

FIRST RELEVANT JOURNAL ENTRY

A man stopped by my office today seeking my services for a research opportunity he would like me to embark upon concerning the inexplicable behavior of the residents from the tourist Town known as “The Greatest Place on Earth.” Apparently, the residents have recently taken to exhibiting odd sociological and psychological behaviors that defy clear understanding. Some of the behaviors he mentioned were as follows:

- Randomly assembling and reassembling roadside attractions
- Worshipping a giant man-made shoe they call “The Sole of Truth”
- Mindlessly rambling on about impending dooms about to befall upon them
- Engaging in blatantly pathological public demonstrations
- Offering genuinely contradictory explanations for said exhibitions
- Consistently disregarding their own previous convictions
- Routinely stressing the fact that “Everything is just grand”

(Again, this is only a partial list of the examples he provided me with)

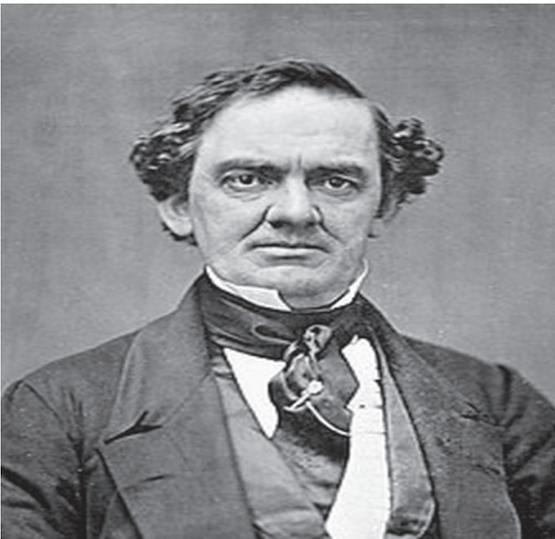
When I asked the man why he was asking me to serve in this capacity instead of one of my colleagues, he responded, “You come

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highly recommended. In fact, by all accounts, you are perhaps the most esteemed person in your field.” Now, I certainly appreciated the compliment, but I also found his response highly suspect (one should never trust flattery from a stranger), yet still, the sincerity and conviction in his voice were unmistakable.

So then, after a brief discussion, he said he would return “the following day” (his exact words) to hear my answer. In the meantime, he asked that I consider an appropriate budget for my “expedition”, as he took to calling it. And that I understand that The Bureau (which was all he would tell me regarding his, and my potential, employer) would provide me with an assistant.

A Side Note: The man wore an expensive suit, an elaborate tie, and had a unique coiffure.



(The closest approximation I can think of)

"The Greatest Place on Earth"

So I decided to at least consider this request (although, at this time, I will refrain from telling Ginny and the kids about it. I don't want to involve them with this until there is a need to).

SECOND RELEVANT JOURNAL ENTRY

While discussing Hegel's theory of madness (the alienation complex, more specifically) with one of my first-year graduate students, the man from yesterday showed up again.

This is my recollection of our conversation—

"Have you considered my opportunity?" the man asked, leaning against my bookcase (once my student left, to clarify), the man donning the same outfit from yesterday only this time wearing an enormous black top hat.

"I have," I replied, sitting up in my chair. "And I have some questions and concerns."

"Yes, yes, I expected as much. So what are they?"

"Alright then," I said, looking over at the man. "First, why do you even care about this Town?"

"I don't," the man answered, leafing through several of my books concerning dementia. "Not in the least, quite honestly. But The Bureau insists that I have this situation investigated. Hence, my inquiry regarding your services."

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“Okay,” I replied, hesitating slightly, while realizing I needed to re-word my question. “But why does The Bureau care about this matter then?”

“I’m not sure,” the man answered, looking at me, his eyes disconcertedly fixed on me. “Some of the board members say it has to do with their values, they are worried about The Town, while others say it has to do with the legitimacy of their proprietorship, they are the benefactors of The Town, you know, while others contend it has to do with reinforcing their narrative. But regardless, I don’t know.”

“Reinforcing their narrative?” I repeated, opening up my notebook in order to write down some of my thoughts in real time.

“Yes,” the man said, turning again to examining several of my books.

And then he told me this: The Town makes its money on selling its story. It is “The Greatest Place on Earth,” you know. People come far and wide to experience this Town. However, the current behavior apparently questions that narrative. In fact, The Bureau’s even concerned about the long-term viability of The Town. Hence, again, my inquiry regarding your services.

“So,” I said, looking over at him, his top hat partially obscuring his face from me. “They want me to explain why this is occurring?”

"The Greatest Place on Earth"

"In a sense," the man answered, picking up Combe's book on phrenology. "But it would seem more accurate to me to say that they want to know about the residents. Should they be worried about them or not?"

"About their behavior, you mean?"

"Yes well, to the degree that it threatens theirs," the man answered, putting down the book. "To the degree that it threatens theirs."

"Their wellbeing then?" I asked.

"Their stability," he answered, turning and glaring at me, his face suddenly blanketed by an obviously forced smile.

My First Real-Time Thought: This man is rather oblique.

"And how long do you expect my services to be needed for?" I then asked.

My Second Real-Time Thought: And disturbing.

"As long as your expedition requires," he answered, before turning and looking out the window of my office, the morning sunshine slightly muted by a thin layer of cirrus clouds, and then he added, "Although, I'm sure you would want to finish up your work as soon as possible."



(What the word expedition makes me think of)

“I do have a wife and two children to be concerned about,” I added.

“We both do,” he replied, pushing his top hat up slightly further over his forehead, better revealing his lightly greying greasy hair and his bushy eyebrows. “Which is why I’m hoping we can get on with this. So what other questions do you have?”

And then, to focus things to the main particulars, my questions went like this—

How do you want me to do this?

Answer: Like any field research assignment, embed yourself with the “indigenous population” (his specific term), study their behavior, formulate your hypotheses, test your theories, and provide us with your conclusions.

"The Greatest Place on Earth"

Will the townspeople know I've been asked to conduct this research?

Answer: Some of them, perhaps. But I'm not sure. However, either way, feel free to conduct yourself as you see fit since what we want is a true verdict on their behavior.

And why me again?

Answer: Because your character is unassailable. Or at least, The Bureau makes that claim.

A Second Side Note: This man is clearly keeping something from me.

And their behavior has not been seen as overly dangerous or alarming?

Answer: No, it has. (He then laughed for several seconds, in a genuinely disconcerting fashion, to specify, before continuing.) But that is not our concern.

And how do you want me to update you on my findings?

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Answer: Through frequent dispatches regarding your work. Also, if need be, various Bureau Operators will contact you. In fact, you should expect that.

And I can have a staff?

Answer: You will be provided with an assistant upon your arrival. But all those details will be worked out upon your acceptance of this offer.

And I will be compensated appropriately.

Answer: Money is no object. But much more importantly, you have the opportunity to be involved with one of the most significant research studies ever conducted. In fact, if you are able to accomplish this task, your name will most certainly go down in the annals of history.

So I will be able to publish my results?

Answer: Yes, well, that has not been decided yet. Not at all.

A Third Real-Time Thought: That is unfortunate.

And what do you expect from my dispatches?

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A Fourth Real-Time Thought: And he is clearly hiding something from me.

Answer: As much information as you can provide—notes, drawings, pictures, anecdotal evidence, secondary ruminations, anything and everything that will help support and explain your conclusions.



(Why I will avoid drawings)

And have any other researchers been asked to do this?

Answer: Yes, several, in fact. But they have all quit on us, or more accurately, perhaps, disappeared on us, although we did fire several people and we even lost someone. But that is no worry, no worry at all. And you will have their work to build off of, of course.

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A Fifth Real-Time Thought: That is also distressing.

And when do you want me to start this?

Answer: Yesterday, of course.

“Alright,” I then said. “I am interested. But I need to talk this over with my family first. It is not easy for me to leave them at this time.”

“Good,” he replied, again adjusting his top hat on his head. “And of course. Talk with your family.”

“They are my primary concern. However, thankfully, the university will clearly support my research if I should choose to embark upon this opportunity. That should not be a concern. Dean Littlefield’s always looking for breakthroughs in our work to sell to the alumni.”

“Of course. And when you have made your decision, please stop by my office. I will be expecting you shortly.”

He then handed me this card—

The Bureau Clerk
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