published a few months before we arrived. Schell explores a society that views its history in millennia, rather than decades, yet manages to build whole industries and mass transit systems in months. Where dung collectors once carried just enough to fuel a home, China was developing an insatiable appetite for oil to power the devices and appliances of well over a billion people. In 1984, an entire neighborhood might share a television. That was progress. Today, China cranks out iPads like candy from Pez dispensers, also made in China.

On a visit to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, we visited Tianfu Square and peered up at one of the largest Mao Zedong statues in the country. Atop a pedestal centered on an giant plinth, a 98-foot sculpture of the Chairman depicts him in his characteristic pose, waving to the masses with one arm, the other behind his back.

Today, the Chairman is still there, but no longer the center of attention. I wanted to pull a pedestrian aside and ask if Chairman Mao’s legacy was still measured in percentages. Chairman who? No one seems to notice. The masses are too busy shopping, studying their phones, or taking an escalator to metro lines fanning them out elsewhere. Some might even be annoyed at the amount of space it occupies. This is prime real estate better used for retail or parking. Mao looks forlorn, as if he had been trying, without success, to hail a cab. In the distance from at his eye level: McDonald’s, Gucci, and Starbucks. I was advancing from victory to victory for Big Macs, luxury accessories, and over-priced coffee?

In 1985, when we left Kaifeng, holding hands was no longer considered a capitulation to capitalist immorality. Even a reasonably form-fitting blouse was acceptable. Hems had risen. “The East is Red” still jolted us out of bed in the morning, but as we left the campus for the last time, those same speakers were playing a song from a poorly copied cassette of The Pointer Sisters’ “I’m So Excited.” We imagined our students covering their mouths to suppress a laugh, trying to guess which unwitting party official chose the song and then cranked
the microphone to the boombox. Out blared “I’m about to lose control and I think I like it!”

That trickle of change is today a torrent. It is easy to find wildly creative art, fine universities, speedy trains. Industrialism did keep up with consumption. Four trillion dollars pass from cell phones to vendors. Who knew that China would become the world’s largest economy, outshine the United States on Fortune’s Global 500 list, engage in trade wars, become the go-to manufacturer for the world, and hold the keys to the world’s most critical supply chains?

Must change come at the expense of openness and human rights? What have we learned about Uyghurs today? As ethnically Turkic Muslims, Uyghurs have been labeled as separatists, terrorists, and enemies of the state—forced to speak Chinese, give up DNA samples, tortured, and “reeducated.” Documents leaked to The New York Times, along with satellite images, have exposed what appeared to be concentration camps. The Chinese government responded by calling them vocational training facilities. Sterilization numbers far exceed rates in the general population.

Human Rights Watch’s World Report 2022 suggests that China’s “zero-tolerance” policy toward COVID-19 may have been promoted as a public health initiative, but also served as an opening for strengthening China’s autocratic abuses: zero-tolerance for Uyghurs; for protesters in Hong Kong; for grassroots voices, for those turning in blank ballots in an act of dissent against the “electoral reform” of requiring allegiance to the Chinese communist party; for pro-democracy academics; for “freedoms of religion, expression, movement, and assembly” in Tibet; for “any online communications that ‘undermine national unity’”

What is the price of change? 24/7 surveillance? Blind faith in ideological purity? How does change square with mass detention? Political indoctrination? Forced cultural assimilation? Homosexuality described as a “psychological disorder” and bans on ‘sissy’ effeminate men and ‘abnormal esthetics’ in the entertainment sector? Pro-democracy speeches deemed “unpatriotic?” Bans on vigils commemorating the victims of the Tienanmen Square massacre in 1989?
And bans on freedom of the press and academic discourse? What is the price for flashing the three-finger salute, a la Hunger Games, to resist tyranny?

Who knew that Xi Jingpin would channel Mao, assume roles that would extend his term indefinitely, and find it too difficult to cut off his bromance with Putin over the invasion of Ukraine?

My wife and I miss our students—those tutoring sessions by candle-light and streetlight, their indefatigable efforts to memorize passages about drying paint, their unflagging interest in the sexy chapters. True, I was attracted to China because after an unsuccessful search for sexy pictures, but I digress. We both miss their attempts to work through the complex rules and exceptions that make the English language so confounding. Their difficult questions. Their sense that they can shape their future. Their belief in change. I knew then that people are not their governments, that learning is an aphrodisiac and a beacon of hope all in one.

Maybe the seed for Teachers Without Borders was planted there. I returned to China 25 years later. It felt open then, too, but I can never say it was. You must make change, my family told me. Keep up the courage of your convictions, they said. My father would also add: “But...caveat emptor...and don’t take yourself too seriously. Remember to accept the courage of your contradictions, too.”

Nothing worse than radicals with all the answers. So noted.
What Do You See Outside your Window?

MOST HIGH-SCHOOL principals spend their days navigating a blur of real crises or tempests in teapots. They show up early and leave late. Their evenings are not their own. A word of advice to new principals: forget buying alcohol in the same town you live in. People will talk.

As principals go, I was in an enviable position running an excellent independent school secure in its reputation and nestled on a hill in an expensive, leafy neighborhood just around the corner from Curt Cobain’s former residence. The school lived up to its reputation as quirky, innovative, and demanding. Parents did not treat me like a piñata. The faculty was committed to academic excellence and their own professional development. The students took learning seriously. And we had fun. During a rare moment when the Seattle Mariners, our major league baseball team, was emerging as a viable pennant contender, a faculty member suggested that we cancel classes and schlepp the entire school to the stadium. It sounded like a great idea to me. We could pull off stunts like that.

Still, I was bored. It had been twenty-five years since I felt that shared intellectual exuberance in my college literature class, and a dozen more since my wife and I taught in China. I craved an intellectual challenge and took up my doctoral studies in educational leadership. The faculty graciously took on extra responsibilities. It was that kind of good.

Within months, I was a student again.

A new century was coming, and I had to be a part of it. The internet was exploding with ideas and new connections. My school had embraced the internet early, one of a handful of non-college or university institutions that could claim an .edu address. Getting online took only about 20 seconds: static, squeal, harmonic squeal, dial tone, 7 number beeps, rushing waves punctuated by more beeps, and—voilà—you were connected. Strangers asked questions of
strangers. Websites may scroll down with exasperating slowness like an outdated pull-down wall map, but it was worth the wait. The world-wide-web was the quintessential example of a level playing at last: opportunities, secrets, insights, and new perspectives – at our fingertips. We could learn from and with distant friends in real-time, rather than simply about “foreigners” from outdated textbooks.

Clearly, students would have to be digitally literate in order to work, study, and play on a global scale. The internet could make all that possible. I felt both the exhilarating weightless of traveling to unknown stars and the gravitational pull of professional safety. Worse, I scolded myself for my whining claustrophobia. I went to work at an early twentieth-century brick mansion converted to wood-paneled offices and classrooms. Outside my window, a cluster of purple and red rhododendrons would pick up the late afternoon light of a seventeenth-century French garden.

I remember every detail of one particular late afternoon. I had turned on National Public Radio, as always, while I stuffed papers into my briefcase. Oblivious to, and protected from the world around them, students were chatting and playing Hacky Sack on freshly mowed grass. A reporter described how an extremist militia group known as the Taliban had taken control of Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul. How could extremism flourish in a world of information? How can kids get an education in a war zone? How can we prepare teens for an irrational world? How might teachers help transform education to meet the needs of a connected world? The world I saw outside my window was precious, bucolic, removed, safe. I felt that much more disconnected. I longed to be in and of the world, rather than a mere bystander studying if from afar.

I searched for a business card of an education specialist at the World Bank I had met at a conference. Perhaps he could help me gain those global perspectives by enlisting his network to disseminate a survey about teachers and their visions of the future.

By the time I met with the chair of my doctoral committee, I had already leveraged those contacts and launched this question into the internet ether: “What do you see outside your window?” I described the trickle of responses I
had been receiving: windows looking onto tenement buildings. Smashed windows. No windows at all.

He gave his best impression of someone trying to listen but was clearly worried. Teachers may not find it interesting (nor would their responses be worthy of coding) to answer a single question, he said. My whole approach was too unformed, improvisational, impulsive. One can’t just initiate a doctoral survey with a chatty ice-breaker. It must be a planned, systematic round of inquiry, grounded in a theoretical framework, and based on a methodology the academic community would accept. How could I expect teachers to take it seriously? Where would this lead?

Had I blown it? Was this another impulsive, addled act? Did my curiosity screw me once again? I returned home and saw a note on the refrigerator reminding me that my wife and two daughters had plans that evening. I had no dance to chaperone, no game to attend, no crisis to address. I decided to take a run in order to think. I took off past the public school across the street, the tire warehouse, the pizza chain, the teriyaki joint, the nail salon, the gas station. I jogged in place at stop-lights until the light changed, took off again, and discovered I had gotten lost in my own neighborhood. Addled.

I was getting lost in this study, but I did not know what I was looking for. I gave no consideration to whether teachers were comfortable with, or understood, this question. Why trust me? Might they second-guess what I wanted to hear? Where are my boundaries? I was confusing the object of my research with the subjects I was querying. I tried to resolve my cognitive dissonance. How objective are answers to qualitative surveys, anyway? And how valid can one’s interpretation of those responses be without understanding the person queried? The Hawthorne Effect made sense: people change when they think they are being observed. I changed when I read their answers. We modify what we say within a social context.

Another jogger gave me directions to a coffee shop near our home.

Why did I think it was so important to build a relationship with respondents I would never meet? And by doing so, wouldn’t I contaminate the results? This is a dissertation, I reminded myself, not a “get-to-know-you” barbeque. Teachers
are busy. Stop the ingratiating, folksy banter and get to the targeted questions. You need usable data. Sheesh.

Over the next several weeks, more responses arrived. I couldn’t just ignore them. One teacher described someone who shook a carpet each day at 11:00 am, like clockwork. Another teacher wrote about a colleague consoling a student on a bench and those little arms reaching for warmth. Still another describing a janitor leaning on a broom, talking with teenagers ejected from the same classroom. I read about windows protected by an x-pattern of iron bars—dicing the view into geometric patterns. Windows decorated with paper cut-outs to obscure a view of sewage.

Word got around. Non-teachers responded (all Americans). I was worried (data would be unusable) yet captivated. A doctor described the view outside her view of a mega-church outside her breakroom. Outside his square jail-cell window, a prisoner described the silhouette of a burly guard against a pale green wall. A farmer painted a word picture of round hay-bales, tilting barns, and a faulty irrigation system that read like something out of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. A driver of a semi hauling furniture across Interstate 10 in Texas wrote about the hypnotic monotony outside his rearview mirror—stitches of white lines dividing lanes stretching beyond sight, perforating the entire state.

I also received sounds outside heard outside windows. The Doppler whine and fade of an ambulance, approaching and receding. Horns. Vegetable vendors. The unmistakable rumble of an approaching storm. Chickens stalking about like sergeants barking orders. Even smells: urine, burning trash, diesel.

I thanked each person who responded and received return emails thanking me for thanking them. I apologized to my doctoral chair for not yet having developed my full, official survey, but managed to steer follow-up questions toward something I could use: “From your viewpoint, what might education look like outside your window in twenty years?”

They began to write only about what they saw outside their windows, but also about what they saw coming. Fewer opportunities for children to play. More opportunities to bring the outside world into the classroom. They also began to
muse out loud. “This is the only job where I can’t pee when I want, but I wouldn’t trade it for the world.” I thought long and hard about that one—a life dictated by bells, but in love with what happens between them. How could I code this for an academic thesis or try to defend it to my dissertation committee and the public?

Within a few months, I had developed a survey worthy of doctoral research, but I also had made several new friends. The return rate on the first round of approved surveys was the highest the university had ever seen. I predicted a huge drop-off in subsequent iterations, but somehow they stuck with it through the second and the third round. Education is personal. Relationships matter.

Teachers continued to respond to my first question while others were providing valuable information from the surveys. It was getting unwieldy, but I could not stop myself.

A teacher from Norway and another from Nicaragua described what they saw outside their windows within hours of each other. Trapped by a tunnel of dark days and an impending new storm, the Norwegian pined for the tropics or an LA beach. Drained by an unrelenting crucible of heat hair-dryer heat intensified by corrugated roofs and siding—testing sanity and all sense of decorum, the Nicaraguan longed to touch snow for the first time and make a snow angel. I connected the two, and what followed was a set of interactions so rich, so filled with humility, hospitality, and friendship, that I would announce my resignation from my comfortable job as a principal in 2000 and launch Teachers Without Borders (TWB). I would connect teacher collaboration with social change, whether it took place in a classroom, a community, or a country.

I was onto something. I set my alarm for 4:30 am to get in at least an hour-and-a-half of study before school. I staggered home after parent evenings or games. I attended my daughter’s sports events, always with a book in the bleachers. I recalled the dogged perseverance of those students in China. If they could do it, so could I.

At my next doctoral meeting, I informed my dissertation chair of my decision. His response was immediate. “It was just a matter of time. I knew early on that I could never stop you. This has taken hold and won’t let you go.”
Teachers are the largest professionally trained group in the world. They are humanity’s early-warning system. They know who is sick or missing, orphaned, subject. Ears to the ground, teachers can feel a community’s pulse.

Those who seek to tear society down often begin by attacking its pillars—teachers. Remember the advice plantation owners gave each other—do not let slaves learn how to read. Around the world, the view outside one’s window may appear bleak—whole landscapes ravaged by climate change, whole communities at risk from civil unrest, inequality, entire nations dissolving into failed states. But teachers? They carry on day after day after day. Teachers are the glue that holds our fragile world together.

Teachers don’t have time—but somehow, they make time—for students, their parents, and their communities. Teachers don’t have much pocket change, but they make change anyway. Teachers have few resources, so they fashion them from local materials, their own creativity, and from the expertise of their colleagues. They don’t have publicity firms, but somehow summon the inner strength to reach multitudes, regardless of who is looking.

Dismiss this view of teachers as quixotic, naïve, even wrong. Go ahead, point out stories of abusive or incompetent teachers, teachers who cheat, teachers shuttled off to meaningless desk jobs because they disappoint children and their colleagues, teachers who sleepwalk and slouch toward retirement.

I’ll listen, but let you know that for every one of those, I’ll show you hundreds of teachers who create safe environments to learn in unsafe neighborhoods. Teachers who brake for garage sales and clip coupons to buy supplies their schools can’t provide, even though their real salary (factoring in tutoring, preparation, after-school obligations, professional development, even house calls) is closer to subsistence wages.

I learned one fundamental lesson from the first question I asked. Brains are evenly distributed around the world, but education is not. From that moment on, Teachers Without Borders would connect those brains. We would find a way to
share collective wisdom globally for anyone who expressed a need and anyone with valuable information to share.

Someday, I hope to meet the Nicaraguan and Norwegian teachers who inspired me to start Teachers Without Borders. I am confident they have no idea how much they have changed my life. Over the past 20+ years, they, like thousands of Teachers Without Borders members, have embraced a vision of courage and dignity. They give substance to hope, even when their windows have been replaced by half-inch Zoom squares.
Meeting Jane

THREE MONTHS after I founded Teachers Without Borders in 2000, I cobbled together enough money to attend The State of the World Forum in New York during United Nations week, held every September for the opening of the General Assembly. The Forum was billed as a “global town meeting” to foster dialogue between civil society stakeholders and big cigars—a who’s who of former and active heads of state, Nobel Prize Winners, technology wunderkinds, non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders, scientists, literary giants, and the notable C-suite. Attendance was estimated at 2,000. Globalization was on everyone’s mind in the aftermath of the World Trade Organization disturbances in my home-town Seattle (“The Battle in Seattle”). To me back then, and to this day, the biggest luminary of all, and the most humble, was Dr. Jane Goodall.

Many of these big cigars shuttled back and forth between the Forum, other high-level clusters of cognoscenti, and consultative meetings at the United Nations Millennium Summit to finalize and launch The Millennium Development Goals, a global agreement designed to address the world’s most pressing problems over the course of the next 15 years.

highlighted the gravity and historical importance of the Summit “at a time when national boundaries have become nearly as irrelevant to economic and political tides as they are to infectious diseases or popular music.” The notion of boundaries as “irrelevant” was affirming, and I was there to witness it.

I could not stop myself from touching my badge as I strode into an opulently appointed room, took a seat in the back, and straightened my nametag so that “Teachers Without Borders” was visible. I leafed through the program’s dizzying expanse of topics: disarmament, human rights, child labor and child marriage, refugees, women’s rights, environmental hazards, the winners and losers of globalism, universal access to the internet, global governance, small arms and drug trafficking, religious and spiritual leadership for the 21st century, indigenous medicine, water wars, media literacy, the ethical consequences of
genetic innovation. It was the first time I had heard the words “artificial intelligence.” WorldSpace Corporation, known for its efforts to provide satellite radio education to rural areas in the developing world, seemed to get a significant amount of airtime. Drowning in debt, the company filed for bankruptcy eight years later.

A program insert urged attendees to complete a short contact information form for the sake of building a network of “all critical stakeholders.” Teachers Without Borders was a stakeholder, damn straight. I was determined to say something evocative and crisp both to get noticed and contribute to the global consensus this summit sought to create.

Mohammad Yunus, the Founder and Managing Director of Grameen Bank, discussed microcredit in Bangladesh, a concept that earned him a Nobel Prize six years later. His humility was refreshing. After Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971, Yunus returned and quickly learned that the economic theories he had been teaching at his university in the United States were out of step with the realities of poverty and despair he witnessed. After Bangladesh’s crushing famine in 1974, he saw that huge infusions of cash from donor countries would not reach the people, but small loans, especially to women, could free them from men who controlled the purse strings of raw materials. He saw a vicious cycle in which women borrowed bamboo from traders but could not sell their products on the open market, but turn them in for pennies. Yunus compiled a list of more than three dozen women who could, in essence, build independent businesses and therefore pay back a micro-loan if freed from the traders’ grip. He tested the idea with $27. All loans were repaid.

With this proof of concept in hand, Yunus approached the banks that rejected the idea of microlending because of a prevailing belief that the poor are not creditworthy. After a while, he invested $300 and guaranteed the loans. These, too, were repaid in full. Without a bank behind him, he helped found the Grameen Bank and has since liberated millions. The 2006 Nobel Committee awarded Muhammad Yunus the Nobel Peace Prize for his pioneering work in demonstrating the connection between poverty, self-reliance, and peace.
President Mikhail Gorbachev spoke about glasnost, the consultative and more transparent measures taken in the post-Soviet era to embrace openness. At the same time, he warned of the consequences of globalism unchecked. Pauline Tangiora, a Maori Tribal Elder, rubbed shoulders with Ted Turner, Desmond Tutu, Colin Powell, and the Clintons. As each heavy hitter stepped up to the dais, my conference program became an almost indecipherable scribble of marginalia.

And then it was Jane’s turn. Her gray hair tied back, she took the stage and captured the room. Instead of arranging her papers and acknowledging the notables in attendance, she leaned into the microphone and let out a guttural pant-hoot, increasing in volume and intensity until a howl became a scream, Jane’s neck extended upwards, lips pursed, the sound softer and softer, her opening ending in a smile. Her welcome commanded a standing ovation, and she hadn’t started her talk. The pant-hoot call communicates emotion, presence, identity, and excitement. In one moment, she both captured our attention and relaxed the room. All speakers pant-hoot, in some way, to be noticed. Hers was different, as if she were saying: “I am here! You are here! We are here! Welcome!”

I remember everything. How she took worms to bed with her to observe what they did. How, at four and a half, she hid in a hen house to see, first hand, “where on a hen was a hole big enough for the egg to come out.” The relief on her mother’s face when Jane was discovered, rushing from the barn, exhilarated, covered in straw. How her mother did not punish her, but asked her about how a hen lays eggs. A mother only too thrilled to save up for books to fuel Jane’s curiosity. The wonderful Dr. Doolittle, able to talk to the animals. Convinced she could be a better Jane than Tarzan’s Jane.

She spoke of saving wages and tips from a waitress job to find her way to Africa and study under Louis Leaky. The Serengeti Plains. Gombi National Park. Lake Tanganyika. The chimpanzees she named: Flo and Fifi, Mike, Goliath, David Graybeard. The moment she discovered that chimpanzees make tools and practice social norms, vacillating from kissing and embracing or patting each other on the back. She described how they emerge from the canopy and relative degrees of swagger. How they protected their young.
She showed us the fear in chimpanzees’ eyes when trapped in medical research labs or wearing electric collars for the circus—the same look in refugee children away from all that was familiar. She described how animals have much to teach, how the earth is failing to compensate for a wonton disregard of the environment, the cavalier destruction of animals, and the desecration of indigenous ideas held in sacred and reverent trust—all in the service of a mistaken notion of progress.

She talked about the resistance she faced from those accusing her of blasphemy for having claimed that man was not the only tool-maker and having blurred the line between science and religion, animals and man. How the scientific community accused her of faulty research for having named the chimpanzees as subjects, rather than objects for study. And yet she was able to laugh about a popular Gary Larson’s “Far Side” cartoon. Two chimpanzees are sitting on a branch. While picking through the male’s hair, the female holds something suspicious between her opposable thumbs and declares: “Well, well—another blond hair… Conducting a little more ‘research’ with that Jane Goodall tramp?”

Jane then described her passion for Roots & Shoots, an organization she founded in Tanzania to pass the mantle of service and leadership to young people, worldwide. “Roots creep under the ground to make a firm foundation. Shoots seem very weak, but to reach the light, they can break open brick walls.” Youth of all ages work with teachers, community members, and graduates to observe their surroundings, take action, and celebrate their accomplishments. Roots & Shoots provides actionable toolkits developed and refined by students and teachers and applied to education and literacy; equality and inclusion; animals; refugees and displaced people; peace and hope; migratory species and pollinators; biodiversity loss; responsible consumption and production; and climate change.

Every Roots & Shoots program I have observed feels like a summer camp for changemakers. Its programs have reached community organizations, corporations, families, faith-based programs, foundations, non-profits, homeschools, prisons, senior centers, zoos, aquariums, and museums. Roots & Shoots simply resonates with the deepest of human needs: to be loved, to connect, to serve.
I simply had to meet her and tell her my vision for Teachers Without Borders. I had already been inching my way closer to the front, then took my place in a line of networkers waiting to introduce themselves. I dried my hands, ready to shake hers. I checked my badge. I fingered my business card. I dropped my program.

When my turn came, at last, I shook her hand and forgot to speak. I dropped my card, which fluttered between the legs of an older woman in pearls. I dropped to my knees and patted around her Ferragamos until I found it. I looked up, fully expecting to see the same glare to which I had become accustomed in grade school. Jane waited patiently. I thrust my card into her hand and, instead of introducing myself formally, simply said: “I’m Fred.” Why hadn’t I said my last name? My organization? What I do? “I’m Jane,” she replied, took my hand in hers and wouldn’t let go. We made eye contact. She looked into me. I blurted out: “My friends call me Freddy.”

She released me, stared at my card, and peered at me one more time. “Thank you, Freddy. Here’s mine.”

Freddy? Really? Was this some cheap attempt at informality? I returned to my seat, horrified at my lack of professionalism. I could not remember the rest of the speeches. At the end of today, the crowd filed out. I wanted to get it all down, so stayed behind, looking up when I saw people stacking chairs. Gathering my things, I missed the exit sign and opened a door into a pitch-black closet. Spotting a sharp line of daylight at the bottom of a door, I found my way out to an alley where a group of caterers, dishwashers, and maintenance workers on a smoke break pointed to the street. I was not the first clueless, star-struck moron to pick the wrong door. I strode past them as casually as I could. Someone said something. Laughter. I must have missed a lesson somewhere about the expectation of casual decorum one must exhibit when meeting a superstar. I even missed the sign to leave.

My embarrassment dissipated quickly. I walked the thirty-seven blocks back to my friend’s place in surreal, late afternoon light. I didn’t see Jane Goodall again at the conference, but I practiced shaking with my right hand and handing the card to the big shot with the left, certain to say something complimentary and
succinct about the presentation. None of it really mattered. I had met Jane Goodall! Hoo hoo!

Four months later, a postcard arrived. “It was great to meet you,” she wrote, “and I believe wholeheartedly in what you are doing. Just know that it’s going to be hard. Don’t give up.”

I couldn’t think of any way to respond other than by handwritten letter, something I hadn’t done since sending aerograms in China fifteen years before. I tore up version after version, words racing ahead of thought. Tell her about the organization in a professional way this time. Too stilted. Thank her for her contributions to science and humanity. Too obsequious. Describe what she means to you. Too shallow. Make it possible for her to feel your pulse or to discover what she was looking for when she stared into your eyes. Make it short, punchy, and focused.

I described the socialist-themed Bar Mitzvah held in my backyard in the San Fernando Valley, rather than in a temple. I summarized my speech that day, which I had long forgotten if not for the tape my father had secretly recorded, transferred to cassette, and dropped in the mail, as a surprise, when I told him I was starting Teachers Without Borders. That speech, 33 years earlier, recorded my voice cracking and squeaking about the need to “help teachers all around the world” and that teachers were the key to peace.

I had only listened to the tape a month before this trip and could not believe what I heard. It was as if behind every scattered and impulsive kid is a drive looking for its expression, a story of consequence and meaning waiting to be told. Maybe there is some kind of ineffable order to an otherwise incomprehensible shuffle of lucky breaks, tragic unfairness, chance encounters, fate, coincidence, impulsive acts of love or anger.

I wrote about how I wanted to connect teachers, enhance the dignity of the profession, and help to mend and repair a broken world. I confessed I had few or half-baked answers for the seemingly insuperable challenges ahead. I promised her that I didn’t know what the rules are, but that I would try to stay the course, just as she had asked me to do.
I practiced my handwriting and revised obsessively. What the hell, I concluded. I am who I am. Seal it. Send it. Don’t expect anything. Write from the stomach, not the head. Oh hell, I let it fly.

Her postcards continued, followed up by handwritten letters, random phone calls, and visits. I have framed one in particular. As Jane approached the 50th anniversary of her groundbreaking work in Gombe, she composed this by a Gombe waterfall.

Dear Brother Fred,

Am sitting, late afternoon by the waterfall, this most spiritual place in Gombe. So much ancient life force. This is where the medicine men used to practice their secret rituals twice a year. How can half a century have passed since then and I first landed here? It does not seem possible. Yet, it is our 50th anniversary on the 16th, tomorrow.

The bombs in Kampala seem so far away, unreal, as I sit here. Another world altogether. A grim world in so many respects, but a wonderful world too.

She expressed her desire to meet soon and, running out of space, added (as she always does):

Lots of love,
Jane

A grim and wonderful world. Though Jane Goodall is on the move 300 days a year, (except during COVID-19), we have found the time to travel together, serve on panels, and meet an occasional head of state. She is as joyful, goofy, warm, and compassionate in private as she is on stage. Once, near the end of a lavish dinner, Jane excused herself. After a while, a colleague and I noticed that she had not returned. We asked for someone at the table to volunteer to check the women’s restroom. No Jane. We looked outside to see if she was mingling with autograph seekers. Still no Jane.

Just as we returned to the table, she emerged from the swinging double doors leading to the kitchen. She wanted to thank the chefs and dishwashers and
waiters directly for their hard work. And when we get together once or twice a year, usually over Chinese food and a spot of whiskey, I feel loved. We laugh. She tells stories of children and their parents, world leaders, prisoners, machinists, dishwashers, and farmers who have held her stuffed monkey, Mr. H. We hug. We take pictures. We promise to stay in touch.

I have seized every opportunity I can to see her again. I am a very lucky man.

My Brother, Jihad

TEACHERS WITHOUT BORDERS began as an concept looking for a project. Soon enough, that project found TWB. The first partner would be a man named Jihad. It was May 2001.

Pilot projects to bring computers to the people, or bring people to computers, were gaining traction. The prevailing wisdom was “If you build it, they will come.” The developing world was, once again, left behind by a new yawning chasm between digital haves and have-nots. Machines would help them participate in an increasingly interdependent world. They needed to plug in to play. It felt sincere and I wanted in.

“Computers for the World” (C4W) is an after-school service-learning club for computer students who refurbish PCs for use in developing countries, set them up on-site, and teach basic IT skills. Students hold fundraisers for their travel and shipping so that people and machines arrive at the same time.

I had heard that Rotary International was holding a meeting at Garfield High School in Seattle to support C4W and wrangled an invitation. When I arrived, students were clearing two tables littered with computer chassis, motherboards, monitors, keyboards, cords, and tools. Tables pushed against the walls and cabinets. Pallets stacked in a corner. A shrink-wrap machine.
After a brief introduction, the computer teacher offered an update on emerging, ongoing, and upcoming projects in Russia, Mexico, the Philippines, and Mozambique. Two Rotarians in attendance pledged support.

It was time to choose the next project. Kay Bullitt, born in 1925, a Radcliffe grad, mother of six, and a tireless advocate for human rights and school desegregation, offered a laundry list of compelling reasons to support a new opportunity in Laqiya, a village populated by a Bedouin community in the northern edge of the Negev Desert, close to the bustling, modern Israeli city of Beer Sheva—once conquered by King David, the source of Jacob’s stairway to heaven, and, incidentally, the city claiming highest concentration of chess champions in the world.

Laqiya had consistent electricity, Kay explained. There were good roads. The community was committed to providing educational opportunities for students to engage in constructive activities after school. Contrary to popular belief, she urged, the community is not isolated or nomadic or threatening, but accessible, anchored, and friendly. She was certain that eyes were on her and said, “Laqiya is not a threat.” Best of all, she argued, the local leader was responsible, brilliant, motivated. She had met him and trusted him implicitly.

Jihad Al-Sana is a Bedouin professor of computer science and mathematics at Ben Gurion University and a Fulbright Scholar with a Ph.D. in Computer Science from The State University of New York at Stony Brook. Highly respected in his field of 3D graphics, mathematical modeling, and augmented reality, Jihad is often cited in his field’s most influential academic journals.

He is also one of nine siblings. Throughout his childhood, his mother was illiterate. His father, a truck driver without a formal education, longed for his children to finish school, but did not live long enough to see it happen. Jihad had vowed to keep his father’s dream alive. He wanted his mother to learn how to read.

Jihad had met with Kay to discuss the idea of a community computer center in Laqiya. His village association agreed to provide the space. Jihad’s graduate students would support the upkeep of the computers and teach youth in after-school programs who, bandwidth willing, would communicate with their
counterparts at Garfield. Jihad would take care of all arrangements on his end. He simply needed computers. PCs, education, and cross border collaboration.

Kay’s idea was rejected. Someone offered: “How about Ecuador?” The mood seemed to change. The final decision would be tabled for the next meeting. I slipped Kay a note to reassure her that I was in. She dashed off her response: “Wonderful!!”

As people were packing up to go, I announced: “I’ll do it,” with no idea how to start. I had neither a track record nor a plan. “I don’t have the details or money for my own travel yet, but I’ll do it. The kids won’t have to go. We can make the connections virtually.” Kay pressed a note with Jihad’s email and her phone number into my hand. Jihad and I took it from there.

I announced to my wife, “I want to go to the Negev desert to start my first project with a guy named Jihad. I met him on the internet. Seems like a great guy.” She hesitated. I could understand her concern. Fire yourself from your job and make friends with Jihad? How about easing into projects?

And yet, she recognized that this dream would neither be deferred nor deterred. Maybe this was a career choice as flimsy as a paper towel; once it absorbed reality, it would lose its purpose. Could I not find a starter project less fraught with challenges? Did I have to learn everything the hard way? She also sensed my determination. She pulled herself together and said, “Freddy, be careful, but I can’t stop you. I won’t. Just do the right thing. It may work or it may not. You’ll make a difference, I’m sure.” She smiled uncomfortably. “Even if this TWB thing is one gigantic extended manic episode.”

For weeks, Jihad and I exchanged ideas and settled on a Community Teaching and Learning Center concept. There would be two rooms—one with computers, the other with shelves for books and pillows. I read everything I could find about Bedouin communities.

Suppose all goes well and the computers arrive on time. What about those dust storms, khamsim, that roar in from the Sinai and render the machines useless? What if I were taken hostage? Eaten by an angry camel? Locked up for fomenting terrorism? Picked off by a vulture, like Warren Beatty in “Ishtar?”
Garfield provided four computers configured for 220 V, monitors, and surge protectors. I convinced the University of Washington computer department to contribute a dozen more they were about to recycle. Microsoft added more of their own after having tested Polish versions of Microsoft Office. I learned quickly that technology companies routinely discard perfectly functional equipment. Their e-waste became my entry into the world of international development shipping and handling. In downtown Seattle, I cozied up to office managers by assuring them appropriate public plaudits for their humanitarian gesture. It worked almost every time. Closets opened. A maintenance man led me once to a dumpster in a parking garage, where I retrieved ten more. Kay gave me a pep talk on how to ask donors for flight money. An executive from DHL offered to ship them for free.

I landed in Tel Aviv and reached in my pocket for Jihad’s directions to take a bus to Laqiya. I handed the driver a slip of paper Jihad had prepared, ingratiating myself to him in broken Hebrew and my best pitiful face to watch out for my stop. A petite Israeli woman in her late teens took the aisle seat next to me and rested her Uzi across my lap, checking her light-pink fingernails and adjusting her ponytail through her scrunchie.

Close to two hours later, the bus lurched to a stop. There was nothing much around, though I thought I had seen a McDonald’s a few kilometers back. An optical illusion, I thought. This is, after all, the desert, though not the cartoon version. As we approached the next stop, passengers began to clutch their stuffed blue tarpaulin bags and suitcases. I followed suit and walked to the front doors. He held out his hand. “Next one,” he said, in English, pointing ahead to nowhere, and in Hebrew: “לשבת תבשל” (sit down please).

The driver drove for a while, then motioned ahead to prepare me for the next stop. I stepped off, and the bus sped away. I stood with a suitcase in each hand, blinking from the exhaust, rounds of sweat under my armpits, and an impressive heart-shaped perspiration blot on my shirt. I looked for Jihad to materialize from behind the dust and bus exhaust. Nothing but a mirage of water as the road curved ahead. I turned to see a modern building behind me. In the corner of the empty parking lot, a camel foraged through a dumpster. Funny, I thought, I had been doing that very thing not that long ago, looking for computers. The camel
returned my gaze, then spat. I was impressed by the arc of spittle but pretended not to notice. "Fuck you, too, ship of the desert," I mouthed out of earshot, moving my jaw in a circle in my best camel imitation. I scanned the opposite side of the street for signs of a bus stop.

I pushed my suitcases together, sat on them, and contemplated my next move and fate. I collected my bags and walked to the building ahead, convinced that it was locked. I tried the door. No luck. I peered inside. A building supervisor looked up, opened the door. I offered my well-practiced “As-Salaam-Alaikum” (peace be upon you), to which he answered with the customary “Wa-Alaikum-Salaam,” (and unto you—peace). The supervisor began to speak patiently in Arabic. Noting my bewilderment, he switched to Hebrew. Charades would be our lingua franca. I fingered my shirt pocket for Jihad’s soggy note, relieved that the words scrawled in pen had not bled into illegibility.

I looked outside. No bus, no cars, no Jihad. I gestured a kind of mahalo request to use a phone. He motioned down the hall. I started to dial, forgetting to eliminate the country code. I tried again, interrupted by the operator before I had a chance to complete the sequence. I slowed down, mumbling the numbers aloud as I punched them in. Still no luck. I am genuinely addled, I thought. I tried again and got his answering machine. I left a message with the number of the phone booth, told him I was inside the building, and hung up the receiver slowly, just as my mother had done after receiving the call from my teacher. I smiled pitifully and indicated I would like to sit down. The supervisor nodded again. I stared at the payphone, willing it to ring, like the Red Sox’s Carlton Fisk attempting with two arms to direct his blast fair down the left-field line in the sixth game of the 1975 World Series.

I considered asking him: “Do you know Jihad?” In that setting, the question would have been a reasonable one, but I wasn’t entirely sure. Had I asked the same question in the United States, I could be accused of slander or, back then, get cuffed. Somehow, asking someone if they know Jesus would be entirely acceptable.

I decided to go with the formal: “I am looking for doctor Jihad El-Sana, professor,” pointing to the words for professor in Hebrew and Arabic, “at Ben
Gurion University.” No response. I sat down. The building was a newly built teaching center, museum, lecture hall, and library. Propitious, indeed. It was only natural that Jihad would frequent such a place. I picked up a brochure in Arabic looking for pictures of Board members, expecting to see a picture I could point to. I waited. Still no Jihad.

Someone new approached me and asked in Arabic and Hebrew who I was. I pointed to the slip of paper drying out on the ledge of the payphone. He placed his hand on his heart to signify, I interpreted, that he was friendly. In perfect English, he said, “You’re looking for Jihad? May I help?” He called the number, looking back at me with a disarming smile. No answer. He left no message. Catching a glimpse at my crestfallen face, he tried again, leaving a message in Arabic.

In what seemed like an hour (but likely twenty minutes), Jihad appeared, breathless and apologetic, took my bags, and ushered me into his car. His family was waiting for us at home, he said. He apologized for being late. He should have left a message with the teaching center.

It mattered little to me. We had connected, and I immediately felt safe. We stopped at a Bedouin market to pick up two freshly killed, un-plucked chickens for the following night.

We removed our shoes. He placed the chickens in the sink, washed his hands in a bowl, and kissed his mother. She smiled. I knew enough not to attempt to shake her hand. In a room furnished by pillows and a flowered, plastic tablecloth spread over rugs woven by local women, we ate sumptuously. His mother smiled often. I as well. Jihad brought home many guests.

The following morning, he showed me the site of what we agreed to call the Laqiya Community Teaching and Learning Center. The computers would show up soon, he reported. I deluged him with questions about surge protectors, maintenance, dust, security, program, paint, carpet, supervision. It’s covered, he explained.

“Don’t be concerned about the Center,” he said. “If we need paint or carpet, we’ll ask. If we need supervision, we’ll talk with the teachers. The program will
follow.” “Now,” he said. “Let’s talk.” We talked about the intractable and precarious relations between Arabs and Jews, the roots of Islam and Judaism, disenfranchisement, the susceptibility of youth to radicalization, the stark difference between self-reliance and charity, and the community as the fundamental basis of sustainable development. We talked about resentment over promises made and broken, land acquired and taken away, and rights versus rights—the right to a homeland; the right of return; the right to defend one’s rights.

Groups of villagers visited Jihad over the next few days. They had identified and secured the building, finalized arrangements for carpet and paint, and created a class schedule for once the computers arrived and were installed. Two of Jihad’s graduate students appeared, having responded to a posted flyer on campus about the need to offer workshops on computers to youth after school.

I was surprised at the ease of it all. Jihad looked puzzled. “Isn’t this what communities do?”

Jihad wanted to address two pressing issues. The first had to do with increasing youth restiveness after a recent incident in which a group of teens had provoked Israeli police after a film made the rounds, shot from a tent, of Israeli soldiers bulldozing an unrecognized village. The police claimed that waste and garbage were fouling the ecosystem of the fields. The community asserted that this was a clear violation of a lease and an audacious excuse for a land grab. He pointed out that youth are easily suckered into a vortex of resentment and set off a vicious cycle of anger, reaction, incarceration, and anger. The Community Teaching and Learning Center needed to be an alluring distraction and a teaching opportunity.

His second concern had to do with a vanishing awareness of identity and history in the Bedouin community. Increasing access to media seemed to underscore the stark contrast between haves and have-nots. Young people craved Big Macs at a the McDonald’s (It was not an illusion.). Adults considered fast food expensive and tasteless and the chain an insult. He wanted more critical thinking. The digital divide was an education divide. At stake, his culture.
I mentioned a lecture I had heard about culture in the age of globalism. Both anthropological and biological metaphors. In Eisner’s approach, culture can be viewed as “a way of life” (who we are, what we do, how we have learned to act, the characteristics of a people) and a “medium for growing things” (a petri dish, a fertile environment).

We discussed what this might mean for our project. Given that culture is viewed only as a “way of life,” how does it cope with modernity? Languages and customs are rendered extinct every year. At the same time, cultural preservations may unintentionally marginalize the very people they want to protect by making them appear exotic and helpless.

Jihad explained that globalization is a given and should be embraced, but it can leave whole communities behind, run roughshod over cultural traditions, and look distinctly American. Anti-globalization groups claiming to speak for the underserved have told him that poor communities do not need computers, but basics, and that the information technology explosion was nothing other than an excuse for rampant capitalism. He rolled his eyes. “Tell that to someone looking for where to get the best price for seeds, or how to get a license to start a business, or what they can do to stop their child’s diarrhea.”

Jihad remained in the village, he said, instead of moving to Beer Sheva or Tel Aviv, precisely because communities bring about sustainable change by marshaling local intelligence. That’s how paint and carpet can appear overnight. He would keep his promise to his father to become educated and to educate others in return.

He invited me to the wedding of a relative in a tent not far from his home. We agreed to split the cost of a sheep as an appropriate gift. We sat on ornately woven rugs and pillows, rose for family members and elders, and expressed our appreciation for the meal and our joy at the family’s pride.

Our conversation continued, unabated. “A way of life and a medium for growing things,” he said aloud. “I got it. We’ll teach them how to conduct interviews, tape oral histories, photograph portraits, and scan them into the computer to capture the stories of their elders and record our traditions. Then they’ll come back to the Community Teaching and Learning Center. We’ll put it
all together and maybe even make CDs to sell. This way we’ll record our culture using skills they’ll need for the future. The Community Teaching and Learning Center will be the bridge between ‘a way of life’ and a ‘medium for growing things.’”

The Laqiya Community Teaching and Learning Center was born. Later that night, listening to the percussive sounds of guns fired skyward to celebrate the wedding, like holiday fireworks at a public park.

The computers made it in tact within a week after I had returned home. Jihad’s graduate students fulfilled their commitment to set them up and serve as teachers/camp counselors after school. Over the years, Jihad continued to operate the Community Teaching and Learning Center to connect technology, education, and community development. He received his tenure at Ben Gurion University and, to this day, leads efforts to ensure that the citizens of Laqiya are learning not only about who they are but also who and what they can be. It takes that kind of leader to raise a village. It takes that kind of

Four months later, on September 12th 2001, I called Jihad. He was devastated. His voice had none of its former confidence." We are devastated," he mumbled. “I also want to tell you this, Fred. At dark times like this, we must light a candle.” I told Jihad that I would also light a candle for those lost in the United States for my beloved friends’ peace and safety in Laqiya.

A few years later, Jihad and I met in New York. He had been working on an early version of virtual reality programs that included an interactive dimension for patients at children’s hospitals to determine whether gaming could help with pain alleviation. I was in Manhattan at an education conference.

A women’s weaving group had moved into the offline room, he said, and were selling their wares. “Do you remember my mother?” he asked. I recalled seeing her in the corner of the room that first night in Laqiya. “She decided she wanted to learn how to read. With the other women in the weaving group, they found an instructor. Get this, Fred, she’s in third grade!”

Jihad and I see each other far too rarely, but it never matters. I love my brother, Jihad. It takes a teacher to raise a village.
Shall We Stay the Same?

I COULD see Teachers Without Borders because I believed it, but I knew that most people would believe it only once they have seen it.

A small pilot in a Bedouin village does not a global organization make. The world owes us nothing. I don’t believe in karma, a higher being, or cosmic synchronicity. There is some credence to the saying that luck favors the prepared mind, but beginner’s luck doesn’t count. I fired myself to step out into the unknown. I should expect slammed doors, rejection, and failure. Looking back, I’ve experienced all that – in abundance, despite the occasional exception.

Most attention is spent on replicating and scaling projects. I wanted to take another approach: to replicate Jihads—talented, good-hearted, unflappable people who think more about removing obstacles than building empires. We would have to find people with street cred, yet equally comfortable around those with, and in, power. People who can challenge the status quo and also maintain the humility to question their own assumptions. People who teach. I wanted to scale the intimacy of global collaboration at the service of human welfare.

It also seemed natural that the organization should act like the best of classrooms. If children learn best when they can help shape their learning, then our programs must be led and governed by the talent that created them. If learning is most effective when personalized, so too should teacher professional development take on the dimensions of a self-regulating, modular, ad-hoc, connected enterprise. If the best classrooms are a buzz of small groups tinkering and thinking together, then a global community of teachers should rely upon each other to test innovative ideas. If safe, healthy classrooms function best when they cultivate and foster a social contract of civility and democracy, so too should we attract those who could help others do the same—on a global scale. Teachers Without Borders would connect networks of dedicated “foreign experts” to tackle challenges in global development.
That was the pitch. I made my case to anyone who would listen.

Still, without much under my belt, I should have expected responses like this one: “Well, would you look at the time?” Some feigned interest, but their eyes told me that their thoughts were elsewhere. Some were blunt: “Fred, teachers are the busiest people on earth. They have enough on their plates already. Now you’re going to dump society’s problems on them?” Or “Doctors Without Borders is different; they can afford it.” In a particularly rugged putdown, I heard this: “Do you really think you can expect people to depend upon you to orchestrate global change from a laptop in Seattle? That’s a pretty tall order.” I didn’t think I had harbored megalomaniacal intentions of being the world’s principal. This wasn’t some Trumpian revenge for being called an “addled child.” I’d also get quizzical looks, whenever I said that we should “connect teachers to valuable information and each other in order to close the education divide.” The membership, not the organization, would be the changemakers.

Teachers understood. They contacted their colleagues. I noticed that teachers who had responded to my doctoral survey seemed to have gotten on board from the very beginning. Had I made new friends? I also received post cards and handwritten letters that reminded me of the personal touch of communication between Jane Goodall and me. I have since received two aerograms in which each writer, curiously enough, also included an email address.

I searched for one particular letter to which I had not yet responded—an invitation from a woman to visit Ahmedabad, formerly the capital of the Indian state of Gujarat. I dug it out and reread it. Deepmala Khera wanted to summon teachers to introduce the concept of Teachers Without Borders, then leave it up to them to see what emerged. Deepmala described her sadness at having seen whole segments of school-aged children ignored and underserved. She had long recognized the futility of waiting for authorities to create, nurture, and enforce education-friendly policies. She was not asking for money or influence or answers. She asked for my commitment to help her spark a conversation amongst teachers. She was convinced that Ahmedabad was the perfect setting for convening teachers to discuss educational issues that matter to them.
“They have a lot to work out in their classrooms,” she said.” I wondered what she meant. I also knew what I had to do. Deepmala showed up. I had to show up, too.

Ahmedabad was a city of cotton, cricket, commerce, construction, and congestion—a Koyaanisqatsi blur of honking buses, cars, Tata trucks without side-view mirrors, yellow and green tuk-tuks, whole families on motorcycles, bicycles trilling bells and gesturing something obscene at the latest intrusion, two-wheeled carts groaning under the weight of rebar, bamboo, blankets, wood, animal cages, and folding chairs, and oblivious farm animals. Swarms at cross streets pinballed ahead once a traffic light changed or a police officer decided to give the “go” signal. It was Tetris, ping-pong, and shuffle board all in one. To survive as a pedestrian or driver, one must develop finely-honed visuo-spatial skills—peripheral vision; a wide range of reflexive eye movements to gauge the velocity, amplitude, size, duration of objects hurtling in one’s direction; enhanced go/no-go reaction time. I recalled the advice once popular in driving’s training: drive defensively, get the big picture, and leave yourself an out. Not possible here. Advanced technology in cars can detect all that. Perhaps the day will come when AI wearables and injectables will be so ubiquitous that these instincts will evolve out of existence. I’ll believe it when I see it.

The air was thick with smog, soot, samosas, brackish water, Durian fruit, urine, diesel exhaust, incense, and calls to prayer. Steam billowed from grills under blue tarps. Women in navy-blue, peach, and magenta saris chatted, balanced bowls of everything above their heads, and held children. Couples fanned themselves with newspapers. Umbrellas shaded others.

I was a stranger in a strange land yet again, dropped off a dozen time zones away and left holding my bags. I took a cab to Deepmala’s neighborhood, but construction barriers and a collision prevented me from reaching her home. I was dropped off without a word, and slipped into an increasingly familiar method-acting mode: the helpless, middle-aged, lost foreigner hoping to find a sympathetic face and a helpful companion to escort me to Deepmala. Pulling out yet another wadded-up address, this one written in Gujarati and English, I drew a small crowd, all of whom were convinced they knew the way, some pointing in opposite directions. I made a mental note to add Gujarati to a
growing list of year-round resolutions. I am convinced that a facility with languages remains the single most effective breakthrough skill for anyone attempting to work on the international stage.

One woman lifted her head and shouted upward to an apartment building. When someone appeared out a third-floor woman, she swiped the piece of paper from me and shouted the address again. That woman, in turn, shouted across a ganglia of power cables and clotheslines of children’s shirts hanging upside down—arms fluttering in the breeze like inflatable air dancers; bras; sarees; saree pants; sheets; sturdier lines holding blankets.

The woman seemed to know Deepmala. Suddenly, I heard my name: “Dr. Fred! You made it!”

Deepmala was returning from her teaching job, panting, waving. “Dr. Fred! Dr. Fred! Mr. Fred! Fred Mednick!” A dozen children lagged behind her—some in school uniforms, others in donated soccer tee-shirts and worn rubber chappals. She picked up the pace, pulled by a determined-looking girl—Disney backpack and braids bouncing and swaying—her fist clenched around Deepmala’s key.

Once inside, I saw an open room. In one corner, a stack of folding chairs. In another corner, a single table with baskets of colored pencils and pastels, bottled water, and snacks. Early that morning, she had taped butcher paper to her four walls from the floor to the height of an eight-year-old on tip toes.

The children knew what to do the moment they entered the room. Two boys, Shaival and Dilip, distributed the colored pencils and pastels. Others paired up to work on their shared paper real estate, careful not to trespass on each other’s drawings.

“Who wants to draw a bowl of fruit?” “Who wants to draw an elephant?” “Who wants to draw from your imagination?” “Show me!”

As the artists labored, Deepmala circulated amongst them, cooing as if she had just stumbled upon a breathtaking work of fine art. Should they tussle over colors or compete for her attention, she would refrain from intervening. Instead, she asked questions. “How can you both solve this problem? What happens inside when one of you wins and the other loses?” She never raised her voice. Manju, a little girl holding her hand, never left Deepmala’s side. At moments
when most of the children were busying themselves with their masterpieces, Deepmala would hoist Manju on her lap, stroke her hair, and read to her softly. She kept track of them. All had Deepmala lap time.


All children were welcome, whether they attended school wearing crisp uniforms or spent much of their day picking through rags and trash. She had sheltered a few, she whispered, at risk for traffickers. “You cannot protect children without educating them,” she said. “And you can’t educate children without protecting them.”

One evening, before we turned her temporary school back into her living space, she pulled out a roll of pictures and smoothed them out on the floor. “I kept these for you. The y drew the World Trade Center,” she said, “from what they heard on the radio.” The buildings had faces. Bodies falling from windows were tears. “It was their choice. I just couldn’t ask questions about it.”

It was the first day of Diwali, a “festival of lights” in which candles and clay lamps lit with oil brighten homes, places of worships, and streets. Lakes sparkle with floating lanterns. Observers clean their homes and create designs in sand, colored rice, or flowers to greet visitors. Deepmala informed me that the fifth day of Diwali, Yama Dwitiya, involves sisters inviting brothers to their homes. All were welcome here—year-round. I was her brother, she said.

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Ahmedabad is the site of Mahatma Gandhi’s Sabarmati ashram, a center of his non-violent movement for India’s independence and his 24-day, 240-mile act of civil disobedience—the Salt Satyagraha—a truth-telling march and global awareness campaign focusing on the single issue of making salt without having to pay exorbitant British Raj salt taxes. Salt became the symbol of the people’s sweat and the product of their labors. The march captured their imagination and catalyzed the transformation from colonialization to liberation.

The Textile Labour Association (TLA) was founded in Ahmedabad in 1920, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership of a textile worker strike. In 1954, the
women’s wing emerged to protect women from exploitation. Cart pullers living in the streets and working for Ahmedabad’s cloth market sought TLA’s help to fight for fair housing and to equal rights. TLA’s women’s wing gave rise to The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a women’s trade union founded in 1972 to provide explicit representation and support for exploited and disenfranchised women through a system of cooperatives and networks. It was not easy. Ela Bhatt, a young lawyer was rebuffed when she and hundreds of garment workers attempted to register the organization with the Labor Commissioner of Gujarat and were told that they were invisible economic contributors, had no direct contact with the formal sector, and most often stayed at home to stitch garments. SEWA reports that they were not included in the census.

With no government structures in place to provide job opportunities, job security, or protections, they persevered. SEWA would “organize the unorganized.” Rather than function as a union of workers, they would be a union for workers: vendors and hawkers, yarn spinners, dung collectors, rag pickers, midwives, women harassed and attacked as they search for work. Two-thirds are from rural communities. Almost 90% work in agriculture. Early on, they recognized that empowerment and self-reliance would only be possible through an informal system of sustainable wrap-around services on their own terms. Campaigns arise wherever women are in need: legal aid, savings and credit, health care, child care, housing, education, capacity building. An International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society illustrates SEWA’s demand-driven approach:

“A good example is the story of Kunvarba, who grows roses for a living with the help of her family members. She picks roses at night for delivery the next morning. Without SEWA, she would hold a lantern in one hand and pick flowers with the other. At SEWA’s instigation, engineers designed a headlamp for Kunvarba, which is much like a miner’s lamp and runs on a solar powered battery. Kunvarba is able to pick many more roses, and, as she excitedly reports, her income ‘has gone up faster too.’”

True bottom-up democracy writ large, where women are only were heard, but in charge, not only locally, but nationally.
SEWA’s model has always been an inspiration—unapologetic in its defense of interpersonal relationships and recognition as a cornerstone. Dignity is foundational to development. SEWA fosters home-grown leadership and the collective wisdom residing in its network. I have always believed that global philanthropy and service focus far more on deficits than on assets. A deficit mentality can foster a dependency on someone else to fill the gaps. An asset mentality fosters a belief in the capacity to identify challenges and local solutions. SEWA walked this talk.

Deepmala introduced me to Dhara and Ami, two cheery SEWA workers who joined us for a seven-hour car trip to a northwest region of Kutch—caked and dusty, arid, and devastated from an earthquake in Bhuj just eight months earlier. Driving in India is a white-knuckled affair. Dhara and Ami thought nothing of it, passing out water and unfolding ghughra sandwiches made of fresh coriander, green chilis, garlic cloves, green capsicum, coriander, onion, chaat masala, salt, and a variety of grated cheeses on buttery fried bread.

They shared story after story of women cast aside by caste, mistreated, and abused, along with an equal number of self-reliance and hope. This was all a part of a women’s movement, and I wanted to learn how they transform principles into practice. Two hours in, Dhara handed me a SEWA poster with these words painted on a picket sign:

- Our bodies are our wealth
- Our houses are our workplace
- Our children are our future
- Our lives are full of crises

“I like your ‘We Can Do It!’ poster,” said, referring to the iconic poster of Rosie the Riveter’s morale-boost to women factory workers during World War II.

We walked streets in Bhuj where multi-storied buildings had dissolved in an instant, killing over 18,000 people, injuring over 165,000, and destroying or damaging nearly a million apartments, many of which were constructed on the cheap by substituting illegal amounts of compacted sand over concrete, and without sufficient reinforcement or anchors, compromising the integrity of walls
and roofs, even the foundation. 992 of 1,359 schools were destroyed. SEWA had already provided learning kits/toys to support the 500 families of the salt fields.

I asked if schools in the region knew about earthquake preparation to mitigate against such a disaster. They knew nothing. Here, too, SEWA was working to support the building of traditional Kutch homes—circular, domed with bent bamboo and wood, thatched, and plastered with mud and dung. I asked about how these homes might fare during extreme heat, cyclones, or earthquakes. I learned that the cylindrical shape does not resist wind and is less likely to become unstable from lateral forces. Mud against curved walls assists with cooling. The dung serves as insulation against cold winters. After the government launched a program to reduce the number of diesel buses, SEWA partnered with NGOs and civil society organizations to turn diesel buses into mobile libraries, even entire schools, rather than clog up landfills.

I could not stop thinking about how earthquakes are as much a national—as they are a natural—disaster. They decimate the poorest and most densely populated communities living in unreinforced buildings atop known, and often shallow, fault lines. All of it was preventable. Educational fault lines are systemic structural hazards because illiteracy and the absence of awareness about basic safety measures undermine the foundations that hold society (and buildings) together. The temblors of corruption and neglect put lives at risk. Unsafe buildings, like an inadequately constructed education system, may withstand a shock here and there, but are compromised each time until they collapse. Five years later after the devastation in Bhuj, Teachers Without Borders would launch an earthquake science and safety program. I consider it to be our finest achievement.

The following day, we traveled to a SEWA-run program by which women farmers were taught how to read, many of whom had never seen their name in print. Dhara and Ami spent several minutes walking about the village, reconnecting with the women in ways that felt like a visit to old friends, then shooed us into an abandoned stable-turned-classroom. Soon, a group of women assembled.
Dhara and Ami distributed slates (yes, slates), chalk, and small damp towels, then told the assembled group, “This could be our lucky day.” The women looked at each other, not certain they heard correctly. She continued, “because today everybody can feel the joy of achievement.” Dhara and Ami both went on to explain that success would be possible only when every student received 20 out of 20 on the upcoming activity. They were to mark their slates (no iPads here) and help each other during the practice session. The incentive for learning was clear: if we help each other, we all win—cooperative learning at its core. Any educator from the west observing what was taking place would be awestruck at its elegance—curriculum seamlessly integrated into assessment, an inviting climate for learning, pedagogy that met the moment, peer support, and measurable outcomes— all without the latest gadget or, for that matter, electricity. The absence of eduspeak was refreshing.

Dhara and Ami were helping women construct and design a resilient foundation for the future grounded in literacy. Should we consider society as we would a building, then this is the kind of educational rebar could build the kind of resilience to address life’s challenges that most of us take for granted.

And yet, SEWA projects were hardly the only education examples of educational ingenuity I saw. Back in Ahmadabad, Deepmala introduced me to Dr. B. R. Sitarma, the Director of the Vikram A Sarabhai Community Science Centre. Sitarma was eager to show how essential science concepts could be made accessible with the simplest of local materials and the recognition of abundant resources never considered educationally valuable. He taught principles of motion and the function of a stroboscope by gluing bindis onto bicycle wheels. He demonstrated how pin-hole camera work and helped children construct their own with cardboard paper rolls and found objects. In a corner, children were hard at work designing a wave machine out of straws, discarded plastic, and gummy bear-like candy.

He was especially proud of the playground. He beamed, “Here is an example of play and physics at work.” We strode up to a merry-go-round. He asked, “What is centrifugal force?” Children held onto the bars and after two revolutions jumped on, leaning against the rail. One screamed: “Whee!” When they came to a stop, a girl peered up at him and described the concept. We walked over to
a swing-set. “What is the conservation of energy?” A student ran away for a moment. I started to worry when I heard the child shout: “Look at me!” He had jumped on the monkey bars and began swinging back and forth slowly at first, and then in a wider and wider arc. “I’m a monkey!” Dr. Sitaram cupped his hands and shouted: “What does a monkey do?” The answer was quick, but felt more understood than memorized. “It goes back and forth like a pendulum!” He responded: “How does that work?” The child responded. “He stores it up and it changes into more and more!” Sitaram said to us quietly. “Well, sort of...but we just started,” and explained the principles of potential and kinetic energy. He had retrofitted the swing-set with an extra bar to show the transfer of energy from one swing that has come to a halt and generate enough to propel an empty swing forward. “Anyone else want to show our guests how the conservation of energy works?” Children jostled for a place on a swing and a running start. Here was street and playground science at work.

With the props of hands-on teaching available in his own backyard, Dr. Sitaram engaged hearts, minds, and imagination. He explained that a lack of resources is an opportunity to be creative. While municipalities should not stoop so low as to use this kind of creative problem-solving as an excuse to abdicate their responsibility for funding schools, he stressed that the lack of funds for science kits or other manipulatives should not stand in one’s way. “Besides,” he said. “Textbook or swing-set? You choose.” No wonder Deepmala chose him to keynote a conference she had been organizing, on behalf of Teachers Without Borders, from all sectors of Gujarati society—Hindu and Muslim teachers, government and private school teachers, teachers from different castes. She had put the children to work, too, assembling packets of materials donated and collected from the boxes I had spied in the corner of her room the first day we met.

Deepmala titled the conference: “Shall We Stay the Same?” True, it was rhetorical, but it led naturally to a teacher-led discussion about the status quo and its consequences—that staying still and waiting for help from the government would put education that much further behind and that learning from peers was the best, and likely only, way to combat the life-deflating
experience of working in such an instrumental role, but without support. This was an opportunity to stretch, interact with colleagues, and take risks.

Teachers did exactly that. They aired grievances and sought help from each other. “My students are falling behind in reading. Can anyone help?” “My school director doesn’t want anything to change. I feel trapped.” “I’ve tried everything to get children re-enrolled after they drop out, but it feels impossible. What can I do?”

Teachers divided into working groups, generated audacious ideas without fear of censure, grouped and prioritized ideas, refined solutions, drew prototypes, discussed the implications of implementation against the realities of policy and resistance. They spread large sheets of paper on the floor (Deepmala must have had endless supply) to sketch out presentations and to list questions for further discussion. Finished sessions pasted on the walls and on the floor.

She had orchestrated everything. At a break, high-school students performed an original play about feeling empty in classrooms that did not celebrate learning. Clearly, Deepmala wanted this conference to end with an answer to her question. No, things should not stay the same. This is what change should look like.

By the end of the second day, teachers called for a commitment to create a global, modular, culturally sensitive teacher professional development program, available online and offline. They wanted to develop teacher communities to supplement traditional teacher education, connect interest groups, and influence policy. They imagined a corpus of teacher training material that they had created and shared—free from restrictive copyright restrictions, so that they could update, translate, adapt, and remix it to meet local contexts, current needs, and cultural orientations.

Moodle, a learning management system, was in its early stages. Facebook would not appear for two years after that, and Google Classroom a decade later. These teachers clearly saw the potential of global collaboration.

For a few hours near the end of the third and final day, Deepmala was conspicuously absent. The conference had taken a rhythm of its own. I had been
enjoying my role as a bystander, but a robust discussion was brewing about building a campaign against corporal punishment in schools. Not everyone agreed, voices rose, and the room felt tense. I did not know what to do if this escalated into a shouting match. Rain began to lash against the tin roof and sweep across windows. I looked around for her and saw that she had arrived with her after-school group of students and street children. Her fellow apartment dwellers joined her in washing them up and adorning them in the finest clothes they could collect. Boys wore a sherwani (a long, silky jacket embroidered with ornate stitchery) and gold pants. Girls wore a lehenga (a long skirt) in royal blue, magenta, or bright orange. They were outside under an awning, shielded from the rain.

Deepmala then led them into the room, single file, hands behind their backs, and split into two groups standing on each side of her. She asked for attention. On cue, the oldest child lit a candle. From behind their backs, each child brought forth their own candles wedged into the slot of a CD they had colored with magic markers — flowers, patterns, and the words: “Spread the Light.” The rain beat harder. No one seemed to notice. The child walked down the line, lighting each candle.

Deepmala clapped her hands. The children began a song they had rehearsed: “Don’t Let the Light Go Out.” It was fitting that children would answer Deepmala’s question, “Shall We Stay the Same?” Please don’t, the children seemed to plead. Please don’t stay in darkness. A minute into their song, the lights flickered and failed. At first, the children looked to Deepmala for direction. Once again, she asked a question, first to the children and then to those assembled: “How can we make certain that the light does not go out?” The children understood immediately and continued to sing and present the CD-candles, their faces effused with a warm glow. The teachers joined in, many with tears in their eyes.

That was enough for the group to put forth their next commitment: they shall not strike children and shall campaign to eliminate corporal punishment in their schools. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child had been adopted by the League of Nations as far back 1924 and adopted by the United Nations in 1959. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child had been ratified by the
General Assembly in 1990. Yet progress was slow. Optional protocols against the involvement of children in military conflicts and prohibitions against the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography were not formally adopted until May 2000. “The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment” was not introduced until 2006.13

Unlike so many other conferences, this one did not evaporate. With a structure and a plan in place, teachers from twenty-three countries soon joined these Indian teachers to build curriculum. Six months later, they had created a five-course, free Certificate of Teaching Mastery (CTM) program on 21st-century teaching, assessment, classroom management, multiculturalism, and community development. The CTM began to travel, adapted by both pre-service and veteran teachers, translated into multiple languages, used in required courses, even adopted by unions as an offering on par with far more expensive and less flexible offerings. Rice University’s Connexions platform and Cisco System’s platforms for course delivery accelerated its reach. United Nations Volunteers and The Peace Corps integrated the CTM into their development work. During a usable computer recycling program, the World Bank included a version of the CTM on 30,000 PCs shipped to country offices worldwide.

To this day, however, I am not certain about the commitment against corporal punishment. Despite Indian law and signed agreements, violence against children persists in homes and schools – as a process of socialization and (for boys) toughening up, for being absent, for being ill, for working, for not doing homework, for not paying fees, for not wearing a uniform, for being a girl. In a 2015 article in The Guardian, a 10-year old girl says: “If we don’t study, they beat us. If we ask other children for help, they beat [us]. I went to drink water without asking sir, so he beat me that time. They said all children should come back to class by the time they count 10 after the interval. But I went home [to use the toilet]. After coming back to school, he beat me.”14

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I hadn’t known much about Ahmedabad prior to this trip, and Deepmala did not spend time filling me in on Ahmedabad’s complicated history, but after that
savagery, I understood her sense of urgency. Beneath its surface of mercantilism, culture, and development, Ahmedabad has experienced periods of deep-seated animosity between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus claimed that Ayodhya was the birthplace of Ram, a major deity and seventh incarnation of Vishnu. Bābur, a Mughal emperor in the late sixteenth century, replaced a Hindu template on the site with the Babri Masjid mosque (“Mosque of Bābur”). In 1992, after a provocation by Muslims, Hindu nationalists rampaged and destroyed the Babri Masjid mosque with sledgehammers, ransacked and demolished hundreds of homes, businesses, and places of worship, raped Muslim women, looted shops, and killed close to 1,000. According to a report in *The New York Times*, a former Muslim member of the Indian National Congress party was “hacked to pieces and burned.” I was unaware that Ahmedabad had been brewing again. After that horror, I saw sense of urgency. Teachers were not only deliverers of curriculum, but models of civility. There was no time like the present. That was good enough for me. I found my way to India to work with someone I had not met.

Three months after our conference, a tinderbox of conflict set Gujarat ablaze once again. A Sabarmati Express train carrying dozens of Hindu pilgrims returning from a religious ceremony at the northern city of Ayodhya had stopped in a city with a high percentage of Muslims. After shouting and provocation, a fire from 60+ liters of petrol-soaked rags roared through one of the coaches, killing 59: nine men, twenty-five women, twenty-five children. Widespread reports attributed the train inferno to a planned attack by Muslim terrorists.

That September, Norendra Modi, Gujarat’s Hindu Chief Minister (and now Prime Minister of India). Initially, there were no arrests. Modi turned a blind eye to those who attacked Muslims. Months later, in the district of Mehsani where Muslims were once torched in their homes, Modi’s spoke at a public meeting and fueled his modernized version of Hindutva, a Hindu ethnonationalist, cultural hegemonic, and Islamophobic movement begun in the 1920s and eerily similar to emerging fascist playbooks. Modi’s declaration in 2002 could very well have sputtered out of the mouth of current far-right demagogues or Charlottesville Nazis: “What should we do? Run relief camps
for them? Do we want to open baby-producing centres?...We have to teach a lesson to those who are increasing population at an alarming rate.”

I had become aware that this conference was a diverse cross-section of teachers from a city on edge. How might teachers make progress in the face of such violence? Could it all evaporate?

Within a week of the conflict, Deepmala had received a note from an attendee with “Teachers don’t kill each other.” She assured me that the very act of convening teachers was an expression of hope no one took lightly. Teachers made further commitments to continue their work. Within a year, teachers from twenty countries had contributed material, edited and adapted content, and translated courses. The Certificate of Teaching Mastery has become an open educational resource, still free, still global.

Shaival and Dilip, two of the artists, have since opened a tea shop and were doing well, Deepmala reports. Manju, the shy, clingy girl, had stood up and opposed her parents as they tried to force her into marriage at 16. “I feel guilty sometimes that I did not follow through and hold all their hands for just a bit longer,” Deepmala confessed.

In 2020, while Modi was hosting Donald Trump in Ahmedabad, nationalists whipped up by industrial strength hate speech chanted a racist anti-Muslim song, vandalized property, and once again set fire to mosques. I can picture Deepmala now, shaking her head, wishing she could do so much more, worried that we shall stay the same.

A peace education program would come several years later.
In the Small Places

IN 1948, just three years after the United Nations was established, the UN General Assembly adopted The Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the most translated document in the world.

Eleanor Roosevelt, the chair of the drafting committee, wrote: “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

In 1955, Edward Steichen’s The Family of Man exhibit opened at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It was a striking portrayal of the human condition in those small places. From 2 million submissions, Steichen’s team selected 503 photographs to depict life in all its magnificence and tragedy.

Carl Sandburg (Steichen’s brother-in-law) called the exhibit “a drama of the grand canyon of humanity.” He wrote: “People! Flung wide and far, born into toil, struggle, blood and dreams, among lovers, eaters, drinkers, workers, loafers, fighters, players, gamblers…,” of “blossom smiles or mouths of hunger” and “Faces in crowds, laughing, and windblown leaf faces, profiles in an instant of agony, mouths in a dumbshow mockery lacking speech, faces of music in gay song or a twist of pain, a hate ready to kill, or calm and ready-for-death faces.”

Lines stretched around the block. Painter Ben Shahn (a contributor to the exhibit) mused that “the public is impatient for some exercises of its faculties; is hungry for thinking, for feeling, for real experience; it is eager for some new philosophical outlook, for new kinds of truth; it wants contact with live minds; it wants to feel compassion; it wants to grow emotionally and intellectually; it wants to live.” Viewers ached for universality and connection in our difference. By seeing the rest of the world, museum-goers began feeling what
others felt, revealing a far bigger picture of who we are—members of an extended family. Borders seemed to evaporate.

I may have been ten years old when I first saw the book version. For me, it was a window to the world and I wanted to know more. I would point to an image and ask impossible questions. That man in a tie salting an egg...what was he thinking about? Those women at a hamburger counter facing the street...what was making them laugh? What was that woman praying for? Why was that man driving so fast? Who are they voting for? Why is that group so worried?

Childhood looked playful and uninhibited. A girl playing checkers with a corpulent old man on a park bench. Playing cards and instruments, dancing in circles, scratching symbols in the sand, dressing up in their parents’ clothes or hiding behind them when being introduced to a stranger. Lifting each other, catching soap bubbles or rain in their open mouths, digging holes at the beach, stretching arms to make long shadows in the late afternoon sun.

Childhood also looked painful, poor, angry, afraid, desperate, disconsolate, trapped behind barbed wire, hungry, and bullied. Kids carrying an impossible load of bricks. Faces blackened by soot from the mines. Children alone in a graveyard. Children older than their years. Children without childhoods.

A section titled “Learning” includes a photograph of a storyteller surrounded by enraptured listeners in the Behuanaland Protectorate (now the Republic of Botswana); a tiered lecture hall of students taking notes; an intimate seminar at Berkeley; an old woman practicing her letters; children reading out loud; a monk lost in thought; someone in a hazmat suit, holding a lab rat; Einstein at Princeton, looking for a calculation or the key to his bicycle lock, hard to tell.

Close to the end of the book are seven images of couples, under which the captions for each are the same: “We two form a multitude,” followed by a two-page spread of the U.N. General Assembly and the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations. As Carl Sandburg wrote: “I’m not a stranger here.” We too form a multitude, even in the small places. Viewing these pictures, I felt as if I were a part of something.
Over time, I would point to photographs that I found wrong, unfair, and cruel and ask my parents: “Why do some people have to live so horribly and others so well?” Their answers seemed to elude me. They stole glances at each other and changed the subject.

The Family of Man did not open to universal acclaim. Some reviewers called it western-centric, vulgar, prurient, sensationalist, sentimentalized, and above the realities of politics. Others took issue with the very idea that a single art exhibit could so categorically and simplistically sum up the human condition. Walker Evans, an author and photographer himself, dismissed it as “bogus heartfeeling.” Steichen came under fire for “taking photographs” without permission and for reckless cultural appropriation. East Indians are portrayed as surreal, emaciated, illiterate, and Africans as primitive, destitute, and largely naked. Another critic makes this churlish observation: “The Family of Man is not art at all, but a social and anthropological document, and ought to be moved from its present location to the Museum of Natural History.”

The Family of Man is not poverty porn or shock journalism, not a callous disregard of form for the sake of content, A Ben Shahn photograph, “Resettlement Administration Client Family, Boone County, Arkansas, 1935” shows a woman in front of a weather-beaten shack. She looks dangerous thin, her arms crossed, her face sunken and lined with worry about how to feed her children. Below the image one finds a quotation from Virgil: “What region of the earth is not full of our calamities?” This is one of many photographs that beg the question: shouldn’t the world outside our windows the ideal prompt to look within and around us?

The Family of Man continues to elicit scorn. In a 2018 article, “The Family of Man: The Photography Exhibition Everybody Loves to Hate,” art and photography historian Alise Tifentale writes: “The Family of Man...was never an avant-garde or even particularly innovative exhibition. Its general message—that all people are similar in their joys, pain, and work—was not especially thought-provoking, unexpected, or radical. Its design was attractive, but by no means ground-breaking.”

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Tifentâle’s “meh” review is even more cynical than its dismissal of the exhibit as a trite, opportunistic Hallmark card. She may be justifiably moved to argue with its curatorial choices or lopsided representation, but the net effect is to distance the viewer from the art itself as if to say, “Don’t let these small places enter you. Don’t be moved.”

I say, isn’t it a tad hard-hearted to turn subjects into objects? These photographs, captions, and quotations are a tap on our collective shoulders and a whisper as if to say: “Lookie here! And look hard! And look now! Hey you, staring at those photographs of people working, praying, laughing, giving birth, weeping, killing, falling in love, losing loved ones, tilling the soil...does it ever make you think about what it might mean to be human? As you make out the expression on that worn and withered face, do any thoughts come to mind about equality and justice, peace and security, race and religion, human rights and international law? Take a moment. Anything? Sorry to interrupt, but while I have your attention, you do you think about that Sioux Indian saying over there: ‘With all beings and all things we shall be as relatives.’” I have to wonder, why inure oneself to snapshots, even the posed moments, by assuming that such a saying has no substance? Why not wonder out loud about whether a nation or a family of nations could operate with a sense of purpose and kindness like a functional family writ large? Why can’t one see momentousness in small moments? Are we to view borders more as danger zones than as cultural crossings? Wasn’t this the heart of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? I don’t claim to be an art critic. Still, I don’t want to have a beer with these folks...they’re too cold...so there.

* * *

I founded Teachers Without Borders just six months before the United Nations formally adopted the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). 189 member states and 23 international organizations set out to reach eight broad categories in fifteen years: (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (2) achieve universal primary education (3) promote gender equality and empower women (4) reduce child mortality (5) improve maternal health (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases (7) ensure environmental sustainability, and (8) build global partnerships for development.
By the close of the MDGs in 2015, aid for several of these targets had doubled, even tripled. Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations Secretary-General, pointed to evidence that the number of those living in extreme poverty had been cut in half. Dozens of countries had met targets to provide clean drinking water, stem malnutrition, remove barriers to school enrollment, curtail unsanitary conditions leading to child mortality, and combat malaria and tuberculosis. Those heralding the success of the MDGs identified a dramatic rise in public-private partnerships and government transparency. Connections were made between rapid advances in technology and accelerated progress toward universal education, enabling millions to access the internet and increase the potential of even greater progress across all MDGs.

The Nike curves illustrating the impact of educating girls and women were all there. An educated mother would become 50% more likely to immunize her child than a mother without an education. With an extra year of education, a girl could earn up to 20% more as an adult and often would reinvest 90% of her income into her family. Children born to literate mothers were far more likely to survive past the age of five. Advances in women’s education had already prevented more than 4 million child deaths.

Like critics of The Family of Man, critics of the MDGs made their voices known as well. Many have claimed that the MDGs were aspirational, shallow, fragile, hyperbolic, and unenforceable—nothing more than a public-relations stunt designed by rich countries to parade their largesse in front of the cameras or, more insidiously, to mold the world in their image so that they may expand markets and exert political influence. Academic skeptics raged about ill-conceived evaluation designs, faulty data collection techniques, flimsy validity and reliability indices, and spotty monitoring capacity.

Some have argued that the countries in greatest need of progress toward MDGs did not meet their targets and that fragile or marginalized countries were consistently incapable of building the resources they needed to address the fundamentals of human welfare and chose, instead, to (a) suck at the teat of donor-country charity and stagger under the weight of loan debt to address these essential services, rather than build sustainable national reliance, and (b) take advantage of do-gooder NGOs to abdicate their responsibilities to care for their
nations’ people. Corrupt heads of state were exposed for hiding their corruption behind windy rhetorical allegiance to the MDGs and shameless photo-ops of themselves distributing textbooks in rural communities, surrounded by the appreciative poor or meeting with doctors clapping their hands upon hearing the latest announcement about a public health initiative that was nothing more than a campaign slogan.

Some took direct aim at the MDGs themselves and argue that the right to water and sanitation was only recognized by the United Nations in 2010; that halving poverty was hardly ambitious enough; that in 47 out of 54 African countries, girls had less than a 50% chance of completing primary school; that in the least developed countries overall, more than a third of young women, 15–24 years old remained illiterate; that in several countries rated at the bottom of the United Nations Development Index, the pace of progress toward equity and human rights had not only slowed but regressed.

But what does it all mean in the small places where it counts the most?

**In the Small Places, Make License Plates**

A Teachers Without Borders group in Nigeria, led by Raphael Ogar Oko, was too impatient to wait for trickle-down development, too suspicious of their own country’s capacity or willingness to translate one-size-fits-all proclamations crafted from well-appointed rooms in Paris and New York. For Raphael, change must be personal. Global goals can only take root in the small places, beginning at home.

The group organized itself around a set of three inviolable principles. First, individuals and communities hold themselves and others accountable for their commitments. Second, pool their efforts and build stakeholdership. How might we educate the midwives? Find mentors. Who knows about clean water and can teach about hygiene? Look around, they told themselves, rather than look outside for help. Third, solutions must be sustainable rather than rely on handouts, grants, or government subsidies.
Enter the Millennium Development Ambassador (MDA) program, advertised all over the capital city, Abuja, and open to “any individual with the drive and power to affect change.” To enroll, individuals completed an application form supported by a colleague’s nomination. Once accepted and a nominal fee paid to cover the costs of meeting space, materials, and an MDA identification card, prospective Ambassadors met for monthly seminars, officially endorsed the vision of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, and affirmed their commitment to ensuring the active pursuit of MDGs in their homes and communities. Those three simple rules—accountability, stakeholdership, and consensus were framework enough to get started.

In a stroke of genius, Raphael built a partnership with the local department of motor vehicle licensing office whereby MDAs got a discount on a group life insurance policy and an official, personalized vehicle license for MDAs. Throughout Nigeria, roads include a maddening number of security checkpoints. Most drivers are expected to press into the guard’s hand an extortion fee or “toll,” along with their requisite driver’s license. MDA graduates would replace the cash with their ID cards. Guards would leave the booth and check the license plate against the register. An ambassador was coming through, so gates opened. Status trumps bribes. No one in Seattle or D.C. or Paris would have thought of that. A win-win for the small places. Passionate educators, driven by a deep commitment to own the Millennium Development Goals, are rewarded not only with a group insurance plan and unencumbered travel, but a new level of freedom to spread about the MDA program that much wider.

Like most grounded, home-grown initiatives, it grew. Ambassadors launched micro-credit enterprises and small business opportunities for women supported by community cluster funds designed to lower initial entry costs. Local businesses signed up to sponsor the Millennium Development Goal Soccer Cup and Peace Cup by underwriting an 8-team tournament, sponsoring a single team, or advertising their business on the program. Others started village-level hygiene education programs or high-school age-level counseling programs.
on antisocial behavior, violence, and sexual health to encourage more testing for HIV-AIDS. Neighborhoods were cleaner.

In partnership with the Ministry of Youth Affairs and the National Youth Commission, a Youth Millennium Development Ambassador program mobilized high-schools and universities to connect mandatory voluntary service with specific projects for each of the MDGs. A Youth Summit highlighted the extraordinary contributions of entrepreneurial students. To attract the research community, these same teachers created a Global Educators for All Initiative, calling for articles from educators in every Nigerian state, from both formal and non-formal settings, to examine critical issues facing the implementation of MDGs in their regions. The Teachers Without Borders MDA program extended to Benin, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, teacher by dedicated teacher, small place by small place.

In 2015, the MDGs morphed into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). If the MDGs were to halve poverty, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 2015 on would set forth the mechanism by which the world would reach zero poverty; address the critical imperative of reducing economic, social, and gender inequality; build peace; create sustainable livelihoods; and honor the power of an informed citizenry.

The SDGs have attempted to learn from the successes and challenges of the MDGs. The measuring stick of development must be adjustable. The discussion has would need to shift from quantity alone to quantity of quality. Advocating for more schools may not be as simple as it seems. More schools, textbooks, qualified teachers, support structures for inclusion, and special needs, school feeding programs, and access to resources are, without question, in desperately short supply. The SDG conversation draws attention to quality teaching and learning, inclusion and fairness, safe schools, policies that enhance student engagement, teacher professional development, critical thinking, innovation, and creativity. The number of textbooks distributed must be accompanied by the value of the content and the quality of teaching and learning that accompany them. Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani Nobel Peace Prize winner shot by the Taliban for her advocacy of girls’ education, does not limit her efforts to getting children into school. Her mission is for all children to attend good schools
staffed with well-trained teachers passionate about their subjects and compassionate toward their students.

SDG goals and challenges on a national scale only when they can be realized in those small places — rural communities that may be the last to get the textbooks, marginalized communities without the requisite literacy and numeracy skills to survive in school, school leadership that does not foster innovation or creativity. A quality school is safe. Parents may want their children to go to school but may resist doing so because they fear retribution by authorities, kidnapping, school sexual violence, or intimidation by those masquerading behind faith to forbid it. There is no question that MDGs enabled the building of more schools, accelerated the number of children enrolled in schools, eliminated fees for admission or uniforms, and distributed more teaching materials. The SDGs are take it to the next level by addressing the destructive influence of educational inequality and fear on a family’s capacity to make decisions, supporting effective pedagogy, connecting inclusion with equality, and promoting lifelong learning.

Enter the critics, whose arguments are as follows: The SDGs are non-binding and have no teeth. SDGs add more goals rather than go deep. Sustainable development is too abstract a concept to touch and feel, rendering it almost impossible to measure. SDGs should have foreseen the approaching collision course between a headlong drive for economic growth and environmental disasters. Nor did SDGs recognize that their techno-evangelism blinded them to the consequences of unregulated big data and artificial intelligence transformed into levers for state-sponsored or non-state hacking, invasions of privacy, the creation of fake-news information bubbles, the rise of the dark-web marketplace, human and weapons trafficking, or the abuse of seemingly agnostic platforms hijacked to promulgate far-right extremism and hate. Here’s a discussion topic for the development agenda: what is the contingency plan for, let’s say, a global pandemic or for procuring grain when your supply from Ukraine is cut off because it is under siege?

I am skeptical of hindsight arguments. At the same time, one can argue that the SDGs would do well if they were to embrace the three simple rules hammered
out by a small group without a project-funded ATM: accountability, stakeholdership, and consensus.

In the small places, the TWB group saw the big picture because they live the complexity of sustainable development every day. They do not have to look for proof of climate change. Outside their windows there is too much water, too little water, or water too dirty to drink or bathe in. They know all about access to potable water, sanitation, electricity, and life-saving medicines. Others can articulate the nuances of food insecurity. In the small places, it’s called poverty. They can take you inside their homes, show you the rodents, mold, and lead. Show you the hole in the roof. They know the difference between backbreaking work and productive work, the ability to sound out words, and the capacity to read the fine print. They know all too well the gap between surviving and thriving. And they will show you solutions to these challenges.

The spark for change lives with those people, in those small places, “close to home, hardly seen on any maps of the world.”
My “Favorite” Dictator

IN SEPTEMBER 2006, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan made his first of two appearances on Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show,” bouncing out from the wings in a western suit to cheers and Stewart’s upbeat house band. Musharraf saluted the audience and took his seat. Stewart offered Musharraf a Twinkie and made small talk, then leaned forward, like a drinking pal sharing a secret, and asked nonchalantly if Musharraf could tell him where Osama bin Laden was hiding. The crowd erupted in laughter. Stewart winked. “Just between you and me.”

On May 2, 2011, Navy Seals entered Abbottabad and killed Osama bin Laden. In an interview with CNN’s Piers Morgan that same month, “former” President Musharraf railed against President Barack Obama for what he called Obama’s arrogant disregard of borders. “Certainly, no country has a right to intrude into any other country,” Musharraf told Morgan. “If technically or legally you see it, it’s an act of war.”

By July, Musharraf was back on “The Daily Show.” Musharraf entered to what sounded like a soundtrack for one of those climactic scenes in sports movies just after a soccer ball in slow motion spins just out of reach of a horizontal goalie and skids into a corner of the net for the improbable game-ending victory.

Same Western suit. Same cheering audience. Same salute.

This time, Stewart offered Musharraf a Gatorade and a Balance Bar and cut the idle chit-chat. “We need each other...clearly we need each other in this region...especially because...we have a plan. I really hope that this...obviously I’m not a general and I’m not involved in high-level intelligence (audience snickers), but we may be leaving Afghanistan (pause) within the next 50 or 60 years (Musharraf and audience laughter), and if that occurs (more laughter), what is Pakistan’s interest in the Taliban, you know, what is the situation that, as you see it, with our pulling back a little bit?” Musharraf provided an
articulate answer—about the artificiality of timelines (especially the implication that the U.S. would withdraw in 2014), which would enable the Taliban to lie low, wait for the Americans to go, and rise again. A prescient statement if there ever was one.

Musharraf asked Stewart to visualize an unstable Afghanistan. Stewart nods, taking it all in. “Well, the problem is...the difficulty for Americans is that Afghanistan hasn’t been stable since, I guess, Hannibal” (uproarious laughter). “They don’t appear to want to be stabilized.” Musharraf reflects but pushes back by claiming that Afghanistan had been somewhat stable until the king was deposed in 1979. The discussion continued about the need for a form of democracy “tailored to Afghanistan’s environment.” Overall, a somewhat heady, yet affable, conversation between a bright comedian and an astute military general/head of state/former director of the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI): Pakistan’s CIA.

Some say Osama bin Laden had lived at the Abbottabad compound for five years, a posh area located about a mile away from an exclusive Military Academy. Stewart asked why no one wanted to know more about the strange house that burned its own trash. Nervous titters from the crowd.

Historians and pundits have been consumed with Musharraf’s possible connection to Osama bin Laden. How could bin Laden not have been seen, tracked? As a former director-general of the ISI, what did Musharraf know and when did he know it? Weird and unsettling, especially for late-night television. Weirder still, the circumstances that led to my own conversations with President Musharraf about Islam and development.

It all started at a meeting Jane asked me to attend in New York. In her visible role as a United Nations Messenger of Peace, she had convened an array of diverse thinkers to address contemporary challenges and brief her about developments from our various perspectives. When my turn came, I described the role of teachers as catalysts of change through cross-border teacher collaboration to dispel stereotypes, enrich the curriculum, and connect education and development, one classroom at a time.
Jane invited Dr. Riffat Hassan, a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Louisville at the time. Dr. Hassan taught at Oklahoma State University and Harvard. She had just received a U.S. State Department grant to gather South Asian Muslim religious scholars, clergy, community activists, and their American counterparts to examine contemporary challenges of globalism, inequality, and education. During a break, she asked me to consider speaking at the University of Louisville and discuss the possibility of participating in the project and traveling to Pakistan.

The talk went well and it was official: I would be traveling to Pakistan...often. One would think that reason would prevail over curiosity, but in my case, that would never be a safe bet. Curiosity wins every time. Why pick a secular Jew from the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, whose only God is the Dodger legend, Sandy Koufax, who refused to pitch on Yom Kippur? My secular Bar Mitzvah took place in my parents' backyard rather than in a synagogue. I was raised as an atheist. My academic background did not include a single course on comparative religion, despite having earned a doctorate from a Jesuit University. All of it seemed wrong. There were legions of people with infinitely more knowledge about the Qur'an.

Within weeks after the Louisville talk, I was on a plane to Islamabad for discussions about the establishment of the Iqbal Institute for Research, Dialogue, and Education (IRED) Institute—inspired by Allama Iqbal, the poet-philosopher, social activist, and “spiritual father of Pakistan.”

By the time I had arrived at a heavily guarded compound, my name was already on the door. I could stay as long as I liked. I would be joining the group of Islamic scholars. Meals would be brought in for day-long conversations. We were not allowed to leave the compound unless escorted by guards that Riffat personally knew and approved. We could study and sleep in our rooms, but the protocol was to frequent the common spaces and hold discussions on topics of our choosing. I spent most of my time there, offering little, soaking up discussions that would go for hours, interrupted by meals and prayers.

If asked for an opinion, I uttered banalities. If I had questions, Riffat assured me, I could ask Dr. Fathi Osman, a preeminent Islamic scholar just a few doors...
down. I was, however, to prepare my questions carefully. To do so, I should read Dr. Osman’s Concepts of the Qur’an: A Topical Reading. She left for a moment and returned carrying a book in both hands, three inches thick and 1,012 pages as if it were a Turkey platter at Thanksgiving. I thanked her and staggered back to my room. Assuming that placing the Qur’an on the floor would be observed and reported as a form of sacrilege, I shouldered it against the wall, fumbled for my keys, and managed both to swing open the door and keep the tome from dropping and splitting its binding like my parents’ dictionary trauma.

Having earned his law degree from Alexandria University and his master’s degree from Cairo University, Dr. Osman served as a faculty member at Al-Azhar University, where he developed a plan to restructure how Islam was taught in higher education. His doctorate in Near Eastern studies from Princeton University focused on taxation and Islamic land ownership.

Clearly, this was yet another self-sabotaging endeavor destined for more public reprobation. I could have backed out, but instead hit the books harder, going back and forth between the Qur’an, Dr. Osman’s Concepts of the Qur’an, conversations at meals, books of commentary, and the hadith—the thousands of notations considered a record of the Prophet Muhammad’s (Peace Be Upon Him) deeds, actions, and references. My approach: be sycophantic and selective.

It was not difficult to find passages affirming the primacy of education as its own reward and as an expression of character: “The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge;” “Verily the men of knowledge are the inheritors of the prophets.” As for global education: “Seek knowledge even in China.” Lifelong education? “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.”

But cherry-picking is not scholarship. It’s pandering. Even if I managed to cram a modicum of knowledge into my addled brain, it still wouldn’t amount to thinking.

My true education came from Riffat herself. She asserts that essential rights—freedom of speech, education, privacy, the capacity for choice—are
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fundamental to the fulfillment of God’s mandate. For her, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a contemporary, secular codification of God’s plan for human capacity and potential. No problem there. The Qur’an, however, represents a higher and transcendent safeguard of rights over the impermanence of negotiated agreements easily neglected, ignored, or dismissed entirely. And yet, while other monotheistic religions get a free pass for historical references to human atrocities, there is no such leniency for Islam.

Following that path, Riffat made clear that feminism is inherently Islamic, not an imaginative twist or wordplay. For her, Islam is the path to development for women’s internal and external empowerment. She described the Qur’an as the Magna Carta of Islam for its power to shed light on social justice, human development, and universal education. She has made it her life’s work to set the record straight, whether it is from Islamophobics or those who have caused almost irreparable harm to the perception of a religion they do not represent.

Sitting next to her at dinner following a forgettable conference of talking heads, someone brought up a common refrain: “Why do the Islamic fundamentalists get all the press? Innocuous enough, I thought, even a nice distraction from windy justifications for their latest sinecures. I expected a few throwaway bromides blaming the media, then a pivot back to the attendees’ “my accomplishments” parade. Riffat, however, would make a terrible strong poker player. Flushed, she turned to the speaker and said blankly: “Well, I consider myself an Islamic fundamentalist.” There’s a conversation stopper if I ever heard one.

She let her words sink in and added, “because the fundamentals of Islam are progressive.” Clever, I thought, though I wondered how this would land. Satisfied she had the table’s attention, she got straight to her point. I reached for another breadstick. “And I align my life with Islamic feminist theology, which is fundamental to Islam.”

Still, it’s a tough slog. It is draining for anyone to defend one’s faith, not to mention a steady onslaught of incoming from uninformed and gullible outsiders; aberrant distortions by extremists who, in the words of Karen Armstrong, traffic in the “abuse of a sacred ideal;” right-wing bigots, and
sanctimonious left-wingers whose rhetoric of secular universality more often than not alienates and marginalizes the very communities they seek to defend. She is quick to point out that Jewish or Christian feminists are not subjected to the same intensity of suspicion. Put yourself in her shoes, day after day, and answer those “but what about…?” questions focused on horrific abuses of women Riffat has devoted her life to combat.

“But what about female genital mutilation?” No such direct mention in the Qur’an. Male circumcision is required; female circumcision is not sanctioned. The larger point, she emphasizes, is that any interference with Allah’s creation (for beauty, to suppress freedom, to punish women for their sexuality) is considered the work of Satan.

“But what about child marriage?” Not true, she says curtly. Someone may recall having read that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) married Aisha when she was nine. Riffat would size up the questioner before going on. If she sensed a sincere and seemingly sympathetic inquirer struggling to address questions, Riffat might quote from the Qur’an, followed by ancient symbolic calculations of age and multi-denominational numerology. Genesis 5:3-5 claims that Adam lived to the ripe age of 930. A Hindu example might fit the bill here. “Out of fear of the appearance of the menses, let the father marry his daughter while she still runs about naked. For if she stays in the home after the age of puberty, sin falls on the father.” Vaśiṣṭha (17.70).

“Infanticide?” The Qur’an abolished it.

“Stoning?” Check out Deuteronomy 21:18-21?.

“Honour killings?” Riffat has fought against the insanity of leniency for murder in the name of Islam, justified on the flimsy evidence that the act was a reasonable response to a “grave and sudden provocation.” Even then, as I would come to learn, this cruel irony: many of these edicts are based, often verbatim, from British law. Besides, honor killing is by no means limited to the Muslim world. The World Health Organization, NGOs, and human rights organizations have documented violence against women around the world — acid attacks, abduction and trafficking, rape, sexual slavery, torture, genital mutilation, forced sterilization, and denial of food.
Patriarchal tradition does not define Islam; it defiles it. The Qu’ran itself asks the faithful why they so blindly continue these abuses, generation after generation, even when one’s “fathers did not comprehend anything and they were not properly guided?” (Qur’an: 2: 170). I immediately thought of Deepmala: “Shall we stay the same?”

Nevertheless, the question for me always remains: what could I realistically offer?

After several trips to Pakistan, Riffat announced that it was time to expand the tent and engage scholars in promulgating the contributions of Islam to development and promoting inter-religious dialogue. We would be traveling to Bangladesh and India.

In Bangladesh, we met with a similar group of scholars who had been developing a room of a library devoted to religious dialogue. I remember an orange-grey beam of late afternoon light illuminating religious symbols: Sikh, Jain, Christian, Bahai, Hindu, Shinto. After a short introduction, we were invited to browse. Eyeing a Star of David, I moseyed over to check out the titles, expecting to find a siddur left behind in a hotel near the airport or a second-hand college textbook on the history of the Jews. Perhaps Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*, Herman Wouk’s *This is My God*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, or, by chance, a biography of Sandy Koufax?

At first, I didn’t see anything, only spillover from other sections. Perhaps an intern shelving books was Dewey-decimal challenged. Maybe there was a disconnect between the symbols and the actual section. Best-case scenario: the books were checked out or on backorder.

Just as I was about to ask for help, one caught my eye: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the widely-distributed, paranoid, anti-Semitic, literary forgery blaming Jews for a conspiracy to dominate the world. The twenty-four “protocols” describe Jewish control of the media, the global economy, and law. Jews incite religious conflict and economic wars, inculcate obedience, and propagate disorder. Jews are criminals, rapists, usurers, liberals, pornographers, corrupt, Marxists who mongrelize the white race and drain Christian children’s blood to make the dough for Passover matzo. Over the course of five months in
1920, Henry Ford published The Protocols as a serial in the Dearborn Independent, also known as The Ford International Weekly, under the title: “The Jewish Problem: the World’s Foremost Problem.” From there, he went straight to book form, having published a half-million copies in multiple languages, just to fire up the assembly line of hate. Goebbels may have thought it was a forgery, but Hitler made the Protocols required reading.

This was all they had on the Jews?

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was not exactly what I wanted to see as a university library’s depiction of Jews at an institution purporting to foster inter-religious dialogue. It is the cruelest of slights not only to my people, but to anyone who respects the moral principles upon which all religions are based. I could have just let it go. They should be given the benefit of the doubt. Nevertheless, it gnawed. It felt like a sin of omission. A few days passed before I registered my concern to Dr. Hassan. She asked for suggestions. I handed her a short list to start. She said she would take care of it. I am convinced she did.

I have since searched for The Protocols on Amazon (Kindle edition is .99 cents or $5.34 in paperback last time I checked), and have scrolled down to see titles under the “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” section. What I found should give any sentient human being the willies: The Six Million: Fact or Fiction? or Holy Serpent of the Jews: The Rabbis’ Secret Plan for Satan to Crush Their Enemies and Vault the Jews to Global Domination, or The Synagogue of Satan—Updated, Expanded, And Uncensored.

Despite a prominently displayed message from the Anti-Defamation League and Amazon’s own disclaimers, the public reviews show the extent to which anti-Semitism is alive, well, and unchecked, though none of you, I hope, need any reminders. Here are a few five-star chillers: “I was blind but now I see! Can you? Look for the source behind these very protocols being carried out right in front of all of us.” Another: “Big Answers right here in this little book. So, what’s the secret plan for the world and who is subtly pushing us forward into it like cattle?” And one final gem: “A great and well thought out book. As you read each protocol, you can see how it has been implemented over the decades and how the Jews took control of us.”
I am the son of a Jewish U.S. World War II veteran, a refugee from Austria, and the son-in-law of Auschwitz and Birkenau survivors. I am a secular Jew. I consider Judaism to be a rich source of historical and contemporary cultural expression and a moral code rooted in a deep commitment to the concept of mitzvot (good deeds) and the importance of working for tikkun olam (to mend and repair the world). I have been told that secular Judaism is facile (a pick-and-choose orientation to the dilemmas and challenges of faith), lazy (an identity without the hard work of scholarship), disconnected (from the institutions of Judaism), assimilationist (interested primarily in fitting in rather than the potential of separation), and oxymoronic (Judaism without affiliation or God as identified in our faith as a contradiction). My secular Judaism fortifies my identity and provides a basis from which I can connect to others. I feel a strength to participate in the world because I know who I am.

At the same time, my secularism, in the wrong context, can be embarrassing, especially in a context where the distinctions I have made are not apparent to others who might say I am Jew-ish or Jewish-lite. On one of our goodwill tours to India, Riffat arranged for a visit to a synagogue in New Delhi. In the van on the ride over, I remember feeling a sense of pride—explaining what little I knew of Friday night services. Though not a temple goer, I was looking forward to the familiarity.

I selected a yarmulke (skullcap) from a wooden tray and entered the synagogue with pride. Others followed my lead. From what I could tell, the congregation was comprised of diplomats and other official government staffers living in India, as well as Indian nationals, expats, tourists.

Friday night services begin with a prayer and the lighting of candles to usher in the beginning of the Sabbath. My colleagues watched me as the congregation recited passages in unison. I mumbled along, louder at passages I knew and have repeated for most of my life at our high-holiday services, other Jewish holidays, bar/bat mitzvot, weddings, funerals. The rabbi continued with the Kabbalat Shabbat (welcoming of the Sabbath). The congregation sang along, as is customary, to set a tone of warmth and celebration to usher in the day of rest.
Suddenly, I heard my name and was called to the bema (a podium on a platform from which the Torah is taken from a little closet, read, passed around the synagogue, and returned). Yeah, you, he motioned. Nah, he wasn’t going to ask me to do more than basic prayers. Either way, I was certain to stumble and panned the congregation for someone with a beard and long, black jacket to whom I could pass the baton. I didn’t get the chance.

I had no idea what to do. It had been close to 50 years since I was a behavior problem in Hebrew School. I spent a year in Israel right out of college and studied enough Hebrew to get by, but much of that has faded. Here I was surrounded by colleagues who studied the Arabic language for its subtle nuances and probably knew Hebrew as well. I could not play the part of the token Jew they might expect. This was going to be painful for everyone.

This atheist began to pray for a one-time-only bargain with the Lord, say a power outage (as had happened with such lovely results once before) to extricate me from this situation. If there were not enough people for a minyan—ten people, traditionally men, necessary for the prayer of the dead, the sanctification of God’s name, and the public reading of the Torah—I’d have to call the game because of insufficient players. I’d settle for a minor, non-debilitating stroke.

During the Bar’chu or “call to worship,” I sang what I remembered of the Shema, the oldest daily prayer commanded by the Torah. I raced through the first line: Sh’ma Yisra’eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad (“Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”) to avoid starting off on the wrong foot by mentioning Israel. I had the second line down: Barukh sheim k’vod malkhuto l’ola va’ed (Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever), figuring that it had a universal ring to it. We are all daughters and sons of Abraham, right?

I got through the next lines, pretending to read the Hebrew, about teaching these words diligently to our children, speaking of them when one is sitting at home, walking along the way, lying down at night, rising up in the morning, binding them as a sign on our hands and frontlets between our eyes, and writing them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. No method-acting was going to
save me here. I nodded to the rabbi with an unmistakable look of a gesture of supplication. I thought about offering him my services of washing his car, shining his shoes, or babysitting his kids if would find a place in his heart to free me. Oh Pharoah, I thought, cut me a little slack.

The guy was pitiless. If I were a struggling pitcher and this rabbi a manager attuned to reading body language, he would have called to the bullpen/congregation for a replacement, but he leaned in and kept me by his side, a sure sign that my reprobation would continue unabated. Did I say pitiless? I meant sadistic.

Perhaps I should speak in tongues. Distraction might work, though the rabbi might intervene and eject me from the game. I started davening (from the Hebrew word doavai, “to move the lips”) and shucking (from the Yiddish for shokel or “sway”), imitating observant Jews mumbling and rocking on their heels. But why choose a practice associated with orthodox Judaism? By now, the congregation must have known I was Jewish-lite. Is there no room for forgiveness?

The rabbi guided my hand back to the sacred text, pressing the yad (or pointing stick) into my hand so that I could find my place. I had no idea where I was to read. I only thought about where I would like to sit.

He took over for the amida (the standing prayers), and led prayers about the power and holiness of God and our connection to our ancestors. I waited until he had finished so that I could slink away. He knew I was ready to bolt, yet again held my arm firmly for me to stay in place, asking the congregation to rise and sit down at the appropriate times.

Next, the aleinu prayer (about how the world should be), a sermon, the mourner’s kaddish (a sacred and collective prayer for the dead), the kiddush (blessing of the wine), and the motzi (blessing of the bread). Once more, the rabbi made the signal for the congregation to rise. Two congregants were asked to join him on the bema (a boy and girl, having recently celebrated their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs), take out the Torah, unwrap it, and carry it through the synagogue so that congregants could touch it with their siddur (prayer book) and kiss their book afterward.
By this time, my blue shirt revealed a small lake under each armpit. I thanked the rabbi again, assuming that he would deliver the sermon and wrap things up. Once the Torah was returned to its arc, the rabbi whispered, “Speak.” The sermon? You have to be kidding me, I thought. At least speechifying is in most non-profit leaders’ wheelhouse. After all, we sermonize all the time. “In English,” he smiled, reassuringly.

I could tell the story of the library in Bangladesh with the one anti-Semitic book, but there was no need to embarrass anyone else, thank you very much. Besides, I had to redeem myself. I plucked from memory my one and only Hassidic tale, an allusion to Jacob’s ladder. It goes something like this: In a Polish town, villagers are concerned because a fool on the hill is jumping all day long, his arm extended as if he were trying to reach something on a top shelf. An inquisitive child asks about the jumping man. “Why does he do that?” he asks. The villagers tell the child to leave the old man alone. “He’s old and crazy, never mind.” The boy’s curiosity gets the better of him, so one day after school, he takes a different path home from school, this time near the hill so that he could ask him directly. Indeed, the man is there, jumping, straining, and reaching.

“Why are you jumping?” the little boy asks. The old man responds, “I figured that if I jump and keep jumping every day, perhaps God’s hand will reach down and pull me up!” I looked out at the congregation with a “do-you-get-it?” look on my face. I was not about to step into any abstruse interpretations of Jacob’s ladder or Talmudic insight.

I connected prayer with public service. “With faith (open for interpretation here: in oneself, in collective human agency, in God, in whatever gets you to do the right thing), we prevail, even if it feels out of reach, so that we may reach God’s outstretched hand. Our faith in our capacity to reach for goodness is an expression of God’s will.” Clearly a stretch, I thought, but serviceable.

I ended with a blessing (in Hebrew) over the wine, candles, and challah (traditional egg bread), which most Jews can recite, and we all filed out. I thanked the rabbi quickly, careful not to look directly at him. I was the first one to take a back seat in the van. Riffat was on the phone. I imagined a squad of
rabbis surrounding our vehicle, asking me to raise my hands and surrender my yarmulke.

As we approached the compound, Riffat announced: “In two days, President Musharraf shall meet with us in his office.” Us, I thought, meant the Islamic scholars. I looked forward to a quiet evening. I shot her a look. “All of us,” she smiled. I wanted to sidle up and plead with her not to report my synagogue caper to the authorities. It was one thing to feel like a bad Jew put on the spot. Was I now supposed to represent 4,000 years of Jewish history, culture, and scholarship to a head of state? I am from the goddamn San Fernando Valley, for Chrissake! Yet, here I was in the country that beheaded Daniel Pearl, the Jewish reporter for The Wall Street Journal.

Rumors had been circulating that terrorists had developed new techniques for targeting official vehicles. Several attempts had been thwarted, but extra vigilance was required due to an uptick in violence-tinged chatter on social networks. After a thorough inspection to detect improvised explosive devices, our Morse code caravan of motorcycle dot, car dash, motorcycle dot, and car dash eased out into the street. A kilometer or two on the main highway and a detour down a side street lined with barbed wire, we were ordered out and told to wait. Within seconds, two well-fortified Mercedes pulled up. Each driver was huge. I wondered about whether they would have to size us up for Kevlar vests. By far the shortest member of our team, I figured I would have to strap on a child’s size. I sat in the middle seat, straddling a fire extinguisher.

We arrived at a circular driveway rimmed by white tents usually rented for expensive weddings and came to a stop under a porte-cochère. Giant, fit honor guards with impeccably-trimmed mustaches approached and opened all four doors on cue, motioning us to walk between two curtains. I craned my neck to look at them—forest-green berets and khakis, red turtlenecks, red cummerbunds adorned with gold frills and the country seal, white sashes, long white gloves, perfect white spats buckled around their ankles. Others stood shoulder-to-shoulder, awaiting commands, then marched stiffly toward the next security checkpoint. Someone touched my shoulder. I flinched. I was falling behind.
Up to this point, my nerves were steady, but when guards motioned us to take our seats next to individual tea sets made of exquisitely crafted china—teapot, cup, saucer, and two-inch plate on an ornately carved table flush with the right armrest—my heart began to race. A guard motioned to me to sit two seats away from President Musharraf, whose throne-like chair was placed on a three-inch slab of white marble. In my attempt to impress him, I saw myself accidentally sweeping the tea set from its delicate perch, plate crashing to the floor, cup hurtling in slow motion toward Musharraf, my face in full Edvard Munch contortion, then the sped-up version of rifles engaged.

In the plus column, President Musharraf took power in a bloodless coup. Pakistan’s economy grew during his reign. He organized “free” elections (debatable) and even accepted Supreme Court rulings (influence peddling far from certain), at least at first. Historians say that he truly did try to end the fighting in Afghanistan (prior to 2001).

In the minus column, Musharraf engaged paramilitary forces to infiltrate the disputed Kargil territory of Kashmir, inflaming tensions with India. He blamed the incursion on Kashmiri insurgents. The campaign was apparently conducted without the input of then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The denials were exposed. No need for an episode of CSI-Islamabad to figure out what happened. Documents found at the scene have since poked holes in his story.

Musharraf has also been accused of either directly ordering the assassination of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the first woman in the modern era to lead a Muslim country, in 2007 (which she had predicted) or failing to provide her with adequate protection. Shots were fired at a campaign rally, followed by a suicide bomb.

President Musharraf suspended Pakistan’s Constitution, placed the Chief Justice under house arrest, and dismissed fifteen Supreme Court and fifty-six provincial High Court judges. In 2009, his actions were declared unconstitutional and illegal. Four years later, he was accused of treason. In 2013, a special Shariat court was established. Musharraf was summoned to appear. He blew them off until one appearance in 2014. A month following that appearance, he was indicted for high treason, punishable by death. In 2016, he was permitted to go
to Dubai for medical treatment, where he remained, defying multiple summonses to appear before Pakistan’s three-person special court. In 2019, the special court made his death sentence official in a 2-1 split. In early 2020, a Lahore High Court unanimously annulled the decision: 3-0. Musharraf is not coming back to Pakistan anytime soon.

At best, plus and minus columns for evaluating leaders are ingenuous, revisionist, and reductionist. I can only report what I experienced. During my trips to Pakistan and subsequent meetings with President Musharraf, I witnessed a reasonable conversation between scholars and a head of state about the role of ancient faith in a global context. President Musharraf asked the Institute to explore how to promote “enlightened moderation,” a notion he had introduced at an Organization of Islamic Cooperation conference, to emphasize how peace, harmony, and development are an optimistic, rational, truer vision of Islam than its perversion by extremists seeking to ensure, by whatever means necessary, its fundamentalist and ritualistic interpretations.

Musharraf made it abundantly clear that he was taking a risk. By stressing a modern, “enlightened” approach, he had been accused of launching a thinly-veiled PR stunt designed to curry favor with the West and anoint himself a beacon of goodness, all the while keeping America in his back pocket.

At my own risk of being called star-struck and shallow, I am going to come out with it and say that I enjoyed my conversations with President Musharraf. He was charming. I have met dictators before, but they were never this articulate, engaging, or curious. And why, to this day, do I take some pride in possessing a framed, signed photograph from him in my office, alongside of my Mao buttons? Do I ever learn?

Dr. Osman, on the other hand, was not so easily enamored. Some consider Musharraf’s choice of “enlightened moderation” as a denigration of Islamic traditions and a nullification of a people’s faith. I did not sense that Musharraf wanted to promote development over faith, but rather to equate Islam with development, leaving no room for extremism. I bought all of it.

And yet, Fathi Osman warned against political hubris. He urged scholars to insist less on being understood and more on understanding others’ points of
view. During an animated discussion amongst the scholars about the strategy or tactics associated with “enlightened moderation,” Dr. Osman reminded us that moderation and acceptance are rooted deeply in the Qur’an. I saw why Riffat asked Dr. Osman. Still, would an American advocating for this approach be seen with anything other than suspicion?

When Riffat returned from a meeting with President Musharraf to ask me to help develop a plan by which teachers can disseminate the idea that progressive, pro-development practices are characteristically Islamic, I vowed not to make the mistake of development workers who wear their own secularism on their sleeves. A Pakistani villager once told me his group appreciated it when I saw it was prayer time, while others to send a message that Islam impedes progress. “Sometimes we feel that they are thinking, ‘if only these people would reduce the time they pray each day, they could get on with their lives.’” I turned to Dr. Fathi Osman. I had no better mentor. Each time I returned to Pakistan, Dr. Osman was there to guide me, already in his late 70s—kind, soft-spoken, capable of sustaining an energetic conversation despite the wheeze of air-conditioners working overtime in stifling heat.

Fathi Osman devoted his life to showing the West that Islam could be made accessible, rather than vilified and distorted. His tireless advocacy for inter-religious cooperation rose from a grounded moral conviction and impeccable scholarship.

On trips to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the United States with Dr. Osman and his wife, Aida Abdel-Rahman Osman (a scholar in her own right), the couple was recognized everywhere. With an equal measure of equanimity, humility, and grace, they engaged everyone in conversation. Fathi Osman passed away on September 11th, 2010. *The New York Times* obituary described quoted an article he wrote on Islam and human rights: “Openness is life, while being closed off and isolated is suicidal.”

The Iqbal Institute for Research, Dialogue, and Education eventually folded from criticism, poor management, and Musharraf’s increasing political troubles. I, for one, was accused of being a CIA agent. Someone suggested I get a
Canadian passport from an expert forger in downtown Lahore. I declined. I never got a chance to see Pervez Musharraf again.

I am grateful for having let curiosity push me to take up Dr. Riffat Hassan’s offer to dive into issues that dominate the world stage to this day. I may have asked dumb questions of Islamic scholars in Pakistan, witnessed a distorted view of Jews in an interfaith library in Bangladesh, and embarrassed myself in a synagogue in India, but I met Drs. Riffat Hassan and Fathi Osman—both extraordinary teachers who enabled me to see the inextricable connection between faith and identity. Opportunities like this do not come every day and they certainly do not go naturally to the best or the brightest. To this day, I wonder if I made any contribution at all.

As for President Musharraf, I’ll let history make that call.
No Fear

ANNE SEXTON describes the battle between her personal and public persona: “Quite collected at cocktail parties, meanwhile in my head, I’m undergoing open-heart surgery.”

Sameena Nazir, on the other hand, is a different case entirely. Unlike Riffat, she has perfected the poker face—kind heart, collected, generous, affable, upbeat, spirited, and, in the face of an impending catastrophe or those seeking to shut down her work, not a flicker. There may be plenty to fear in her region of Pakistan, but it didn’t seem to register.

Sameena and I had been corresponding for months. She was in Islamabad giving a speech about her organization, The Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA), a women’s rights organization devoted to facilitating the empowerment of marginalized, rural communities, especially women. Riffat let me attend. Sameena knew exactly how to frame her work. “PODA’s vision is to promote democratic equality based on social justice — a tall order in Pakistan. We focus on economic rights and civil and political liberties. Our role is as a facilitator to empower local communities to articulate their goals and anticipate their needs. Men and women are equal. We work as a bridge between rural communities, stakeholders, resources and linkages.” We hear this rhetoric often in the global development business. PODA, however, is a concrete example.

Sameena faced a volley of hard questions, mostly from men. Her answers were clear, direct, articulate, and kind. Afterward, we found an open café. I asked her what she thought of the previous evening. “That was fun!,” she said as if she had just come from an inner-tube slide at a water park.

Riffat also gave her blessing to meet up with Sameena and travel to a village outside of the Chakwal District in the Rawalpindi Division, Punjab province, an hour and a half from Islamabad. I wanted to see Sameena’s work firsthand to
learn more about how she managed to connect girls' education and livelihoods. A car showed up and we climbed in. When we closed the doors, a pick-up truck edged in front of us right before sentries opened the front gate. Three men wearing “No Fear” T-shirts, each with automatic weapons slung casually across their chests took up positions in the truck bed. One guard looked east, the other west, and one kept his gun pointed at the car, all trained to pick off an attacker coming from either side of the car. What if our driver popped a tire or something happened that sounded like gunfire? Would they shoot first and ask questions later? From around a corner, a guard kicking up dust from his souped-up three-wheeled motorcycle brought up the rear. Sameen could read my Yes fear.

“I’ll let you know when it’s time to worry,” she said, pulling her curls behind her ears. “Where do you think I get these gray hairs from?”

Sameena didn’t mind that Riffat had ordered this mini militia, but found it unnecessary. “Really,” she grinned, “there’s nothing to worry about. Really, really.” The trip turned out to be uneventful. Sameena was right. No need for scary protection.

Sameena and I had had long talks about challenges in her community. Rural populations in Pakistan have a literacy rate nearly 30% lower than that of urban populations (44% compared to 72%) and have less access to drinking water and sanitation facilities. While women across Pakistan face gender discrimination and gender-based violence, the problem is exacerbated for many Punjabi women by substandard living conditions, where they face high levels of malnutrition and limited employment opportunities. According to Human Rights Watch, 32% of girls in Pakistan do not attend school, 87% of whom do not reach ninth grade. In “Shall I Feed My Daughter, or Educate Her?” a Human Rights Watch report claims that “Twenty-one percent of females marry as children.” While Rawalpindi fares much better than other areas of the country, PODA remains a local lifeline. “It’s safe here,” both girls and women say. “I learn here. I have hope.”

The benefits of supporting education for girls are well known. The Center for Global Development asserts that, with an extra year of education, a girl can earn
up to 20% more as an adult and often reinvest 90% of her income into her family. Children born to literate mothers are far more likely to survive past the age of 5; that, in an ever-swooping curve, women’s education has prevented more than 4 million child deaths. Educated girls and women tend to be less vulnerable to HIV infection, marry later, raise fewer children, and send them to school. In short, more schooling, better health. Better health, more schooling.

In one room, a group of women wearing smocks inspected clay pots and papier-mâché bowls. On the walls were posters of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with pictures of handicrafts for sale. In another room, girls were practicing multiplication, quizzing each other in impressive English. In the front office, I noticed that men were doing clerical work, making entries into notebooks, each one labeled for its intended use—a fastidious accounting for all the animals, the number of villagers participating in programs, children in school, vaccinations. Even more, there was an ease between men and women, which seemed to defy all that I had read and heard about Pakistan. Here, women were in charge.

It was a studio, a school, and a social movement beehive all rolled up into one. Women worked on their projects. Sameena circulated amongst them, seamlessly shifting easily from offering compliments on their art to The Declaration of Human Rights. She pointed to Article 26 (Everyone has the right to education.) and directed a question to teenagers: “What is a right?” They responded by listing words that came to mind: choice, freedom, equality. “Where do rights come from?” More responses: they come from me, my village, my government. One woman from a surrounding village began to cry. I looked away.

I was ushered outside to meet a group of teachers sitting on rugs under a canvas tarp. A dusty gust swept through, bellowing the tarp trampoline-like, up and down, straining its poles and anchor. A man and a woman jumped up to steady a shall chalkboard on a flimsy easel. Women covered their eyes and mouths with scarves or the sleeves of their shalwar kameezes. Sameena would join us in a minute, I was told.
I smiled and nodded awkwardly to the assembled group until someone blurted: “How are you, Mr. Fred!” I brightened up and pointed to myself. “I am fine!” a bit too exuberantly, leaving room between each word as if I were teaching English. Someone shouted: “I am fine!” Then another, even louder: “I am fine!!” Still another, straining, the loudest of all: “I am VERY, VERY fine!!!”

Sameena appeared with a few staff.

Teachers had been asked to prepare topics for open discussion. A notetaker was charged with summarizing each on the chalkboard. Urged to speak in English, some shifted to Urdu or Pashto to make themselves clear. Sameena made certain I understood what they were saying. “If education is the responsibility of the state, why doesn’t the government stop extremists from attacking schools?” Someone wrote: Government responsibility – attacks on schools. “Why do Americans lump all madrassas together as schools that only train people to memorize the Koran, and then say it is okay to run ‘fundamentalist’ Christian schools?” I blushed. The blackboard scribe wrote: American hypocrisy. “People say that technology is a low priority for the poor. Why do they think they can make those decisions for us?” Technology is our choice was added to the list. “Pakistan’s constitution says that all children can go to school, but they don’t make an effort to enroll children. Why do their turn a blind eye when children they don’t?” Another gust blew the tarp up and whooshed it down. Next line: Enrolment – government doesn’t care.

No fear here.

And so it went. “How can we teach parents to read?” Literacy for all. This was no rudimentary training exercise in classroom fundamentals, but a serious, critical discussion amongst educators empowered to assert their ideas and think like development professionals. I offered a question of my own. “How do you deal with resistance to change.” Without deference to my question above others, the scribe wrote: Resisting change.

Men working on the building close by leaned on shovels and rakes to listen in on the conversation. No tribal leader had emerged to cast a foreboding shadow. An older woman signaled for attention and directed her statement to me. “Men here understand that educating girls is good for the entire family.” Men
supporting girls’ education. She continued. “My son told me a story of a man that had saved up to purchase farm equipment. He didn’t have the collateral for the loan to be approved by the bank and was convinced by a loan shark that he was getting a good rate. The lender had come to collect the first installment. The farmer did not have as much money as the lender expected to receive, so the farmer called his son over to help him do the calculations.

His daughter was nearby, but he was embarrassed and told her to go away and stoke the fire. His son did not know percentages. Overhearing the lender and her father, the girl came back and tried to intervene, having looked over her brother’s shoulder for months while he had been doing his homework. She knew the answer but was once again shooed away. The lender insisted on collecting. The daughter persisted, telling her father she could help. At the last minute, her father relented. She solved the problem and saved the family money. The father managed to fish out the correct payment and warned the lender that he would be reported (a punishment of up to ten years imprisonment with a fine of Rs 500,000). The blackboard read girls, math, and money literacy.

We broke for a meal and prayers, then reconvened, and the discussion took up where it left off. Responsibility. Madrassa. Technology. Enrolment. Literacy. Change, Money Literacy. It was enough for a series of graduate seminars. Sameena articulated her vision of Pakistan as a society of equals. This village, this moment was an exemplary society of equals.

Somehow, however, they quieted down abruptly. Even the wind seemed to have shifted. The canvas sagged. Something must have caused this conversation to deflate so abruptly. Was I the reason? Though the discussion was candid, was I supposed to say something? Sum it up and answer these questions? I have been put in that position all too often—an expectation that the expert from the west was duty-bound to enlighten the rest. By just being here, listening in, had I crossed yet another invisible line? Had I been too chummy or forceful or candid? By not saying anything, did I make them afraid? Had I overstayed my welcome? I could not pick up any social clues. What the hell was going on?

I noticed that a few women had been looking past me. I twisted around. The four guards who had escorted us to the village had returned. They had parked
the truck and the motorcycle at a distance but now made themselves known. Sameena leaned in. “It’s the no fear guys,” she giggled, then spoke rapidly to the women, informing them that I needed to return to Islamabad, thanking them for their honest conversation and interesting questions, then something else I could not decipher. They tittered and cackled, some breaking out into a belly laugh. Apparently, she had informed them about the escorts. In unison, women and men shouted in English: “No Fear!”

Sameena spoke with the guards and returned. We would be leaving in a half hour, she informed me. She would like me to do one more thing, however, and take a walk with her father.

“He’s blind. Hold him close, just you and him. He speaks and understands English perfectly.” He’s over there, pointing to a man under a metal awning, sitting in a blue and white webbed aluminum lawn chair, seemingly asleep. She walked me over to him and introduced me. He stood up erectly and bent his elbow. I hooked my arm through his and we started our stroll. I didn’t know how this would go, but he broke the ice by asking me to make a circle around the village and tell him what I saw. Was he testing my observational skills? That feeling passed quickly. He seemed genuinely interested. I described the water buffalo, the color of the fields, birds skittering across a murky pond and veering off, a well that looked unsafe. He asked me about my family. I described my mother, how she was born in Vienna and spent her afternoons in a candy store her mother owned, how they were lucky enough to flee in 1938 as Hitler was gaining power, and her career as a French teacher. I told him about my father’s childhood in Washington Heights, his brief acting career, his war years, meeting my mother, the move to Los Angeles, falling in love with international folk dancing, the return to college as the oldest student in his class both for his bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Sameena’s father told me about the village and Sameena’s strength. How she could motivate her classmates to do anything. I steered him away from a puddle and a pile of bricks. I wanted to know more, but he asked about my wife. I told him of her work as an art therapist for the elderly or tough kids or sick kids. I turned the conversation back to PODA’s work to connect art, human rights,
literacy, and livelihoods for women, but he interrupted me to ask about my two daughters, their schools, and where we live. He squeezed my arm affectionately.

He wanted to walk around the village again. This time, there were fewer questions. I told him that I saw a bird resting on a water buffalo cooling off in a swamp, chickens gossiping and skirting around corners, light flickering in the trees. I noted menacing clouds on the horizon. “I smell rain,” he said.

As we made the final turn toward the cars, he told me about his own childhood and his belief in the ideals of a pluralistic Pakistan, the tragedy of extremism, and his faith in youth to learn from PODA. How important it is to be stewards of the land, its animals, and each other. Jane would love this guy, I thought.

I made out Sameena ahead, motioning to us with both hands as if she were guiding a plane to its appointed gate. I leaned in to say that the boss was telling us to pick up the pace. He smiled. “Get used to it,” he said. He returned to the topic of Sameena and his belief in her, how she supports the village, yet seeks to continue her graduate studies in the United States. “She is my eyes, my heart.”

At the office, I settled him into a chair. He turned his head toward me and patted my arm. “It will rain soon,” he said. I told him that, after years of dancing, my father could tell if it was going to if his legs ached. He was usually right.

The women from the circle waved and smiled. The motorcyclist started up and revved his engine, belching black smoke. A few more chickens protested loudly at the intrusion. The three “No Fears” led the way. Sameena waved, holding onto her father’s arm.

Not two minutes outside the village, I heard a thud and skitter, as if a rock had hit the windshield. I instinctively ducked, and then searched out of the window for the “No Fear” guards. No, we were not someone’s target practice. It was only a late afternoon storm, first a sporadic rattle then with more intensity until it felt like an enfilade strafing across the hood. Five years later, I would know what rain would mean to Pakistan — floods so extensive that up to 40% of the country would be considered underwater.

That night, I called Sameena to thank her and ask her for a candid assessment of the day. She said the encounter with her village was a success and that we had
taken the most important step. I asked why. “The teachers told me that, when you met with them, you didn’t sit on a chair, though they were sitting on the ground. You sat with them.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it. Also, you didn’t lecture. Most of all, my father likes you and told me to ask you to come back soon,” she said.

“But next time, lose the guards.”
WELL INTO morning lessons, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake centered nineteen kilometers northeast of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, struck with enough apocalyptic fury to rattle bones as far away as Kabul and Delhi. In school, children died at their desks. Dislodged by aftershocks, boulders tumbled from cliffs to flatten communities below. The city of Balakot was almost completely destroyed. Near the port town of Gwadar, villagers reported that a small island had emerged. Muzaffarabad, the largest city of Azad Kashmir and close to the epicenter, was inaccessible, blocked by landslides. School buildings collapsed, burying children.

82 kilometers away, in Islamabad, internal and helicopter video captured the implosion of the posh Margalla Towers. Permits were granted for only five of its seven floors. Bribes took care of the extra two floors. A water tower leaking for years finally gave way. The builder of the Margalla Towers was eventually judged criminally negligent for substandard construction but it took six years to bring him to justice. Apartment owners were eventually compensated. Since the builder also owned four apartments, he was paid as well. A 2011 Express Tribute article, “Earthquake 2005: Faulty towers—cursed by nature, haunted by apathy” exposed ongoing corruption and negligence six years later. Twelve years later, survivors were still clamoring for the release of a 1,600-page report not released because, according to critics, there were too many other tragedies like this one...waiting to happen. Yet another natural and national disaster.

Underfunded emergency response teams did what they could. Rescue workers airlifted into remote regions were not certain that they had landed in the correct place. Familiar villages looked unfamiliar. Armed with picks, shovels, and basic debris-moving equipment, they pawed at everything—bricks, beams, glass, shouting updates to each other, aware that roughly 90% of the victims must be reached within the first 24 hours. Desperate to find family, friends, anyone—many villagers would not stop digging until physically pulled away by police, collapsing with guilt and exhaustion in their arms.
Radio reports informed villagers that their best hope of survival was to find their way down into the valley to seek shelter, water, food, and medical assistance.

Communities had long abandoned the belief that authorities would protect them and took matters into their own hands. Sameena called to say that the road from Village Chakwal to Islamabad was jammed with cars, trucks, and villagers on foot, she said, not so much from people fleeing the hardest hit areas, but from those traveling toward the disaster to deliver supplies to trapped communities.

She reported that the snow would be coming soon, after which all would be lost. The area would be sealed off, entombed. Without winterized tents, blankets, water, and food, whole communities would freeze to death. Her voice quavered with exasperation, exhaustion, and...fear. “We’re working day and night to help. We must get them what they need now, then we’ll set up a school.” She may have been afraid, but never undeterred, never without a plan.

United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, made repeated and increasingly agitated appeals for immediate global assistance and international cooperation. The development and global aid community was worried about donor fatigue. Only 10 months earlier, an earthquake measuring 8.9 on the Richter scale, located under the sea near Aceh in northern Indonesia generated a tsunami caught on hundreds of video cameras. And less than six weeks earlier, Hurricane Katrina smashed into New Orleans’s Ninth Ward and St. Bernard’s Parish.

Conditions in the earthquake zone became more perilous each day. Rocky terrain impeded humanitarian relief made even more complex by the coordination of local and international NGOs, average citizens, the Pakistani army, Indian soldiers, Cuban doctors, and volunteers.

Pakistanis would wait for no one. They just kept digging. Sameena was unfurling her plans to anyone who would listen, and called again with my marching orders: “I’ve got a lousy connection here and two minutes before I have to share the phone. You need to get a large shipment here—tents, clothes, winter clothing, sanitary supplies—by November 25th. Sweet-talk a shipping company to get it to New York. Pakistani Airways will take it from there. Bye.”
I may often question my approach to global development, but at least I take direction well. And there’s nothing as motivating as a deadline, certainly when lives are at stake. I could not fail her, her father, the village, PODA, Pakistan, or myself. Besides, Sameena would never let me.

In Seattle, the Pakistani community had already mobilized a tent and blanket drive. I found several local leaders and invited them to my home, along with anyone I could find. That night, we coordinated our efforts. Our campaign would be called “Warmth Without Borders.”

The following morning, DHL agreed to waive all costs for shipping up to eighteen pallets to New York, as well as transfer them to a Pakistani Airways cargo plane by mid-November. Sameena worked her magic on the Islamabad side, having secured permission to waive customs fees and expedite delivery.

My local post office and the fire station agreed to reserve space for donations. We printed “Warmth Without Borders” flyers with the time and place for collection, along with a 35-font headline about the impending snow and the urgent deadline. Mail carriers slipped them into mailboxes. Volunteers snapped them under windshield wipers. Supermarket managers pinned them on public bulletin boards. A small team cold-called camping stores and showed up at churches, synagogues, and mosques.

At a principal’s office, I plunked down the front page of *The New York Times* on his desk. “Look at these people. If we don’t get the tents and blankets to them, they will die.” In the ensuing silence, I watched his eyes scan the faces of the dusty, the dazed, the bereft. Wait for it, I said to myself. It worked almost every time.
Every school principal in my community supported the cause and convened parent meetings where I could talk about “Warmth Without Borders” and hand out an updated shopping list: “Please consider adding these items from this list.” Every school in my community publicized the urgent need to save lives in Pakistan. Rotary International chipped in to solicit supplies, house by house. One of the Rotary officials and I found ourselves in the dumpster of a recycling center, looking for boxes and bubble wrap.

At a time like this, I needed to act like Robin Hood, Karl Marx, and the Catholic Church all rolled up into one. The rich can afford it and it makes them feel good. Fine. The poor needed it. Our sense of humanity demanded it. If I had a chance to speak, I took my father’s advice. He told me once, “To be taken seriously when asking for something, wear a tie. At times like these, go Ralph Lauren over Ralph Nader.” I dusted off Saul Alinsky’s Rules for Radicals. “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it;” and always “keep the pressure on.”

I stayed away from politics. Pakistan scares people. I had to focus on our common humanity. Let them hear in your voice an obligation to respond, with human decency and generosity, to those whom one may never meet, living in a country one may never visit, and who may never experience such an unfathomable catastrophe.

It was time for me to demonstrate my own leadership. To allow people to come up with ideas, but to hold them accountable. To validate and consolidate those ideas, allow well-meaning people to prioritize them and, with guidance and clarity, create a coherent and actionable action plan. Now would be the time to rise.

At times, leadership must be visionary—above the fray, transcendent, transformational—a compass in hand and a direction for others to follow. At other times, it is all about supply-chain logistics and a road map. A Native American colleague of mine once told me about a piece of advice he once heard from an elder: “Look out far from your home into the horizon to see what can be,” he said, “but make certain your horse is tied down.”
With Sameena’s voice in me, I began to bark orders: “I need you three people to call the camping stores in Seattle, give them the list of things we need: 300 winterized tents and 600 blankets, as well as warm clothes, mostly children’s sizes. Show them the tax write-off form, appeal to their better selves, and please get the name and phone number of those who commit and follow through.” I pressed harder. “Two days after you get a ‘no,’ go back to them and ask again.”

I would not be deterred. “When you’re meeting with a store, a company, or a group of parents, bring a prop—a picture of a winterized tent, a blanket, a photograph from the newspaper. Allow donors to feel like heroes for pitching in. Thank them profusely and publicly. Leverage the donation of one neighbor to inspire another neighbor. Hey, the people five doors down just donated five blankets! Make sure that everyone knows the deadline for donations, after which all is lost, the plane will leave, and the place will turn into a tomb to the forgotten, the lost, the abandoned.”

At the post office, a supervisor granted me permission to hang a “Warmth Without Borders” sign across the building as citizens entered the parking lot and allow strangers to drop off unmarked packages outside, under a tarp rigged up both for dramatic effect and protection from Seattle rain. Within a few days, boxes were stacked precariously high. The fire station next door told us that we could not obstruct entry to the post office, and then proceeded to free up their own meeting room, now that the voting booths were cleared away.

The local thrift store combed through their own donations and dropped off winter coats. The local newspaper publicized the event. Donations flooded in. Middle school students volunteered, giggling when they came across lingerie or high-heels. We labeled boxes containing sealed bandages, sanitary napkins, toothpaste, toothbrushes, and soap. We sifted through tents, children’s clothes, men’s and women’s clothing, jackets, and coats. Drivers rolled down windows to hand checks, $20 bills, pizzas.

On a Sunday, a succession of 20-foot Ryder trucks arrived right on schedule, some waiting in a line of cars still dropping off supplies. Without any prompting from me, a human chain formed naturally—people accepting donations to sifters to packers to labelers to truck lifts to arrangers in the trucks. Once filled,
the trucks took off, each with a volunteer, for a DHL office on the tarmac at Seattle-Tacoma airport. DHL employees at the ready, stacked boxes on pallets, supervised volunteers to use the shrink-wrapping machine, and whisked pallets to a conveyor belt headed straight for the cargo hold of a Boeing 737-300QC scheduled for a 2:00 pm flight mid-morning the next day.

Late that afternoon, I eyeballed one more truck’s worth of supplies, a 20-footer. This might be doable. I promised that both the area outside the post office and the fire station would be spotless. The makeshift camp/command center outside the post office was cleared, except for the “Warmth Without Borders” sign, but the fire station was not. We had never obstructed the free flow of operations, but the warehouse staging area was a disaster. I pleaded with the dispatcher for one more day. He grudgingly obliged. I would pick up a Ryder or U-Haul, wrangle a volunteer or two to help me pack it up by noon, then head out for the final delivery to DHL. Even then, it would be tough.

I thanked everyone profusely. I announced our tally of tents and sleeping bags, coats, and medical supplies. I promised to inform everyone when the supplies arrived and were distributed. The moment the last volunteer left, logistics began to break down. No one could make it on Monday. The other collection groups had long since met the deadline. All the truck rental places were closed and many would open too late on Monday. I managed to find a 22” footer if I brought cash only. I did as much loading and prep work as I could until I was asked to leave the warehouse, found an ATM, and met the truck owner in a sketchy part of town. I was too late for the truck with a lift, he said, as promised on the phone. That night, I made calls to drum up volunteers. It’s just one truck. This would have to be a solo job.

I approached the fire station at sunrise, just as fire trucks screamed past me. When I arrived, the red aluminum doors were open, but the station was empty. I gingerly stepped in, expecting to see a dispatcher. No one was in the office. I spied a dolly and a hand truck but was reluctant to use them. I scurried outside to see if anyone was available at the post office. Beneath the “Warmth Without Borders” sign, there were at least 10 more boxes. My community had ignored the deadline. Someone must have cleared out a cellar here. I opened up a couple
of boxes, fully expecting junk. Instead, I saw shoes, children’s clothes, and toiletries.

The door of the post office was open for access to safe-deposit boxes, but the room for service was locked. Around the back, I searched for someone loading those ubiquitous white, boxy Grumman LLVs. The chain-link fence was bolted. I climbed on the newspaper stands to tear down the sign and returned to the fire station, carrying a box. Still tentative about taking a hand truck from the fire station, I made trips back and forth between the two buildings, box by box I was breaking my promise to two vital tax-funded entities kind enough to offer their facilities. The least I could do was hold up my end of the bargain.

Once the post-office obstacles were removed, it was all fire station. I began to balance a box first on the trailer hitch, then into the truck, sliding each one to the back wall. I assured myself that someone would soon arrive.

Alaska Airlines called to do a phone interview about Teachers Without Borders because I had been chosen as a “giraffe” by “The Giraffe Project,” a Pacific Northwest organization devoted to highlighting the work of people “who stick their necks out.” Mine was on the line. Trying to catch my breath, I gave the interview, squeezing the phone between my neck and collar as I lifted boxes, disconnecting the phone several times, calling back, and apologizing.

By 9:30 am, I had not made a dent. The post office was open but the workers were too busy to help. Yet another moment of panic, embarrassment, self-loathing, and “I-am-an-addled-child” syndrome, mixed with a major sin of do-gooders making promises they can’t keep. This particular international shipment required that I be ready at the tarmac by 1:30 pm at the latest to sign the bill of lading and other forms taking personal responsibility for the contents on pallets. A faxed copy including my signature would not suffice. My choice was clear. I can’t take off with the truck holding a fraction of its contents and guarantee that the other pallets can be loaded so that DHL can stay on schedule, fly to Kennedy, and meet the Pakistani Airways cargo plane. I would ask the Salvation Army to pick up the rest. Or I could fill this truck up, somehow.

I hurried the Alaska Airlines interview to a close, just as a box fell off the truck, bouncing off my shoulder as I was taping up another, splaying its contents on
the floor. I didn’t know what to do. Wiping tears and sweat, fighting off a flash of rage, I decided to quit, apologize to the fire station, expect to pay a fine, and hope that time would assuage my acute sense of guilt from not having clothed more children or helped replenish a rapidly-depleting supply of basic hygiene supplies.

I tossed a jacket and broom against the wall, barely missing a forklift driver who had entered the fire station warehouse, expecting to shift back into place shelving and supplies that had been generously made available for our manic collection efforts.

The floor was also littered with unpacked pup-tents, toiletries, markers, half-assembled cardboard boxes, dolls, and toys. Someone had been shouting “Hey!” but I was too consumed with self-hate and disappointment to hear him. “Yo, little guy!” I turned to see someone leaning over the cab of a forklift, its tines halfway up its fork carriage. Facing the mechanical stegosaurus bearing down on me, I raised both arms, as if I had been caught red-handed in the act of burglarizing the place.

Non-profit leaders tend to take too long to explain everything: their mission, what they do, whom they serve, and why they exist. He wasn’t listening. “Look,” he said, “I’ve got shit to do. These guys told me to show up and put the place back together. You seem like the guy who made this mess.” I looked at the stegosaurus and started to plead with him that I had to get the truck to the tarmac for a humanitarian effort. I pointed to my watch. I waved the DHL papers like a flag of defeat. He rose in his seat. “Sit down! Over there!” I followed his finger to a naugahyde chair in front of open lockers, as if consigned to the purgatory outside a principal’s office. I checked my watch again. After about five minutes, I decided I would jump in the truck to race for the airport, my imagination racing even faster. I would likely be gored by the dinosaur or caught in a comic version of a slow-speed O.J Simpson chase: a van from a disreputable place carrying camping gear on warm clothes being chased by a cranky fork-lift driver, backed up by Seattle police cars bearing down on me until I surrendered. “Jesus Fucking Christ,” he mouthed. “Go back up the truck.” He lumbered off, pushing boxes toward the center of the warehouse, turning on a dime to push them together from the side.
“Jesus Christ has nothing to do with it,” I mumbled under my breath. I raced to the truck, grinding a few gears getting it into reverse, and made sure I didn’t run into a large electrical panel. Within minutes, he had swept up the remaining boxes, whirled around, stopped, and began sliding them into the back of the truck, an inch or so from each panel wall and the ceiling, nudging them next to each other in to minimize movement. He was a Jenga genius. It took him about 20 minutes. “OK. Truck packed. Jesus Christ,” he mumbled again. “What did you say this was for, little guy?”

It took me ten minutes instead of 30 seconds. I told him about the earthquake, the impending snowstorms in Kashmir, PODA, and the deadline for the flight. I pulled the New York Times article out of my jacket. He stepped down from the dinosaur. In a moment of gratitude, I hugged him. “You mean I helped?” he said. I told him he did more than simply help; he was responsible for saving lives, and that his skill made the difference. He smiled. “Jesus Christ, little guy!”

I made it to the tarmac on time. DHL loaded the planes, which left on time for New York. Pakistani Airlines picked up the pallets. PODA signed for them and trucked them to camps for distribution to relief agencies and directly to families. Sameena sent images of displaced families in warm coats and sturdy shoes. Blue tarps were stamped with logos for PODA, Teachers Without Borders, and local partners.

Like clockwork, the snow began a week later. As predicted, they were merciless.

Most people think they have nothing to offer. They may work in a cubicle, on a farm, beneath a car. They may have unlimited resources or the keys to unlock storage closets with perfectly usable, yet discarded supplies people need. The office worker with a passion for graphics who can design a flyer that captivates attention for a cause. The assembly line worker with a ham-radio hobby capable of doing a voice-over for a podcast. The people who fix things. The artist. The immigrant studying for citizenship, with expertise in document translation. A refugee carpenter who served as an engineer before having to escape injustice or
war for a better life. Fork-lift drivers. We just have to ask them for their help. Most will say yes. They all have valuable information — and skills — to share.

It’s all good news, but within a few days, I was discomfited by the nagging feeling that I had led an effort, on behalf of my organization, into the alluring trap of being a savior after the fact. Teachers Without Borders was not a relief agency. Friends and colleagues presented rational arguments: why deprive people of the exhilaration of service? How could we not support a colleague pleading to help people in need? I was not convinced.

I also experienced serious earthquakes in LA. Sure, our house had sustained damage, but it was built to code. Within days, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) showed up, looked around, and handed us a check.

This was different. I had seen the ruins of buildings made of sand and shoddy cement after the earthquake in India, and could only ask questions. I should have taken some solace that, for Pakistan, we provided some temporary relief. It was necessary, even satisfying, but hardly sufficient.

We had to be proactive and educate communities about earthquakes. Education must save lives before those lives are mercilessly sacrificed. It is not as if we weren’t warned. Around 65 AD, Seneca’s Naturales Quaestiones wrote:

“We have just had news, my esteemed Lucilius, that Pompeii, the celebrated city in Campania, has been overwhelmed in an earthquake...For what can anyone believe quite safe if the world itself is shaken, and its most solid parts totter to their fall? Where, indeed, can our fears have limit if the one thing immovable fixed, which upholds all other things in dependence on it, begins to rock, and the earth lose its chief characteristic, stability?”

I had questions of my own. What about the children? How can we let this happen, again?

The answers came soon enough.
ON MAY 12th, 2008 at 2:28 pm, schoolchildren were about to pack up their satchels when an earthquake registering 7.9 on the Richter scale struck Sichuan Province in China. Reports from the relatively new microblog site, Twitter, broke the story before any of the news agencies. Children died in their seats—the same tragedy faced by children in the Kashmir quake.

Those in the upper elevations closest to the epicenter heard a thunderclap of subterranean fury. The earth turned over, as if by an enormous, invisible spade. Boulders the size of trucks tumbled onto, and engulfed, villages below. Rivers dammed by the avalanches caused up to 800 “quake lakes.”

My local NPR jazz station was interrupted by breaking news about an earthquake in China, though little information was yet known. Switching stations, I picked up more information. It was a quake in Sichuan, China. Someone identified a message from a new micro-blogging app, Twitter, from a hilly section of Wenchuan County, the epicenter.

The quake decimated Dujiangyan, an ancient city known for its construction of a unique flood control project in 256 BC, before dynamite was invented, that harnessed a tributary of the Yangtse river and prevented it from rushing down the Min Mountains and flooding the Chengdu Plain. After it was built, the flow of the river could be regulated through a levee in the shape of a fish’s mouth that would divide the water. 60% was used for irrigation and 40% filtered out silt and drained away to prevent floods. Still in use today, the Dujiangyan water magic has attracted tourists from around the world and was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000. Some say it is an achievement that rivals, if not surpasses, the Great Wall.

Dujiangyan was also the site where Teachers Without Borders had been collaborating with Chinese science teachers to conduct professional
development sessions science-inquiry methods at the middle and high-school level. This had been our third year.

This could not be. I must have heard wrong. I pulled the car to the side of the road, my gorge rising. Then the news came cascading in. Villages gone. Twisted roads. Buildings flattened. By the afternoon, tourists on foot and motorcycle posted footage made visible worldwide. I stopped at a big box store and raced toward a bank of televisions, watching a Mobius strip of documentary horror.

All that past week, NPR’s Melissa Block and Robert Siegel had been recording interviews for a piece called “Chengdu Diary,” an hour-and-a-half away from Dujiangyan. I had been following the story with keen interest. It had been 24 years since my wife and I lived in China, and I wanted to hear their take on China’s growth, politics, culture, and economy. When the earthquake struck, Melissa Block was on air discussing the issue of religion just outside a church. “What’s going on?” she asked as the ground rumbled, doing her best to maintain her reportorial equanimity. “The whole building is shaking. The whole building is shaking. My Goodness!”

“Oh my Goodness, we’re in the middle of an earthquake!” her voice raised, a combination of question and alert. “The whole block is shaking. The… the top of the church is falling down! The ground is shaking and all the people are running out into the street.” She continues, “We’re standing here. The birds are flying. The ground is undulating under my feet. The cross on top of the church is swaying violently... People are huddled here on the street. The shaking seems to be slowing down. I can still feel vibrations underneath. Everybody has run out in the street. There are crowds gathered. Somebody is naked…”

I raced home in time to hear Alex Chadwick, the NPR reporter in D.C., reach Ms. Block and ask: “Where are you now?” Reporting from a car, she responded: “We are trying to get to the city of Dujiangyan. Buildings have crumbled into a heap of white dust and glass.” Tofu buildings, as many later described them.

“Screams everywhere. Parents rushing to the schools, wailing.” The names of the schools were made public. Xinjian School. Juyuan Middle School. I knew immediately that we had lost children, teachers, whole schools. I gagged.
could not sleep or eat. My wife asked me to talk about it. I could not think. She asked me to stop looking at the same videos over and over again. I couldn’t tear myself away.

It was impossible to reach my colleagues in Duijiangyan. The only colleague with an insider’s view was Yong Zhao, Distinguished Professor at Michigan State University’s College of Education, a pioneer in the field of globalization, technology, and education reform. We had been in touch only once. I knew he was born in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, only 60 kilometers from Duijiangyan. Surely he could fill me in. I couldn’t get through to him either.

I glanced at his speaking schedule. In a bizarre coincidence, I learned that he was in Seattle. He had spent the day working with teachers and principals and received the news right after he landed. I raced over to the lecture, just in time to reconnect, hear his speech, and offer to take him back to the airport.

We spent a few moments at a diner, both of us either wired and talkative or silent and shell-shocked. I gobbled up my sandwich nervously. He pushed his food around. We promised to stay in touch. He boarded his plane and I raced home again. Into the night, I paced and networked and watched the same news video footage again and again. Yong Zhao had managed to reach his family, but could not connect to his friends. We compared notes.

Reports soon confirmed that up to 900 children had died at Juyuan Middle School. I called everyone I knew to ask about relief efforts. Without an appointment or plan, I drove to the University of Washington and knocked on doors until I found professor Steve Harrell, an anthropologist, who was holding an open forum in a few days to discuss how his students, studying at Sichuan University, were responding. They had already formed an impromptu organization, China Earthquake Aid, to assist relief efforts with water, tents, and quilts, making certain to coordinate their efforts with a stream of military trucks dispatched to the region.

For three days, every hour from 5:00 pm west-coast time to midnight, I called the Director of Education for the region, Zhang Qing, with whom I had built a strong relationship. No answer. Finally, a message arrived from his interpreter, with these three words: “Can you help?” We would no longer raise money for
relief. Teachers Without Borders had to rely on its central mission to connect and serve teachers. To educate. Still, I had no plan.

I landed in Chengdu two weeks after the earthquake. Streets were blocked off, some buildings had collapsed, I saw cracks everywhere, the Mao statue was still intact, but for the few hours there, the city did not look like the war zone I expected. But, then again, I was racing to get to Dujiangyan. Even then, the new high-tech corridor on the way seemed intact, though there was a clear military presence. The closer we got to Dujiangyan, the more we saw cracks in walls and several damaged homes. Billboard advertisements were painted white, replaced by red one-line Chinese phrases encouraging citizens to be strong and work together.

Traffic began to slow. Up ahead, emergency personal wearing luminescent orange vests with bands of reflective tape directed traffic to pull over on the shoulder to leave room for caravans of open People’s Liberation Army trucks carrying soldiers to stream past us, two by two. Having completed 24-hour shifts at the earthquake site, some were leaning against metal railings, others asleep. Outside my window was a massive assembly of ecru and khaki tents with building equipment, army cots, and food. After the caravan passed, we inched closer until we were motioned to hug the shoulder again. A new caravan was coming up behind us.

Near our turnoff toward Dujiangyan city, we saw the edge of the apocalypse. The landscape had fundamentally changed. Entire hillsides were sheared away. We entered what remained of the city. Concrete chunks hung from smashed ribcages of hotels, stores, and schools. At one school, the only part of a classroom I could recognize was a blackboard on a second story. At others, stairwells stood without classrooms. Some classrooms teetered without stairwell supports as if separated from each other by an immense, serrated knife.

It was hard to breathe. My throat began to burn, a headache bore down on one side of my head, then the other, like a metronome with mallets. The order of life can’t just shift like this. Children are to outlive their parents.

At the site of a school reduced to concrete slabs, scattered bricks, splintered wood, and paper, we came across a shrine constructed by grieving parents—
bamboo poles and siding held up a tarp, its front flaps folded upward, revealing a plywood wall and shelves filled with framed photographs of their children. Painted on a bed sheet were the words which, in English, expressed their rage: “Painful Mourning for Underserved Children.”

Two tables in front of the shrine held water and flowers for sons and daughters in heaven. Some also held photographs of children where they used to sit. Surrounding this shrine and others we saw wherever there once stood a school, were hand-made easels supporting wreaths. In front of the tables, daypacks were heaped together—pink ones with Disney characters, shredded ones with steno-pads, workbooks, and colored pencils strewn about like a riot of pick-up sticks.

We watched a young boy twist and wriggle through a temporary chain-link fence and walk tentatively toward the shrine. He stood in front of it for a moment, head bowed. Once he caught sight of us, he scampered away. No one spoke.

It’s not easy to tamp down your rising nausea, then fight it back. You take a deep breath. And then another. Buildings standing erect one day, crushed like Tinker Toys under a bully’s foot the next. Nature and shoddy construction – 1; humanity – 0.

In the middle of the street in downtown Dujiangyan, I spied a white limb of a mannequin amongst clothing, paper, and plastic bags, furniture legs, twisted metal, roof tiles. Whole families’ possessions made rudely public were plowed to the side of the road like filthy snow banks after a freak storm.

A member of Director Zhang’s staff escorted me to an office building he assured me was structurally sound enough to reenter. Once inside, someone offered tea, but made no eye contact. Outside, the wee-oww, wee-oww, wee-oww of an ambulance raced past. Zhang entered, a changed man, exhausted, wan, distracted. His family was safe, he said, then he, too, looked away. Our meetings had customarily lasted at least an hour, followed by a meal and celebratory shots of baiju, a high-octane clear liquor customary for multiple toasts to friendship and good health.

This time, after a short briefing, he stood up and asked that I accompany him to a shelter and temporary school. As we rose, he received a call and left the room
for a moment. We sat down again. A few minutes later he returned and spoke rapidly in Chinese. Heads lowered. “We have found another child.” He excused himself and pulled a colleague close, cupping his hands to say something out of my earshot. The colleague gestured to the interpreter and driver. They, too, began to whisper. Once in the car, the interpreter told me that I will not be spared from the truth. There would be no need to save face. I was family.

On the way to a temporary school, we drove past crushed apartments teetering above vacant stores—window frames bent and bowed into parentheses. The driver pointed out what was left of the old school. The front had been sheared away, revealing six stories of blackboards, panda paintings, benches, mangled rebar poking out of concrete like spilled licorice. We arrived at an area bulldozed for tents and 40-foot shipping containers. Students were queuing up for lunch outside a tent, metal tins in hand.

Zhang’s team identified a man supervising the student line. He was asked to tell me his story. We stood together. He looked at me briefly, then turned to face the lunch line as he began his story—slowly, methodically, clinically, as if he were being deposed, each sequence of events stamped, minute by minute. The interpreter relayed every word. At 10:15 am, my class was doing this. At 1:30 pm, my class was doing that. To him, time measured moments, lives cut short.

I expected some level of sadness as he got closer to the moment of tragedy, but he remained composed. He explained that, as was customary, he had escorted half his class to a one-story language lab at 2:25 pm so that they could begin at 2:30 pm. A math instructor took the other half. “My daughter was in the classroom that was flattened.” I placed my hand on his shoulder. He wobbled as if he were about to faint. I caught him and propped him up. A folding chair appeared. Two colleagues held each elbow and helped him sit.

“Why couldn’t it have been me?” His face lost all color, then flushed again, as if he had come down with the flu. Wincing, his face sour and sucked into itself, he stood up to show me where it all happened, once again sweating, then shivering, unsteady. I eased him back into his chair. “An hour earlier, she would have been there, in the other class…” Another colleague brought him water.
I asked myself, why am I here? What kind of perverse interest am I taking in all of this? As the day progressed, some teachers were stonily silent, others angry, most unable to finish their stories.

I learned that Mr. Zhang had consistently been a stalwart campaigner for structurally retrofitted or new, structurally resilient buildings. Under his watch, a new high school under construction had sustained little damage. Many other schools, however, contained little rebar, non-standard bricks, an unregulated mix of sand and concrete. Rocks and pebbles were filtered out by tossing sand against a screen. Someone explained that schools are often considered fourth-level quality construction—after tourist hotels, government buildings, and businesses.

The Juyuan Middle School grounds were sealed off and guarded, though we were allowed to travel along an access road. Zhang motioned to a guard to open the gate. We were to go no closer than 50 meters from the actual building. That was enough. Down the street, an ambulance

Zhang was unable to meet with me again on that trip, and so I relayed a message that I would return soon. A member of his staff replied: “Mr. Zhang says that he appreciates your American saying, ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed.’ He suggests a change in your program. Could you focus now on earthquake science and safety?” I agreed immediately. I had no idea where to start, but we had to do more than provide support for relief efforts—after the fact.

Funders for our science and safety program immediately assented without hesitation. After having run around looking for help, I turned to the Teachers Without Borders network and found Solmaz Mohadjer, a TWB member from our early days, who had been concerned about the state of earthquake science education, particularly in seismically-vulnerable communities.

She would know. 90% of her native Iran is crisscrossed and surrounded by tectonic activity: the Iranian plate, the Indian plate, the Eurasian plate, the Arabian plate sliding under each other. Plenty of P-waves (primary) zipping through liquids, solids, and gases, but a tease—a small jolt and light shaking—followed by brutal, roller-coaster S-waves (secondary), traveling along the surface of the earth—wreaking unimaginable havoc. With all that folding and
curved sedimentary strata, subduction, and compression going on, the seams come undone. After the devastating Bam earthquake in 2003, government officials considered moving the capital to somewhere other than Tehran. Iran is a seismologist’s stochastic nightmare.

Solmaz’s life has always been about preparation and planning. As a child, after having been jolted awake by mean-spirited quakes far too many times, she made a decision to wear shoes to bed—clearly a geophysicist in the making.

The December 26, 2004, the magnitude 9.1 Sumatra earthquake lasted 10 minutes and ruptured an area longer than California. Below the surface, the two coastal plates, once connected, broke apart, then traded places. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) reported: “NASA scientists using data from the Indonesian earthquake calculated a change to the Earth's rotation, decreased the length of day, slightly changed the planet's shape, and shifted the North Pole by centimeters. The earthquake that created the huge tsunami also changed the Earth's rotation.”

According to M.I.T.’s Tectonics Observatory, it took 20 minutes for 100-foot tsunami waves to flood and drown Banda Aceh at a speed of a Boeing 737 climbing to cruising altitude.

In a brilliant TED-X talk, “How to Disarm Earthquakes,” Solmaz tells the story about Tilly Smith, a ten year old from the UK vacationing with her family during winter holidays in Phuket, Thailand in 2004. She was strolling with her parents and her younger sister at Mai Khao beach when she noticed that the tide had receded dramatically. People looked around, amazed. “Tilly’s mother noticed that the beach was getting smaller and smaller.” Tilly saw the water begin to bubble. She stared off to the horizon to see boats bouncing like yo-yos. “Tilly, however, knew exactly what was happening. She was recalling a lesson her geography teacher gave two weeks ago in which she learned about plate motions, earthquakes under water, and tsunamis.” Tilly became hysterical, screaming to everyone to evacuate the beach. People heeded her call. Her family made it to the top floor of their hotel a distance from the beach. The hotel was hit by three tsunami waves, but withstood three large tsunami waves. Tilly saved the lives of at least 100 people who also found higher ground away from the shore.
Solmaz: “...more than a quarter of a million people lost their lives on this day. Millions were injured and, even more, displaced and became homeless.” Tilly knew what was going on, even though the UK is not known to be prone to earthquakes and tsunamis.

As a graduate student conducting GPS geodesy in Pakistan, India, and Tajikistan, Solmaz observed that students possessed neither knowledge of geology, structural and nonstructural hazards, and earthquakes, nor what to do to prepare for them or how to respond once the ground began to shake.

In Pakistan, she was told that God chose who lived or died or what gets destroyed, that “one of the reasons for an earthquake was women’s sins, inappropriate behavior, and dress.”

Solmaz’s lightbulb went off in Tajikistan. When she asked students about what causes earthquakes, several told her variations of this theme: earthquakes occur when a bull, down in the earth, bothered by mosquitoes, thrashes about and causes the earth to roil. They have never given it a second thought.

She had been testing her science and safety curriculum with middle school students in Dushanbe, Tajikistan’s capital city, where earthquakes and aftershocks were so common that the community at large seemed not to notice them. Young people, however, remained afraid.

Earthquake origin stories are certainly not limited to Pakistan or Tajikistan. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) has been cataloging “Earthquake Legends.”

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2 “Realfoot Lake, on the Tennessee side of the Mississippi River” was caused by The Great Spirit, who stomped his foot, causing the river to overflow its banks and drown a wedding party when a Choctaw princess’s father refused to give Reelfoot, a Chickasaw chief, her hand in marriage. In Belgium, God strikes the air when people are sinful. Children in Assam (a state in northeastern India) shout “Alive, alive” to a race of people buried under the earth, checking whether there are people living on the surface. In east Africa and Japan, it’s all about fish and stones. The East African version involves a giant fish “with a stone on his back. A cow stands on the stone, balancing the Earth on one of her horns. From time to time, her neck begins to ache, and she tosses the globe from one horn to the other. In Japan, “a giant catfish namazu, lies curled up under the sea., with the islands of Japan resting on his back. A demigod, or daimyojin, holds a heavy stone over his head to keep him moving. Once in a while, though, the daimyojin is distracted, the namazu moves, and the Earth trembles.” This goes on and on: sins cause
Dear reader, I must offer some ideological nuance here. Before you start accusing me of smirking at “primitive cultures,” let me say this: (a) examine your own myths about how the world works (b) allow Solmaz to show you that you are jumping the gun here.

Ahem. As I was saying, Solmaz had no intention to dispel adopted beliefs or take the bull by its proverbial horns but to describe what happens to the earth itself and let children come to their own conclusions. The challenge was to seize upon their stories as an opportunity for scientific exploration and reflection. Therein lies the magic of her short film, “Between Bulls and Mosquitoes.”

She spoke their language. She knew when and how to introduce and move through topics. She used props to explain what happens in an earthquake. Students loaded sand, soil, gravel, and flat rocks on a cookie pan, then shook it on an incline. They did the same with water to show what happens when the pan also includes heavy rain or snow. They used hard-boiled eggs to display the earth’s layers. They demonstrated the properties of vibrating waves by shaking spaghetti of different sizes with a raisin on top to simulate low and high frequencies. They manipulated springs and local toys to visualize the physics of tension. They competed to build the strongest structure using popsicle sticks, connectors, and rubber bands, then shook them until they fell apart.

Her students began to think like scientists. They identified variables that could influence the experimental outcomes. They made predictions and tested them. They collected, recorded, interpreted, and evaluated their results. They simulated hazards and mitigation strategies. They worked in small groups to come up with questions about their school’s structural integrity. She concluded lessons with a book-making project so that students could show others what they have learned. They were becoming science and earthquake safety advocates.

Post-assessment interviews with students exhibited an extraordinary level of retention and commitment to safe schools. Children talked to their parents and educators about the science of earthquakes, the devil cause earthquakes, the earth – with child – stretching and kicking causes earthquakes.
their parents not only thanked the schools but demanded answers from authorities. Something else was sparked, too, each time—curiosity about science itself. In a video of one of her wrap-up sessions, a student said that now she had learned about earthquakes. Now she wanted to know about astronomy.

In Tajikistan, both students and their parents began to insist that community buildings be submitted to vigorous inspection and reinforcement. The students themselves were not only thinking scientifically but also emerging as activists. Imagine if earthquake science and safety were embedded into curriculum. Imagine if teachers could explain geological factors underlying the earth’s movement, the physics and engineering of poorly-constructed buildings, and the non-structural hazards of objects dislodged and flung about like ping-pong balls in a storm. They would be best positioned to communicate what to do to prepare and plan for natural disasters. They were the first-line critical decision-makers during a seismic event. By emphasizing safety, they could effectively transmit earthquake preparation and planning to families. She was at the wrong place (an earthquake zone) at the right time.

Easier said than done. In one seismically-vulnerable and poor community and country after another, Solmaz would conduct pre-assessment interviews resulting, with appalling and devastating consistency, in the absence of knowledge about the origin of earthquakes or preparation strategies to mitigate their impact, placing everyone at risk.

With science on her side, she was on solid ground. She adapted her curriculum to meet the context and science of each setting. “Not all earthquakes are created equal,” she explained. “Earthquakes are complex scientifically and regionally specific. In earthquakes, some buildings sway, others sink.” In many cases, an automatic “drop and cover” response alone, without understanding the terrain and the buildings, could result in death. Her message could not be clearer: teachers and students must be empowered to know the fundamentals of geological science in their community, prepare for the eventuality of earthquakes, pass their knowledge along to their families, and, as a community, make noise until voices are heard, changes are made, and corrupt builders are held to account.
We returned to China, armed with a Quake Science and Safety Program in Chinese. Li-Hong Xu, an English teacher from Chengdu, mobilized teams of colleagues to learn the trade of earthquake science education. She engaged Chinese seismologists to ensure scientific and cultural accuracy. She connected with our surviving network of science teachers. With the help of Cisco Systems and Agilent Technologies, she coordinated language communities and distribution networks to remove all barriers to accessing the curriculum and appropriate teaching strategies. She found illustrators to incorporate each science lesson into drawings that included familiar Chinese buildings and faces. She negotiated a plan by which new backpacks issued to children included a pocket guide on earthquake science and safety.

Who now can make an argument that education is the ounce of prevention the world needs? Does it ring on deaf ears?

In the January 12, 2010 Haitian earthquake, estimates of the dead range from 250,000 to 316,000. 300,000 were injured. 1.3 million people flooded into hastily-constructed camps just weeks before the rainy season. Clean water was almost impossible to find. Cholera took hold. Up to 80% of Haiti’s schools were decimated.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) and Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI) have reported that, at the time, “Haiti had no seismograph stations during the main earthquake,” a “lack of detailed knowledge of the physical conditions of the soils (for example, lithology, stiffness, density, and thickness),” and, you guessed it, “poor construction practices.”

Haitians described the quake as if it were a locomotive bearing down or, more onomatopoeically, as “goudou goudou,” the sound of the earth shaking, screaming people and animals, praying, singing.

In an article titled “The Sounds of Haiti” for the Journal of General Internal Medicine, a doctor speaks his heart. “After seeing a third child this week die of pneumonia, or dehydration or cerebral malaria, we clearly understand that this country existed in a state of emergency long before the earthquake: an
emergency without enough witnesses. The earthquake exacerbated an existing bleed. The country is now hemorrhaging.”

I must quote the good doctor once more. He writes: “In the midst of the fog of all that is chaotic and difficult, I witness an awe-inspiring collaboration.” He asks: “How the hell are the Haitian people so tough? How did they absorb the brutal shaking of the earth into their bones, and still endure? The last few days reveal what they have always had to deal with—death from dumb, treatable diseases.” Why? Because no one is paying attention to “goudou goudou.”

At the first sign of civil disturbance or natural disaster, many Haitians instinctively run indoors for protection. One would think that the school would be the safest place in one’s community. Not so. For years after the Port-Au-Prince earthquake, many Haitians were too building-phobic to send their surviving children to school.

It's the same tragic shit storm: densely populated communities, unreinforced schools, powerful earthquakes, and little or no earthquake science and safety education. 50% of children who perish in earthquakes die in their schools. My God.

There is plenty of blame to go around, much of which centers on greed, graft, corruption, massive urbanization, and shoddy science. Lay a transparency of seismic zones and hot spots on a table, then lay another transparency that identifies areas of high levels of neglect, dense populations, unconscionably low literacy rates, outdated curricula, bureaucratic obstructionists, teachers with no opportunity for professional development, and a sense of fatalism because the voices of science and safety are not being heard...and you’ve got deep fault lines.

The Earthquake Science and Safety program was adopted by many communities throughout Haiti, Afghanistan, India, Russia, and Pakistan, and translated by volunteers into seven languages. Each program was double-checked by geologists and adapted by local teachers to reflect the geology, culture, and classrooms of each region. It expanded its community-engagement component by identifying and supporting regional geologists and teachers willing to promote the program and offer professional development in science and safety.
at their schools and districts. Solmaz urged local practitioners to work with maintenance workers so that they would become heroes for their work to secure the objects that can dislodge from walls and cause serious injury or death during an earthquake. She also reached out to community leaders to mobilize parents who, in turn, would insist on earthquake science and safety instruction.

We posted all content in the public domain. In Haiti, a poster campaign provided an extra level of community access. Scholastic Magazine published “The Haitian Earthquake of 2010” and chose Solmaz as the content consultant. The Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and Prevention Web, two leading organizations in the field of education in emergencies, posted Solmaz’s earthquake science and safety content. Scitable, an online collaboration space run by Nature Education, added further credibility by highlighting the science content. The White House under the Obama administration, along with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, acknowledged the Earthquake Science and Safety program for its commitment to open educational resources, public safety, information portability, and community outreach. They both recognized the connections between earthquake science and safety education and international diplomacy.

Teachers Without Borders would no longer ask helpless questions or send relief packages after the fact. We were out of the world of humanitarian shipping and handling. We were educators, and educators can save lives.

In 2011, Solmaz founded ParsQuake, an organization devoted to “earthquake education in the global Persian community.” ParsQuake is devoted to bridging “the gap between scientists and the public in regions of high geohazards risk exposure.” While her use of remote sensing techniques to study neotectonics and geodynamics has earned her global recognition, her work in education has gotten the attention of policymakers.

It matters most to Solmaz that communities can protect themselves from catastrophic earthquakes. “We cannot prevent them,” she will say, but “we can disarm them,” strengthen buildings, and know what to do in an earthquake. The complexities of earthquake science can be understood: “faults, elastic energy, friction, seismic waves, liquefaction, landslides, structural hazards, non-
structural hazards” if the curriculum is engaging and active. Today, teachers are training other teachers to use whatever materials are at their disposal to demonstrate plates and plate motions. In Afghanistan, they color pieces of cardboard to show layers. In India, teachers easily found scrap material to construct a shake table in order to demonstrate structural integrity.

Over the years, Solmaz’s earthquake lessons have reached hundreds of thousands of teachers, students, school administrators, maintenance workers, and school safety officers.

The country and context may change, but Solmaz ensures that one remains constant: “to cultivate, support and revive elements of indigenous safety consciousness” through science and safety preparation and planning. In Tajikistan, a bull—bothered by a mosquito—may shake the earth, but students now know not only know what to do next but also how to protect themselves in advance.

That’s education from below the ground and up.
A Country Under Water

SIX MONTHS after the earthquake in Haiti, July monsoon rains in Pakistan were relentless, with no sign of letting up. In a 24-hour period, Peshawar recorded 10.8 inches. By August, whole cities were submerged. Comparative satellite images of the Indus River basin did not look like they were taken of the same place. In 2009, the basin anatomy looked like a heart and the main artery extending from north to south. In 2010, the same region looked as if those arteries had been sliced, creating blood lakes.

News agencies captured photographs of panicked children and angry parents marooned with their livestock, looking for higher ground. Once fertile land was washed away, taking with it grain, cotton, rice, and sugarcane. An aid worker remarked: “Pakistan is living a tragedy in multiples of 2: 2,000 people and 200,000 livestock killed. 2,000,000 bales of cotton rendered useless. 20 million people affected. 20% of promised relief funds available for a country 20% of which was under water.”

Over 10,000 schools were destroyed. The aid worker continued. “I’ve never seen anything like it. How do you triage for a country under water? But you know what? The Pakistanis have regrouped before. They’ll do it again.” Many weren’t so sure. Pakistanis and donor agencies were losing confidence in the government’s sluggish response to disasters. They feared that, in the breach, the Taliban would flourish. Others rejected all help from the west. Reading the tea leaves from the western press, donor fatigue was setting in anyway. I steeled myself for comments like, “We’ve given to Pakistan before. Not this time.”

Meanwhile, price gouging and incidents of cholera—along with the need for increased security for aid workers—made normalcy unattainable. Critical infrastructure had collapsed. Relief would not be enough. Education couldn’t wait.
The good news was greater awareness in the development community about teachers as vital assets in disaster intervention. Now they join first-responder teams to count children, reunite families, and prevent human trafficking.

Sameena called me. I called Solmaz. Solmaz called Li-Hong. The three developed a plan to support and create child-friendly spaces. Child-friendly spaces provide consistency, a semblance of order, and essential protection so that parents can start to reconstruct their lives. For a community in shock, child-friendly spaces are familiar, safe, and structured. Children can sing and draw, hear stories, use manipulatives for learning, play with toys, play soccer, and do what children do — play.

The establishment and maintenance of a child-friendly space in an emergency setting is an extraordinary undertaking. It demands open conversation, the capacity to map local resources and sustain an intervention over an undetermined amount of time, in an area often difficult to reach, and for traumatized and suspicious families. It involves communication with, and coordination between, government authorities and parents, grandparents, religious leaders, women’s groups, NGOs, and local authorities.

Those who create and maintain these spaces must navigate between the formal and non-formal education system because the crisis itself upends basic assumptions of what constitutes a school and who can be qualified to teach. They address cultural orientations toward integrating girls and boys. They leverage the resources of peers and mentors over textbooks, creativity and inclusion over the standard curriculum, and human rights and gender equity over competition. In an emergency, a new social contract emerges and must be communicated, reinforced, discussed, and adapted.

PODA, the Pakistan Association for Mental Health, and the Roshni Helpline for Children established a counseling center, child-friendly spaces, and a women-friendly space in the Kemari Internally Displaced Persons Camp near Karachi. Sameena, Solmaz, and Li-Hong then dovetailed their work with a wide cross-section of Pakistani society: workers, nurses, students, psychologists, teachers, journalists, medical doctors, human rights activists, artisans, lawyers, and community development professionals. Equal numbers of men and women.
Access to content without restriction. Identifying the people who can reach the people. Teachers Without Borders was learning from experience.

Each child-friendly space was outfitted with toys, furniture, and educational materials, supported by staff trained in children’s rights education and basic skills. PODA managed to staff the counseling center with psychiatrists, psychologists, and physicians who provided outpatient care for panic disorder and depression, treated injuries, scabies, and diarrhea, and trained local para-professionals.

Our network was now sufficiently strong to enable teachers to find each other, share resources, and mobilize quickly. There was something else at work here, too. Talent found talent. A new form of professional development was emerging—a community of practice seasoned in the real world—facilitated by technology and connected by common objectives. If they needed to know more, they would reach out in wider and wider circles until they got what they needed, The vicious cycle of earthquakes and floods was met by a self-generating, reciprocal virtuous cycle—just-in-time, ad hoc, focused, and practical. What they learned, they shared.

Earthquakes or floods cannot be prevented or even predicted with certainty. Given the preponderance of research on the disproportionately negative effect of climate change on poor populations, these calamities are only growing in intensity and deadly force. With preparedness and planning, however, educators can prevent a disaster from turning into a catastrophe.
Time is Not on our Side

ABOUT JOURNEYS, John Steinbeck once wrote, “all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless.” Let’s begin with relatable annoyances: a positive COVID test that puts an end to the trip before it starts. Food poisoning the night before a long flight. A zipper’s slider derailing from its set of teeth on an important pocket of your favorite backpack. A flat tire on the way to the airport. The canceled flight or a missed connection. The officious interrogation at the customs kiosk. The turbulent nine-hour flight, four-hour layover, and lost luggage. “Scammed again,” you mutter to yourself in a cab as you gaze outside your window to see that statue for the second time along a Möbius route to a meeting within walking distance from your starting point. We get over our pity party. We move on.

Other journeys are lifetimes in a single day. By the time one particularly Shyamalanesque day had come to a close, I had gained first-hand knowledge of several versions of the ten plagues, in no particular order.

Within fifteen minutes of our 245-kilometer odyssey from Port Harcourt, Nigeria to Calabar the car plunged into a crater-sized pothole filled with brown-gray rain. The driver jumped out, lowered himself thigh-deep into the pool, lifted the hood, swatted away the steam, swore a blue streak, and fiddled inside. He ran around to the front and asked for help to pull the fender away from the driver’s side front tire. Raphael and I offered to help, but he waved us away. A small crowd in flip-flops offered advice, but the driver waved them off, too, preferring to call a dispatcher for another car. Bicyclists, white and blue buses, and cars slalomed around us. He told us to collect our belongings from the trunk in case the carcass sunk any lower into the sludge. Someone offered to hose us off.

Before we had a chance to say no, he had already thumbed the nozzle. The police arrived and directed traffic around the car. Someone started screaming at the police, something corrupt contractors. Another car arrived promptly to
continue our journey. Our original driver stayed with the car and a new one took his place. We handed him our bags, tiptoed through the slosh, and endured more spray as we prepared to climb into car #2 when a motorized three-wheeler whizzed past, speckling us — a Rorschach made of mud. Driver #2 had towels.

For the first hour, we threaded through a knot of commerce and humanity. Trucks faced each other in a standoff, leaving no room to maneuver past abandoned or immobilized hulks straddling the road and a ditch on either side. Here, streets are “free-for-alls,” every object in motion and out for itself. It was hard to tell if one should avoid a muddy patch or drive through what may be a car pit in disguise. Street children jockeyed for the best place to sell phone chargers. An ambulance could not bleat and whine its way past the crush of everything. The driver kept the siren on but also leaned on his horn. A paraplegic man shouted and waved to get attention, straining forward to propel himself on a makeshift child’s bed frame outfitted with shopping cart wheels. The air was thick with a queasy, noisome odor of petrol, urine, garbage, and humidity.

Traffic in Nigeria is called a “go slow.” I would consider this an understatement. Still, just an annoyance.

I was in Nigeria to meet with a high-school math teacher, Raphael Ogar Oko. He had embraced the Teachers Without Borders vision during its infancy, inspired enough to interpret our vision for Nigeria’s context. He had already established job-training programs for abused women and prostitutes to reclaim their lives, built ramps for the disabled to access cyber-cafés, mobilized taxi drivers to learn how to read, held workshops on strengthening healthy family relationships, taught mathematics, encouraged teens to get tested for HIV-AIDS, and established community teaching and learning centers modeled after the one we first developed with Jihad in Laqiya.

Raphael wanted to show me how he might adapt our newly formed Certificate of Teaching Mastery courses into a program relevant to Nigeria. He did not ask me for money or resources or recognition, but simply for ideas. He was convinced that if there was any hope for success, programs would have to be
conceived, executed, and developed by Nigerians. For Raphael, dependence upon foreign aid was anathema to development. Homegrown or bust.

We were traveling together to discuss new projects along the route from Port Harcourt to Calabar. Federal Senator George Thompson Sekibo of Rivers State, sat in front. Raphael and I sat in the back. “It will be a while,” Raphael said. “We just have to get through it.” The new vehicle did not have government plates, so no police parted the sea for us. It was all up to the driver to push forward a pawn here, block a rook there.

Leaning on his horn, lurching us forward, directing traffic from his window, and waving away vendors, our driver wriggled through, then thrust us forward like a rocket shedding its boosters. The engine stopped. He started it up again. The road smoothed. We had been traveling for 45 minutes and had only covered 8 kilometers. A car swerved past us, straddling the median.

Once untied from the gnarl of congestion, the drive was governed by another, yet no more predictable, set of rules about passing lanes. On multi-lane highways, several pedestrians would avoid walking bridges and make a break for it, aiming for an opening between blue and white zebra-striped painted concrete barriers. Drivers have braced themselves to anticipate and brace themselves for the possibility by spotting small groups of people leaning forward, ready to bolt.

The humidity never seemed to break. The driver explained that the air-conditioner did not work because of a host of reasons: freon leak, compressor problem, cooling fan on the fritz, clogged filter, radiator trouble. Where we were, the sun was brilliant. Up ahead, we could see dark low clouds and toothpick streaks of rain. We were moving toward the storm and the storm was moving toward us. I did the math: it would be a matter of moments.

I lowered my rain-smeared window to take in swampland, shops, clotheslines, corrugated roofs, children waving, billboards, and women balancing wash basins on their heads filled with jugs of cooking oil, sheaves of grain, and rags, followed by more farmland, plumes of hay, and trash fires.
At each checkpoint, Senator Sekibo flashed a card, cutting down our waiting time. Nevertheless, our driver—affable enough when we set out—grumbled something to Raphael who, in turn, muttered something to Senator Sekibo, who told the driver to “speed up before it got too late.” “Too late for what?” I asked. Silence. “Darkness,” Raphael muttered. The driver straightened up in his seat to make eye contact in the rear-view mirror. “And bandits.”

I changed the subject from the race against impending doom and asked Raphael about our itinerary. “Several stops,” he said. “Each one is a project.”

The Senator explained one of those stops in the Niger Delta region. He described how the land in the region had always been fertile, but wanted to show us how oil run-off had poisoned the food and caused disease amongst the cattle. Plague #2. From there, he described a litany of Nigeria’s challenges. Like the land, he explained, education lay fallow and disregarded. “When we discovered oil, education took a back seat. You’ll see new colors up close...and smell it.”

Raphael described our ultimate destination, Old Calabar. The largest street festival on the continent, the Calabar Carnival, is held there. It is a city known for its public art and its port indispensable to the trade of palm oil and commodities.

And slaves. Between 25-30% of those sold to the new world during the 17th to 19th centuries embarked from Calabar. Here, an unusual credit or “pawnship” collateral system was developed. A paper published by Oxford University Press describes how African slave traders would offer “human pawns to secure goods advanced against the delivery of slaves.”

Between 1967 and 1970, Calabar was known as the Republic of Biafra. Cultural, religious, political, ethnic, and economic tensions led southeastern Nigerian provinces to attempt secession, stimulating coups, counter-coups, blockades, and the Nigerian Civil War, which left in its wake a trail of death, malnutrition, and starvation. Close to 3 million people died there. The world was alerted to images of headless bodies left on trains and emaciated children with bloated bellies. Boils. Locusts. Blood in the water. All plagues.
Bernard Kouchner, a French doctor, had witnessed the violence while working with the Red Cross, leading him to co-found Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), committed to providing access to medical care to all races, religions, political affiliations, or backgrounds. Not bound to any government control or special interest group, the organization’s objectivity enabled it to speak and act with authority, provide desperately-needed medical care in the most acute global crises, build local healthcare capacity, and heighten global attention to the needs of average citizens in humanitarian crises. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999.

Our first stop—a school for pregnant teens, all of whom had made a vow to get educated. The lead teacher had prepared for our arrival by issuing candles to the students. They rose as Senator Sekibo entered the room. The walls were covered with public health posters. Raphael and the lead teacher took the floor and talked about education as key to women’s health. We all lit the candles, said a prayer, and shared some sweets. I immediately thought of Deepmala’s slum children, carrying candles. The room felt softer, a shared space.

Raphael told us that our next stop would be a school where I could meet TWB members. We scurried back to the car as the rain began again. The driver picked up the pace. I pretended to look at the scenery when he switched lanes to pass cars. Raphael handed me a fist-sized meat pie wrapped in wax paper from Mr. Bigg’s, a ubiquitous fast-food chain. My first bite spurted meat and sauce onto my shirt. As if on cue, the driver flipped a napkin over his shoulder. Rubbing made it worse.

“Time is not on our side,” Raphael said. The rain increased. On both sides of the road, abandoned tires looked like half-eaten chocolate donuts wading in swimming pools of coffee. There were advertisements everywhere: for cell phone and gas companies, Hennessy, legal services: “Just because you did it doesn’t mean you’re guilty,” churches, UNICEF posters on hygiene, and a new highway billboard campaign educating about HIV-AIDS.

We arrived at the school, but the building was not accessible by car, so we walked up a hill past children in uniforms returning from the school’s second
shift, carrying desks on their backs. They would be using their furniture at home and at school.

By the time we arrived, a group had already assembled. Patricia Acquah, a fiery graduate student and committed activist for women’s and children’s rights, joined us. Students and teachers were rapt as she explained that teachers are not civil servants, but the backbone of society, how teachers around the world were mobilizing to talk with one another and share ideas, and how there was hope.

Despite a lack of facilities, the school was expanding and literacy rates were improving. The principal met with us in a tidy office and her vision of building a school around how children learn, rather than on what they were required to memorize. She refused to accept the notion that children could not learn. For her, it was the teacher’s responsibility to find a way to access the forms and the mystery of each child’s developing strengths, rather than expose weaknesses.

“Schools have learning disabilities, too,” she said. Her bookshelves included outdated UNESCO literacy primers and Bibles provided by a drive-by missionary group from the UK. “It doesn’t matter what they read as much as they understand what they are reading. They have to lift words off the page, build phonetic awareness, and decode what is in front of them.”

We toured classrooms and lingered in a room identified as a lab, comprised of tables and chairs, a few beakers, and a single poster on the wall: “The Story of the Cockroach.” In the corner of the room, I imagined several cockroaches scurrying about, looking for a piece of Mr. Biggs. Several children were scratching their heads. I suspected lice.

Raphael told me how we would secure science equipment. He had already started his own fundraising campaign. In the months that followed, I would learn how he navigated through both legitimate and corrupt customs offices and distinguish between truck drivers who would faithfully execute the last mile of the supply chain and a small minority who would drive off after loading up, never to be seen again.

We were shuttled back to the car and bounced along the path to the highway. Patricia and Raphael were not asking me questions, flattering me, or fawning
over my every word. They were discussing projects. I was just along for the ride.

We were kicking up too much dust to open the windows, yet the heat inside was suffocating. The floorboards were hot beneath my feet. Senator Sekibo clipped a battery-operated fan to the sun visor and reached for the radio, swooshing through static AM stations until he landed on a news channel.

After the sports and weather, a reporter mentioned my name, careful to enunciate it correctly, along with a clip from an interview with Raphael. Senator Sekibo turned around in his seat and smiled. “Did you hear that?” Raphael turned to me and said, “Fred, Teachers Without Borders is on the map!” I returned a halfhearted smile. He looked puzzled, noting a suspicious expression on my face, which must have read: am I a white rook in a chess game here? I toned down my concern. “How did they know?”

“Use it, Fred.” He repeated himself. “Use it. Use it, Fred,” and continued: “The public will forget our names. We’re messengers, that’s all. They won’t remember us. But they will remember Teachers Without Borders, and they will take to the idea. Use these opportunities!” Patricia smiled. “To make a difference here,” she said, “you need friends like Senator Sekibo. We need friends like you. This has never been about the great white hope. You are not here to save us. We are here to save ourselves.”

I had little time to reflect. The sky unleashed Gene Krupa paradiddles and drum-rolls of rain strafing across the hood, the windshield, and the trunk, bouncing around the car, and dissolving into caramel puddles. Not exactly the hail plague, but it felt like it. Our wipers thwumped and scratched across the windshield in a futile attempt to swat away the onslaught. I heard something bounce against the roof. I kept staring ahead, too petrified to look at what that was, yet fully expecting something like the four-minute frog storm from Paul Thomas Anderson’s movie, Magnolia. A plague.

“Time is not on our side,” Raphael shouted again over the din. “No fear,” I whispered to myself.
We reached a teaching hospital in Abia State to deliver handhelds loaded with ePocrates RX, a freeware app with FAQs about public health and a cross-referencing tool for checking drug interactions. Raphael wanted to establish a Community Teaching and Learning Center for patients and add a technological component to the medical library.

We were led down to a gated reception area to wait for a physician to give us a tour. Before greeting us, a doctor asked a receptionist to see a notebook. He seemed to take his time, piquing my curiosity. I stood up to stretch my arms and legs so that I could peek over his shoulder. On sheets of paper were uneven vertical ruler-drawn lines designating columns for the name of the patient, age, and HIV-AIDS diagnosis. I watched the doctor’s hand flip through page after page of people in their twenties and thirties, many of whom were given the designation “HIV+.” After no more than a minute, he closed the binder slowly and patted its cover as if he were consoling the notebook for having to record the news—a Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Nigeria version. He shook his head and refused to make eye contact.

Raphael said they were ready. I followed the doctor down a hall into a room where I was given basic instructions on how they conducted simple blood tests for HIV. Written with a felt-tipped pen on the outside of an oblong white-plastic slide and specimen package was the name, “Fred” and a set of numbers. Plague.

We walked through a wing primarily of HIV-AIDS patients mingled with accident victims. The hall was lined with beds, all occupied, like planes waiting to take off. We entered the children’s wing. For some reason I cannot fathom to this day, a nurse placed a carefully swaddled infant in my arms. She lay there, peacefully at first, though she seemed to breathe rapidly. She began to seize, shake, cough and, just as quickly, become limp. I looked up. A doctor reassured me and motioned a nurse to come. She thrust her hands under my own and whisked the baby away, returning later to see us off, though she was ashen, drained. Plague.

Raphael leaned over to whisper that negotiations were underway to supply computers to create a Community Teaching and Learning Center at the hospital with a particular focus on health information and patient advocacy. I nodded but
was no longer listening. I asked about the baby. The doctor would not respond. A teenager entered the room with plastic bottles of warm Orange Fanta. I did not ask again and proceeded to demonstrate the basics of how to access the ePocrates program. The demonstration was cut short by an emergency. Quick handshakes and expressions of gratitude.

“We need to get to Calabar before sun-down.” “I know,” I said curtly, “Bandits.” Raphael replied, “time is not on our side.”

We drove past a field of oil and gas refineries, and a line of single stacks, flaring natural gas like three-story-sized trombones. In the distance, a cluster of fire-breathing tubes looked like a birthday cake or the surface of Proxima Centauri. On each side of the road, oil drums contributed to the eerie yellow-gray noisome cloud. Senator Sekibo turned off the battery-operated fan, though the air-recycle button kept the outside fumes circulating inside the car. Not even dreams of comfort food could snap me out of this funk.

While we jostled along on a small road following a tributary of the river Niger, Senator Sekibo talked about environmental degradation and the increase of toxic-related illnesses caused by oil companies, international and Nigerian, that had been raping the area for years.

“Look there,” poking his fingernails against the passenger window to tributaries carrying chemical runoff and waste. I made out a stream wending its way through a lush landscape. Catching the late afternoon sun, the iridescent sheen looked like food coloring in salad dressing—kaleidoscopic, viscous, swirling, bubbling, hypnotizing. “The animals and the people drink, wash, and bathe in this.” Plague.

“And look here.” He pointed to the land. “So much rich soil here. You used to be able to throw a cassava seed in the ground and it would grow. Now, the soil can’t produce. No yams, no cassava, no bananas, no work. Can you smell it?” The stench was an unmistakable blend of sweetness, rotting vegetation and fish, mold, and gas.

He was furious. “Some foreign oil companies have recognized the damage they have caused, but they are giving 40 percent back to the country and have really
tightly tightened their standards. What do these corrupt leaders do with the money? Do they turn this revenue into schools and hospitals? Not a chance. And the Nigerian oil companies are the worst culprits of all—a bunch of environmental rapists. This is ecocide. At the same time, the people have no protections. It’s a crying shame.”

We got out of the car. Senator Sekibo slammed his door. Despite the heat, he had not removed his jacket, and now, adjusting his tie and wiping sweat from his brow with his handkerchief, he marched toward a group of women who immediately recognized him, greeting him warmly. Lots of animated conversation. Patricia joined him.

Raphael talked with a few villagers. Some children in trees waved to us. Senator Sekibo described impending legislation he was introducing and pledged his support for an emerging women’s movement focusing on addressing education injustice and environmental degradation. Women were taking action nearby, he said. He wanted to stir the pot.

“Let’s go.”

On our way back to the main road, Senator Sekibo turned to Raphael. “Filmmakers are arriving here within a few weeks,” he smiled. Powerful agitprop films like “Poison Fire” and “Sweet Crude” would eventually follow, bringing global attention to a growing group of ecofeminists and catalyzing public outrage. To this day, I have not seen as stark an example of environmental devastation as the Nigerian delta region.

The driver followed signs toward Calabar. Senator Sekibo spent the rest of the time on the phone.

We arrived in the Old Calabar in the late afternoon and dropped off our overnight bags at a roadside motel. The driver looked relieved. No bandit attacks. No cavernous sinkholes. No flat tires, just a long day with several stops and a broken air conditioner. Mere annoyances. Nevertheless, I shook his hand over-zealously. A van with graduate students from the local university doing field research and a car with two men in ill-fitting suits and Foster Grants arrived within minutes. The drivers shook hands. Driver #2 unloaded box after
box of Styrofoam take-out dishes and a small folding table. Senator Sekibo was
the first to step out, followed by Raphael, Patricia, and me. The Blues Brothers
handed Senator Sekibo the keys to the car and nodded to us, rather than shake
our hands. Senator Sekibo could not stay for dinner, he said, his mood
noticeably lighter. He shook hands with us and promised to stay in touch. He
and driver #1 drove off.

“Let’s eat,” Raphael commanded, “but...” I interrupted. “Time is not on our
side.” Out came a bucket and towels for washing hands. We gorged on
plantains, scoops of jollof rice (red from johlan peppers, tomatoes, and curry
powder), chicken and beef skewers, spinach, and fufu (made from cassava) for
scooping up fish and meat from soups. The Blues Brothers’ only gesture to the
rest of us was to offer napkins.

The sun was sinking—the buildings, roads, and sky bathed in a tangerine
smoke-smog haze. We packed up quickly, hardly making a dent, and drove
down leafy streets, past a huge concrete sculpture of hands, roundabout
statuary, and verdant public parks.

We turned down a dirt road headed toward an abandoned commercial area
donated to the Calabar municipality to accommodate a displaced persons’ camp
for 3,600 people caught up in ethnic violence. On the way, Raphael informed
me that time was running out here, too, The camp would be dismantled unless
plans were approved for a temporary school to serve up to 150 families. They
eventually were.

Patricia scampered out of the car and met her husband, who had been
coordinating relief services on site and mobilizing Nigeria’s National Youth
Service Corps (graduates of universities and polytechnics required to volunteer
for one year) to create learning spaces and support public health initiatives. He
hugged her, then held her shoulders and delivered distressing news. She began
to step back. He held her steady. Most of the village was at the far end of the
complex, in a woody area. She took a breath, straightened her dress, and told us
to wait. She whispered something into Raphael’s ear, who announced: “They
have just buried a child. We are not sure how he died. They will be here soon.”
In the distance, I saw a row of two-story buildings without an entire outside-
facing wall. I imagined a child playing on the open platforms and tumbling to
certain death on the rubble and street below. The buildings looked like
downtown Dujiangyan after the earthquake. “If they ask you anything, say you
are paying your respects.” Plague.

Up ahead, illuminated by rigged shop lights connected to a car battery, I could
make out a mass of about 80 people coming in our direction. Some drifted off.
Most stayed, and we were soon surrounded. Once again, a baby was placed in
my arms. I rocked him back and forth, but once he took a look at me, he started
to scream. This time, the child was whisked away and coddled by her mother.
At least there is life in that baby, I thought. I have held a baby in distress twice
today, I thought. What does that mean?

A village elder spoke, then Raphael, Patricia, followed by words of prayer,
consolation, sorrow, and warmth. Some shook my hand. Others stared. Children
peeked out from behind their parents’ legs. The crowd thinned, leaving room for
the village elder, a city official, Patricia, her husband, and me to talk about
establishing a child-friendly space there. Raphael made no commitments.
Patricia, her husband, and the village official huddled in conversation. The
Blues Brothers checked their watches.

We said our goodbyes, Patricia stayed back with her husband, and we pulled out
of the camp. By now it was dark. No one spoke, our minds busy processing
images. A driver switched on the battery-operated fan and the radio. We drove
up the path from the camp to the main highway and turned down a tidy street
with upscale homes.

Dear reader, forgive me (please) in advance for what I am about to report, but I
would be remiss were I to take my father’s advice seriously about having the
courage of one’s contradictions, and so allow me to cop to the truth of what
happened next.

Untethered, unmoored, undone, I blurted: “Stop the car!” The driver looked at
Raphael in his rear-view window for instructions. Raphael looked horrified but
complied and asked the driver to pull over. The words tumbled out of my
mouth: “Give me your money.”
“Fred,” Raphael protested, having himself never asked me for a dime. “I don’t understand.”

“Just turn the van around. We’re going back.” Looking at everyone directly, I said, “Here’s my money.” I emptied my own wallet. “Now I want some of yours. It’s not for me, damn it, it’s for the school.” Raphael told me that veins were bulging and pulsing on my forehead. The graduate students complied obediently. I took half. The Blues Brothers exchanged looks and grudgingly reached for their wallets for spare naira. The driver leaned back with his own crumpled bills. I closed his hand around his wad and pushed it back at him. “Not you.” I turned to the graduate students and the Blues Brothers. “I will pay you back.”

“Fred,” Raphael injected. Raphael had always called the shots, but I held my hand up to stop him as if to assert a newfound authority. I began straightening the bills. The driver made a U-turn. “Raphael, we are going to find the village elder.” When we arrived, he emerged from one of the two-story buildings without an exterior wall, shielding his eyes from the car’s high-beams, surprised to see us. Patricia and her husband had left.

I reached over one of the grad-students, snatched the handle, wrenched it open, and climbed out of the van. “Here, take it.” He was reluctant, looking at Raphael. I pressed it into his hand. Patricia and her husband were approaching. Raphael tried to step in to settle the issue, though I wondered how he might navigate this awkward territory, given my impropriety and abruptness. The village elder headed toward Patricia Acquah’s husband, his hand outstretched with the cash as if he were holding an injured bird. Patricia hurried to catch up. The Blues Brothers, graduate students, and driver remained in the van. Raphael huddled with Patricia, her husband, and the village elder. Patricia took the elder aside and spoke to him, walking away from us. A few people inquired about the commotion. The elder waved them away, emptied an envelope in one pocket, and placed the money inside. It was settled. I opened the van door, reaching past one of the Blues Brothers to slide it shut. We drove away in silence. I knew I had done something terribly wrong. All day, I was afraid of bandits. Now I had become one.
I knew well how the international aid world reinforces dependency rather than self-reliance. I defied all my convictions about how effective development must be rooted in reliance upon local brains who can build stakeholder support, strategies, partnerships, and tactical steps to ensure sustainability. Even on a good day, quick fixes are palliative at best. More often than not, they exacerbate government corruption rather than build the responsibility of nation-states to provide for the social welfare of the people.

Clichés immediately came to mind. I was committing the sin of the handout rather than the handup. I fed them for a day, rather than taught them how to fish. This pitiful step forward would surely lead to two steps back. A pound of cure over an ounce of prevention. Worse yet, even though all of this came to mind, these words came out of my mouth before I could stop them: “If time is not on our side, why can’t we start now?”

This made no sense. This random act of kindness was not kind, but random, even insidious. It was more about me than about them. It undermined our purpose. I was not a partner in efforts to alleviate suffering. I was simply placating my guilty conscience. I belong to the haves. I have privilege. You are part of the have-nots. I have power. You are under a time-crunch for your survival. I can satisfy my needs almost all the time. Right now you can’t. Here, take my money. This was not Raphael’s idea of “using” or leveraging Teachers Without Borders to get things done. It was about abusing my sense of entitlement. To this day, I have not forgiven myself.

Forgive me, dear reader, for I can be weak. My impulsivity overrode my judgment. This is not an unctuous silent wink to burnish my image as a good guy. I was wrong. I knew it immediately.

The charitable among you might surmise that robbing the van may have been the cumulative outcome of a day witnessing a pregnant teen trying to ensure that she and her child know how to read, despite the absence of books; a school looking for the basics of science equipment, yet with only a poster to use as a prop; a principal driven to transform education into a living and breathing enterprise, yet without resources; children who use the same furniture for studying at school and eating at home, but with few opportunities to study; a
listless baby whose life ebbed away before she had a chance to walk; a village forced to get its water from a fetid, foul-smelling, oil-saturated river; and here, at a displaced persons’ camp in Calabar, another baby buried in a field this community may have to abandon, just as they were forced to do just weeks before. Still, I was wrong.

As we returned to the motel, the graduate students asked me several questions. I imagined they would not report as much about establishing a school in a set of unsafe, abandoned buildings but about the ugly American. I collected addresses from the students and the Blues Brothers and paid them back from cash I had hidden in a shoe. The students thanked me. The Blues Brothers counted the cash and didn’t say a word. Raphael handed me a Styrofoam container, aware that I was in no mood to debrief the day.

Back in my room, I flipped the switches for the fluorescents and the ceiling fan, then curled up on a thin mattress supported by two-by-fours. The lights flickered on. The fan began to pick up speed, but then began a bleating, plaintive sound, as if it were working against its better judgment. I rose to turn it off and promptly knocked a glass off the nightstand. Scenes from the hospital flooded back. I picked up the shards carefully and funneled them into a trashcan by the door. I walked to the wash basin in my room and kept dousing myself with cold water as if to wash away everything I had seen. So this is what Yeats’s poem, *The Second Coming*, must mean:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
> Mere anarchy’s loosed upon the world.

Have I lost “all conviction?” Is the beast he describes, “a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun?” Is this what he means by “The ceremony of innocence is drowned?” Have I lost any semblance of conviction? Is all of this just feeble “passionate intensity?”

On the road back to Port Harcourt the following day, he consciously avoided any mention of my robbery. His actions tell a different story. He worked backward. Patricia’s husband would present the plans to Calabar authorities for that school. Teachers in the oil region would educate children about water safety. A community teaching and learning center would be established at the teaching hospital. Efforts were underway to secure science equipment for the
He articulated a strategy for attracting universities to the Certificate of Teaching Mastery program to secure state endorsements and official accreditation. We would be meeting officials in the next several days, he explained, along with Yoruba elders, peace activists, HIV-AIDS educators, and self-organized women’s organizations to build stakeholder engagement to influence policy.

He once found a way to raise $7,000 and wired the funds so that I could pay for a shipping container full of donated computers, science equipment, and books. Within months, he had mobilized youth volunteers to support non-formal education in community teaching and learning centers—hubs for community education, after-school programs, and women’s education. Somehow, the Girl Scouts found out about the project and collected supplies. DHL shipped the supplies to Port Harcourt for delivery to Calabar for a substantial discount. He trained volunteers to manage a rent-to-buy microloan program of foot-powered sewing machines. This was a partnership—an effective way to leverage resources for the greater good.

He presented 3,000 volumes of books, journals, magazines, and other educational resources on HIV/AIDS to the Management of the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Gwagwalada, Abuja. The Rivers State Library Board added a section on HIV-AIDS with resources Raphael secured. Benue State approved the opening of a Community Teaching and Learning Center. He created a special educational program for the empowerment of the disabled to become skilled, self-reliant, and useful to society. He retrofitted a van outfitted with literacy primers, notebooks, writing utensils, and a dry-erase board to create “The Wall-less Classroom,” a mobile literacy program for cab drivers. In the car-jammed sprawl of Jabi Motor Park in Abuja, Nigeria’s capital city, he unfolded chairs and supervised volunteers to teach reading under a rented canopy.

This was what he meant by “use it.” We were doing what he needed to do.

Raphael continues, unabated and undaunted, to connect education and development though he has been beaten by gangs, ostracized, dismissed, and
harassed. He has been betrayed by those who have posed as volunteers to extract money from TWB members or by those who have cast aspersions on his leadership and character to promote themselves.

Raphael launched a “Voice of Teachers” journal and invited academic submissions on regional educational issues. The Certificate of Teaching Mastery grew, adapted to Nigeria’s context, sustained by universities in dozens of Nigerian states, and morphed into seminars on HIV-AIDS, problem-solving, community organizing, hygiene, information technology, early childhood development, gender equity, intercultural and intergenerational relations, mental health, mentorship, micro-finance, sustainable development, sports, and volunteerism. He rounded up 3,000 volumes of books, journals, magazines, and other educational resources on HIV/AIDS for a school of nursing and midwifery. He conducted “teaching tours” in 12 Nigerian states and convened major teacher professional training conferences dealing with subjects such as the mobilization of teachers for national renewal, parent education, disability education, HIV/AIDS education, girls education, entrepreneurship development and capacity building.

He relied on teacher networks and partnerships to spread the word and identify talent. He breathed new life into Nigeria’s national service program for college graduates. He courted donors, solicited sponsorships, and charged small fees so that participants would commit to, and cover, the costs of everything: the van, a computer center, microloan capital, and a small stipend here and there. Today, as his audience and support continue to expand, his head never has.

Where I saw plagues, Raphael saw possibility.

“Time is not on our side,” he continues to say, “But I’ll use the time we’ve got.”

The world took notice. In 2010, Ashoka, a global network of change-makers and social entrepreneurs, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation initiated an open voting system to identify individuals who have made a tangible difference in Africa. From the 400 submissions from 30 countries, Raphael received first prize—the Champion of African Education award, accompanied by a $5,000 check. He promptly poured every naira into “The Voice of Teachers” radio show.
Peace on the Radio

“…on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences.”

— Albert Camus, The Plague

YOU CAN teach courses on peace. You can create a safe classroom so that students learn in peace. You can march for peace. But if you want peace to flourish, you must provide a platform to be heard. The radio is as good a platform as any.

“The Voice of Teachers” radio show combined music and community announcements with showcase stories of local education heroes explaining new teaching techniques. He reported news from an educator’s perspective and convened panels of teachers with occasional guest speakers. He cheered on schools committed to equality and innovation. He kept it humble, practical, and thoughtful.

The switchboard lit up each time an episode was aired. If listeners were unable to get through, they could send text messages to a team of volunteers. Raphael either responded directly or added those topics and questions to the following week’s show. Before asking questions or making statements on air, callers would announce the time and place for their local Listeners’ Clubs.

The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria, a federal government entity responsible for licensing teachers in Nigeria, endorsed the show, enabling him to reach his funding goals for the following season. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria syndicated “The Voice of Teachers” to Niger, Plateau, and Kaduna States. Every Monday, 1.6 million listeners tuned in to his 45-minute broadcast on Kapital FM 92.9, Abuja—from tinny speakers on buses.
during the afternoon commute, from open car doors so that others can hear, and from transistor radios at the public market.

Raphael has long known about Nigeria’s own grotesque horrors, stirred by a barrage of messaging and intimidation. Boko Haram (roughly translated as “western education is evil”) had taken hold in northern Nigeria. The logo is comprised of two crossed AK-47 rifles in a V shape. Between them lies an open Qu’ran, above which is a flag bearing the shahada (“There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God”). Their crimes against humanity have not been limited to the kidnapping of hundreds of girls in Chibok. They seek to impose the strictest form of Sharia law against what they saw as government corruption. Boko Haram has robbed banks, burned down schools, and conducted execution-style murders of officials, police, Christians, and any Muslim who would oppose them.

On an afternoon filled with meetings (for which I had turned off my phone), Raphael had left four messages, his latest one time-stamped at 6:00 pm in Seattle (3:00 am in Abuja). Surprised, I returned the call. After several attempts, we connected. At first, it sounded as if he were underwater, followed by static. I couldn’t seem to piece together what he was trying to say. The call dropped several times. We persisted.

When the line cleared, he spoke slowly, his tone flat and sepulchral. Silences between sentences lasted so long that I had to ask often if he was still on the line. He recounted how he had traveled to Benue state to visit his mentor, Joseph Hungwa, who had taken ill. Hungwa’s credibility and depth of knowledge had attracted hundreds of teachers to attend Teachers Without Borders seminars about the right to literacy and the ability of any community member, regardless of background or financial capacity, to gain the skills necessary for active participation in civic life. His Community Teaching and Learning Center at Vandeikya in Benue State was a magnet for the curious.

After the visit, Raphael traveled onward to Jos—a cosmopolitan city located in Nigeria’s Plateau State—to observe an emerging Teachers Without Borders program. Plateau State has been characterized as a center of peace and tourism.
However, there were reports of unrest in the area, and he wanted to ensure that his colleagues and friends were safe.

He had arrived in time to witness the aftermath of a massacre—a ditch strewn with bodies. There were other bodies in the streets. Villagers had fled. News reports were graphic: screaming, blood, machetes, a church on fire, faces stony, wailing, huddled, praying—a community ripped apart. He was unsure if this were the work of Boko Haram or other groups.

After having hosted months of “Voice of Teacher” broadcasts, Raphael simply wanted to be heard by an audience of one. I remained silent, thunderstruck, mortified. I don’t remember if I said anything consoling. When this first conversation came to an end, I urged him to call every day. Over the next two weeks, I may have uttered fifty to a hundred words.

A team he and colleagues at Teachers Without Borders studied everything we could about peacemaking through education, success stories about reconciliation, grassroots efforts, and top down strategies. The more we researched, the more we saw layers upon layers of connections between state and non-state actors and violence; religious tensions; deep inequalities and injustice; the weaponization of food; barriers to access of government services; abuse of girls and women; suppressions of freedom; teachers attacked and schools closed.

I realized I wasn’t listening to Raphael, even when the line was clear, but to the deafening thrum of fear. Teachers Without Borders had learned to play it safe. I had been promoting the hardly contestable, sanitized idea of supporting teachers around the world. But peacebuilding? We had reach, but few resources. How could this be done on Nigeria’s terms?

And yet, this entire time, and in his own polite way, Raphael had been screaming, “Time is not on our side.” I could not betray him. He certainly did not need my approval. He simply wanted a friend, someone with whom he could connect, someone with whom he could build peace.
Joseph Hungwa soon succumbed to his illness. To honor him, Raphael wrote:
“To rest in peace, we must be born in peace, grow peacefully, become an
ambassador for peace, and—at the time of death—die in peace.”

“The Voice of Teachers” broadcasts switched almost exclusively to call-ins and
SMS messages. Teachers could vent, tell stories, make appeals, connect, and
offer ideas about how to teach peace. He left little room for government
officials to dominate the airwaves with soaring rhetoric and hollow promises.
Raphael asked me to listen in, live. Colleagues huddled around the phone on
speaker. We shot each other looks of horror. We spent the remainder of the day
lost in our thoughts, too numb to speak.

After a series of posts on our website about the radio show’s focus on the
catastrophe in Jos, our members flooded us with stories. We received a call
about a teacher unionist in Iran, Farzad Kamangar, who was facing the
imminent danger of being executed—just for his views. His trial had lasted
seven minutes. Trade unions around the world appealed to His Excellency
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Soon afterward, his death was confirmed. We heard
about escalating drug-fueled violence in Mexico, attacks on teachers, and
torture of human rights educators in the Congo, Myanmar, the Philippines.
Racist attacks in schools. Police violence. We contacted organizations
cataloging attacks on teachers and schools. And then, of course, a leader
showed up.

Stephanie Knox Cubbon, a Peace Corps volunteer in Niger and graduate of the
University for Peace, stepped forward to help Raphael and inquiring teachers
develop a curriculum adaptable for communities to use anywhere, on their own
terms. Konrad Glogowski, TWB’s Executive Director, provided the strategic
vision and daily support. Members sent in curricula for all grade levels, opinion
pieces, links to research, examples of teacher professional development, and
examples of home-grown peace efforts. Within a few months, a collaboration of
Teachers Without Borders members, under Raphael’s, Stephanie’s and
Konrad’s leadership, created the Joseph Hungwa Memorial Peace Education
program supported by a network of teachers ready to adapt the program to meet
local needs.
The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child considers Peace Education an indisputable human right: “Education shall be directed … to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship.”

We reminded ourselves of our mission to convene and support collective intelligence, rather than dispense wisdom or provide solutions, and that the vision of peace was in their hands, not ours. Our best contribution would be to convene teachers and then get out of their way.

The Peace Education program followed what has become a familiar pattern: an inspired teacher assembles a team of committed stakeholders from every station in life, creates something adaptable and adoptable by others, and ensures that the work is grounded in culture so that it may cross borders easily.

In South Africa, Nyasha Mutasa completed the Joseph Hungwa Peace Education program and engaged her colleague Patrys Wolmarans, Director of the South Africa National Peace Project to conduct workshops in primary schools. In Mexico, Deyanira Castilleja adapted the program for teachers living and working in gang-infested communities. In Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United States, and Canada, in online courses and offline community meetings, on the radio, and in podcasts, the Joseph Hungwa Memorial Peace Education program has grown because it is a shared enterprise.

Raphael supported the Joseph Hungwa Memorial Peace Education program with more grassroots efforts, literally, by creating a soccer and peace-building program to reach youth. Peace teams with sponsorships sprouted in schools, churches, and senatorial districts. He established a community peace soccer academy and peace soccer commissions. Teams adopted “play in peace” policies on sports character (violence, arguing with refs) and penalties for racism or demeaning statements. “Play for Peace” campaigns raised awareness about the role of education, sports, and peacebuilding. The “most peaceful player” award would go to the individual who best demonstrated three central qualities: (1) mind/body harmony—character (2) teamwork—cooperation and citizenship, and (3) non-forceful ball control/possession—creativity. Conversations with teams addressed the winners versus losers relationship.
(peaceful competition), sacrifice for one’s team (harmony), and acknowledgment of the opponent (“support your enemy”). All teams were encouraged to serve as Soccer Ambassadors for Peace and given a handbook on how to get started.

Soccer was a great venue for teaching peace. The radio was a great medium for getting the message to a wide audience.

And yet, 6,000 kilometers across the continent, an Islamic military group in Somalia utilized the radio for another purpose. At the time, Shabaab had been running a quiz show for 10 to 17-year-olds. The New York Times reported that the top two winners got “AK-47s, some money, and Islamic books. The third-place winner was given with two hand grenades.”

I pity the children who didn’t score well at all.

Shabaab had barred aid groups during a famine, forbade gold teeth, dancing, and soccer—deeming them un-Islamic—and detonated truck bombs, one of which was parked at a government building, killing students simply awaiting the posting of their exam results.

The article continues: “Sheik Muktar Robow Abu Monsur, who is widely considered a moderate Shabaab leader, proudly said, ‘Children should use one hand for education and the other for a gun to defend Islam,’ according to Somali accounts of the event.” School bells were torn down because they sounded like church bells.

Textbooks included arithmetic exercises that “ask students to calculate the number of explosives a factory can produce…or the number of Shi’ite Muslims or ‘unbelievers’ that can be killed by a car suicide-bomber,” yet had removed the plus sign (+) for its similarity to a Christian cross.

In one place, Shabaab raged war on the air by fomenting hate, broadcasting a terrorist call-in-quiz competition for children during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, distributing weapons, and dividing their communities into zones for militias to carve up as they pleased. In another place, Raphael waged peace on the air by seeding a community of listeners with information they could use, in turn, to sow the seeds of hope—how to create an inclusive environment in
classrooms and on soccer fields that emphasize curiosity, engagement, tinkering, experimentation, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

In 2018, Teachers Without Borders was awarded both the Luxembourg Peace Prize and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Prize for the Advancement of Peace. Despite my inquiries, the organizers of these prizes have never revealed how we measured up enough to be so acknowledged.

Raphael set the peace soccer ball in motion. Teachers from around the world passed it on, and that’s all that matters.
Jabriil, Angel of God

“All things in the world are two. In our minds we are two, good and evil. With our eyes we see two things, things that are fair and things that are ugly.... We have the right hand that strikes and makes for evil, and we have the left hand full of kindness, near the heart. One foot may lead us to an evil way, the other foot may lead us to a good. So are all things two, all two.”

—Eagle Chief (Letakos-Lesa) Pawnee

THE TAXI arrived on time, 3:45 am. While the driver scampered out to collect my roller bag, I noticed that the passenger side was occupied with books, bindings up and viewable, bound by a bungee cord. We exchanged pleasantries. I took my backpack off and shoved it into the back seat and climbed in for what would be a long stretch ahead of anonymity and negotiations—three flights, two middle seats with strangers, and layovers too long for comfort and too short for sightseeing. Settling in, I unzipped the pockets of my backpack to check for my passport and paperback, untangled and rewound my charging cords, thumbed through my itinerary, and glanced back wistfully at my home. Once on the freeway, I pulled out The New York Times bulging from a side pocket and scanned the headlines. What followed was the first of a cascade of mistakes. I should have taken a snooze. It was, after all, the middle of the night.

A below-the-fold article had caught my attention, a Dick Cheney diatribe impugning the integrity of Senator John Kerry. For reasons I still cannot fathom today, I blurted out the headline, followed by a disapproving grunt, expecting anyone to agree. From that point on to Departures, I found myself outmatched in an intellectual tennis match in which I, the pitiful amateur, lobbed ridiculously easy serves to my opponent, Serena Williams, ready with a blistering return.
Who the hell was I to presume that this guy would be interested in the subject or feel chatty after who-know-how-many-trips-to-the-airport? Cab rides were often small-talk, punctuated by the drivers’ “yes sirs” and deference to customers for a good tip and review. He mumbled something I could not quite hear, but I interpreted it as agreement. Betraying my own advice to leave at that, I stepped in it further, prattling on about Cheney’s infuriating smirk, his Halliburton no-bid contracts, and his all-around smarminess.

I realized I was yet another passenger using this opportunity for free therapeutic venting without consequences. I started to apologize, but then he offered, unambiguously, the following five words: “Cheney is possessed by evil.” Six or seven seconds passed. He continued: “He has been overtaken by evil.” Stunned, I decided that my own silence would send a message that this was just an awkward exchange. I would ride this out, so to speak, but then thought, how can Cheney simply be the host for deeper, malevolent, forces? Nah. I seethed. Folks like Cheney deserved no pity. His decisions were deliberate and deadly, and he must be held accountable for them in a criminal court. Before I had a chance to respond or change the subject, he said: “I know what evil looks like. I am from Somalia.”

Option 1: feign sleep. Option 2: serve up something with a little more umph. I didn’t have an Option 3. All I could muster was: “Evil?” I did not have my follow-up in order, but I didn’t get the chance.

He launched into an exposé on the nature of evil as something inexorable and distinct from character. His intensity was unsettling. I fiddled with my phone, hoping he’d pick up on my discomfort and leave me alone, but he was waiting for my volley. Riding tall in his seat, he adjusted his mirror down so that he could look at me directly.

I returned his gaze, a pulse beginning to intensify behind my right eye. Lack of sleep, probably. I wanted coffee and one of those oversized, overpriced muffins. But, option 2 it was. “Cheney knows exactly what he’s doing. He’s deliberate and responsible for all the havoc and pain he causes. I can’t accept that it’s simply out of his hands.” Before I could stop myself, I quipped, “The devil made me do it?” I immediately suppressed the idea that I was attempting to
channel the comedian Flip Wilson’s Geraldine Jones character—long a stereotype and parody of the sassy black woman that, years later, made Flip Wilson cringe. Besides, it was incredibly condescending. I pivoted to: “I don’t buy it.” I warned myself to leave it there, but continued anyway: “So if Cheney lies, he can’t stop himself? Cheney is evil because he lies—intentionally. His motives are clear: power and greed.” Who the hell did I think I was, lecturing this guy? I should have known better. If these topics came up in a course, I would have asked questions rather than asserted my views.

“No,” he said, clearly indicating that it was his turn, you’re wrong. Some people are evil by nature. That’s why they rape and kill. Reason has nothing to do with it. They have no control. The world tries to assign reason to evil, but they always come up short. It’s pure evil, plain and simple.”

“Reason has everything to do about it,” I snapped, surprising myself with my ferocity toward anyone, no less someone I had just met. “How can someone be born inherently evil? They learn evil. Maybe they’ve had a traumatic experience as a child. Or a brain scan shows pockmarks like the moon instead of what a normal frontal lobe should look like. Or they’ve been brainwashed or drug-addicted.” I was evening up the score. I forgot about coffee and pastries. Adrenaline took over. “There have to be reasons. I don’t believe there is an evil gene or evil for evil’s sake. Without addressing the root causes of evil acts, we just condone them.” I immediately regretted that last line. Too aggressive, pedantic, unyielding.

He changed lanes abruptly. I was not certain if he had consulted a rear- or side-view mirror to see if a car was too close to the space he had abruptly chosen to occupy, if this was how he drove, or if he was acting out of anger. I expected someone to lean on a horn or flash a middle finger. I knew I had crossed over my own lane, too.

We drove for about 30 seconds in silence, yet it felt loud. We all know that touchy subjects about good versus evil or nature versus nurture need boundaries. Without them, they rarely end well. When, dear reader, was the last time you witnessed a conversation between two opposing positions resolve itself with an epiphanic moment in which someone says: “You know, you’re
right. Wow, I see your viewpoint in a whole new light. I’m convinced.” This was one of those times, and I was not going to be one of those people. There is nothing like a belief under attack to activate those adrenals. But, then again, the very least we can do is exercise a modicum of restraint and civility. But, then again, sometimes you just have to call it as you see it. Take a stand.

“I just don’t buy it,” I protested.

“You don’t have to buy anything,” he quipped. I wondered if this guy thought that all Americans have to frame everything in commercial or mechanical terms. If we want consensus, we go for “buy-in.” Gullible people drink the “Kool-Aid.” Something confusing or complicated has “lots of moving parts.” If we want more details, we “drill down.” If we want to avoid the details or we have lost patience, we simply “don’t have the bandwidth.” If we want to assert our will, we cut directly to “the bottom line.” The world reduced to money and machines.

I lowered my window an inch both for air and for the white noise of the freeway, but the thrumming sound from one window open and the other closed was not helping the headache. Besides, it would be insulting to open the other window. I closed it, trapped.

“There has to be a reason,” I repeated plaintively, reassuring myself—my headache pulsing behind both eyes. “We are in control of our own fate. We’re not driven by some kind of divine presence or cosmic force. There has to be a reason, even if we can’t find it—yet.” I had veered way too close to the topic of faith. I chastised myself for my audacity and hubris. In the animal kingdom, predators and prey usually size up each other and the situation before deciding to lunge or make a break for it. In stark contrast, we humans prefer to dig in our heels.

Without an official to decide the sets, this match could go on forever. Better minds would say something like: “I see your point.” A passive-aggressive comment like “I’m sorry you feel that way” would not cut it here. Rather than slow this down, I ratcheted up the stakes.
“We have to find the root causes and address them. Otherwise, dictators will exploit and strip away our right to choose our own fate. They will substitute themselves for the social contract. They will prey on fear to further a populist agenda in which they masquerade as saviors uniquely destined to be at the top. It makes their crimes that much more abhorrent.” Gratuitous and affected.

We drove on for another 30 seconds of silence. Was he giving me time to recognize how ponderous and hackneyed this was? Assign logic or understand what drives ethnic cleansing, genital mutilation, political purges, school shooters, the invention of napalm, tiki-torch-wielding and goose-stepping Nazis, and people who filet other people? It felt petulant and wrong.

Another 30 seconds passed, but the destination seemed to recede, even as I spied a highway sign with an airplane icon up ahead. Had he given up? Had we reached some kind of shallow intellectual détente? Was this just a break between battles so that he could reload? Almost immediately, I knew the answer. He was simply reloading.

Fully armed, he rattled off a chronology of acts of savagery and sadism that made my argument seem flimsy and superficial. I began to feel taxed, decaffeinated, queasy. I distracted myself with thoughts of those blueberry-and-cheese Danish with three perfect swirly treads of icing, the kind you get at 7-11.

I considered singing a stanza from West Side Story’s “Gee, Officer Krupke,” about being depraved on account of being deprived, or launch into a predictable soporific about the marginalization of youth by institutions that do nothing to support their “bringing upke?” How might I convince this guy that he has it wrong? And, while I am at it, who am I kidding?

I considered singing a stanza from West Side Story’s “Gee, Officer Krupke,” about being deprived on account of being deprived, or wear him out with a soporific about the marginalization of youth or criminalization by formal institutions that do nothing to support their “bringing upke” by failing to mitigate “a social disease” with therapy, jobs, support for families, more schooling. I am going to convince this guy that he has it wrong, that people are not deprived on account of being deprived? Am I kidding?
I decided to take another approach. A lesson plan came to mind. “OK. Here’s a thought experiment I’ll try out on my students. ‘I’ll ask them this: ‘Is Jerry Sandusky, the football coach that abused those kids, sick or evil?’ I’ll tell my students that they may not say he is both sick and evil or that one causes the other. They must pick only one: sick OR evil. Then they’ll have to defend their argument without trying to defeat an opposing opinion. If we ever meet again, I will tell you what the students say.” Why did I think this would satisfy him? But I did not leave well enough alone. “We have a vocabulary for sickness, even words for how we try to understand that human beings can commit acts of genocide. We have rehabilitated and deprogrammed child soldiers, extremists, or cult members. Change is possible. But we don’t have a vocabulary for describing evil. The evil argument shuts down all conversation. It’s too pat an answer.” Then again, human cruelty and a reptilian indifference to suffering is also unfathomable, I thought to myself, undermining my own argument. It was his turn at the lectern. “Some are touched with evil and some are not.” He was also well-read. “Freud said man is a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien. And Dostoevsky said we get a demented pleasure from hurting others—that inside of us all is a hidden demon full of rage. He said it was a demon with ‘lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim, the demon of lawlessness let off the chain.’” Yikes. Those books in the front seat were not for show. He believes that demons dictate reason. I believe there are reasons for our demons. I thought this was a fair volley, but his mastery of Freud and Dostoevsky felt definitive, impenetrable. A clear winner in the scholarship department. I was getting trounced. We dipped under the departure sign and slowed as cars converged into a single lane. OK, here comes the humor. “I can only quote Woody Allen, who once said, ‘If it turns out that there is a God, I don’t think that he’s evil. But the worst that you can say about him is that basically, he’s an underachiever.’” I thought this would make him smile. I noticed an affable turn of his mouth, but at that point, it might have been wishful thinking.
We arrived at the terminal. “I’m United,” I smiled. “That’s my airline, not an agreement.” This elicited a chuckle, at last, I was sure of it. But, then again, he was full of surprises. This guy might not do jokes easily. Respect that. He jumped out, popped the trunk, and pulled out my suitcase. “United,” he said, lips tight, but his eyes warm. As I got out, I peeked at the meter and dug out my wallet for the fare and tip.

Walking my suitcase to the curb, he said: “I don’t want your money.”

“What? Why?” I asked. I thought all was well, but my heart fell. I truly had offended him. He answered, “Because when my friends ask me to take them to the airport, I just take them,” he said.

“I don’t understand. This is ridiculous,” I said.” I can be your friend, but I’m a customer now and you provided me, a perfect stranger, with a service, for which I am obligated to pay. It’s only fair.” He said nothing. I couldn’t tell if he was sulking or about mic-drop.

“C’mon, man. That was nice. You’re not angry with me,” I pleaded, “A fare is fare.”

He shrugged it off and a genuine smile formed.” No,” he said.” “No passenger has had a conversation like that with me. Most of them ask me where I’m from, as if they are being truly inquisitive and open-minded, then bury their heads in their phones or look out the window. He handed me a slip of paper with his phone number. Next time you need a taxi to the airport, call me. No extra charge.” He pulled up the handle and returned to the driver’s side.

I could not let this happen. “You’re very kind. Probably born that way,” He smiled. “But no, this is not right. Here is the fare and tip.” He would not move his arms to take my money. “I insist,” I said. “Why should you pay for providing a service to me?” After a struggle, I pried open his fist and pressed the money into his palm. “That would make me evil,” I said. He flashed a brilliant smile and closed his hand around the cash. “Good journey!” At least I had won this battle. I was more than happy to concede the war.

“Sir? About what you said? You’re wrong… and naïve… and so American. You think everything will work out just fine.”
I couldn’t argue with that. I looked at the slip of paper with his phone number and asked: “Who should I ask for when I call? What’s your name?”

“Jabriil,” he said. “You can call me Gabriel, the archangel entrusted to deliver revelations on God’s behalf.”

“And yours?”

“Frederic,” I said. “It means peaceful ruler.”

I thanked him again and slipped my backpack over the handle of my roller bag. He leaned his lanky frame over the top of the cab and shouted. “Goodbye, Frederic, king of peace!” I turned around to see him wave. I waved back: “Bye for now, Jabriil, angel of God!”

He sped off. I entered the airport, 4:30 am. Security was smooth, even cheery. I found a coffee and pastry kiosk just then rolling up its steel gate. I asked for a jelly donut and latte. The sugar, caffeine, and conversation tightened up the screws for my long journey ahead to Burundi, then Rwanda. I had no idea what lay ahead.

For now, I settled into my middle seat. I pulled out the article about Cheney—my bias confirmed—what a sonovabitch. That was more than enough for a single day and I stuffed it into the seat-bag mesh pocket, choosing the crossword puzzle. I put that away, too. Jabriil had both unnerved and inspired me. His voice was in my head now. I was headed to two countries only ten years removed from their genocides. He had spoken with conviction, experience, and knowledge. Perhaps there is such a thing as evil in some pure form—indefinable, deep, independent of reason. I zipped and unzipped my backpack to check my documents once again, got up to let the passengers on the window and aisle take their seats, buckled up, and scrolled through the movies to find something distracting. Another prayer answered: a season I had somehow missed of Big Bang Theory.

Surely these Cal Tech. guys have all the answers.
The Time of the Running

“Ukize Inkuha Arayiganira”
If you survive a tragedy, you should speak about it.
—Rwandan proverb

I WILL NEVER FORGET those two matching tweed suitcases with three neat stripes down the middle and leather trim. In the distance on a long gravel road leading to our teachers’ conference in Bujumbura, Burundi, three organizers and I made out a man wearing a felt hat, white shirt, and oversized khaki pants like a character stepping out of a William Faulkner novel.

He propelled himself forward by swinging his suitcases as if he had rowed himself here. He had not noticed us yet. At one point, he twisted his wrist and one suitcase careened into his leg, but he immediately regained his rhythm and momentum and the swinging began again. 50-yards later, he lowered his suitcases to the ground, removed his hat with his left hand, and, with his right, gave a decisive judo chop in the center to keep the fold intact before balancing it on one of his suitcases. He sat on the other, pulled out a handkerchief from his front jacket pocket and wiped his brow, careful to fold it again into a proper white triangle before returning it to its proper place. He reached in his pants pocket for a cloth to buff his shoes, took off his hat to check the crease, placed it firmly on his head, bent his knees, and stood upright with suitcases in hand. Taking a deep breath, he carried on. His elegance and composure were captivating.

We waved to him. Catching our gaze, he quickened his pace. We met him halfway, shook hands, and handed him a bottle of water. An organizer pulled out a clipboard and asked for his name in Kirundi, English, and French. “I am Saloman, from Rwanda, and I am here for the Great Lakes Teachers’ Conference!” He pointed to the registration form. “Here I am! Saloman! “Ndiyo!” “Oui!” “Yes!” he beamed.
Someone shouted: “Find Saloman a mattress and a bottle of water!” I wondered how long he had been on the road. Clearly, several days.

A young man scurried forward to grab his suitcases. Saloman would not let relinquish them easily. The young man understood not to push and motioned him toward lodgings nestled in a low grove of banana trees. Saloman was tall, erect, wiry. Up close, his eyes were red from dust and his brow creased as if he had taken many of these same journeys, toting the same heavy suitcases, wearing the same hat. His voice, however, betrayed his weariness. One could not detect signs of fatigue, the insults he must have faced: officials overreaching their authority, the heat, the blisters. His enthusiasm, all exclamation marks, was infectious. “We’re glad you’re here,” I announced. “Thank you!” he responded. “You’re welcome!”

Teachers arrived all day, some pouring out of cars and vans, others walking in groups like tourists searching for their bus from Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, and as far as Uganda—similarly exhausted and exhilarated. From a distance, two women looked as if they had just come from church, their hats gold, beaded, extravagant, and proud.

That evening, one of the Ugandan delegates sharing a room with Salomon told us that Saloman had been traveling for three days. He was not the only one. The teachers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had navigated through treacherous territory to reach a dock where they could travel by boat over the tip of Lake Tanganyika, take a bus to the center of Bujumbura, and walk the rest of the way.

We expected about twenty-five teachers in total, but by late afternoon, the ranks had swelled to over 100. Youth volunteers continued to marshal mattresses and distribute bottled water. The host paced about on his mobile phone, ingratiating himself to some, eviscerating others, doubling up rooms, cajoling cooks to stretch meals, and scouting for chairs and additional housing.

Several months earlier, a Burundian teacher had contacted me about convening teachers from the Great Lakes region. The Great Lakes Teachers’ Conference would be one of the first of its kind in Burundi. He had already secured a facility without cost. Small grants and a home-grown auction at a neighborhood
church were enough to cover basic expenses. Two colleagues from Seattle and one from Boston helped Burundian teachers with logistics.

We set some initial ground rules. This would not be a reconciliation conference. I knew enough not to play the self-appointed American savior dispensing platitudes about getting along. No kumbaya sessions. No lectures. No press. Just honest conversations about teaching and learning and what shared experience can do to enhance the teaching profession and the capacity of teacher leaders to serve their communities.

We agreed that it would unfold organically, based upon the elegant principles of Open Space Technology (OST). Harrison Owen, an Episcopal priest, observed that the most productive and memorable work at conferences often takes place in the spaces between formal presentations, at coffee breaks, rather than in the sessions themselves. Owen conceived a self-organizing structure for conferences—no pre-set agendas, no approved-in-advance research papers, no greatest-hits biographies and postage-stamp photographs of keynote speakers and second-tier plenary sessions, no signing up in advance for time-place-topic presentations-that-leave-little-time-for-questions, no planning committees, no unforeseen technology glitches, or someone looking for a switch to dim the lights. Owen’s work at World Vision convinced him that development must be rooted in the wisdom of local knowledge, stakeholder-driven, iterative, and bottom-up. I loved the idea. Don’t orchestrate and script everything.

This would be the kind of teachers’ conferencing organized by teachers. It begins with a full group session at which the main facilitator describes the OST process by introducing four principles and one law.

The four principles respect the dignity and intelligence of participants.

1. Whoever comes is the right person. If you care about an issue, show up.

2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. The group is responsible.

3. Whenever it starts is the right time. Creativity does not conform to schedules.
4. When it’s over, it’s over. Efficiency matters. Sessions can take time, but not waste it. Think back at classes or meetings that fill time. If and when participants are satisfied, they move on.

The one law, the law of two feet, fosters freedom and respect. One is encouraged to get up at any time during a small-group session and leave, for any reason. Bored? Leave. Someone talking too much? Leave. Cross-pollinate by joining another group. Leave that one, too, if one wants. No judgment.

At the full session, anyone may introduce an idea on the spot but must also take responsibility for convening a group of the willing. What one thinks and feels—matters. If topics appear similar, the main facilitator may ask if they may be grouped under a single heading. Once all topics have been introduced and prioritized under general headings, the facilitator ensures that each group is led by those who have introduced it. A time and place are determined for groups to convene. Groups are asked to determine a note-taker and a person to summarize the main points the following morning when all reconvene.

OST is simple, generative, and self-and-group policing. It’s guiltless, blameless, and responsible. The facilitator (facilitate, 17th c. Fr., to make an action or process easier) is not the crown jewel of wisdom but the person who keeps the space open for thinking, yet stays as “invisible” as possible.41

Facilitators navigate through the slow, sad periods when it feels as if the group has lost momentum, but avoid wresting control because the law of two feet will take care of this. They gently steer away from group venting or finger pointing, but do not suppress it. They encourage introverts to share but never embarrass them. They celebrate any form in which an idea is expressed: a statement, a picture, a story—whatever it takes. In short, the leader embodies visionary thinking without having to be the visionary. There are no heroes here.

In turn, the group both documents and prioritizes all ideas to notice patterns, but must do so by consensus. If an idea is too personal and someone would prefer their idea not be shared publicly, group members are to protect that person’s privacy.
The work of bottom-up consensus and stakeholder building, the instinctual staple of community elders and development practitioners, has faced considerable derision and name-calling: it’s managerially incompetent and inattentive to detail. It’s a time-consuming obsession with process over product. It’s depoliticized and therefore unattainable. Alliances and factions will always undermine its progress, and shrewd elites and interventionists will always use it to manipulate others into embracing their own legitimacy. “C’mon, Fred, you know better than to fall for this glorified touchy-feely, self-help, aphoristic, magical-thinking bullshit.”

I worried out loud to the organizers in Burundi. “Will our use of Open Space Technology feel western or lazy?” The response was confident. “Don’t let your fear cloud our judgment. We’ll take care of it.” I have heard this lecture before. I thought of Jihad and our first Community Teaching and Learning Center in Laqiyya.

The conference began. Everyone understood the rules. Within fifteen minutes, topics flooded in. They struck at the heart of teaching: how to create alternative ways of learning, rather than depend upon imported call-and-response textbooks well past their expiration dates. How to foster hands-on learning in a classroom with little space to move around. How to write grant proposals. How to reach children with special needs. How to reach parents who cannot read. They railed against incompetent leadership, policies that undermine the profession, physical and mental abuse, and indifferent Ministry of Education officials. Gatherings like these can easily devolve into a whirlpool of despair, but they had traveled too far to leave it there. Facilitators were paragons of patience. Participants knew they were responsible for outcomes.

When I first circulated to observe small-group sessions, they turned their attention to me, accustomed to development professionals regaling them with mundanities and impossible suggestions. Following “the law of two feet,” I was able to slip into an empty seat in the middle of an animated discussion, unnoticed. It did not matter to them that afternoon rains on the corrugated roof made it almost impossible to hear what a teacher was saying. It did not matter that organizers had run out of mattresses or that meals were stretched to feed a
group four times the size we had expected. I thought of Jihad and was reminded of his advice: “The village will take care of it.”

At the first dinner, during announcements, two Burundian and Ghanaian youth volunteers stepped to the microphone and announced that they had discovered a boom box and suggested that groups from each country prepare to demonstrate and teach a dance. Their idea met with thunderous approval.

Sessions grew increasingly personal. In one session on meals for teachers and students, a man broke down in tears when he described how he was not certain he could feed his family. This group was speaking about an issue that would unlikely appear in other conferences.

And for good reason. While progress has been made in the years since I was there, the United Nations 2020 Human Development Index places Burundi at “185 out of 189 countries and territories.” UNICEF reports that “69% of children live below the income poverty line.” Just over 40% of children complete basic education. 62% of the population can drink and cook with clean water, and 46% have access to basic sanitation.

Nevertheless, they were here at this conference, to speak freely about what they chose to be important: poverty, school gardens, leadership, lessons, parents, absenteeism, professional development, children with special needs, and topics close to home: cooling chickens with leaves, depression, how the use of MUAC (mid-upper arm circumference) tape to diagnose malnutrition could help them advocate for nutritional supplements...anything. They were here not only in spite of their challenges, but because of their challenges.

During breaks, groups practiced their dances. Costumes appeared. Music and feedback from a microphone shoved up against the boom box ricocheted off the cement floor and tin roof.

After we cleared dishes and moved the tables and benches against the walls, everyone stood in a circle. Youth volunteers opened the large screen doors, as if for royalty. Sister Donata Uwimanimpaye of Muramba, Rwanda entered with six others from her convent, each wearing their starched-white and black habits. Their arms moved like elegant birds. They bent their knees in a rhythm of one
large accented step, then two rapid, short steps and snaked their way through the center of the room. If he were there, my father—a folk-dance teacher—would have lept out of his chair to join this Rwandan waltz, take a nun’s hand, and add his own Serbo-Croatian or Greek flair—coif, wimple, veil, tunic and old Jewish guy riding a wave of joyful syncopation.

Teachers began to cheer and formed a conga line. Sister Donata was beaming. We all were. Later that evening, I asked her if I might visit her in Rwanda and talk with more teachers. Saloman leaned over to tell me that plans were already in the works.

The following day, I received word that President Pierre Nkurunziza would like to meet the organizers. Nkurunziza’s mother was a Tutsi Protestant and his father, a Hutu Catholic. A former physical education teacher and football coach, he was teaching at the University of Burundi when Hutu students were attacked and killed. He went into hiding and joined a Hutu military group. He lost all five of his siblings during the Burundian Civil War and became a born-again Protestant, convinced that his rise to power would be his destiny.

Nkurunziza’s long reign was marked by corruption and settling scores. In 2010, his election to a second term by a vast majority was not due to his popularity, but because opposition leaders boycotted the polls.

I learned much later that Nkurunziza banned “outdoor jogging” in 2014 because he believed that illegal demonstrations were organized amongst the runners and subsequently sentenced twenty-one supporters of the opposition movement to life imprisonment for “jogging” their way to violent protests.

Election watchers were kept away from his election to a third term, which resulted in a loss of 1,200 lives and the displacement of more than 400,000 people.

According to Reuters’s less-than-flattering 2020 obituary, “Burundi withdrew from the International Criminal Court in 2017, shut down the United Nations office on human rights last year, and expelled the representative of the World Health Organisation last month amid criticism of the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic.”48 His wife was admitted to the hospital on May 29th.
with COVID symptoms. President Pierre Nkurunziza died 11 days later. The official announcement said it was cardiac arrest. The Guardian and The Economist reported that the cause of death was likely due to COVID.

I expressed my reluctance, but reminded myself to “use this.” If “this” could be an opportunity to draw attention to the challenges facing education in Burundi, rather than some sycophantic photo-op, it would be worth it. We entered the reception room, awakening a guard slouched under a gigantic painting of the president and a tapestry of a cave man wrestling a bear. After the customary frisk and bag search, we took two flights of dark stairs to a landing outside the president’s office. A guard circled us, then opened two large doors to a relatively narrow, unadorned office. He entered. We stood. He told us to take our seats. He did not ask for introductions, choosing instead to rattle off a script about Burundi’s economic and social progress. He expressed his appreciation for the conference. He neither asked nor solicited questions. There was no Musharraf give and take. I separated his mouth from his face, like commercials with talking dogs. He told us to rise again and stand in a circle for a silent prayer. I complied and mumbled along, my head bowed.

We stopped for a photograph under a photograph of himself. I wanted out of there.

We arrived back at the conference site to learn that a hand-grenade thrown from a cattle truck onto the entrance road to our conference venue exploded not more than 80 yards from a group of teachers and our Executive Director returning from an afternoon outing. Miraculously, no one was hurt. That night, the dancing resumed.

On the final morning, teachers filled the room with posters of recommendations for improvement. Several sheets included the outline of a grant proposal. Others included names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses they could copy. Several had made arrangements for conferences in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda. No one spoke of reconciliation. Salomon whispered, “In our shared cots, we may have spoken about darkness, but it was all light!”
Several sang goodbye songs. Music seemed to be playing from everywhere—cabanas, meeting rooms, a cluster of benches outside, the kitchen. Two groups of women lucky enough to come by car hugged others before crowding in and waving from the windows like beauty-pageant winners or a victorious sports team at their hometown parade.

Saloman indicated that we were ready to go to Rwanda, “Pays des Mille Collines” (Country of a Thousand Hills). He gave his hat one last judo chop, placed it on his head, stretched his hands to reach for his suitcases, and then tussled with me to take my bags as well. Before stepping inside the car to the airport, he buffed his shoes one more time.

I never inquired about the backgrounds of those who attended the conference in Burundi. Were they Hutu or Tutsi? Did they represent government schools or private schools? What mattered was that they were teachers, traveling at their own expense through dangerous checkpoints and unfamiliar ground, to learn from each other about teaching, caring for children, cooling chickens, measuring arms for malnutrition, making resolutions, and vowing to stay in touch.

Next stop, Rwanda.

In Kigali, we drove to a street of one-story cinder-block structures and came to a stop in front of one where guards slumped in lounge chairs outside their booths were listening to a football game. Rwanda was Salomon’s territory and he was at home. He accompanied around the back to secure deadbolts and sliding locks. “Rest!” he said. “Join me in an hour over there!” and pointed to a cabana-like structure up a series of steps. We ate sorghum, bananas, and mutton, and drank large, lukewarm sodas. I paid the bill after a struggle and we continued the conversation in the car as he showed us the city.

At one point, open Toyota and Daihatsu trucks filled with soldiers careened down opposite hills and were converging near us. I could not tell if this was an exercise, an emergency, or an insurrection. They were brandishing sticks or broom handles, perhaps rifles, rising and falling above the cab. I got nervous. Were they wearing “No Fear” t-shirts underneath their uniforms?
I turned to Salomon. “What’s going on?” “What’s happening?”

He smiled. “They’re planting trees, Mr. Fred. Thousands of them. They’re also singing!” The trucks whizzed by, the ends of shovels popping up and down, others enjoying the breeze after a hard day of digging and re-forested. Nevertheless, I could not shake the tension and turmoil just below the surface of daily life. How was it possible, I mused, for human beings to descend into such hell and appear so upbeat a decade later?

From the road below, the Kigali Genocide Memory Centre appears like an upscale home or church in the Hollywood Hills—palm and banana trees, a small pool oasis, brick driveway, stone patio, and white gate. A fairly innocuous winding road leads to the entrance dips into a small valley and rises again. The Memory Centre stands at the top of the hill as a beacon of remembrance for up to 250,000 people interred on its grounds."

In the entrance foyer of the museum I noticed a plaque with a portion from the Torah and Qur’an: “If you have saved one life, it is as if you have saved the world.”

The Memory Centre consists of three permanent exhibitions. Exhibition 1 is entitled, “The 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi.” It focuses on life before colonization, followed by the massacres, stories of survival, and the heroes who intervened, and includes efforts made to ensure justice and nurture reconciliation. Exhibit 2, “Wasted Lives,” documents massacres that have not yet been recognized internationally as genocide. Exhibition 3 is “The Children’s Room.” Enough said.


It had been only ten years since the Gikondo massacre on one of Rwanda’s picturesque hills, in a rural, red-brick church where over 500 worshippers were unable to protect their children from a killing frenzy that took place over the course of two days. Children wrenched from their parents’ arms or dragged
away, shaking and screaming, from beneath pews, then decapitated. I imagined Jabriil looking at me and asking me if my faith in reason had started to wobble. Clearly, I thought, there is always a reason for these long chapters of colonial aggression, injustice, and rage fueled by scarcity, an incessant campaign of demoralization, and retribution. I wanted to believe in something. I needed religion.

A 1994 New York Times report of the macabre scene included this line: “A poster of Pope John Paul II is tacked on the main door and above it is a large white statue of Jesus, his arms beckoning.”

And only a decade since a plane carrying two heads of state—Rwanda’s president, Juvénal Habyarimana, and Burundi’s president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, was shot down by rocket fire as it approached the runway in Kigali. Soon afterward, state-sponsored militiamen bludgeoned, hacked, dismembered, and disemboweled 800,000 people over the course of 100 days and burned their victims’ identity cards to eradicate any trace of identity or memory. Throughout the Third Reich, enemies of purity were called Lebensunwertes Leben (or “life unworthy of life”). So, too, were Tutsis called cockroaches, to be stamped out by the boot of tyranny and hatred.

The following morning, we started our journey to Muramba to reunite with Sister Donata at the College of Immaculate Concepcion. The first several kilometers were paved, but for most of the trip, we jostled our way on a red dirt road through a quilt of terraced hills planted with banana trees and corn.

Muramba is perched in the fertile Gisenyi Region, close to the Democratic Republic of Congo. During the genocide, Sister Donata’s convent was attacked by armed fighters streaming across the border. According to an entry in “School Girls Teach a Lesson of Love,” from African Stories for Preachers and Teachers, children were ordered to divide up into ethnic groups, Hutus on one side, Tutsi on the other. The school girls refused. The men ruthlessly opened fire killing seventeen and wounding fourteen. A Belgian missionary nun, Sister Margarita Bosmans, the directress of another school nearby, tried to stop the assassins and was killed, along with four lay people.
Salomon commented: “Here, we call it the time of the running.” The killing in the area continued well into 1998 when citizens of Muramba ran between the Interhamwe (a Hutu paramilitary gang) and forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. I did not ask him for details.

Sister Donata greeted us and conducted a tour of the convent, including the rooms where the screams were heard and the bodies found. As we walked, children ran ahead, ducking behind foliage, then popping out to point at me affectionately and shout, “Bye-bye mzungu!” (pronounced “muh-zun-gooo”), a Bantu word generally taken to mean “white person,” originally stemming from the phrase, “Those who roam around.”

She also showed us a computer room and explained how Engineers Without Borders (EWB) was planning projects for rainwater catchment and solar panel-powered electricity. Having met with EWB leadership at their base in Colorado, I knew that this would happen. They are an extraordinary group.

We met with other nuns who spoke with us about returning the “civil” in civil service. How schooling must be redesigned to reconstruct the self. How children from families in conflict must learn how to be comfortable with each other. How children who have killed others have returned to school, yet remain lost, over-aged for their grade, and traumatized. How schools must have taken on community issues of public health, parenting, and psychological services. They spoke of the roadblocks to success: school fees, uniforms, bribes. How curriculum can be a tool either for fostering old hatreds and blind obedience or for engaging minds in the thrill of new ideas. How policy-makers must be held accountable not only for the basics but also for the quality of teaching.

Sister Donata dug into her faith to launch The Association for Christian Peace Values in Education (APAX), a peace project designed “to contribute to the reconstruction of the social links ruined by violence.” Devoted to building a sense of wholeness for those who have suffered—autistic children hid by their parents, disabled children bullied and neglected, the bereaved and permanently traumatized, and anyone left behind—she blended her graduate work in peace psychology and theology from Fribourg University in Switzerland with a focus
on the power of spirituality of unity, cultural mediation, compassion, and 
“Christian listening.”

Make no mistake. Sister Donata does speak in aspirational generalities. APAX 
was devoted to constructing training centers, training a cadre of village peace 
workers, and developing vocational skills in handicrafts, agriculture, knitting, 
and sewing.

Most of all, she makes one point unequivocally clear. Social fragmentation is a 
failure of education to teach reading, practical skills, critical thinking, 
collaboration, self-respect, and the cultural values of peace. Sister Donata 
Uwimanimpaye was a Rwandan Sameena!

The sun was setting. Sister Donata refused to accept that we would be traveling 
back to Kigali so soon and so we stayed a second night in the nuns’ dorms. 
Food came out of nowhere. The sisters could transition with astonishing ease 
between the horrors of genocide and daily life. They were curious, cheery, and 
contemplative at the same time. They enjoyed each other’s company. I felt 
embraced. One sister issued us each a candle and a plain matchbook. We 
followed her silently to our tiny, windowless rooms. Once inside, I lit mine, 
watching shadows play across the walls, and drifted peacefully off to sleep—the 
atheist Jew in a Rwandan convent.

Before leaving Rwanda, I asked to visit the Kigali Genocide Memory Centre 
again. I wanted to see it anew after having spent time with Sister Donata. I 
returned to the chronology of horror, but somehow took a wrong turn and 
stepped into a room I had not seen before. I was expecting a path through 
exhibits of atrocities or a view into a brightly lit prep room crowded with 
graduate students wearing cellulose face-masks and blue gloves, probing skulls 
or lifting fabric from wood with tweezers. This room was neither. It was white, 
empty, and smelled of drywall and fresh paint. A sentry came in behind me.

Was this, perhaps, a meditation room for museum-goers to pause and reflect on 
the grisly artifacts they had just seen? Feeling a need to return to the herd and 
follow the path, I turned around. The sentry cleared his throat. “Vous êtes 
perdu?” he said affably. (“Are you lost?”). He stared at me and continued, “Do 
you speak English? Are you looking for something?”
“No. Thank you.” I replied, and headed for the door through which I had come. But I had to ask: “What is this room for?” I noticed the solitary folding chair in the corner.

“What, sir, is this room for?” I asked. “Right this way sir,” he said, pointing to another exit. I started to rephrase the question. He cut me off. “This way, sir,” he said, pointing to the exit, his tone clipped, flinty.

Perhaps he didn’t know and was just doing his job. Without an answer, I filled in the gaps. Perhaps this museum had expansion plans—readying itself to house the memories and artifacts of the next genocide. If so, would this museum have to revise its expansion plans every year to catch up or stay ahead?

It led outside. I retraced my steps and decided on following a different exit sign. It led outside. Adjusting my eyes to a piercing sun, I noticed a lush garden and patio where tourists could reflect on the enormity and senselessness of what they had just seen. That leaves out the option that the empty space was a meditation room. As I walked, I came upon a grave holding a casket and wooden cross whittled from two branches. A sign above it read: “PLEASE, DO NOT STEP ON MASS GRAVES. NE MARCHEZ PAS SUR LESTOMBES, SVP NTIMUKANDAGIRE KU MVA.”

I repeated the words in English. “Please, do not step on mass graves. Please, do not step on mass graves. Please, do not step on mass graves.”

At the bottom of the valley, I could see children playing soccer in an area cleared between a clutch of homes, some assembled from scrap metal and wood, others from stucco. In the distance, homes and small farms dotted every hill. Just three kilometers from where I stood, I could see downtown Kigali. A building boom was underway to line Kigali’s immaculate streets.

We left the parking lot and edged out to the street but had to wait. Joggers were streaming by.
How Could This Happen, Again?

“For in the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and, of course, its consequences.”

— Elie Wiesel, Night

JANE GOODALL invited me as her guest at the United Nations International Day of Peace. She had been named a U.N. Messenger of Peace, along with dignitaries such as Muhammad Ali, Michael Douglas, and Elie Wiesel. “Let’s see if you can meet Kofi,” she said, referring to Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations.

She led me to a small garden outside the reception area. There, a small group stood in silence as Secretary General Annan strode up to The Peace Bell, donated by the United Nations Association of Japan to the General Assembly in 1954. Housed in a structure modeled after a small temple symbolizing the Buddha’s birthplace, the bell rests on a stone base donated by Israel. Cast from coins and medals collected by children from around the world, The Peace Bell is rung with a wooden mallet at the Vernal Equinox and again on September 21st, the International Day of Peace. Extraordinary timing, I thought.

Mr. Annan strode up to the bell and turned to face the assembled. “A month ago, almost to this very hour, an act of unspeakable brutality struck our friends and colleagues in Baghdad. Today we ring this bell for them, for their families and loved ones. We ring it for the people of Iraq, whom our colleagues were working to assist. We ring it for people of every nation, who need our prayers and peace.” He raised the mallet and struck the bell gently. The bell’s resonant toll throbbed and seemed to float above, around, inside us—invisible and hypnotic. No one moved, all of us transfixed by a sense of communion.

Inside, Jane introduced me to Secretary General Annan, who, along with the United Nations, had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize only two years prior.
He extended his hand. Though shorter and his eyes sadder than I had imagined, he radiated gentleness, humility, and elegance. Still holding my hand, he announced to the assembled. “Please follow me,” and ushered me ahead of him.

The power of that day did not lay in quick encounters with global luminaries, but in a single question. Seated in the front row, Jacqueline Murekatete raised her hand. She looked directly at Elie Wiesel. In 1994, she was 9 years old, living in an orphanage in Rwanda. Her entire immediate family had been killed, as well as most of her extended family. Granted asylum in 1995, Jacqueline moved in with her uncle. When she was a sophomore, David Gewirtzman, a holocaust survivor, spoke in graphic terms about what he had seen. New York Jewish Week reported: “I felt like he was telling my story,” said Murekatete, now 20 and a sophomore at New York University. Stirred by the lecture, Murekatete penned Gewirtzman a note. “At one time I, like you, had a feeling of guilt for being alive,” she wrote. “Now I’m thankful I was left.”

Jacqueline and Gewirtzman traveled together, telling their stories.

After Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel spoke about the sin of indifference, Jacqueline raised her hand, introduced herself and told her story: her six siblings and her grandmother dragged to a river, hacked to death, then dumped into the current.

“How could this happen, again? What happened to ‘never again’?”

300 people held their collective breath, except for the sounds of cameras in rapid fire, shifting from the Nobel Prize winner to Jacqueline and back again. Wiesel straightened up on his stool and shielded his eyes, scanning the audience for the source of the young woman’s voice. He sighed and thanked her for the question. He first addressed the audience. He described how world leaders had been certain that, after the Holocaust, such horrors would be considered inconceivable, a thing of the past. Never forget, never forgive, never again. And yet genocide continues. How American knew what was going on, but did nothing to stop it. How he had implored other major world leaders to intervene, but to no avail. The United Nations Secretary General at the time, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, chastised member states for their unwillingness to intervene.
Wiesel told the assembled that we were hearing testimony for the dead and the living. He mused about how he had hoped, only six years after the Rwandan genocide, that he could embrace the ebullient optimism surrounding the coming of a new millennium. “Lots of fireworks and speeches about world peace,” he said, and close the chapter on the bloodshed of the 20th century so that we may open a new one—of peace, inclusion, and opportunity.

And yet it took over where it left off, he explained, in Darfur, “like a chapter in a history book in which we tear the pages out one-by-one, until we have nothing left.”

He stopped and met Jacqueline’s gaze again. He told her that he had sought his entire life to answer questions like the one she posed, that even though he did not know why or how it continues to happen, one’s efforts to prevent it cannot flag. “I have dedicated my life to preventing it from happening again.”

Again, a long pause. He continued, “I know this: we cannot hate in return. There’s even something worse, he said, than hate. The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.” He wished he could reach across generations, across time, across race, across religion, just to hold her. Members of the audience began to weep.

There was no more to be said. The meeting ended. Elie Wiesel was the first to rise. He crossed the stage and walked down the stairs directly toward Jacqueline. He placed his arm on her back as they walked past me. I snapped this just in time:
Jacqueline went on to work with Miracle Corners of the World, a non-profit devoted to empowering “youth to become positive agents of change in their communities.” At a 2011 commencement speech at Washington University in St. Louis, he peered out at the crowd and talked about his visits to Bosnia, sent by President Clinton as a Presidential Envoy:

“And I would go there, really, to those places in Bosnia, to speak with the victims. My interest is in the victims. And I would go literally from person to person, from family to family, from barrack to barrack, from tent to tent, asking them to tell me their stories. And they always began, but they stopped in the middle. Not one of the people I interviewed or interrogated...
ended the story. The story was usually about rape in the family, and murder, they were tortured, there was humiliation—no one finished the story! Because they all burst into tears."

I kissed and hugged Jane, thanked her, and promised to see her in the morning, then set out for my friend’s place. I needed air. It was a beautiful late September afternoon. I left the building and joined a small crowd posing in front of “The Knotted Gun,” a bronze statue of a large .357 Magnum revolver tied into a knot. Tourists took selfies. A little boy ran in circles, thumb and forefinger extended, shrieking “Bang! Bang!” His mother grabbed his arm as he tried to climb up and reach the trigger. I lost interest in my own snapshot and walked through Ralph Bunche Park, named for the first African American winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his key role in the armistice between Egypt and Israel. Prior to the Nobel, Bunch helped draft the U.N. charter, and for years after the prize, worked in the Sinai, the Congo, Yemen, Cyprus, and Bahrain. He attended the 1963 March on Washington and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March.

I stopped to read the well-known words inscribed on a curved wall at the entrance: *They shall beat their swords into plowshares. And their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.* It was U.N. week again, just as it was when I first met Jane Goodall years before. Streets blocked. Sharpshooters on roofs. Secret Service agents talking into their shoulders. Orange cones and detour signs. The steady parade of ambulances whoop-whooping. Limousines and horses. Cabs were useless. I was lost again.

I wondered why the documentation of voices of grief and pain does not stop the human race from bringing upon itself and the world such premeditated horror and the steady parade of swords and machetes. I heard Jabriil’s voice of anguish grow louder. I wanted to block everything I had seen and heard the past several years. Communities leveled by the neglect. The abject deprivation of basic human rights. A teacher wishing that he, rather than his daughter, perished in a shabbily constructed school within seconds of the Wenchuan earthquake. A doctor’s despair as he turned page after page of a notebook filled with names of patients who tested positive for HIV. The rage of an environmentalist government official at seeing tributaries of the Niger Delta fouled by waste and
purple with oil. Raphael’s funereal description of what he had witnessed. I had just seen an Auschwitz survivor console a Rwandan survivor of a genocide. I tried to shake it off. I wanted a drink.

But other voices drifted in. Jihad’s confident “the village will take care of it.” Deepmala’s children urging us not to let the lights go out. The voice of the teacher who, despite the violence in Gujarat, wrote that “teachers do not kill each other.” Sameena’s lack of fear in the service of girls’ education, human rights, and livelihoods. A forklift driver stunned that he could apply his skills to make a difference. Solmaz’s use of science to strengthen community safety. Sister Donata’s soft, and Salomon’s exclamatory, voices of resilience. And, of course, there was Jane’s voice: a pant-hoot to pay attention, a warning about our stewardship of the earth, and a kind of call to prayer: “I am here, you are here. Let’s get to work.”

Those voices are a collective chorus of hope. They cannot be let down.
I Want to Meet the King of America


Her name is Sharbat Gula. She was 12 years old.

In 2002, McCurry had located and photographed her once again with help from the inventor of iris recognition. Along with the new photograph, Curry wrote: “So many here share her story.” In her review of McCurry’s book, “A Life Revealed,” Cathy Newman agrees: “Consider the numbers. Twenty-three years of war, 1.5 million killed, 3.5 million refugees: This is the story of contemporary Afghanistan.” Sharbat Gula’s green eyes had lost their light. Her face showed betrayal, fear, and bitterness. The world had all but forgotten her.

In 2016, Sharbat was arrested for alleged forgery of identity documents. A mother of four and sick with Hepatitis C, she faced prison time and an exorbitant fine. Amnesty International came to her defense. Pakistan deported her. In December 2017, *Geographic* reported that she was greeted with open arms (debatable) in Afghanistan. Nina Strochlic writes: “Sharbat Gula was greeted by President Ashraf Ghani, who handed her a key to a new apartment and promised her children would have health care and schooling. ‘I welcome her back to the bosom of her motherland,’ Ghani said in a small ceremony.” Had Afghanistan also exploited her for the sake of its national image? Probably.

Haven’t we all? Let’s take a breath here, dear reader, because an elephant just tip-toed into the room. I looked it up. Elephants actually walk on their tip-toes.
First, the background of the photograph itself. Vlogger Tony Northrup has uncovered a disturbing back story. According to Northrup, Sharbat never received any money from the use of her image, no less prints sold at auction for over $175,000. Girls were not allowed to show their faces, yet McCurry seems to have convinced her teacher to tell her to do so. Photographs are forbidden and certainly were not to be publicized. Then, Northrup claims, he set her up in another room with better lighting and a clean background for a kind of perverse glam shot with enough space above her for the magazine title. Apparently, too, Sharbat was not only scared but angry and high-tailed it out of the room. On talk shows, McCurry seems to have photoshopped the truth both of her experience and how he came to take the photograph itself. In short, the operational word here is take, as in ripped off, staged, boundaries crossed, resulting in the image of an aestheticized poster child for poverty at greater risk because of the photo. Chalk up another focal point for the Family of Man critics.

Second, it’s worth examining some of the more heady implications once The Afghan Girl flew off the shelves. It riled up the fury of those convinced that her image reinforced the classic “orientalist trope of veiled Muslim women.” How it amplified the characteristic “one-dimensional” narcissism of western rhetoric about “saving” the exoticized, eroticized [critics point to our obsession with her green eyes as evidence] victims of Oriental oppression.” How it served as yet another high-stakes example of “white men saving the brown women from brown men.”

Oy. All valid arguments.

I recognize the objectification inherent in focusing on a single name and a tragic face. And, what’s worse, you probably noticed that I chose this story for the title of this book. Shouldn’t my earlier cultural transgressions (like robbing the van) have taught me a thing or two about misplaced compassion and the savior complex?

But allow me to shoehorn this feeble question as a lead-up to making a small point: by paying attention (indeed, it’s hard to turn away), might one hold a
single face and its representative enormity in our minds at once, like particle and wave?

Teachers Without Borders has consciously chosen to avoid the trap of pandering to the instinctual human wellspring of love and protection for children in need. We reach the people who reach those children. But then again, enter Vasila Hosseini. Here, I’ll say it upfront: the courage of one’s contradictions can hover precariously close to hypocrisy. In the words of Britney Spears, “Oops, I did it again. I played with your heart, got lost in the game.”

Forbearance...please. When I first heard about Vasila, she was eleven years old, living in tight quarters in the Kārte Se neighborhood of western Kabul. She was a standout in The Afghan Mini Mobile Circus for Children (MMCC), the brainchild of a Danish couple determined to help Afghan children experience joy in childhood. At the time, without the Taliban stranglehold of the Afghan people, they maintained, children should express themselves and make others laugh. The MMCC was a combination circus camp and after-school program that operates for a few hours every day. The children pick up rudimentary English, sing, learn to juggle bowling pins on the street, and perform acrobatics and skits about proper hygiene, malaria, and dysentery. Audiences of children squeal with delight every time.

Vasila was a firecracker, a leader, and a crowd pleaser. She would step out from the chorus, puff out her chest, and sing the loudest of her peers, veins bulging on her neck. During breaks, she gave piggyback rides to bigger children just to show off her strength—mischievous, alive.

Filmmaker Stacia Teele learned about Vasila while on a return trip to Afghanistan, where she and other Americans had once lived and attended high-school in comfort during the 1970s. She and her crew were shooting a short feature, “Back to Afghanistan,” to capture the contrast between the Kabul of her youth and today.

Stacia had stumbled upon the Mobile Mini Circus for Children and met the founders who introduced her to Vasila and her father, Armand (an unemployed truck driver), and gained permission to follow her daily life. Here was the
beating heart of Afghanistan’s children—faces worth remembering, especially Vasila’s.

Stacia soon learned that Vasila’s heart was the problem. She had been diagnosed with a congenital heart defect known as Patent Ductus Arteriosus (PDA). Symptoms include an enlarged heart, fatigue, difficulty breathing, and cyanosis (blue coloring).

Before a baby comes into the world, the ductus arteriosus (a blood vessel essential for fetal blood circulation) connects the aorta and pulmonary arteries, bypassing the lungs because oxygen is provided through the mother’s placenta. Once the baby is born and the lungs fill up with air, the ductus arteriosus is supposed to close up and it’s all systems go for the real world. If the ductus remains open, blood does not circulate normally between the lungs and the heart.

Doctors can identify the defect easily enough through a routine examination by stethoscope—a raspy phffft-tum-phfft-tum sound of blood squirting through the opening, like water through a garden hose partially covered and uncovered by a finger. It can also be detected through more sophisticated diagnostic means like electrocardiograms, x-rays, echocardiograms, and cardiac catheterization.

That’s the problem. Early treatment is essential. Depending upon its severity, PDA can be treated (closed) with medication or a trans-catheter device. If that does not work, extensive surgery is the next option. Untreated, PDA can cause hypertension, an infection of the inner lining of the heart, or heart failure. To take care of it, one needs resources. Fast.

I imagine that her doctor, Dr. Vishant Tivari must have sighed, twisted his stethoscope back into his white lab coat pocket, and delivered the news that Vasila’s life was at risk. Afghanistan did not have the appropriate facilities. Perhaps India might work, he had thought, but he had been calling around for pro-bono services, but there were no takers. Only a global appeal could help fund an operation in the United States or Europe. The sooner the better. There could be no playing around with her heart.
Meanwhile, Stacia had been documenting everything—visits to Vasila’s family, interviews, footage of Kabul to give viewers a sense of context, and conversations with Dr. Tivari. Stacia described Vasila’s family as:

“…squatters who live with six families in a bombed-out house riddled with bullet holes. They have no electricity or plumbing. The eight members of her family live in one room that just has two pillows on the floor—all of them sleep lined up with their heads on the pillow and their legs on the floor. The twenty or so kids that live in the house have no toys. They only had one doll that they shared between them—a little plastic doll that had no arms and no legs.”

While it was fortunate that Vasila could see a competent doctor in Kabul, her family could neither access the kind of medical care she would need for a procedure of this nature, nor pay for her recuperation. Stacia put her feature on hold and, with her colleague, Edward Robbins, wrote and produced a short documentary, “Vasila’s Heart.”

Stacia asked her friend for help. Marnie Gustavson, a social worker from Seattle who had also lived in Afghanistan in the 1960s, had made several return trips to her neighborhood after the fall of the Taliban, and has dedicated her life to Afghan widows, public health, girls’ education, and human rights. She has described Afghanistan wistfully as time-lapse photography in reverse. In-tact buildings dissolving into rubble. 6th century Buddhas carved into caves in Bamiyan blown apart, leaving a haunting, hollow outline and shell. Hemlines become chadri, cars became oxcarts, intact windows splintered and replaced with tarps. And intricate, rustic Baluchi prayer rugs of intersecting leaf and geometric patterns replaced by a cruder, blunt weave of AK-47s and helicopters.

Marnie had already connected a classroom in South Colby, Washington and Kabul through an exchange of postcards. Her film, “Pen Pals,” profiled each classroom and their reactions to hearing their postcards read aloud to their peers thousands of miles away—about hobbies, play, food, dreams. With surprising consistency and without prompting, students defined their separateness, as if just asked: “Who am I?” and moved quickly to “Who are you?” After several exchanges, Marnie and her team interviewed students in both settings.
Afghanistan had a face and Afghan children had names. America had a face and American children had names. Curiosity led to friendship, to their form of: “Who are we?”

At one under-resourced public school in Seattle, Marnie and I introduced “One Face at a Time” by asking students to describe what they knew about Afghanistan. “It’s in the Middle East,” many said. We explained that Afghanistan is a Central Asian country. “They speak Arabic.” We explained that most Afghans speak Dari and/or Pashto. As soon as the first group of postcards and videos arrived, their fear seemed to evaporate.

We had hoped to enhance emotional connections between children from different parts of the world. As the program unfolded, teachers in both settings described how students were more attentive to their schoolwork. Longer paragraphs. Fewer absences. More questions. In Seattle, we hosted a parent night to display the cards, show some videos, and discuss the program. Children stood up and pointed to Afghanistan on a map, talked about the language, practiced a Dari phrase or two out loud, and described their new friends.

Attendance at such events had traditionally been low. This time, all parents and guardians came. Global education through post-cards and digital storytelling was not just a luxury reserved for elite private schools or a temporary boost in motivation. It could very well be an engine for academic achievement. A considerable body of research is affirming our hunch.

As Penpals wrapped up, Teachers Without Borders established a digital storytelling program, “One Face at a Time.” In parallel, “Bridges to Understanding,” a non-profit conceived by the spectacular photographer and champion of indigenous and tribal cultures, Phil Borges, centered its attention on how photography can document local social-change projects, including the protection of endangered cultures, the dignity of otherwise marginalized communities, and the shared existential threat of climate change. Today, global classroom exchanges through digital storytelling have flourished. Learning is, indeed, personal. A shift was underway from taking photographs to indigenous photography.

* * *
Marnie called and then showed up at my home 45 minutes later. She was not interested in global exchanges, but in one face and one heart. “I need to tell you something.” Marnie is not known for being vague. She usually cuts right to it. I could tell she had a plan involving a considerable amount of homework on my end. I practiced how to stand my ground and say no.

She described the Mini Mobile Circus for Children and Vasila. “We have to help her. She needs an operation here in the United States.” I fully expected her to channel Raphael and say that “time is not on our side.”

I launched my defense Sharbat Gula’s face came to mind. There are millions in need, why just pick one? This is exploitative and derivative. Marnie was silent. “Marnie, even a cursory glance at Afghanistan’s history can tell you that outsiders are perceived as pernicious invaders. This could cause more harm than good. I understand the urgency, but aren’t we as exploitative as all those organizations who pull at heartstrings to get to the purse strings?” No reaction.

“What about her life when she returns? Will the family be disowned? Will they think she was infected by the U.S.? What if she brings back a Barbie?”

Never mind that Marnie had been devoting her life, with great success, to individuals and organizations in Afghanistan. Her silence was killing me.

My argument had zero influence, so I shifted to a more pragmatic argument.

“Look, you know that the Kabul NGO directory is the size of a municipal phone book—filled with well-funded, do-nothing organizations. I’ve heard about all those perfectly manicured lawns and reinforced fences and spotless Range Rovers. TWB is tiny! Why not engage a big non-profit to help her?”

“Do you really want an answer to that?”

“Yes.”

I realized that Marnie had planned a verbal “rope-a-dope” strategy. I would swing away, jabbing my excuses here and there, eventually tiring myself out. I was George Foreman. She was Muhammad Ali.

She began to look bored, then tugged at a recalcitrant zipper of her bulging briefcase and rooted around for a small photo album. She opened a random
page. Vasila’s laughing eyes. Vasila sitting on her father’s lap. Vasila singing in her purple dress and green chador, playing with the tiny mirrors and beads on her sleeves. Playing hide and seek. Rambunctious Vasila hiding behind a blue tarp, ready to jump out to scare someone. Vasila straining on a swing at the Mini Mobile Circus, hoping to complete a circle.

“That’s unfair.”

“Where’s your DVD player?”

Marnie inserted a copy of “Vasila’s Heart,” Stacia’s film, and pressed play. This was her knock-out punch. OK, perhaps TWB could help Vasila by working with educators to support educational change efforts for the children of Afghanistan. By serving Vasila, TWB could find a way to show the world that Afghan children’s hearts beat like those of all other children, and that their parents—like all parents—want the best for them. We could help connect children to children, classrooms to classrooms, one face at a time. I suggested something small.

“She needs an operation, Fred, not a teachers’ workshop.” Next came the dagger: “Were you not paying attention?”

I ask you, dear readers, to put yourself in my shoes. It is difficult for any bleeding-heart liberal to say no to an actual bleeding heart.

“Project Kids Worldwide, founded by Stephen B. Colvin, M.D., Chair of the Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery at NYU Medical Center will help you collect funds and NYU will do the surgery for Vasila, pro bono.” She and Stacia had already sent ‘Vasila’s Heart’ to Ted Koppel and Nightline at ABC. “We find out in two days if they will give us the green light, and if they do, we’ll have a week or two before it airs. That means you will have to publicize the show, then have your online donation site ready to go for online donations. You’ll have to keep records, provide donors with receipts and thank you letters for tax purposes, and find a way to get the funds to Stacia so that she can make arrangements for the family to come to New York, pay for post-op care, and help her father, Armand, buy a truck once he returns to Kabul after the operation. We’ll need somewhere around $35,000. Be ready.”
The story unfolded as Marnie predicted. Vasila’s Heart aired on Nightline and donations flooded in as the show made its way across the country. Together, Project Kids Worldwide and Teachers Without Borders exceeded the fundraising target.

The entire troupe comprising the Mini-Mobile Circus for Children, a tearful family, and a community of well-wishers waved as she got into a car for the trip to the airport and a flight to the United States. Stacia had arranged for Vasila and her father to stay with a prominent Afghan family in Manhattan. The surgery was a success. She recovered beautifully. A few days after her release, I flew to New York to meet her.

She was the Vasila I expected. Cheery, bold, comfortable in her own skin. She loved playgrounds and parks, squinted at skyscrapers, and connected with other children. We stood around watching, like proud relatives.

Through Stacia’s connections, Ted Koppel wanted to meet her and so we flew to D.C. When we walked into the Nightline offices, the staff jumped out from their workstations to meet her. “Our favorite episode by far,” one intern said, and the staff lined up to shake her hand.

Koppel entered the room. “There she is!” he said, beaming. Vasila plunked the keys on Koppel’s typewriter, on display for visitors. She posed for snapshots. A staffer opened a door to the control booth. Vasila climbed up on the swivel stool, whirled around, slid knobs up and down and switched on and off. When other staffers crowded in, she shouted something in Dari. The interpreter blushed. “I am a movie star!”

The remainder of the day was spent on a tour of D.C. She stopped at every public park, asking us to push her harder and harder on the swings. We stopped in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. She ran her fingers along the bars and peered through at the White House. Her father gently coaxed her to release her grip and hoisted her on his shoulders. “What do you see, Vasila?” he asked. Vasila responded. The interpreter said. “A white castle!” Someone leaned down to tell her who lived in the white castle. Once her father let her down, she grabbed the bars and shouted, “I Want to Meet the King of America!” Someone mumbled sarcastically, “Are you kidding me?”
Someone distracted her with a Teenage Mutant Turtle popsicle. She inhaled it, her tongue turning green and blue. Chewing the two red eyes, she exclaimed: “Tashakor!” Thank you! She saw the castle. Now she wanted to see the king. She pulled on her father’s sleeve. She asked the interpreter, Stacia, a member of her crew. The next morning, Stacia poked around to find the public affairs office and made a few perfunctory calls, prepared to tell Vasila that such arrangements are rare, almost impossible, or that the president was busy or out of town. In no more than a few hours, a White House staffer informed Stacia that President George W. Bush would, indeed, meet Vasila at the Diplomatic Reception Room.

After Stacia, Vasila, her father, and interpreter emerged from the White House, we took Vasila to another playground. She turned to a child and said, in Dari, “I met the king of America!” The child looked at her with a puzzled expression and then chased her onto the merry-go-round.

* * *

Personal Notes: August 28, 2021

President Ghani has fled. Kabul has fallen. As the evacuation continues, I cannot connect to my Afghan colleagues. My NATO colleagues tell me that
they are working on 48 hour shifts to locate families and map out alternative roads to get to the airport. I don’t know where Vasila is. She’s a young woman now. What must she be thinking? Is the Mini-Mobile Circus for Children still in operation? What shall become of the thousands of firecrackers like Vasila desperate for a place to play and learn? Will the Taliban ban kites and music again, shut down the circus, and stone women? Will they hunt the journalists and kill the teachers?

**Personal Notes: August 15, 2022**

Civilian casualties have dropped precipitously, but detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings by the Taliban are on the rise. Women are forbidden access to public areas unless their faces are covered and they are accompanied by a male guardian. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs has been abolished. The Taliban reversed its promise to educate girls past the 6th grade. 95% of households cannot meet basic needs. Malnutrition. Drought. Inflation. Foreign reserves amounting to over 50% of the Afghan government’s budget frozen. Kidneys sold to feed children. Children sold for survival.
Multiple Intelligences in Kabul

“Let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love.”

—Rumi

MARNIE and Teachers Without Borders established a Community Teaching and Learning Center in Kabul, modeled after the one we had established with Jihad in Laqiya.

This one, Marnie said, would be housed at a high school run mostly by women. She wanted me to find computers, monitors, and surge protectors and ship them to a DHL office in Kabul. Local leaders would take it from there. Would it be possible in six weeks? No one says no to Marnie.

I returned to my old sources for computers, this time with an appeal to supporting women’s empowerment in Afghanistan. I promised donors that we would document the impacts of their largess. I convinced junior managers of office complexes that all content on donated computers would be erased. DHL once again agreed to palletize and fly them to Kabul for free. Marnie had worked out the details with government offices to make certain that there would be no value-added taxes or extortion.

We would run seminars on innovative teaching methods and also train high-school teachers, all women. I got my marching orders.

* * *

Just before touching down at Kabul’s international airport, I spied the rusted shells of Russian tanks, some with treads marked with barbed wire outside my window. As we disembarked, soldiers funneled us to the terminal. Ahead, citizens waved and whistled to passengers from a viewing deck below an enormous “Welcome to Kabul” sign. As we entered the terminal, guards
shouted “burro, burro” (go, go), but singled out nonresidents from the others. One guard shoved a Foreigner’s Registration Form in my hand. When I had completed it, I slipped it into the passport. A few minutes later, a guard tugged at my passport. I held on.

One stern look from him was all that was necessary. My passport was his. I swallowed back the burning feeling in my throat and breathed through the adrenalin panic and the stages of grief—denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and landing on resignation. No passport, no life.

Up ahead, an official held a dozen passports in his left hand, licked the thumb of his right, and fanned through one like a card pro. I kept my eyes on it as if this were some kind of find-the-ball shell game. When he finished with one, he’d slip it to the bottom of his deck. I watched for one with a U.S. insignia and familiar security clearance stickers, but he slipped away toward a crowd jostling for position at the sight of a baggage truck ready to unload. At 5 feet, 5 inches, I tried in vain to see through arms and any available space to find him, but he was gone. I took a breath to slow myself down and accept my face.

Soon, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to face an official who shoved another empty Foreigner’s Registration Form at me. I gave him a helpless look and mimed the story of giving up my passport and hall pass. He looked me up and down and pulled out a deck of passports and shuffled through the pages with one hand like a card shark, staring at the picture on my passport, back down at me, then at the passport. He shoved it into my pocket. Passport stamped, I joined the ant-hill swarming over a mountain of luggage, found my bags, and entered the reception hall to scan faces for any sign of Marnie. I spotted her immediately. The curse of being lost in a foreign land may have been lifted. “Follow me,” she said.

She nodded to a young boy to gather up my bags. I hurried behind, not letting my possessions out of my sight. The young man reached a car, its engine sputtering, and the driver, a one-legged man on crutches, smoking, leaning against the passenger-side door. Marnie signaled to him. He flicked his cigarette and popped the trunk. Once the young man slammed the trunk, I said: “Tashakor!” to both. Thank you! The driver giggled and folded himself into the
car, and we headed off, through Kabul’s streets. Marnie said, “Well now, tashakor...very nice touch!”

Outside my window, I could see birds in cages, sparks flying from an electric lathe, meat vendors, live turkeys, piles of striped melons, apples, rugs, meat, and an array of burlap sacks filled with pepper, cardamom, cumin, tamarind, turmeric, mint piled into cones. A child slumped against a wall clutched yellow and green balloons. Shops selling layers of bolani (fried flat bread). Women in blue and green burqas. Boys with arms around their shoulders, teasing each other. Older men in “pakol” (a wool brimless cap) or “koofi” (skullcap) and “khet partug” (a wide-sleeved tunic, and string-tied loose pants) and argyle sweaters walked with their hands behind their backs. It seemed as if the entire city was layered as if dressed for winter, though it was summer.

When we arrived at the guest house, Marnie announced: “Put your things down. Relax. I boiled some water for you.” I sat on a couch way past its prime, shifting to avoid the springs. “Don’t get too comfortable just yet,” She announced, smiling. “We have about twenty minutes before the DHL office closes.”

At DHL, employees recognized Marnie, propped open a swinging door, and dollied computers to the truck. There were no hints at a bribe, no official “fees,” no tangle of paperwork. An employee hopped in the back of the truck because he wanted to help with installation. The following day, we transformed one room into a computer lab and rearranged tables in another to create a square, seminar-style, instead of rows. Two days later, classes began.

* * *

Najia, the school director, is well over six-feet tall, confident, and in charge. When we entered the classroom, I was struck by the immediate shift from noise to quiet. I placed my hand over my heart and nodded awkwardly to teachers, avoiding direct eye contact. Many returned the greeting. They did not seem intimidated by her, but I wondered if the silence were hospitality, respect, suspicion, or all three. Out of my element, I expected the worst-case scenario: hostility, something along the lines of: *Who is this guy and why is he here? What do you want us to do this time? Do we humor this dude? What’s with the*
new shape of desks and chairs? What lecture or “pearls of wisdom” will we have to endure? If he’s an American, why is he so short?

I had my own questions. Why am I here? Who the hell do I think I am foisting my groovy American pedagogy on these folks? Will students respond only if called upon? Should I humor them? By arranging the room this way, was I implying that were doing it all wrong? Are they expecting a lecture? Do they think I’m too short to be taken seriously?

I had discussed these questions (except the one about being short) with Marnie and colleagues already but took little stock in their answers. “You teach honestly,” she explained. “You offer ideas. What’s wrong with that? Why are you so tentative about this?”

Flattered, I said: “But I am a man and they are women,” I had explained. “I am an American and they are Afghans. I have power and privilege. They do not.”

Marnie cut me off. “You’re too sensitive to how you think they perceive the world, and you are so afraid of offending them that you muzzle yourself. I’d rather have it this way, I suppose than haul in some foreign, pasty-faced schmuck mansplaining proper teaching. You have something valuable to share, so share it. Believe me, they won’t take everything at face value.” She had mirrored the very words I heard from that U.N. staffer: “A teacher is anyone with valuable information to share.” I had never thought this had applied to me.

I went ahead. “What are the pros and cons of teaching and learning by arranging the chairs and tables this way?” The teachers looked at each other. I flushed, convinced that I was right all along. Did I pose this question as if it were a quiz, expecting them to rattle off a list of pros and cons? That was not my intention. I checked to see if the interpreter was ready and asked it in a slightly different way so that the teachers would not be expected to read my mind, but rather consider the question in light of their experience. “How might the shape of these tables and chairs work or not work in your classroom?” The shift worked. It was no longer a question directed to them, but for them. They responded.

They liked the idea of students feeling included, but there was not enough room. They began to talk with each other. The interpreter reminded them that I did not
know Dari. They were mixed about how students would perceive the change. Some liked the idea that a student couldn’t hide. Others defended the idea that some children would find it intimidating. One asked, “If a student sits in a square shape, does she have to participate or can she just observe and learn that way?” Another asked what would happen if two tables faced each other for group work. “Would I lose control?” Another said she used groups often, but “there have to be rules.” The questions were coming at a rapid clip now. “People say lecture is bad. I tend to agree if the teacher uses lectures all the time. But does this shape mean the teacher can never lecture?” “When is it a bad idea?” This was a real discussion.

Reality quickly reintroduced itself. An older teacher cleared her throat. “There are places here where a circle or square of desks would be against the law.” The silence returned. Najia said something in Dari that the interpreter chose not to explain to me, then said that it was time for a short break before going to the computer room next door.

The teachers began to file out. The one who asked about the issue of whether the arrangement of tables and chairs could be illegal was the last to leave. We exchanged looks. Hers read: just so you get my point, American, not all teachers can do what they want here. Your fetishization of choice and flimsy optimism are getting on my nerves. Mine read: I’m sorry.

The following day, I asked if students had heard of Howard Gardner’s “Multiple Intelligences” (none had). Gardner challenged prevailing assumptions long held by psychometricians and behaviorists that intelligence was a quantity, measurable by IQ tests. He sought to understand how intelligence manifested itself in solving problems by examining criteria, patterns, and signs developed from observations and studies of exceptional individuals (those with brain damage, savant syndromes, prodigies), identifiable operations, development history, psychometric findings, experimental psychological tasks, evolutionary history, and “end-state” performances. All factors had to be present in order to define the unique characteristics of each intelligence.

In his groundbreaking 1983 book, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Gardner posited that all humans exhibit eight intelligences
applied to problem-solving within a cultural context. These intelligences were
an exhibit of qualities, not a God-given gift or a life sentence of punishing
manual labor. Gardner avoided making sweeping recommendations about
curriculum reform and distanced his work from learning styles. To date, those
intelligences include: linguistic intelligence (word-smart); mathematical-logical
intelligence (logic-smart); spatial intelligence (picture/place smart); bodily-
kinesthetic intelligence (body-smart); musical intelligence (music-smart);
interpersonal intelligence (people-smart); intrapersonal intelligence (self-smart);
and naturalistic intelligence (nature-smart).

I had already been teaching for three years when I first across Gardner’s Frames
of Mind. I remember thinking that I may still be addled but I might be able to
uncover intelligences buried in my students and even help them discover their
own.

Cultural complexities, political constraints, and ongoing tests of methodology
and research findings can—and should—challenge the legitimacy of any theory.
Multiple Intelligences has faced its fair share of skepticism from progressives
and conservatives alike. It has been accused of focusing more on individuals
over the collective; valuing freedom over control; questioning traditional forms
of assessment; shifting the locus of control from teachers to students, and de-
emphasizing traditional subjects. Critics have dismissed the concept of
“multiple intelligences” as watered-down neuroscience; that it blames teachers
if students underperform; that it lowers standards in favor of self-esteem
building; that it is impossible to measure; that it can quickly disintegrate into
categorization and marginalization of a particular ethnic group or class.

For me, however, the concept of multiple intelligences is a worthy catalyst for
reflection. Marnie asked me to engage teachers without second-guessing myself.
I’ve never had Sure, it comes from the west, along with its anyone-can-succeed
optimism. It’s structured, yet not dogmatic; relatable, yet not squishy.

In class, I offered thumbnail and admittedly simplistic sketches of each
intelligence, along with examples of how each may be recognized by way of
illustration, making certain to avoid formulaic pedagogy. For linguistic
intelligence—poems, pamphlets, word games, debates, ancient tales, interviews,
journals. For spatial intelligence—models, pop-up books, maps, jigsaw puzzles. For mathematical-logical intelligence—numbers, mysteries, investigative experiments. For bodily-kinesthetic intelligence—construction, movement, hands-on activities. I continued for each of the other intelligences.

The teachers appreciated the distinctions between intelligences, but critiqued the categorizations of intelligences as quantity versus quality as too stark. A certain amount of brains are needed before one could talk about quality, one teacher said. Another asked about whether someone might be smarter because s/he was able to demonstrate more than one form of intelligence—a quantity of qualities. There was concern about how to measure multiple intelligences, especially when authorities do not look kindly on radical departures from rote learning.

I noticed a look of consternation on the older teacher’s face and prepared myself for what would follow. As predicted, she reinforced her earlier point. “In some parts of the country, this would not be legal.” I had never intended to use Howard Gardner’s work in multiple intelligence to introduce “revolutionary” ideas. Najia and I had agreed on the topic because she found it interesting. She also told me to expect concern or resistance. “This is a safe space,” she said. “They are free to speak their minds here.”

The teacher may have loved multiple intelligences and how these concepts could inform her classroom practice. But she was thinking ahead. She knew if and when to sow such seeds, how and where to water them, and who might squash them.

If I gloss this over, I thought, I will reinforce every ugly perception of westerners as heedless to danger, cavalier, and ill-informed. If I commiserate by discussing tragic parallels in the United States—how books are summarily taken off library shelves and how the study of evolution has been replaced by creationism. I could not appropriate her point, draw unfair equivalencies, or minimize the strength of her assertion.

I chose silence, tensing my butt like a third-grader who has just been told that his urgent request to go to the bathroom has been denied. No one wants to hear your verbal diarrhea, Fred. Her words must take their palpable effect. Your job
is to convene, not to intervene. Any glib answer would be hollow, destructive. This is their professional conversation, not yours. Their country. Their school.

What came out of my mouth would not exactly be called an example of erudition. “I understand,” I said.

Another question came soon enough: “How can we recognize a child’s intelligence?” It was as if they saw it coming and were already prepared to move on. Better yet, this question was no longer directed to me. I wasn’t being dismissed because I did not have the answer, but included. Another: “How about a checklist for teachers to observe how students approach classroom work?” Someone else blurted, “And how they play!” Still another, “And what they do to fix their mistakes!”

Someone spoke up: “Before we talk about how to recognize multiple intelligences, I want to go back to where we began. Let’s talk about what we teach. I’ll start. I think I can teach Pashto language with music.” This conversation was about pedagogy, but I no longer cared. Beneath it was a larger drive—to be curious. She began to hum, then sing, the words to the Afghan National Anthem. While the interpreter was interpreting the words as fast as she could, someone called out, “The songs and the lyrics will probably change too!”

Laughter. The older teacher seemed to retreat, eyes narrow, lips tight.

For the next half hour, one teacher after another identified her subject and how to incorporate one or a blend of intelligences. They spoke over each other, but the room felt affectionate and alive. The interpreter began to wave her hands in an attempt to slow the class down and give her a chance to keep me up to speed. Standing at the back of the class, Najia clapped her hands to get their attention. After a moment of silence, they were back at it. The interpreter took a seat, exhausted. This was a deluge of good ideas that should not be interrupted.

The session had already run past its allotted time, but I felt compelled to ask the question: “What did you think of the class today?” I wanted to take it back. If someone from another country gave a talk and asked how it went, basic hospitality and decorum would prevent anyone from offering anything but praise. Why would I ruin things by fishing for compliments? The Pashto teacher
exclaimed: “Maybe the seating arrangement worked too well!” The class tittered. Najia beamed.

I sensed that they enjoyed a shift from teaching material to students to something qualitatively different—teaching students the material. The former implies a top-down transmission: the teacher, the textbook, the lesson, and then the student. The latter considers the student first, followed by the material, the textbook, and the teacher. Even in a conversation about pedagogy, the focus was on students.

Here in Afghanistan, a country ravaged by war and a doormat for empires seeking a foothold in Central Asia and beyond, women with 8th-grade educations, and—by their own admission—almost no professional training, were exploring the essence of teaching and learning, challenging assumptions, and asking hard questions.

I said “Tashakor!” They giggled.

I wanted to face the older teacher and apologize for a long list of possible transgressions. Condescension? Pandering? Intimidation? Ignorance? Preferential treatment of the others? Avoidance? As the students were filing out, I looked for her, but she seemed to have slipped away. I followed Najia to her office, for tea. Students passed by, half in headscarves, the other half in full burqas.

Outside the principal’s office window, I could see them part ways at the end of a street. Those wearing burqas drifted off like ghosts joining a blue and green parade. Others held each other’s arms, then kissed each other on both cheeks before parting ways.

If I could contradict everything I just taught about intelligence as a quality and, instead, quantify intelligence, I thought, it was abundant here, in multitudes.

* * *

Today, Marnie is the Executive Director of PARSA, an organization devoted to “building healthy Afghan communities,” working at the grassroots level since 1996, when the Taliban first captured Kabul, and, at last count, has been
working in 19 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. PARSA has established social protection programs “that serve the disabled destitute, and orphans.” They train social workers and align their efforts with the Red Crescent Society to “rehabilitate and modernize the Marastoons or ‘places to find help,’ an Afghan cultural tradition of social protection for vulnerable people.” They foster youth leadership programs, provide services for widows, and support livelihoods. When there is a need, PARSA shows up.

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Journal Entry: August 31, 2021

I just heard the news that the war in Afghanistan is over and the evacuation has begun. I am certain that the war against women will remain…and intensify. Women who had clawed their way to seats in Afghanistan’s parliament face a government that, during their last rule, committed such brutish abuses. Girls who have flocked to school and embraced STEM are now afraid to leave their homes. Schools are closed. Taliban 2.0 will not be reformed. It will be Taliban 1.0 with better phones and greater reach. I’m horrified.

Jabriil might say, “I told you so.”

The night before she left Kabul last week, Marnie WhatsApped her network: “As late as Saturday evening, under deepening political chaos, Tamim and our staff were working to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans coming into the city seeking safety and support. They set up a family village shelter with tents, food, medicine, and other necessary items. Our staff left the village in the care of local residents who were supporting them and ensured there were sufficient supplies to feed and care for all residents.

The staff are scared, but I want you to know that PARSA staff is moving forward with grace, compassion, and courage to keep PARSA open and operational so that we can take part in this next chapter of Afghanistan’s future and participate in bringing peace to this nation.”

She promised to return, soon. She did.

Journal Entry: August 2022
It is hard to believe it has been a year since the fall of Kabul. A year since desperate people found their way to the airport, flooded onto the tarmac, and raced to catch up and hang on to a C-17 on the runway. Afghan people have been failed by leadership - both Afghan and international - on so many levels. But Marnie is there. I have hope.

**Yes, No, Maybe**

**QUICK VOCABULARY LESSON**

**Boojum** (from Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem, The Hunting of the Snark (1876). An imaginary animal, a kind of snark (mid-19th century North America)—from “snore, snort,” or “find fault.” Nina Lyon, a student at Cardiff University, is preparing her Ph.D. thesis on the subject. She writes: “it is said to taste ‘meagre and hollow, but crisp:/Like a coat that is rather too tight in the waist.’”

**Deipnophobia:** (Greek: dinner)—a morbid fear of dinner parties

**Uhtceare** (Old English: daybreak, care and sorrow)—waking up before dawn and not being able to get back to sleep because you’re worried about something.

DURING LONG layovers, I tend to gravitate toward the persuasion and leadership section of airport bookstores to check on the newest titles. At first, these books seem interesting, but after a few minutes, I glaze over, tired of hearing all that pithy, bottled, intuitive wisdom. I usually end up at a Sharper Image store or conduct an internal debate about whether I should eat now or wait to peel the plastic off the TV dinner I’ll get on the plane.

Here are 11 leadership titles in numerical order:

1. Zero to One: Notes on Startups or How to Build the Future (Peter Thiel and Blake Masters)
2. Leadership: Lesson One: Mastering the Fundamentals of Leadership (Morten Hedeegaard)

3. The First Two Rules of Leadership: Don’t Be Stupid, Don’t Be a Jerk (David Cottrell)

4. The Three Laws of Performance: Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life (Warren Bennis)

5. The Four Dimensions of Extraordinary Leadership: The Power of Leading from your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength (Jenni Catron)

6. The Five Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential (John C. Maxwell)

7. Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences That Matter Most (Peter M. DeWitt)

8. The Seven Habits of Effective People (Stephen Covey)

9. Monday Morning Leadership: 8 Mentoring Lessons You Can’t Afford to Miss (Juli Baldwin and David Cottrell)

10. The 9 Virtues of Exceptional Leaders: Unlocking Your Leadership Potential (Karl Hayden and Rob Jenkins)


These days, the theme du jour is the hearty embrace of failure. How sweet and instructive it is, they all say. How necessary. The refrain goes something like this: success is based upon passion, sacrifice, resilience, unwavering commitment, and trial and error. Fail quickly and often. Keep your eyes on the prize. Fail again, regroup, rinse, and repeat. Hang in there. Never give up and you will win friends and influence people. Failure is opportunity.

Intrigued? Read on! Try John C. Maxwell’s *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. Apparently, there are irrefutable laws. Psst. Don’t tell anybody, but you can pick up *The New Secrets of CEOs: 200 Global Chief Executives Lift the Lid on Business, Life, and Leadership* (Steve Tappin and Andrew Cave) for a
mere $40 on Amazon...or a pre-owned copy in very good condition for $10.50 + $5.99 for shipping. The Scottish mountaineer, W.H. Murray once wrote: “Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.” The point—go forth and faith, then go forth again.

I don’t have a problem with perseverance. I am skeptical, however, about the rest. The universe will not reward us simply because our efforts are noble. Everything does not always work out. The world owes us nothing. Intention and hard work is not enough. They’re just the baseline. You can’t cash in karma points. Try it and you’ll end up with a lot of nos...worse yet, maybes.

You don’t need a leadership book to know this. Besides, most of these books about failure are written by the successful who can’t help themselves from sharing their pit of hubris hidden inside a peach of humility. There is serious bank to be made in the failure biz. Then again, I could be jealous. Better to stop here. I’m sounding too boojum, too snarky.

Founders of NGOs are a strange, conflicted, trapped breed. We are pulled by our vision and are committed to our values, but wait for the phone to ring to find out if we can keep the lights on, all the while dancing perilously close to the line between making compromises to secure funds and being compromised by those willing to mold that vision in their image. We extol the value of collaboration, but we spend a great deal of time trying to differentiate our organizations from others. We fix our eyes on what we can achieve realistically but are easily distracted by the bright, shiny objects of mission creep. We’re tenacious in our efforts to make this world a better place, yet we worry if we can make and sustain any lasting change. Ahead of our time, we find ourselves building a road in front of our speeding car.

We wrestle with our inner Karl and Groucho Marx. Our Karl Marx persona proclaims the universality of our cause and our strident calls to embrace it. Marx writes: “We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles...We merely show the world what it is really fighting for...” Our Groucho side challenges our resolve. Wiggling his cigar and eyebrows, he remarks, “Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them... well, I have others.”
We play several roles: lawyer, marketer, teacher, HR specialist, technologist, shipping clerk, program creator, speech maker, and janitor. And when all of that is done, we have to ask for money, though we know that there will never be enough because the need we seek to address will grow faster than our ability to provide a salve, no less a sustainable solution.

We spend hours writing grant proposals, longing for a yes. We know we have to get the grant reviewer’s attention quickly because we only have only one chance to make a first impression. We know how to answer the questions asked, not the ones we would like to answer. We suppress the impulse to dazzle program officers with shameless appeals to emotion because most proposals are likely reduced to a 50-word summary and a checklist before the vetting even begins. We include only those charts and tables that will drive home our point, careful not to make the reader strain. We tell stories, but try to keep them crisp, relevant, emotional, and memorable. If we tell too many, we might be perceived as sycophantic. Deluge them with numbers and they will sense a snow-job.

We watch our tone. We do our best to be confident, but not cocky. Our sentences are economical, our grammar impeccable. We proofread obsessively. And just after we press “Send,” we discover a glaring syntactical error, followed by the dread of second thoughts and regrets. After we conjure some way of resolving our cognitive dissonance about why or why we did not include an additional description or go into greater depth in the area the grantor cares the most about—we wait. An answer will come soon enough.

There are three: (1) Yes, (2) No, and (3) Maybe. Obviously, you might say. Allow me to explain each and how deceptive two of the three can be.

**YES**

Teachers Without Borders received its first grant from the Cisco Foundation. The program officer affirmed that they would take a chance on us after having read about Jihad, Deepmala, and Raphael’s work. The Executive Director at The Cisco Foundation confided: “Many nonprofit leaders treat us as if we are Hollywood producers. They pitch us. They wow us with graphics. They have clever business plans. They anticipate that we will ask about SMART metrics (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely), so their slick deck includes
the requisite slide. They think we’re skeptical of anecdotes, so they provide the numbers, such as how many people they have reached. All of this is fine, but reach and impact are two different things.

They cut to the chase and tell us up front what kind of money they are looking for. If we sense that they need money to take the first step, we clam up. To them, we’re an ATM, not a partner. When that happens, we’ll give them advice. You, on the other hand, have been asking us for advice for almost two years now.”

My heart sank. I expected to hear about how we should have developed a more detailed plan to replicate or scale our fledgling pilots, that our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were vague, or that the organization needed a more substantial track record to play in the big leagues. My tinnitus sounded more like the squeal a weird uncle makes with a balloon at a birthday party.

“So congratulations!”

“Huh?”

“You got the grant.”

I broke through my stunned silence and stammered through too-many thank yous and toadyish promises not to disappoint. At home that night, I reached for a DVD of “The Natural” and fast-forwarded to the make-or-break last scene where baseball slugger Roy Hobbs (played by Robert Redford), hobbled by the re-emerging pain of an old gun-shot wound, belts a rocket with the bat he carved himself, but veers foul, his bat reduced to splinters. A chubby bat boy hands him a new one he had carved himself.

Randy Newman’s Coplanesque soundtrack begins to crescendo here—a trill of strings and that anticipatory bass counterpart. I cranked up the volume. The crowd is roaring and chanting his name. Roy Hobbs is hurting, a streak of blood appearing on his left side just above his belt. The umpire asks, “Roy, are you alright, fellah?” Roy winces and says, “Let’s play ball.” The catcher notices, too, and gives a sign to a brawny Pittsburgh Pirates southpaw. Goliath on the mound glares at David at the plate. I am welling up just writing this.
The camera pans the screaming fans and teammates and settles on the pitcher’s arm rearing back in slow motion. The string-section is trilling. At the moment Hobbs makes contact, we watch the arc of the ball in silent anticipation, followed by the announcer screaming, “High in right field! That ball is still going! It’s way back! High up in the air!” The ball smashes into the floodlights, setting off a daisy chain of fireworks and explosions. The crowd is downright apoplectic.

The announcer is on his feet. “He did it! Hobbs did it!” Pandemonium. Faces effused with delight. Someone retracing the flight path of the ball. It’s all brass, strings, and timpani as Roy Hobbs crosses the bases and heads home—bathed in a rain of light sparks. At that moment all is right and just with the world.

We had hit a homer, and homers need a full orchestra. No one watches Chuck Yaeger break the sound barrier on mute.

We celebrate. We feel we have hit stride. We have been recognized. We begin to think about leveraging this one for the next one. That fades quickly. Even if we get a yes, we feel like Teflon, fully expecting the grantor to take it back before the contract arrives in triplicate...and only when the check clears.

**NO**

No, on the other hand, is the Velcro of the profession. Not-for-profit. Non-governmental. Non-denominational. No or little overhead. We are Velcro for no. Some grant proposals are contingent upon a final “no objection” from peer reviewers and their Board of Trustees.

A “No” response comes in second place because it is, at the very least, clear. Sure, it hurts. You get mad. You want to give up. You calculate how much time you put into the proposal against the minimum wage. It confirms your worst suspicions. After a string of rejections, I had a dream in which I had joined a queue of commuters waiting for a bus, all of us parallel to the street at precise bird lengths. I am the last one in line. Our heads are down, squinting at flip phones. Somehow, everyone else except me has noticed the cue to start flicking the phones closed, then open again—back and forth down the line. I can’t keep up, upsetting the rhythm. Someone in line turns toward me and scowls: “We’ve
practiced this so many times. It should come naturally by now!” The rest let out a snort and ignore me.

Suddenly, I see an apparition resembling Don Ameche in a Halloween costume of gossamer wings, swooping down from a building crane and fluttering wildly in front of me, holographic and menacing. Contorting his mustache into undulating caterpillar shapes, he growls “addled, addled, addled!” and shakes his head in disgust. I look around. The bus has left, spewing diesel in my face. I run after it, yelling “No, no...no!”

I console myself that an obscenely high percentage of grant proposals, however painstakingly crafted, have little chance of making it past the foundation’s shredder. That feeling does not last long. I’m pissed, but at least I have my answer. Again, it’s clear. I’ll take the next bus.

MAYBE

“Maybe” comes in dead last for its patronizing sense of sustained animation. “Maybe” is purgatory. Maybe is Santa Claus’s promise, which means even less for a Jewish guy.

Let’s say you have jumped through all the hoops. You’ve submitted a fabulous response to a Request for Proposal, but the “maybe” is tearing you apart. You can’t wait a moment longer, so you make a sheepish inquiry about where your “proposal might be in the foundation’s pipeline.” The program officer informs you that your submission is worthy of consideration and that you have made a compelling case, but there is no commitment.

I have often found myself in well-appointed corporate boardrooms with people truly interested in Teachers Without Borders. I can actually see my pulse quicken. Everything is exhilarating. I’ve surely made a lasting impression. This could be a match. Surely, success is imminent. The words “compelling” and “no commitment yet” should be enough to get the point not to get your hopes up. I have been walked up the aisle and jilted at the altar too many times to count on anything.

If funders tell you they admire your work, it’s a maybe. We admire Mother Theresa, but are surprised she would want to spend her time with lepers. We
admire the more observant members of our religion for keeping the faith so that we do not have to waste a surprising amount of time with those tedious and time-consuming rituals. Admiration does not keep the lights on. Expect nothing from admiration. It’s a maybe in disguise.

As for the YES or NO answers, Rudyard Kipling has sage advice. He implores us to meet these two imposters of triumph and disaster and treat them both the same. The yeses are essential for survival, no doubt, but a transitory and addictive dopamine rush at best, for what goes up must come down. Dependence upon yeses makes the disappointments that much more devastating. A no is deflating, but equally transitory because it forces you to move on.

Do I sound like I have contradicted myself and see the value in failure? A tad. I think learning transcends success or failure. Learning is about recognizing context. That funder may have rejected the proposal. Another funder may accept it. It could be a great proposal or a bad proposal. The idea is to disconnect from the outcome.

But, then again, I don’t know that many NGO leaders with the internal fortitude to handle that level of Zen. By the way, there are several books about this, too: *Zen Lessons: The Art of Leadership* (Thomas Cleary); *The Zen Leader: 10 Ways to go from Barely Managing to Leading Fearlessly* (Ginny Whitelaw, Kimberly Henrie, et al.).

To my colleagues, I can say this: you may be exhausted from strapping on knee pads and wearing ChapStick to get funding. I feel your deipnophobia. Get over it. Your funding challenges do not register on the Richter scale of human suffering. Think about the funding challenges of whole countries staggering under a mountain of debt for the interest rate alone, no less the out-of-reach costs for basic infrastructure, crumbling schools, contaminated wells, intermittent electricity, pitted roads, or feudal education systems, unpaid teachers, 50-year-old textbooks, or resistance to learning itself.

The antidote for all this manic-depression is service. If you get a big grant, scrub a toilet for a shelter to get a dose of reality. If you do not get that big grant, scrub that toilet anyway.
It’s all about being of service.

In the middle of an exceptionally dark period of self-loathing, I once snapped out of it by the end of a single phone call from someone I have never met, 7,000 miles away, asking for help. I remember having a hard time deciphering what the caller was trying to communicate against a background of honking horns, street commerce, and barking dogs. I kept straining to understand. I hung in there. Someone with an idea for helping her village. She was looking for ideas about how to mobilize teachers. It was just her, she said, and some family and friends. Was there anyone in the TWB network that could help with her problem? Someone who speaks her language? I said I would look. I set a date for another call.

When that happens, the win or loss column evaporates. I lose track of advice or strategic plans. Those will come later. But for a while, I realize that my mood has shifted away from resignation. Her idea may not work out. She may even be someone who thinks we have money to spare. Then again, might very well be wholly unaware of the seven or eleven magic keys to the kingdom, but a transformational leader nevertheless.

If she has valuable information to share, it’s going to be a yes.
Noblesse Oblige, the Cologne of Colonists

BE CAREFUL about what you ask for. Sometimes, even a yes can be a problem.

Teachers Without Borders was selected as one of four grantees to execute a substantial foundation initiative in South Africa: a collaboration involving housing, internet access, community engagement, and teacher professional development.

The first planning meeting in Silicon Valley was an affable, nicely catered affair in a well-appointed conference room. High-level representatives of well-recognized organizations were there, so the introductions took too long and felt like public service announcements. I remember fiddling with the Aeron chair to appear taller, but pushed the seat-lever in the wrong direction and plunged down to the point where I almost hit my chin on glass table. Everyone looked my way.

The program officer suggested that we hold a few days of meetings in Johannesburg. We all agreed, and within weeks, we had assembled around an exquisitely polished African mahogany table in a fine hotel. I picked up the scent of wood polish, filtered air, high-end coffee, fresh flowers, and expensive deodorant. I wondered about the voices not in the room.

Was this about showcasing solutions looking for problems? Too premature. I would not bite the yes hand that fed me. I chastised myself for coming to this conclusion—even worse, for using my privilege to cast aspersions about the intentions of the privileged. Dinners were cordial and the drinks stiff, but I could not loosen up.

Sunday was a free day. Someone suggested golf and asked for partners. Two others jumped at the chance. I had already made plans to visit South African Teachers Without Borders members. I returned to my room and noticed the blinking red light on the hotel phone. It was Yunus Peer.
Born in Apartheid-era South Africa, Yunus and his Teachers Without Borders team had been facilitating science and community development education for South Africans since our early days. This was the newest project—a learning center outfitted with computers and books—in a prison.

Social justice runs in his family. He writes: “The apartheid government offered no math or science of any consequence in black schools because they said clearly that black people would never get the opportunity to use these skills since they were destined to be laborers anyway.” They harassed his father for “his efforts to bring education to the black, rural, poverty stricken areas.” His passport “was withdrawn for studying at Waterford School in Swaziland with the children of Bishop Tutu, Walter Sisulu, and Nelson Mandela.” For Yunus, an education denied is tantamount to stripping a human being of integrity, hope, and a future. He has devoted much of his life to ensuring that he would remove obstacles to education.

His message: “Be ready at 6:45 am tomorrow. Special day. Bring your passport.” I set my alarm for 6:00 am. At 5:30 am, I awoke to a steady rapping of knuckles on the door. I fumbled for my watch. His eye met mine at the keyhole. “Traffic!” My colleagues will be sleeping in, followed by golf and lunch. My plans, as I learned as we got in the car, were to begin with a visit to the Odi Correctional Services Centre. I reached back for my seat belt. There wasn’t one.

The guard tower was easily recognizable and the reinforced walls wore their typical hairdo of razor-wire, but the scene itself did not give me that Shawshank feeling. Two security checks later, we were allowed to park. Yunus walked me up to the entrance and chatted with a guard in full bulletproof gear with extra leather pouches holding ominous objects. The guard nodded to me and motioned me forward. Yunus turned to me and said, “Back in an hour.” The guard pointed to a sign reading: “Clearance at the next Gate. Show your ID.”

I pictured my fellow grantees back at a country club. White linen. Air conditioning. An affable porter leading the way to an elegantly-appointed restaurant with oil paintings, chandeliers, and extra silverware. Attentive waiters holding button-studded leather chairs and ready with freshly-starched napkins.
My greeting was less elegant. A pat down. Valuables scanned, dumped into a plastic box, and whisked away. Walnut and teak-paneled walls for my peers. Cinder-block for me.

I walked past a row of inmates, some shirtless, others in orange prison garb. I wanted someone to explain the abstruse symbology of tattoos. Some were crude etchings, others sophisticated. I was struck by those who shared the same pattern—medieval warriors facing in opposite directions. Scorpions, cobwebs, roses, dollar signs careening around scars, women. One guy included a Star of David in the mix. The Centre was designed for youth offenders, but these men were not necessarily young. They had either been here for years or had returned often.

After an initial stare-down, one asked me: “Hey little man, who are you? Why are you here?” Fair questions, actually, asked without malice. I wanted to answer with: “Funny you should ask. I was meaning to ask you the same thing.” I did not. I told him about the TWB project and Yunus. I was not sure he was paying attention.

A converted storage room was outfitted with eight computers. I squeezed past their chairs, careful not to bump into them or upset the bookshelves bowing from the weight of car-repair manuals, old textbooks, and vocational training guides, all in English. One barked, “Hey little man, c’mere.” My mind raced. When a reporter investigates what happened here, I will be described as a Woody Allen-type and the inmate as Michael Clarke Duncan from The Green Mile. He was simply asking for help making create transitions in PowerPoint. How could I default so quickly to a racist outcome, so quickly?

In a smaller closet next door to the computer lab, men were working on their English. I watched several struggling as they sounded words out. “Hey, little guy! Little teacher guy! Teach us something!” Lost in my thoughts, I did not hear the same man trying to get my attention. “C’mere, over here! C’mon, little man! Can’t you hear me? Check your batteries, little man!” I flushed.

I asked one of the unit staff for permission to play a quick game, whispered some instructions to him, and got a nod. He left the room for paper and pencils, returning within seconds. I then asked the men to count off in 1s or 2s to split
the group into two. The guard distributed a piece of paper to each group and golf pencils. Golf pencils, really? My colleagues on the links were using golf pencils, too. Different setting.

I asked each member of the group to write the letter of his first and last name in a separate column. Once completed, each team was to list as many words as they could beginning with that letter. A guard agreed to be the timekeeper. I turned to the men and instructed, “When he calls ‘time,’ stop writing and choose someone to read the words. The group with the most words wins.”

The game went well, though of marginal teaching value. No one got bent out of shape. I heaved a sigh of relief. “Hey, little man!” I turned to see who it was. I got a nod. I took that as affirmation. This learning center was going to be successful.

South African prisons are often described as overcrowded, unhygienic cages with a revolving door for the neglected, the poor, the angry, and the marginalized. From my count, most of the inmates I interacted with were black. At the same time, The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) requires the system to be “secure, safe, and humane, and that offenders are optimally rehabilitated to reduce their likelihood of reoffending.”

Though recidivism is high, this felt productive.

After the exit pat down, I scooped up my belongings, and went outside, shielding my eyes against an unrelenting midday sun. I spied Yunus waving from the car. He didn’t ask about my visit. He started describing a piece of prime real estate offered as a donation to Teachers Without Borders, upon which we would build a school where teachers could spend a part of their sabbaticals as educators-in-residence. By day, they would teach local children side-by-side with their South African colleagues. By night, the facility would double as a health clinic. Yunus had been talking about this for at least a year. It was time to make some decisions.

I peppered him with questions. How many teachers have the opportunity or funding to take a sabbatical, no less an international one? The last time I checked, teachers in the United States were shelling out $1,200 per year for school supplies. We were not Médecins san Frontières (Doctors Without
Borders); doctors have the extra cash. How could a Sabbatical School make an impact beyond those lucky enough to make the trip? Who, really, is the audience? Private school teachers? How would it be sustained?

Yunus listened attentively. With a blend of sanctimony and envy, he promised me that it “would be better than anything Oprah could pull off,” a reference to her newly inaugurated school for girls emphasizing academics and leadership in a state-of-the-art facility.

My doubts notwithstanding, Yunus was a compelling spokesperson, someone who had acted upon ideas, a doer. He was successful before. After all, he had transformed an ugly storage room at a correctional facility into a computer lab and reading center. I was warming to the idea. Funders could touch it, feel it, and show it off. Buildings evoke stability, school children in tidy uniforms, something from nothing. Teachers would interact face-to-face with colleagues they would otherwise never meet and help build robust networks. One could measure the before-and-after picture of interventions in local communities.

The least I could do is meet with the benefactor in the morning. We all have an inner empire builder, and now mine was starting to stir. The pitch was clear enough: “A Sabbatical School in South Africa, combining an innovative blend of technology and face-to-face teacher professional development, comprised of teachers from all walks of life, serving a local community in need of support.”

He glanced at his watch and gunned the engine, pinballing around blind curves, cranking up Stevie Wonder’s “Signed, Sealed, and Delivered” (I kid you not). Our conversation shifted to a webinar I was to deliver that evening. Up ahead, a semi bore down on us. Was he in our same lane? Would this be the soundtrack of my imminent demise? I could feel the membrane of speakers thumping against my leg, like my heartbeat.

We eventually skidded to a stop at a lonely-looking bar in what looked eerily similar to a strip mall in the San Fernando Valley. I asked Yunus where I would connect for the webinar. The Cisco Foundation had promoted it heavily, and I needed to make a good impression. “We won’t make it in time, so it has to be here.”
“In a bar?” Yunus shrugged, asked me to start setting up and ordered a couple of Castle Lagers, assuring me that the proprietor was cleaning up and it wouldn’t be noisy. I took a slug and pushed them out of webcam view.

The internet connection kept timing out, and I couldn’t tether my laptop to my cell phone because the signal teetered unreliable between one and no bars. I tried to log in by repeatedly finger-punching the return key, expecting a different result each time in the classic definition of insanity. I downed the first beer. Calm down, Fred.

A bartender promptly brought another without bothering to ask if I wanted them. The camera flickered to life and I was connected. I immediately noticed the wall behind me, on which hung a mirror reflecting a Hamm’s-like Scene-A-Rama Motion Beer sign, complete with stream, muffled sound effects, and an ominous bear approaching an unsuspecting fisherman. I shifted the laptop just in time to be the serious-minded Dr. Fred Mednick, Founder of Teachers Without Borders, a global nonprofit with operations in dozens of countries, describing my organization’s mission, demonstrating how teachers are multipliers, and how technology can be an accelerator.

The internet-lite and sound quality were holding up. I welcomed the webinar participants in my most avuncular, foreign correspondent voice. I had rehearsed and delivered my pitch so many times that it came naturally, aided by two beers on an empty stomach—a pep talk about teachers as a development army; the importance that teachers take their rightful place at the policy table; how teachers’ networks can accelerate U.N. goals; that educating girls leads to better measurably better community health, cleaner water, and greater social and economic stability. I said that the resources we offer without strings attached do not make them any less valuable. I urged teachers to contribute their best work for the collective good.

The bartender had started wiping down tables and stacking chairs. He had forgotten I was in a corner and blasted a lounge-a-billy song. I waved at him to stop, fingering my wallet for another beer, anything not to blow it. Faces on my screen pixilated, then froze. The connection was fading, but I was grateful that I
may have avoided giving my webinar participants the impression that I give talks in bars.

A few Teachers Without Borders-South Africa members showed up at a restaurant next door. I had another Castle Lager. A prison and a webinar were enough for a single day.

The next morning, we met our putative donors offering the land for the Sabbatical School. After cheery introductions and card exchange, they sketched out their concept of a compound of buildings outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment, a home for experimentations in twenty-first-century pedagogy, public spaces, and private spaces. Yunus must have rehearsed them. I was interested.

I asked questions about how this ambitious project would be financed. We were reassured that the land would be entirely ours. Too good to be true, I thought. They asked architects to join us for the tour, and a spotless black Mercedes appeared. Heartened by the sight of seatbelts and the blast of frigid air, I climbed right in. We traversed our way through a hilly expanse of farmland, model homes, and a golf course clubhouse. My uneasiness returned. My colleagues weren’t here, were they? They were not.

As we climbed, outside my tinted windows I could see men and women—all of them black—in rags. Men stooped over in the fields, wearing floppy felt hats, hoeing. Women bearing huge sugar cane stalks on their heads. I shot Yunus a look. He did not return my gaze.

I felt a lesson plan coming on. I set my camera to its sepia setting. I pretended to snap a landscape shots but aimed directly at a man resting on his hoe, staring at the car kicking up dust. As the first slide at my next public talk or seminar back home, I made a mental note to ask the audience to guess when they thought the picture was taken. I imagine that the audience would place it in the 1930s or 1940s—a perfect opening for a discussion of contemporary serfdom.

Years later, I uploaded it to Google images. Dorothea Lange popped up: *Sharecroppers. Eutaw, Alabama (1936).*

Just to be clear: as for composition,
Lange’s photograph is a masterpiece and deserves its place in the Museum of Modern Art. Mine is a snapshot for a lesson plan. Still, it would drive the point home.

We entered a conference room. The landowner and chief architect had already laid out preliminary sketches. The Sabbatical School would be built atop the division’s five thousand acres, overlooking the ocean. Charrette sessions would center on what buildings and grounds would work most productively for “our vision.” I was assured that the land donation itself would serve as a catalyst for easy fundraising. I reminded myself: there’s no such thing as a free lunch.

I stuffed a brochure into my back pocket. We returned to the site itself, from a smooth road to crushed gravel to a dirt road wedged through the sugar cane, like something out of Field of Dreams. I wondered if the space closed up behind us after we passed. The architect followed in his truck, along with a passenger in a hard hat.

We parked and followed the architect up a hill, through dried stalks, to its highest point. The Indian Ocean, an expanse of turquoise and honeydew, met a milky-blue sky. Field of Dreams meets The Sound of Music. I fully expected the architect to put his arm around me and say, “Someday, son, all this can be yours.” Field of Dreams, The Sound of Music, and The Holy Grail.

The hard hat asked the architect about the planned height of the Sabbatical School building. With a chilling nonchalance, the architect said: “See down there? The buildings have to be tall enough and at an angle to hide the view of those slums down there. We need to keep these property values high.”
So it has come to that. Teachers Without Borders gets a piece of property to build our Sabbatical School. The developers get a tax write-off for their opulent real-estate venture and a visual barrier blocking out the nearby black slums from the view of rich white homeowners. They sell homes; we sell our soul. They weren’t interested in our vision, but their sight lines. Pure avarice masquerading as charity. This was no movie. It was a black and white picture of a black and white society writ large, accompanied by the stench of noblesse oblige—the cologne of colonists.

I pulled the brochure from my pocket and read: “Our heritage dates back over 150 years when our founder settled in KwaZulu-Natal.” What heritage, I imagined, might that be? What settlers? What did they settle...plantations? What part of apartheid did I not understand?

Yunus and I drove back to the conference room—dirt path, crushed gravel, smooth road—in silence. The architect and the hard hat drove back in another Benz. I expected a conversation about drawing up a contract, followed by a formal handshake and a group photo. Politely noncommittal, I thanked them and made tepid statements about the need for more planning and analysis. We would be getting back to them soon.

On the ride back to Jo’burg we needn’t discuss the project. Yunus was raised in a family committed to justice, schools for rural children, and exposure to world-class teaching, particularly in the area of science and math—national priorities for South Africa, but denied to those attending black schools. This man’s heart was pure...and broken.

The cologne of noblesse oblige can hypnotize. Following the scent, it’s easy to lose one’s way.

It was my turn to say “No,” not even “maybe.” I informed the developers that, no, we would not be moving to the next phase of the project and immediately felt a wave of relief. The storage closets in a prison felt less claustrophobic than this hilltop view. I almost broke out the soundtrack to The Natural. There would be no land and no Sabbatical School. No wrenching what-ifs.

Most of all, no regrets. A no never felt so good.
DEYANIRA CASTILLEJA (Deya) had been a member of Teachers Without Borders for several years before she inquired about volunteering to translate our teaching materials into Spanish. Two years later, she was changing lives and leading our emerging Maestros sin Fronteras program, adapting our Certificate of Teaching Mastery to meet regional needs, and developing our Peace Education program in partnership with the Baja California Department of Education to create Zones of Peace for 12,000 teachers at 1,500 K-8 schools. She also founded a non-profit organization, Instituto Mejores Niños, in Saltillo, Mexico, to promote early childhood education to economically disadvantaged families.

I had just seen her brilliant presentation about the power of Mexican teacher networks at a conference sponsored by one of Mexico’s most prestigious universities, Tecnológico de Monterrey. Deya had described how Mexico’s rapid rise in educational enrolment was encouraging, but its alarming drop-out rate felt like an educational sieve. “Getting them into school is one thing. Keeping them there and giving them the skills they need to pursue education for a lifetime is something else entirely. We’ve accelerated double shifts to accommodate more students, but we pay a steep price: schools can no longer be local hubs for after-school activities. I don’t want that picture outside my window.”

She challenged the assembled: “Where’s our energy for change? Why do people always volunteer to travel to Mexico to help poor Mexicans? Our brains are here. I am not going to settle for the pity of others, handouts, stagnation, apathy, or defeat.”

I knew she was a leader when I asked her the question that led to launching Teachers Without Borders: What do you see outside your window? She took a
moment, drew a breath, and said: “It’s not what I see outside my window that
concerns me,” she said. “It’s what we stop looking for, what we ignore.”

Deya described the unacceptably low number of students aged 18 and older in
Mexico who held a bachelor’s degree or consider teaching a worthwhile
profession. “Too many pre-service teachers fail their job-placement exam. A
tiny percent of working teachers pass an exam that would give them a pay
raise!”

Mismanagement or extortion of funds distributed to states was rampant, she
explained, mincing no words. When she spoke about the teachers’ union, her
spine seemed to straighten. During the years I watched Deya in action,
enrollment in the national teachers’ union. Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores
de la Educación (SNTE). Membership was mandatory and required dues of 1%
of one’s salary. It was the most powerful political force in the country, by far.
Elba Esther Gordillo, the union president, reputed to have been appointed for
life, could make or break a presidency, and she was in deep. Money laundering.
planes. Mansions. Hummers handed out like trick-or-treat candy to aides in
return for loyalty and favors. A seven-figure credit card bill at Neiman Marcus.
No teacher believed Gordillo had their best interests at heart. Gordillo’s window
overlooked a different scene entirely.

Allá donde fueres, haz lo que vieres. When among wolves, we must howl.

Deya described how, inside classrooms and outside their windows, teachers and
students did not feel safe on their way to—or at—school. A wave of drug-
related violence grabbing headlines had led to school closings. In several
regions, Mexico had been subjected to a homegrown form of implosive
terrorism, reversing gains in every area of education and destroying the tourist
industry. “Teachers say they’re being extorted, kidnapped, and intimidated by
local gangs and they’re refusing to return to their classrooms until the
government does something to protect them.”

I asked about Mexico’s ambitious new national plan for education for areas in
desperate need of attention: curriculum reform; greater autonomy for schools to
focus on student learning; new governance structures that emphasize stakeholder
participation and school-level planning; multiple pathways for teacher career development; and a greater focus on equity and inclusion. The plan ticked off all the highlights of promising educational research: 21st-century skills, critical thinking, digital competence, socio-emotional sensitivity, and educating the whole child. “Empty promises,” she said. “Eduspeak.”

Lavar puercos con jabón es perder tiempo y jabón. Washing a pig with soap is to lose time and soap.

“Here’s the problem,” she said. “It’s trickle-down rhetoric. How many times have we heard professors lecture about how lectures are ineffective? Education is political and Mexico’s parties run the show, so it’s ridiculous to hold our breath and expect change to come...They say we’re decentralized, but the union controls thirty-one of the thirty-two states. I’m all for career pathway reforms—they’re long overdue. Top positions, however, are bought, sold, traded, and handed down. But what about doing the hard work of reforming our teacher preparation program? The teachers I work with are desperate for feedback, but they don’t get it. Stakeholder governance? Great idea...and impossible. There is nothing I can see that has held anyone accountable, so they turn the tables and evaluate teachers on artificial appraisals. This is a special type of cruelty—don’t prepare teachers, don’t support them, don’t foster innovation, don’t solve problems...and when it does not go well, be sure to blame the teachers. It’s never about them. They think of themselves as God’s gift to the universe.”

Creerse la última Coca-Cola del desierto. To think of oneself as the last coca-cola in the desert.

“One sounds hopeless. It feels like you’re waving a flag of defeat.”

She smiled. “Absolutely not,” she said. “If you can’t vent, even rage against hypocrisy and inequality, then you can’t make a difference.” I have seen Deya in action. Her command of details and willingness to challenge authority, yet remain affable, was magnetic. Teachers passing the café noticed her and waved. She waved them in. “And getting mad...together...that’s when the fun starts!” She sipped her coffee and nibbled at the cookie. “Great cookies! Anyone want one?”
A few teachers joined us. “There are some real efforts to support reform. More transparency. More equipment in schools. More resources for girls to study science. There’s more parent education, early-childhood programs, literacy programs.” I thought she would stop there, admitting she may have been too harsh, but that would minimize her strength.

“But then comes the steamroller. Habit. Influence. Fear. Corruption. Indifference. The emerging reform efforts are promising only if teachers were at the table. Then we’d see real change.” Teachers nodded. ¡Así es! ¡Exacto! I thought I heard an ¡Amen!

“In the meantime, I’d rather support teachers who will likely never be asked to serve on a national educational reform committee. If we share what they have accomplished, maybe decision-makers will take notice. In the meantime, we can’t wait for that to happen.”

“Ella habló sin pelos en la lengua.” To speak without hairs on one’s tongue (i.e., speak candidly, frankly)

The teachers hugged Deya and giggled their way out the door. By the time our conversation had finished, Deya had transitioned from an unvarnished look at the stark realities of education reform in a country with a quarter-million schools to a practical and optimistic view.

Passionate about youth development, information technology, English as a Second Language, and inclusive education for students with disabilities, Deya formed partnerships so that she could extend her reach and impact. She supervised the translation of hundreds of educational resources. She created groups to discuss topics of deep concern to teachers. She made regular contributions to a webcasting community for Spanish-speaking teachers from around the world, spawning webinars in dozens of Mexican states. And she stayed in touch. The network grew.

Teachers were embracing the Spanish version of the Certificate of Teaching Mastery because it was theirs. She created blends of self-paced and online learning, fortified and reinforced by peer support and mentor guidance. Teachers began to mine their communities for cultural and contextual gems. If a
school leadership did not support them, social networks would serve as a platform for professional development. Besieged by the pressures of teaching and learning under sub-optimal conditions, teachers signed up to volunteer. She doled out tasks like playing cards.

No hairs on Deya’s tongue.

I would not see Deya the following day. She had made plans to see her parents that evening and attend a birthday party the following day. Instead, with a certain bubbly exuberance, she told me where to eat, to promise I would say hello to the chef, and handed me directions to Plaza Hidalgo in downtown Mexico City. Passionate advocate for the teacher’s voice one moment, tour-guide the next.

Years after my conversation with Deya, Elisa Bonilla-Rius, a Antonio Madero Visiting Scholar with the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard acknowledged the research-driven scholarship that underpinned Mexico’s educational reform initiatives and the challenges ahead.

How might an honest and appropriate measurement of change take hold in a country? Address inequality and inertia? Chart the progress of student achievement within the situated realities of their lives? How to foster autonomy, yet embrace the new directions autonomy might uncover. How to build productive alliances and enlist parents as partners. How to overcome intransigence and entrenched power. How to balance efficiency and effectiveness. How to enlist the wisdom of the non-formal and indigenous education sector. How to engage the teachers’ union when failures might lead to the termination of jobs.

These questions are amplified in a country of a quarter-million schools, 60-plus indigenous languages, and millions of children both in and out of schools. And yet, their questions are critical for any large-scale reform effort.

Deya was all over those questions but always returned to: “It has always been about the teachers. Find the great ones and the promising ones and remove obstacles so that they can do their jobs.” She was doing just that, convinced that teachers can fling open their windows onto a world they have created. All they
needed was a leader from amongst their peers. Deya is one of many such leaders.

In 2018, the winner of the presidential election campaigned on “canceling the education reform.” In 2019, a rollback initiative was underway. In 2020, COVID-19 stopped everything in its tracks. Setbacks mean nothing to her.

* * *

Sima Yazdani joined me on the visit to Plaza Hidalgo. Sima is a senior technology leader and Chief Data Scientist at Cisco Systems. She works on Collaborative Knowledge Cognitive Analytics to help enterprise users maximize learning as mentors and training partners in order to personalize knowledge discovery. I know, a mouthful. Her expertise lies in business process optimization, information modeling, machine learning, cloud computing, and semantic technologies. She has applied it all to workforce development, leadership, and the right of communities to build self-reliance.

So what’s a multiple patent holder and technology superstar like her doing in a place like this and with an organization like Teachers Without Borders?

Teachers Without Borders had been selected to benefit from Sima’s vast experience through Cisco’s extraordinary Fellows program. As part of Cisco’s Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, high-level employees have been placed in “local and global community organizations, where they work to provide strategic guidance, promote best practices, and build capacities that help these organizations have a greater impact.” It is one thing to provide a grant to a community or non-profit organization. It is another to immerse oneself in these organizations’ daily life – for a year, at Cisco’s expense. This was to be a trade. Sima would work with us full-time for a year, and we would support her future growth in leadership and strategies for the impact technology could make on human welfare.

I could not believe our good fortune. Sima combines technical brilliance with a deep commitment to global inclusion and diversity, social justice, and global awareness about humanitarian crises impacting women and youth. She was in Mexico to support Deya and the launch of Maestros sin Fronteras.
Ringed by shops and restaurants and anchored by both an imposing municipal hall and a majestic church, the Plaza was alive with shoppers, lovers, and families stooping down to hand their children ice cream cones. Police paced about, their automatic rifles bouncing from their bulletproof vests. Pigeons typed on discarded cobs of grilled corn. Children used magic markers on paper. A tourist waited patiently for a fresh churro to surface from a submerged fry basket.

The public square was a soundtrack of public conversation, popular songs hand-cranked by organilleros, baritone sax riffs from a free jazz concert, and children chasing each other in their parents’ T-shirts smeared with paint.

It was the week before Día de los Muertos—the Day of the Dead. To commemorate the holiday, Mexicans mourn those who have passed. Some visit cemeteries, sweep away debris from a special plot, and leave marigolds. Families gather and eat a delicious, sugarcoated, doughy bread: Pan de Muertos. Neighbors visit each other, gossip, and honor La Calavera Catrina, “The Elegant Skull,” by making clothes to fit tiny skeletons satirizing contemporary political figures.

Here in Hidalgo Square, Día de los Muertos took on a different tone. As we rounded a corner, we heard strident pronouncements bleating from a megaphone. Gang deaths. Unsafe communities. Drug wars. We navigated around pop-up libraries, bins of free clothes, a circle of tents, and cardboard signs—some reading:

Si no nos dejan sonar no les dejaremos dormir. If they don’t let us dream, we won’t let them sleep.

Las ideas son a prueba de balas. Ideas are bulletproof.

Me indigna la promesa y no sucede nunca. I’m outraged by the promise and it never happens.
An assembly line of teenagers stapled and whitewashed crosses, tossing them onto a pile, while others spaced them evenly on the sidewalk to represent a two-dimensional graveyard. Volunteers were handing out water.

We came upon a group of people sitting in an arc of benches. Most heads were bowed as if praying, while others chatted. They were embroidering messages on handkerchiefs for each person killed by gun violence. As each handkerchief was completed, it was passed along the line.

Some told an individual story, along with the birth and date of the victim and the handkerchief maker’s phone number:

[Nombre] que transitaba por las calles de la colonia altavista y fue ultimado a bolazos por un grupo de sujetos armados. [Name] was walking through the streets of the Altavista neighborhood and was shot to death by a group of armed individuals.

Some made statements: No son cifras tienen nombre: hijos, abuelos, hermanos, hermanas, amigos. They are not numbers, they have names: children, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends.

Others embroidered flowers, lyrics, or a favorite symbol. One asked: ¿Dónde estás? Where are you? People nodded, smiled, cried, hugged each other, then lovingly added them to the collection of handkerchiefs crisscrossing the square, fluttering in a light breeze like a Mexican version of Tibetan flags.

A young woman approached us. She explained that she was a member of the organizing group: “Rojas Fuentes.” She encouraged us to sit with the others and sew one of our own. Her voice was kind, solid, accessible, and forgiving.

She held up one of the linen handkerchiefs by its corners. A wooden hoop stretched the fabric in place, revealing a blood-red stitch halfway through a poem. She told us that her group would continue every day through the end of the year, then replicate it elsewhere. She offered me a starter handkerchief. I asked for the name of the person I would honor. I struggled with the stitching. A grandmother came to my rescue. She whispered something to the others, who held their hands over their mouths, attempting to prevent themselves from breaking out into uproarious laughter.
Laughter, yet so much pain. I did not know, personally, of someone cut down in Mexico’s drug wars. It did not seem to matter. Over her shoulder, a sign read: “Todos Somos Juarez” (We are all Juarez). “Two major drug gangs rule Ciudad Juarez,” she said. “And the police? Corrupt. Meanwhile, the city faces over 8 murders every single day.”

We called Deya. “Get her name and phone number,” she said. “I’ll talk to her and we’ll put this activity in our curriculum, maybe even put up a website to share pictures of the handkerchiefs.”

“Are you a teacher?” I asked the organizer. Some respond with: “How did you know?” Others are surprised by the question, having never considered the idea. Still others find it cheeky. “I’m not a teacher in the formal sense,” she answered affably. “But it was kind of you to ask.”

Over the years, I’ve tapped several strangers on the shoulder—truck drivers in Vietnam, Pakistani scientists, South African salesclerks, and American servers at diners—to ask that very same question. I know it when I see it: passion, presence, patience, a sense of inclusion, attentiveness, reflectiveness, and appreciation.

Passersby held onto a few to read the messages—nodding, smiling, crying. It was as if this community was transforming the flag of defeat into a renewed commitment to wipe tears and educate for safety and peace. They seemed to say: this world is our world. Their pain our pain. Our world is small, like a handkerchief.

This is the heart of Deya’s work—to hear teachers’ stories of pain and to transform them into momentum for positive change in classrooms and communities throughout the country.

Deya was in Hidalgo Square the next day, making arrangements.
Quick Quiz: What is Suriname?

(a) a native language in northern Alaska  
(b) a grain from Canberra, Australia owned by Monsanto  
(c) an island off the east coast of Africa  
(d) a Caribbean country on the South American mainland  
(e) the capital city of Uttar Pradesh in India  
(f) none of the above

Over the years, I have collected many of these answers. No need to look at your phone. The answer is (d). Don’t beat yourself up. I didn’t know either. But, then again, I am an American; geography is not our strong suit. When Marie Levens, Suriname’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs, called me, I knew it was a country, but that would be it. Luckily enough, I Googled it while she was explaining why she had called.

Suriname is located in the northern coastal region of South America on the Atlantic Ocean, atop Brazil, and sandwiched between Guyana, due west, and French Guiana, due east—formerly known as Dutch Guiana. This might ring a bell for some—an umbrella term for a broad swath of prime colonial property once owned and dominated largely by the British (for a short while), then the Dutch. Suriname declared its independence from the Netherlands in 1975.

Indigenous settlements in Suriname were established as far back as 3,000 BC. Historians largely point to the Arawak as its original Amerindian inhabitants, including the Lokono and the Taino. Christopher Columbus is likely to have met the Taino. In the 200 years from 1651 to 1850, the Dutch imported 300,000 west- and central-African slaves to Suriname.76 The Netherlands abolished slavery in 1863, though slaves were formally released ten years later, following mandatory work in plantations for minimal pay.

Descendants of west-African slaves, the Maroon people of Suriname are known for having fiercely and successfully resisted colonial troops, resulting in a peace treaty with the Dutch in 1762 and the granting of their own land in the interior of the country—a full century before the abolishment of slavery. Gold mining
brought drug smuggling, gambling, and prostitution to the Suriname River. Maroons continued to fight for their rights and ownership of the land against encroachments from multinational timber and mining companies. In 2007, the Saramacca, one of six Maroon peoples, emerged victorious from a dispute for land rights, resulting in a compensation fund, to be controlled by its indigenous residents.

Today, Suriname is a mix of Amerindians, Creoles, descendants of Dutch Europeans and Africans; Maroon; Hindustani; Javanese; Chinese, Lebanese, Syrians, and a smattering of both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. In the streets, the lingua franca is Sranan Tongo, a mix of Spanish, Dutch, and West-African languages developed by African slaves in the 17th century, though not taught in schools or spoken by the government. You can also hear Sarnami-Hindustani, Surinamese-Javanese, eight Amerindian languages, English, and Dutch. This lingual diversity can also be traced back to a time when the Dutch could no longer rely on the loyalty of a slave workforce and so resorted to importing labor to produce coffee, cotton, and cacao. Today, up to 40% of Surinamese are Hindoestanen, descendants of Pakistanis, Indians, and Sri Lankans, many of whom came to the country to work in the construction trades and on the land.

Approximately 80–90% of the country is rainforest. Close to 50% of Suriname's 622,000 people live in Paramaribo or “Parbo,” Suriname’s capital city and also the brand of its most popular beer. Tropical birds swoop from royal palms around a downtown that looks like a spaghetti western set with a Creole flair — brick foundations, white wooden frames, gabled roofs, and shutters—some precarious, tilted, vulnerable, weather-beaten, others restored. Inner Paramaribo has been designated a United Nations World Heritage site.

Stores sport names like Secret, Cute as a Button, Black Tribal Tat’Shop, Jeruzalem Bazaar, and Beni’s Christmas Palace. Casinos are open on weekends from 10:00 am to 6:00 am. Bars and restaurants are full and alive with laughter, someone always pulling up an extra chair for a friend walking by. After traveling for two days from Seattle to Suriname, I usually plunk down my bags at a hotel within walking distance to a nearby bar for either a Southwest Juicy (Texas-style) burger, a Quattro Formaggio pizza, or nasi goreng—Indian fried rice with garlic, egg, tamarind, and chili. I have learned to ask to go light on the Madame Jeanette
peppers (a habanero with a Scoville scale of between 100,000 to 300,000). Tourist and open party buses outfitted with woofers the size of refrigerators blast Billboard hits, reggae, classical, hip-hop, Cajun-Zydeco, carnival party music, funk, Beyoncé, Adele, and kaseko (a fusion of “big drums,” big-band brass, and calypso). I remember sitting at a table closest to the street during an 11:00 pm traffic jam. A party bus decorated with Simpsons characters played Lizzo’s Big Grrrl Small World, Nicki Minaj’s Anaconda, and a disco version of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony. Betting that the bus would be there a while, someone climbed down the side, handed me a Parbo beer, and scooted off to jump back on as traffic started to move.

Paramaribo is known for its respect for all religions. The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha’at Islam Mosque is the largest mosque in the Caribbean, originally constructed by hand. Muhammad Ali was once a visitor. The mosque shares a parking lot with its next-door neighbor, The Neveh Shalom Synagogue, its floor covered with sand to symbolize the 40-year exodus in the desert or, some claim, to muffle the sound of prayers from Marranos (Jews forced to convert to Christianity during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, who fled to Holland and then set out for the Dutch colonies). Saint-Peter-and-Paul Basilica of Paramaribo, originally built on the site of a Jewish theatre, is a ten-minute walk away. It is the largest wooden structure in the western hemisphere. On a stroll in the area, I counted 11 Hindu temples, an LDS church, a Baptist church, a First Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, and Foursquare Gospel churches.

A short walk away, a statue of Johan Adolf Pengel—erect, Jackie Gleasonesque, dignified, holding a hat and cane stands at the center of Independence Square. Pengel, the legendary prime minister from 1963 to 1969, is credited for having built Suriname’s infrastructure. Across from Pengel’s statue is Fort Zeelandia, built to protect the Dutch trading post. Maroon resisters and political prisoners were tortured there.

Believe me, dear reader, there is no attempt here to channel Anthony Bourdain or to present a picture of Suriname as a paragon of harmony. I cannot know the interior of this country any more than I can know the interior of any other human being.
Indigenous and tribal people in Suriname suffer from violations of human rights, poor access to health care, exclusion from participatory government, and exclusionary land and resource laws. Suriname’s religious, ethnic, geographic, culinary, and cultural diversity a tourist sees belies a story of incalculable pain.

On New Year’s Day, 1738, a West Indian Company slave ship carrying 700 abducted Africans from Ghana—bound for Suriname—could no longer steer through a strong tide and storm in the Maroni river and foundered in a sandbank, tilting and taking on water. Fearing an insurrection and a subsequent struggle for life rafts, the captain ordered crew members to nail tight the hatches and sit on them to ensure that none of the 644 in the cargo hold could escape, all of whom suffocated or drowned. The entire crew above deck was saved, along with a box of gold, resulting in a handsome reward. For the senseless murder of slaves, no punishment was meted out.

In Bittersweet: Sugar, Slavery, and Science in Dutch Suriname, Elizabeth Sutton examines the depiction of Surinamese slaves in woodcuts, oil paintings, and brown-pen vignettes from the 1760s as a natural part of the high-capacity machinery of sugar, coffee, cotton, or chocolate production. Sutton writes that the prints and paintings “provided the plantation owners in Holland information, and significantly, they also reinforced their sense of power and legitimacy through depictions of ‘objective,’ rational mechanized systems of production.”

And yet, Surinamese slaves developed sophisticated knowledge systems of their own, hidden from overlords. In Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World, Londa Schiebinger describes a frustrated naval surgeon, Bertrand Bajon, who “reported that ‘sauvages’ (by whom he meant Amerindians) knew many remedies but had not ‘the least idea of medicine.’” Schiebinger describes how “Bajon pleaded that ‘for the good of humanity’ the slave be obliged ‘to communicate the plants he used and the manner in which they are employed’ and tested by ‘persons more educated than are the Negroes.’” One such slave, Graman Quassi, “won his freedom for revealing his cure.”

The legacy of colonialism built from the blood lust for power, greed, appropriation, and theft required not only an accompanying legal system and
embedded institutional support but also its own mechanisms for etching into the human psyche the framing of human beings as either superior or inferior.

In 1860, Napoléon III and Empress Eugénie satisfied a Parisian fascination with exotic plants and animals from the colonies by opening the Jardin d’Acclimatation. Naturalists were curious, too, to see if the plants and animals could survive. After the siege of Paris in which many of the animals (and plants “not in season”) were sauteed and seared for haute cuisine, the Jardin d’Acclimatation was renamed l’Acclimatation Anthropologique, featuring anthropological “exhibits” of human “specimens” or “savages” of non-European indigenous populations, including Caribbeans. Charles Darwin was a visitor. Human zoos were a runaway hit. In 1882 and 1892, a children’s amusement park in Paris included an Exploradôme museum to add a layer of scientific justification for a vicious hierarchy made explicitly clear in textbooks and popular culture: Europeans on top of the ladder of civilization, with everyone else on a far lower rung. Evidence for exhibitions of human beings held in animal cages has been documented as recently as 2011.

Suriname’s independence from foreign domination in 1975 led to its own militaristic dominance, despotism, economic dependence, a weak rule of law, repression, the wholesale abnegation of identity, marginalization, and indiscriminate violence. In 1980, Dési Bouterse successfully launched a coup and established military rule from 1980 to 1991, assassinated fifteen opposition leaders in 1982, and organized the massacre of Maroons in 1986. A well-known human rights abuser, Bouterse was prosecuted for the 1982 murders, sentenced in 1999 for trafficking in cocaine, elected to the presidency in 2010, given amnesty in 2012, elected again in 2015, and sentenced—in absentia—to 20 years in prison in 2019 for the 1982 murders. Chan Santokhi, a former chief of police, was elected on July 13th, 2020 in an uncontested election.

It works here, in the small places, in a country many people think they’ve heard of, and a location that may be just on the tip of their tongue.

Suriname must be known for the capacity of its people to rise because it has embraced its diversity. I have traveled to Suriname dozens of times. As an American, I have been conditioned to see the world through the lens of class,
I want to meet the King of America.

caste, and color. Winners and losers. I have long ago dismissed the idea that true equality could happen in my lifetime. But when I land at Adolf Pengel International airport in Paramaribo, Suriname, it fades. I come away each time with a sense that familiarity breeds far more community than contempt. I fell in love with the optimism and drive of a people committed to education, with Marie Levens as their champion.

* * *

Marie had called from her office in Washington, D.C., as Director for the Department of Human Development, Education, and Employment of the Organization of American States (OAS), a regional agency designed to defend solidarity in Latin America and the Caribbean, strengthen peace, promote cooperation, mediate conflicts, preserve diversity, foster trade, and ensure independence among its thirty-five member states. In 1826, Simón Bolívar first proposed the unification of Hispanic American nations. Having gone through various iterations, twenty-one countries signed both The Charter of the American States and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, the first global human rights declaration of its kind, on April 30, 1948.

For Marie Levens, development, education, and employment have always been inextricably bound with the indispensable power of human rights. She had experienced it first hand, tragically. In the middle of the night on December 7, 1982, thirteen men critical of the military dictatorship of Suriname were abducted from their homes for attempting a counter-coup that spring. Along with two already in prison, they were transported to Fort Zeelandia and shot. Marie knew something tragic was about to happen. She did not sleep at home. Those murdered were her friends, many from the local university. The December murders only served to strengthen her resolve for education to stress critical thinking, human rights, and the joy of learning without fear.

As Suriname’s Foreign Minister from 2000–2005, Marie Levens led, or sent missions to, regional peace negotiations; connected education to development; fought for gender equity; and enhanced Suriname’s standing as a legitimate trading partner.
As a Director at The Organization of American States, she created a Professional Development Scholarship Program for students to study in Latin America and the Caribbean or abroad, then return home to build local capacity—to share their wisdom. She established a Student Loan Program designed to keep higher education affordable, along with the Educational Portal of the Americas, a platform for online coursework in electoral cooperation and observation, education, sustainable tourism, and economic development.

Marie called to express her appreciation for TWB’s work in Haiti to identify and connect talented teachers, mentors, local institutions, and NGOs so that they may collaborate to create their own professional development. She explained that Haiti is awash in NGOs, international aid agencies, and church-funded pet projects. She took notice that our program was conceived and run by Haitian teachers, and that made her smile.

I could tell she was homesick and soon got the news that she would retire, return to Paramaribo, and develop a vision for building a culture of innovation in teaching and learning rooted in Surinamese culture, but capable of incorporating technology into daily practice.

I agreed to meet her in Paramaribo. When I arrived, I met a group of Surinamese teachers, a professor from George Mason University, and a group of professors from Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels).

Over Coke Zeroes and kababs, she described how Surinamese children who do not go to school or drop out at critical transition periods “become ghosts. Their families may walk among us, but we have lost them, and that fact alone should haunt everyone.” The ones who cannot master Dutch and have nowhere to turn for consistent instruction become ghosts. The older ones who have attended school and must repeat grades are humiliated for being the oldest or the largest of the class. They feel empty. Unnoticed, they fade to the margins. Ghosts.”

Children throughout Latin America and the Caribbean who speak an indigenous or non-official language, live in poverty, or have inadequate access to health care have shown consistent and substantial gaps in basic knowledge and early signs of failure. Classrooms with untrained or poorly trained teachers perpetuate disruption and violence, bullying, and marginalization of students with different
learning needs. A high percentage of these students give up pursuing gainful employment, do not partake of health services, and restrain themselves from voicing concerns. With inadequate skills to gain employment, young people grow to mistrust power and promises of a productive future. Exclusion decimates self-respect and feeds a vicious cycle of self-imposed discrimination. Ghosts.

She launched into a tirade about Suriname’s protracted failures to break free from a sense of inferiority; how school directors have been afraid to take risks; how the lack of quality early-childhood programs in the country’s interior guarantees marginalization; how no one has been listening to innovative teachers; how Suriname needs to develop a national curriculum that reflects the culture of all ten of Suriname’s districts; how high-stakes testing has destroyed morale; how outdated, Eurocentric textbooks and colonial policies have caused stagnation and alienation. I ran out of paper and wrote in the margins of a New Yorker, worried I would recycle it by mistake.

Having assembled her team, Marie laid out the goal: to develop a new undergraduate degree program for preservice and in-service teachers that would integrate indispensable digital competencies. She wanted teachers to connect, share, express themselves, and to take risks, then cascade their training throughout the country. If teachers could not get online, or if there was no electricity, teachers would still be able to enjoy and transfer the benefits of quality professional development to their classrooms. The program would fall under the umbrella of the Advanced Teacher’s College and enjoy the full endorsement of the government. “I know change must be gradual, but once stakeholders embrace what they help to create,” she said, “it will take off.” I was thinking this would take about a year. She looked at each of us and unmistakably phrased her question as a command: “Would three or four months work for you?”

None of us got a chance to think it over. She did not want to be a minister again. She simply wanted to build something durable for her country that would last long after she was gone.

For Marie, educational change in Suriname could no longer be reduced to tokenistic photo-ops of officials during election season handing out rulers and pencils. Who we teach matters as much as what and how we teach. Teaching
must be practical, interesting, demanding, and joyful. She wanted to see noisy, productive classrooms. She wanted to surround herself with children pushing out their chests with pride to show adults that they knew how to read, how to solve problems, and how to climb the stairs of their accomplishments. To do this, she said, Suriname must identify and support its own talent, rather than export solutions from the U.S. or Europe. She second-guessed a question some of us had on our minds. “So, why are you here?” Her answer was clear: “Suriname needs global colleagues and local leaders.”

The Surinamese I have since met—and now teach—know they have the wherewithal and will to tackle some of their country’s most vexing problems. They recognize their collective creativity. They also know that their diversity is a source of strength. Marie knows it, too. And yet, Marie asserts, they have little confidence in their competence. Suriname may be a sovereign state, she explains, but it suffers from what she identifies as a deep-rooted sensibility of a country long dominated by foreign powers and self-inflicted wounds. Marie calls it a “trans-generational relay of impotence.” A country burdened by the insidious stranglehold and legacy of colonialism can climb the stairs of its accomplishments—on its own terms with a quality education. She stressed, “The Surinamese do not need solutions. They needed colleagues.”

She managed to communicate this thread through a consistent stream of interruptions. An old friend stopping by to gossip. A colleague asking for “just a moment of your time.” Another Coke Zero. A gaggle of teens or neighbors coming by for a hug.

Marie has made it abundantly clear that education must be bolstered by the rule of law and government accountability, and integrated into all poverty and public health initiatives. She acknowledged that local capacity-building takes time. That those entrusted with teacher preparation and development must challenge traditional norms and pedagogies that exacerbate inequality. That fear of technology is no excuse for discovering its value. “These are also ghosts. There is a voice in our ears that says: ‘you’re not up to the challenge. You’re not worth it.’ I had heard those whispers as a child. No child should.”
We got to work. We would stress self-regulated learning, formative assessment, problem-based learning, and experimentation. The experience would feel like a maker fair, a summer camp, a university, and an NGO all rolled up into one.

Students just out of high school and veteran teachers signed up immediately. Some had computers, others borrowed money from family to buy one. Despite a drastically-weakened Surinamese dollar, they found a way to get online. Students scrambled out classroom windows from the third floor onto the roof to hand off ethernet cables and extension cords to each other and rig up more stable Wi-Fi access.

At one evening session, my colleagues and I were teaching about how wikis are pieces of content that can be moved around—an efficient form of prioritizing and creating hierarchies from information. They are also a technological manifestation of a time-honored pedagogy of collaborative editing and are aligned with many of the criteria outlined in Bloom’s Taxonomy, a framework that emphasizes the dynamic nature of cognitive processes. Teachers observing students working together to piece together their knowledge can note how students recognize, remember, and recall past learning; understand by interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining concepts; execute and implement learning by applying it to a particular context; develop their powers of analysis through differentiating, organizing, and attributing ideas to their source; evaluate what they are learning; and generate, plan, and produce new learning.

The students were familiar with Bloom’s Taxonomy. It is a staple of teacher preparation programs. However, in teacher-centric classrooms, they viewed it as an abstraction. They saw that wikis represented a challenge to chalk-talk. It was a decentralized way of teaching that put learning in students’ hands, leaving teachers the time and space to pay attention to the wheels spinning in their students’ heads.

Just then, a storm knocked out the electricity to the campus and melted the electricity panel. When this happens, students instinctively pack up and head home. This time, they reached for their phones to turn on their flashlight app. Training their beams of light on the chalkboard, a student suggested we use sticky
notes to demonstrate the concept. Someone commented: “Who needs electricity to use wikis?” Someone else chimed in: “Who needs wikis to teach well?”

The roof began to leak. A few students left and returned shortly with small metal trashcans. For the first 10 minutes, anything said was punctuated by a synchronized plunk in an empty bucket. As the rain continued, the sound trilled across several buckets, but none of it mattered. No one packed up to go.

For every plan A, they found a plan B. They were not only becoming teachers, but also teacher leaders. Marie often sat in the back. What a difference, I often mused, between her presence—supportive, enthusiastic, engaged—and the communist party members forty years ago in China—suspicious, impassive, reserved.

Each year, the program added a new cohort of enthusiastic students, quickly becoming Suriname’s largest degree-granting program at the Advanced Teachers’ College. Politicians plastered slogans about technology to the sides of their campaign buses. In August 2017, the first cohort received their bachelor’s degree in ICT in Education and began to fan out across the country to introduce new teaching methods and coach other teachers for an emerging, modernized curriculum.

“I’m just getting warmed up,” she once said, smiling broadly, describing what was to come next. After 33 years, Suriname had taken on a loan from a regional development bank to build schools and reform its curriculum. Near the end of the grant term, a decision had been made to purchase new textbooks from a publishing house in the Netherlands. Marie was horrified. “The students opened their textbooks and immediately asked their teachers to explain the illustrations of white children on snowboards or skis.” She explained how some educators bought colored pencils to color the faces to look closer to the children of Suriname. With a sad grin, she said, “It is not going to snow in Suriname anytime soon.”

Some districts had received a flood of the new books with little or no accompanying or sustained training. Other regions received the books in a trickle. Still others received none. The Ministry of Education introduced new pedagogical techniques, but there was little attention to how they might fit into the unique contexts of Suriname’s distinct districts. Teachers throughout Suriname asked: If we don’t get new textbooks, are we supposed to teach the old ones in a new
way? If we get new textbooks, but no training, are we supposed to use new teaching methods? Students speak several languages, a critical factor in low achievement. How do we bridge the gaps? Marie lamented: “It’s one thing to have a new crop of inspired teachers capable of transforming classrooms, but what will happen to them if we don’t address teaching and learning itself? We have the talent, let’s use it!”

Marie took the lead on a second-phase attempt at education reform. Suriname must cease the textbook purchase program and commit to a reliance on native intelligence to create and adopt educational resources for textbooks, support materials, and teacher development one can identify as truly Surinamese.

After months of conversation, the Suriname-Belgium-U.S. team began an ambitious national education reform project to investigate the gaps in grades K-6, re-write textbooks for grades 7 and 8 to reflect the challenges, culture, diverse communities, and curiosity of each of Suriname’s ten districts, and build a culture of sharing content, resources, and ideas—across the country.

The brains and the courage are everywhere—in Paramaribo, under the waterfalls in the interior, in schools accessible only by river. The passion is here, too, for trying and sharing new ideas and taking risks. The legacy of colonialism and historical disappointment may weigh heavily on them, but onward they go. Marie recognizes those brains, champions them, and pushes them to greater heights. She brought about transformational change in education and gender equity in the 1980s, fought for it in and out of office, used her position at a hemispheric agency to set in motion tangible bottom-up initiatives, and spearheaded a national education campaign designed to bolster Surinamese teaching and learning.

Every time I see her, she says she is tired and wants to sit on her porch with her grandchildren. But I know Marie. She would be too restless, too engaged, too in love with education not to have a hand in building the country she loves. Within months of her 70th birthday, the national educational reform project was completed. During the COVID crisis, I couldn’t travel to Suriname for one of several parties in her honor. Dozens of us sent in videos. A global pandemic would be as good a time as ever to end her spectacular career.
On this one point, I am not naïve. In July 2020, Marie Levens was appointed to the position of Minister of Education, Science & Culture. She did not want to be a minister. The country sent an unambiguous message: she had to be. Teachers’ voices are now heard. They are in a position to address her hard questions: How do you propose we move from memorization to meaningful and project-based learning? How do you propose we move from summative assessment to diagnostic formative assessment? How do we customize learning to meet local conditions and personal needs, rather than test and separate winners and losers?

By mid-April 2021, her position was clear. The issue of dropouts would be a measurable priority. She would start with no longer requiring a “sixth-grade test” that unfairly determines or dampens students’ futures. Large classes of over 40 students would be reduced to a maximum of 24. Teachers shall have a larger voice in curriculum development and teaching practice. Systems would be set up to facilitate sharing.

Suriname’s national motto is: “If you put a stick in the ground, it will grow.” The ground for fruits, vegetables, and home-grown pedagogy is fertile. Ms. Levens is planting seeds and this nation is bearing fruit. Ministers of Education can be teacher heroes, too.

Vrije Universiteit Brussel honored Marie Levens with a Ph.D. I would add that she put Suriname on the map. The rest of us simply have not been paying enough attention.
Since You Asked, Your Excellency

AFTER THE PANDEMIC, when I have a chance to see Ms. Levens again in Suriname, I want to remind her of the time she put me on the spot in front of fourteen other Latin American and Caribbean Ministers of Education. I want to hear that laugh again.

Marie had invited me to give a talk at a major technology and education change conference at the Hyatt Regency in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Swanky place. Guests are greeted with frothy mixed drinks or fresh orange juice.

After I readily agreed, she remarked: “I will need to go after a half hour. It’ll be interesting to hear them talk and share ideas.” She did not tell me that the meeting would take place for the next two mornings.

Fourteen Ministers of Education, a UNESCO officer, and me. Polished, oblong table. Neat Hyatt notepads and sharp pencils. Chilled water bottles. I knew better than to fiddle with my seat. The Minister of Trinidad and Tobago set ground rules in a voice sonorous and confident: there will be short introductions, then a frank discussion of shared challenges. I was skeptical. At an average tenure of 18 months, Ministers of Education live under a microscope. They are often held responsible for problems they did not create. They crave spectacular wins within a system that often staggers under the weight of its bureaucracy. They compete for money, reputation, and accolades. Why reveal one’s country’s weaknesses in front of those who may exploit them?

I expected carefully-scripted polemics. If they identify a challenge, it will probably be accompanied by an eloquent statement about the recent upswing in their country’s progress toward remediation and even greater promise in the coming year—in short, a testament to how their sheer perspicacity managed to reverse a negative spiral that eluded Ministers before them. It would leave the others to wonder why they hadn’t thought of such an elegant solution.
I had been to enough meetings to know that it is difficult, if not impossible, to hold elected or appointed VIPs to an economy of words. I settled in for a long haul of biographies and cherry-picked statistics about their respective countries.

When my turn came, I expressed my gratitude and pleasure for being there, as per protocol, stated my name and job as if I were a contestant on “To Tell the Truth,” and dropped Marie’s name to add some street cred. For all I knew, Marie may have chosen me to attend this meeting after she had exhausted the other options and likely because other colleagues were smart enough to refuse. Maybe it was a random choice like a business card plucked from a fishbowl at a county fair. Some prize this was. I’d rather win a coupon for elephant ears or a deep-fried Twinkie.

The UNESCO officer would be the final introduction before a 15-minute break for coffee, quick calls, and mini negotiations. She asked to make a PowerPoint presentation. Given the time frame on the agenda, a quick glance at one’s watch, and the convener’s overbearing demeanor, this was a bad idea, but she seemed to insist. I was surprised at her truculence. 99% of the United Nations personnel I have met have been affable and collegial. Her request was approved reluctantly, but interrupted not more than two minutes in with a baritone “please wrap it up.” Unintimidated, she clicked through a few more slides, testing his patience. She was reminded again and only then advanced to her last slide. She read the slide aloud, despite its self-evident message, as if to say, “game on.” She closed her laptop, satisfied. No one asked her a question. The convener growled, “Let’s take a break. Please be punctual.”

Marie and I stepped outside. She reminded me that she would be moving on to other meetings. I broached the subject of ducking out as well. “If you would like,” she smiled. “But the next part gets interesting.” That’s Marie’s way of saying no. I made casual conversation with a few Ministers, my mind laser-focused on a tray of mini muffins and a bowl of diced fruit. The convener sent an aide to motion everyone back in. I wolfed down three muffins and poked a cantaloupe scoop for good measure, proud of myself for not spilling the coffee on my suit.
The UNESCO officer never returned. To respond to the topic of shared challenges, a Minister raised his hand and, in stark terms, described his country’s pressing issue—a meteoric rise in teen pregnancies. He acknowledged that fertility rates in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean had been falling sharply over time. He was familiar with research on correlations between personal and family educational attainment, economic development, and lower rates of teenage pregnancy. He made no attempt to evade responsibility. He did not say he had inherited the problem. The issue was growing more desperate under his watch. He was truly asking for help. This was an emergency. He looked around. The convener nodded for him to continue.

The speaker twisted open the cap from the water bottle and took a sip to calm his nerves. He was going to go there. “I believe in condom distribution and birth-control education.” No gasps. “But this is a Catholic country, like many of yours. My head of state would have none of this.” Surely, he was pleading for advice about how to address the issue without having to clear out his desk.

Throughout much of Latin America and the Caribbean, government policies along with harsh and prohibitive abortion laws, despite evidence that such laws do little to curb abortions and lead to illegal and risky procedures. Legislation is also weak in prosecuting sexual offenders. Births to teenage mothers are 30% higher in Latin America than the global average. Sex education is woefully inadequate Pro-choice and pro-life advocates do not see any reason to compromise.

I expected the convener to open the floor for discussion and more expressions of transformative miracles masked as suggestions. He turned it over to me—the observer, Marie’s notetaker, and secretary. In full baritone solemnity, he said: “I want to hear from the NGO community. What suggestions can you offer?” Was this a sincere, heart-felt appeal or a trap?

I found myself once again in the eczema hot seat. I have never been to this Minister’s country, nor could I recall its capital city. I am not Catholic. I have never held a government post. I have studied education policy and research on family planning interventions, but could not make any tangible connections to “best-practice” programs in Latin America. This room was full of highly-
educated folks with advanced degrees from world-class universities. Why solicit advice from an outsider on Planned Parenthood’s mailing list? What did he mean by suggestions? Besides, no NGO founder or director would claim to represent the entire “NGO community.” I scrolled through a multiple-choice set of responses. I could:

(a) Bolt for the door. No. I would let Marie down and never forgive myself.
(b) Tell the Minister to run for head of state. Hilarious, but no.
(c) Answer the question by asking other clarifying ones and run out the clock. No. Are you kidding yourself? They know that trick!
(d) Defer to women Ministers in the room in the name of gender equality. The obvious choice. Too diversionary and risky.
(e) Assert the need for home-grown or regional solutions over imports. Reasonable, pseudo-academic, but a deflection nonetheless. These folks are politicians, after all. They know obfuscation when they see it.
(f) Sloganize without specifics to get out of this. No. You should be ashamed of yourself. This guy wants a roadmap, not a rusty compass pointing nowhere, and certainly not a bumper sticker. This is an emergency.

I landed on: (c) — (f): ask clarifying questions, defer to women Ministers, emphasize home-grown and/or regional solutions, and offer vague slogans. It went something like this:

“We can all recognize that this is an economic, public health, and community development issue.” I, too, reached for the glass of water. “I am wondering if you have explored a less direct plan by integrating education about sexuality with current public health initiatives and enlist women’s organizations to take the lead? I have found that public health professionals working in concert with parent associations and community-based organizations are able to communicate messages effectively and at scale.” No pearls of wisdom here. They had just asked a lightweight a heavyweight question.
Why assume he had not consulted widely with public health and women’s organizations? If he said no, he had not consulted one or both entities, I will have humiliated him by implying he was not qualified or creative enough to have thought of it himself.

He said nothing. I looked at the convener, who gave me that imperious nod, indicating that I might as well jump into the hole I was digging. Were they all testing me? “I would then enlist teacher communities to back up these messages.” It was reductionist at best, skirted complexities entirely, and made assumptions that teachers will readily board the family planning train—an immaculate misconception.

When the going gets tough, the tough create lesson plans. “It is important for teens to experience the realities and challenges of young parenthood.” I then proceeded to describe a science and psychology unit in which students were required to prepare and care for a hollow egg over the course of two weeks. The program began with facts about the effects of alcohol on pregnancy. Students were to create a safe container without a lid in which to carry one’s egg-baby; once the egg-baby arrives, choose a name and be prepared to explain why you chose that name; in one’s journal, refer to the baby by name only; provide safe supervision at all times and abidance by the rule that egg-babies cannot be left unattended even for a few minutes; find and vet egg-sitters during physical education class and if other teachers do not allow egg-babies in their classrooms; describe and document what recreational activities (including exercise) and instruction you have provided; protect the egg-baby from harm during egg-baby play dates; file an incident report, rather than be reported for egg-baby abuse, if the baby exhibits even minor hairline cracks; adopt of another baby for another two weeks if the egg-baby is crushed.

I read the room. No one interrupted me and said they had tried this already, with little to no impact. No one called security. I kept going with the lesson plan. “At the end of the two weeks, teachers then lead discussions in class about the personalization of the egg (choice of name and gender), the challenges students had to face, how this experience had changed their perspectives on potential life as a parent and an adolescent.” I described variations of the egg-baby program in which some students were given information about their particular egg’s
socio-economic and genetic conditions students had to consider. Some eggs had pre-existing or acquired conditions or were more fragile than others. I told them about how some schools (rich ones) had distributed baby-simulator dolls, each programmed to cry randomly and to capture data about when they were fed, changed, or actively engaged in a stimulating activity.

Who the hell did I think I was, lecturing a Minister of Education and dropping family-planning or scared-straight curriculum bombs? Why would I assume that he had not considered any of this? Besides, did I have any evidence if these programs had ever been measured reliably? No, I did not.

“Just some thoughts,” I said diffidently. I should have stuck with (d) Assert the need for home-grown or regional solutions over imports. Why had I suddenly forgotten that brains are evenly distributed?

Here, there were no glares, no word spears to dodge, no public humiliation, no retraction of the invite for day two. Marie did not pull me aside that evening for a lecture on basic manners and cultural appropriateness. The convener spoke about teenage pregnancy as an issue worthy of a task force. He had established the structure for it well before this meeting.

A few years after the conference, while contributing research to a monograph on inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean, I came across several in-depth studies from the region that have examined not only the correlation between economic and educational development and planned or unplanned pregnancies, but also key variables without which the challenge could not be fully understood: access to health clinics; privacy; the influence of peer pressure on decision-making skills; the need to change school curricula that have traditionally taught anatomy, but consciously omitted and reference to relationships and the delay of sexuality; stigma around pregnancy; discussions with parents of adolescents who were themselves teenage parents; low self-esteem; a lack of personal agency or “bargaining power” in a male-dominated environment; and, from interviews with teens, the malaise and resignation that their lives were not destined for anything other than parenthood, anyway...what they call “quemimportismo” (whatdoesitmatterism). Some teenagers, worried about violence, acknowledged that they wanted to see their children now
because they didn’t have faith that they would live past 25. All of this must be considered.

* * *

A Minister of Education’s desk sags from the weight of proposals competing for limited funds. Patch the leaky school roofs before the monsoons begin again. Update textbooks and then ensure that the teachers are up to speed. Lower the incidents of grade repetition. Stem the drop-out rate. Reduce the weak links in the transition between primary and secondary school. Revitalize teacher professional development. Balance the clamor for teacher evaluation to be connected directly to student performance against fierce resistance by those who rail against the idea that a teacher’s fate would be based upon unreliable measurements. Ensure that policies don’t discriminate against students with special needs. Ensure equitable access to educational support. Respond to presidential campaign promises, even if they run counter to research or common sense. Educate the citizenry to acquire skills necessary for jobs not yet invented. Raise requirements for entry into pre-service training programs, yet ensure there are enough new teachers to go around.

I don’t know how they do it.

These days, there are no secrets. Ministers are subjected to public scrutiny based upon performance on multiple exams published for the world to see and make judgments accordingly. There are several—Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), to name three.

The mother of them all—the one that grabs the most headlines and turns Ministries of Education offices into manic episodes of “The West Wing,” is...wait for it...The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Developed by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), PISA measures how fifteen-year-old pupils perform on a two-hour test of problem-solving in mathematics, science, and reading. The intent of the PISA is to assess the degree to which classroom learning leads to (a) the capacity of students to solve problems and (b) their subsequent odds of meeting the global
demands of a 21st-century workforce. Offered every three years, the PISA exam ranks the overall performance of participating countries.

PISA scores are accompanied by a technical report about how raw scores are scaled and comparative standings justified—the use of latent regression interpretations of the Rasch model (a psychometric model that makes a connection between a given respondent’s abilities, the difficulty of a question, and attitudes and personality traits...yes, you heard that right) and item response theory (probability of a correct response determined mathematically by considering a range of parameters that link behaviors in response to a test question to one’s environment, my particular favorite being the “psuedoguessing parameter).” There’s more, but I will not drift from the point. The PISA exam has become the global standard in a high-stakes, globally-competitive sports league.

OECD attempts to inject a measure of humility. They state that the PISA exam should not be viewed as a report card, but a helpful diagnostic tool and a snapshot in time. Some countries have done just that. Most do not. If a country’s PISA scores show measurable progress compared to scores three years prior, it’s fodder for bragging rights. If scores have declined, especially compared to those nations with whom they compete, a staggering array of excuses are trotted out. Countries that do not participate feel left behind. Some question how a test could identify a country’s persistent educational weaknesses, yet feel pressured into participating so that they will be taken seriously, knowing they have been dropped into the deep end of an academic pool filled with brainiac Olympians.

In 2009, India was ranked seventy-two out of seventy-four participating nations and immediately went on the offensive. The PISA exam could not possibly reveal any data of value, India claimed, given their unique “socio-cultural milieu.” The comparison of India to other, tiny countries was “unfair.” The test itself, therefore, was suspect. India decided to boycott the PISA exam but committed to participate in 2021. Were they standing on ceremony and making a political statement or buying plenty of time to prepare...and win? You decide.

Some argue that the PISA exam does not do enough to combat the fetishization of scores. Others contest the reliability of data that characterizes an entire
country based upon a limited, non-representative sample size. It “mirrors and facilitates the neoliberal mania for privatization,” favoring test-prep. schools and a lucrative contract to Pearson, the world’s largest education company. It sets off a panic-driven frenzy to find a solution. Consultants make recommendations to import x curriculum from y country or use this software and your assessment problems will be solved.

Finland, a consistent high scorer, is known for not preparing its students to take the PISA. They have no system of standardized testing, nor do they obsess about teacher evaluation and accountability. Students start school at 7 years old. A joke used to circulate that Finland has the highest percentage, per population, of illiterate six-year-olds in the world. Their school day is shorter, their textbooks thinner, homework almost non-existent.

They owe their success to free school meals, a loving environment, well-prepared and engaged teachers willing to innovate and share ideas, and comprehensive wrap-around services (excellent health care, psychological support, individualized support). They provide multiple pathways to develop one’s career, but the intent of education is not focused solely on getting ahead or competing globally, but ensuring that society balances educational and economic development so that everybody benefits. Imagine that—education designed to strengthen social equality.

Still, Finland struggles with a gender gap in reading, even with inequality, particularly when it comes to the poorer achievement of immigrant children.

Estonia, Finland’s southern neighbor across the Bay of Bothnia in the northern arm of the Baltic Sea and the new poster child of PISA success, attributes its high marks to a coordinated system of curriculum changes, decentralization, technology, and consistent financing. Estonia considers school principals as instructional leaders, rather than building supervisors. Architects of education reform sought to “create favorable conditions for the development of individuals, family, the Estonian nation, national minorities and Estonian economic, political and cultural life in the context of the world economy and culture but also to provide conditions for continuing education.” Estonians emphasize stakeholdership and consider education a collective enterprise.
Estonia is one of those nations that views the PISA exam as one of several diagnostic measurements of progress. At the same time, one wonders if the goal is to improve the education system or improve the score.

Singapore, another superstar PISA scorer across all three fields—science, readings, and mathematics—leaves little to chance. The teacher remains at the center, yet part of a centralized ecosystem of structures that support human capital held to high standards. Policies are enacted only when Singapore recruits and develops teachers with enthusiasm for the profession and a propensity to meet Singaporean standards of demonstrated success. About 12-13% of the applications to teacher training institutions are accepted.84 Students in teacher preparation schools receive a salary and are almost guaranteed a job once they graduate. Singapore wants its teachers ready for, and comfortable with, excellence. The stereotype of Singapore’s unyielding, formulaic approach to rote learning does not comport with its top performance on indicators for collaboration.

The PISA exam has become a media and marketing windfall, a political football, a key consideration in new development agendas and policies, a lip-smacking opportunity for technology startups, a cash cow for consultants, and a cultural trophy.

The Economist calls the whole thing PISA Envy.85 And it makes Ministers of Education crazy.

* * *

Over Trinidad doubles (sandwiches made of fried dough, chickpeas, cumin, garlic, cucumber, and cumin) and Trinidad sours, I asked several colleagues from across the Americas what they would have done to respond to the Minister’s question about a rise in teenage pregnancy. The later it got, the more honest we all became. “Just say what’s on your mind.” Another: “Condoms, abortion, education, and...did I say it? Condoms. In vending machines.”

Easier said than done. Academics and consultants are Pez dispensers of advice. They love to deconstruct what’s wrong. Constructing something new, vital,
sustainable, and culturally grounded is quite another thing. Glad I’m not a bigshot or a Minister. I can make my own mistakes, thank you very much.

I say, hold Ministers accountable, but put yourselves in their shoes. Here’s a thought experiment. The World Health Organization announces that all schools are to be closed, indefinitely, because of a global pandemic. The mandate: move to online learning immediately. Deal with issues of child-care and workplace mayhem. Make certain that marginalized populations do not fall further behind. When hybrid learning returns, find the resources to protect teachers and students, sanitize surfaces, take temperatures, and look for children and whole families who may have become ghosts.

I decided that night to write a hypothetical letter to the Ministers of Education I’ve met. As it turns out, my colleagues have done the same. I’m glad I’ve never sent it.

* * *

Your Excellency,

I imagine you must be quite busy examining your country’s performance on the most recent PISA scores. Perhaps you’re thrilled or find them disappointing. If it’s the latter, I imagine that your head of state might have already called. I urge you not to blame school directors, inspectors, schools of education, teachers, or parents. Instead, I would bring them in and hear them out.

Listen to the teachers. Let them describe what they see inside and outside their classroom windows. Ask them to tell stories of what children experience and how they navigate their way through the education system. Avoid the impulse to import solutions from someplace else. Your expertise is right here in your backyard. If you want to enlist global support, make certain they work in service of your teachers, not in spite of them.

Pay attention to what makes teachers curious or worried or hopeful. They are your country’s eyes and ears. Give them permission to dream and then take their dreams seriously. Be prepared for vexing and uncomfortable questions that challenge national priorities, then solicit their advice on how to answer those questions. Believe me, it’s not a waste of time. Teachers are pragmatists and do
not have time to waste. Given their unique access to communities, teachers will rise to the challenge sooner than you had expected and not only present an accurate, unfiltered picture of education gaps, but also develop a strategy for remediating them.

Expand the tent of those with valuable information to share. Invite in nurses and professors and elders and shamans, rebels and clergy, school directors and parents who have been too shy to voice what they believe because, somehow, they were intimidated, never believed they had much to offer or were never asked. Ask teachers to facilitate those sessions.

Suspend your belief that there is only one way to prepare teachers. Remove barriers that have stood in the way of learning from and with each other. If given the chance and incentives to build communities of practice, they will create new forms of professional development that will feel less like an institution and more like a café, clearinghouse, and marketplace all rolled up into one. The café elicits the power of familiar talk, shared lessons, tips, and laughter in a safe atmosphere. The clearinghouse ignites the social network of the café with a library of resources that can be applied in classrooms the very next day. The marketplace fosters innovation, experimentation, professional advancement, and entrepreneurship.

To ensure that you do not get ahead of yourself, show up in communities least likely to guess you would ever visit...without the cameras or reporters. Sit on their folding chairs like everyone else and listen, rather than lecture from the podium. Take notes, summarize what you have heard, express your gratitude to all present, and never leave early. The more you reach out to them, the more they will reciprocate, for people are generous by nature. Your strength lies in your receptivity, unfiltered, to those seldom heard. If parents are angry, listen. If they are expressing grievances, recognize that they are grieving for their loss of dignity or fairness, or inclusion. No change will take place until you are trusted in small places.

Your teachers will point to the deep injuries of educational inequality. Fancy private schools and poor public schools. Reading for some and illiteracy for others. Overcrowded classrooms versus individualized attention and support
staff. Rich, personalized, attentive early-childhood resources for some and not for others. Access to health services for some, and none for others. A school-to-college path for the well-resourced versus a school-to-prison pipeline for the rest. A tightly woven safety net and wrap-around psycho-social services for the wealthy and a shredded fabric for the poor. A voice for some and not for others.86

Technology is valuable, alluring, and problematic. Given the pressure to do something far more tangible and visible, you may advocate for expanded investment in technology. You may have heard pitches for solutions that automate tasks to free teachers to focus on what counts the most—learning. Sounds great, but allow me to inject a heavy dose of caveat emptor here. There is no such thing as a magic bullet or killer app. Enlist classroom teachers, not company reps, to examine technologies during long, free trial periods, not just trimmed down features for 30 days. They will tell you what works versus what is hype, confusing, and duplication of something already available for free, simple to use, and without strings attached.

Support experimentation and risk-taking, within the bounds of privacy and safety. Teachers understand the importance of keeping children safe and strengthening their students’ resistance to dark networks, online trafficking, cyberbullying, and identity theft. They will find ways to use technology to bolster our civic social contrast under assault by alternative facts, conspiracy theories, fake news, and efforts to deaden their capacity to think critically. If you do this, you will have developed an ambassador corps of changemakers with a stake in your country’s future. There could be no more powerful momentum for change than that.

As you work with teachers and communities, pay attention to talent. The young teacher with a knack for experimentation. Mentors with a highly-tuned ability to offer the right sage advice at the right time, who not only know their subjects but who take the time to know the teachers they support. Then, free those mentors from the suffocation of administrivia so that they may catalyze more transformational change, for they are the people who reach the people. Talent, like teaching, grows like a chia pet the more it is watered. The new generation of professionals considers workplace dignity a deal maker or breaker. Sure, if you
have the money, pay them as much as you can, but if you can’t, then allow them to design their own professional development.

Your Excellency, teachers are nothing short of a network of change agents in your own backyard. I believe a country truly is only as strong as its teachers. Start there. Believe in them. Teachers will find a way. Please let them.

Sincerely yours,

-Fred Mednick

* * *

The next morning, I was prepared for any question coming my way with this answer: ask the teachers. I never got the chance.
Teachers Without Borders is like a Folding Chair

OVER THE PAST 20-PLUS YEARS, I have searched for an apt metaphor for Teachers Without Borders. A folding chair comes to mind. Allow me to explain with, you guessed it, a story.

I was not more than ten when my mother let me in on a family secret. “Your great-uncle, Tobias Miller of Cleveland, Ohio invented the folding chair.” (He didn’t exactly invent it, though he held a patent for a version.) I was too young to understand her curious attempt at a pep talk, but at least she got my attention. Distraction works.

The thought buzzed about in my head, as John Updike would put it, “like a bee in a glass jar.” As an adolescent, buoyed by the notion that coursing through my very own veins was a genetic blueprint of originality, I chatted up an ample 10th grader on a hayride at summer camp. Not a great approach. She may have found it endearing at first, but as I droned on, she listened patiently, doe-eyed, unreadable. By the time the truck wheezed to a stop, I knew I had failed to impress her. I scrambled out quickly and reached out my hand to help her down. She preferred to do it herself, thank you very much. What was I thinking?

Still, I remained intrigued. From time to time, I would try to wrest from my mother a few more details about my great uncle, but she was unable to produce a shred of tangible or rational evidence that the man ever existed, no less immigrated from Austria, settled in Cleveland, had any connection to our family, or had conceived any such imaginative breakthrough. Her escape clause seemed too airtight and inarguable. She claimed that Tobias was forced to sell the patent to survive during the Great Depression.

For years, I would ask about Tobias Miller. With maddening consistency, the reply was always the same. “Your great-uncle, Tobias Miller of Cleveland, Ohio, invented the folding chair.” The mention of Tobias’s hometown sounded regal, grounded, a birthright. Think William, Prince of Wales. Tobias, Prince of Chairs. My Mother, Queen of Tales.
In my twenties, it dawned on me that my attempts to derive meaning from a thin branch of our family tree was futile, if not pathetic. Why did I keep asking, and why did she so persist in sticking to the script? Was this about pursuing ideas just out of reach, even if they never culminated in a patent? Was she saying that inventions are not as important as inventiveness?

In my thirties and forties, busy with a career and family, Tobias Miller came up from time to time. And yet, I remained curious.

It became increasingly difficult in my fifties to probe her for more information about Tobias or, for that matter, very much any subject at all. Feeling sunny, she might retell the story (still, word for word) with a certain gusto, but then clouds of dementia would move in. Her lips would curl into uncertainty and her eyes turn a shade greener and more vacant, as if she had just twisted the door handle of memory but had forgotten where she was going. I knew we needed to start anew and so I would ask her, enthusiastically, to tell me about Tobias Miller, as if it were for the first time. By this time, I was well-rehearsed at appearing surprised and pleased to hear this interesting bit of family history, despite feeling a bit sinister, as if I were conducting a cognitive-capacity assessment without the subject’s permission.

“Mom, you once mentioned someone named Tobias Miller What did he do again?” Near the end of a commercial break for her favorite TV show, “The Mentalist,” in which a former “psychic” becomes a discerning and prescient consultant to the California Bureau of Investigation (CBI), I ventured forth again, fully aware of the irony. Triggered, she read from her mental teleprompter: “Your great uncle, Tobias Miller of Cleveland, Ohio, invented…” but before she could finish, the dashing Simon Baker returned as Patrick Jane to solve the case by identifying simple cues that had eluded everyone else. She would swoon. All was forgotten — again. I would hold her hand and we would watch the rest of the show in silence. I had long ago coached myself to let it go and give her credit for having kept the story alive for so long.

I imagine Tobias’s basement—easing his small frame onto a newer, reinforced wood-slatted version, not entirely confident that it would hold up under pressure. Or folding and unfolding the chair to test the pliability and endurance of the hinges. Or testing the strength of his prototype with burlap bags filled with potatoes to simulate a corpulent worker seeking relief after a long day on the
assembly line. I imagined Tobias constructing a folding chair out of a discarded picket fence, then gingerly stepping onto the seat, careful to hold onto the wall at the same time just in case the hinges gave way and trapped him between the seat and the backrest. I pictured him folding and unfolding his invention, replacing a double hinge with a pivot hinge and spacer to keep the seat from wearing through the leg finish. The kindling of his failed attempts was stacked in a corner. Undaunted, Tobias certainly would pick up the challenge another day. What tenacity! What vision!

I had to “get to the bottom” of the Tobias Miller saga. I searched genealogy sites for alternative spellings of his name, just in case an inattentive clerk at Ellis Island had been unable to decipher his Austrian accent amidst the din of anxious immigrants speaking multiple languages, officials barking orders, and exhausted parents attempting to pacify cranky children. The spelling function of these websites tried to be of assistance. “Did you mean Tobias Mueller?” Too Germanic — wouldn’t work for Austrian Jewish immigrants. “Thomas Mahler?” Maybe Gustav Mahler’s son. True, he was Jewish and born in Austria, but my mother, a classical music lover, would have told me. “Toby Moler?” Too suburban, goyish, clunky. I searched for Tobias Miller of Cleveland, or Tobias Mueller of Vienna, Austria or Mueller of Cleveland, Miller of Vienna. I searched old phone books in the archives of a dank university basement. I made cold calls to strangers in alphabetical order: Mahler. Miller. Mueller. No luck.

This was a colossal time suck. I chastised myself to stop perseverating, and then went ahead to supplement my internet sleuthing with frequent visits to the library. I cranked through a weave of microfiche squares from Cleveland newspapers, census data, death certificates, ship registries from Europe to Ellis Island, and voting records. Maybe I would stumble upon a two-inch news item in the Cleveland Plain Dealer with a photo of Tobias wearing a long coat and a wide grin, resting his hands on his backrest, his name right there in the caption, followed by a comma and the word “inventor.” At Good Will and the Salvation Army, I fingered beneath folding chairs for any identifying metal label or branding. Most of these attempts led to splinters.

If I come up empty this last time, I consoled myself, I will walk away from this family myth to keep it from cluttering up my adult headspace. Did I stop? No.
My investigation of connections between my family and the invention of the folding chair morphed into reflections and research about the folding chair as a metaphor. After all, what is a birthday party without musical chairs and that sadistic host only too ready to snatch one away at the very moment when the needle is shivered from the LP? At a public reading in the corner of your local chain bookstore, might we listeners otherwise be forced to sit on our haunches like baseball catchers, just waiting for the guest author’s next pitch? Without the pragmatism and community made possible by the folding chair, how might the facilitator convene the AA meeting or flower-arranging workshop? Sans folding chairs, the string section of the community symphony could not file in to take their seats in the shape of a fan with just enough elbow on the sides to accommodate the string section on the side and in the back to leave enough space for the outer edge of a trombonist’s slide tube.

On holidays, we don’t say to a surprise extra guest, “Hey, grab that Lazy-Boy over there and pull it up to the table.” Besides, a fifty-pound leather chair-with-ottoman is too imperial. Any person who audaciously chooses to sit there, rather than on a plastic or wooden folding chair like the rest of us, is conspicuously elitist, if not downright weird. Nicholson Baker adds another mysterious dimension to the obtuse thumb of immovable chairs. “Haven’t you felt a peculiar sort of worry about the chair in your living room that no one sits in?”

The folding chair began to take shape in my mind as the narrative of progress — an accessible, flexible, immediate, affordable, equalizing prop of democracy — capable of strengthening our fragile social contract with an act of civility. We pull “up” a chair at a moment’s notice. Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman in the United States and advocate for social justice and the disenfranchised, said it best: “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” At the political convention, delegates wait patiently for the moment when the candidate’s speech reaches a crescendo, then leap up — exultant, proud, clutching signs, shouting the campaign slogan in unison.

When the President of the United States strides up to the podium at the Rose Garden to announce a new Supreme Court Justice, the eight others are seated regally on folding chairs. In the situation room where American leaders tracked the movements of Navy Seals about to assassinate Osama bin Laden, President Obama, formality be damned, viewed the unfolding drama from a folding chair.
Without folding chairs, our community meeting places would be filled with people just milling about, looking lost. Folding chairs can be arranged in obedient rows for the lecture and in circles for the more intimate conversation afterward. They accommodate overflow crowds at public events. White folding chairs set up at a wedding are immediately swept and stacked away for an entirely new use—dancing. Folding chairs are the ultimate expression of utility.

Folding chairs have not always been viewed so magnanimously. Ancient Egyptians and Greeks constructed folding chairs for commanding officers to plot their next moves. Etruscans used folding chairs during tribunals. From the Romans through the Renaissance, folding chairs were reserved for the ruling class, often shaped like an X: the Italian Dante chair, the German Luther chair, both covered in silk or velvet. At the end of the 13th century, Edward I was crowned on a folding stool. In Raphael’s 16th century fresco at the Vatican museum, “La Messa di Bolseno,” Pope Julius II is seated on a folding kneeling stool.

Let’s put aside all the regal associations and stay focused on representation. Much of the credit for the modern concept of the folding chair goes to John Cram of Suffolk, Massachusetts (patent 1855), improved upon by John Dann of New Haven, Connecticut (patent 1863), followed by Nathaniel Alexander, of Lynchburg, Virginia (patent 1911), whose version included a book rest. Many people invented and reinvented the folding chair, but I only cared about Tobias.

Three years after my mother passed away, I made one final attempt to summon the Google muse, keying in “Tobias Miller, folding chair” in Google images. There it was, along with a set of drawings entitled: “Auxiliary Seat. U.S. Patent 1302828. Tobias Miller. Publication date: May 6, 1919. Cleveland, Ohio.”

My great uncle, Tobias Miller of Cleveland, Ohio did not so much invent the folding chair as reinvent it.

My mother could neither have known—nor would she have cared—about the 26,700 variations and patents: beach chairs, lawn chairs, deck chairs, canvas tailgating chairs with holes in the armrests for beer cans, fully-upholstered folding chairs, directors’ chairs, tobacco leather butterfly chairs, folding Adirondack folding chairs with indentations designed for butt cheeks. Folding chairs with attached folding footrests. Folding barstool chairs. Folding school-
desk chairs. Folding high-chairs. Folding chairs that evolve as we age: the folding rocking chair for the nursing mother, then the weary bones of a retired laborer, then the retiree. Walkers with folding seats (a compassionate gesture), folding lift chairs, and folding wheelchairs. Tobias seized an opportunity to adapt an idea for service to others.

But that is my manically over-embellished point. Ideally, Teachers Without Borders is a folding chair organization—portable, accessible, affordable, adaptable, rearrangeable, and storable for any crowd ready to unfold and improve upon. You can set it up, rearrange it on your terms. Our members, like the Tobias Millers of Cleveland, Ohio, tinker and wrestle with prototypes, construct pilots, and test them out. Some of our ideas collapse under the weight of our ambition. Others require reinvention. Everything we do should begin in hospitality (a welcome gesture, like offering weary strangers a folding chair) and end in gratitude—thanking people for sitting and sharing ideas with us.

I’m fine with that.
“So I Will Walk Toward Them”

TWO DAYS after Russia invaded Ukraine, I knew that my graduate course on Global Education and Development at the Free University of Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) would never be the same.

I logged into Zoom early to be ready for what I knew would be a powerful evening conversation. The students were already there, consoling each other, each horrified at what was unfolding. Anastasia, a Russian student, who had been WhatsApping me with up-to-the-minute information about protests in Moscow, spoke of her horror. In a course revolving around the critical role of teachers in emergency education, girls’ education, peace, and human rights, we could not think of anything else.

Over the next two hours, we experienced a raw and palpable mix of despair, anger, and a desire to do something—anything—to address the graphic brutality broadcast around the world. When I asked, “Who is thinking about the schools on the border of Russia?” hands shot up in dozens of Zoom squares. Several students had been refugees themselves.

A week later, I received a phone call from one of those students, Simbarashe Manyike (“Call me Simba”). He was timid at first, then blurted it out: “I want to walk to the Polish border from Brussels to raise awareness about the role of teachers in emergencies and to raise money for Ukrainian refugees and the teachers who serve them. You told us that teachers aren’t born or made; they show up. Prof., if you say no, I won’t go, but I am a teacher. I am thinking about my students back home in Zimbabwe. People are suffering. I can’t concentrate unless I do something to take the first step.”

* * *

I have never met Simba in person, only on Zoom and WhatsApp calls. I believe, however, that I know him well. I will never really know what inspires a humanitarian impulse in some and not others, but Simba’s drive is pure.
Born in rural Mt. Darwin, Zimbabwe, Simba’s parents’ divorced early, then both died. He was passed around, destined to work on a resettlement farm. His great aunt took him in and encouraged him to get an education and ignore those who called him an SRR: Strong Rural Background—a back-handed way of saying that if you come from a rural area, you have nothing valuable to offer. He took his education seriously though it was only in 2014 that his community had enough solar power to enable him to read at night.

The Capernaum Trust’s Higher-Life Foundation took an interest in him. Focused on support for orphaned and vulnerable children, Higher-Life promotes healthcare (concentrating on Ebola and cholera), crisis response, and a scholarship program that has enabled children to access mentorship, psychosocial support, and pastoral care. They also scout talented young people who show great leadership promise. I am certain they had their eye on him.

While I am convinced that both the push from below and the pull from above have had much to do with Simba’s commitment to service, one story seems to stand out. While he was participating in a Higher-Life Foundation program when he was 24, his mentor required his mentees to pray for one hour a day, take breakfast, and spend several hours a day walking around. While walking, they were to keep in mind this question: “What did you notice?” Many of his colleagues pointed out what they observed in nature. Simba noticed people, what they were living, what could make their lives better.

Fred: “You got an early start!”

Simba: “When I took those walks by myself, in silence, I never felt alone.”

* * *

Within a couple of weeks, _Walk the Peace Talk_ was conceived. The Russian student initially had told me that being involved was too painful. Three days later, she called to say that it would be too painful _not_ to be involved. Even more, she took a leadership role. Students formed committees to map Simba’s path and find places for him to stay with families and students; to reach out to schools, universities, businesses, NGOs, government agencies, and the press to
hear his story, walk with him, document his journey, share his purpose, and teach peace. Another committee was devoted to social networks and university outreach. Soon, the head of the university’s internationalization efforts was alerting the university’s connections along Simba’s route.

While there are thousands of initiatives for Ukraine, there is something deeply symbolic about Simba’s journey. Simba is the first to say that he is walking as a proud African.

"Many people automatically associate Africa with war, famine, disease, and refugees. But I know this—suffering is universal and Africans are a generous people. As long as I am on this earth, I will do what I can to alleviate pain and promote education—anywhere. If teachers truly are change agents, then I must walk the peace talk. And if Ukrainian people are forced to walk away from a country they love, then I will walk toward them. Education cannot wait. If we don’t act now, then when?"

Dear reader, let’s take a breather from my stories about others. Let’s hear Simba’s own voice.

**Simba’s Walk the Peace Talk Journal**

**25 April**

Today, I visited a school in Brussels prior to the 1 May launch. I wanted to know what students were thinking.

The human toll of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is immeasurable. Up to 5 million people have fled Ukraine. Half of all children in Ukraine have been displaced. Cluster bombs have reduced inhabited towns to ruins, leaving trenches for mass burials in their wake. Rape and torture of minors are examples of war crimes.

Every 90 seconds, a youngster from Ukraine becomes a refugee. Teachers have been advised not to avoid the subject because the youngsters have already been exposed to the media. This teacher, however, has introduced the subject to her class, and the students want to know why I am walking to Ukraine. I told them
that Africans are a giving and proud people. I want to counter the perception that Africa is all war, famine, disease, and refugees.

A student asked me what I want to accomplish. I told the class that teachers are changemakers and peacemakers. I was walking to raise awareness about, and attention to, education in emergencies (1) preparation and planning for natural and national disasters (2) intervention in emergencies, and (3) reconstruction of society afterward. I told the class that hate is a cancer that has metastasized. I believe we should protect borders from that hate. Education builds bridges while tyrants blow them up.

1 May

The journey begins. The organizing committee me on campus early this morning. Dr. Mednick couldn’t be here because of travel restrictions, but Dr. Lombaerts, the Director of Education Sciences, came to see me off. Two students decided to walk with me on the first leg of the journey: 31 kilometers.

3 May

Walking the 20 kilometers from Leuven to Tienen, my internet connection was not working properly and so I was not sure I was walking on the right path. My team had a backup plan, though, so I kept the faith that things would get on track soon. What happened next was miraculous.

Walking in what I thought was the right direction, a car pulled over and offered to take me to wherever I was headed. The driver mentioned something about having seen my bright yellow “Walk the Peace Talk” shirt while I was walking to Leuven from Brussels and, as luck would have it, was seeing me again. I was suspicious and declined the offer. The person insisted, so I explained what I was doing — walking to raise money for deserving organizations working with Ukrainian refugees and awareness about the role of teachers in emergencies. I told him about the symbolism of refugees forced to walk away from their homes…and my effort to walk toward them.

He got my point. He told me his address, which is just three kilometers from my final destination. Near his house, he said, there is a lady who owns a home currently unoccupied, so she offered it to a Ukrainian family. I had to see this!
I walked to the house and met the family and filmed her talking about her journey, using Google Translate to get the gist of what she was saying. My colleague will translate what she said. Stay tuned. As it turns out the wife of the owner of a shop selling nutritious food took it upon herself to take care of this family. I remembered that, as I was leaving campus for the first leg of the journey, two of my classmates—Yan Liu and Ana Margarida Maia Magalhães Ferreira—handed me an envelope with €45 and a gift card. I had already spent €25 on food for my walking companions and myself. I offered the €20 remaining to the family, but they refused!

By this time, I was comfortable with the man who had spoken with me on the road. I visited Steven and his wife Kathleen. They have a wonderful son. They handed me €20 and told me that if I ever found myself in need, perhaps the money would help. Imagine that!

Here is where the story touched me in the same way that hearing the Ukrainian family’s story moved me. Steven took me to his child’s new school, which just opened in 2017, that emphasizes each child’s strengths. After my journey, I agreed to return to the school to learn more about it.

Steven then turned to his son to explain what Walk the Peace Talk was all about. After listening intently, his son sweetly looked at me and, unsolicited, offered his soccer ball to take to the Ukrainian kids in Poland. I told him how much I appreciated his kindness, but that it might be difficult for me to carry it since I was walking.

So he offered me a cookie. I accepted it. :)

5 May

This invasion has sparked Europe’s worst refugee crisis since World War II. The crisis here goes back further, too, to Stalin’s aggression, particularly the 1932–33 famine, often called the Holodomor, a term derived from the Ukrainian words for hunger (holod) and extermination (mor). The International Rescue Committee recently wrote:

“According to the United Nations, two-thirds of children in Ukraine have been displaced from their homes, with the two-month-old conflict
showing no signs of resolution. Many of these children have been living in bunkers as their towns and villages are bombed; those who have escaped to neighboring countries are also coping with emotional trauma.”

As I crossed into The Netherlands and into Germany, I thought of Oksana, the Ukrainian woman I interviewed back in Tienen. If we hear her story, we can hear the story of all refugees, anywhere. And that’s my point. As I walk, I am not only thinking of Ukrainian refugees, but child refugees in Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. Refugees need our attention.

6 May

I have been reading about how Ukraine has captured much of the world’s attention because those with means can relate and fear that it could happen to them, too. Vox reports that “race, culture, and religion certainly play a role in the warm welcome fleeing Ukrainians have received.” I can see the point. I know that Poland had put up barriers to refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq who attempted to cross from Belarus to Europe.

But where does that leave us? We cannot turn away from this ugly reality. We are not neglecting the children and refugees from around the world when we walk this Ukrainian path to peace. We cannot be selective in whom we serve. Isn’t that the very definition of discrimination against people—based upon their country of origin?

7 May

I arrived in Cologne and made my way to the Catholic Cologne Cathedral (Kölner Dom), a breathtaking UNESCO World Heritage site—the tallest two-spired church in the world. On any other day, I would spend time inside the church, taking in the excavations, craning my neck to see the handiwork of

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3 Story
masons and carvers, marveling at the intricate clockwork, feeling the vibration of its enormous bells, or sitting in silence amongst the believers.

Today, though, I was attracted to the performing and visual artists who assemble every day on a promenade outside the church. I gravitated to the work of Maryo Andrey, a Romanian artist, who was drawing flags on the ground. People threw money to land on the flag of their country. I told him that I was expecting to see a Zimbabwean flag, and he quickly produced one for me.

I also saw a large heart in Ukraine’s colors as an expression of solidarity. I noticed several coins tossed there as well. Struggling with the language, I tried to ask if the money collected from tourists would go to Ukraine. While I was not sure I understood it correctly, my feeling is that it would. The messages of solidarity, however, were sure to reach the 20,000 visitors the Kölner Dom receives every day. One message read: “We may have different languages, different color skin, but we all belong to one human race!”

8 May

I met a dentist and avid cyclist today. He and his friends decided to ride from Köln to Budapest, dressed in Ukrainian colors and carrying a flag of Ukraine to spread the message of peace in their own “cycling” way.

It is Victory in Europe day today. We honor those who perished for the sake of democracy over tyranny. If ever there was a lesson in learning from history, today is the day. Soon I will be on my way to Bonn.

I promised Dr. Fred I would go to the NS Documentation Center of the City of Cologne. It is both a memorial and a learning and research center. This was the site of the Gestapo house. Prisoners were held in the basement. The website describes inscriptions and drawings “written with pencil or chalk, sometimes with lipstick; or scratched on the cell walls with iron nails, screws, or even the prisoners’ fingernails.”

10 May
Walk the Peace Talk is getting attention. The logistics team has been fielding inquiries. Everywhere I go, meetings with students have been set up. Some are walking with me!

Today is the anniversary of the book burning of 10 May, 1933, where students from dozens of university towns across Germany lit over 25,000 books on fire. It is hard to believe that, given an opportunity to study, minds could be so easily swayed by enlisting young people to buy this. Joseph Goebbels declared that “the era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end.” He goes on to say that “It is to this end that we want to educate you...And thus you do well in this midnight hour to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past.” Dr. Fred told me that these were the same books his parents had on their shelves.

In Bonn’s market square, there is a memorial plaque that opens to reveal a chest holding books. Each year, the box is emptied and the books are given away, then filled again with donated books.

13 May

I met the Mayor of Marburg (Dr. Thomas Spies) today! The logistics team seems to have come through again! Dr. Spies was joined by a student group at Marburg University devoted to peace. They call themselves: BRUK (for Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Kazakh students).

Dr. Spies makes a connection between his field of medicine and politics. He talked about the social causes of illness. “Poverty is the number one cause of disease, unemployment is the number two cause. Poor people live ten fewer years than rich people. That’s unbearable.” He told us that, for every dollar one spends on war, one must pay the same amount to rebuild communities. He said that Marburg is a welcoming and inclusive city, and made a commitment in front of reporters to look at how the Marburg city budget can allocate funds to help Ukrainian refugees.

In smaller conversations with various student groups, I heard personal stories. A Ukrainian woman pointed out that sometimes she is afraid of walking around because there are several Russians living in Marburg. Whenever she hears the language, she feels uncomfortable. She is traumatized. She told me that, soon
after she arrived, a trash-collecting van was on her street. She immediately thought of Russian tanks and could not leave her house. Russian and Ukrainian students talked about their Telegram groups mobilizing against the war.

14 May

Germans have addressed the holocaust directly and bluntly. The permanent exhibition at the Bonn Memorial and National Socialism Documentation Centre depicts the exclusion and persecution of political opponents. The Jewish community, Sinti, and others from Bonn and the surrounding area were victims of National Socialism (Nazi) terror.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was cloaked as a fight against Nazis. This could not be further from the truth. Instead, their invasion has perpetuated Nazi-like atrocities. After World War II, the universal message was: “Never Forget.” And yet, 77 years later, here we are. We can’t forget. A temporary exhibition at the museum resonates well with my journey by incorporating the Ukrainian crisis into their exhibition about Nazism. It reminds us all to act immediately to stop the scourge of war. Teachers cannot avoid discussing these issues, particularly the Ukrainian crisis. If they do, the forgetting will continue.

I reflect on the words of Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner and holocaust survivor: “Whoever listens to a witness, becomes a witness.” In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he said: “Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.”

In that same speech, he continues: “Action is the only remedy to indifference: the most insidious danger of all.”

15-20 May

Between walking 30+ kilometers a day and meetings at schools and with NGOs, I will have to condense my journal entries.
In Marburg, Bonn, Weimar, Erfurt, and Jena, I met with young people’s organizations that provide migrants with opportunities through entrepreneurship apprenticeships; revitalize diverse cultural heritage through augmented reality; create forums for migrants to tell their stories; use radio and board games to teach youth about civic and democratic education and peace-building.

And then I come across an exhibit about "Reichskristallnacht," also known as Night of the Broken Glass, November 9, 1938. All that Jews owned was destroyed. Hospitals, homes, and schools were levelled. Across Germany and Austria, hundreds of synagogues were decimated, people beaten, burned, and shot. Forty years later, one can recognize the signs of fascism.

I am getting such a powerful education — about goodness and evil. I just don’t understand the human condition. I am exhilarated and exhausted at the same time.

24 May

My journey these days has been difficult because the route was uneven, and I was largely in the woods. After walking for 30+ kilometers, a kind stranger approached me and offered me a ride. Guess what? I didn't turn down that offer today. So, I was aided for at least 6 kilometers. I wish I had purchased one of those tiny canvas camping chairs I can fold up and slip into my backpack.

27 May

I met with African students who had fled Ukraine and are now enrolled in German universities. People can also use public transportation in Germany with their Ukrainian ID cards. Nobody knows when this generosity will come to an end. They tell me that the invasion in Ukraine has affected the world—disrupted the global supply chain, driven up global prices of grain and petrol, and threatened to extend past Ukraine itself. At this time of writing, one-of-three children in developing countries is adversely affected by this war; crop access in developing countries has declined by over 25%, and with the blockade of the Black Sea, the World Food Program is predicting widespread famine.

The African refugees also tell me about the double standard toward third-country nationals. Others are getting residence and work permits, along with
social welfare support, but they are not. One student said that all the efforts toward inclusion are real, but that replacement theory is alive and well here, too. “Feels like Make Germany Great Again” — Holocaust deniers, Islamophobics, and xenophobes who ascribe to an identitarian ideology that promotes the protection of western culture from any ethnocultural identity not their own. The Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany or AfD) sends chills up my spine. Sure, the government is investigating them as an extremist group, but they are well known. They deny that climate change is human-caused and oppose same-sex marriage and immigration.

Each night, I talk with Dr. Fred about the generous people I’ve met. I tell him how impressed I have been with Germany’s ability to reckon with its dark past and teach about how easy it is to fall into demonizing others. This time, however, I told him about my discomfort. The more east I walk, the more empty buildings I see...that could house refugees. Stayed with John, a Teachers Without Borders member in Dresden. Having been on the road for over 125 hours, I am drained. He must have recognized that. He told me that he would take a train to Berlin with me to ensure that the last leg of my journey in Germany went smoothly.

28 May

You can imagine my surprise when I met one of my classmates, Nicola Battistuta, who decided to join me in Berlin right during a youth demonstration about the Sustainable Development Goals! The global pandemic has jeopardized hard-won gains in education. This war has turned back the clock on development.

30 May

I crossed the border from Germany to Poland and have taken a train to Warsaw. From here, Maria Jasiorowska, my dear Polish classmate, will help with the remainder of the journey. I was invited to talk about Walk the Peace Talk at a school that so happened to be hosting its registration day for the upcoming school year. A woman listened for a while and then broke down in tears. Registering her children for school meant that they were not returning to Ukraine anytime soon. In a world of refugees, teachers are critically important.
They can provide normalcy amidst chaos. Ukrainian and German teachers surrounded her with love.

I was welcomed into one of the classrooms by one of the teachers. Part of the class was inspired after I described the reasons for our visit, but some youngsters are still traumatized by their experience, and it appears that it is still difficult for them to accept the fact that they are dispersed because of the invasion of their country. After hearing about our initiative and travel, the students had some challenging questions. They were looking for answers from us at the time. They want to know what will happen to their future, as well as what they can do right now to prepare for it and assist their parents.

To be honest, I felt like the two hours we spent at the school today were a year.

31 May – 1 June

A Ukrainian student walked with me as I left the school. That meant so much to me. It was as if Ukraine’s soul was tagging along.

Students gather to share my journey and hear about Walk the Peace Talk. Television crews follow me. I read posts on Twitter and Instagram. Radio interviews and newspaper articles give me an opportunity to spread the word about teachers as change agents and education for a sustainable future. All of that is wonderful.

At the same time, what will stay with me is seeing so much pain on the faces of refugees. The ache of being forced to leave one’s home, to walk away from it all, to be unsure about one’s future, worried about one’s family, to carry the weight of their grief. Dr. Fred told me about William Faulkner’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature: “Man will not only endure, he will prevail.” I have seen a great deal of human pain. I have learned about death camps 77 years ago, genocide since, and genocide just two months ago, in Bucha, Ukraine.
I have seen the world rise to the challenge to support Ukraine, from the little boy, unaware of the depth of this catastrophe, but who knew what good looked like and offered me a soccer ball and a cookie.

You are not fully human until you hear others. You can’t hear others unless you can feel them. I haven’t walked in their shoes, but I have shared their journey.

2 June

I have landed in Brussels. Walking through customs, I saw the smiling organizing committee waving. I rushed home to hug my wife and my son.

Thank you, everyone!
The World’s Fair or a Fair World?

*Paul Robeson stood
on the northern border
of the USA
and sang into Canada
where a vast audience
sat on folding chairs
waiting to hear him.*

*He sang into Canada.
His voice left the USA
when his body was
not allowed to cross
that line.*

*Remind us again,
brave friend.
What countries may we
sing into?*

*What lines should we all
be crossing?
What songs travel toward us
from far away
to deepen our days?*

— Naomi Shihab Nye, “Cross that Line” from You and Yours

DON’T go just yet. I have another story. You don’t have to look far for the message. I’ll give it to you now, straight up: hope and fairness are not enough. Real progress requires a plan, action, and agency. But you probably knew that already.
You should know that my mother and father made another claim about Tobias Miller of Cleveland Ohio. They were convinced that he not only “invented” the folding chair, but also designed the Trylon and Perisphere—the iconic symbol of the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair. Credit for the Trylon and Perisphere goes, without question, to Wallace Harrison and J. Andre Fouilhoux of the Harrison-Fouilhoux architectural firm. I couldn’t find any reference to Tobias. That has not stopped me from giving my parents the benefit of the doubt.

I check Google patents once in a while, just in case, but even if come up empty, my research has uncovered gold. I’ve learned more about my family, about the United States on the brink of war, about teaching, and what we imagine our future will look and feel like. The daydreams alone have been worth it.

So, here goes.

At a cost of $160 million, the 1939–1940 World’s Fair was a snow globe of modernity and marketing built on reclaimed swampland, the Corona Dumps, at Flushing Meadows in Queens. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Valley of the Ashes from his 1925 masterpiece, The Great Gatsby, was modeled after the soot spewing from its coal-burning furnaces. The Trylon, a 610-foot spire, rose phoenix-like from those ashes, literally—phallic, triumphant, and visible from the top of the Empire State Building. The Trylon could be reached via the world’s largest escalator from the Perisphere, a moon-like orb constructed of steel and plasterboard housing its flagship exhibition: “Democracy”—a scaled model depicting the metropolis of the future: “The World of Tomorrow.”

An average family without the means to travel the world could take in the exotic wonders of 60 countries in a single day by taking the IND World’s Fair Line, built just for the occasion. 45 million people frequented exhibits and snapped up souvenirs and collectibles—bookends, clocks, aprons, soap, plates, glasses,
cutlery, earrings, cigarette lighters, paperweights, coins, kazoo, postage stamps, fans, horseshoes, belt-buckles, toy airplanes, coasters, mugs, salt and pepper shakers, drinking glasses, coffee-table books, not to mention Kan-o-Seats, a combo folding stool and cane (no connection to Tobias). Babe Ruth and the rest of the Yankees wore a Trylon and Perisphere patch. So did the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers. It was perfectly acceptable to wear a brand outside one’s clothes.

That same family could escape the crushing grind of the present and be transported instantly to familiar reminders of America’s idealized past, then leave the relics behind to step into the promise of a prosperous future. You could touch it, imagine it, take carnival rides—even buy a piece of it. Corporations eclipsed countries. Rather than focus on the abstract virtues of science and technology, this Fair would target families and what innovations in communication, clothing, shelter, kitchens, and food would do for them. The National Cash Register built an enormous replica that revolved to show that day’s attendance in 2½-foot numbers.

In a nod to the genius of green urban planning and driverless cars, congestion is eliminated, the air is fresh, parks are accessible, and in an ominous nod to the future of Roosevelt’s redlining gone terribly wrong, “residential, commercial, and industrial areas all have been separated for greater efficiency and greater convenience…the old replacing the new, each city block a complete unit in itself.”

A historian at The Gotham Center for New York City History writes: “There was no crime in the city of tomorrow, no slums, and no poverty. Human conflict and hardship had been eradicated by the heroic efforts of planners and designers. Progress was presented as inevitable and uniform.”

Accessible and scrubbed, that is, except for its burlesque side. Men slipped away for a brief “smoke” and congregated at a pavilion for dancing, topless models or at Salvador Dali’s “a Coney Island of the Surrealist mind,” entitled: “Dream of Venus.” Men stamped out their cigarettes and entered through pillars shaped like a pair of women’s legs. Two swimming pools featured naked mermaids called “living liquid ladies.” One nude woman lay in a bed of flowers
on top of a taxi, another Venus lay in a 36-foot bed shared with lobsters. Men could touch a giant udder. A couch was shaped like Greta Garbo’s lips. One could and his protest at what he called “the hideous mechanical civilization that is your enemy, that is also the enemy of the ‘pleasure principle’ of all men. It is man’s right to love women with the ecstatic heads of fish.” That is, if they don’t get caught. The vice squad raided the “Miss Nude Show” at the Cuban Village. A peep-show into tomorrow was scintillating, surreal, and wildly popular—at an admission price of 25 cents.


A promotional video about the American Futurama exhibit opened with cheery music and expansive scenes of New York City. That same cinematic male voice assured viewers: “Mentally and physically, we are progressing toward new horizons.”

The actual voiceover said this: “To help us get a glimpse into the future of this unfinished world of ours, there has been created for the New York World’s Fair a thought-provoking exhibit of the developments ahead of us, the greater and better world of tomorrow that we are building today, a vivid tribute to the American scheme of living, whereby individual effort, the freedom to think, and the will to do have given birth to a generation of men who always want new fields for greater accomplishments and will always find new things for all others to enjoy. Come, let’s travel into the future. What will we see?”

To memorialize the occasion at noon on the Autumnal Equinox, The Westinghouse Time Capsule was lowered 50 feet on fair grounds through a steel pipe. Geologists were consulted about whether there might be land sinkage and were assured that it would not be a problem. The capsule included “micro-files” and a microscope to read the 10,000,000+ words, even instructions for “making a more comfortable reading machine” and a “motion picture reading
machine.” Instructions for raising the capsule were sent to libraries and universities around the country. The time capsule was to be opened in 5,000 years—6,318 AD. 98

The 1939–1940 World’s Fair was an art deco-themed, futuristic, Coney-Island commercial funhouse. Children pushed buttons and asked impossible questions. Parents hoisted them on their shoulders to see and cheer spectacular parades by day and a spray of fireworks by night. E. L. Doctorow once wrote: “We stood in the shadow of the Trylon and Perisphere, and I felt these familiar forms, huge and white, granted some sort of beneficence to my shoulders.” 99

World’s Fair planners faced two risks. First, public suspicion around corporate greed behind The Great Depression needed better marketing, and so the Fair “[married] the product with the consumer and the consumer with the notion of good. And underneath that came the whiff of patriotism—capitalism dressed up as being good for America” 100 and, one was expected to assume, the world. Unshackled from regulation, capitalism’s invisible hand would work its magic for a utopian future in which there would be no winners and losers, only winners. 101 Would fair-goers open their wallets?

In newsreels, the confident, baritone CBS radio commentator, H.V. Kaltenborn, rhapsodized about clean, efficient cities linked by superhighways and the secret sauce of science, technology, and American-style democracy. Ira Gershwin’s “Dawn of a New Day” played in the background.

“Here we come young and old, Come to watch the wonders unfold, and the tune that we play is the dawn of a new day.

Tell the world, at the door, that we don't want him 'round anymore.” 102

Second, the Fair had to convince Americans that the future would be peaceful. Up in the clouds of the Trylon, a publicist writes, “spectators will find themselves cast in the role of the gods of old, from Olympian heights, to pierce the fogs of ignorance, habit, and prejudice that envelop everyday thinking, able to gaze down on the ideal community.” 103 The Fair was also marketed as a gathering place for world leaders to negotiate peace. Simply put, the carnival atmosphere would surely “charm dictators.” 104 Opening festivities included a “Pageant of Peace,” an “Altar of Peace,” and a “Court of Peace.”
I cannot help but daydream about Tobias. I ask you to take my parents’ word for it that Tobias was a player at the Harrison-Fouilhoux firm. Imagine the lights dimming again, then opening on a recognizable big city thrumming with the city noise of commerce and construction, circa 1937. Upstage are brick tenements, fire escapes, laundry strung across buildings, and faded advertising slogans. Traffic lights are suspended from cables on either side of intersecting streets. Grills, headlights, partial hoods, and the front tires of cars peek out from the wings, stage right and left. At a green light, workers and business people wearing hats scurry across the stage/street, while others wait at a red, except for a gaggle of shoppers who walk into traffic and are startled by honks, flashing headlights, and angry admonitions from drivers. Traffic eases and the actors walk to the wings. The cars reverse behind curtains. Traffic lights retract upward and out of view. The stage dims as a black scrim falls to obscure the city outside. In the dark, stage hands hurriedly set up the next scene, a top-floor workspace.

We hear footsteps. A spot illuminates a hinged trap door. Enter Tobias. He lifts the square door with his left hand. We see only his head at first. He is work-weary, yet resolute. He looks around. With each step, we see more—his worker’s jacket, his bulging bottom-left pocket, the heavy tool bag on his left shoulder. He is pinching a roll of plans under his right arm. Resting the door on his head, he manages to heave the plans upward onto the platform. He grabs the rope handle to open the door fully and climbs out.

Once on his feet, Tobias switches on a light with his elbow, revealing an attic space transformed into a makeshift wood shop. Tobias spreads his schematic drawings on a folding table and weighs down each corner with tools. Scattered about are a heap of tire rims, wire hangers, wood, rusted circulation vents, and bicycle fenders. A school clock mounted on the wall reads 5:15 pm.

As Tobias steps away from his model of the Trylon and Perisphere to get a more encompassing look, the voiceover takes on a less cinematic and more conversational tone. “Ladies and gentlemen, meet Tobias Miller, inventor. Let’s take a peek inside his mind, shall we? He feels the world on his shoulders. As he gazes at his symbol of the world of tomorrow, he muses: it should grand, yet not gaudy; extraterrestrial, yet grounded. Both should

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complement each other—one that jabs skyward like a spaceship ready to take off to a fresher, cleaner tomorrow. Beside it, his prototype for a city characterized by efficiency and cleanliness, round like a new planet ready to absorb a well-informed, larger population.”

Tobias pulls out a flask from his jacket and takes a furtive sip, though he is alone, starts to put it back, takes another, then faces the audience: “A little fortification, folks!” The audience giggles. He reaches his other jacket pocket for a piece of whitefish wrapped in the front page of The Cleveland Plain Dealer, pulls a fork from an inside pocket, and stabs a bite.

He returns to his schematics and pulls out a charcoal marker to shade in one of his designs, comparing the drawings to the model and making adjustments to both. He steps back a few steps to get a broader perspective. “There is a grandeur to it, wouldn’t you agree?” The clock’s hands move to 7:15 pm. He moves toward a window, then lifts it with two hands (cue the sounds of the city), propping it up with a two-by-four, and sticks his head out to breathe it all in. Light from outside streams in that cinematic, crepuscular moment when the golden hour meets the blue hour. The voice-over returns. “Our genius is satisfied, don’t you think? No need to push his luck. That’s enough for one day.” He holds the base of the window with one hand, removes the two-by-four with the other, and with both hands eases the window down.

Tobias collects his tools, rolls up his plans, and starts to wrap up the greasy newspaper when he notices a headline below with gloomy news from Europe. His face changes. Satisfaction gives way to doubt. He paces. Voiceover: “It’s hard to design a future. The world does not travel at the same speed as our imagination.”

I imagine myself in the audience, squirming and uncomfortable. What does all this mean? Tobias is not oblivious to the world around him. Could he be distracted and haunted by Aldous Huxley’s dystopian book, Brave New World? Could its shape portend something bleak, sanitized, cold? Is the Trylon more missile than rocket ship? Is the Perisphere dome nothing more than a pathetic attempt to shelter and insulate a planet from forces attempting to destroy it?
I can also hear the one voiceover shoved aside and another in its place—more reflective, even portentous. “What if the Trylon is nothing more than a gigantic pin and the Perisphere an enormous balloon? What if German designers, laboring under huge, ominous klieg lights are putting the finishing touches on their own nefarious representation of tomorrow? What are their symbols? Tobias picks up his tool bag, tucks his plans under his arm and descends the stairs. We hear him directly: “For now, folks, let’s put all that apocalyptic thinking aside. Let us follow our dreams. Let’s reach for the stars!” He lifts the trap door and twists his body to descend the stairs. Closing the door behind him, the stage darkens and the house lights come on.

“Tickets please.”

* * *

But I digress from my digression. Instead of seven continents, the world was apportioned into Seven Zones of Excitement: the government zone, the communications and business zone, the production and distribution zone, the transportation zone, the community interests zone, the food zone, and the amusement zone. A General Motors promo film described The World’s Fair as the “true parliament of the world. Here the peoples of the world, like the Olympics, unite in amity and understanding, impelled by a friendly rivalry and working toward a common purpose: to set forth their achievements of today and their contributions to the ‘World of Tomorrow.’”

It continues: “True, each of us may have different ideas about what that future will be, but every forward outlook reminds us that all the highways of all research and all communication, all the activities of science, lead us onward to better methods of doing things, with new opportunities for employment, and better ways of living as we go on determined to unfold the constantly greater possibilities of the world of tomorrow as we move more and more rapidly forward, penetrating new horizons in the spirit of individual enterprise in the great American way!” Hopeful (though bordering on a run-on sentence), but what might he mean about “penetrating new horizons?” Whose horizons?

Europe was, indeed, descending into hell, but on Sunday, April 30, 1939, one-hundred and fifty years to the day George Washington was inaugurated in
Lower Manhattan, the clocks were turned forward an hour for daylight saving time. RCA introduced television to the public. In NBC’s first broadcast, President Roosevelt crackled to life. At the dedication of the Palestine Pavilion, Albert Einstein, the Fair’s honorary chairman, evoked the Fair’s political aspiration—a plea, not only for a homeland but also for a universal embrace of peace.

“The World’s Fair...is in a way a reflection of mankind. But it projects the world of men like a wishful dream. Only the creative forces are on show, none of the sinister and destructive ones which today more than ever jeopardize the happiness, the very existence of civilized harmony.”

On March 15, 1939, Hitler seized Czechoslovakia. The New York Times reported that the “Czech Fair Center is Now an Orphan.” On August 23, Germany and Russia signed the Non-Aggression pact. World War II had begun. On October 31, as the first season of the World’s Fair came to a close, an editorial mused plaintively and tenuously at the disconnect between aspiration and reality. The New York World’s Fair...

“...showed how comfortable a dwelling place the earth could be if men could only learn to work together...The key to the World of Tomorrow, as shown in Flushing Meadows, was the application of science to men’s work and play. In war and peace, prosperity and depression, scientific knowledge marches on...But it was clear, even at the Fair, that mankind has lagged behind in what have been called the social inventions. Above all, we have not yet invented a cure for war or a panacea for those destructive economic policies which preceded the present conflict.”

On November 30, the Soviet Union invaded Finland. The League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union, and on December 2nd, Russia quit the Fair. The four million-dollar socialist realist building, the tallest at the Fair (except for the Trylon), was to come down within ninety days. I imagine dozens of workmen on tall ladders chipping away at Stalin and Lenin from the sides of the building and others strategizing on how to take down a 79-foot high, stainless steel statue depicting a muscular and proud Russian worker, one arm raised skyward, holding a five-pointed star.
The 100,000 square-foot lot was renamed the “American Common” and designated as “a performance venue given over to patriotic pageants and events celebrating democracy and American diversity.” Scholar and activist W.E.B du Bois spoke during “Negro Week,” July 23-28, 1940. W.C. Handy, the father of the blues, performed. “Negro Week” also featured the work of a fledgling drama troupe from Harlem—the Rose McClendon Players. Their dramatic adaptation of “The Life of Booker T. Washington,” starred Dooley Wilson, the actor who played the diminutive pianist named Sam in the movie, Casablanca.

My father, another diminutive Sam in that same drama troupe, had initially constructed the lighting for their sets, but the Rose McClendon players needed a white guy to play the part of President Theodore Roosevelt. He obliged.

I imagine my father coming to rehearsal each day that week, looking up with admiration and pride at the Trylon and Perisphere as he disembarked from the IND World’s Fair Line. Perhaps he arranged folding chairs in a circle for the table read-through. I picture actors murmuring their vocal warmups—alliterations, tongue rolls, scales when Ossie Davis (who would later play roles in Roots and Do the Right Thing), settles everyone down for a discussion.

“When Booker T. Washington decided to cross the threshold of the White House and meet President Roosevelt, was this an audacious act of ethnic pride by a former slave, or was it an act of naïveté for believing he could earn the respect of whites?”

Another reflects: “What might happen to us if white communities see a depiction of Booker T. Washington and call us uppity?” Still another: “What will the black community think if we portray Booker T. Washington as entirely passive and conciliatory?” My father is silent. He stares at his lines. He was just a neighbor, filling a role. A friend.

One of the actors might pull out a brochure for the World’s Fair and read aloud: “The City of Tomorrow which lies below you is as harmonious as the stars in their course overhead—No anarchy—destroying the freedom of others—can exist here.” Someone surely must have asked: Do all those highways include us? Will these new machines free us, too? Will everyone be able to afford them?
Surely, one was likely to assert, momentum is on our side. The organizing committee for “Negro Week” included Fiorello La Guardia, New York’s 99th mayor; Hattie McDaniel, fresh from her performance of “Mammy” in Gone with the Wind (for which she was the first African American to win an Oscar); author Richard Wright; contralto Marian Anderson; and pastor Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of Harlem, born of a free woman at the end of the civil war and the first African-American from New York elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Impressive indeed.

Someone interjects: “But did any of you attend W.E.B Du Bois’s lecture during ‘Negro Week’? Is our country ready for full civil rights and political representation?” After all, when the fair opened, 500 African Americans stood outside with picket signs, protesting discriminatory hiring practices. The son of two teachers, William Grant Still’s Song of a City played on a continuous loop at “Democracy.” Considered “the Dean of Afro-American Composers” (works performed by the Los Angeles, Rochester, Berlin, and Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestras, the BBC Orchestra, and the New York City Opera), his granddaughter has claimed that he would have to have police protection to attend the Fair on one occasion: “Negro Day.”

A memo circulated to those hiring workers for the fair mentioned “no distinct foreign or racial types.” A World’s Fair historian tells the story of an applicant for the position of “sandwich girl” who was turned down. When she applied to be a product demonstrator, the agency “emphatically informed her, ‘We are not taking Negroes or Jews.’” Reverend Adam Clayton Powell met with the organizing committee to point out the hypocrisy of the Fair’s theme: “You cannot have a World of Tomorrow from which you have excluded colored people.” Grover Whalen, president of the New York World’s Fair Corporation, often called: “Mr. New York,” responded with: “I do not see why the world of today or tomorrow of necessity has to have colored people playing an important role.” In Frank Buck’s Jungleland, black men had jobs as African natives. Of the 391 blacks employed (out of 4,356), 191 were sanitary attendants. Most of the rest were maids, porters, and entertainers.

Progress?
Did the Rose McClendon Players frame a future of hope through education and self-reliance or compromise and marginalization? Did they imagine that their children would go to schools led by creative teachers or by an army of Elektros? In the future, would their children’s teachers challenge, inspire, and believe in them or ignore them? Could they envision “the dwelling place the earth could be if men could only learn to work together?”

It had been just over 20 years since the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed with abandon, but struck the poor and illiterate with particular vengeance. Surely, we would make enough progress in science, literacy, and equally distributed public health for that never to happen again or, for that matter, another world war.

The 1939 fair launched with the slogan "Dawn of a New Day" and the promise of "The World of Tomorrow." In 1940, the slogan was changed to "For Peace and Freedom" as tensions mounted in Europe." The World's Fair closed early, just about bankrupt. “On Closing Day in 1939, the Perisphere was lit to look like an enormous jack-o’-lantern, complete with blinking eye.” Both the Trylon and Perisphere were melted down for armaments. Tomorrow was facing a wrecking ball.

December 7th 1941 was a Sunday. The next day, my father enlisted in the American army, landed on Utah beach on D-Day, fought at the Battle of the Bulge, and helped to liberate Nordhausen, a “Vernichtungslager” or extermination camp designed for ill prisoners. He lost touch with his fellow thespians, but he held onto his hope, convinced life would get better, safer, more humane, equal, fairer.

Maybe his friends in The Rose McClendon Players looked forward, too. 10-years later, fellow Harlemite Langston Hughes would rework his poem, Harlem. Would their dreams be deferred? Sugared or scabbed over? Too heavy a load to bear? Could they imagine that it took until 1954 for the Supreme Court to rule that segregation in schools was unconstitutional?

Could they see it? If so, would they believe it? Was this what progress would, or should, look like?
The very next year, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till would be forced to carry a 75-lb. cotton-gin fan on his back and be savagely beaten, disfigured, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Could they take some solace that the Montgomery Bus Boycott late that very same year might, at long last, be the beginning of the end for such heinousness? Did they aspire, dream, and pray for an era of justice and human rights? Did they see progress ahead?

Were they to dial up that time machine twenty years later, would they be impressed by The Civil Rights Act of 1960 and the assurance of no more voter disenfranchisement, coupled with penalties for obstructing voter registration? What would they think of Harper Lee’s new book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Progressive? Paternalistic? Could they see themselves as one of the four students attending North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College—Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil—who would refuse to leave after being refused service at a Woolworth’s? Or a national movement of non-violent resistance modeled after the principles put forth by Mahatma Gandhi? Would they witness the day when six-year-old Ruby Bridges, protected by four armed federal marshals, would integrate William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans?

Would progress be that painful?

On Mother’s Day in 1961, a bus of black and white Freedom Riders faced a white vigilante gang A firebomb was lobbed through a smashed window. The Smithsonian reports that “arriving state troopers forced the rabble back and allowed the riders to escape the inferno. Even then, some were pummeled with baseball bats as they fled.” George Wallace would block black students from registering at the University of Alabama. A quarter of a million people would march on Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King, implored by gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, would describe his “promises of democracy.” King would not mince words. America’s “bank of justice is bankrupt,” the “unspeakable horrors of police brutality,” the refusal to grant a weary traveler a motel room. “It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.” America had “no time to engage in the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”
Steps back. Steps forward. Steps back. Steps forward. Less than a month after the Reverend King’s speech, four young girls would die in a bomb at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. And yet, Lyndon Johnson’s signature on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would prevent employment discrimination. In 1965, Malcolm X would be assassinated and John Lewis and others beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In 1968, President Johnson would inch forward a bit more to sign The Fair Housing Act to provide equal housing opportunities for all.

What would the Rose McClendon Players think had they known all this? Would the shape and narrative of “progress” live up to its Latin origin, *progredi*, “to step, walk, go”? Even with all that persistent, institutional discrimination in housing, voting, and employment? Those police beatings?

How about when Shirley Chisholm campaigned for the Democratic presidential election in 1972? Or when Barbara Jordan, Andrew Young, and Thomas Bradley established their places in government? When Marian Wright Edelman founded The Children’s Defense Fund, surely then? Would they keep the faith, despite humiliations from self-help pundits attempting to blame black communities for not lifting themselves up? Or when black incarceration rates surged and Reagan’s cuts to federal housing assistance and unequal revenue from property taxes left black youth without a quality education?

Would progress have to wait until 1980, when Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday would become a federal holiday? Or when “The Cosby Show” would attempt to normalize and socialize black family life?

By 1990? More mayors, even in the south. More members of Congress, too. Would their hearts break again after the L.A. police beat Rodney King? How much patience and persistence might progress take? How wide and long must that arc bend before it reaches justice?

 Plenty of progress in the new millennium, right? A new age, a new leaf, a fresh start? And surely when America would elect a black president less than a decade later. The day Barack Obama took the oath of office on his first day in the White House, I called my father. “It’s about time. I’m too old to play the president, anyway,” he said, through tears of joy. How about at the opening of
the Martin Luther King Jr. monument in 2011 at West Potomac Park, right next to the national mall! I never got the chance to take my father to the MLK statue to finger words from its inscription in stone: "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

Progress, indeed. Would black lives matter, at long last? When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, I called my father from Belgium. He was 101. His macular degeneration had clouded his vision. He had been sitting inches from a gigantic television, listening to an endless stream of pundits expressing shock and disbelief. I was in tears. He waded through my rants and sadness. He acknowledged the tragedy of the election and its blow to civility and progress, but his tone changed. He had seen his share of poverty, war, disease, and injustice, he said. “I fought the fascists. It’s your turn. Freddy, remember what Joe Hill said?”

Aware that he was dying, songwriter and labor activist, Joe Hill had written a telegram to Bill Hayward, the head of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). “Goodbye, Bill, I die like a true blue rebel. Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!” Hill followed that telegram with another: "Could you arrange to have my body hauled to the state line to be buried? I don't want to be found dead in Utah."

How was it possible for the pillars of a social contract based on fairness, decency, and truth dissolve so easily, like all those disheveled buildings I have seen in earthquake zones? Disappointed at not hearing words of consolation, I answered his question and mumbled, “Dad, Joe Hill said: don't mourn, organize.”

During the Women’s March the day after Trump’s inauguration, I was by his side. I watched his bony elbows stiffen against the back of the armrests. Through the blur and blotches in front of him, like a swirl of seaweed and darting schools of fish, he had pieced together that hundreds of thousands of protestors were mourning AND organizing. He began to stand. I moved toward him in case he faltered, but he shook me off and rose to express his support. He began to march in place.
My father did not live to see the Unite the Right fascists in Charlottesville. Or witness news footage of George Floyd’s murder. Sadly, neither was he around to celebrate the election of Kamala Harris—a woman, black, South Asian—for Vice President. He would have cheered the election from Georgia to the Senate of Reverend Raphael Warnock, a black pastor holding the same pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church held by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, and a 33-year-old Jewish man, Jon Ossoff, an investigative journalist. He didn't see the noose outside the capitol on January 6 2021 and the insurrectionists swarming through the Capitol building, waving Confederate flags and wearing “Auschwitz Camp” t-shirts two weeks prior to Vice President Harris’s first day in office. I am convinced he would still tell me to remember what Joe Hill said.

Steven Pinker’s telescopic view of violence, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined,* makes a convincing case that life is, indeed, getting better. All that grisly carnage—machetes, car bombs, suicide vests, church and school mass murders, sarin gas, knees on necks, or the violence of a family torn apart by war are momentary exceptions to a historical view of measurable progress.

According to Pinker, the chronic raiding of land has declined and countries no longer attack each other with the same ferocity as the ancients because the world is watching (published before Russia’s attack on Ukraine). Humanity’s five demons—predatory violence, dominance, revenge, sadism, and ideologically-driven acts of violence—have, in the long view, given way to our four better angels—empathy, self-control, moral sensibility, and reason.

It’s hard to have faith in our better angels when, at a moment’s notice, an American school becomes a war zone: Columbine High School, Red Lake Senior High School, Virginia Tech., Sandy Hook Elementary School, Umpqua Community College, Rancho Tehama Elementary School, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Santa Fe High School, Robb Elementary School. The bright-eyed woman in Afghanistan one day is stoned to death the next because of a rumor of sexual impropriety. The violence of neglect in a city that once trusted its water supply, but now carries the irreversible neurological trauma from lead poisoning. The intrusion on women’s reproductive rights. The
explosion of refugees fleeing from the ravages of climate change and national and ethnic cleansing.

It is hard to argue with a painstakingly researched, exquisitely documented 800-page tome by a Harvard professor. I won’t try. I won’t take his word for it, either. Progress does not simply evolve over time. It has to be fought for. It does no good to mourn. We must organize.

* * *

And so, it comes to this: empathy, self-control, moral sensibility must be accompanied by something more—a commitment to action and the power of human agency. These qualities are abundant in our back yards. Hope requires teachers. 20+ years of Teachers Without Borders affirms this, time and again. It began with the Nicaraguan teacher longing to see snow and the Norwegian teacher pining for a few consecutive days of sun—just two teachers who began to share their stories and, in so doing, gave me hope that a world of connected teachers could, indeed, get us all that much closer to equity and justice.

Teachers who grab a folding chair and talk. Jihad mobilizing his community so that “they will take care of” installing carpet and furniture for our first Community Teaching and Learning Center. Deepmala convening teachers to discuss issues that mattered to them. Sameena connecting and fostering women’s human rights and entrepreneurship. Raphael mobilizing teachers as agents of change and peacemakers, regardless of his own personal risk. Marnie opening the door for Afghan women teachers to flourish. Salomon walking for miles to learn from his colleagues. Yunus finding new ways to educate teachers and prisoners in South Africa. Solmaz enabling communities to learn how earthquakes work and keep themselves safe in the most seismologically vulnerable places in the world. Li-Hong leaving the safety of her home in China to join her colleagues and erect child-friendly spaces in flood-ravaged Pakistan. Deya inspiring Mexican teachers to build professional networks. Marie keeping teachers’ voices uppermost in her mind as she develops policies that impact every teacher in Suriname. A nameless forklift driver who would never call himself a teacher, but taught me that anyone can reach those in need with valuable information to share. Jabril, the cab driver, reminding us all that
strangers are just friends looking for an excuse to bond. Simba, walking for peace.

So many others have shown up and continue to show up. In Zambia, Mbao Mwiya-Ngula showed up to educate about rising malaria infections, even after wide distribution of medicated bed-nets. Having observed that many nets were not used correctly, thus leaving children exposed, she designed a global competition for children to design the most effective use of a bed net. The winning entry was a game to construct a pup-tent out of the net material, the children sleeping in a new home-inside-a-home. Malarial infections declined.

In China, Feng Ping showed up to create videos of excellent teaching and a network of teachers to learn how to apply these insights to their own classrooms.

In Uganda, Jude Tadeo Walubo showed up to collect teacher testimonies and lesson plans for a free, online journal.

In Kenya, Joseph Muleka and Mathias Osimbo showed up to adapt our peace education program for a region torn asunder by post-election violence.

In Haiti, Fenel Pierre, a Fulbright Scholar, has built teacher capacity throughout the country, from teacher preparation to earthquake science and safety following the devastating 2010 earthquake.

Teachers in Palestine, Israel, Morocco, Yemen, and Turkey showed up to create MYTecc (Mediterranean Youth Technology Club) so that youth could gain technology skills while connecting to each other across borders.

In Sudan, impatient with waiting for government or international agencies to support teachers, Eiman Yousif showed up to create an in-country and ex-pat network of volunteer teachers to reach students using Telegram. Her initiative, Mashael Anour (/masha/el an/nour/), or Beams of Light, is closing a gap in education made far worse by the devastation of COVID-19.

“Don’t lose hope,” I remind myself. When the going gets rough, the tough keep teaching. In every corner of the earth and in intractable and desperate places
written off as beyond hope or labeled as “failed states,” these teachers don’t lose heart. They organize. They show up.

I have witnessed teachers erecting and staffing child-friendly safe spaces to protect children from thugs in pickup trucks with black flags and masks or white hoods and burning crosses. Teachers who reach girls, even when they—or the girls themselves—may be abducted, sexually terrorized, or shot. Teachers who find ways to carry on even when the schools themselves have been occupied, bombed, burned, ransacked, and turned into storehouses of munitions or fronts for fake polling places. Teachers who find a way to be heard even when repressive regimes consider civic discourse an act of treason. Teachers who connect earthquake science with safety and who insist on safe schools in seismically vulnerable communities so that families can feel less school-building phobic. Who not only make sure buildings are reinforced. Teachers who also reinforce a community’s will to solve problems.

Some make it look easy. One teacher told me: “All you need is personal will, a high tolerance for failure, and an almost insane obsession with sticking with it.” If only there were guarantees that such perseverance and goodwill would be rewarded, that once they take the plunge, the world would notice and right itself. It’s not a fair world, but teachers can make it so.

Teachers are not the problem; they are the solution. In a 2022 article for The Nation, Liat Olenick writes: “Healthy democracies don’t hate their teachers.” If given a true voice, teachers can build the democracy we want. For teachers, the children of families fleeing injustice or war or worried they will be deported are not someone else’s problem, but their children, too, because they know that the faces in their own classrooms are a local patch of a global commons.

They neither leave change to chance nor wait for Acts of Congress. Theirs are acts of conscience. They don’t depend on rich benefactors or celebrity endorsements to make a difference. Instead, they fashion lessons from local materials and collective expertise. They care little about the tyranny of the urgent. They’re more concerned about the urgency of tyranny.
They may not be able to light up every corner of the world at once—and more often than not, our lights are dim—but I must remind you that teachers light up classrooms every day, even when the electricity is off.

When bullies and despots erect artificial boundaries between nations and cultures, teachers foster comity and forge even deeper human connections. When the wall of bigotry attempts to cast a long shadow over children who shiver with fear that they will be plucked from their seats and forced onto a cattle truck to be sent elsewhere, teachers open windows so that children can see a world of possibility. Teachers will not let their classrooms, their colleagues, or their communities down. They can’t, they never have, and they never will. This is the ineffable, powerful force of human agency and reciprocity built right into the profession. This is what hope and fairness look like.

Just as I had discovered after my mother's passing that she was right, all along, about Tobias—patent holder for the folding chair—it wasn't until after my father's passing in 2018, at 103, 73 years to the day he received his Bronze Star in World War II, that I would make the connection between his exhortation: "Don't mourn, organize!" and my encounters with teachers who have transformed their own mourning into mobilization for social justice. I can hear him now. "Freddy, progress is not an escalator to the world of tomorrow. It's a slog through huge obstacles. But it will go somewhere, I promise you."

In an era characterized by a pandemic, a precipitous swing to the far right, Russian genocide against Ukrainians, the proliferation of gun violence, assaults on the truth, and an unprecedented rise in the number of families forced to uproot themselves and search for a better life, the world can look downright Pompeian.

Change might feel painfully slow, like watching a pearl descend a curvy glass bottle of Prell. The odds of resolving the debt and impact of colonialism are not in your favor. Inequality will not go away in your lifetime. The prospect that education can address the ravages of climate change or injustice is, to put it charitably, a Sisyphean. More, if you make a commitment to education and global development, let me add this depressing note: you will suffer because
you will feel others’ suffering acutely. You will never feel as if you’ve done enough.

But you will suffer differently because yours will be an examined life.

The world really does feel like a cesspool and a crime scene, but if the folks like those in this book can strap on a pair of rubber boots to walk through it, so can you. At the risk of sounding like a commercial for a new drug, there are ways to deal with the pain of having immersed yourself in the muck of the world. Give yourself a lecture not to get comfortable with acrimony, sanctimony, resignation, or despair because that will surely prevent you from distinguishing noise from signal. Say goodbye to maybe.

The world needs roads, vaccinations, fresh water, sustainable livelihoods, equity, safety, the consistent application of the law, clean energy, protection from—and mitigation of—the devastating effects of climate change, and social justice. But without education and educators, the road falls into disrepair, the poor get sicker, good jobs farther out of reach, inequality widens, victimization gets more entrenched, imprisonments racism festers, dignity ebbs, and. Hope can evaporate.

At the same time, education breathes new life into hope. Jane Goodall ends her latest work, The Book of Hope, with this message: “Please rise to the challenge, inspire and help those around you, play your part. Find your reasons for hope and let them guide you onward.”

Show up. Don’t give bigots and tyrants another vacation day. If you don’t think it’s a fair world, then get out those timbales and cowbells and lesson plans, comrades, and make some noise because today is Emancipation Participation Day. Flex your inner tattoo: aquila non capit muscas (the eagle does not catch flies). Pull up a folding chair and look outside your window. If you don’t like what you see and have valuable information to share, share it! Let these teachers remind us all:

Sameena: “No fear!”

Deya: “Ella habló sin pelos en la lengua.” Speak without hairs on one’s tongue.
Raphael: “Time is not on our side!”
Simba: “If not now, when?”
Joe Hill: "Don't mourn, organize!"
The clock's tickin'.
Acknowledgments

I COULD not have founded Teachers Without Borders were it not for the teacher leaders I have met—whose sense of reciprocity and agency have defined and shaped us and whose impacts continue to reverberate worldwide. Behind them, there are legions more.

Jim Astman, Ph.D., the groundbreaking and visionary headmaster of the Oakwood School, hired me in 1980, knowing that I would be a project. Throughout our years together, he has instilled in me an abiding faith that, given the chance to learn, human beings will make moral choices.

During my doctoral research, I came across an article by Fernando Reimers, Ph.D., Ford Foundation of International Education at Harvard University and Director of Harvard’s Global Education Innovation Initiative. “Where are 60 Million Teachers? The Missing Voice in Educational Reforms Around the World” introduced me to the role of teachers as catalysts for change. Time with Fernando and guest-lecturing in his course at the Kennedy School has been a thrill of a lifetime. I must mention that his 2020 meditation on World Teachers’ Day is also powerful reading. He and co-author Eleonara Villegas-Reimers write: “As we witness the collapse of the educational opportunities for the children of those most affected by this plague, and by the deficient responses of many in leadership roles, we ask again, as we did a quarter century ago, where are eighty million teachers? (that is the number of those teaching at all levels today). How are their voices included in shaping society’s efforts to rebuild our communities better?”

Early supporters and engaged colleagues bear special mention: Joseph King, Ph.D., Laurie Racine, Haviva Kohl, and Lois Fein, TWB board members, volunteers, and legions of teachers in 171 countries who join the organization because our message seems to resonate, and who take things from there.
In 1998, Sunita Gandhi, the director of the largest Montessori School in the world in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India (over 56,000 students) introduced me to colleagues running a global conference on education while I was conducting my doctoral research, and has remained my mentor ever since. Without her, I wouldn’t have summoned the nerve to fire myself from a good job and start this escapade.

In 2001, Don Jacobs, Ph.D. recognized the value of a global network of teachers and pushed me to remove barriers so that it could happen. Back then, his Center for Applied Technologies in Education at the University at Buffalo, in New York, had already developed signature projects of lasting impact around the world. Don once wryly confided this to me: “In this endeavor, you might get screwed 49% of the time, but at least you can say that the majority of the time, it worked out.”

The Cisco Foundation’s Peter Tavernise, Michael Yutzrenka, Alex Belous, and Sima Yazdani took a risk on the idea and promise of Teachers Without Borders. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s Kathy Nicholson and Cathy Casserly soon followed and funded our passion to develop free and open educational content and tools. Lynn Nixon and Karen Lewis of The Agilent Foundation provided funding, translators, and support to regroup after the Wenchuan earthquake and support teachers in our efforts to connect science instruction with community safety and wellbeing.

Without Konrad Glogowski, Ph.D., TWB’s Chair of our Advisory Board, Teachers Without Borders would have faded away long ago. He has kept his eye on what matters most: measurable change, stakeholder-based professional development, and teacher communities of practice. His intellectual honesty, fealty to research-driven practice, and goodwill make it possible for so many others to show up.

To Jihad El-Sana, Ph.D., Deepmala Khera, Sameena Nazir, Solmaz Mohadjer, Ph.D., Li Hong, Dr. Raphael Ogar Oko, Marnie Gustavson, Yunus Peer, Maria Levens, Ph.D. (Hon.), Simbarashe Manyike—you inspire me every day.

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Marta Orellana, a Teachers Without Borders volunteer and editor, showed up to offer professional editing services, followed by a student, Valentina Dragičević, whose attention to detail and clarity has been nothing short of exceptional.

This book is dedicated to Dr. Jane Goodall—the preeminent primatologist, environmentalist, United Nations Messenger of Peace, and friend—who considers me one of her little brothers and reminds me that global service is never as romantic as it sounds, that it’s often one step forward and two steps back—mystifying and emotionally taxing. Indefatigable in her late 80s, she recognizes that the human family is at its greatest when we collaborate and share wisdom across borders and act as stewards of each other, animals, and the environment. Who can argue with that? How can anyone slow down with such a role model? And one more question: when shall she be awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace? I know of no one more deserving.

Thank you, teachers. Please accept this book with my deepest gratitude.
About Teachers Without Borders

Teachers Without Borders (TWB) is an international teachers network and development organization launched in 2000, with a mission to connect teachers to information and each other to close the education divide. TWB views teachers as a sustainable army of community change agents and key catalysts of global development. TWB’s membership spans 177 countries. All course content and workshop materials are free and governed by the least restrictive Creative Commons license in order to foster sharing across borders. No strings attached.

 Teachers Without Borders is best known for its work in education in emergencies, girls’ education, and peace and human rights education.

 True, the organization offers free membership, free downloadable resources, and free courses, nor do we fundraise (except for the Jane Goodall Institute)—no strings attached. We do not have a payroll and depend entirely upon volunteers...people who show up. “What kind of business plan is that?” I’ll be the first to say it’s a terrible business plan. But, then again, those I describe in this book are employed as teachers (or cab-drivers and fork-lift operators) who volunteer and hold both themselves and others accountable. I’d call that a “staff” comprised of multitudes.

 Teachers Without Borders was awarded the Champions of African Education Award (2010) for its use of radio to disseminate information about the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and to accelerate efforts in educational capacity and peace-building.

 In 2018, Teachers Without Borders was also the recipient of two peace prizes: The Luxembourg Peace Prize, for Outstanding Peace Education Initiatives designed to build a climate of peace one classroom at a time,121 and The Ahmadiyya Muslim Peace Prize for "outstanding work in the promotion of peace through efforts to convene teachers from regions in conflict, provide unfettered access to courses and networks devoted to teacher professional development, and to ensure that Peace Education is integrated into all initiatives.”122
For more information, please see:
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UN High Commission for Refugees: https://emergency.unhcr.org
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13 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General comment No. 8 (2006): The Right of the Child to Protection from Corporal Punishment and Other Cruel or Degrading Forms of Punishment (Arts. 19; 28, Para. 2; and 37, inter alia), 2 March 2007, CRC/C/GC/8, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc7772.html


More than 40 languages other than Dari and Pashto are spoken in Afghanistan. Between Taliban occupations. Bollywood was so popular in Kabul that a sizeable number of Afghans can understand Hindustani.


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Simba and I spoke every day and exchanged messages. Simba wrote the first draft of his journal entries. I did some editing and sent it back to him for his approval.

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