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Introduction

What If?

Imagine Michel de Montaigne under an 800-word limit. I don't mean to compare my little pieces or myself to the one who started us on sharing personal reflections. Yet the thought keeps coming back. Montaigne would have (a) chafed against a limit so artificial, (b) tossed it aside disdainfully, or (c) taken to it comfortably. All we know for sure is that, in his case, rage or indignation would not have been factors.

I can't say that Montaigne "inspired" these efforts, but he did establish the Self as a subject worthy of others' attention. The time and space we inhabit is not comparable to his: ambient warfare and neighborhood atrocities his only distraction, he had a castle tower and tons of time. We of the twenty-first century might have fixed his gallstones for him, but could never have made conditions propitious for economic indifference or the seclusion we all say we crave, but never make for ourselves.

Personally I like the 800-word form. It came from the editor who carried my first blog – the one about Laurent Gbagbo which follows. I was neither pro nor con, just wanted to surface the idea. Conformity to the form was the price of doing so. As I wrote it on April 5, 2011, I thought, "Whoa, this actually suits me." No straight-jacket, no Procrustean beds. Something about it was pleasing, and led me to write more. I never sought or received money for any blogs, nor frankly even wide readership. Having them "out there" (read: preserved and accessible) was the main motivation. This may sound coy, but it's true.

A blog is not an “*essai*,” it’s just a blog. As one friend put it to me, it’s an hors d’oeuvre. He didn’t mean to trivialize my content, nor did I take it that way. An hors d’oeuvre whets the appetite. Even at their most contemplative and human moments, people “whet” appetites (that is, create them), so as later to sate them. Satiation is an elusive goal, so we often are left with wanting, more than having, and it seems we almost like it that way. Yes, it’s a perversion, but every vice has its corresponding virtue, and humans deal with both, all the time. The corresponding virtue here is movement and dynamism. We are not meant to be fixed in time and space. We have plane tickets, Skype, tele-this and tele-that which Montaigne never needed or lacked. See Emily Dickinson on this subject.

The blog form has something to do with friendship, which is a very high value to me, higher anyway than freedom or the type of morality that can be checked by bar code. Friendship’s dialogues are too seldom captured, its cherishable moments too easily dispelled. “Too seldom” and “too easily” only in the sense of wanting to get my druthers, and I don’t always get those. So I whet, then I see about satiation.

Interaction takes place in time and space, and works best when interlocutors can converse in a room. The things you do together can be chronicled or recorded, but what you say will define, establish, and perpetuate the friendship. It defies permanence, though, and is not usually available to others. I’m not advocating exhibitionism.

Setting these conversational moments in amber (the blog) does not make up a noticeable human advancement, but it does scratch an itch.

Blogs to me have to do with how people spend time together, including a moment together with a reader I may never know. The 800-word limit somehow assures that the blog gets written and, more importantly, thought. The conversations themselves are records of what we think, and “to think” – well, enough centuries and energies have gone into figuring out the nature of that. As with our biologies, the specialists may have reason to understand them, the rest of us just put them to use when we’re lucky and things work.

Make what you will of these reflections. Some are topical, others non-temporal observations. I hope they may lighten moments on a plane or in a waiting room. Receive them with my cordial thanks. If I say "I don't need you to read these," I am being permissive, not dismissive. I don't exaggerate the importance of "my world" but I welcome you to enter it.

For me, a blog is a thought. It is more pleasing to have a thought than to postpone it. Classical theater had enormous suspense and appeal, more for what it could not and did not say, than what it said. Nowadays we say nearly anything, but the 800-word limit removes the helium and gets us on a single topic for the time span of a thought. Limits thereby ease and comfort us. And there go my 799 words, so I guess I'll stop.

Not the Gbagbo I Knew

April 6, 2011



Reprinted from the *Examiner*

By the time you read this, Cote d'Ivoire's president and strong-arm dictator Laurent Gbagbo will be out or in, alive, dead, or in flight. He's not about to return as the friend I knew in 1980 when he traveled to the U.S.

At that time, Laurent wasn't even of the rank of *enfant terrible*, though he strived to be. With others, I served as his interpreter, chauffeur, drinking partner, and foxhole comrade. Those who knew him found him funny. He had us in stitches.

Gbagbo, an historian, traveled to seven states in five weeks that year with Operation Crossroads Africa. Crossroaders were familial,

adventurous, willing to live and travel in basic accommodations, open to mutual discovery.

Laurent was selected from a competitive pool, and financed, by the U.S. Embassy in Abidjan, as a "Young African Leader." The irony here is striking, but does not impugn the fine work of U.S. government educational and cultural exchange over six decades.

Laurent was one of Africa's benchwarmers, hoping for a brighter time when their countries would correct their courses and accountability would prevail. The term "kleptocracy" came up in the 1970s, and with it, the hurtful stereotypes of African rulers more out for themselves than for the well-being of their countrymen.

I remember Laurent's railings against his country's president at that time, the long ruling Felix Houphouet-Boigny. Laurent saw Houphouet as a ruthless dictator, and knew he could do better.

He had unlikely schemes to replace him one day, and amazingly he did, after two unsuccessful attempts. I wasn't even sure if he would make it through in one piece, judging from his own horror stories about his country's regime at the time. He was a utopian. Utopians don't usually take over countries.

What happened, then? How do humans become the very oppressors they spend their energies and equities to remove? Shakespeare and Verdi blamed it on the wife behind the throne. Of this I know nothing.

And yet, have better explanations come along? Inspired leaders go rancid too often not to beggar explanation. We ignore this quirk at our peril, a science should be cobbled together ASAP to see why these things happen.

The Laurent I knew wouldn't spill his countrymen's blood even if the UN, U.S., EU, and AU had all been mistaken in declaring Al-assane Ouattara the winner of the 2010 elections. My Laurent was inclined to compassion over others' misfortunes. A sadist he was not.

Lessons learned? People change. A lot. So far, the variables and causes have eluded social scientists, psychologists, political strategists. A little humility here: We need to figure this out, and fast. I don't follow: how could a fun-loving person willingly harm his country for an unattainable degree of self aggrandizement? The train has no brakes, we'd better retrofit them wherever we can.

Another Shakespeare character would have picked up the skull of the demised, and said, "Alas, poor Laurent! I knew him, Horatio." But that was at a kinder time, when a single person could disappear safely to obscurity.

With a Thousand Pictures, Nothing is Still Nothing

April 18, 2011



Reprinted from *Africa-Info.org*

December 30, 1941, Armenian-born photographer Yousuf Karsh got a photo session with Winston Churchill, after the latter's speech to Canadian Parliament during Britain's darkest days of World War II. Unable to get the look of defiance he thought was needed for the occasion, Karsh ripped the cigar from Churchill's hand. The iconic photo resulted, with Churchill's famous scowl.

April 11, 2011, photographers recorded the apprehension of Cote d'Ivoire's now ex- president, Laurent Gbagbo. Take any news service you want, but the Reuters version shows the bewilderment of a wronged three-year-old boy with his red fire engine taken away. In this case it was a nation state of 21 million inhabitants, the world's largest cocoa producer, with a per capita GDP of \$1800. Cote d'Ivoire, once the economic engine of francophone West Africa, emerged, barely, from five months of one giant toothache as its president refused to accept the outcome of the November, 2010

elections. Order restored, sort of. The Great Birnham Woods did to Dunsinane march, and the community was restored to relative sanity. Election winner Alassane Ouattara showed magnanimity in assuring Gbagbo's physical well-being while assuring a trial to determine the latter's possible human rights violations.

Classical theater shows us that the boy with the fire engine is the more interesting character than the one who restores the community. The former is usually a tenor in the opera version, the latter a bass-baritone. In Calderón de la Barca's seventeenth-century classic, a cranky Pedro Crespo gets to be mayor of Zalamea and behaves badly, as does his mistress Chispa. The fuss is brought into line by the king's soldiers. In the Soviet version, the people—not the central government authority—take things into their own hands.

Bullies have whipped us around since the invention of speech, and probably even before. No one has yet figured out how to confine them, other than laboriously beating them at their own game—usually with unacceptable numbers of casualties. It gets to be labor intensive to do so.

Think of the little gangster Abimael *Guzman* arrested in Peru in 1992 and put on trial as the magus behind the Sendero Luminoso in Peru. Or the pudgy Buddha, Aum Shinrikyo, who staged murderous sarin chemical attacks in the Tokyo subway in 1995. Unmasked, they usually turn out to be punks.

With Divine Right out of style and monarchies no longer keeping temporal structures on an even keel, we seem to have only fiction and theater to address the monstrous wrongs done to us. Gorgeous opera can result, but this is the Real Thing. The question arises, why maintain vertical, hierarchical structures at all, if this is the best we can do?

I am not talking anarchy here, or world government. Sovereignty is the model we have before us, until something better comes along.

Once the fools, the bullies, are unmasked, they are shown to be mollusks without their protective shells, as in the unforgettable

photos of Laurent Gbagbo that hit the wires April 12, the day after his arrest. The vulnerability of the invertebrates at the hour of their reckoning does not give us blood lust, but more sadness at their bewilderment, and at our own inability to defend ourselves against them.

The good news for the Christian Laurent Gbagbo (Alassane Ouattara is Muslim) is that he enjoys continued support from Senator James M. Inhofe, (R-OK). Quoted by the *Foreign Policy* blog April 14, he said, "It is more of a Jesus thing, but I have spent a lot of time in Africa."

My understanding is that Jesus meant for authority to be taken away from abusers and given to the Meek. High time for this to happen. No more Gbagbos please, and in the meantime let's at least keep them distracted with the fire engines they crave.

A university in Boston offered Gbagbo a professorship some weeks ago, as incentive to give up power in Cote d'Ivoire. Nice gesture. But imagine sharing an office space with him. Would you leave your own red fire engine overnight in the office?

Of Apes and Arms: When Brains Prevail

April 27, 2011



It started seven years ago with one man's empathy for chimps – those little guys with DNA 98 percent like our own. (When I broke my thumb once, the doctor said, “Now you are one percent closer to being a chimp,” but that was another story.)

Ofir Drori, Israeli eccentric and transplant, fell in love with Cameroon and all things African, and took a do-gooder approach of saving chimps, even as the humans needed a ton of saving as well. The result was LAGA—the Last Great Ape Organization—based in Yaoundé.

Drawing fully on the only interdiction tool he had—chutzpah—Ofir engaged brain and proceeded. He improvised his own plea bargains, confronting big contraband gangsters with partial details of their misdeeds, and getting them to rat on one another. How he got past the doors of the *padrinos*, or why he has been left unmolested to this day, kneecaps intact, is a secret best known by him.

In countries with the best justice money can buy—Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon—Ofir got an 83 per-

cent incarceration rate from those he went after. Clang-clang, case closed. It's a miracle.

Wait, though – just picking at the scabs of ape abuse, and by the way, illegal ivory harvesting, LAGA found huge additional sores underneath: the same networks that shipped tons of contraband ivory to unscrupulous buyers in Taiwan often slipped arms, narcotics, and cash into the containers for delivery. NGO private wildlife law enforcement began doing for governments what governments were not positioned to do themselves. It turns out that needlessly torturing apes is unsettlingly akin to other forms of personal gain which can do in the humans as well. Who would have thought? The UN, World Wildlife Fund, and U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service all took notice. A lone individual cracked a code, and by the way, got awards from the Secretary General of the UN Convention on Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

With Ofir's brainy methodology even child trafficking gets on the agenda, with Catholic Relief Services now picking up on his model. Transparency International also followed his approach, and set up an anti-corruption hotline to flush out corrupt judges and officials who are more part of the problem than the solution.

In seven years, LAGA has appeared in 366 media pieces and gotten 59,000 views on YouTube. With no government authority (but with cooperation from the latter), LAGA has conducted 244 investigations, and in one case nabbed 21 major dealers in five days. Prosecution? LAGA gives full documentation in 85 percent of the cases, and gets 83 per cent in jail.

Abducting an African grey parrot, or a sea turtle, leads in a more or less direct line to contraband and the corruption that robs African people of 25-50 percent of their wealth per year. You don't have to love chimps, but it helps. Corrupt regimes even turn state's evidence, caught up in the exhilaration of the process. Most people don't really prefer to be enemies of humanity, as long as it's rewarding and fun to join the Other Side.

LAGA puts out a press release every day – that would make over 2,000 to date. They have maintained a stable rate of one arrest per week for the past six years, and have put over 350 dealers behind bars. LAGA has documented that in over 80 percent of its cases, bribing attempts would have averted justice if LAGA had not intervened.

Ofir is still basically a one-man operation, and yes, he needs money in order to keep going. Have a look at his website www.laga-enforcement.org.

