A Typically Hackneyed End of Year Sum It All Up Post

Hey kittens! It's been far too long since I dropped some knowledge here in the bloggy vineyard. The wait for knowledge will, alas, continue, but there are a few things to talk about as we wrap up the 2016 calendar.

First off, and maybe biggest: we've (you and me) amassed a little more than $4000 towards my travel expenses for the Uganda/RUTF project. Massive gratitude to everyone who donated, and big props to pal Doug Blackburn who put together a terrific piece for the Tallahassee Democrat to give this project wider exposure.

As of last week, we are targeting mid-February for the journey. We had hoped to go in October, then November. We are at the mercy of the NGO we are traveling with and the conditions on the ground in Africa. I am about to crawl out of my skin with anticipation.

AND IF ANYBODY NEEDS TO RING UP A LAST MINUTE TAX DEDUCTION,
please click here
and drop a little coin in the kitty.
Fully tax-deductible, and all for a good cause.
You'll feel so much better if you do.

It's been quite a year in the vineyard, even though the blog frequency has been, uhm, infrequent. Mea culpa. Life has been full, and I've had the great luck to place two pieces in The Bitter Southerner in 2016, one of them included in their Best

Stories of 2016 roundup. Attention ho that I am, I am extremely proud and honored, especially when you think of the consistently amazing writing they serve up all year long.

The ridiculously long piece on New Orleans and the Panorama Jazz/Brass Band and the merely-absurdly long piece on Hearty White were true labors of love. The opportunity to stretch out and tell stories about places and people that I love is one of the year's great blessings for me. Hard to thank the BS crew enough, especially Chuck Reece, for letting me ramble at length. And now there's another piece in the pipeline for the Bitter crowd, one that will be either longer or shorter than the Hearty piece, but definitely shorter than the NOLA ramble.<fn>btw, I've started looking at how I might expand the NOLA material into a book. Anybody knows a publisher or a deep-pocketed benefactor, please send her my way.</fn>

And bigly: Judy invited me to collaborate on her new Comma project. Look at me, Ma! I'm in the Academy!

I'm also deep into the research on the Uganda project and have begun sketching out some fiction projects that are either short stories or novels or perhaps a multi-volume epic that will make me richer than George JK Rowling Martin.

Hey, kidz! Let's get interactive. Take this poll to help me decide which fiction project to tackle first.

[Total_Soft_Poll id="2″]

Vote. It's important.

On top of all that, some fairly challenging and satisfying corporate 'ho type work that has been fun and rewarding. Hey, a guy has to eat.

And on top of that topper, a couple of really cool music projects in the first half of the year kept me hopping. Most notable of these was the Edgewood Big Band project led by my

pal Jeff Crompton (pictured up top). Fortunately, this beast will rise again in 2017, with at least one ATL performance already on the books.

Here’s a taste of EBB in action. Really excited about this next go round.

There’s more over at Jeff’s SoundCloud page if you get the hankering.

So, yeah, I’ve been as busy as a one-armed wallpaper hanger with the hives. And the blog has suffered neglect. But I’m back, bitches. Plans for the next year include regular visits to the vineyard. I hear we have a new Preznit to look after.

Other plans for the year? They’re yoooooge, the best plans anyone has ever had, you really aren’t gonna believe them. Suffice to say it means lots of scribbling, lots of string tickling, and lots of walking.

We may be in a world of hurt with the Orange Haired Thin Skinned Pencil Dick in charge, but there is still Shit. To. Be. Done.

Who’s with me?

It Did Happen Here

We took down our Clinton sign yesterday.

I accept what is. I'm beyond denial and bargaining. No Fairy Unicorn is going to swoop in and alter the Electoral College. No White Knight from the FBI is going to clap irons on the Trump cabal for back channel dealing with Russia. There is no miracle in the wings.

President Trump. Get used to it.

But even with acceptance, the anger and depression remain.

I'm angry at those who voted for an obvious fraud, a man of low morals and boundless greed, a man who plays footsie with racists and bigots.

I'm angry with a press corps that enabled this two-bit grifter in their quest for ratings, that spent more time and ink on Clinton's email server than on every other policy issue combined. And today I am infuriated by exhortations that I should reach out to Trump supporters, to try to understand and respect their reasons for voting the way they did.

Well, I'm trying to understand. The respect part will have to wait for someone to articulate a reason that is not bound up in abject falsehood, logical fallacies, or outright racial animus. So far, not a single Trump voter I've listened to has even come close.

I am angry that such a simple choice was shrouded in overthinking and fantasy. It really should not have mattered who the Democratic nominee was. Decent people vote against a racist, misogynist, lying fear monger. Period. How goddam hard is that?

Back in 1991, when David Duke first took off his pointy white cap and ran for governor of Louisiana, convicted felon Edwin Edwards ran against him. The bumper stickers read: "Vote for the Crook. It's Important." The voters understood. Anything

was better than a Klansman. Edwards won.

This year, David Duke crawled out from his rock and ran for Senate. And endorsed Trump. And crowed that “Trump’s agenda is our agenda”. Trump winked and nodded and claimed to not know who David Duke was. The Klan endorsed Trump. The neo-Nazis, the alt-right, they endorsed Trump. Trump was Taking America Back, just like they have been trying to do all these years.

And the KKK is holding a Trump victory parade this weekend in North Carolina. In 2016. Welcome to Trumpland.

All this country needed to do was vote against the racist and his enthusiastic followers. That was apparently too much to ask. No matter the rationale, this is who the Trump voter endorsed:

And these folks:

I am angry because people I know, and people in my family, voted for these people. The rationale may be gussied up in talk about values, or economic insecurity, or because Obama was coming for their guns. Maybe people just don't "trust" Hillary Clinton because emails something Benghazi. But that's all noise masking the real signal: these voters, including many of my friends and family, have given the hate crowd a resounding thumbs up.

Worse: these knuckle draggers know it, and they are ready to act on their long-held and cherished beliefs about their "heritage". The mask is off. The meanest among us need no longer fear the jackbooted thugs of political correctness, a term that seems to really just mean "don't be such a dick to people", but which the throwback crowd finds an intolerable intrusion on their God-given right to "say what they really mean".

Already, the first glimmers of life in Trumpland are coming into focus. It ain't pretty. A rough beast has been set loose. School children are chanting "build that wall" in class. Children of color are being told to "start packing [their] bags" to "go back where you came from". It's happening right here, in my little island of liberal sanity. It's happening all over the country.

My anger is impotent. Nothing about it feels empowering or productive. "We" are outnumbered and the balance of power is exaggeratedly against the values we hold dear. It just feels depressing. Their anger has been given license. A savage darkness is upon the land.

"Time" executed its annual "fall back" maneuver over the weekend. Not yet 5 p.m. and dusk is creeping in. The days are shorter. Trees are going bare, plants browning and withdrawing. The weather here in the Panhandle has turned decidedly brisk, dry and dusty with predominant cloudiness.

We are deep into the autumn, the season aka Fall, and there is a heartless winter close on its heels. It is the twilight of a

year that has been filled with capricious cruelty from the start, laying low a parade of heroes and legends, a reaper's roll call that framed this election with an appropriately morbid echo. This week, hope died for millions of people. It is the greatest loss yet.

Today is Veteran's Day, a day where we thank those who have served for all they have sacrificed for this Nation. It's a day to remind us that we have, collectively and historically, faced many dark hours and survived – some of us – to tell the tale.

It is also a day to recall that many did not survive, that some events are so benighted that we can be sure people will suffer and die. The calendar will cycle round, but I fear that the political climate is going to get much worse before it gets better. Coming off of eight years of actual progress, this is a bitter damn pill.

I hope I'm just being a drama king here. I hope that some spark of inclusiveness, tolerance, and kindness emerges in the nation's Trumpian soul, but we know none of that is coming.

Wednesday evening we went out for a bite and found ourselves among friends (and not the Trump-voting kind). It reminded us that we are a part a very fine community, that we are not alone where we are. This is a comfort, not at all small. But it's not enough to cocoon in our safe zones. Too many people out there do not have this luxury.

It falls upon us to expand our notion of community, to ensure that people who need a safe harbor know where to find one. To do what we can at the local level to work for social justice, to help protect our neighbors from cruelty. To call the powerful to account, and to put ourselves on the line in solidarity with people whose lives are on the line because 49 million people put them there.

This is our call.

I’m pissed.

I’m depressed.

But I am not beaten, motherfuckers. Who’s with me?

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Night

Soon, it will all be over. Hard to believe, but true.

The end.

Denouement.

Fin.

The end of the arguments, the pitched battles on Facebook and in the comments section of your favorite newspaper, the unbridled anger, the long friendships dashed, families split asunder. The embarrassed glances as your neighbor plants another sign for *that* person, that idiot fraud who is going to destroy democracy as we know it, that tool of the special interests whose only interest is in undermining your freedom, your very way of life.

But enough about the race for Leon County Property Appraiser<fn>Which is, in fact, a nearly perfect microcosm of

the entire U.S. political circus.</fn>. There seems to be some kind of reality show contest underway to see who gets to live in the Big House That Slaves Built. And it all comes down to November 8. Come November 9, we will either wake up to a bright tomorrow or to the certainty that our polis will soon descend into a scorched earth hellscape upon which once-promising seed will find no purchase.

Here's my humble prediction: no matter who wins, the entirety of our electorate will find themselves in one or the other of these mindsets. The rosy scenario, alas, is possible only if MY preferred candidate wins. Otherwise, all is lost. Naturally.

Tuesday will mark the twelfth consecutive Presidential election that I have followed, dating back to 1972, with an almost clinically-diagnosable degree of obsession. In that time, I have watched every major election return – all the way into the late West Coast returns – and every national party convention. Gavel to gavel. Coast to coast. If recognizing a problem is the first step toward beating it, I'm good.

My name is Rob, and I am a political junkie.

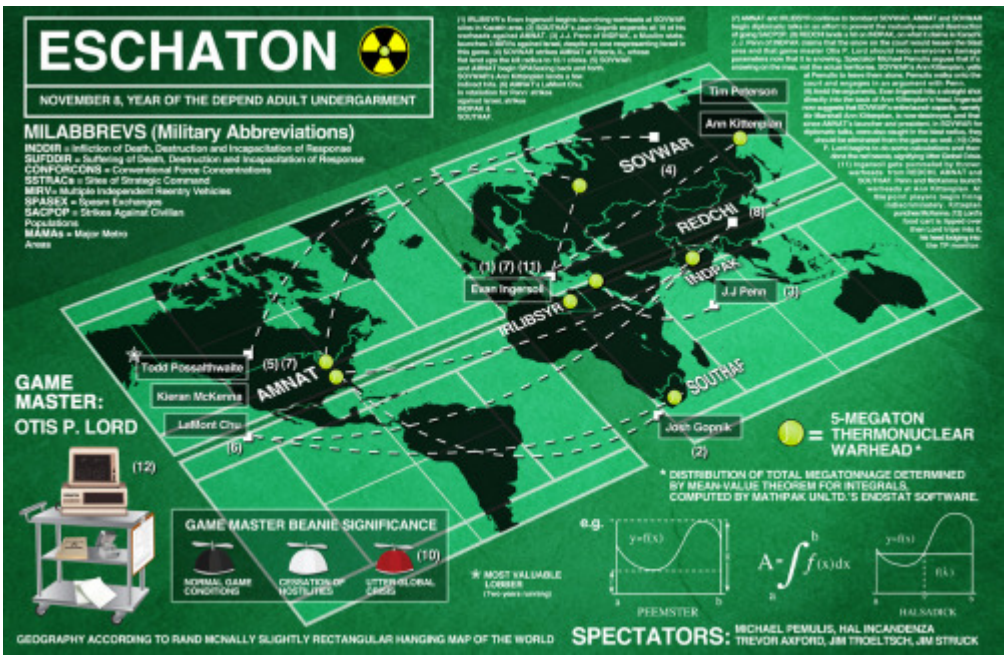
(Faithful followers of the blog [all three of you] have wondered why Your Narrator, of all people, has not written more about the election this year. Short answer: what could I possibly say that hasn't been said at least 7 times already? Also, too: I've had a hard time making any sense of it. It beggars belief, really.)

Anyway, November 8 is a pretty Biden big deal. It is a critical hinge-point in one of the greatest sagas ever told, a day of epic convergences and salient plot development.

I am speaking, of course, about David Foster Wallace's gargantuan *Infinite Jest.*<fn>Available at a fine local bookseller near you!</fn> In lieu of rehashing the obvious and over-determined plot points and characters of the Clinton-

Trump pas de deux, what say we resist my electoral OCD and spend a little time on an addiction in front of which Your Narrator finds himself compelled to pay attention to every tiny fucking detail no matter how inconsequential in the larger scheme it may actually be. Just like this fucking election.

Pages 321-342 of *IJ* describe the last, epic contest in the game of Eschaton. This is DFW at his comic peak, his closest brush with the fiery arc of Pynchon flaring rockets. Eschaton is a game invented at Enfield Tennis Academy in which youngsters with tennis rackets play out a nuclear holocaust scenario by lobbing "tennis balls so bald and dead", each representing a 5-megaton explosive, on a quartet of tennis courts marked off to represent a world map. Various items of clothing – shorts, shirts, socks, jockstraps – demarcate military installations, civilian population concentrations, transportation assets, &c. Each kid represents a different world power<fn>Or non-power; Canada in particular takes a heaping share of disregard.</fn>, and battle is waged according to strict decision trees derived from game theory, international relations studies, and the ability of said kids to accurately lob a tennis ball onto or into a nation-state and its clothing-represented assets.



It was Sunday, November 8, that this last and final Eschaton contest of all time, a game that had heretofore been a staid and measured contest of skill and strategy, descended into *Lord of the Flies*-esque blood-letting, a free-for-all melee in which propriety and acceptance of civilizing norms are discarded in favor of a winner-take-all-damn-the-torpedos orgy of anything-goes savagery in which anger and vengeance seem to be more important than arriving at mutually beneficial outcomes.

Sort of like this fucking election campaign. Damn. Can't get away.

And it happened on November 8. The Day of Eschaton.<fn>To be clear, it was a Sunday, not a Tuesday, this November 8 in the Year of the Depends Adult Undergarment was. YDAU is likely equivalent to our own 2009. Noting that the main action of this novel of a dystopian future is now several years in the old rear-view is as jarring as growing up with, and living past, the years of action described in *1984* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Time's arrow is relentless in its poking of Your Narrator's hind bits.</fn>

November 8 is also, in the *IJ* mythos, Interdependence Day, a celebratory occasion that marks the declaration by President Johnny Gentle of the forced union of the US, Mexico, and Canada. Johnny Gentle, a germ-o-phobic lounge crooner cum television star – a man described as having a "pathological inability to deal proactively with any sort of real or imagined rejection" – has defied the odds by winning the Presidency on the platform of, basically, 'everything is filthy and awful and I'm the only one who can clean it up'. That he has never been bothered by two or more ideas occupying his mind at the same time, or that he has disturbing and obvious sociopathic and authoritarian tendencies, is of no apparent concern to a largely imbecilic American electorate which is anxious to have someone place a firm hand on the wheel.

Forget building a yoooge wall. Johnny Gentle forced Canada to accept a “gift” of a massive swath of land comprising most of Northern New England and New York, a land that will be used as a toxic dump for America’s trash and radioactive waste. The land is quickly rendered uninhabitable for humans, though rumor abounds that giant feral rodents, perhaps descendant of liberated pet hamsters, roam the wilds feasting on garbage hurled by massive catapults from the south.

Also, too: Johnny Gentle dismantles NATO, ostensibly because they won’t carry their own weight, defense-spending wise.

Also, too, also: the mysterious Joelle Van Dyne – aka radio cult personality Madame Psychosis (which we are intended to hear as ‘metempsychosis‘); formerly-aka the Prettiest Girl of All Time (PGOAT), subsequently a victim of a hideous acid-hurled-in-the-face deformity episode, and currently a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (UHID) – is admitted into Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House on November 8, YDAU.

Of note: JVD is also the featured performer in *The Entertainment*, a video cartridge that is so compellingly mesmerizing and entertaining that anyone who starts watching it will sit transfixed, through episodes of hunger and thirst and bladder/colonic evacuations, until actual death occurs.

Something like this fucking election campaign.

As Pierce noted in a recent post: “Are We Not Entertained?”, both camps have pulled out all the stops to capture our eyeballs, from HRC’s parade of celebrities we love to watch – like the celebrities currently occupying that Big House That Slaves Built on Pennsylvania Avenue, no to mention A-listers like Bey, Katy, Bruce, &c. – to Trump’s parade of Chachi and Ted Nugent and uh, mm, uh…… OK, granted, Trump can’t call down the star-power the way Hils can, but it doesn’t matter…he himself is The Entertainment *ne plus ultra* of this campaign.

He is the can't-stop-looking train wreck that everybody watches just to see what happens next. Some of us are horrified, some of our neighbors thrilled, at the "authenticity" of his antics. Either way, the folks with the teevee cameras know that if they point at him, a goodly number of us will gawk, perhaps not through embarrassing episodes of defecatory/excretory mishap, but certainly in great enough numbers to keep the camera pointers focused on what we have deemed most important this year.

"So," you ask Your Rambling Narrator, "the fuck what? I can't stand this stuff and I *never* watch/listen to any of this crap." Indeed. And why should you?

(You just know I'm gonna tell you why. But not yet.)

I recently re-read some Joan Didion essays about the 1988 conventions and election – a moment of relative civility in the recurring preznential drama – and I found myself wondering<fn>Heads up! We're back to *IJ* again.</fn> what was the real-life equivalent of the instant that snivel-nosed Evan Ingersoll snapped to the in-built contradictions of Eschaton's niceties and agreed upon "apparatus of the game", which realization led him to drill a frozen rope, line driven tennis ball into the base of Ann Kittenplan's skull – she representing what we would all recognize as Putin-land – which action shattered the "civility" of old-line Eschaton strategy and unleashed the hellish fury of a full-bore Eschatological melee that culminated with Otis P Lord ending up with an old-school CRT computer monitor fitted tightly over his skull, glass screen side first – pondering how/when/why the norms of "civilized" political battle fell into glass-slivered pieces, looking for the exact moment when our own so-called *real* political culture turned the corner into the lunacy that has us contemplating the actual-if-slight possibility that a spray-tanned reality show host might actually assume the office of the Presidency. Our own Johnny Gentle.

Your Narrator is compelled to consider one of i2b's guiding principles: Reagan Ruined Everything. Perhaps St Ronald was the metaphorical tennis ball to Kittenplan's skull?

Consider Ronnie's abject demonization of the word "liberal" and the various schemes and machinations of the Reagan campaign, their dickying the Iran hostage crisis and stealing debate books and barely concealed racist appeals. Is this it? Here, after all, was a man careening headlong into dementia, a dim bulb in the chandelier ascending to the presidency, a B-movie contract hack with name recognition largely derived from his silver screen history. Saint Ronnie indeed left a trail of carnage and terrible policies in his wake. But no, Reagan had at least been a Governor, as had many Presidents before him, and despite his anti-towering intellect and retrograde policy inclinations, he was a legitimate choice for President.

I glance back at *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* and I find myself amazed that History's Yard Waste himself looks almost good in comparison. But no, this was not the moment.

We can think about Willie Horton or Al Gore inventing the internet while he wrote *Love Story,* or the Great Clenis Hunt of the 1990s, or or or….and sure, all these things are

contributors to our current debaclish condition, grim harbinger of the degradation to come. But not quite the nadir.

In the end, I think the line drive tennis ball to the nape of our political neck<fn>Block that metaphor!</fn> comes down to the moment Mavericky John McCain, with the help of his fawning media monkeys, convinced America that a barely-literate nobody from a tiny village of Alaskan meth heads was a legitimate choice to sit second in line to the presidency.

And really and come on, that was the moment where the “apparatus of the game” got thrown against the rocks and our descent into Gentle Trumpery was ordained. Not that it wouldn’t have happened anyway, eventually, that somebody would see the weakness inherent in the politico/media co-dependency and knife that soft-underbelly with almost Stradivarian skill. But that moment when a reasonably sentient Presidential nominee selected a barely sentient snowbilly in 4-inch

Louboutins to stand as second-in-line to the Presidency, when the media broke its own back bending to deal "even handedly" with a person who justly deserved all the mockery we could muster – that was the moment of insemination, the moment the Trump monster was made possible. Because once we treated her as though she were in the least qualified, all bets were off for any future carny act that wanted to play the media like small-town marks in front of a cartload of snake oil.

Compare the amount of coverage of Palin v Obama in 2008. Compare the amount of coverage of Trump v everybody else this past year. The media gazed upon Palin/Trump as do the victims of *The Entertainment* – they are willing to endure anything because the freak show is so damned compelling. And while we may not be down with soiling ourselves, it's pretty clear that we will swallow pretty much anything.

Along comes Trump. The shattered apparatus of the game was no match for a guy who couples razor-sharp media instincts with the morality of a Kimodo dragon. When Johnny Gentle emerged:

> *the Dems and G.O.P.s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other's surely got it, the two established mainstream parties split open along tired philosophical lines in a dark time when all landfills got full and all grapes were raisins and sometimes in some places the falling rain clunked instead of splatted, and also, recall, a post-Soviet and -Jihad era when – somehow even worse – there was no real Foreign Menace of any real unified potency to hate and fear, and the U.S. sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue and hideous redolent wastes with a spasm of panicked rage that in retrospect seems possible only in a time of geopolitical supremacy and consequent silence, the loss of any external Menace to hate and fear.*

The GOP was caught flat-footed by Trump, struck dumb by his

remorseless manipulations of the very same elements the Party had assumed were their personal playthings, rendered impotent by a stable of so-called contenders who were either utterly content-free, horrifically unlikeable, or both. The Republican party – for all the earnest, very public soul-searching by the very same people who set the table for this Bosch-like feast<fn>Looking at you, Bobo.</fn> – built this damn monster. But unlike Frankenstein's feared and hated creation, the townspeople loved Himself, and turned on Himself's creators when they tried to reign him in. Shelley never saw that ending coming.

One of William F Buckley's notable quips was "Don't immanentize the Eschaton", which was directed at the do-gooder utopians who he accused of attempting to hasten a post-Armageddon kingdom of god. At root, it was just a fancy way of complaining about government intervention in human affairs, but it made the speaker feel all plummy and clever about his (almost always his) disdain for the lily-livered, oatmeal-brained, pusillanimous pukes of the liberal persuasion. I first heard the phrase in an undergrad pol sci class.

But now it seems the equation is flipped. We have the Great Orange Menace casually declaiming "I'll bomb the shit out of them" and other such expressions of policy, much to the great delight of his devotees who are ready to blow the whole damn thing up out of frustration and anger. We have arrived at the inversion of Buckley's concern in which the purported conservative candidate – our own Johnny Gentle – is the one calling for a thoroughgoing cleansing.

Fortunately, and unlike the sad picture of the Dems and GOP as hapless doubles partners offered in *Infinite Jest*, the Democratic Party found itself nominating a candidate with perhaps the greatest set of qualifications and experience in the history of the Republic.<fn>With the possible exception of James Madison.</fn> And barring some calamitous turn, our next President will be a woman – a WOMAN! – who has been preparing

her entire life for this opportunity. An opportunity which, one should note, nobody could have foreseen as even remotely possible when Hillary Clinton began her long climb.

This is history, right now, obviously and colorfully unfolding each and every day. It is an amazing thing, this system of governance, with its peaceful transfer of power (at least up to now…stay tuned) and its sometimes maddening pace of non-change, its deference to compromise and consensus, to finding something resembling common ground. It is utterly imperfect. Not watching this would be like not paying any attention to the Civil War or the Depression if you'd been alive then. I cannot fathom the disinterest; then again, Your Narrator is notoriously lacking in empathy and imagination. Mea culpa.

I reckon that within a very short period of time, President Clinton II will disappoint me in some profound ways. In this she will join every other President, including Barack Obama, who I consider the finest President of my lifetime, and one of our all time top 5.

I am damned glad that she is the Democrat who stood in battle with our very own Johnny Gentle. When we wake up on November 9, we better hope (hell, pray if you want to) she took the prize. Anything else is, literally, unthinkable.

Still Out of Africa

A quick update on the Very Big Project. The interest and support has been fantastic, with more than 40 donors contributing to my efforts to travel to Uganda and follow this story. I'm especially grateful to Doug Blackburn for his generous coverage of this project in the Tallahassee Democrat.

Fundraising

Exceptional generosity from people like you has amounted to around $3700 collected so far. This is still around $1300 shy of what I need to make the trip, so if you haven't dropped some coin, please click here to make a tax deductible contribution. (You can also use the Donate button on this page. It's at the upper right, or on mobile devices, down at the bottom.)

Aside from air fare, travel expenses include a series of exotic vaccinations; a supply of anti-malarial medications; food and other on the ground expenses; lodging; cash for "tips" to various parties who need encouragement to do their jobs (or follow the law). It adds up.

(The fund is being administered by the Domi Station organization through their non-profit arm; they are acting as fiscal agent for the project. This enables you to contribute with a tax advantage.)

Travel dates

Eagle-eyed readers must wonder: "Aren't you supposed to be gone and back by now?"

Yep.

The first dates fell through. A new date was set, one that would have me descending into Entebbe Airport right about…now. But that date fell through, too. As to why? The process is pretty opaque, but I'm guardedly optimistic that we are going to make the journey before the end of the year.

The waiting is making me crazy, but it has afforded me more time for fundraising and advance research. Still…ready. to. go.

Research

Lots of progress in this realm. Dozens of books, research papers, articles, etc. on topics such as African history and economics; the many facets of famine, including not just relief efforts but attempting to understand the weaponization of famine as an instrument of war (truly horrific); Euro colonialism in Africa and elsewhere; the emergence of startup incubators and technology hubs in Africa (very exciting!); the peculiar dynamics of co-dependency between massive aid organizations and the governments and people they "serve"; and the role of the humble peanut in transforming agrarian economies in the southern US.

Among the many other rabbit hole tangents that keep appearing beneath my feet, I have become a follower of the English-language press in sub-Saharan Africa, especially Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan.

As one should expect, the reality of Africa is often at odds with the generally accepted mythos of what has been called the Dark Continent. Africa is modernizing at a remarkable pace, even as millions of people remain essentially isolated by the extreme distances involved; however, even this has been abated somewhat by the proliferation of mobile phones and devices. And the economic growth rate of much of Africa has far outpaced most of the "developed" world over much of the past decade.

Yet still, outbreaks of violence and famine and infectious disease are an almost constant element on the continent.

It is a layered story, and while I’m trying to maintain a radical neutrality as far as story frame is concerned, I am beginning to see that most of what I thought I knew about Africa was basically a fairy tale. What will I discover? What stories will I find and bring home? Can I do any of this without just being another well-meaning Western interloper who parachutes in for a taste of the exotic just so I can be the life of the cocktail party when I return?

There is serious work on my plate. I hope to honor the expectations of those of you who have supported me, but even more so, to honor the people and places that I’ll be visiting.

It’s huge, this endeavor. But really, the support I’ve received means the whole world to me.

Molto grazie! Grazie molto!

Back to the books…