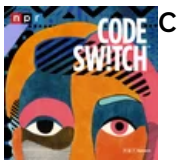

CODE SWITCH

LISTEN & FOLLOW

< What does it mean to be good?

OCTOBER 11, 2023 · 3:00 AM ET

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Transcript

B A PARKER, HOST:

Heads up - this episode contains some spicy language.

Hey, everyone. You're listening to CODE SWITCH. I'm B.A. Parker. Now, folks, we live in an age where being a good person can sometimes feel like reposting a link online or virtue signaling from the comfort of our own homes. I've done it. I've seen my friends and family and colleagues do it. I know you all listening do it too. But what would it look like to try to do more?

Not too long ago, I came across a book that was asking those questions. What could being of service look like and what could being a person of color in the position to be of service look like, especially when you're trying to help people who look like you? And this book sort of shook my ideas of faith and ministry and trying to be in community. The book is called "River Mouth: A Chronicle Of Language, Faith And Migration." In it, author Alejandra Oliva talks about her experiences as a translator, interpreter and advocate for asylum-seekers. It's work she's done in New York, in Chicago, where she currently lives, and at the U.S.-Mexico border. She writes that sometimes the work feels meaningful.

ALEJANDRA OLIVA: But then there's the larger question of whether or not I am ultimately catering to anyone's needs but my own. Sometimes I feel good and helpful. Other times I wonder how much I have in common with some of the people in Tijuana who are there to help but actually seem like they want to see something for themselves. It seems sometimes that volunteering at the border is almost a fad for the kinds of people who show up at sites of injustice to see, to document, to help, but also to star in the helping.

PARKER: The book is part memoir, part reported essays, part musings on translation theory. And all throughout, Alejandra writes about the ways she's connected to the asylum seekers that she's working with as a Latina, as a Spanish speaker, as someone whose family has always straddled the U.S.-Mexico border. But she also talks about her differences.

OLIVA: I'm the daughter of immigrants, but, like, my dad was getting a Ph.D. And so, like, it's very different from needing to flee your country because it's no longer safe for you to be there. And so, like, my experience of being a first-generation immigrant is very, very different and, like, has different consequences than the folks that I've been working with. And so, like, we speak the same language. We have, like, a lot of these words in common about our experiences. Part of it was, like, exploring what it meant for me to try and be in community and in solidarity with folks while also, like, having very, very different lives.

PARKER: I sat down with Alejandra to talk about her life, her book, her faith and the winding path that led her from publishing to divinity school to translation. But it all began, of course, in childhood. And just a quick note - you may hear a few glitches in this audio, but I mean, that's technology.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

PARKER: You write so beautifully about growing up bilingual, but Spanish and English were used in very different realms. And I wanted to talk about that and how it informed your understanding of where each language, quote-unquote, "belonged."

OLIVA: Yeah. So Spanish was, like, the language of being at home. It was the language of talking to my parents. It was a little less the language of talking to my siblings because I think all three of us reach for English first. And so if we were

there and, like, my parents weren't in the room, we'd be talking in English. And then they'd come in and be like, en Espanol.

PARKER: (Laughter).

OLIVA: And English was, like, the language of school and friends. And English is very much my first language, but Spanish is also a language that, like, I would not be the person that I am if I wasn't able to also express that in Spanish.

PARKER: So you've had lots of jobs in your life...

OLIVA: Yes.

PARKER: ...Like, I mean, translator, interpreter, writer, activist, advocate. But, like, it started out in divinity school?

OLIVA: Kind of.

PARKER: Kind of - like, are all of these just extensions of one another?

OLIVA: Yeah, more or less. So I started working in immigration work as a volunteer while I was working in the publishing industry. I was, like, a - what was it? - digital marketing assistant. So I was, like, doing all the tweets for a publishing company. That was, like, my full-time job. I was on Twitter all day, which - yeah, great, great (laughter). From there, I went to divinity school. What had actually happened is that somebody tagged the publishing house on an article on Twitter being like, all these writers went to divinity school, and they had a great time and had spiritual crises. And I was like, ooh, that sounds great. I would love to have a spiritual crisis in a place where everyone's having them.

PARKER: Did you have a crisis of faith while in divinity school?

OLIVA: Sort of - I feel like I had actually had my spiritual crisis earlier. I grew up super, super evangelical in Texas and had kind of moved away from that as absolutely quickly as I could once I got out of my parents' house, once it was, like, up to me whether I went to church. So then going to divinity school was kind of like a return to these things and these ideas that I was coming to realize were really important to me, whether or not I was someone who was going to church or would ever go to church. So divinity school was less of, like, a crisis - which I kind of interpret as, like, one moment where you're suddenly like, what is going on? -

and more of, like, this slow realization that I could figure this stuff out on my own terms.

PARKER: You talk a little bit about this, but what was the impetus for starting your work at the border, like, going from divinity school to asylum work?

OLIVA: Yeah. So I had already been doing some of it. I had been helping people fill out asylum applications at a pro se clinic before divinity school, and then deciding to go to the border came, for me, at a time when there was already a lot of attention at the border. And it was the time when a lot of people were talking about a migrant caravan, which was just a group of people who were traveling together for safety and were on their way to the border to claim asylum in the U.S. or ask for asylum.

The other thing that kind of played into it is that at the time, I was taking a class on spiritual autobiography, and I read a book of sort of essays and sermons by Saint Oscar Romero. He was the Archbishop of El Salvador during their Civil War, and he sort of did the things that archbishops are supposed to do. This was a time when people were being sort of assassinated in the middle of the street without any clear reason, were being disappeared. And he, as sort of part of his job as archbishop, would say the names of the dead and would call for reconciliation and peace and forgiveness. And it just struck me how much he was just doing his work and doing the work that he was supposed to do, and it became radical because of the context that he was doing it in.

And I kind of realized that I had these skills, and I had these abilities. And I had the possibility to do this work of interpretation, of translation, of spending time with people and that it was something that was needed. And even if there were parts of it that, like, kind of made me nervous or that I was unsure about, there were other parts that, like, it hopefully would be helpful to people, and it hopefully would be needed. And it wasn't anything that I didn't already know how to do, and, like, that ended up being wrong.

PARKER: Wait, what was wrong?

OLIVA: I thought that I would be going in with a skill that I already had, which was doing trauma-informed interviewing, doing translation, doing interpretation and kind of being able to, like, help people fill out a form or, like, accomplish a set task. And the thing that ended up being more needed at the border was just, like,

spending time with people as they were going through this process and, like, listening to what they wanted to say.

Like, we were doing a little bit of know your rights. We were doing a little bit of sort of explanation around what the credible fear interview was, what they needed to know or do for it. But we were also just doing a lot of like, hey, do you want a cup of coffee? Do you have food to eat before you cross? Do you want us to, like, play with your kids while you repack your luggage? And so it went from this set of skills that I was like - oh, I know exactly what I'm going to be doing; I know that I'm good at it; I know how I'll be able to help - into this much more open-ended kind of - like, it became harder to know if I was doing a good job or if people were actually, like, glad that I was there. And, like, doing that kind of accompaniment work is its own skill, just not one that I thought that I had at the time.

PARKER: One thing that I found really interesting about the book is just, like, the emotional pitfalls of altruism. You write about that you were afraid that you only went to do this work because you wanted to prove to yourself that you were a good person. Why were you worried about that?

OLIVA: I feel like part of this comes down to, like, some of the more intense, like, religious upbringing I had, which is, like, being really sure that you are not engaging in any kind of, like, good works that your name is attached to for fear of, like, trying to seem like a good person. And I think that the other part of it is that when I first got back, I, like, you know, posted a Facebook status that was like, hey, these are all the things that I've seen. These are all the things that were extremely difficult to be witness to, and I want people to be, like, thinking about this and worried about this.

And, like, the vast majority of the comments were like, oh, my God, thank you so much for sharing your story and for doing all this important work that you do. And like, I still get comments like that all the time, and I'm like, that's not - that's really not it. That's not the response. That's not why I'm doing this. And it felt really important to be like, I am worried about being a good person. I think about it a lot. I, like, want to be a good person. And, like, I worry about the work that I do being actually helpful, actually necessary, rather than like a bunch of other people I saw who would show up, did not speak Spanish, did not even pretend to try to speak Spanish, but were just there to kind of, like, play with babies and see what was going on.

PARKER: Oof (ph).

OLIVA: I wanted to make sure that I wasn't like one of those people that was just here, like, being like, I'm here to, like, bear witness with my special American eyes that are the only ones that can, like, actually see the truth of what's happening here. And, like, it was important to me to try and figure out, like, am I doing this work and am I telling these stories because it's helpful or because I want to be perceived as good?

PARKER: Yeah. I understand because I think so much of this being, like, a millennial online is there so much virtue signaling. And it's being, like, someone has to film themselves giving someone money. And there's a moment in the book where you talk about this concern that, like, oh, no, am I making the people that I'm helping perform gratitude? And that, like, really struck me. That's, like, a big concern in your work. And I wondered why. I mean, I understand why, but also wanted you to talk about that a little bit.

OLIVA: Yeah. I think that when you, like, go and when you get all these trainings, people are like, these are people in the most stressful situations of their lives, and you - like, it's your job not to add to it, which - that makes a lot of sense. And then at the same time, again, you see a lot of people show up and be like, oh, my God, can I hold your baby? And you see that, and you're like, in what way is what I am doing annoying or intrusive or, like, not actually helpful? In what ways do you feel empowered or not to tell me to, like, f*** off and leave you alone?

PARKER: (Laughter).

OLIVA: And that's, like, kind of what it comes down to is, like, the power difference and, like, to what extent you feel anyone feels like they can opt out or say, no, thank you, or say, you know, like, I don't want you here. I don't want you bearing witness. I don't want a bunch of gringos standing here watching me.

PARKER: Can you talk about some of the other ways you saw power imbalances play out, I guess, between you and the migrants you were working with?

OLIVA: Oh, totally. I mean, so I would cross the border every morning with my little passport in my little backpack. And at the end of every day, after watching people who had spent months trying to get to Tijuana and who would have to go into, like, possibly detention centers, who would have to be processed, who would

have to be asked all these invasive questions in order to do the very same thing that I was going to do that night - which is to say, just walk back across the border on the other side and go to my, like, nice hotel room with air conditioning and, like, a really hot shower where I could be by myself - and that alone feels like a tremendous, tremendous power imbalance, particularly because I didn't do anything to earn that. That's just one of those, like, deep, deep, like, privilege questions. Like, I had people ask me about it. They'd be like, so wait, did you just cross the border today? And wait, tonight you're also going to just - you're going to cross back? And I'd be like, yes. And they'd be like, how? Like, how is this thing that feels like the Grand Canyon for us to cross just, like, a little line for you?

PARKER: Coming up, more with Alejandra Oliva - this time we're going from the border to a little asylum office in New York City.

OLIVA: That's what you're telling people to do when you tell them to come over the right way. You're telling them to wait in a 10-year-long line.

PARKER: Stay with us.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

PARKER: Parker - just Parker - CODE SWITCH. And I'm back talking to Alejandra Oliva. She's a translator, interpreter, immigrant rights advocate and the author of the recent memoir, "River Mouth: A Chronicle Of Language, Faith And Migration." Before the break, Alejandra and I were talking about her experience at the border, working as a translator for folks trying to enter the U.S. through Mexico. In the book, she also talks about the time she spent much farther north, in places like New York City and Chicago, helping people fill out forms they need to apply for asylum. In talking to her, I wanted to better understand what that process was like. As it turns out, it boils down to a boring piece of paper.

OLIVA: Like, that same kind of format as a tax document - a lot of that same information of, like, your name, your date of birth, all of these different things, your last five addresses - that's not on the tax document. But, like, it's kind of like that same, like, governmenty (ph) space.

PARKER: The document needs to be filled out for people to remain in the country and eventually be able to get a work permit. And it needs to be filled out within a year of someone arriving in the U.S. But unlike a tax document, it requires people

to condense some of the most painful, traumatic experiences into just a few sentences.

OLIVA: There's a spot at the end that has all these questions that are like, have you ever been hurt or mistreated by anyone in your home country or, like, by the government in your home country? And if you answer yes, then you have about 150 words to put down where you explain what happened, why you think it happened, when it happened. And so, yeah, you have these really long interviews with people where they're telling you these stories often of tremendous violence, of tremendous pain, talking about the violent deaths of family members, talking about assaults and abuses against themselves, and then you kind of pick out the worst parts of it.

And you pick out the timeline, and you do, like, these three short sentences being like, on this date, this thing happened. I suspect it happened because of this characteristic that I have or because I made these gang members mad or because of any number of reasons. And you kind of summarize it, and you put it into the document. And then that's it. That's what they have. And if you're working with an attorney, you get to have an affidavit, which is like a longer, more detailed version of this. But if you're just going in front by yourself, you're still looking for an attorney, or if you're trying to meet that filing deadline and you don't have time, then you just get that little paragraph. And that always felt really violent and messed up to me.

PARKER: Yeah. This is such a cynical question I'm going to ask you. When you would experience these stories, did you have a feeling of which ones would essentially work and which ones wouldn't - like, who would be allowed to immigrate and who wouldn't?

OLIVA: That's also a tough question to answer. So much of it is down to, like, individual courts and judges. And, like, there are maps and data that you can see that like - the courts in New York, for example, grant like 90% of all their cases. The courts in Georgia grant like 10%. And it really, really just matters, like, what jurisdiction you're in, and that can depend on where you're being detained. Asylum is, like, this very specific category that was designed by the international community in the wake of the Holocaust if your government was persecuting you for a characteristic you couldn't or shouldn't have to change.

And so many of the cases that we were seeing in clinic, especially from like Central and South America, were folks who are not being persecuted by the government necessarily, but by gangs, which also sort of counts as an entity the government is unwilling or unable to stop. Sometimes it was for protected categories. And sometimes it was just because, like, you were a teenage boy that they were trying to recruit, and you didn't want to join. So then the question is like, is not wanting to join a gang a political stance that you shouldn't have to change? And so a lot of these cases were, like, very, very clear cut in the sense of these people would be in danger if they were returned to their home countries. But it was much, much more unclear and much, much more up to a judge's discretion if that actually, like, counted as part of the case law.

PARKER: I think one of my favorite quotes from the book is when you're like, the U.S. government is not the Catholic Church, but it does require asylum-seekers to be saints.

OLIVA: Yeah, they, like, require a very specific kind of story, which is basically like, I was a good person minding my business. This horrific thing happened to me even though I, again, was minding my business and didn't seek it out. I went to the police, and then, like, I came to the U.S. to seek asylum. It's both, like, a very expected, like, story beat that they want out of you and also a very specific, like, person that you are that they are looking for.

PARKER: One goal of the book seems to combat this notion of the, quote-unquote, "right way"...

OLIVA: Yeah.

PARKER: ...To immigrate to the states.

OLIVA: Yeah.

PARKER: What is the narrative you hear people sharing about the right way to immigrate?

OLIVA: First of all, that asylum is not a right way to immigrate. Like, asylum is a legal right. Asylum is an international right. You can absolutely show up to our southern border and say hello, I would like to ask asylum. And that is the right way. And a lot of people are like, oh, that doesn't count. These are all illegal - they're not. They're asking for asylum. It's legal. That is a legal right. That's it. I

also don't know if people realize how long it takes to actually go through any of these processes or like, if you, like - family visas are the other way that people get in. Like, you immigrate and then you apply for, like, your dad or mom or your children or your sister or something to come over as well. And, like, that's another legal way to come over. Depending on the country that you are from, you could be waiting for over 10 years for that visa to be processed.

PARKER: What?

OLIVA: When you apply for asylum - and getting asylum can take, I think, as long as like three years. Then you have a waiting period - I don't remember how long that one is - before you get your green card. And you can't leave the country while you are waiting for your green card. Like, if you have applied for asylum and you have gotten it, you can't leave the country. I cannot tell you the number of people who I have talked to who have not been able to be with their parents as they are passing away, who have not been able to be with their families during hugely, hugely important moments, who have not seen their parents for decades because of these travel restrictions and because of the crazy long waiting periods, who are like - well, I'm safe now; I'm able to live here and make a life, but like, I did not get to see my mom before she passed - again, and that's really hard.

PARKER: How do you process that? Like, you - I mean, it isn't you experiencing this, but you are collecting all these stories and collecting all of this pain and trauma. How do you deal with that?

OLIVA: I rest a lot, and I try not to feel guilty about, like, taking steps away when I need to or being like, I'm not going to look at the news today. I think also, like, taking the time to rest, taking the time to process, taking the time to really, like, think about what these things mean also - like, it makes you madder. And I feel like there is a sense in which rest is important, but there is also a sense in which, like, engaging in the work and getting mad about it and getting into it is also its own comfort, I guess is the right word, maybe.

PARKER: A lot of narratives about immigration and nationalism are about purity. Like, we've talked about that a little bit. You're either from here, or you're from there.

OLIVA: Yeah.

PARKER: And you speak Spanish, or you speak English. You come the right way. You come the wrong way, whatever. But over the course of your work, you realize that you want to fight against this idea of purity and embrace what you describe as a more porous identity. And I wondered if you could talk about that a little bit.

OLIVA: Yeah. So I think that kind of like I just mentioned, actually, it became increasingly difficult for me to do the work and claim to not have been fundamentally changed by it or claim to be the same person who started out doing this work. It's just like an argument for being changed by the people you meet and for being changed by the work that you do and allowing yourself to notice that and allowing yourself to say, OK, like, (inaudible) does this mean for who I am as a person? And what does this mean for how I want to keep conducting my life?

PARKER: Throughout the book, you talk about these different cringey slogans and phrases that you hear thrown about in different spaces. There's, like, the lawn signs in segregated neighborhoods that say immigrants have a home here. But there was one phrase that actually wound up being pretty meaningful to you. It was - don't look away. Why was that one different for you?

OLIVA: Yeah, I feel like don't look away is both kind of empty in that like, OK, don't look away, but you have to do something after you look, or you have to do something while you're looking. So much of the immigration system, so much of the ways that this country mistreats people is very purposely sort of pushed out and kind of kept the margins. Many, many, many immigration detention centers are purposely located far away from large cities and urban centers so that it is, again, like, difficult to see people presently in your spaces. So many of these, like, systems of injustice will, like, flare up for a minute when a new report comes out or when a discovery of some other injustice like kind of comes to the forefront, but then it fades away. But it also means that it's super, super easy to forget that these things are happening all of the time, even when you're not, like, seeing it in the news. Like, just because you saw a report that there is moldy food being served at detention centers and then you stop seeing that report does not mean that the food at detention centers has gotten any better. It just means that the last, like, Human Rights Watch report on it came out six months ago, and nobody's covering it in the news anymore.

And, I mean, sometimes things happen to, like, sort of bring it more into your everyday life. I live in Chicago, where we have been getting a tremendous number of buses of people from the border, from Greg Abbott. And I think, like, other

places are sending them now, too. But there are people in my neighborhood now that did not used to be there. There are people who are staying at police stations. Every time I drive past the police station in my neighborhood, I can see that it is full of people's luggage because the city has run out of shelter space because they're about to start housing them in tent cities with a incredibly damaging military contractor. And it's visible in a way that it's not always visible. And so I feel like don't look away is also just a reminder of like, yeah, this is still happening. Right now these things are going wrong. Right now all of these injustices are taking place - right now. It's happening.

PARKER: There's one more passage I want to have you read, which I think hits really powerfully on so many of the themes we've been talking about. In it, you're at the border, and you're writing about all the feelings that start rushing through you when a pastor there is giving a sermon.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

OLIVA: (Reading) Father God, he intones, we ask you to meet us here at the border. You are lord of all, God of everything. You are lord over all the people here. You are lord over the governments and the nations of men. We forgive the governments for their actions, for everything that has occurred here, just as you forgive us, sinners before this wall. My fingers tighten on the steel in front of me. My eyes snap open - the pastor's words blanketing out into a microphone hum, whipped away by the ocean wind. I will forgive no one for this - not the governments, not the people, not even God. This is unforgivable. I owe nothing to a God that might let this happen. The evil of the border is on a biblical scale.

(Reading) Earlier in the church service, a visiting rabbi had spoken about the Israelites fleeing Egypt. The Israelites had gotten men in the desert to feed them, had gotten an entire sea opening up before their feet, had gotten plagues on their behalf. Migrants in Tijuana got me and a couple hundred other well-intentioned gringos, got Jose Andres' World Central Kitchen and got f***ing Border Patrol officers in the desert. Annie Dillard writes that there is no less holiness at this time as you are reading this than there was the day the Red Sea parted. But as the waves keep lapping up against the shore and the wall, people keep getting loaded into vans and taken into detention centers for wanting to be safe. They keep being fed into a system designed to humiliate and dehumanize them. We are not at the shores of the Red Sea, and this wall is stronger than Jericho's. We don't have trumpets. We don't have an army. And most of the time, it feels like we don't

even have God on our side. It feels like all that's left here is the slow work of time and the waves - mechanical and unstoppable.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

PARKER: Once again, that was Alejandra Oliva. She's a translator, interpreter, advocate and author of the memoir "River Mouth."

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

PARKER: And that's our show. You can follow us on Instagram @nprcodeswitch. If email is more your thing, ours is codeswitch@npr.org. And subscribe to the podcast at the NPR app or wherever you get your podcasts. And you can sign up for our newsletter at npr.org/codeswitchnewsletter. Just wanted to give a quick shout-out to our CODE SWITCH+ listeners - we appreciate you and thank you for being a subscriber. Subscribing to CODE SWITCH+ means getting to listen to all of our episodes without any sponsor breaks. It also helps support our show. So if you love our work, please consider signing up at plus.npr.org/codeswitch.

This episode was produced by Jess Kung. It was edited by Leah Donnella. Our engineer was Gilly Moon. And a big shout-out to the rest of the CODE SWITCH massive - Courtney Stein, Christina Cala, Xavier Lopez, Dalia Mortada, Veralyn Williams, Steve Drummond, Lori Lizarraga and Gene Demby. I'm B.A. Parker. Hydrate.

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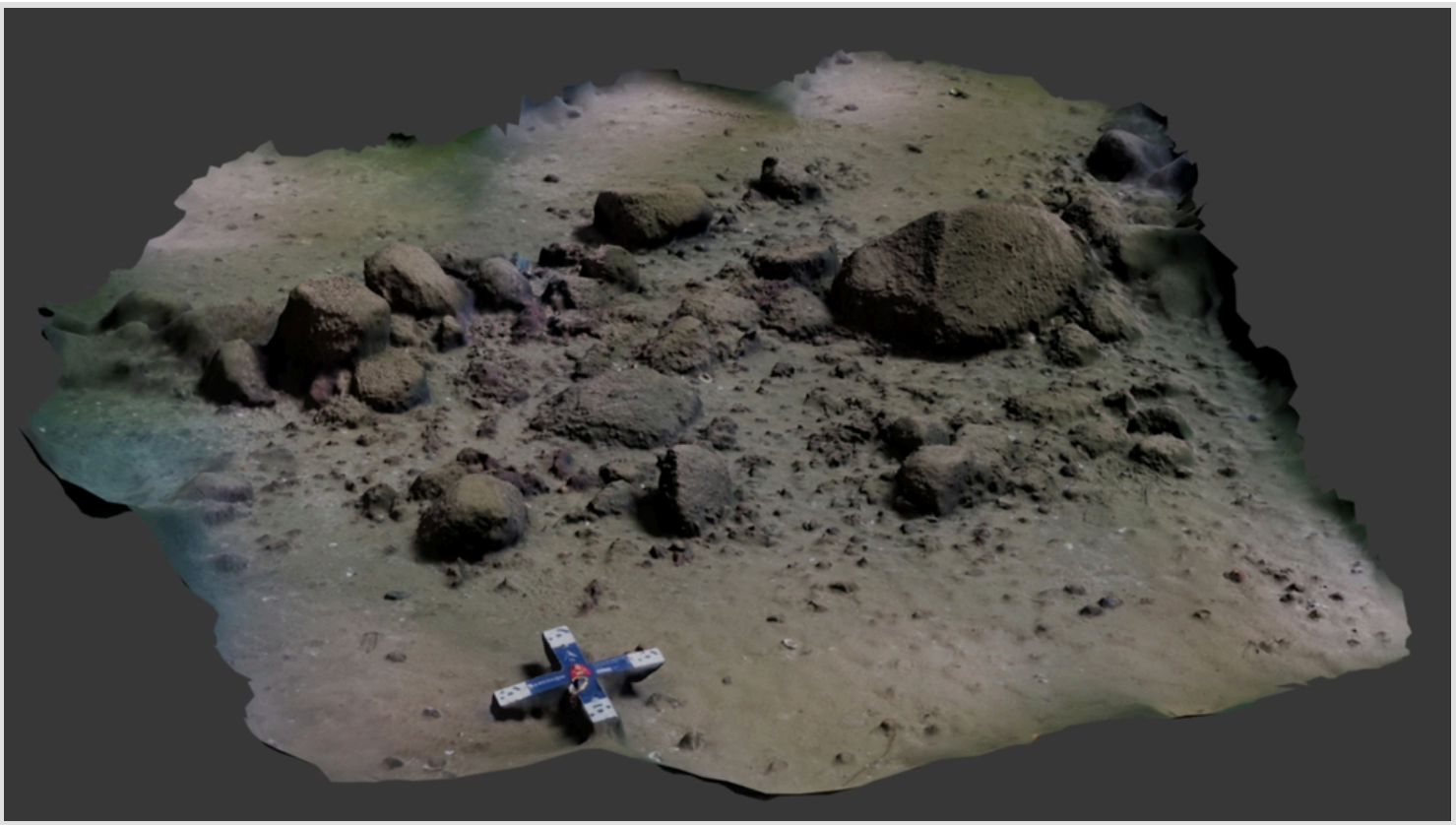

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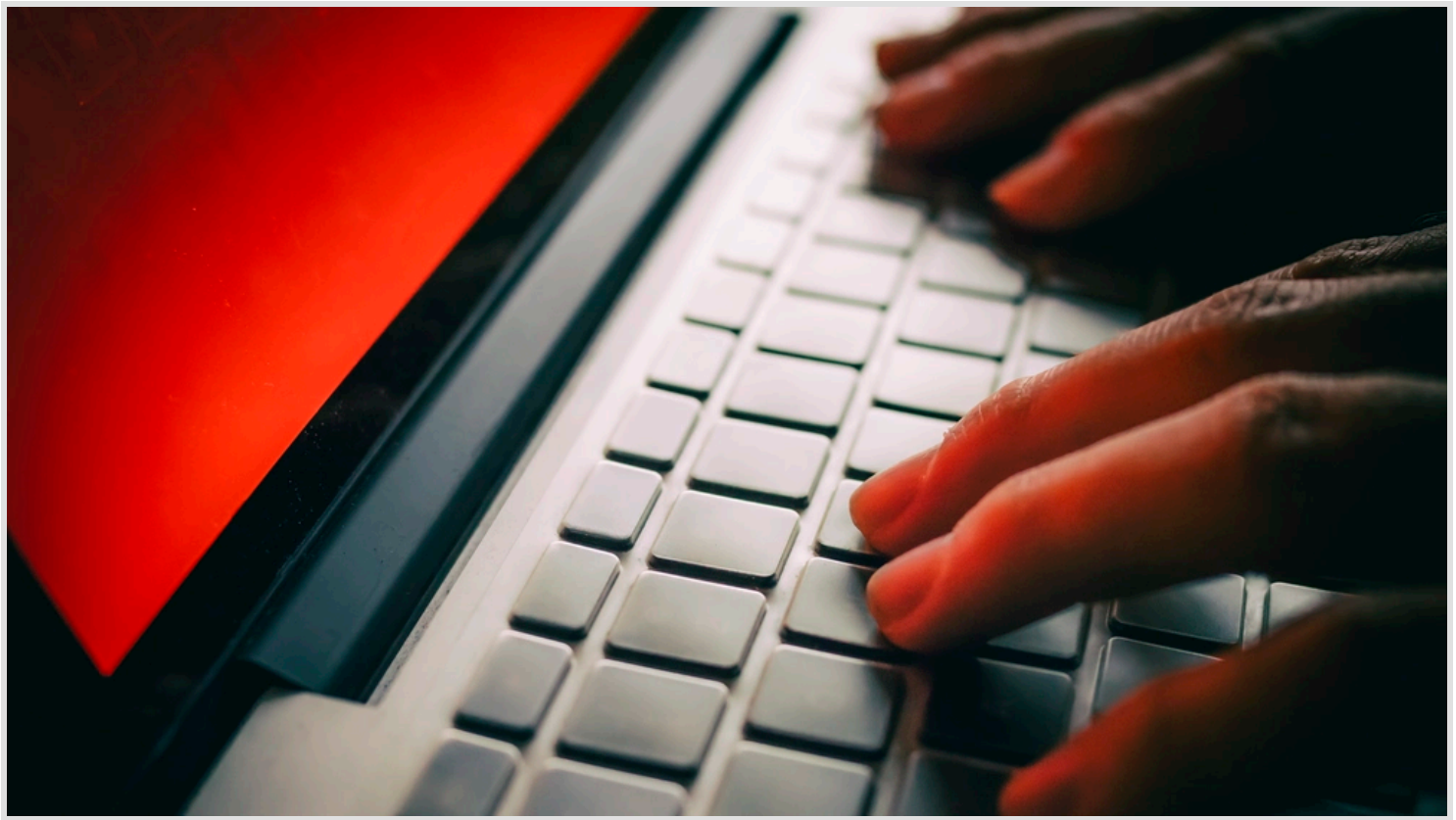

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