

# Fear and Loathing in Biotechnology Firms

July 10, 2007

[Original link](#)

---

I was sitting with my journalist and reading *Fear and Loathing* when I noticed that things weren't seeming the way I'd become accustomed to them seeming. For one thing, my journalist's nose seemed a fair sight bigger than one would expect a nose to be, even accounting for taste, while her eyes seemed to be moving back and forth in her head as if they weren't quite sure whether they preferred it in or out.

Still, I shouldn't criticize. I suspect I didn't look my usual self either, what with my head making those small wobbly notions on my neck and my leg vibrating back and forth as if it were thinking very hard about something. Why it was forced to work as my leg, supporting me all the time while i gave it no consideration in return, perhaps.

As I finished the book I slammed it down on the desk, causing a couple other books to fall off the side. "We must rent a very fast car," I demanded, before scrunching up my face in an inevitably doomed attempt to get a look at myself. I didn't normally sound like this.

My journalist agreed, so we popped some pills and picked up a BMW. It was a little past midnight at the time, so you could hardly notice the car's nasty habit of accelerating right up to the edge of other cars, stopping hard a couple inches before it hit them.

"We must find a heart of darkness," said my journalist. I just looked at her. She continued mumbling about a heart of darkness while stepping on the accelerator. I decided to look away. She continued to make friends with the accelerator. "I've got it—" she shouted, wrenching the car around, "Vacaville!"

My journalist assured me that Vacaville was a small city outside San Francisco filled with giant vats of transgenic mutant corn that cured cancer. I wasn't quite sure what any of that really was, let alone which part of that was a heart of darkness. My fears were not allayed when we pulled off the freeway under a giant light-up sign that said "Authentic Historic Vacaville", only to see a couple 7-11s and a CostCo. We got back on the freeway.

The next time we got off the freeway, there were a dozen industrial buildings with sinister yellow lighting belching vast plumes of smoke into the air. We ditched the car behind a tree, dropped our wallets and identification in it, and, arm-in-arm, begun strolling through a place which had even less claim to the title of Authentic Historic Vacaville.

In 2006, the leading biotechnology firm Genentech was named the number one “Best Company To Work For” by *Fortune Magazine*. I suppose this incredible allure could explain why the company’s campus was surrounded by barbed wire. It did not, however, explain why the barbed wire was facing *in*.

There are a couple of ways to get into the Genentech campus. You can climb the barbed wire fence. You can swipe an ID badge and go through the imposing metal turnstiles. You can drive past the guard at the main gate and show some kind of ID. Or you can find the side gate that they forgot to lock and open it. My journalist didn’t want to scratch her pants, so we used the side gate.

And that was how we found ourselves strolling in the moonlight around the factories of a leading biotechnology firm.

“This place is incredible,” my journalist said, as we approached it. “Construction worker,” I said, as I spotted a man walking through the corridors of the empty new building. We continued walking around it.

“I’m always morally torn by major biotech companies,” she explained. “Smoke break,” I said, as the construction worker stepped outside the building and paused.

“On the one hand, this place makes drugs that save people’s lives — treatments for cancers and cystic fibrosis and asthma,” she told me. “Heading out,” I told her, as the construction worker walked across the campus towards the gate.

“And yet, on the other hand, this place is pure evil.” We walked past large vats labeled “Poison” and huge machines that looked like they could crush us. Smoke belched from the top of the building and we could see more buildings and a parking lot in the distance.

“Companies like this are made up of dozens of people, each of whom, individually, are the sweetest guys. Nice, friendly people who just care about doing well at their work.” As we approached the buildings, we saw that even now — 2AM — the place was alive. New cars were pulling into the lot and men and women were walking from building to building. The yellowed light on their white lab coats gave the whole thing a sinister air.

“And yet, together, they manage to pull off the most incomprehensible evils.” I was about to join her discussion of organizational sociology when I heard a go-kart pull up behind us.

“Excuse me,” said the man in the go-kart. “Do you folks work here?”

I was about to come up with some explanation but my journalist dodged in front of me and saved me the trouble.

“No, sir,” she said, with complete sincerity.

“Do you have visitors’ badges?” asked the man, sounding a bit puzzled.

“Definitely not,” she said.

“Are you supposed to be here?”

“No way. Actually, we were just going for a stroll when we found ourselves in this bizarre place. We were wondering if you could tell us how to get out.”

The man in the go-kart thought about this for a while before getting out of the kart and walking towards us. As he stepped into the light I could see he was wearing a bright orange vest.

“Huh, well the fastest way to get out of the facility from here is probably to walk through the entire campus,” he explained.

“Oh, I see,” said the journalist. “Well, could you escort us off the premises then?” she asked. I restrained myself from kicking her.

The man in the vest looked back at the go-kart, where his partner was sitting. “Nah, my there’s no more room in the kart,” he said.

“Oh, well then maybe you could take us to security?” she said. I dug a small hole in the ground, placed my foot into it, then used the other foot to fill it back up with dirt in a vain attempt to stop myself from kicking her.

“I’m actually not allowed to take you guys to Genentech security,” he said. “See, I’m over with construction. One of my men came by and told me that he saw to people walking around the premises, so I just came to check it out.” He thought about this for a while. “Let me see if I can find you someone,” he said.

And that is how we got a burly man in a bright orange vest to escort us onto the Genetech campus, a series of industrial buildings facing a shared quadrangle of matted grass, with some concrete sidewalks laid across it. The whole thing looked a bit like a college campus, I suppose, if the college’s buildings had been designed to look like some kind of sci-fi bubble city. Through the windows one could spy huge machines with many levers dials and large vats that stuff was being oozed into and out of.

People entered and exited the buildings in a hurried manner, and one scientist, a frazzled-looking man with a redhead’s beard and an orange t-shirt reading “got juice?”, crossed the path in front of us.

“Excuse me,” said the man in the vest, his manly striding posture suddenly becoming bowed and deferential before the frazzled scientist. “I found these people who got lost wandering around the campus,” he explained, as if it was a question. “Do you think you could try to get them home?”

“Oh, sure!” said the scientist, genial and alive as a carnival barker, as if he made a habit of wandering around the Genentech campus at 2 in the morning looking for people to take back to their cars.

“Thanks so much,” said the man in the vest, before scurrying back to his go-kart.

The scientist reached for a walkie-talkie from his back pocket. “Security, are you there? Security?” he said and paused. The radio crackled. “This is security,” it

finally replied. “Where are you?” he asked. There was a pause. Then a crackle. “What?”

“Are you in your office?” Pause, crackle. “Um, yeah.”

“OK, be there in a bit.”

And that was how a Genentech scientist badged us into the facility and begun taking us through its corridors.

“So what do you do here?” I asked, as if making conversation.

“Oh, we, um, make drugs to treat breast cancer,” he explained.

“Yeah, right,” my journalist whispered in my ear. “Awful big facility just for treating breast cancer.”

“What do you do?” I asked. “Oh, I’m a scientist here.”

“Oh, really? A scientist? Heh, I always imagined scientists wandering around in big white labcoats carrying beakers,” I joked. “Oh, we do,” he said with utter sincerity. “Actually, I just took my lab coat off — if you guys had been here a couple minutes earlier I would have been wearing it.”

We wandered past hallways labeled with Genentech propaganda and stopped right before the company cafeteria, ducking into a door to find the desk for security.

“Hey there!” said the scientist. “Hi,” said the bored-looking African-American woman behind the desk.

“Um, these two folks got a bit lost wandering around the neighborhood and I was wondering you could help get them out of here.”

The security woman’s eyes widened. “What?” she shouted. “You brought random strangers in here? They can’t be in here! You can’t just bring people in here!”

“Well, I just figured I ought to take them to security and you guys could help them out.”

“Help them out? Help them out? I’m not allowed to leave this desk,” she cried. “Oh, they can’t be in here. You gotta get rid of these guys.”

“Oh, okay,” said the scientist, completely unfazed. “Well, I’ll walk them back to their car.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she said dismissively. “You just do what you gotta do, ‘cause they can’t be in here.”

And that was how a Genentech scientist took us through the building, past offices, through the loading dock, out the back past more industrial equipment, a running commentary all the way.

“How’d you guys get in here?” asked the guard at the gate as we walked past him. He’d obviously heard about us. “Oh,” my journalist said, “it was open. We just walked in.” The guard just laughed and waved.

The scientist asked where we were from, just in the spirit of making conversation. My journalist explained that we were from San Francisco and we’d decided it was a nice night for a casual stroll, so we had been walking around Vacaville. The scientist nodded approvingly, as if he always ran into cityfolk who came out for a stroll around Vacaville’s office parks at 2 in the morning.

Soon we’d located our car and said our goodbyes. The scientist waved goodbye at us and we tried to stifle our giggles until we got back to the car.

At moments like these, which seem to stand outside of space and time — middle of nowhere, middle of the night — one thing remains constant: Denny’s. Always open, with decor that hasn’t changed since its founding in the 1960s, a diner like Denny’s is a perfect place to go to make sense of it all. But none of it makes any sense at all; there is nothing to do but lay your head down on the table and puzzle at a world that is more strange than you can possibly imagine.