

Irrigating the Sahara

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The Secret Room

I grew up in this semi-magical house in Maryland. It was a Cape Cod style with dormers and a secret room above the porch that you got to by crawling through a little space between the eaves and the walls of the upper bedrooms. I had a quirky father who knew everything worth knowing and was happy to prove the point if you asked him a question in the appropriate tone of respect. One day he was talking and mentioned a "solar still", a simple device to collect water used for survival in the desert. The idea is that you scoop out some sand, lay some plastic across the resultant hole (one always should carry plastic when crossing the desert), set it up correctly with some rocks so that the condensed water drops will roll conveniently down into your starbucks cup.

Since I was all of eight years old and my world was full of building castles, adventures and magical devices that could transport one anywhere at the speed of thought I hatched what I still consider one of the most brilliant ideas ever conceived. Now why is this idea brilliant, which I won't reveal now in order to keep your interest perked? A fair question. It is brilliant in its simplicity, being based on the solar still and brilliant in the benefit to mankind, although unrealized so far. For what if there were abundant water available in the Sahara? I will not mention some of mankind's so called social problems concerning food production, overpopulation and land use. The solution is obvious! At least to an eight year old boy crawling towards the secret room above the porch.

On the west coast of Africa is a fascinating country called Mauritania. It is cool because it has an awesome flag, has some very odd landforms and is sparsely populated. Now there are many similar places in the world but here by the ocean is a funny spot not far from the capital called "Sebkha de Ndrhamcha", a salt pan roughly 500 square miles in size that is the perfect starting point to irrigate the Sahara.



The Desert Still

So what does moonshine have to do with the stillness of the desert? As I crawl through the attic on my way to the secret room I think of booze, the forbidden treat of adults that makes them act like kids. The act of distilling is to separate mixtures by heating, used to create gasoline, alcoholic beverages and water from salt water. If there was a plentiful supply of salt water, sunshine and land, couldn't a solar still create abundant water cheaply.

“Oh no!” my father would say, “it is very expensive and impractical. Desalination is energy intensive and difficult”. Kinda like protecting a city that is below sea level or farming dependent on gasoline and pesticides. My dad wouldn't understand that in my world, anything was possible and everything was simple.

OK, so lets make a still in the desert by the ocean. The ocean water will come into a big flat area at high tide through a pipe. There will be a simple plastic shed above the water. When the sun comes up the water evaporates and some of it condenses down the side into gutters where it flows down to the local coffee shop but most of the humid warm air rises by convection through ducts in the top of the shed(s) and travels to the nearby hill where it condenses into a reservoir. In the evening the water is released downhill to irrigate fields and as it bubbles down it happens to rub against little efficient generators that supply some electrical power to the farmers. Maybe pump some water from the local coffee shop to the reservoir thereby creating a natural energy storage capacity.

Hmmm, pretty simple yet...“It'll never work, who'll pay for it...” you say. Easier than shooting a space shuttle into the sky and a LOT cheaper.

But as I reached the secret room and relax in the fullness of the brilliance streaming through the little window above the porch I think; “this idea will have to wait, they believe in solving the problems they see, not playing and creating a new magical world”.



The Shelf of Great Ideas

In the secret room with the little window was one corner formed between the brick chimney that came from the living room below and the edge of the house. When you entered the secret room it was through this corner (I am sure at this point that you have a completely different picture of what this room looks like than I do but it really doesn't matter) and this was the only area that had a proper floor so naturally this was to be the place to have the shelf.

Now every child knows that you have to have a shelf cause where else do you put your cool stuff unless you have a cool box but I didn't. So with a little scrounging a shelf became part of the room and on the shelf cool stuff collected. Some cool rocks, poptop chains, coins of great value and other stuff but I didn't know then as I do now that great ideas have to go somewhere or they die. So the desert still idea floated up to the back of the shelf and stayed there hidden.

After a while I had to go eat or pee or something so I crawled out of the secret room and for a while I left the shelf and the brilliance behind. Not until a cold rainy autumn day about a month later did I get back to the secret room. I had no reason to go there but to have fun so there I was having fun with some cool stuff and noticed on the back of the shelf a great idea. What was weird was I didn't know how this great idea had landed on the shelf. I wasn't sure if it belonged to me or was stolen from some genius somewhere or better yet from some movie. There is a small chance that it had drifted up off of my dad's white hair but in any case there it was grinning at me.

Now that was really annoying....



The Shocking Earth

One of the great things I had done with my Dad was make an electric motor out of paper clips, nails, a block of wood and copper wire. Once it was working my Mom thought it was really interesting and exciting but my Dad could only analyze it and offer improvements. This opened my eyes to the reality that there were little energy gizmos running around really fast all over the place. But what were they doing most of the time? Here we are so worried about our lack of energy and here they are with way too much energy. I mean look at lightning after all!

In the secret room was some tin foil on the wall for reasons that have to do with the 60's, black lights and Jimi Hendrix. The electric motor a few days after being built rested under the Shelf of Great Ideas and fairly close to the tin foil on the wall. Hmmm...

What if those energy gizmos starting crawling on the tin foil and then were enticed down a copper wire to the electric motor. I could run a fan or something 'cause it was getting hot in here or better yet I could power the life support system for the transport-one-anywhere-at-the-speed-of-thought-thing. Cool.

It required more thought but I wasn't in the mood and later on I found the Testatika which had it pretty well worked out. This great idea lived on the Shelf of Great Ideas quite happily and it turns out it was related (grand nephew or something) to the simple earth battery that early telegraph operators employed without pay to power their remote stations.

Years later my Mom asked about the tin foil and I mumbled something incoherent, afraid to reveal the mysteries living in her house...



A Feisty(able) Move

Now I was raised a Quaker. No, I didn't wear funny hats and ride in a buggy. That is the Amish who are very cool and believe in Peace and Love which the Quakers do also. I was a modern Quaker and inconspicuous to the untrained eye. We had a Sunday thing called "meeting" where the "friends" sat in a room and waited to be "moved" by the "inner light" sometimes called God.

In the room was a mobile, quite large, hanging from the high ceiling. The room was the assembly room of a Quaker school and was huge, square and drab. I was small, bored and looking at the large mobile in the huge room with the "meeting" of "friends" waiting to be "moved" by God. I decided to move the mobile with my incredible powers of concentration.

Proof is an arbitrary thing really. Like when my brothers would fight about something sooner or later one would shout; "Prove it". Then the other would recite some "facts" of dubious origin and the now enriched fight would ignite once again. Proof depends completely on the rules of the game, so anyone can prove anything if they are making up the game.

The mobile hanging from the ceiling started to move in a clockwise direction. Slowly at first then accelerating oh so slightly as my face scrunched up with the effort of my concentration. Now slow it down, slower, slower. Now start it back the other way, that's it, now slow it down again. Man, this is tiring but at least now the "meeting" is over and it is time to play.

Sometimes in the morning I'd lie half awake or half asleep for a while because it felt so good. Occasionally I'd go flying, which is similar to moving mobiles in Quaker meeting. All you do is visualize the flying with a clear intense focus and intention. I loved it. At first I could barely get off the ground but over time I could get up above the trees and on rare occasions get into the clouds which was scary and a little cold. If I really worked at it (which I am not inclined to do at the moment) I could propel the transport-one-anywhere-at-the-speed-of-thought-thing anywhere in the Universe I wanted. Since it would be a lot of concentrated effort I instead decided to just make a little anti-gravity device. This is powered by the little energy gizmos that are everywhere and has a neat ion jet built right in.



Forgetting to grow up

A weird thing happens to some of us as we get older, it is generally referred to as “growing up”. It is actually a complex set of adjustments to societies whims. Some of these are;

- ✦ being responsible, which means making rational decisions based on other peoples opinions.
- ✦ acting your age, which means pretending that anyone else cares about how you look when they are busy keeping their own act together.
- ✦ striving for success, I don't know much about this one but I think it has to do with joining a game full of liars and cheats where the rules are constantly changing.
- ✦ noble sacrifice, in which a person blindly follows the blind and gives up happiness.

I found myself recently in a class doing an exercise in which we were asked to remember something from our youth and how it felt. I thought of the golf course near my home which was really cool where Rich, Carlos, John and I used to play. I remembered what it was like to get up in the morning and think about going there for adventures. It was full of adventures. Then I got that I had almost, ALMOST forgotten how to play. What a shock came crashing into my world. That magical joyous experience of play that was so real was missing from my life.

Well this had to change, so I decided to play again. Which took some practice because I had trained myself in time management and being productive, both of which have nothing to do with play. The first thing was to forget about time (the essence of being grown up) and do stuff with no agenda. That is; “Hey, let's go over there...Hmmm, nothing here, let's go over there. Wow, there are some cool rocks here. I wish I had some more rocks. Oh wait, I know where some other rocks are...” etc. The next and really only other thing is to have the priority of enjoyment. That is fun. If it ain't fun, make it fun or don't do it.

After a while I started to get better at it and found my days becoming more magical and simple and so many concerns that used to fly around my head had gone somewhere else.

Also it became clear that most people had become adults and were worried, while a few had forgotten to grow up.



Golf Courses

What is so amazing about golf courses anyway? There must be something about the course itself otherwise why would people spend zillions of dollars and zillions of hours there playing that stupid game.

Rich, Carlos and I used to go to the golf course after we got tired of the secret room. The golf course was real fancy and they even had a tournament there but all we ever saw were grumpy old white men. Next to the golf course had been a public swimming pool that was awesome with a big slide and fountains but it got shut down during the civil rights stuff rather than allow black people to swim there. There was a big fence all around the golf course but there were also holes in good spots and one train track that ran right smack through the center of the course from our side to the other side where the pool was. The train track was the official superhighway of all the kids in our neighborhood and any neighborhoods down the line so who knows where it would end. The train track went down to Georgetown on the river that way and over Rock Creek Park on a high scary trestle the other way. It also went under two surface roads which created small tunnel underpasses that had weird dirt embankments. Over time the dirt had eroded creating castle like formations which became the site of numerous offensive and defensive maneuvers.

Back at the golf course if you were walking on the train tracks you could see how long you could balance on the rail or else try to run on the cross ties really fast which created a unnatural rhythm in your stomach that made you laugh. The train track stayed fairly level but the ground with the tees, paths and grasses of the course sloped down to the creek so after a while you were walking up in the air looking down on the course and the grumpy white men.

In winter the best sledding hill in the country was right there in the middle of the course. It barreled way down then leveled out for about twenty feet before the creek. There was one little wood bridge across the creek and if you were lucky you could get across. Or if not you could bail before you got wet. People used to make fires there in the snow and the dogs went crazy chasing the sleds.

But in summer one had to dodge the grumps so we would carefully skirt the fairways and search for stuff in the back corners of the course. John and I one summer started moving all the signs around hoping to send a golf cart into the woods. We also found that you could aim the big sprinklers at each other making one great water fight. I know I spent a lot of time there but it was so great I forgot to remember most of what I did.



Languages in the Living room

Below the secret room was the porch where my brothers and I watched thunderstorms in the summer and rated the lightning on form, style and execution. Next to the porch was the living room where people sat and talked. During the anti-war movement days it was a dormitory too.

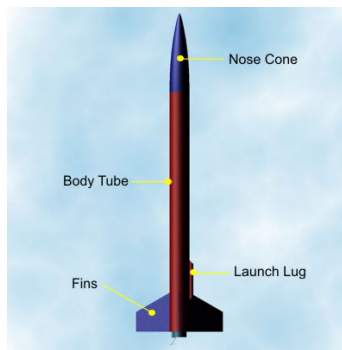
My mom and dad had carried on the fine family tradition of doing good so they had gone to China and produced two of my three brothers. When the communists gained power in China they kicked most missionaries out and my folks went to Turkey after dropping by the U.S. to produce me. So I spent my first few years on Earth in Turkey which was OK and I think I really liked it. I don't remember many details but there is a deep impression of desert and peoples with many colors and sounds. Later on I saw a picture of my kindergarten and it looked like a "We are the World" poster.

Friends of my folks from Turkey, China and elsewhere would drop by occasionally, have dinner and later tea in the living room. My brothers and I ate separately at those times and were banished to the rec(kt) room to play and then to bed.

Sounds travel upward when they are happy so sleeping on the second floor allowed the conversations in many languages to drift up into my dreams. When Turkish comes into my dreams I dance around a fire and sing. When Chinese comes into my dreams I talk and paint and cook. When English comes into my dreams I laugh and invent things.

The sound of adult voices in another language on young ears is really amazing though. It affirms the mystery of a world much bigger than us and brings comfort that those big people are busy figuring it all out while I am falling asleep and tomorrow will be a beautiful new day. It is the sound of the voice that is meaningful not the content. Every cat knows this.

The sounds from the living room tended to collect in the secret room like fine dust. They murmured of far off lands seen in slide shows. Occasionally the crack of thunder would stir the languages violently in a swirl and I would pull the covers more tightly over my head until it all settled down.



Rockets, wind tunnels and worms

Half of the basement below the living room below the secret room was the Rec(kt) room and the other half was the shop. The shop was a wonderland of benches, bins, tools and dust. There was a table saw, a metal lathe, all kinds of mislabeled drawers and a general clutter that brings forth the inner creativity in the fertile mind. It was here that lamps, motors, pinewood derby cars, furniture, and great inventions were made. My father often was found muttering and singing to himself here while engaging his passion for making practical things.

The wind tunnel was a science fair project of mine that we built together. It didn't create any breakthroughs in science but was nicely made and won an honorable mention in the science fair. My previous year entry was a study of worms in different types of soil. Although this was fascinating to some it didn't receive any award and I thought this was because of a bias on the part of the judges towards projects that squirmed and smelled bad.

My brother Aubrey got into model rockets around that time with a friend of his and allowed me to accompany them to some launches. This was where kids would set a model rocket on a stand, attach some wires, count backwards and watch the rocket either explode, zoom around in circles before exploding or fly upwards to the heavens where it might release a parachute or just collapse down to earth in triumph.

It was in the shop that I found the shelf of great ideas and also many of the ideas that ended up on the shelf. When my father would mutter "what so-and-so moved my drill", and "why don't those darn-blamed kids clean up after themselves", I learned that when one was inventing Earth-transforming-things one should be careful about pissing off people on the Earth.

So I decided that before making the transport-one-anywhere-at-the-speed-of-thought-thing I should do my chores.

I'm almost finished with my chores now.



Energy Transference

About now you might be asking; "What's the point?" Well of course there is no point but it does bring up the subject of Energy Transference.

Kids like to collect things, all kinds of things usually with a theme, say dolls, rocks or things that squirm but the important part of the collection is to show it to someone else. Otherwise "What's the point?" This sharing of the collection brings a transfer of enthusiastic energy to those shared with. Most great ideas get bored on the shelf without a little energy once in a while. But when shared they are reborn in the secret room of all great ideas and can then pop up when needed.

At one point I tried to organize the ideas with cool code names but they all ended up in a pile anyway so now I am just planting them to see if they will grow. If you have a garden you may be the type of person who wants all the little plants to be in a line like kindergarten kids behind their desks. Or you may not really care how the garden looks but be more interested in the fruit it provides and what funky little bugs are crawling through it. My garden is evolving into a random-whatever-works pattern that reminds me of the way leaves fall and the stuff on the shelf of great ideas.

So sharing the great ideas is planting them and if the energy nourishes them and they grow then they will be of benefit, otherwise they return to dust and no harm done.