

On the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the World Bank

A Fairy Tale

by Eugene H. Rotberg



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Once upon a time, there was a magician born in the woods of ordinary folk—well, maybe not ordinary, sort of upper, middle class intellectual types. The magician had a potion, but did little with it at first. He was not sure what he was supposed to do, and frankly, his parents did not know what to do with him. No one bothered him. He had few requests for the magic potion and led a normal, if pedestrian, childhood.

One day a visitor in his parents' house whispered something in the magician's ear. By this time he was past adolescence already. The visitor said something like, "Get on with it already." The visitor was sort of like how Martin Luther would have turned out had he gone to Harvard Business School. He had a big influence on the magician.

The magician began to use his magical powers. At first, he brought corn to poor people and barren lands. He trained sowers, harvesters, processors, marketers and gave magical advice. Soon, food became more plentiful—not only for local farmers, but also for others outside their boundaries. Many asked for the magic potion. Expectations rose, and soon people began to do other things with their lives which were productive and healthful. They built factories and went to work. They began to take control. They even began to compete against those who used to push them around. They had an increased sense of pride—those the magician touched—and many left their fields and entered new worlds.

But the magic potion was not infinite. It had to be allocated. That was the beginning of the problem. Too many wanted the potion which produced such wonderful crops and harvest, and there wasn't enough to go around. Others wanted only the corn (please, not

the training nor advice, not the sowers, nor the harvesters, nor the processors). Some wanted it free—after all, was it not from magic? And, there was frustration over the absence of quicker benefits. Why did it have to take so long to see the results of the magic potion? There also was competition from other magic people who seemed to have an almost infinite supply of real cash money, made available quick and easy, with no questions asked and little advice given about corn, or harvesting, or anything else. Later, when the cash suppliers got in some trouble, the magician would not help them out. The magician wasn't very good at making or keeping friends that way.

But, mostly, the crop growers wanted more of what the magician offered, not less. No one forced them to take the magician's magic potion. They came to respect and love the magician, even though he was a bit of a demanding father figure at times.

But, things did not go smoothly. Some—not the beneficiaries of the potion—argued there was too much corn. Who needed all that corn? There was concern that corn would lose its value, and worse, the recipients of the magic potion worked for far less pay than those in the magician's own lands. That made things more difficult in affluent places. And remember, they were not just planting corn. Others were upset that the corn and the factories diverted streams in the wrong way and turned forests into lands of plantings in the sun, or worse, cities of metal and smoke. But, starvation lessened, the poor had better food, went to school longer, lived longer, fewer children died near birth, and they led fuller lives.

Some, particularly outside the borders of the corn growers, mourned for the lost innocence of the poor, their lost tribal ties, their simple ways. Others were upset over the newly-found indepen-

dence of once plain-minded folk. They just didn't know their place. Uppity. Imagine, learning about algorithms. They blamed it on the magician.

Some said the magic potion cost too much, and the magician was profiting from his brew; others said, with equal vehemence, the opposite—the magician was practically giving it away, not charging enough, inducing inefficiency, and worse, making it tough on those who did not have access to the potion because they were rich already. Others said the magician caused human hands and minds to be exploited, and still others said, "If he really is a magician, how come there remains so much sorrow, pain, and poverty?" And some said the magicians's potion only made the rich richer. Others said the potion did more harm than good and it didn't really help the poor. Or, if it did, it would have happened anyway. The poor, though, did not think so. "What do they know," said the critics from far-off lands.

Sometimes the magic potion did not work—it created side effects which overwhelmed the cure—so it went for nought. So the magician, who knew quite well the risks, was always refining the potion, sustaining it, and maintaining its strength. The critics had a field day. They held the magician to a tough test: infallibility. So when the magician sometimes adjusted the magic brew, learning from experience, the cynics took great pleasure at the admission of mistake. As if that were a great sin. That, too, is what comes from trying to be a do-gooder.

"Anyway," said some critics, "the magician is powerful and rich, how could he possibly want to help the poor, or know how to?" That just didn't fit into the idea of the class struggle. And others said the magician was a traitor to his class. If he were so smart and well-intentioned, why didn't he use the

magic in the place of his birth where others like him lived.

So, the magician found himself surrounded by a lot of people who were giving him a hard time. But the users of the magic potion had better food, went to school longer, lived longer, fewer children died near birth, and they led fuller lives. They liked the potion and gave credit where it was due.

Now, it must be said the magician was pretty rich. Nice clothes. Nice place to live. Perks. Lots of travel. He didn't look poor. So, he had a real image problem, which was not helped by the fact that he didn't pay much attention to his parents. You see, 178 of them claimed credit for his birth and upbringing and each, therefore, understandably felt entitled to give all sorts of orders and advice. Understandably inconsistent. The magician, under the circumstances, had to choose between being independent—sort of going his own way, or going nuts. He just went on his way dispensing the magic potion.

His parents, those upper middle class folk who gave him life, were hard put to explain what their kid did for a living. You know how it is with parents: "So, what does your kid do?" They just couldn't say, "Why, he just tries to do good things." It was too embarrassing; it wasn't fashionable to say that sort of thing.

So, the magician lost a lot of support. He was beset left, right and center. Even his parents were shook up. By middle-age, he had few friends, except the users, of course, of the magic potion. The magician kept trying to do good things. And starvation lessened, the poor had better food, went to school longer, lived longer, fewer children died near birth, and they led fuller lives. "But what do they know," said the critics of far-off lands—some of whom were looking for jobs as the magician's apprentices. ■