

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

A RETURN JOURNEY WITH MEDICINE AND HOPE FOR SUDAN

ZEENA NACKERDIEN

Social media has amplified the message of atrocities suffered by Africans and others and helped to mobilize millions of people into action across the globe. The North/South Sudanese conflict is a specific example of war brought to the attention of millions of people through the efforts of the media and celebrities such as George Clooney. Flickering television images of war-ravaged Sudan and the occasional *New York Times* article also provide overworked Americans with glimpses of what is happening in an African country that officially became two countries with the secession of South from North Sudan. While education of an increasingly interconnected world is important in stopping violence, the truth is sustainable development in any war-torn region can only be achieved through the active participation of its own citizens.

Who will help carry the developmental torch once the media spotlight has dimmed? In the case of the Republic of South Sudan, newly established in 2011, one of those people is Jacob Atem. After losing his parents (members of the Dinka tribe) during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), six-year-old Jacob accompanied by his fourteen-year-old cousin, Michael, walked for miles towards Ethiopia and the safe harbor offered by President Magisto. They were two children lost in a sea of refugees, with the threats of wild animals, hunger, thirst, and death constantly lurking over them. As he would later recall: "If four or five people went to sleep at night, chances were great that two people would not get up the following day."

Jacob converted to Christianity in Ethiopia and stayed in the refugee camp for two years. President Magisto's government was overthrown and the new regime forced the refugees back to their home country. Caught between warring factions and fearing retribution from the Sudanese government of President El Bashir, Jacob and oth-

ers started walking again. This time they headed towards Kenya where those that survived the treacherous journey stayed for nine years. Thanks to the efforts of dedicated private citizens and the US government, Jacob was brought to the US in 2001 and he became a foster child in Michigan. The complete story of Jacob and Michael can be found on the Web site of the Southern Sudanese Health Care Organization (SSHCO, www.sshco.org).

Television specials at the time recapped stories of the "Sudanese lost boys" (a misleading moniker as both genders endured these hardships), culminating in adoption stories and images of them in leafy white suburbs. Jacob would later marvel about the amenities and shelter that Americans take for granted. He obtained his high school diploma in record time, followed by a Bachelor's degree at Spring Arbor University in Michigan and a Master's degree in Public Health (MPH) from Michigan State University. Jacob is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Health Services Research, Management and Policy at the University of Florida. Along the way, he married a girl from his hometown. That is traditionally where the story would end, with a young man finally being able to live the American dream.

However, Jacob has been inspired to be a conduit, i.e., a liaison between American and African cultures who applies knowledge gained in the US for the benefit of his countrymen. Together with Lual Deng and the assistance of others, he formed the SSHCO, which aims to provide healthcare and a sense of hope to the people of South Sudan. Jacob and his colleagues have completed the first phase of their dream, namely the construction of a clinic in his hometown of Maar. The second phase involves the shipment of medical equipment and

supplies to the clinic. Medical supplies are en route via Mombasa in Kenya, but more donations are needed for the perilous second leg of the trip through rough terrain to Maar. Since arrival of the supplies in good condition has to be carefully orchestrated with the rotation of qualified medical personnel through the clinic, the SSHCO and dedicated volunteers are reaching out to their real-world and online communities to raise the anticipated \$13,000 needed to achieve their immediate goals. If all goes well, the SSHCO will be opening the clinic at the end of April 2012. Donations are welcomed on their official Web site.

The SSHCO has also been entered in the Dell Social Innovation Challenge. After registering on the Dell site and confirming his or her e-mail address, a prospective supporter can type in "Maar Health" in the search box and vote for the organization. A People's Choice Award from Dell, facilitated by numerous "likes" on Facebook and tweets, would go a long way to making the dream of Jacob and his countrymen become a reality.

To encourage your local representatives to help change the global issues in South Sudan, please visit http://www.enoughproject.org/take_action. ◉

Primary Source: Interview with Jacob Atem.

NATURAL SELECTIONS



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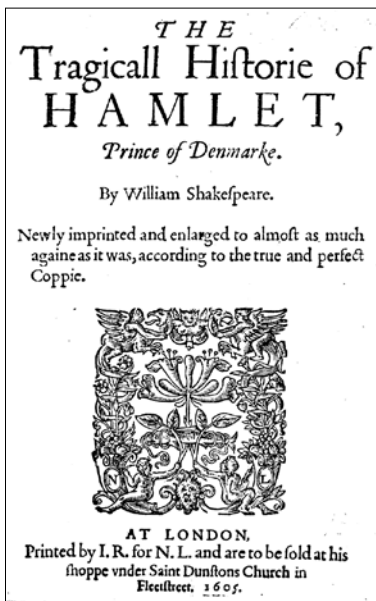
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NEEDS YOU!

Culture Desk: A Lifetime of *Hamlet*

BERNIE LANGS



Title page of the 1605 printing of *Hamlet*

There are certain monuments in the history of art, literature, and music so culturally prevalent that they seep into our consciousness at a very early age and remain with us throughout our entire lives. Try, for example, to recall the first time you saw a photo of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or heard the opening strains of Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony." Included in this list would be the opening words of Shakespeare's tragic character's most famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

I can trace images of *Hamlet*'s lament to my 1960s childhood and to an episode of the television show *Gilligan's Island*, where the island-stranded cast rehearses a musical version of the play to impress a Broadway producer briefly marooned with them. I can still sing part of Hamlet's song, as well as the one sung by Polonius in his advice to his departing son, Laertes. In addition, in the Jerry Lewis film, *The Nutty Professor*, I can recall a very funny scene where Lewis' character convinces a school administrator to recite the famed speech (with hilarious ensuing results).

When I was in my mid-teens, my uncle went through a phase, in which, during family gatherings, he would impart his theories on the play. He believed it was a psychological study of a young man who wrongly believes his father was murdered. By that point, I must have read it, because at one dinner I cornered my uncle and asked him why, if there is no murder by Claudius of the elder Hamlet, does Claudius admit to the crime in Act III? He laughed and simply declared, "That's the flaw of the play!"

It was in high school that I first considered what Hamlet is actually saying in his speech. I came to this awareness by watching the television show *Happy Days* in which "The Fonz" is forced to play the lead role of Hamlet, but interrupts his performance to chastise his distracted audience, explaining the woes and tribulations of the protagonist and the seriousness of his situation.

I always regretted not taking a course on Shakespeare while in school. My brother broke up his premedical studies in college with a yearlong course on Shakespeare, which he is ever grateful to have participated in. I recently asked my brother if they read every play by the Bard and he noted that they read all but three: *Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III*. My brother joked that now, when those three plays pop up for discussion in the

cafeteria, he feigns an excuse for departure and heads for the door.

In the 1990s, I spent a lot of time reading art history and there was one book in particular that discussed *Hamlet* at length in a way that was truly enlightening. *Mannerism*, by Arnold Hauser, centers on the theory that after the High Renaissance and the genius of Michelangelo, art spiraled into a crazed crisis, i.e., the Mannerist movement, from which it never truly emerged. He sees the character of Hamlet as an indication of how far this movement spread. Hauser calls Hamlet "the first fully fledged representative in dramatic literature of the enigmatic modern character...with his inner conflict, his alienation from the world, his resentment of humanity which throws him back on himself." Labeling Hamlet a "narcissist," Hauser says, "from now on, the criterion of psychological plausibility is lack of wholeness and integrity and a sense of inadequacy."

In 1996, I sat in the Paris Theater in Manhattan watching *Hamlet*, Kenneth Branagh's four-hour-plus film. For the first time, I could "hear" and make sense of all that is great in Shakespeare. Branagh sets the play in late nineteenth century dress and Derek Jacobi and Nicholas Farrell give absolutely first-rate performances as Claudius and Horatio, respectively. Branagh is excellent as the Prince, but often does go over the top. I've watched this movie probably six or seven times at this point, which means I've given it more than an entire day of my life!

Most recently, I was very moved by the book *Specters of Marx* by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In it, he extensively uses Hamlet and, in particular, the chilling ghost of the murdered king to discuss a similar "spirit" that haunts us in today's society, Marxism. Derrida's book gives the front piece to a quote from the play: "The time is out of joint," and then it introduces the first chapter by quoting dialogue from the end of young Hamlet's first meeting with his father's ghost, which includes the beautiful lament, "Rest, rest perturbed spirit."

At present, I've downloaded Branagh's movie to a handheld device and I watch it in forty-minute clips during my commute on the train. I may take my edition of the text and read along as I watch. This could raise a few eyebrows from my fellow commuters, to which one could reply, "I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw." ◊

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Should I Say It or Not?

MAGALI AUDRY

Opinions are something we all have but not something we all share. Why? Interpretation of one's opinion can be viewed as an additional source of food for thought or associated with criticism, judgment, ignorance, analysis, or misunderstanding. If the latter happens, who wants to be asked, "Why are you attacking me?" or "Do you really know what you are talking about?" Can we give our opinions without being critical?

I think the best way to start is to go back to the basics and ask the most accessible tool—Google—the definitions of the words in question. "Criticism" can be seen as having two meanings; the first one is difficult to politely verbalize, and hard to accept the right way: "Expressing adverse or disapproving judgments." This definition carries a negative connotation, which, whatever the context, affects you negatively. The second meaning of "criticism" gets closer to the meaning of "opinion": "Expressing or involving an analysis of a creative work or performance." Art or movie critics evaluate what they see according to what they know, with more or less expertise. Critiques and reviews are not necessarily negative.

The word "opinion" also carries two meanings. An opinion can either be "a view or judgment formed about something, not

necessarily based on facts or knowledge," or "it can represent the beliefs or views of a large number or majority of people about a particular thing." I think the term "opinion" is more ambiguous: "In my opinion" sounds more polite and pleasant, and does not carry a negative connotation. However, in the end, it is simply a more diplomatic way to voice criticism. And people often opt for "opinions" when striving to be heard without hurting their audience's feelings. In other words, it is "politics." Everyone has the right to give his or her opinion. That doesn't mean that people want to hear it or that it is interesting, but if one finds the right words, an opinion or a critique can turn into a piece of helpful advice. Translating a critical thought into a constructive suggestion can be more difficult, but certainly smarter than just spreading one's thoughts.

From the moment someone acts on his or her opinions, whether by committing to a cause, exhibiting art, or publishing a work, for example, he or she is prone to be criticized. As a scientist, I am aware of critics—but not always prepared to respond to them. Critics



Cartoon by the author

can be useful—sometimes necessary—but only with diplomacy can they actually make their points. Words have meaning and words have an impact. Of course! Everybody knows that. Reading this is like reading a reminder e-mail to turn off the lights when leaving a room; doesn't that seem obvious? However, many would be surprised at how many lights remain on after hours. Sometimes people forget even the most obvious things. Use psychology to word your critiques and convey them with success! And turn off the lights when you leave a room. Critique, opinion, diplomacy, psychology. Am I trying to get you to manipulate people's minds? Of course not—I am just sharing my opinion. ◊

For Your Consideration—Crystal Ball Edition

JIM KELLER

With February's Academy Awards behind us, it's time to look into the crystal ball and see what the rest of 2012 has to offer. Who will be next year's Viola Davis or Meryl Streep vying for the top slot? How about those who gave unrewarded performances such as this year's Kirsten Dunst or Elizabeth Olsen? Who will be the Best Actors of the year, which films will be the Best Pictures? We may not know, but with some handy guesswork, we might come close. Here are some films making their 2012 debuts that could find themselves within the throes of Oscar come next year. Of course, it is way too early to predict and all in fun at this point, but what better way to stay occupied during the colder months of the year?

Lawless (Director: John Hillcoat):

Why you might like it: The story centers on a group of brothers who run a bootlegging business in depression-era Virginia.

Why I've got my eye on it: Having seen an early cut of the film, it features a strong perfor-

mance, with Oscar potential, from Tom Hardy. The film is gorgeous in its lush landscape and has pitch perfect music to match the scenery.

Prometheus (Director: Ridley Scott):

Why you might like it: It is Scott's return to the sci-fi mindset that brought us *Alien* (1979) and serves as a start of that film franchise.

Why I've got my eye on it: It features a stellar cast led by Noomi Rapace (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2011) and includes Charlize Theron, Michael Fassbender, Guy Pearce, Patrick Wilson, and Idris Elba. I'm a big fan of the *Alien* franchise and am excited to see what Scott's return will do for it.

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (Director: Peter Jackson):

Why you might like it: You more than likely enjoyed Frodo's adventures in *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) and you are curious to see what Jackson can do with the story that started it all.

Why I've got my eye on it: Jackson was

nominated for two of the three films in the LOTR trilogy and won for *The Return of the King* in 2003. Being a heavy hitter, he will more than likely figure into the race with this first installment of two films.

Django Unchained (Director: Quentin Tarantino):

Why you might like it: A slave-turned-bounty hunter sets out to rescue his wife from a Mississippi plantation owner with the help of his mentor.

Why I've got my eye on it: Tarantino's films play like a thrill ride and it's always fun to see what he has in store. The cast isn't too shabby either, namely Jamie Foxx and Leonardo DiCaprio.

Lincoln (Director: Steven Spielberg):

Why you might like it: It's a biopic on the sixteenth US president, particularly focused on the Civil War.

Why I've got my eye on it: Daniel Day-Lewis plays Lincoln, which seems a perfect role

for him. It will be interesting to see what he does with it and to see if the film nets him a third Oscar for Best Actor. It also features Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who was brilliant in *50/50* (2011).

The Great Gatsby (Director: Baz Luhrmann):

Why you might like it: It is the film adaptation of what many considered F. Scott Fitzgerald's best novel.

Why I've got my eye on it: It features Leonardo DiCaprio and Carey Mulligan in the leading roles, and both have a history of racing for Oscar. Also, it will be interesting to see if Luhrmann can bounce back after the disappointing *Australia* (2008).

Anna Karenina (Director: Joe Wright):

Why you might like it: You were a big fan of Leo Tolstoy's novel about a woman trapped in a loveless marriage who seeks something more out of life, but only finds more complications.

Why I've got my eye on it: It is directed by Joe Wright: I consider him one of the best directors of today, having directed *Atonement*, *Hanna*, and *Pride and Prejudice* (2005, 2007, and 2011) in this decade alone. *Karenina* seems a well-worn role for Keira Knightley—especially after her turn in *A Dangerous Method* (2011).

The Master (Director: Paul Thomas Anderson):

Why you might like it: A 1950s backdrop centered on the relationship between a charismatic intellectual known as "the Master" whose faith-based organization catches on in America, and a young drifter who becomes his right-hand man.

Why I've got my eye on it: The director of *Magnolia* (1999) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007) returns with a top-tier cast, featuring Amy Adams, Joaquin Phoenix, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Laura Dern. Anderson received a nomination for *There Will Be Blood* in 2007 and Adams's, Phoenix's, and Hoffman's performances often figure into Awards season.

Les Misérables (Director: Tom Hooper):

Why you might like it: The director of *The King's Speech* (2010) returns with the film adaptation of the Broadway musical.

Why I've got my eye on it: Both Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway have proven they have the pipes for this kind of production. It will be interesting to see what Amanda Seyfried, Helena Bonham-Carter, and Russell Crowe can bring to an adapted stage production of this magnitude.

Zero Dark Thirty (Director: Kathryn Bigelow)

Why you might like it: The director of *The Hurt Locker* uses the screen to depict the hunt

and capture of Osama Bin Laden.

Why I've got my eye on it: Bigelow achieved a *tour de force* with *The Hurt Locker* (2008) when she became the first woman to win the Oscar for Best Director. The film features this past year's it-girl, Jessica Chastain, alongside Joel Edgerton and Chris Pratt. Both Chastain and Edgerton could well find themselves in the throes of next year's Oscar race and who knows, Pratt (who appeared in *Moneyball* in 2011, and is part of the cast of NBC's *Parks and Recreation*) could surprise us, stepping outside his comedic self.

Killing Them Softly (Director: Andrew Dominik):

Why you might like it: Jackie Cogan is a professional enforcer who investigates a heist that went down during a mob-protected poker game.

Why I've got my eye on it: This year is looking to be a year of mobsters and gangsters with the likes of *Lawless* and *Gangster Squad* (see below) so what's one more shrimp on the bar-b? Besides, Brad Pitt is front and center here.

Gangster Squad (Director: Ruben Fleischer):

Why you might like it: It's a chronicle of the LAPD's fight to keep East Coast Mafia types out of Los Angeles in the 1940s and '50s.

Why I've got my eye on it: It features Sean Penn, Ryan Gosling, and Emma Stone and fits in well with a gangster/mob theme for 2012.

The Place Beyond the Pines (Director: Derek Cianfrance):

Why you might like it: A motorcycle stunt rider considers committing a crime in order to provide for his family, an act that brings him head-to-head with a cop-turned-politician.

Why I've got my eye on it: Cianfrance wowed with *Blue Valentine* (2010) and Gosling can only go up, up, up! The film also features the severely underrated Aussie Rose Byrne.

Dark Shadows (Director: Tim Burton):

Why you might like it: You enjoyed the cult television series on which this film is based and/or you're a fan of Tim Burton.

Why I've got my eye on it: Burton's macabre-tinged films are always a lot of fun to watch. I'm sure this gothic-horror tale centering on the life of a vampire and his run-ins with various monsters, witches, werewolves, and ghosts will be no different.

Voyage of Time (Director: Terrence Malick):

Why you might like it: It's an examination of the birth and death of the universe.

Why I've got my eye on it: Malick wowed with *The Tree of Life* (2011), which went on to be nominated for Best Picture and Best Director honors. He had also been nominated for *The*

Thin Red Line (1998). This film features Brad Pitt and Emma Thompson, who are always exquisite.

Untitled Terrence Malick Project (Director: Terrence Malick):

Why you might like it: A romantic drama centered on a man who reconnects with a woman from his hometown after his marriage to a European woman falls apart.

Why I've got my eye on it: Again, Malick is one of the best working directors out there at the moment. This time he uses the skills of Ben Affleck, Rachel McAdams, Jessica Chastain, and Rachel Weisz to tell his tale.

Only God Forgives (Director: Nicholas Winding Refn):

Why you might like it: A Bangkok police lieutenant and a gangster settle their differences in a Thai boxing match.

Why I've got my eye on it: Winding Refn's *Drive* (2011) put him on the map last year, earning him critical acclaim for himself while pushing along the burgeoning career of Ryan Gosling; I see no reason why this film wouldn't do the same. In addition, Kristin Scott Thomas is always one to watch.

Gravity (Director: Alfonso Cuarón):

Why you might like it: The lone survivor of a space mission to repair the Hubble telescope desperately tries to return to Earth to reunite with her daughter.

Why I've got my eye on it: Besides featuring Oscar winners Sandra Bullock and George Clooney, Cuarón earned critical acclaim with *Children of Men* (2006) and *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001).

The Avengers (Director: Joss Whedon):

Why you might like it: You're a fan of the comic by the same name.

Why I've got my eye on it: This adapted comic franchise started off with a bang with the premiere of *Iron Man* (2008), which was followed by a sequel and last year's *Captain America* (2011), the latter of which surprised me. I'm also a fan of Scarlett Johansson, who joins Robert Downey Jr.'s Iron Man and Chris Evans' Captain America as Black Widow.

The Paperboy (Director: Lee Daniels):

Why you might like it: A reporter returns to his Florida hometown to investigate a case involving a death row inmate.

Why I've got my eye on it: Daniels directed both *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2010) and *Monster's Ball* (2002), both of which were in the Awards races in their respective release years. The film features Zac Efron in a more serious role than his previous outings—this time paired with seasoned actors Nicole Kidman and John Cusack. ◊



New York State of Mind

This Month Natural Selections interviews *Alejandra Gonzalez, Animal Health Technician in the Comparative Bioscience Center.*

Country of origin: Colombia

1. How long have you been living in the New York area? Eight years.

2. Where do you live? Spanish Harlem.

3. Which is your favorite neighborhood? The Upper West Side.

4. What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated? Everyone who visits New York always goes from midtown to downtown. Tourists never go uptown, but there's a lot to see uptown. Instead, everybody goes to Chinatown. Chinatown is overrated. I don't like it at all. It's too dirty and crowded.

5. What do you miss most when you are out of town? I miss the subway (even though now I have a motorcycle). I went to Texas for a month and it was so bor-

ing! It was just mall, car, house, mall, car, house. That was it! So boring!

6. If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be? I would change how people drive here. They're all crazy people.

7. Describe a perfect weekend in NYC. On my perfect weekend I would have a picnic in Central Park, walk around and go The Museum of Natural History. Then I would just hang out and relax at home.

8. What is the most memorable experience you have had in NYC? My first snow day! I moved to New York from Colombia eight years ago in March and I had been living here for one week when it snowed. I had never seen snow before so it was a very special moment.

9. If you could live anywhere else, where would that be? I would live in Colombia. It's my country!

10. Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? I am now! I don't think

I could live in any other city. Especially after my experience in Texas. ◊



Vox Clamantis In Urbe There is Nothing New Under the Sun or A Defense of Liberal Democracy

JACOB OPPENHEIM

I recently had the pleasure of discovering an adversary within the pages of *Natural Selections*. As debate is more interesting than polemic, I wholeheartedly embrace this new dynamic. I must take issue, however, with several of the points made and caricatures painted about my beliefs presented in the March issue. Rather than a point by point dissection, my aim is to take on three fundamentally mistaken beliefs that motivate Benjamin Campbell's piece: the question of meritocracy, the technocratic fallacy, and the influence of money in politics.

Policymaking should be an empirically founded endeavor. The problem with a "politics of ideas" is that nearly all political ideas are inimical to human welfare. Millennia of human history have given us a myriad of examples of forms of government and social organization, with an explosion of forms arising with mass politics in the nineteenth century. The problem is that nearly all of these forms were tested and found wanting during the twentieth century. What remains as a subject of debate, then, are those within the narrow

range that at least do not cause harm. This is undoubtedly a sign of progress.

Within this spectrum, there is room for philosophical debate over the value of certain rights and freedoms, but again, this range has been fortunately circumscribed. In empirically based policymaking, there is good reason to believe that scientists, and the well educated as a whole, have an outsized role to play. A thorough education gives us an understanding of statistics, and an experience with empirical methods, testing claims and weighing evidence. We have experience dealing with uncertainties and errors. Given the messiness of social scientific data, this is invaluable. Ultimately, if an educated elite accepts its duties, politics would be reduced to the weighing of certain fundamental values (say, freedom versus equality), an exercise only legitimized by democracy.

There remains the question, however, of human fallibility, which brings us to the technocratic fallacy. By the turn of the twentieth century, the old aristocratic orders had fallen away enough that the Fabian society in London could envision a

socialism administered by the most talented. Writing in 1939, George Orwell presupposed that technocracy was the only way to resist Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Friedrich Hayek memorably countered these ideas in the late 1940s. Responding to the postwar Labor program of nationalizations, he argued for the power of free markets and against centralizing economic control in the government. Markets were invaluable tools for revealing preferences, spreading information, and standardizing products. Thus, they outperformed any form of technocratic control. History was to prove him right, with the Soviet economy stalling by the late 1950s and the failure of "The Best and the Brightest" to win the war in Vietnam.

As Hayek believed, the only way out of the technocratic fallacy is capitalism and decentralized, distributed decision-making. The basis of nearly all left wing political thought is a denial of the costs of technocracy. It is thus self-contradictory to attack capitalism from a standpoint of the fallibility of human reason. If regulators did not see the financial crisis coming, the answer

may not be to hire more bureaucrats, but to stop protecting the financial services industry from the consequences of its own actions. The best regulation we can write involves putting large error bars on our ability to control the economy and nature itself, and then weighing costs and benefits.

Lastly, I would like to address the influence of money in politics. While a column about campaign finance is in the works, the extreme claims made about the ability to buy elections are patently false. In 2010, the fortunes of David and Charles Koch and others (funneled through Americans

for Prosperity) were unable to buy Senate seats for broadly unacceptable candidates, like Sharon Angle in Nevada. No matter how much of her own fortune Meg Whitman spent, her moderate conservatism proved unable to defeat poorly funded liberal has-been Jerry Brown in California. The same is true on the left; the tens of millions funneled to the John Kerry campaign and allies by Peter Lewis and George Soros proved incapable of defeating George W. Bush. A glance at editorials in the major newspapers, across the gamut of political Web sites, and even on television, should be

more than enough to convince a reasonable person that moneyed interests do not control political discourse.

If the system and the state of our country are imperfect, it is not due to a lack of discussion about certain issues. Rather, it is due to the fecklessness of our leaders and the treason by inaction of our intellectuals. Without empirical facts and methods, complaints about the state of affairs are just so much incoherent rage; they are, as Macbeth describes his own life, "...a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing." ◊

Name Games

CARLY GELFOND

My Aunt Nori was sure the name was "Claire." The rest of us—friends and family alike—batted names around like beach balls, but in the absence of important details (the baby's sex, for instance) were more reluctant to commit to a solid guess.

Nearly a year ago, after squealing over the news from the mother- and father-to-be, we were dismayed to learn that for the duration of our friend's pregnancy we would be told neither the sex nor the chosen names for the baby. Oh, how we pleaded and griped. Could they really keep us in suspense for nine months? Little did we know what enormous pleasure we were about to derive from the name-guessing game, months of endlessly pitching possibilities—Oscar or Annette, Tucker or Chloe, Shmuly or Helga. In the meantime, we referred to the unborn child as Peanut, the shape it most closely resembled. In fact, we soon left the expectant couple (their lips vacuum-sealed) out of the discussion altogether; our hypothesizing really didn't necessitate their participation at all.

In the US, the art and practice of naming children is a reflection of personal values. A child's name may act as a signifier that connotes a certain pedigree, or it may be a way to honor and to pay tribute to an elder. It might also simply be an expression of the parents' creativity, as was perhaps the case with little Blue Ivy, the much-anticipated infant daughter of music power couple Beyonce Knowles and Jay-Z.

It might come as a shock to many Americans, then, to learn that not all governments embrace the art of baby naming with quite the degree of openness found here. In a number of countries around the world, laws have been enacted to regulate the name choices of parents. Take Germany, for instance, where the chosen name must unambiguously indicate the gender of the child, must not negatively affect the child's well-being, and must be neither a last name nor the name of an object, product, or place. German parents must submit the chosen name to the local area's office of vital statistics, which will then decide whether to accept or reject it after an evaluation. The results of such a process may seem counterintuitive at times: as one source reported, in separate instances in which names were submitted for male babies, Matti was rejected, as it did not indicate gender, while Legolas and Nemo were approved.

In Denmark, the Law on Personal Names dictates that parents choose from a register of around 7,000 acceptable names. Names

that are not on the list (for instance, Pluto, Monkey, and Jiminico) must be submitted to the local parish church and reviewed by a panel of government officials. Among the types of names often rejected are unusual spellings of common names, names that do not clearly indicate gender, last names as first names, and any other unusual names. While the law may appear distasteful to some—an effort to prevent creativity and enforce sameness and practicality—its backers point out that the intent is to protect innocent children from the burden of absurd or silly names. (Because I know you're wondering, Pluto and Monkey were rejected; Jiminico was accepted.)

And Denmark and Germany aren't the only ones finding it necessary to enact legislation for baby naming. During the past ten years, registrars of New Zealand's department of internal affairs saw fit to reject such names as Lucifer, v8, Anal, Fish and Chips, and Stallion. As *The Economist* reported in January of this year, disappointed parents in that country included those wishing to christen their children with numbers (89), letters (J, I, and T) and punctuation marks (*).

In 2009, *The New York Times* reported that parents in Sweden wanting to name their infant son Q were prohibited from doing so. Lower courts ruled that the name did not comply with the 1982 Naming Law, legislation that in earlier years had allowed approval of the names Lego and Google (as middle names), but not Superman, Elvis, Metallica, Ikea, and "Brfxxccxxmnpccclllmmnprxv-clmncckssqlbb11116" (apparently pronounced "Albin.") In the case of Q, the boy's parents, arguing that the name was simply what they had taken to calling him since birth, appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, which, perhaps as a sign of the times in Sweden, at last granted approval.

While naming laws have eased in many countries, the US remains one of the most tolerant. If it can be spelled with standard letters, the name is allowed here. Celebrity children having benefited (or perhaps suffered) as a result of this tolerance include Frank Zappa's Moon Unit, Gwyneth Paltrow's Apple, and Penn Jillette's Moxie CrimeFighter.

Fortunately for the little peanut who arrived in January, her parents named her "Nora." Aunt Nori admitted that she'd been wrong, but was hardly dissatisfied with their choice. ◊

High Desert Running

JEFF SMITH



Miralena admires the vastness of the high desert. Photo by the author.

Within half a mile of home I am running along a wash-boarded dirt road, bumping over rocks and jumping over holes in the ground the size of manholes in Manhattan. The road is lined with the skeletons of small animals and the remnants of fires set by locals hiding in the desert while they drink. There are no trees or there is nothing taller than I (except for the odd cottonwood that stands alone in a field), and the big, clear blue sky offers no protection from the relentless sun looming overhead like a bare bulb in a closed room. The good news is that the humidity is so low that even on the hottest day in August, when the air temperature gets up to 95 °F, I barely break a sweat. Still, dehydration comes easy in the desert and I find myself drinking more than I ever did in New York.

Last year, training for Boston, I was running in New York, racing through Central Park and pushing my daughter in a BOB stroller over flat macadam. In New York, my main running circle was Central Park. There, I had all the training ground I needed: Harlem's steep inclines, the rolling hills of the West Drive, the long straightaway stretch up the East Drive, and frequent water fountains. I had other routes I enjoyed, other places to run, but Central Park was my Mecca. I would see friends running there, meet other runners, make new friends, and bond with old ones.

This year I shall train for Boston through the high desert of northwestern New Mexico, where, in July 2011, my wife and I moved with our daughter and two cats to a little town called Shiprock—itsself part of the great Navajo Nation. The population here was about 8,800 in 2007 (ref: <http://www.city-data.com/city/Shiprock-New-Mexico.html>) over a land area of less than sixteen square miles. That's 515 people per square mile. (Manhattan alone has a population of about 1.6 million over a land area of about twenty-three square miles, or 71,000 people per square mile.) Out here the sky is almost always a clear, bright blue; clouds are few and far between and are usually the contrail of a jet passing high overhead; and the terrain is as unforgiving as a crying toddler in the middle of the night. Running here couldn't be more different

than running in New York.

Though considered the high desert, the geography is not the kind of desert one might imagine. Rabbit brush and desert sage cover a landscape punctuated by the occasional piñon tree or prairie dog hole. Snakes hide under scrub brush and piles of rocks. Dried riverbeds called "washes" stream through the reservation, gashes cut by years of erosion. Distant mountains rise out of the desert mesa: the Lukachukais to the west over the Arizona border; the Chuskas to the south; and Ute Mountain to the north into Colorado. Flat-topped mesas rise from the desert floor like monoliths: Chimney Rock, Flat Top Rock, and Standing Rock. The hog-backed ridges of Hogback to the east frequently stop snow and rain from reaching the reservation. And to the northeast lie the mountain-like cuestas of Mesa Verde National Park. Connecting everything like a giant jigsaw puzzle are those dusty rutted dirt roads that twist and turn, crisscross each other and cut straight towards the horizon until the earth itself seems to disappear.

I try to stay on the dirt roads because veering from them leaves me open to snake bites, trips, turning an ankle in a hole of loose sand, or simply getting lost. And though the roads are well traveled, they are neither smooth nor, for the most part, packed dirt. As I was searching for a regular route, I came across many of these roads that would be fun to run across if they were near the ocean; it was like running over a California beach with a stroller. The sand was so thick my foot sank up to my shoelaces and the stroller tires disappeared. On some runs it can take me more than an hour to travel nearly four miles. The altitude hasn't helped. I'm more acclimated now than I was four months ago, but I still get winded much easier—especially on the hills. The third mile of my regular route has a 400-foot elevation change. (For comparison, Heartbreak Hill on the northwest corner of Central Park rises about 100 feet in one mile.)

My daughter is usually the only person I encounter on my runs. I've seen a total of four other people running out here. It is such a rare occurrence that by the time I get over the shock of seeing someone they have already passed and I forget to say "hello." Still, Miralena is a great training partner. Pushing the stroller has made me a stronger runner, and in many ways a better stay-at-home father. I'm calmer after a run, more patient with a daughter who won't sleep, won't eat, or throws a toddler tantrum. She has gotten into the groove of running, too. One of her favorite activities is to "run like daddy," which she does with the full abandon of a child who may one day run the Boston Marathon.

Back on my regular route, I pass farms where Navajos stand in the blaring sun chopping weeds out of long rows of corn and lawns of vegetables. They pluck the corn from the stalks by hand and carry ears by the basketful to a pickup waiting near the road. I wave to an old woman sitting beneath the shade of a single tree that seems placed there just for that purpose. She waves back at the strange white man pushing a child in a stroller through the desert. After a mile I look down at my running partner. She is asleep, the way she usually is on these morning runs. I arch my back and hold my head a little higher, and I wonder how far I can make it today before she wakes up. ◉

Hippie-Punching for Highbrows

BENJAMIN CAMPBELL

In his March column, Jacob Oppenheim delivers “An Investigation into Environmentalism” in which he avoids any serious discussion of the topic he is ostensibly investigating. On one hand, Oppenheim admits that there are significant scientific reasons for environmental activism. However, rather than exploring these, Oppenheim prefers to imagine that “the central idea of environmentalism” is some sort of irrational religious devotion. This convenient straw man allows him to dedicate the majority of his column to the rhetorical equivalent of hippie-punching. Remarkably, after avoiding all real debate, he then concludes with a casual dismissal of all opposition on contentious issues such as Keystone XL, pesticides, and nuclear energy.

Unfortunately, this is nothing new for Oppenheim, as his writing for *Natural Selections* has repeatedly centered around dismissive caricatures of activists as irrational fools, without seriously

considering their reasoned arguments. While I am certainly vulnerable to similar criticisms of caricature, I believe there is a fundamental difference between condescension aimed at the powerful in society and that directed toward the powerless. At its best the former is satire, while the latter is simply bullying and not particularly consistent with the claim to represent “the logical principles elucidated during the Enlightenment.” ◊

Comments and Feedback?
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Life on a Roll



Untitled by Carolina Prando

