

IMPACT TIMES

A News Magazine

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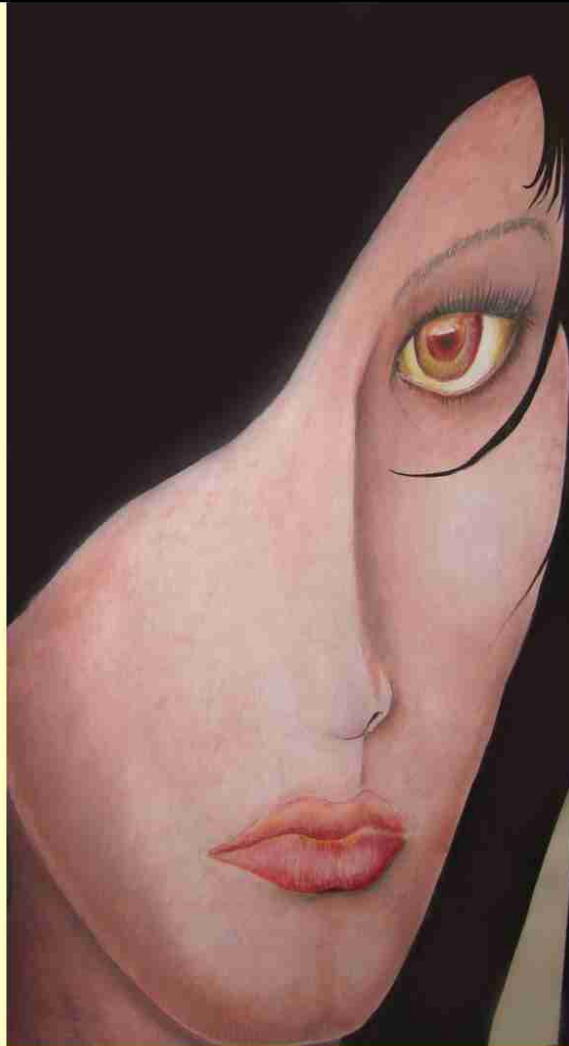
RELIGION

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Volume 1: Issue 1: Spring 2008

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THE DAY OF RECKONING was the day those B-52 bombers swamped the night sky of my former homeland. Cicero said that nature herself has imprinted on the minds of all the idea of God. What he did not tell us is that nature herself has also imprinted on the minds of all the idea of war. The world, according to the sages of ancient Greece, are composed of four basic elements—earth, air, water and fire. Those sages failed to mention the existence of a fifth element—human. The precept is obvious: contemplation of our existence as humans not only makes us commonsensical, but benevolent and more empathic, too. When all the elements of the earth array against us, the earth shudders beneath our feet, the air fills with poison, and the torrent inundates our street as fire devours our home and burns our family. Then we will truly know what it feels like to be human and to be helpless when the world turns against us. From 1969 until the time I was three, more than 500,000 tons of bombs were dropped on rural Cambodia—more than the amount unleashed on Japan in World War II.¹ The hole in the ground that my grandfather had dug to keep his family safe reminded the world of those days of infernal hell. During this period, and in the chaotic years that followed, millions lost their homes, the economy faltered, a civil war broke loose, and a ruthless regime took control. That was then, a thousand light years ago when I was a child; a time when the American warplanes flattened the vast landscape of Cambodia's countryside, the Khmer Rouges killed millions, and the Vietnamese waged war against Pol Pot's forces in a country that had been trampled by foreigners for over two thousand years.

Thirty something years later on a windy January night in 2008, I faced a new enemy; this time it was Mother Nature. Her powerful gush jostled my car left and right like a child's plaything as I sped it past a pothole on Monroe Drive. With both hands tight on the steering wheel I steered clear of an oncoming car. It was a jazzy, unsettling Saturday night. The traffic lights bobbed along with the swaying trees that aligned both sides of the street. Excitement filled the air. On some couches of some living rooms somewhere in town or in some jammed pack bars, people must have been cheering on for their football team. "Go Patriots!" someone on the radio shouted. My New York root prevented me from cheering along. Yes, I was working in Manhattan when the terrorists attacked. Images of the burning Twin Towers stalked my mind as I sped to a friend's performance for which I was already ten minutes late. I had just finished my book signing in another town forty-five miles away from Atlanta. It was one of my many road trips in the humble life as an author. My cell phone rang. I scrambled for the black pouch below my beltline. "Hello," I said. The roaring engine, spinning wheels, and howling wind made it near impossible to speak. I rolled up the car window and pushed the phone up close. "Who's this?" I asked. The signal began to fade. With my head tilting at a forty-five degree angle and the phone pivoting between my ear and right shoulder, I swirled the car out of the deserted road and did a perpendicular on an empty parking lot. My high school days of doing the donut on dry pavement had finally paid off. The car aligned perfectly between two fading white lines that were barely visible under my Saturn headlights. "Who's this?" I asked again. A Cambodian voice replied. His name didn't stir a hair on my neck but what he said next jolted many nerves.

There, in that unlit empty parking lot, memories of my childhood sprang back to life—memories of tanks thundering across the battlefield. "Run for your life!" a voice from my past emerged from the thickness of my brain cells. Life, I learned, is a fox in disguise. Who would have guessed that on the other side of the line was the grandson of the Cambodian Minister of Defense who had trained Lon Nol, another revolutionary leader who staged a coup against Prince Sihanouk in 1970, started a civil war, and later caved to the invading forces of the Khmer Rouges in April 1975, the year that Year Zero began and the year I was five.

¹Revisiting the Killing Fields: The Khmer Rouge and Globalization. [database online], Rachel Rinaldo, Department of Sociology, Culture, Society, & Globalization. Professor Arjun Appadurai and Ronald Khalidi. (April 1997, accessed 02 July 2007); available from <http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/revisit.htm>; Internet.

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L-O-N-D-O-N, embossed within the sidewalk in front of the historic H.H. Battles Building, sparkle in the sunlight. This is not London, England. This is Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In 1976 Warren and Dolores Browne bought the historic H.H. Battles Building and created The London Restaurant, an addition to the various London insignia's they had already formed. At the age of fourteen I was the hostess at London Restaurant. Every Saturday night I danced in the disco upstairs until wee hours in the morning. I enjoyed my Bat Mitzvah party there, and savored tender eight-ounce burgers with sautéed onions and portabella mushrooms as I sat by the window and enjoyed the view of people passing by many nights after diving practice.

Now, 30 years later, when I mentioned The London Restaurant to native Philadelphians a huge smile filled their faces as they recollect the good old days.

In 1982 I left Philadelphia for college to pursue a career in theatre. During my absence my parents decided to expand their London tribute in Florida. Part of their pursuit, however, was leasing the Battles Building to other restaurateurs – Odeon and Bistro Bix. I thought that was the end of London at 114 S. 12th Street. When I returned to Philadelphia for law school and entered the building for the first time since I left town, the building was empty. When I entered, the shimmering L-O-N-D-O-N remained printed at the entrance.

“What was to become of this construction?” I asked myself.

In 1999 I completed law school, but my passion drove me into a different direction. My question was answered when my parents offered me the job of establishing an innovative nightclub/space event. I jumped at the opportunity and 114 S. 12th Street became TPDS Club (The Philadelphia Dance Spot). I worked long hours and enjoyed everything the building had to offer. Each day I was greeted at the front door by the silver glittering letters. Those letters reminded me of the past. The reminiscence of an incredible time was becoming a part of a fantastic present.

I stopped working at TPDS in January 2003 after giving birth to my son. I wanted to go back and work but motherhood took precedence. At the age of 70, my mother took control of the business. She hired people to fill my role and did a great job maintaining the hot spot herself. She seemed to love every minute of it.

I visited TPDS every chance I got. It was my second home. Two hundred family members and guests were entertained at my son's first birthday party there. When the miracle of birth arrived into my life again, the parties multiplied. In February 2008 I was informed that TPDS Club was no more. The estate was sold to John Mims, a renowned chef. John will craft a new existence for this jewel. Hopefully, he will take heed to the imprinted inscription by the entrance at 114 S. 12th Street.

ALLEGRA S. COLEMAN began her creative career hosting TV shows at the age of 12. After earning her BFA in theatre, she continued to perform in diverse roles including playing Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and Lulu in *The Dutchman*. Her favorite job was with The Magic Mirror Theater Company, a children's improvisational traveling show. CONTACT: Allegrascoleman@gmail.com

Remembrance: the act of remembering, the ability to remember, or a memorial. Recollection.

A FEW YEARS BACK, MY WIFE DISCOVERED an estate sale in a nice neighborhood near our home. The house was listed through a real estate professional, and a company brought in to evaluate, price, and sell was clearing out its contents. The elderly gentleman had recently passed, and his wife had died a few years earlier. They never had children, and their entire estate had been willed to a local church. No one existed that could claim the inheritance. As my wife, and soon afterwards myself browsed through the beautifully appointed home, we made several purchases, including an antique bench with matching chair, a nice oriental rug, and lamps. One item really caught my attention. As a photographer, I have an appreciation for old photos, and I came across an old, framed image of a child sitting in a chair. Black and white, touched up, likely from the early part of the twentieth century. I was informed this was a portrait of the gentleman who had lived here. I purchased the framed image.

My thoughts went to the couple, childless, and now gone. How will they be remembered? When I look at the old image, I wonder if anyone else has recollections of this couple that spent so many years together. Perhaps they were pillars in the church that they generously donated their worldly things to. Are they immortalized with a plaque or a display of photos? Was a child changed forever by an encouraging word from this couple in the distant past? How do I want to be remembered? For those with children, it becomes a bit difficult to fade away into obscurity. A parent's legacy is often passed down to children, both possessions and values. Successful individuals can usually look at a positive influence at home when reflecting on their successes. This is not always the case, but it is difficult to overcome adversity at home. Kids will have the stories to pass down between generations. The photos will remain in the family and the videos will keep memories alive. A new generation of genealogy buffs will emerge. Treasured artifacts of the past are kept for generations; the story behind them becomes weaker and more fictional unless immortalized in writing.

Remembrance is not necessarily a positive action. The abusers are remembered for the pain they inflicted. A lack of caring for one's family is not quickly forgotten. My experience has been for these types to be discussed less, allowing the individual to fade more into obscurity, as though he never existed. Mere remnants of information that may be gone in a generation's time. The word potential is not a positive legacy.

When life's goals have been achieved, events have unfolded as planned, and one dies seemingly happy but in obscurity, aren't they a success? Certainly they won't be categorized a failure if no one is adversely affected by their life? Does one have to positively affect others to leave a successful legacy? Writers can touch many lives through books, artists can influence through paintings and sketches, and leaders can bring a profound influence upon a generation of people. What about those who live a modest life out of the spotlight, then leave their portion to an organization that uses it for the benefit of others? Did they live up to their potential, or their calling in life? Perhaps through their words and actions many have been touched, and they never were aware.

Legacies are created one small piece at a time. Some touch lives, places, and things, and leave them better than they were found. Some destroy everything they touch, and then move on when all avenues of further manipulation are exhausted. Another round of people and things to wreck. I will be remembered through my children and the future generations, either for better or for worse. Helping others reach their goals is a noble cause, and it will lead to you reaching your own goals. The impact an individual can have on their circle of influence is staggering, as it can trickle down for generations. What is my legacy? Through photographs, writing, and example to others . . .

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A BOY, AN OLD MAN, AND A DOG laid belly up on Jekyll Point Beach. An arm length away a baby crab made its way toward the three. Sensing danger near the dog rolled over and let out a mighty growl. The wind blew, the ocean roared, and the baby crab raised its claws. The dog attacked and the crab snatched back. "Grandpa, why does Chuck bite?" the boy asked. The old man looked into the sky, took a deep breath, and said, "Because God gave him teeth." The boy scratched his head and said, "I don't understand. I have teeth but I don't bite." The old man's eyes remained on the sky. He studied the darkening clouds and the hungry seagulls that circled overhead. "You will one day, sunny," the old man said. The dog and the crab continued to wage their war. The dog growled, inched closer, and attacked. The crab stayed low to the sand and snapped its claws. The dog jumped back. "Why did God gave Chuck teeth so that he can bite?" the boy asked. The old man's eyes followed the seagulls in the sky. His gracefully silver hair fluttered with the wind. "God gave him teeth but He didn't tell Chuck to bite," the old man said, his thinning voice nearly drowned by the roar from the sea. The boy scratched his head and continued to keep an eye on the fight. He couldn't decide who to feel sorry for, the baby crab or his own dog that was a thousand times the crab's size. Both were God's creatures in his eyes. "If God didn't tell Chuck to bite, then who did?" the boy asked.

The boy's question struck a nerve in the old man's mind. Being a retired geneticist, he had only one answer. "It's in the genes," he said. The boy scratched his head again. "What is a gene?" the boy asked. "It's called DNA," the old man said. "So who made the DNA?" the boy asked. The old man looked beyond the flying seagulls and the clouds. Toothless, he smiled and breathed in the salty ocean air. "The grandest question of all has finally arrived," he thought, "and it came from the mouth of my grandchild." The question triggered memories of his youth, his teenage years, his adult life, and finally his elderly state. He had an unhappy first marriage to a woman who he called Witch, so he recalled those bitter memories of that witch-of-a-woman. He had a loving relationship with his angelic second wife so he recalled those happy summer nights that he spent making love to her under the stars on the beach. From his second marriage spawned a child that later worshiped the ground that he walked. Therefore, he remembered the quiet afternoons that he spent fishing with that child by a shallow rolling stream where the trout were plenty and the water was clear. Like a fairy tale being washed clean of all that were unreal, the truth began to unveil. Beyond the first and second World War of which he was a part, and beyond the existence of the concept of time, the story of his life unfolded. It became clear to him that life wasn't what it seemed. The life that he knew was no longer set in the quiet farm town of Michigan where he grew up and picked corns, or the big bustling city of Boston where he went to school and studied science and philosophy. Those were simply backdrops that distracted his state of mind.

Greater verisimilitude was given through a series of questions that stretched across the vast landscape inside the old man's head, a place that remained as foreign to him then as the day that he was born. Interwoven into intricately rivers of firing neurons and brain cells, cells that held pages of his life, were helical strings of DNA that held keys to unlock doors to answer his ultimate questions: "What now? What come next? Will I be a chef, a deer, or a particle of dust to be recycled in the dynamic nature of things in my next life? Am I going to be seated on a cushion of clouds next to what some of us called 'God' in his heavenly throne or I am going to burn with flesh melting in the pit of hell?" For what it was worth in a butterfly of a life, he finally broke free from his cocoon. With wings spread and weight stripped from the restraint of society's gravitational pull, restraint previously chained by the value of his upbringing and the rules of society, this old man's mind finally became as sharp as the edge of a needle's tip. Hinging in critical balance on that tip was one refractive but globule of a question: "Why does Chuck bite?" He finally got it thanks to his grandchild. Chuck bites because God made him. It was in Chuck's genes to bite.

RICHARD QUAN survived one of history's greatest genocide, Cambodia's Killing Fields. He is the founder of Impact Times and author of Siren's Silence. He is currently writing a war novel about the Killing Fields. CONTACT: richard@qvisionpress.com

THE DAY MY LIFE CAME CRASHING DOWN by Darcy Busch

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IT BEGAN AS ANY NORMAL FRIDAY. I went to work teaching preschool; a job that that I loved and felt appreciated. The day dragged on. I had to leave work early for a doctor appointment, a meeting that I truly dreaded. Finally, it was naptime for my students, meaning it was time for me to see what my would doctor have to say.

Although only a ten minute drive, the trip to my appointment seemed like an eternity. I had a horrible feeling the moment I stepped inside my doctor's office.

It might not be a normal day after all, I feared. The doctor entered the room, sat down, took a deep breath and spilled out the three dreadful words.

"You have cancer," she said. She went on and informed me that I needed to get an operation as soon as possible.

The rest of the visit became a big blur. I did not remember much of the conversation that ensued. When our meeting ended I sped home in my car and broke

down the moment I stepped into my house. Tears poured down my face. My husband came home from work and I told him what had happened. It was hard for me to share the heart wrenching news, but more difficult to tell him than finding out for myself. We sat on our bed and hugged; both trying to reassure the other. My daughter was next to find out my condition. She had yet to arrive home from school.

"Oh how can I tell her that her mother may not be around to see her grow up and get married?" I asked myself.

When she finally arrived, we sat down on the sofa and I began the talk that no parent should ever have to have with a child. I could not sleep later that night. Suddenly the phone rang. I could not make out the mumblings from the other side of the line. My husband walked in; he had that same look that he had had earlier.

"What , what is it?" I asked.

"One of your students was killed in a car accident," he said.

"What, no...who?" I asked.

"Connor," he said.

Just when I thought that nothing more horrible could happen it did. I sank into a deep depression. The funeral was held on Sunday, followed by my surgery on Monday. Both days do not seem real to me; even to this day. Afterward, I prayed for God to provide me an answer as to why all of this had to happen. Finally, it came to me.

"Take control of your life," a voice in my head echoed.

Knowing what had to be done, I quit my job and enrolled in college to make my long forgotten dream of being a pediatrician a reality. At Wichita State University my love of writing was rekindled. Sitting at the computer one day, the words began flowing. Before long I had written my first manuscript. I mailed it to a publisher and waited. A few days later, after coming home from school, there was a message on my answering machine. I pushed the button on the machine.

"We want to publish your book," a voice said.

The words kept replaying in my head. I knew right there and then my new purpose in life. Everything that I do from that moment forward will be in the memory of my little guy. Forever & Always.

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PEOPLE SAY THAT SUICIDES WHO DIE wearing red shoes and a piece of red string tied to their pinky will become vengeful ghosts. They will come back and seek retribution for the injury done to them when they were still alive.

This morning, Cynthia was running late. Han Lin Vocational College enforced a strict uniform code so she hurriedly threw on her wrinkled uniform shirt and skirt, trying to smooth them out the best she could with her bare hands instead of using an iron. The radio blasted scratchy news on ICRT, the only English radio station based in Taipei. The good thing about ICRT, although Cynthia's listening comprehension only allowed her to pick up an English word or two here or there, was that it broadcast strictly international or political news. No horrible Taiwanese society news about the man who stabbed his ex-girlfriend last night or the love suicide of Taipei's premier hypnotist's daughter. No acid poured on anyone's face, no stalkers, kidnapers, gangsters, or sex crimes. Cynthia could no longer watch Taiwanese news on television, not after that man. It would take forever for her to feel safe again, because he had threatened to take her life after she refused to have anything more to do with him.

Finally rushing out the door, Cynthia noticed a piece of paper taped to the front door. She reached for it and read it.

"Dear tenant: a message in red mentioning your name was found scribbled on the basement wall. Regretfully, we must ask you to clean the writing on the wall as soon as possible, as it must be left by an acquaintance of yours. The Building Managers."

He was Cynthia's first boyfriend. Once or twice they went to a motel and rubbed against each other's bodies, but never went further than that. He was dissatisfied.

When Cynthia said that she wanted to break up with him, he began threatening to kill her. He sent her letters written in his own blood and followed her after school. This continued all winter and spring, and in the summer Cynthia went south to stay with her fraternal grandparents. Nobody knew about her boyfriend turned molester. When classes began again in March, Cynthia's stalker was gone. She never felt entirely safe again, and wished she had friends at school, but she didn't. She was just one of the faceless many with the same uniform and similar hairstyle at Han Lin Vocational School; nobody knew her, and ultimately nobody would notice when she was murdered.

After school, Cynthia finally walked downstairs to look at the writing on the basement wall.

CYNTHIA I AM GOING TO SLIT YOUR THROAT YOU ROTTEN BITCH YOU JUST WAIT

Cynthia put one palm against the wall to support herself. He was back. She should never have gotten mixed up with him. She would be next on the Taiwan news: "vocational school student brutally mutilated by spurned boyfriend".

She walked back into her apartment, put on a pair of bright red shoes, and picked up a sewing bag from a shelf. She removed a spool of red thread from the bag and carefully cut a small piece of it. She tied the thread around her left pinky, took the elevator to the twelfth floor, and went to the roof of the building. Up there was a jungle of gas and satellite equipment, and a large humming water tower surrounded by a metal net. She walked close to the ledge and closed her eyes for a second. Then she put one shiny red shoe on the ledge, and with a boost, the other. She didn't take the time to rebalance herself as she stood; she simply fell, fell, and landed on the first floor, in a grubby alley beside No.3 Sing Yi Street. A neighbor's dog barked, hearing the dull thump of the body.

YU-HAN CHAO is a Taiwanese writer, artist and poet. Her books include a short story collection, "Passport Baby", and a poetry book, "We Grow Old: 53 Chinese Love Poems". Her short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in Bellevue Literary Review and other literary magazines. CONTACT: chao_yuhan@yahoo.com

I EDIT BOOK-LENGTH MANUSCRIPTS and have an excellent track record and happy clients; nevertheless, I hear horror stories about people who chose the wrong editor. Each sad story represents lost time, lost money, and an end product that reflects poorly on the author. When I ask what made the unhappy author choose a particular editor, I get one of two answers: low price or quick turnaround. Of course! Those factors are uppermost in the minds of most buyers of editing services, yet they should be the least important, because they are the most short-lived and shortsighted. Instead, look for a reputable editor with credentials and an understanding of the type of book you have written. For example, if the book is selfhelp, your editor should be a reader of self-help books and should have a history of editing such books. If the book is a thriller or a fantasy or romance, the same holds true.

How can you be sure you're getting a reputable editor who will do what he or she promises and who will still be in business later, if you need help? Here are things to check. Find out if he or she...

- Is a full-time editor and doesn't have another job that detracts from editing
- Has edited books that have been published by traditional publishers, not just by selfpublished authors
- Has written or contributed to books that have been traditionally published (not just self-published)
- Has been editing in general for at least a decade
- Has been editing books for at least five years
- Is willing to supply you with a list of recent clients, along with contact information, so you can check references
- Has a Web site listing accomplishments, services, and prices
- Offers follow-up guidance and mentoring—allows you to ask questions afterward
- Includes a report on elements such as organization, clarity, and marketability

When the editor you find fills those requirements, you won't be disappointed in the results; no matter how long you wait or what price you pay. In choosing an editor, low price and fast turnaround both work against you. The best editors charge for their experience, spend a great deal of time with each manuscript, and have a backlog of work. To get the right editor, be patient and be willing to pay, because you will get what you pay for, and you'll be rewarded with a good editing job. As a result your books will reflect well on you and sell well, too.

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“The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for.”

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

THANKS TO TECHNOLOGY LANGUAGE IS dying. A current television commercial shows a family playing Scrabble, the young daughter relishes scoring points for ROTFL, and the mother is made to look the fool for her remorse over the fact that words, in all their beauty, are being replaced by Internet shorthand. Indeed, our society seems obsessed with abbreviating nearly everything in our everyday language, perhaps because we boast of being able to multi-task so well that we have little time to partake in the pleasure of stimulating conversation (or the play of a simple word game), enjoying the sounds of words in our ears, even the mechanics of enunciation on our lips. Some words – like imbroglia (pronounced im-brōl-yō) – even sound like what they mean. I know what ROTFL means, but its sound in my ears is anything but melodious.

SUVs have been on our roads for more than a decade; I wonder if anyone today, particularly under age ten, can, off the top of their head, relate what the letters represent.

As a writer, this concerns me. I spend hours crafting an article, an essay or a short story, agonizing over not only punctuation, but grammar – the choice of the proper word in its proper place – to express a thought or an idea.

In my work as a proposal writer, I’m often left to guess at the meaning of a sentence a subject matter expert provides me because he or she is unable to properly convey a concept. When I submit to them my revision, at times I’m told, “No, that’s not what I meant,” and I must bite back my retort that they should then write what they mean.

I correspond via email, daily, with executives – partners, presidents, CEOs – and am often aghast at their inability to use proper tense and write coherently, concisely. Perhaps it has always been this way; but today, without a secretary to transcribe their memos for them, their text leaves them looking nearly illiterate. No doubt they would argue that writing is not what they are paid to do. Granted; yet if wars are started the result of misunderstandings, then no doubt business deals are lost the result of an inability to speak to a client’s needs through the written word. Is it any wonder that a Bachelor’s degree today is the equivalent of a high school diploma? Worse, that most colleges and universities devote the freshman year to teaching students what they should have learned in high school?

As a business writer I strive to write for clarity; as a creative writer – for my love of language – I strive to create art. Yet it seems I will one day outlive my usefulness. In corporate America as well as in our youth, few today recognize when something is incorrectly written, so therefore what purpose does it serve to correct it? If words are indeed the small change of thought, sadly, in time all I know will be what I have acronyms for.

J. CONRAD GUEST’s fiction and essays appear in various online and print publications, including [Cezanne’s Carrot](#), Saucy Vox, [River Walk Journal](#), [63 Channels](#), [The Writers Post Journal](#), Redbridge Review, and Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine. A more complete bio and body of his work can be found at [MySpace](#). CONTACT: www.myspace.com/iconradguest

SCIENCE FICTION FANS ARE A PECULIAR BREED. Anyone who has attended one of their conventions knows how serious these folks are about objects and ideas that may appear silly to the rest of us. The almost religious reverence that this human subset has for their various versions of our future makes the injection of humor into their world a risky proposition. As a writer of humorous science fiction/fantasy, or what I prefer to call speculative satire, I continually struggle with bridging the gulf between these two seemingly incompatible things I dearly love: humor and science fiction/fantasy. It is never good to alienate one's core audience. Since these fans are more likely to view my humorous spins on their treasured genre as ridicule rather than playfulness, I have given this dilemma more than cursory thought. These good folks have reason to reject ridicule, to be defensive. Science fiction has been right in many predictions in the past: organ transplants, genetic manipulation, technological advancements of every kind. Indeed, it is arguable that cell phones and flat-screens owe their development to science fiction. But, when I speculate on our future, humor springs forth naturally to me. Science fiction takes the world we know and adds an element of surprise, pulls it out of the everyday, and humor does the very same thing. They both serve up twists on the norm in order to entertain. To combine them serves to enrich both. Attacking the status quo is the goal of satire; it makes fun of the powerful, the established, and the ensconced. Speculative satire makes fun of established future views, be they utopian or dystopian. The philosopher George Santayana claimed that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. I find humor in this thought. Further human evolution is unlikely to eradicate our funny bones. The props and locales may change, but our human foibles will remain, and we can see this borne out in many of science fiction's past predictions today. For example: celebrity cosmetic surgery - okay, perhaps this topic is more creepy than funny, but Mary Shelley's Frankenstein could just as easily have been a comic novel about the King of Pop. We use powerful supercomputers to animate cartoon fart gags, and Hummers as commuter cars. We allow actors to lead governments and employ the internet as a dating service. We are like precocious children: simultaneously clever and naive, sophisticated and vulgar, and I doubt those aspects of our basic humanity will change any time soon.

It's hard to completely admit to myself that I write speculative satire because what I write is so firmly grounded in reality. To me, it is merely life as it will be. We writers all select and edit the things we observe to inform our writing, then reorganize them into something new. We lend them our peculiar perspective. We do this whether we write historic non-fiction or comic books - the process is the same. Exploring serious things from a humorous perspective doesn't necessarily render them inconsequential. It can be a way to skew tired rhetoric and veer off of over-mined veins, creating fresh perspectives. Most current science fiction seems dominated by the dark, nihilistic, Blade Runnerish or Matrix-like thing - everybody runs around dressed in black and we're all doomed. There is no room for laughter in this clichéd future, and it is primarily because of the omission of such a core human element as laughter that it rings hollow. So much of real life is observably funny and this informs my writing. When I was creating my all organic, genetically designed future of EVE, things like McDonald's Characters directly inspired me to go further than I might otherwise think to go with my own Creature Comforts™. The fact that Mayor McCheese's head is actually a big slab of ground beef is pretty funny. Think about it. The little giggling "McNuggets" are chunks of dead fowl flesh with cute little smiles carved into them. They are urging you to eat them. I find these kinds of things to be so twisted and humorous and odd. Even more odd is the fact that most people don't see them as such. Most people don't think about these characters beyond their surface appeal. So, for example, when people tell me my Lick-n-Span© is gross, I think, is it really any grosser than having a hacked up piece of chicken flesh giggle at you? The satire or humor comes from taking only a very small step away from reality. Any form of satire makes publishers nervous. As George S. Kaufman said, "Satire closes on Saturday night." This is why I doubt there will ever be a speculative satire shelf at your local Barnes & Noble, but since most of us normal folks out here are not the establishment, it would follow that there is a large potential audience for it, shelf or no. It may be hard for publishers to get their brains around, but take it from me: whatever our future holds, there will be a healthy dose of satire in it.

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“OH CRAP, THE FIRE MUST HAVE GONE OUT,” I thought. The frigid winter chill crawled over my skin. It was four-thirty according to the clock on my nightstand. I got up and entered the living room, knowing full well that I was more likely to find an orangutan sitting there by the hearth than a stack of wood. There were no coals left in the stove and I dreaded splitting logs and kindling them. Our recent load of wood was quite green. More work than usual awaited me. I stepped into a pair of my old tennis shoes and staggered to the carport. “Where’s the axe?” I asked myself. I scanned my surroundings and tried to recall the exact location of where I had placed it six hours ago. Just before bedtime, I asked my husband to bring in some wood, which he failed to do. The axe was still there, lying on the floor with a wooden handle that felt like super cooled steel. It was nineteen degrees outside. I could see the temperature reading on the thermometer. Billows of steam gushed from my mouth as I exhaled.

I scanned the woodpile for an easy-splitter. I didn’t hesitate for a second because my face was already starting to hurt. I grabbed a log with a flat end and set it up in front of me. I pulled my coat around my waist a little tighter, lifted the axe above my head like the way an 1880’s railroad builder would hold a hammer, and slung it down with the full force of the gravity. The log split into two perfect pieces. I sighed; hoping that this easy-splitter was an omen for the next four or five. I grabbed another log and aligned it vertically in front of me. Just as I had the axe poised over my head, the log fell over. “Man, I hate this!” I said out loud. The task at hand made me reflect on the courage of the early pioneers, particularly women whose husbands had been killed by the Indians. In an odd way, I felt connected to my unknown ancestors. I picked up the log, set it upright on the other more leveled end, and slung the axe. Whack! The log split. “This isn’t too bad,” I thought. Next log. I swung the axe over my head and let go another blow. The axe missed and almost caught my shin. A back muscle twitched. I stopped, rubbed my stomach and began again. As I lifted the axe, a stabbing pain attacked my abdomen and my lower back. I let go of the axe and rubbed my stomach again. The extra weight of the growing baby inside me was making it more and more difficult to chop wood. At six months, I could still chop wood with no unusual pain. But in the past few days, things were stretching and pulling inside of me. I could not tell whether the troubling signs had anything to do with my age, I was a thirty-seven year old woman carrying her third child, or was it simply a physical deterioration from the daily axe swinging.

I leaned on the axe handle and continued to rub my abdomen. A rush of energy surged to my head. My awareness of my surroundings faded. All I could feel was the life inside of me. “This is not right. Why am I out here chopping wood?” I asked myself. I dropped the axe, walked inside the house, and sat on my blue chair. Tears ran down my neck and onto my breasts. I couldn’t stop weeping. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live like this. Something has to change,” I said. My hand trembled while I reached for a tissue on the end table. I could not sit still; I got up and headed to the dining room table. I got to one of the ladder-back chairs and grabbed the top rung for support. My back throbbed again. It felt like the baby inside me was kicking my ribs. Perhaps was it a contraction. I pulled the chair out, sat down and cried. “What am I gonna do?” I asked myself. Any remaining trace of hope for a better future completely dissolved that night. “God, please help me!” I prayed. Desperation filled my soul. “What am I supposed to do?” The disquieting thoughts inside me finally calmed down. I walked down the dark hallway to check on my girls. My two angels remained asleep on my bed despite my husband’s loud snoring. The snoring usually bothered me, but the peace that I felt in that moment seemed to smother every disturbing thought. “Everything is going to be O.K. God is going to help me,” I thought. I returned to the carport to chop more wood. I placed two pieces of logs behind the kitchen door to prop the door open before hauling more logs inside the house. Some heat from inside the house was going to escape but there was nothing I could do. I could only haul in one or two logs at a time with my swollen belly.

The fire lit quickly. “Thank God.” A serene feeling unlike any that I had felt in years coursed through my veins as I sat on my blue chair and watched the flames dance. “Why is this happening? I am a college educated woman and a certified teacher,” I questioned myself. My husband and I, together, have over fourteen years of higher education. My life just didn’t make any sense. A new excitement emerged inside me. “That’s it. I’ll get a job,” I thought, “I can interview over the phone but who in hell is going to hire a woman that looks like she’s about give birth to triplets? Well, don’t worry about that now. It’s only March. The baby comes in May. I can start to work in August. That will give me three months with the baby. We can bond. I can breastfeed her or him. Then I can go to work. That’s not too bad. Three months old. I wish I could have more time. But I don’t and that’s just the way it is. I can take care of these kids, alone. When I have a job, I will ask him to leave.” I went back to my bedroom and joined my two daughters and my husband in bed. My two angels slept peacefully in the middle of my bed. Their heads were covered in colorful elfish-looking nightcaps. My husband continued to snore. I climbed in bed and snuggled beside them.

KATHY T. CAMP is a high school Spanish teacher. She was born and raised in Atlanta and is a current resident of a small western Georgia town called Bowdon. Her passion is in writing. Kathy discovered that tragedies make the best story and therefore incorporated dark chapters of her life into her collection of short stories. Kathy enjoys playing the guitar, reading, writing and painting. CONTACT: kathyiamnotgod@hotmail.com

SONNIE MU DID NOT KNOW THAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR LOVE when he entered an Internet chat room called "Gay Chat". He was the quintessential Taiwanese bachelor, an established thirty year old with a house, a car and a job whom every mother would want her daughter to marry. Unfortunately for them, Sonnie preferred men.

At the moment, Sonnie was chatting with Brian.

"Where you from?" Sonnie typed.

"Britain," Brian answered.

Sonnie's heart skipped a little; he had never been with a white man before. They arranged to meet at the old train station plaza at seven in the evening, but Sonnie lost track of time and got there an hour late. He half ran towards the plaza, thinking that he had missed Brian, who probably assumed he had been stood up. As his eyes scanned the bustling plaza packed with commuters, some going to work and others rushing to school, Sonnie spotted a Caucasian man in worn jeans and a wife beater.

"You are Brian?" Sonnie ventured.

Brian nodded.

"I am so sorry I am late. Where will we go? My treat," Sonnie said.

"Let's go to an MTV. I know one nearby."

Sonnie had never been to an MTV in his life. Usually lovers went there, rented a room and a movie, and watched it there in privacy. Bad teenagers went there; drug addicts, too, when they could afford it. This MTV, much to Sonnie's horror, was a tiny business hidden on the sixth floor of a sleazy, ugly building. The two men stood at the service counter in the MTV as the clerk invited them to pick a film to watch.

"Okay." Brian smiled. "Let's watch this film, Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels. It will be an education for you about Britain."

Sonnie nodded. The movie turned out to be long, violent, strange and mostly incomprehensible for him; it seemed to be all mobsters and smoking guns.

"This is the kind of life I grew up with," Brian said after the movie. "We had to struggle, and we were very poor. Most Taiwanese don't understand that."

Sonnie nodded sympathetically.

The next evening, Sonnie was already in "Gay Chat" when Brian logged on.

"I think we can't be friends," Brian said.

Sonnie stopped for several seconds. He felt the impact of a hammer thrown at his face. Why? He thought.

"I get the same response every time. When I go interview for a job teaching English, they see that I am not wearing a nice shirt and tie, they are disappointed, and don't hire me. They judge people by the cover, and that's wrong. You judged me, too. Last night you saw that I was not clean cut and your face fell," Brian continued.

Sonnie was stunned. This was not true. He felt misunderstood, somehow dirty.

"It's okay," Brian continued. "You and I come from very different backgrounds. Take care." Those were Brian's last words.

Sonnie thought: he shouldn't have entered the chat room, shouldn't have gone on a blind date with a stranger, particularly a foreigner—if he had done none of those things he would not have been hurt. A Bach theme came to him, a sad one in G minor with stretched, split chords. Sonnie picked up his violin and began to play. He pulled the bow across the strings, trying to wipe away the memory of his date with Brian, and the rejection.

YU-HAN CHAO is a Taiwanese writer, artist and poet. Her books include a short story collection, "Passport Baby", and a poetry book, "We Grow Old: 53 Chinese Love Poems". Her short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in Bellevue Literary Review and other literary magazines. CONTACT: chao_yuhan@yahoo.com

I MADE TOAST TONIGHT and cried. I buttered six pieces of bread, two for me and four extras for my children. They said that they didn't want any but I knew they would gawk at me while I ate my toast, until I gave them a bite. When I plopped jelly on the warm toast, I began to cry. I kept my face hidden from my children because they would not understand why I cry.

Some people like to toast their bread first before applying the butter. The truth is, you have to apply the butter first to get perfect toast. How much butter to use is a personal choice. If you spot a drop of oil on your cookie sheet, you know the amount is about right. The biggest problem with the toast-first method is that the butter does not completely absorb into the bread. It simply lays on the surface. The other problem has to do with aesthetic reasons. If you toast the bread first and then apply the butter, the crunchy tidbits on the top layer of the bread blend in with the yellow butter and what you have is something that resembles the skin of a giraffe. I've never been inspired to eat a giraffe.

Once I apply butter to my toast, I let it cool on a plate for about seventy-eight seconds. This gives me just enough time to find and remove the jar of jelly from the fridge. Another mistake that most people make is to put jelly on the toast before it has time to "set". When the toast is warm, it is fragile and soft. And if you don't wait for it to firm up, you can end up with an ugly hole from trying to spread the jelly on this delicate item. I didn't make toast for several years. Now that my craving returned, I can't imagine life without it. Initially, I wondered why I excluded toast from my life to begin with. I then realized the reason. It was because of my mother. I did not want to be like her.

Making toast consumed my mother's life. She believed toast was a divinely-inspired, completely nutritious meal. She was a doormat to my father. After I had a child of my own, I remembered something else. I recalled the brief period that my father went on an all-veggie-guru eastern diet. He ate tofu and chanted to Hare Krishna on a daily basis. During this period, my mother continued to cook her deepfried foods. My father had no choice but to learn to cook rice. One day, after several hours of transcendental chanting, he emerged from the basement and delivered the eleventh commandment: "No more white bread or refined sugar." But, there was the toast. Pure and simple toast made from white bread. It made a statement just sitting on the plate. "I will not be pushed around by your religious whims or your Timothy Leary approach to the universe!"

My mother, the youngest of five, was a simple southern woman. She grew up during the depression and back then the first person to get to the dinner table received the best pieces of meat and bread. My mother's routine consumption of burnt biscuits during her childhood years created a preference for "blackened biscuits." She vowed not to pass on her preference, hence: The Toast.

My mother doesn't eat toast very often these days. In fact, she doesn't eat much of anything the nursing home serves. Last Friday, the nurses asked me if I was going to "let her go naturally" or choose the tube feeding route. Instinctively, I knew that she would not want to exist if she could not chew her own food. I cried tonight, because I don't think she'll be eating any more toast in this life. My mother had no idea the respect her toast making would create. I can still hear her pulling the cookie sheet out of the oven. Thanks mom, for teaching me to make toast.

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I REFER TO MY HUSBAND AS MY “LITTLE ABSENT MINDED ATTORNEY”. For him to work diligently from 9 A.M. until midnight at his firm is not uncommon and to hear a statement referring to his brilliance concerning the law is a frequent occurrence. Proudly, I keep a magazine featuring him as the most powerful New York Attorney atop our living room table. He is dressed in a pressed black suit, designer red tie with a matching handkerchief placed delicately in his right pocket, and a classic white Ralph Lauren shirt. His twinkling eyes and bright smile radiate from the page.

On this particular night, though it was not unlike most nights, I was to be tested for the last time. Bill’s caramel colored body sprawled across the king sized bed. His belly pulsated up and down as his snores reverberated throughout the 2,000 square foot apartment.

“How do I look?” he asked me that morning.

“You look great, but you might want to zipper up your pants, and you’ve got a huge stain on your shirt. What’s that all over your pants?” I asked.

“But, you just got this stuff out of the cleaners?” he responded.

“Maybe, you need to be a bit more careful when you eat,” I snapped.

“Could you hand in your receipts to be reimbursed from Snyder? You’re \$10,000 behind and we are seriously in debt. I don’t know how we’re going to make it through next month,” I pleaded.

“By the way, I donated \$500 to the Hillary campaign.”

“What? I thought you were so into Obama,” I retorted.

“But, Hillary’s going to win, and my boss asked me to,” he said.

My brain was about to explode. After being nudged to a corner of the bed, I slowly opened my eyes. Usually, I found Bobby slumped on our beige sofa stained with a late night snack.

“Please don’t eat on the sofa,” I repeatedly told him.

Does he listen? Thank God I paid extra for the stain proof micro suede.

The lights were on and the television was blasting, but I decided to ignore it. Instead, I disregarded the travesty that was to await me in the morning and though unnerved, instead of covering his face with a pillow, I gently removed his book about understanding globalization from atop his bent \$900 Mickli glasses. My newborn started crying. Bobby didn’t move; his nasal passages bellowed Fifth Element’s new hit CD and I held my head.

After I calmed my baby, I realized that every single light was on in the living room, dining room and bathrooms. I sighed. Mechanically, I turned them off, closing Bobby’s closet doors on the way. I better check the front entry. Of course, it’s not fully closed. The keys jingled as I shut it. While placing the 50th copy of keys in its appropriate place, I groaned at the sight before me. An opened juice bottle lingered on the table, and crumbs covered the floor mixed with melted butter that had mistakenly fallen from the refrigerator. Plastic wrappers were strewn about and chicken bones were thrown into the sink so that the garbage disposal could meet its destruction.

I’ll make him clean in the morning. God damn it. He won’t and the kitchen will smell. And, the mice and roaches will have a field day.

While I scrubbed and wiped, I contemplated divorcing and death. However, when I returned to the comfort of my bed, I couldn’t help but chuckle at my husband’s snorts.

I guess I won’t strangle him this time.

In the morning we’ll playfully match wits, hypothesize about our son’s future, and make hopeful plans of a well-earned vacation. I stared lovingly at Bobby’s open-mouthed snores.

I asked myself, “Who is this man?” with a giggle. “He certainly was a walking contradiction.” I softly kissed his shiny baldhead. He’ll never change. He is my absent-minded hubby.

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IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL MY CLASSMATES nicknamed me pih, fart. Everybody thinks I'm retarded or something, but it's just that I don't know what to say a lot of the time. I can think perfectly fine, but when I speak the words just don't come out or don't come out entirely right.

Working at my parent's store is how I met Natasha. She has golden hair and a long, perfect egg shaped face with round eyebrows. Natasha used to come to the store two or three times a week. She bought the same thing every time, one pack of green Wrigley's gum with seven pieces in it. Once I showed her a value pack of Wrigley's gum because she bought so much every week it would save her money to just buy a larger pack, but she smiled and pushed the value pack away; she only wanted seven pieces at a time. I thought about that for weeks, for months. I decided it was a good philosophy. Instead of being greedy and hoarding a lot of gum, you can get it seven pieces at a time, just like life, you just consider one week at a time and never worry beyond that because there's no point. You might die next week, and somebody else will eat your extra gum.

I ran into one of my old junior high classmates the other day. She couldn't believe that I was married and had a son. You, Fart, married? A son? Yes. It was mean of her to still call me Fart after all these days. If I see her walking down the street next time I will close the store door and pretend to be closed.

Natasha worked in a bar. She was one of those Russian white girls who came here to dance in bars for money. I lost my virginity to Natasha on my first date. A few months later, when Natasha pointed at her stomach, slightly rounder than usual, and made baby noises for me, I understood that she was having a baby. She also pointed at me. I took a piece of gum, pulled it into the shape of a ring, and put it on her long, bony ring finger. She smiled. That was how we were married.

White was a gigantic, healthy baby. When I walked close to Natasha and wanted to kiss her after the baby was delivered, she reached over and slapped my face, saying something in Russian. I offered her some gum, which she grabbed and tossed straight across the room. The Taiwanese doctor chuckled at me.

"Some wives are in a bad mood after the baby," he said. "It will pass."

I stared at White. He was plump and adorable. When I put my face close to his, one of his hands reached out and slapped me, too.

A few months passed; Natasha went back to work. One night, she didn't come home. I waited all day. When I closed the store, she still wasn't home. She had left for work like normal the night before, taking only her purse with her. The closet was still full of her clothes. I went to the bar she worked at and asked her friends and boss about her, but they said that she didn't come to work and they hadn't seen her or heard her say anything about leaving.

A few weeks later, I got a small envelope in the mail with a foreign postmark on it. I tore open the flap and shook the contents out of the envelope. It was a small stick of Wrigley gum. It had seven pieces in it. I guess Natasha really was living life seven pieces at a time, and my seven pieces with her were up. I looked at White, who walked over and took the gum from me.

"Mama?" he asked.

He had learned to talk just recently.

"Yes, from Mama," I say to him.

YU-HAN CHAO is a Taiwanese writer, artist and poet. Her books include a short story collection, "Passport Baby", and a poetry book, "We Grow Old: 53 Chinese Love Poems". Her short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in Bellevue Literary Review and other literary magazines. CONTACT: chao_yuhan@yahoo.com

EATING LOCAL AND ORGANIC: PART I

by Janie Chu

Vol. 1: Issue 1: Spring 2008

MENTION A PASSION about organic and local foods, and any attempt to discuss it is often met with an eye-rolling, pre-conceived notions attitude. I'm frequently dismissed as a tree-hugging, excessively indulgent yuppie who is just succumbing to a trend of the here and now, because it's cool. Before you berate me, just remember you're dealing with an independent, non-label musician who still clips coupons, loves a bargain and is scrimping and pinching to find ways to fund a new album. I'm not trying to maintain facades of an exorbitant lifestyle so much as to maintain one that has dramatically improved quality of life. Let me explain.

A few years ago I was diagnosed with an incurable, autoimmune disorder that also affected the digestive system. In addition to painful and serious symptoms, my life turned upside down as I overhauled my diet to accommodate my rapidly deteriorating health. I was first introduced to specialty products at Whole Foods and various natural grocery stores that, while more expensive gave me options to have a sense of normalcy.

Fast forward to 2006, when a dramatic and educational experience allowed me to not only return to robust health, but my previous symptoms with this autoimmune disorder disappeared completely! Part of this is due to a revolutionary diet plan discovered by Jordan Rubin ([The Maker's Diet](#)). It advocates eating what nature intended: Non-processed, organic foods that are farmed with care. By following most of what is advocated, I've seen my physical body reward me from the inside out, freeing it from the times I used to flood it with junk.

The truth is, our bodies were never meant to consume the kinds of products our post-modern society churns out daily. We're still hard-wired to operate like we did in ancient times, eating as close to nature as possible. Lacing our fresh produce with pesticides or anti-ripening agents not only ruins the flavor of the food, but it can often ruin the nutritional value as well. Did you know that an organic tomato has twice¹ the amount of anti-oxidant flavonoids² as a conventional one? This not only includes protective properties against cancer, heart disease and aging, but also shows that the plant's own self-defense (called phenolics³) retains the nutritional value that is all but destroyed with synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. This is backed by science!

You might be thinking at this point that, while it may not just be a marketing ploy, how can I afford to buy organic foods when they're typically more expensive and harder to find? These days it's much easier. Trader Joes offers an array of cheap, organic produce along with conventional grocery stores like Publix and Kroger that have expanded their offerings. With a little research, you can find natural food stores near you that stock inexpensive, locally grown organic produce. Even Whole Foods has brought down some prices to compete. While I realize that eating organic is not always possible, you can still control what you eat at home, and supporting local food initiatives at restaurants such as those at www.georgiaorganics.org. Your body will thank you.

In the next issue: Why organic and local foods help the environment.

¹From Times Online UK - July 2007 Issue. Article titled "Organic Fruits And Vegetables Really Are Better For Your Heart"

²From the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry. (ACS Publications). "Healthful Compounds In Tomatoes Increase Over Time In Organic Fields"

³From ShapeFit at <http://www.shapefit.com/organic-foods.html>. Further described in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry in "Total Phenolic And Ascorbic Acid Content of...Using Conventional, Organic And Sustainable Agricultural Practices" Jan. 2004.

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SHOULD YOU LEVERAGE YOUR HOME OR PAY IT DOWN RAPIDLY? by Karen Chartier

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THERE IS A GREAT DEBATE within the inner-mortgage circles these days. Should we, as loan professionals, encourage clients to borrow as much money as possible? Or would consumers benefit more if we helped them to understand the advantages of 15-year amortization schedules and pre-paying principal? Let's examine the pros and cons of both strategies.

Leveraging Your Property. In order to understand why you'd want to borrow as much as possible for your home purchase, you must first grasp the concept that equity has a zero rate of return. Here's an example: If Consumer "A" buys a home for \$300,000, and puts 20% down, then they have \$60,000 in equity. Over the next 5 years, the property appreciates \$100,000 in value. Consumer "A" now has \$160,000 in equity. Consumer "B" buys a home for \$300,000, and puts no money down. At the end of 5 years, that same home is now worth \$400,000. Consumer "B" has \$100,000 in equity, which is the same appreciation as Consumer "A", a net \$100,000. As you can see, your down payment has nothing to do with your rate of return. What becomes important is how you choose to manage the \$60,000 you didn't use as a down payment. If you use it for frivolous activities, such as going to Las Vegas, it would be more prudent for you to use that money as a down payment so that you can obtain a lower interest rate. However, if you were to invest the \$60,000 in a vehicle that can out-earn the cost of that debt, then this could be a formula for success. This is why some lending professionals suggest putting as little down as you possibly can, maximizing your tax write-off, and investing the rest. This principle has been applied for many years in the life insurance game. The old saying goes, "Buy term and invest the rest." The key component is taking the money you would have used as a down payment and creating an asset accumulation account. This account should earn a significant enough rate of return to enable you to pay your mortgage off entirely and achieve the ultimate goal of being debt-free.

Paying Your Home Down Rapidly. There are very few times over the course of my career that I have seen a client with zero debt and no financial difficulties. Choosing to pay off all of your debt can reduce stress and help you to gain freedom of cash flow for investment opportunities. A 15-year mortgage or a bi-weekly payment strategy provides structure. It can also put you on track to have your mortgage paid off within a set timeframe. It's important, however, to understand that regardless of how rapidly you pay your home off, you're not getting any greater rate of return on your investment than if you paid it off slowly.

So how does one determine which scenario is best? The choice depends on the individual. Savvy consumers who are disciplined, and are comfortable taking chances from an investment perspective, would do well with the first scenario. Over the course of time, it's been proven that your rate of return over the long haul will be far greater than the rate you'd pay for a mortgage in today's rate environment. It's important to seek the advice of a skilled investment advisor to ensure success with this strategy. The second scenario is best for those who have a difficult time managing their money or who'll sleep easier at night knowing they have a plan in place to pay their loan off more rapidly. Be sure that your budget can handle accelerated payments. When consumers "bite off more than they can chew" with a 15-year mortgage, they frequently end up having to refinance back into a 30-year schedule. If you find this subject intriguing and would like to know more, I recommend that you read a book titled, *Missed Fortune 101*, by Douglas Andrew. It's an outstanding read that is very simplistic and goes into far greater detail than I can cover in this column. Douglas is a financial planner who advises safe-structured investments such as whole life policies and tax-free fixed income instruments.

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ESTABLISHING NET-CRED — WHY IT MATTERS

by Andy Greider

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IT USED TO BE that when you wanted to know more about someone or something, you went to the Yellow Pages or the encyclopedia or asked someone you found to be knowledgeable. Over the past few years, and especially since the coming of the search engines, and the advent of Google as a verb, the world of finding information has changed a great deal. It has become faster, more efficient and yet, less accurate, due to the morass of information available. Finding a needle in the haystack has become easier – but is it the right needle or the right haystack?

We began using the Internet to search for things. Next we began to search the Internet as if it were a huge dictionary or encyclopedia, seeking coveted knowledge. Now, we are seeing people using the Internet to find other people – to find out how to connect with or contact them, to learn a little more about them – and to quietly assess their “net cred.” (That’s like steel cred, but now on the information super highway.) As such, the Internet has become a prime resource for individual promotion, for establishing worth and for raising yourself to expert or at least, findable status. Holding an upper hand online can be as critical as the difference between getting the next job, appointment, and promotion or as seemingly minor as reconnecting with old friends.

However, if you don’t search well, it also says a lot about you – that you haven’t been found worthy by the search engines, or by the massively expansive world of the Internet. It says that you are not recognizable – at all, or as the person you are – a real universal issue for people with common names. It says that you are lacking in Net-Cred. So what can you do to position most effectively online? How do you take control of the information people find about you when you are searched? You will be searched, believe that.

Let’s face it, who uses the white or yellow pages anymore to find resources or people? How do you search for people these days? Have you ever “googled” your business associates - or yourself even? This search for online relevance is one way in which the Internet is changing the surface of the business world. From Baby Boomers down through Millennial’s, people are searching your information. If you don’t know what your “web presence” is now, then it is imperative that you find out. If there is no information about you on the first three pages of the search, then expect your clients or prospective employers to infer that you have not done enough in your life thus far to earn a web presence. (You’d surely want them to know otherwise, right?) The other issue is – what if they find someone with the same name who is not really you? How can you control that? You can find out about when your name and company name are searched and posted through RSS feeds from the major engines.

Admittedly, people that we meet, do business with or seek a job from are increasingly using the web engines to find out more about us. We certainly need to take control of our image, or as we call it — “personal brand”. Learn to “love the Search” like I did.

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HOW TO PERSONALLY BRAND ONLINE

by Andy Greider

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THERE ARE PLENTY OF OPTIONS to be found online. Let's take a look at some of them – and you can find the one that helps you the most – and does the work you need done to increase your professional presence on the Web: You can often purchase your name as a web address, or URL. Costs are not too high to buy the URL (about \$20/year) – and hosting costs between \$5-20 a month. But then, even if you can create and build a great website, you must maintain it, and then market it. In a world where new websites appear every three seconds, the theory of “if you build it, they will come” no longer applies, if it ever did.

There is space to post your information on popular social/business network sites like Linked-in, Ryze, Fast Pitch or Xing - for free, or for a monthly charge. Here, you give them your information in a field driven input space, that is often then paid for through selling your presence to the seven trillion dollar ad industry. Also, although you have your “network” it is easy for anyone, including people who want to sell you things, to connect with you. The people who do search for you have to be signed up to see all your info and to contact you - and you aren't guaranteed priority on the search engine pages. MySpace and Facebook, although massively popular, are not always what professionals seek to provide the proper docking space for the net-cred most experts seek.

There are also spaces like Ziki and Naymz which do help provide you space online to post your profile or resume – some are “free” like those above – but none provide guaranteed top page placement, or they do it up to a certain dollar level each month - and many sell your information, or candy-wrap your profile in ads. Either way, it isn't often helpful, unique or professional. There are also services like qAlias and SearchForMeOnline. For a set fee per month, (\$29.95 Searchformeonline.com and \$9.95, qAlias) you gain guaranteed page one placement on Google (SearchForMeOnline) and for the top two search engines, Google and Yahoo (qAlias), when someone searches your name. You become easily accessible and confident that your best self is represented when people are searching for your name.

Be sure to check out all the resources and make your choice as to what best represents you, lets you be found and lets you claim your Net-cred.

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NETWORKING—THE TIPPING POINT WAY! by Andy Greider

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KNOWING WHERE YOU FIT in amongst the connectors, mavens and salespeople in your sphere of influence can greatly increase your viability and effectiveness as a networker. It had been a long time since I read “The Tipping Point” by Malcolm Gladwell. In fact, it had been long enough there was much of the material that had new perspective and fresh light for me. Out of all the marketing manuals, all the lengthy discourses on what works and what doesn’t, this book really nails things to a T. This time through, I had a new vantage point. I felt I was seeing things more in the way Gladwell describes in Blink, and then applying my own skills sets as a connector, as a maven and as a salesman - driving relationships and introductions from a gut level - and learning who was whom, and how I could best create positive flow and change within my own networks.

Over the past two years, since last reading the Tipping Point, I had grown my network extensively, acting mostly as a connector - bringing together people to altruistically assist each side. In the process, I found a little of the Maven in my delivery - I’ve always loved to educate folks about “why” they would work well together - and a little of the Salesman - “if I believe in something I will advocate it heavily.” Still being a Connector is my main calling. I love to bring people together through a three way email or phone call, sing the praises, and then present the reasons why I think they will work well together. What has grabbed my attention and piqued my curiosity has been the level to which this approach works in forging relations between those I am netweaving and networthing together. For some, my approach works very well. For others it seems to simply hold court. And for others, the approach is overkill. So, I stepped back, slowed things down and examined when the approach worked, when it was adequate and when it crashed...and with whom. What I found is that for two people who are in the salesperson persona first and foremost, they were not meant for lengthy intros - they just want to meet and be done. If I am introing a salesperson with a maven, the intro needs to be kept short, but with concise facts. If I am intro-ing a salesperson with a connector, the intro needs to contain who they each know who can help the other – gateopener commonalities, if you will.

When introducing connectors to connectors, my current approach works very well. Same with connectors to mavens. And when bringing together mavens with mavens, the more details and the thicker the underlying fabric the better. So, in order to more effectively network with those in your current stable- it is crucial to understand who you are bringing together, as well as why they will help each other and how they can progress best from here forward. To best leverage this type of networking, take a few minutes and figure out - are you a connector? a Maven? or a Salesperson? Then, think about all the people in your immediate network. List the five best connectors in your network, then make sure they all know each other. The five best mavens - and make a list of the niche they may advocate - and see who you know that needs that kind of expertise? And then the five best salespeople and be sure they know of the coolest and best new things you’ve come across. You’ll immediately expand your cache within the circle of 15 and allow you to take the next steps. From there work on your style of introduction. As an example, each week, I try to choose three people from my variety of networking channels and concentrate on finding them leads first and foremost. I also suggest reviewing who you will be meeting with - who do you know, what do you know, what can you share that will benefit them. As for them, are they a connector, a maven or a salesperson? If you don’t know, try to gauge in the first part of your meeting. Knowing how someone networks - we can know both how to communicate in the meeting itself and how to make introductions afterwards. Being aware of the tendencies of your network help you make it a more profitable one – for all involved – whether you are a novice who just passes leads or a master who makes deals happen, you need to have signposts to help guide you. Be sure to check out the next installment, tilted towards recruiters, called “Networking, Netweaving, Networthing – How to Know Who You’re Hiring.”

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NETWORKING, NETWEAVING, NETWORTHING— HOW TO KNOW WHO YOU'RE HIRING by Andy Greider

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FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE CONCEPT OF NETWORKING is becoming less and less a foreign concept. People are connecting leads and vendors more and more. Still, going beyond simply passing leads and building relationship capital isn't something most people think of. Yet relationship capital holds great influence and should be a focus. Companies are currently heeding the trend that people do business with people and not the company they work for and are making hires based on who the candidate brings to the table with them - not just a client and former client list, but what network(s) they are associated with and whom they are connected to. With the surge of business networks like Linked In, Fast Pitch, and Ryze the materials are there to establish an online network and bevy of contacts. In person networks are flourishing with the international explosion of BNI, and a morass of localized groups (in Atlanta, we have 5 or more that are simply Atlanta based, or southeast based). Companies are finding credence in who you know - and who trusts you...but...just like so many times before, corporations are missing critical questions. Put succinctly - hiring managers shouldn't be impressed with the size of someone's network - or even the quality of people on the list. They should instead be asking themselves if the candidate can truly leverage the network to bring together the various parts into wholes that are greater than the sum of those parts? Does the candidate know how to network, then netweave and even network?

This is the true gauge of relationship capital - this is the glue someone should be hired for. Finding new employees who can either netweave or in fewer cases, network, should be the goal - not simply employing people with a large network, or business-social club. So, how does a company go about applying a networking litmus test to see what they are dealing with? The first step is to ascertain if the candidate simply knows a lot of people - or if they are a true connector? The second is to understand if the same candidate is simply an idea advocate, or truly knows how to sell others on big concepts - if they are a person who can connect all the dots and rationalize why and how? Let's examine these points in further detail. If you find someone who knows how to move beyond just knowing people and has learned how to ask questions that allow for deeper introductions - ones that open gates, give connection and add to the bottom line - you have a netweaver. If that person can see positive connections between all those in their network and those they meet on a daily basis - and can express this in an introduction - they will be a huge asset to your company. From knowing personal traits that connect people (where did they attend college, what sports they like) - to recognizing professional synergies (same associations, similar but not same goals). If the candidate is a connector, they should be able to increase company status and add value to current clients as they make strategic introductions to those in their network. If they routinely make these connections, the clients they assist will begin to follow the lead, and the reciprocation will begin. Netweavers are excellent to have on staff and are people who can greatly increase your brand and your value to both current and perspective clients.

If someone can both connect and also powerfully sell the ideas they are promoting - both those of your company and those tied into each connection - they are a networker - someone who networks to make deals happen. They are the highest form of networker - and they are an interesting myriad of communication skills and "alternative thinking." Networkers are a rare breed - a careful mix of Malcolm Gladwell's Connector and Salesperson with a dash of Maven. They are people who can recognize the extraordinary in each relationship, see how it could be bolstered and augmented by others in their network and then have the panache to sell this as an idea or partnership to those involved. They make the money flow many levels deep in a network, not through simple "lead passing" but through the pushing of bigger ideas - finding ground that provides traction for those in their network on various projects. They are the most valuable, and should be the most coveted of all the networkers out there. So, how do you hire a networker and groom them into a netweaver or networker? It is possible, although those with a natural propensity will of course, excel more quickly.

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**PURSUIT OF AMERICAN DREAM BECOMING
NIGHTMARISH** by J. Conrad Guest

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“... the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.

--Epic of America (1931) by James Truslow Adams

THE 1990'S SAW A HUGE INCREASE IN GLOBAL POVERTY. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen in the new millennium. Statistics from the World Bank and the United Nations, suggests the role of capitalism in developing the world order. In the 1990's alone, 54 countries saw the decline of average incomes, and 21 countries actually went backwards in terms of human development.

It may sound Marxist to suggest that class exploitation is the very nucleus of how the economic system under which we live functions. Yet consider that fully a quarter of the world's countries suffer increasing poverty. The system clearly works for the United States, as our citizens turn a blind eye to the remainder of the world's suffering, instead redoubling our efforts to amass more things - cell phones, computers, Blackberries, big screen televisions, bigger cars with more toys; in short, anything depicted as timesaving, convenient, beautifying, age-defying, weight controlling, fertility enhancing, erection improving, birth preventing, mood or energy enhancing, sleep aiding, or entertaining. In Adam's definition of the American dream, I don't think he foresaw the option for a second DVD for the family SUV to eliminate bickering between siblings and to rescue the parents from having to talk to their children.

When one considers that day-to-day global decisions are made in the boardrooms of multi-national corporations whose only concern is bottom line and besting the competition, it becomes clearer that a better way must be found, one which does not throttle the have-nots for the benefit of the haves, one that eradicates global poverty and brings education, healthcare and development to all nations, great and small.

Perhaps a democratic socialist planned economy controlled by councils of workers, trade unions and governments who are subject to immediate recall by We, the People they represent might be the answer. From this a fraternal World Federation based on democratic socialism could be constructed. World Federation sounds very Star Trek. Indeed, in Gene Roddenberry's depiction of the 22nd century, Earth belonged to the Federation of Planets. They'd done away with currency and social class, as well as poverty, bigotry and war. Very science fiction. But then, a lot of what once was considered science fiction, such as space shuttles, lasers, computers and cell phones are today a reality.

Here's a long-term solution: in becoming a citizen of the world, our myopic view of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man should be amended to a world in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man.

J. CONRAD GUEST's fiction and essays appear in various online and print publications, including Cezanne's Carrot, Saucy Vox, River Walk Journal, 63 Channels, The Writers Post Journal, Redbridge Review, and Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine. A more complete bio and body of his work can be found at MySpace. CONTACT: www.myspace.com/jconradguest

IMPACT
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As one gets older, one discovers everything is going to be exactly the same with different hats on.

—Noel Coward

CHANGE: DOES IT COME EASILY TO ANYONE? Not to me; never has, never will. Yet I change every day, as surely as we all change. Barely, imperceptibly sometimes, and then one day we wake up and ask ourselves, “What happened? I was never like that before.”

We like to think we control change. We make New Years resolutions to lose weight, to eat less, exercise more, to curse less, to spend more time with family, less at work or in front of the television. But other changes just occur. When my parents passed away, within eleven months of one another, I was no longer someone’s son, and I was faced with my own mortality in the absence of the two people who’d been in my life for the “forever” that had at that time composed my 42 years on this planet. My life was irrevocably changed as a result of their loss to me. Perhaps, with no children of my own, I was prone to focus on the family that had left me behind rather than on the one I would one day leave behind.

Some changes are symbolic. After my parents passed on I changed residence. My reasoning was that I needed a new start, wanted to make changes; so I changed jobs and chose a new career, yet my life stayed pretty much the same save for a new environment. Perhaps the end result was a misconception on my part that new surroundings could be the catalyst for other changes.

Sometimes we are victims of change, or as Heraclitus wrote: “All things flow. Nothing abides.” No matter our rank in life we are all bit players in the grand scheme, and one thing is certain: change is one thing on which we all can count — from the changes mirrored before me during my morning shave, the changes taking place in my body (changes I may not relish but am powerless to withstand), to changes thrust upon me, some the result of my own irrational actions (a failure to live my life, as we all should, as if it were an open book), others unwelcome and perhaps undeserved (bad things sometimes happen to good people). If good people are capable of bad deeds, then it must be considered that bad people are capable of good deeds. A bad deed cannot erase a good deed any more than the obverse. That a serial killer might donate money to a worthy cause doesn’t change his monstrous actions. Who are we to judge? Yet judge we must in the absence of a higher authority, even if we all are accountable, at a later time, to that higher authority.

Change is part of the human condition, and perhaps we would do best to consider it part of life’s process, perhaps evolutionary, as we move toward life’s fifth season, for surely we are on any given day a product of the changes that occur to us — those that we allow to happen as well as those we chose to make.

I’ll be fifty-two this year, and more changes are in the works: a recently completed novel to market to publishers and agents, a new novel in the works, new characters from whom I can learn, even as other changes are on the horizon, in my personal as well as my literary and professional lives; some of these changes I embrace even as others I’m loath to accept.

Change: It may not always come easily, but it comes as surely as do aging and death.

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EUTHANASIA IS ASSISTED SUICIDE by a healthcare provider or by a physician through methods such as oral, intravenous or intramuscular administration of drugs. The topic of assisted suicide has been controversial in the past and continues to be controversial today because it touches on moral issues. Those who are for euthanasia say that this is a merciful way of providing a peaceful death but those who are against euthanasia consider this method to be a form of murder.

Dr. James Kervorkian, a pathologist and defender of euthanasia, claimed to have assisted in over 100 suicides of patients who were near the end of their life. He once famously said that dying is not a crime. Advocates of euthanasia would probably agree with the man whose nickname was “Dr. Death” and claim that euthanasia is a peaceful way to die. They believe that it is hard for those who have no terminal illness to understand the extent of pain and suffering that the countless terminally ill patients face. In addition to the physical pain, there is the emotional pain of losing their independence that the patients must overcome. Those who are not against physician-assisted suicide also say that the method provides dying patients with a sense of control. In some countries healthcare is unaffordable for most. There is an extreme shortage of resources to provide comfort for the dying. Euthanasia supporters say that assisted suicide provides a way out for those terminally ill patients who do not wish to continue living due to their worsening condition. According to supporters, it is more risky if the patients try to end their own life but do not succeed. They believe that if assisted suicide is not permitted, those who genuinely wish to die may consider more drastic measures such as suffocation, bleeding, or hanging themselves.

The practice of assisted suicide is considered to be immoral for those who are against euthanasia. Religion plays a major role in their view. They argue that voluntary euthanasia is a violation of the sanctity of human life. Christians who are against euthanasia state that life belongs to God and humans do not have the right to make the choice to end their own life. Some theologians consider euthanasia as sinful for both parties -the suicides and those who assisted in helping the suicides.

Dr. Kevorkian practiced euthanasia for a number of years while preaching his beliefs. On November 23, 1998, on a prime time news show called 60 Minutes, Dr. Kervorkian allowed the airing of a videotape he had made which showed the voluntary euthanasia of a man named Thomas Youk. He was a 52-year-old man who was in the final stages of Lou Gehrig’s Disease (ALS). Youk was in full functional capacity and able to make the decision for himself. He gave Dr. Kevorkian consent to end his life. The video showed Dr. Kervorkian administering the lethal injection. While the tape was rolling, Dr. Kevorkian made a bold move. He dared the authorities to try to convict him and try to stop him from carrying out more assisted suicides. Kevorkian served eight years of a 10 to 25-year prison sentence for second-degree murder. He was recently released in 2007 for good behavior. Since his release, Dr. Kervorkian continues to preach his beliefs that euthanasia should one day be a legal “medical service” for patients who are suffering and willing. Whatever your view may be and even if the laws permit euthanasia one day, it will continue to be a controversial topic.

SOURCES: Euthanasia.com, Elbe.com, Kcls.org, Amsa.org.

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YOU'VE BEEN PLANNING THE FAMILY VACATION FOR MONTHS and feel you have finalized the travel details. To ensure peace of mind while you are away, why not run over this checklist of travel and packing tips you might not have known before you go? When planning a trip, the only worries you should have are what to pack!

1. Passport laws are changing. Air travel outside of the U.S. now requires a passport. Cruise travel will require a passport or the new passport card starting this summer. For up-to-date information regarding the new policies, please visit the Department of State's website at www.travel.state.gov.
2. Purchase travel insurance. Travel insurance can act as a secondary policy to your current health insurance and will help with such issues as trip delay, baggage issues and trip interruption as well. Travel agents can sell travel insurance.
3. Leave copies of your passport, airline tickets, traveler's checks, and any credit cards you plan to use with a family member or trusted friend. Pack a copy of these documents with you as well in a separate location than the originals. Place a card with your name and address inside your luggage, as well as on the outside. Carry the exact change for public transportation. Buying passes as well makes traveling via public transportation easier.
4. Familiarize yourself with local laws and customs of the countries to which you are traveling. Remember, the U.S. Constitution does not follow you! While in a foreign country, you are subject to its laws. If you get into trouble while traveling abroad, first contact the nearest U.S. embassy. Visit <http://usembassy.state.gov> for a list of the U.S. embassies.
5. Keep travel numbers handy. Have the words "hotel" and "taxi" programmed on your cell-phone speed dial. For the trip, change the numbers, but leave the preprogrammed titles the same providing instant access to the important numbers.
6. Purchase a pre-paid international calling card or activate the international calling plan on your cell phone. Know in advance about roaming charges and extra fees. If traveling independently of a tour group or cruise, have someone write directions to your hotel address in the local language and keep it with you.
7. Postcards are helpful when there's a language barrier. Buy postcards of the places you want to see. An English description of the landmark is usually found on the back. Show the postcard to a taxi driver and he'll take you to the spot. Take a journal or notebook and record the sights and sounds and what pictures you have taken. If you are an avid photographer this will help identify the places you see in the pictures as well!
8. Pack an extra set of clothes in your carry-on luggage just in case your luggage is delayed or lost. Pack an empty duffel bag inside your main piece of luggage for extra storage on the return trip.
9. Use a large water bottle to store toiletries. Instead of packing a complete shaving kit, fill the wide-mouth water bottle with items like razors, spare contact lenses, glasses, toothbrush, etc. You can use the water bottle on those day trips you take on vacation as well.
10. For children's clothes, assemble complete outfits (shirt, pants, underwear, socks) by placing the largest piece on the bottom and stack the rest on top of that. Then roll up into one bundle. This eliminates having to rummage through the suitcase each morning, as you just pull out a complete outfit that is ready to wear.
11. Purchase adapters for electrical items (most overseas locations have 220 volts, 50 Hz electricity).
12. Write a master packing list on your computer that should include everything you might pack for any given trip. Then, when you're going on a specific trip, you can cross off the stuff you won't need and you don't have to write up a new list for the next trip.

When you prepare and plan ahead, your dream vacation will certainly live up to expectations!

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IT IS NOT HARD TO TURN ON THE TELEVISION to hear news of soaring gas prices, the cost of war, airline woes and a slumping economy. It is enough it seems to keep anyone for traveling these days particularly internationally. However, that is not the case. Despite recession worries, travel trend watchers say Americans aren't giving up their vacation plans just simply being more cost conscious. With these economic challenges, comes creative ways to travel. The cruise lines, tour companies and resorts are stepping up to the plate with special deals and packages. Nationwide summer travel booking figures show most of the leading destinations this year are not linked to the euro. In addition, there are still countries and destinations where the U.S. dollar is strong. From the Caribbean and South America to Asia and simply staying in the U.S., there's still hope for an affordable vacation. The top spots include Alaska, Orlando, Cancun, Honolulu, Dominican Republic and Argentina.

The cruise industry has been reaping good business from vacationers attracted by the value of seeing several destinations in one trip and the ability to pay for the package in dollars before leaving. The cruise industry projects 12.8 million people will take a cruise this year, up 200,000 from last year. Do you remember as a child getting up in the wee hours of the morning to be piled into the family car to drive to a vacation destination? There is a surge in these "drive time" vacations again. Georgia and the surrounding states have beaches, mountains, state parks and lakes to explore. From a cruising perspective, the Atlanta area is an easy drive to such ports as Mobile, Jacksonville, Tampa, Charleston, and Port Canaveral. Here are some key things to remember when planning your trip:

TRAVEL OFF-SEASON—Every destination has a season that is considered a "value season". This means lower prices and fewer crowds.

GO WHERE THE DOLLAR IS STRONG—Visit or cruise to such areas as the South America, Barbados, Jamaica, or Switzerland. Passports are required for international air travel.

BUNDLE YOUR TRAVEL—Very often you can save money by booking package deals that include the airfare, hotel, meals, car rental etc.

USE PROMOTIONAL "CITY CARDS" TO SAVE ON ATTRACTIONS—Cities around the world offer City Cards/Passes to tourists that promise savings through discounts on top tourist attractions and public transportation.

BE CREATIVE WITH THE PLANNED ACTIVITIES—Plan a picnic lunch, hike along a bubbling stream, fly kites on a windy day, or skip rocks across the mountain lake.

TRAVEL WITH EXTENDED FAMILY OR WITH GROUPS OF FRIENDS—Split the car rental bill or carpool, split the room costs and take a half price vacation.

SEEK THE ADVICE AND SERVICES OF A SEASONED TRAVEL AGENT—Unlike a mega online travel seller, these experts not only provide invaluable and personalized service but can often times get unadvertised deals. It is nice to be able to talk to the same person when you have a question.

So plan ahead, seek advice and travel! Don't let the talk of recession or bad media take the place of truly enjoying time together with your family. Whether it is long weekend at the lake or a cruise to Alaska, relax and enjoy the escape from reality. It is amazing what being away from the cell phone, television, email, and work can do to regenerate the soul!

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GOING TO AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ heightened my awareness of the mental health issues affecting many of the men and women serving in the military. Alcohol and drug abuse, spouse and child abuse, depression, marriages at risk, failed marriages, attempted suicide and suicide, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are becoming more common. One unit we spent time with, for example, had 50% of its marriages at risk. Combat stress and conversely, boredom, separation from family and friends, multiple deployments, financial problems and bad phone calls from home can combine into an emotionally toxic and potentially lethal state of mind.

One day at a Forward Operating Base (FOB) near Fallujah, just before my film partner arrived, a young Marine put the heel of his weapon into the sand, leaned over it with the muzzle pointing under his chin and pulled the trigger. There was some discussion among his buddies whether a phone call triggered the suicide. At that time I was flying missions with a Black Hawk medevac unit when, on two consecutive nights, we carried young female Marines who had attempted suicide. The flight medic wondered if one of them would survive. Later, we learned their lives had unraveled back home and that they must have felt hopeless and trapped by their circumstances.

We were in Afghanistan for one month and Iraq for two. We went on combat missions with Marines and paratroopers, suffered rocket attacks and spent considerable time with casualties who were badly wounded with multiple bullet wounds and blown off limbs, and some dead or dying -- soldiers and civilians alike. We were there long enough and saw enough to be emotionally affected and changed, but I was already inoculated against the worst. I had been with the refugees of the Rwanda genocide.

I stepped into the pan of chlorinated water, as we were instructed, before entering the large cholera tent at the edge of the sprawling camp of almost 250,000 refugees in Goma, Zaire. The beds were mostly filled with children. Unless they had been orphaned by the killing, their mothers were sitting on the floor next to them. They were treated by members of the Spanish MSF (Doctors Without Borders). The children were listless and dangerously dehydrated. Medical supplies were in short supply. I asked about some of the mothers who were singing to their children. I was told the mothers only sang to comfort their souls when they died.

The Combat Outpost near Sadr City in Baghdad was the darkest, dreariest, and dustiest cavern of a building I ever saw. One meal served each day, no a/c with daytime temperatures nudging 120 degrees, tepid drinking water, casualties from rocket attacks and IEDs, and an operational tempo that sent most paratroopers on combat missions two and three times daily. Sleep was rare and fatigue common. It is a testament to the spirit and toughness of our military that morale was high. One young soldier, though, wasn't coping. He had been disarmed for insubordination and was on a suicide watch. I spent a lot of time with him during that week and learned that his older brother had just killed himself. His grandfather-- who was the father figure in his life -- had also died, both in the previous month. He had lost his place in the world and turned inwards. He was shunned by all but the chaplain and the Iraqi technicians who came for work each day. He didn't care whether he was court-martialed, dishonorably discharged or sent back into the line. He talked to me, though, and for that I was grateful. I want to know what became of him.

I finally threw up in an alley near downtown Nairobi. I had been wandering the streets for an hour trying to make sense of the images of genocide in my head. We had been screening footage in the edit suite for over a day trying to build what I called the "sinister sequence", a dark bit of horror lasting less than a minute. I don't think I knew about PTSD at the time. I certainly didn't know about Secondary PTSD. It was explained to me years later by a sympathetic nurse.

By doing their duty many members of our military have waded into the deep water of mental health problems and they can't get back by themselves. Regardless of how long we stay in Iraq or how quickly we withdraw we will have damaged Americans among us. PTSD is a normal reaction to the stress some of our troops are exposed to in Afghanistan and Iraq. The most important way for them to recover from PTSD and other mental health issues is to talk. If you are privileged to meet veterans, I encourage you to ask them about their experiences. Then honor them by listening.

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WALKING BETWEEN THE 6 FOOT HIGH BERM OF SAND and the violent, unforgiving surf, I am completely immersed in the spectacle of this unpredictable landscape. I am entirely at home. As the 25 knot winds whip the berm into a menacing blast of sand that stings the face and threatens my camera gear, I turn my back and wrap myself around my camera, waiting for the screaming to subside. As I walk towards the bay side of this Katrina-ravaged barrier island, I come to a large inlet, complete with a heron, crabs completely covering the floor of the 4 foot deep inlet, and an occasional fish jumping out of the water. Flocks of seagulls appear, and are gone. Where the bay meets the island, virtually no surf exists on this windy, hostile day. A narrow walkway of sand, 10 feet wide and 100 feet in length, extends between the bay and this inlet, creating a sensation of being surrounded by water with virtually nothing between one and the temptress. The quiet nature of the surf on this side, in contrast to the gulf side of the narrow island, is surreal. As I reach the end of this walkway, I come to a stream of ocean water that breaches the path and feeds the inlet. The current is swift enough to take your balance, despite the shallow depth. The crabs are waiting for a misstep. Such a brittle, helpless stretch of sand, surely to be destroyed by the next hurricane.

Going past this obstacle leads to a large area of sand that looks more like a lake bottom that is trying to dry up. Mucky, sticky, and a bit treacherous, as the depth of the semi solid area is unclear. Katrina debris is still evident. This section of the island, the extreme west end, is flat. It has been totally decimated, and it reminds me of a war zone. An oval shaped hole, filled with water, appears 4 feet across and 8 feet long, the water looks deep. I wonder if I could get back out if I were to enter this crater. Very deep, but with a sloping side. After dark, one could easily step into this abyss. Beyond, nearing the end of the current configuration of the island, lies a bevy of watery twists and turns carved into the fragile landscape. The sunset casts unimaginable colors and patterns upon the odd canals. Like a painting of pastels. Beyond lies a one mile cut that was formed by the hurricane. Five feet deep I have been told. At the narrow tip, where no further exploration is possible, someone has turned his back to the cut and written in the sand: "I've Always Been Here Before."

Reversing my course back along the gulf side, the surf is crashing with a deafening noise. Again, the sand is swirling and blasting me as I turn away in defense. Ahead, lights shine in the distance, a 30 minute walk. This uninhabited stretch is my solitude. I love the cold, dreary, gray walks along this beach. Maybe the appeal is knowing the powerful, unforgiving lady will kill me if given the opportunity. I am in awe and respectful. Nothing remains in its place here. A month passing will create a new landscape of shells, driftwood, and debris. And the narrow, fragile walkway of sand I have wondered what would be my thoughts if caught in a sudden storm on this stretch. Surely this thin, flat, devastated piece of sand would be washed over with a minimal storm? Was the surge 25 feet during the hurricane? During a recent event 60 knot winds were reported on this part. Whiteout conditions existed due to driving sand. My mind drifts to a solitary walk along the edge of the gulf during this event. The challenge. I prefer the gray skies with the gale force winds, and the privilege of respectfully coexisting with nature's extreme, raw power. Driftwood, large and small, washes up. Holes are bored in the side, with shells inside the openings. Clinging for life. These are my souvenirs, not the postcards with the pretty beach and umbrellas. The tumultuous life of anything that survives here. This place is my solitude.

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