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The End of Normal: Is Trust for Suckers?

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Another perspective in my series that considers life after the meltdown.

The other day, Dr. Abu Kambi showed up in my e-mail box.

It seems that for very complicated reasons, the only way the family he represents can get their rightful \$40 million deposit from a Nigerian bank is to wire it to a U.S. account, and then have it wired back. If I would be the "legitimate transferee" of that \$40 million, I get to keep 20 percent.

All I have to do is establish a \$100,000 deposit in a branch of the Central Bank of Nigeria. I can wire it, or bring it myself.

As I adjusted my spam filter, I started thinking about my own bank.

... the one that recently informed me in small print at the bottom of the bill that they were moving up the payment-due date. If I miss that date, the very small print goes on to explain, there will be a penalty or an increase in the rate.

And it struck me. Who is the more dangerous fraud -- Dr. Abu Kambi and his comically brazen attempt to relieve me of \$100,000, or the bank whose ads ask for my business and my trust?

It's a question the led me directly to the dismemberment of our financial system.

Nigerians bearing gifts are, after all, what they are. Anyone who wired and lost \$100,000 in hopes of an \$8 million payday is probably not all that concerned. They can always get it back the next time they catch a leprechaun.

But my bank?

Would those friendly people who know me by name and whose tellers put treats in the canister when I have my dogs at the drive through really try to squeeze me for a few extra bucks with a sleazy slight of small print?

Apparently so - and for the very same reason that a tiny group would-be financial wizards were able to roll the dice with the future of a country: It never occurred to us that they would. We never thought that Adam Smith's "unseen hand" - which the economist argued binds business interest to national interest - would end up giving us the finger.

And even if the wizards would act against our interest, we never imagined that they could. Our government and the rating agencies, after all, are the job. Oops.

Then again, it's not like we haven't been fooled before.

We've learned from pedophile priests that those we trust with our children could harm them. We learned from Katrina that that the person our government assigned to rescue us from natural disaster could be a whimpering idiot. We learned from Iraq that our leaders could lie to engineer a war in the name of a murky geo-political end game. We learned from Enron and MCI that that the letters CEO could stand for: cheat, evade and over-compensate.

But this is something new. Never have so few hurt so many.

This deception is terribly and broadly invasive. It has broken through to our lives, our future, and even our sense of who we are as a people. It is evicting families, shuttering local businesses, obliterating retirements and denying educations.

It may finally be the one where our abiding faith in good intentions invites wounds that leave permanent scars.

When trust is so massively abused in the largest arenas, what happens in the smallest ones? It looks like comedienne Lilly Tomlin was on to something when she said: "Just when you think you're too cynical, you realize you're not cynical enough."

The current truth of that statement points to a very a big problem. Even getting back on the road to normalcy - let alone restoring it - may take a level of cooperation and shared sacrifice that an entire post-war population has never experienced; even contemplated. It is going to demand trust in the very same financial managers and government overseers that caused this mess in the first place. Those who are being asked for their faith and sacrifice will rightly ask: "Why?"

In answering that question, we do have one thing going for us.

We elected a president who appears to be worthy of the trust he is going to need. He does not appear beholden to narrow social or financial interests that can warp a national agenda. He does not appear driven by any personal demons that will cloud his judgment. Nor does he appear to be a man who will run from the inevitable mistakes to come.

We should all hope - pray if works for you - that he proves worthy of a trust that we have never had less reason to give, or needed more.