Update on Peanuts and Famine Relief

So color me amazed and humbled. Since I announced the fundraising drive for the Send Your Narrator to Uganda project, the donations have been rolling in. We have passed the $1000 mark and well on our way to two large. I am incredibly encouraged and excited. And grateful.

First thing: the link to the 501(c)(3) Domi Education account is live. Hit the Donate button at the top right of the page to make a tax deductible contribution.

There have been a few questions about the project, the why and how, but one question in particular has popped up several times:

Given all the great publicity the Mana folks will receive from my work, why aren't they paying for my expenses?

Fair question. There are a few reasons, but the main issue is this:

I want Immune to Boredom to retain complete editorial independence and ownership of the resulting work.

I'm not doing this as a paid PR operative. I am looking for a story that, hopefully, represents some aspect of our human/social/political drama that helps us understand the larger implications of community, compassion, and the human condition. I want to be able to ask uncomfortable questions

when needed, and not feel bound to any specific interest beyond the story I find.

Second, the farther into this that I dive, the range of work this research can produce expands almost by the hour. Already fielding questions and contacts from a variety of possible channels that I had not imagined were viable. Very exciting.

Third, my travel costs to cover this story amounts to treatment for about 100 kids suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition. I really don't want that money if it takes away from kids who are in dire need. And as I've said before, if you don't want to donate to this project, please consider contributing directly to Mana. Fifty bucks will literally save the life of a child.

Heck. Donate to this project and to them. You'll feel double plus good.

Finally, I will be receiving substantial support from Mana. All our critical arrangements – for ground transport; access to government officials, relief agencies, and camps; and on-the-ground security – are in the hands of people who know the terrain and the political landscape. They are providing access to some very difficult to reach people and places. It would be unthinkable to travel there without that kind of logistical support.

Hope this clarifies the situation. Thanks for the support and well-wishes. I have an amazing community around me, both close at hand and at-a-distance. My gratitude is indescribable.

PS and also, too: if anyone knows of a suitable audience within driving distance of Tallahassee, I am happy to come speak to groups about this project. Let's do this.

PPS and also, too, too: **If you prefer to make your tax-deductible donation via check, please remit to:**

Domi Education
914 Railroad Ave
Tallahassee, FL 32310

Days of Miracle and Wonder

One of the activities that keeps me off the street and out of trouble is serving as a mentor to up and coming entrepreneurs at the Domi Station incubator in Tallahassee. This is purely volunteer work where I listen to people pitch their ideas and then tell them a million ways they could do it better. Most people appreciate it; some, not so much. Either way, this was their chance to throw rocks my way.

The 1 Million Cups series is a Kauffman Foundation initiative based on the notion that entrepreneurs discover solutions and create networks over a million cups of coffee. Every Wednesday, in dozens of cities, one person stands up and throws a pitch to a crowd of caffeine-fueled colleagues, peers, and the occasional VIP. Today was my turn on the mound.

Your Narrator delivered a scintillating, finely woven tale, peppered with witty asides and penetrating insights. Jaws dropped. Grown men wept. In the distance, a coyote howled. It was amazing. No, really.

But you readers have to make do with the short version.

Basically, I was asking for financial support to chase down an amazing story. Essentially, to chase a miracle.

There are several strands at play, like Southern agricultural economics and the role of the peanut in the politics of social justice, largely centered around this man's story.

George Washington Carver

It's a story about how African-American farmers, instructed by an African-American researcher, upended the cotton-based economics of the agrarian South by embracing the humble peanut at the beginning of the last century. It's about how that switch regenerated the soil depleted by cotton (an extremely extractive crop that turns soil to dust) and offered a pathway to self-reliance to people who were still toiling under a de facto continuation of slavery. It's about the discovery of the superb nutritional qualities of the ground nut, the lowly goober pea, which eventually found its way onto everyone's pantry shelf in the form of peanut butter and other products,

not to mention taking a central place in African-American foodways traditions.

It’s also about a small town, Fitzgerald Georgia, population 9053, a long-time peanut center, which has a new factory for peanut processing that employs around 80-90 people. And how most of the employees are convicted felons searching for a pathway back into mainstream life.

But more than anything, it’s about this little guy.

This child is in the final stages of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM), the leading cause of death of children in the world. One every 8 seconds, around 5 million deaths per year. The kids who survive are typically developmentally challenged – saddled with poor motor, cognitive, immune functions – for the rest of their lives. Entire generations of future problem solvers, leaders, entrepreneurs, doctors, &c., are left hollowed out. There are many reasons that sub-Saharan Africa is plagued by social and political crisis. This is one of the chief contributing factors.

The worst thing about it…this suffering is easily preventable. Absolutely curable and reversible.

This is the miracle part. And we’re back to the peanut.

Miracle and wonder

The boy on the right is the boy on the left after five weeks of treatment with Ready to Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), a high-protein, vitamin-fortified peanut paste. At a cost of a little more than a dollar a day, RUTF will reverse the symptoms of SAM and place a young child on a path to normal physical and mental development. The treatment efficacy is in the 95% range. Miracle and wonder.

There are a handful of companies in the world that make this stuff according to a formula prescribed by the UN. One of them is in Fitzgerald, GA, population 9053.

Miracle Nutrition

Mana is a non-profit that is committed to eliminating SAM. It also takes seriously an opportunity to provide stimulus to an economically suffering part of rural South Georgia, and to provide job opportunities for ex-cons looking for reintegration.

It’s a big job, and like most important missions, it is

underfunded. Mana reaches around one-third of the kids in need. Upping that figure takes money. (One of the stories that I dread, and that is inevitable, is how just a few miles from where we distribute Mana is another camp that will not be served.)

So they had a bright idea: create a for-profit company that leverages the existing peanut processing facility to manufacture a high-quality consumer product that can fund the famine relief mission.

Funding the Miracle

So Good Spread was born, an effort to harness a chunk of the $2Billion/year peanut butter industry in service to a larger good. We hear an awful lot about Social Entrepreneurship these days, and when it’s touted by the oil companies and such, it’s easy to get cynical. But these folks are the real deal.

Next month, October, Mana/Good Spread is loading up a plane for delivery to Uganda, which recently received around 750,000 refugees from the civil strife in South Sudan. This is on top of a multi-year drought and crop failure cycle that has already stressed the Ugandan food infrastructure to the

breaking point. Not to mention an earlier influx of refugees. The situation is dire.

And Your Narrator has been offered a seat on the plane and in the back of the truck. This will mean 8-10 days on the ground in Uganda, sitting in on meetings with governmental and NGO actors, and visiting the camps and relief agencies. What I've related so far is the tip of the iceberg on this story. I want to dig deeper and bring this story home. There is already interest from a few publications, and my pitch this morning has led to potential contacts at some other notable vehicles. My gut instinct is that this story has potential for full book length treatment. It is that big.

But this project will take money, way more than I have. I'll need travel expenses to Africa, as well as resources to pursue story lines in Fitzgerald, Tuskeegee, and other significant locations.

So I'm asking straight out: please donate to this project. We are not going the Kickstarter/GoFundMe route, or directly to granting orgs and foundations, because the trip is coming up so quickly. Direct action, and pleading, is necessary. We are setting up a donation channel through the Domi Education Fund, which will make your contribute tax-deductible. I'm putting up a PayPal link at the top of this page. Please use it. Tell your friends. If you know any philanthropists, tell them.

IMPORTANT: (UPDATED)
The PayPal link leads to a donation form where you can place a tax-deductible donation to Domi Education, which is administering the funds.
If you prefer to donate via check, please remit to:
Domi Education
914 Railroad Ave
Tallahassee, FL 32310.

I need to raise about $4000 to put me on that plane (and the

one that comes back!), and around $5000-6000 beyond that to cover research expenses and development. If I get anywhere close to $4k, I'm on the plane and I'll worry about the rest later. Any donations beyond those amounts will go to Mana.

And if you want to skip my project and just give directly to Mana, angels will smile and blow trumpets. I'm good with that. Do whatever feels right.

But since I really want to bring this story home, I'm turning to my network of faithful readers and pals to do the one thing I do worst: ask for help.

Whaddya say?