

9 April 2014

Dear Vivienne,

I am very much looking forward to seeing you tonight. I owe you a little written piece you asked for last we were in Paris. Here is the answer to two of your three questions (as for the third question, I prefer not to write about the Brazilian recycled bricks, till I learn more about them.)

Much love,
Lawrence

Lawrence believes that humanity can come together as never before by using advances in digital technologies to give the two billion people who live on less than \$2 a day a better chance to generate their livelihood and provide for their children. These same technologies can be used to improve energy efficiency, help communities cope with climate change and provide opportunities for women and youth seeking employment around the world.

Lawrence grew up in the 1960's in Cape Canaveral Florida where his father, who was in aerospace, worked on the Apollo program to send the first man to the moon. In the 1970's his father moved Lawrence and his family to Tehran Iran to head a project there for Boeing before the Iranian Revolution.

At age 14, Lawrence, while he was a student in secondary school, started teaching English in the slums of Tehran. In an era of growing wealth in the country, he saw many children his age suffering from horrific diseases and malnutrition. One day when he was going to teach, a woman screamed in front of him as her baby died in her arms. Her shriek stays with him to this day.

After studying finance and international studies, he looked for solutions to lifting the poor in the developing world out of poverty, particularly women because he could see that they would invest in their children. He began a career in microfinance where he worked with Muhammad Yunus the noble peace prize winner who devised the first major bank for the poor particularly women. He spent fifteen years working in over 40 countries to build microbanks to help lift the poor out of poverty. He worked closely with world opinion leaders such as Hillary Clinton, Queen Rania of Jordan and Natalie Portman to get the word out about the value of microfinance. After the fall of the Taliban, he returned to the region of his boyhood and built a network of village banks for women on the boarder between Afghanistan and Iran.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation invited Lawrence to join their team and consider how to bring banking services to the world's poor – only ten percent of African's today have access to banking services. While at the Gates Foundation, he worked with Bill and Melinda to try to create a breakthrough in banking for the poor. They discovered that a few countries such as the Philippines and Kenya had innovated a very low cost way of delivering banking using digital currency through mobile phones. He focused his efforts on finding ways to accelerate the poor's access to digital currency and its efficiencies through mobile phones.

Lawrence then became the President of the GSMA Foundation. The GSMA is a global association of 800 mobile phone companies. The Foundation focuses on accelerating the access of the underserved to digital connectivity through mobile phones and using the phones then to access other services in health, banking and education. The Foundation has supported the deployment of 40,000 mobile base stations powered by wind and solar energy to reduce dependency on diesel fuels in rural areas in low-income countries.

Lawrence says that today a Massai herdsman in Kenya can use his phone powered by solar energy to get a better price for his cattle. He can also then take his savings and store them in “the cloud” in a digital currency account he can access anywhere on the Kenyan plains through his mobile phone. The Massai herdsman he says may never have had this chance if it weren’t for the technologies developed by the Apollo team in the 1960’s which today helped to spawn the digital revolution. He hopes that digital technologies can be deployed to realize man’s greatest aspirations to end world poverty, give everyone a chance to lead happy and health lives and take on the next challenges facing humanity collectively – preserving the earth, exploring the frontiers of space and propelling a vision of human civilization in the solar system that is grounded in profound respect for all life.