

A Tale of Travels to the Seven Kingdoms:

By

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Being an authentic and unedited narrative of mental journeys to:
The Kingdom of the Cowboy, The Realm of the Chess-Player, The Vast and
Rising Tide, The Valley of Peace and Prosperity, The World of Fire and
Brimstone, The Land of the Survivors, and The Domain of the Floating Few

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Prologue:

What a wonderful, terrible, frightening, inspiring, and amazing world we live in. I surveyed the world around me and reflected on the many different aspects of its politics, its history and the vast differences between people's conditions. And it was then that I, who had already traveled far and wide, and who had remained connected with most parts of this huge and multi-faceted reality, decided to revisit these different parts of the world. In the footsteps of Gulliver, I went to all of the seven kingdoms and recorded the impressions that I got from these mental travels. Since I know these places well, I did not expect to discover something new, but perhaps I would see it in a different light. It was one of those cases that really

fitted well the famous phrase of Proust: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but in seeing with new eyes.” At least I hoped so.

The Kingdom of the Cowboy:

I started my journeys by visiting the Kingdom of the Cowboy, a marvelous place with wonderful people where I spent half my life. But somehow, all across the land, the mood had shifted, and recent developments surprised the world. Such developments have many people concerned all around the planet, for the Kingdom of the Cowboy has enormous influence throughout the world. I choose to call it the Kingdom of the Cowboy, because the Cowboy remains a mythical figure in the history of this, the richest and most powerful nation on earth. That mythical cowboy was the epitome of rugged individualism, freedom, and taking his destiny in his own hands, confronting the world with just his trusty gun at his side...

This was supposed to be the land where “The City on the Hill” was to be found, where dreams come true and the fabled Eldorado was a reality. But no more. The landscape was littered with the corpses of failed policies and broken promises, the people were disgusted with their leaders. Change was in the air, but even more, anger was everywhere.

Things have not been going well for the town and its people. Though they may be better off than many other towns, they are still going through some tough economic times. Some “bad Hombres” are in town. Rumors of their dastardly deeds are the talk of the town. The last sheriff was incapable of stopping this, or so the rumor said. The rich ranchers down the road, stay on their big spreads, entertaining the visiting railroad barons. They use legal maneuvers to get the choice parcels of land, and squeeze the townspeople out of their potential earnings. They do not seem to care about the townspeople, or their problems or their feuds or their fears.

The townspeople try to organize themselves. All to naught. Their efforts fail and they remain divided between those who want to get outside gunfighters to “clean up our streets” and those who want to work with the owners of the large ranches and the sheriff in place. They want to settle this democratically. They call for a town meeting.

Another useless town meeting. Severely divided, the Townspeople cannot agree on what to do. The town is silent and angry after bitter feuds divided its citizens. They are unable to agree on what to do to confront the menace that looms over the

town. Ah, if only things could get back to what they were like in the old days, when your parents came out west and settled here...those were the good old days, when everyone was working, town spirits were high and buildings were coming up everywhere. Wistful thinking of the old? Dreams of a bygone past? Maybe an image of a future still to be? Whatever you call it, it surely is not the ugly present.

I speak to the townspeople and find that many are still under the spell of dreams of “the good old days” and are yearning to bring back that past. A few youngsters talk of leaving the place to go to the cities where the real opportunities lie, places like NY and LA. But most are just angry. They want change, whatever its means, whatever its outcome. They want to believe those who will promise to bring change rather than those who may have detailed plans but have not been able to bring change in the past.

The lonesome cowboy rides into town. Standing tall, he promises to bring order to the town and to protect it with his trusty six-shooter all by himself against all comers. One after the other he guns down sixteen pretenders who question his ability to do so. Finally, he confronts the established leaders of the town who hesitate to give him the leeway he wants. They back down. Suddenly he is the savior. He is the only one who can fix the situation. Nobody knows where he came from and nobody cares. He is believable. The majority of the residents in district after district in the town rally around him, surrender to him, and collectively they name him sheriff. Just get the bad guys out, and just let the good people of the town work and live as they were meant to do.

The tall cowboy does not really explain what he will do. But he promises to fix everything by standing up for the town, against all comers. Just he, his gun and maybe a few trusty deputies,

What a story! Honed in a thousand western films, it is imprinted into the memory DNA of every American. It lives in the subconscious love of guns, and the innate acceptance of the notions of manifest destiny and the great expansion westwards. The Frontier is part of the American psyche as much as the notion of the “Wild West” that was tamed by men of steel. Never mind that the historic reality was different for the native-Americans, the African-Americans, and the Hispanics. Women fought long and hard for their rights. All of these inconvenient realities were swept under the rug by the mythical sweep of that great narrative. The updated version is not that different!

The Realm of the Chess Player:

I then travelled to the land of the recluse. An immense estate said to be the largest on earth, and by a wide margin it was. You travelled incredible distances into that huge estate among quiet villages with limited possessions but with a sense of self satisfaction. They liked that reclusive overlord in his vast castle, with his passion for chess.

As I moved about in that vast estate, I was again struck by its rugged beauty and many fine exemplars of the art and artistry of its diverse people. I stopped to look again with awe and fascination at the legacy of great rulers named Peter and Catherine, and the city with magnificent canals that some people called the Venice of the north. I admired the collections in that great museum that is referred to as the "Hermitage."

But I did not want to dally too much, so I went to the capital: Moscow, a city transformed in the last quarter century. But the vast Red Square with its spectacular St. Basil remains as magnificent as ever, and the Kremlin Palace, once home to the Tsars and to the soviet tyrants who succeeded them was unchanged in its splendor. But it now had a new master, the overlord of this vast estate. The man I had come to see.

I finally met that overlord. A small and feisty man, brilliantly in tune with his people, he knew how to manage his image better than the artisans of America's Madison Avenue, and who gained and maintained their support as he struck out to reject a diminished status and to regain the power of the past.

He was passionate about his mission, but he could also be cold as ice. He sat me down to explain how all his neighbors had once been his vassals and had now turned against him. The whole world is against him, but he is determined to regain what was once his. He will do it with deliberation and precision.

There was a large chess board in his castle. It corresponded to real troop deployments on his land, at his borders and beyond. His opponents were sending him messages about how they moved their pieces.

Letting pure reason govern his actions, the Lord of the vast estate would move his pieces whenever he sensed a weakness in the deployment of his opponents. The moving of the chessmen was very controlled. Pressing his advantage, the limited

movements of his silent chessmen on the board were matched by the limited movements of his pitiless real chessmen on the world scene.

He was good at this game. He did not force the pace, but tried to seize opportunities when they presented themselves. He did not sacrifice his pieces and left no openings for his adversaries, be they real or imagined. I watched with horror as he imposed his will on one mini-campaign after the other, imposing the order of his chess-game on the chaotic reality of the world around him. Bit by bit he was getting what he wanted and the counter-moves of his opponents seemed to have little effect on the series of tactical gains that he was making.

He was very good at that, the tactics of small gains, that reasserted his presence not just as the uncontested lord of the immense estate, but the overlord of the near frontiers of his realm and an important actor well beyond.

“When does the game end?” I asked. Still absorbed in his chess game he answered me: “There is no end, but there are stages in this game. The next stage is when all my opponents will acknowledge my dominant position in this part of the world. Then the game changes, for we – the main players – can become partners again, each being given more of the surrounding lands as vassal states if not as outright annexations.” I shuddered and asked: “but your estate is so immense, surely you do not need further expansion.” He smiled and cold as ice he said: “Need, no. But want, yes. For it is through that reach that others will give me respect”. With that, I started on my long journey from the castle in which he sat and governed to the borders of that truly immense estate. Reflecting on my meeting, I was leaving convinced that he would make few mistakes and that he was counting on the mistakes of his opponents, and that he might well succeed in his quest if things stayed on their current course.

The Vast and Rising Tide:

I then travelled to a vast and largely still unknown kingdom, of legendary history and amazing present, where the economy was booming and a rising tide was indeed lifting all boats. But this vast kingdom with its teeming millions and millions of inhabitants, was itself extending its reach onto the rest of the world in the manner of an unstoppable tide that cannot be comprehended or combatted. Like the arrival of daylight as the sun chases away the shadows and covers the whole landscape, or like a rising tide that engulfs the shore. It was there, it was

expanding, it was getting into every nook and cranny and it was imbuing its teeming multitudes of citizens with an incomparable self-confidence.

Widespread poverty had given way to established communities of well-fed children, and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution had given way to the emergence of some excellent academic centers and world class research facilities. The drab standardized “Mao Suits” had given way to all forms of international dress for both men and women. The people who had prided themselves on their austerity and functionalism are now indulging in consumerism...individual billionaires are everywhere in the land of the collectives and the communes... But discipline and hard work are still everywhere.

The large and empty boulevards of the capital city are now choked with endless private cars...The appearance of the cities that yesterday had been coated in the drab grey of the typical communist regimes, now vied with the capitals of the Gulf for glitter and glitz, for showmanship and flashing sparkle. They grow faster than the cities of almost all the countries on the planet.

The long distances especially towards the huge interior of that great nation, are now easy to cross by some of the best roads in the world as well as innumerable airports connecting a network of cities that look to the future, knowing that the 21st century is going to be the century where the greatness of the middle kingdom will be reinstated. And where once they built a great wall to keep the world out, they are now eager to stretch out their reach to that great world out there and sure to make it their own...

Veneration of the old has given way to the adoration of the new. But the pride in their past of greatness is there, from cosmology to architecture, from armies of terra-cotta warriors to artifacts of jade and cloisonné, the past is a living reminder what once was and can be again.

And despite the rising inequality, and the cracks that have recently appeared in the once impenetrable facade of the homogenized governance machinery that remains subservient to that mysterious and opaque entity called “the Party”, there is no slowing down the frantic pace of modernization. There is a vital force that blows across the land, a force that lifts people’s spirits and imbues them with a new-found self-confidence as they march to their own version of “manifest destiny”. It is unstoppable, like the great rising tide that covers ever more of the land it touches...

Even if occasionally the expanding tide may seem to falter at some point, with wavelets drawing back in, momentarily withdrawing with a gurgle and a lapse, they will be almost immediately replaced by other wavelets, emerging from the immensity of that vast rising tide, and the brief local hesitation will be as if it had never been.

“This is our time. The world has to accommodate itself to us,” they said. And the marvels that they were creating were indeed close to magic. I had visited that land many times in the last 40 years, and had I not been witness to the transformation of that vast and rising tide, I would not have believed it.

The ingenuity of the people has been unleashed. These were after all the people who not only established their civilization in the mystic past, it was these same people who had given the world that most precious of inventions: paper. They also invented printing, the compass and gunpowder... today their labs were among the best, and the most advanced science was being done there... and they had even beaten the cowboys at the production of supercomputers.

Not content with spreading like the incoming tide here on earth, the Chinese were now invading the realm of space, and I feel certain that the next astronaut to visit the moon will be a Chinese woman...

As I left, I was reflecting on a saying that is now prevalent in that part of the world: “The sun may indeed set in the west, but it rises in the east”!

But if these three kingdoms were still the uncontested leaders of the political and military reality of the planet, where were the erstwhile masters of the world? What were they doing as the remaining (or rising) strength of the “big three” was making itself felt more day by day? So I travelled to the Valley of Peace and Prosperity.

The Valley of Peace and Prosperity:

This was the home of the “Europeans”, once the richest and most powerful inhabitants on earth. Collectively, their standard of living is still the best in the world, and they are still among the wealthiest people on earth. But they no longer rule the world as they once did. Their knowledge and technology was second to none. But so was their greed. Not content with the resources of their rich homeland, these wonderful people, organized in sovereign nation states, would stretch their authority over most of the people on the planet... They created

empires that colonized most parts of the world, and kept the peoples of these colonies in a subservient status, breaking their spirit so that a few people from a far off land could indeed control and govern the multitudes.

They were people of talent and ingenuity. They invented their future. They created manufacturing and developed science and technology. They were magnificent organizers and administrators. They also invented modern Democracy and beautiful concepts like Human Rights. They produced the “Enlightenment”, and the light of their ideas shined on their societies and on the whole world.

But they were also capable of a terrible ferocity. They found some of their kindred souls among the Arabs and the Africans, and with their colonies across the vast Atlantic Ocean they organized the global slave trade just as they organized the global trade and the modern economy. With ferocity and greed came power and weaponry. And they turned that weaponry on each other. Their wars among themselves were even more ferocious than their conquests and colonization of others. And with ever advancing technology the wars became ever more deadly, until in a paroxysm of blood and tyranny, the last century saw wars to end all wars, and weapons so terrible that their use was banned by any concept of a common humanity. After the second of these terrible wars that claimed the lives of millions, the visionary few among them said that we can live differently. Let us overcome our differences and learn to work together and live together. Let us abolish war and let us ensure democracy. And they built a structure the likes of which the world had never seen: a huge dam that would keep at bay the nationalism, the anger and the ferocity that used to sweep down on the continent like a Tsunami every few years, destroying all in its path and drawing more of their communities into the fray. That construction took time to build. But it stood tall an impressive, with many busy engineers and administrators to keep it standing and maintain it and reinforce it again and again.

And the years passed. In the shadow of the great dam, the valley was peaceful and prospered. It became the envy of the world. New generations never experienced war, famine and destruction like their parents had. They took the blessings of the dam for granted. They started worrying about whether others should be allowed to join in their expanded community by the dam. They relegated the stories of the furies that were captured behind that dam to the realm of myth and fairy tales. They could govern themselves without the need of a dam. They could ensure democratic ideals and human rights without the dam and these ant-like engineers and administrators running around to maintain it. Besides, they said, maintaining that dam spoils our view and costs us a lot of money.

One by one, the peoples of the valley started to question the importance of the dam. The siren song of populist demagogues began to work on the small but significant irritants that existed: Foreigners in our midst that are spoiling the purity of our way of life; the true and terrible inequality that was rising in our societies; and the obligation to respect the directives that were issued from time to time by these ant-like creatures working at maintaining the dam. Why not expel the foreigners, regain our old way of life in our little piece of the valley, and put a little white picket fence around it? We would be happy. We would make our own decisions. And let others do the same. We don't need the dam and its ant-like servants. We can work and trade just as well without the dam.... Everyone knows that the stories of furies held back behind the dam are not true. If we destroy the dam nothing will change.

And it happened. One of the members actually voted to breach its bit of the dam. It voted to leave the collective security of the community of nations that now populated the whole valley. But they were now wondering what sort of a fence they would need. A little white picket fence would not be enough. Perhaps a giant wall with cashiers windows and small openings where goods and money could be exchanged but no one could go through? The internal debates started, and the divisions appeared profound within that society itself, not just between that society and the rest of the peoples of the valley. Their future was at stake. Other politicians in other communities were now saying that they also wanted to secede and let's destroy the dam....

Having been a friend of long standing I could participate in their discussions and I told them that like the terrible secrets in Pandora's box, the furies behind the dam were real and more frightening than most people can imagine. The Chess-player next door was moving his pieces and the only thing that would counter his skillful moves would be an even stronger dam. I pleaded with them to look at the little kingdom known for chocolate and cuckoo clocks... they were actually much more than that. They had succeeded at reaching the pinnacles of science and technology and lived extremely well. They were a miniature of what the whole valley should look like... They had learned the alchemy of maintaining the diversity in that little mountainous country and thrive by all working and living together...

But all to no avail. The virus of separatism was gaining ground. Its agents, the populist politicians, were busy spreading their message, and diverting all anger at the foreigner and the other, and all resentment at the big Dam that had so

successfully protected the valley and brought it peace and prosperity for so many decades... I left them in intense discussions.

The World of Fire and Brimstone:

Here was the birthplace of all three of the great monotheistic religions; here was the beating heart of Islam and the core of Arab culture. Here was where people still believed in martyrdom and practiced versions of their faith that went from the most idealistic to the most nihilistic, from the all-embracing and all-forgiving to that driven by toxic notions of the exclusivity of the chosen few. This was a world where people seemed to see everything in terms of black and white without any shades of grey.

They were nourished by visions of hell and suffering, visions fueled by vitriolic sermons full of fire and brimstone, with vivid descriptions of judgment and eternal damnation. Sermons that keep referring to passages in the Holy Quran that called on the faithful to avoid God's wrath by opposing the enemies of God on earth, which were described as all those who did not share their particular extremist visions of Islam and salvation that the preacher espoused. Elsewhere, some Christian and Jewish preaching also included a few elements who went for this fire and brimstone variety of calls to action and versions of manifest destiny prompting more settlers in what is called the holy land.

The sad reality of that world was that it had become a version of hell on earth for many, if not most, of its inhabitants. Egypt, the oldest sovereign nation on earth, went through convulsions as the Arab Spring turned into the Islamist winter, but survived the ordeal and now stood impassive in the eye of a storm raging all around it from Libya to Sudan to South Sudan to Somalia to Yemen to Syria and Iraq.... The Palestinians in the occupied territories still yearned for a solution to their 70 year plight... The armies of the night, the soldiers of political factions, the militias of all types and stripes of ethnic and religious groups, and the warriors of the extremist and terrorist organizations, were all engaged in bitter and endless destruction, murder and mayhem. All this was much worse than the worst horror film for it was real.

This once great region, birthplace of human civilization on the planet, had become a World of Fire and Brimstone, a real hell on earth for the poor wretches caught up in these conflicts with all their various degrees of intensity and severity. Here the voices of reason and the calls for peace were few and far between, and seemed to

be drowned out by the cacophony of self-righteous demands and the screams of the anguished victims of the fighting... the endless fighting...

As William Butler Yeats said in "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Ah, but what valiant deeds go unrecorded by those who remember their humanity in the midst of the chaos and the destruction. Doctors, nurses and ordinary citizens who bring help and sustenance to the many victims young and old, without regard to which party they belong to or for which faction they are fighting, simply because they are fellow human beings in distress. These noblest and most selfless of works are an inspiration calling to the best in our nature, as well as a condemnation of our inability to bring peace to these troubled lands.

There are also other even more quixotic acts of bravery to save remnants of our cultural heritage threatened by vandalism or warfare. They try to save the legacy of our past grandeur from the destructive forces of the present that it may live to inspire future generations to rise once more to reclaim bygone greatness.

But for now, the devastation in places like Syria and South Sudan is beyond comprehension. Man's inhumanity to man seems to know no bounds. Every act of violence seems to call out another and worse act of retribution, and the cycle speeds up as it goes ever downwards in these destructive wars where there are no winners, there are no victories... only death, destruction and misery.

I tried to talk to some of the protagonists. But everyone was too busy fighting to sit and talk with me. Those who talk, they said, were far away in places like Geneva and New York, out of reach of the bombs and beyond hearing the screams of the wounded, the maimed and the dying, escaping the dull stare of the children who are caught in this nightmare of insanity and violence.

This world of fire and brimstone is what surrounds my native land, which, though itself at peace, was being corroded by the cancer of corruption and the dulling of the senses that comes with continued exposure to atrocities and violence. But

within that horrible landscape of nightmares, the innocence of childhood and the idealism of youth bespeaks of a new day... Indeed “hope springs eternal in the human breast” and it is often darkest just before the dawn...

The Land of the Survivors:

This land was not one kingdom; it was many many nations that shared few common characteristics. When in a moment of arrogance, the westerners would refer to the world as “The West and the Rest” this was “the rest”, or at least a large part of it. Spread over several continents, and representing extremes of natural resource endowments and size, whether by land area or population, these countries have little in common. But in most of these countries, the inhabitants, or a majority of them, have to struggle to cope with the challenges of daily life. Whether in the favelas of Latin America, or in the slums of rapidly growing African cities, or in the dense rural villages of the Indian subcontinent, they all struggle. True there are a few who have successfully overcome these struggles in the last thirty years or so: Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and a few others, and true there are a few more poised to replicate that feat, but for the vast majority of them it a challenge just to survive. Hence I referred to them as the Land of the Survivors...

It is of course the landscape that I know best, having spent a very large part of my professional life – based at the World Bank – trying to help these same people confront these same challenges. But beneath that external appearance of continuity and lack of real change there was something different in the Land of the Survivors.

For one thing, there were a lot more people. Children, children everywhere. But if the population growth was slowing in most countries, it remained on its steep rise in Africa.

Africa, beloved Africa where we humans first learned to walk erect, and where our human family tree began. Africa, where civilization and the modern state were born, by the banks of the Nile... Its northern part was involved with the Mediterranean and the conflicts within the middle east, that World of Fire and Brimstone... But south of the vast Sahara, Africa was still a mystery... it had achieved miracles under the guiding hand of truly exceptional leaders: Nelson Mandela, Chizano and Masire to name but a few. But where were their successors? Dare we dream that the political miracles they achieved would also be matched by socio-economic miracles in all of Africa?

Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa where population growth was highest, was also witnessing an additional transformation as rural peoples became urbanized, and the cities were to further deepen the inequality and the stress that citizens had to cope with. Pollution and ugliness, poverty and inadequate infrastructure, congestion and absence of sanitation... these were the challenges of the survivors in the shanty-towns of Africa. And their rural counterparts were also threatened, by deforestation and desertification, by the risks of rains that capriciously refused to come or came at rates that caused flooding and further miseries. Survival, bare survival for many of the inhabitants of these nations was a challenge.

But amidst the ugliness of the shantytowns and the new urban landscape, and even in some of the remote villages, hope was emerging. Like the edelweiss breaking out of the snow, like unexpected flowers emerging from the cracked concrete or the eroded soils, a new generation of young Africans had somehow obtained their mobiles, were mastering Facebook and texting to each other, unleashing their imaginations, seeing opportunities where others saw only despair. So who knows what the future may bring? Could they replicate the miracles of East Asia?

I remember when the tables were turned and when every “expert” was saying that Africa was the continent of the future while Asia, already over-populated and poor would see nothing but famine and disaster. But the Asians proved them wrong.

The East Asian and Pacific nations showed the world that economic miracles were possible. First Japan had risen from the ashes, and forged the passage way to prosperity that other neighbors were to follow. Today it stood in splendid isolation, conscious of its history and achievements, impassive and opaque to foreigners, it showed that it had mastered the game that the land of the cowboys had been champion at...and that enormous ability and self-confidence was to manifest itself in country after country... and finally, that rebirth also reached the land of the sleeping dragon itself.... China awakened from its long sleep and began to rise among the nations with lightning speed ... it was like an unstoppable tide...I had just come from there...

Now it seemed that the other sleeping giant, the Indian subcontinent, was also stirring... maybe its time had also come. Maybe it too was about to surprise a complacent world.

But what about the Latin Americans? Ah, we said they were incapable of governing themselves, dictatorships and military coups being the norm across the

vast lands of that fascinating continent.... A tormented history that had been kept that way by the constant interference of the giant in the north. From gunboat diplomacy, to the land-grab of the Panama Canal, from covert wars to overt support for the worst dictators, the “Yankees” had been behind many a setback in these tortured societies.... But then, suddenly, in a single decade the entire continent turned into functioning democracies! Like beautiful butterflies coming out of their chrysalises the nations were reborn. Democracy swept the continent in a decade, and by the 1990s all of Latin America was democratic and run by civilian elected governments. Miracles do happen!

So the occasional stall, the pressure of population, the vagaries of climate change and the uncertainty of the future, put all of the inhabitants of these three continents at risk... thus they were indeed living in the land of the survivors... for now at least, but tomorrow, who knows?

The Domain of the Floating Few:

High above the din and toil of the surface of the earth I floated in total peace and quiet. The plane was flying at 35,000 feet altitude, high enough to pass over the peak of Mount Everest with ease. We were higher than the highest mountain on earth. It was a habitat that I was extremely familiar with since I travel about 150-200 days a year. In a way, it was the Domain of the Floating Few, where we traveled and where we met...

I reflected on the world below and on the privileged few who floated above it and tended to meet each other at many global events: from Davos-Switzerland in January to STS-Japan in October, with many other events in between. Clearly I was one of those privileged few who had been admitted into that enchanted and protected domain. Various referred to as “the elite” or “the establishment” or by other names, this elite included people from many fields: finance, technology, industry, services, politics, media, sports, the arts, culture, academia and the sciences. Then there were the celebrities who would briefly dominate the international scene and then fade away. That was the world where these highly privileged individuals – the Floating Few – would float above the push and shove of the daily grind of most people. Chauffeured limousines and five star hotels or elegant homes with domestics on earth, and private jets or high class travel above. These were new types of nomads who met at particular oases and could be counted on to be at the best elite events anywhere in the world, from Cannes to the Oscars, from the Nobel Prizes to the Top sporting tournaments, from Davos to STS, and from the UN assemblies to the Bretton Woods annual meetings.

It is at such meetings that the future of the world is discussed. Many of the movers and shakers of this planet assemble there and the prevalent opinions that will guide decision making are forged in the realm of informal discussions in that strange mix of the new nomads, those I have chosen to call the Floating Few. Powerful civil servants speak earnestly to distinguished academics, while political leaders drop tidbits to important journalists, and all forgo the formality of official function to chat among peers and those others that they find interesting, all following – more or less – the so-called Chatham House Rules.

We, the Floating Few, used to be criticized by the NGOs who had their hands in the mud and the filth as they tried to help the survivors, or risked life and limb as they tried to bring aid to the victims of conflict. But the elites managed to blunt the criticism by inviting the leaders of these NGOs to join our deliberations, and by providing support for their endeavors. But that did not affect the chasm that existed between the privileged elite and the vast multitudes. It did not affect growing gulf that the greed of the super-wealthy was expanding as it appropriated to itself an ever larger share of the total wealth of the nation in country after country. In the Kingdom of the Cowboy, the top 1% now received 20% of the income, while the bottom 50% of the population had to be satisfied with only 10% -- no wonder that the anger was widespread! But China, with its rising tide that lifts all boats, is also witnessing a growing gap between the booming cities and the rural hinterland, and what is more, China today boasts more dollar billionaires than America! From Sweden to Somalia the widening gap is one of hallmarks of our times.

Epilogue:

I look out of the window next to my seat and see the clouds way below me, and see nothing of the earth or sea beneath the clouds. A suitable metaphor of how the Floating Few can be detached from the daily grind of the billions of human beings below the clouds, who will never experience that delirious headiness of that first time above the clouds, nor would they ever experience the blasé attitude that jaded travelers would acquire in their way of looking at that miracle of modern technology that is air travel.

Putting down in writing the reflections of my imaginary travels to the “Seven Kingdoms” did not bring anything new. But it helped me crystalize my thoughts on the profound problems of our times. I held up a mirror to my world and recognized myself as a member of the “Floating Few” But I have perhaps done

more than many of my peers in that group to try to use that vantage point to better understand the realities of our world, and to bring change and to improve the conditions of the poorer inhabitants of the lands below the clouds. Perhaps it is true that reflecting from a special vantage point and dreaming of the impossible may give us the insight to turn the dream into reality. I recall a few lines from Coleridge:

What if you slept
And what if
In your sleep
You dreamed
And what if
In your dream
You went to heaven
And there plucked a strange and beautiful flower
And what if
When you awoke
You had that flower in your hand
Ah, what then?

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
The Complete Poems

With that, it is time for this traveller – like Gulliver after his ordeals – to return to earth-bound realities, and rejoin friends and adopted family and try to put to good use the insights that such travels and travel writing bring.

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