Vocation as Personal Calling: A Question for Education

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In this paper, it is proposed that historically positive meanings regarding the concept of a vocation be given serious consideration in the practical role of vocational education. The history of vocation as a spiritual calling to manifest personal gifts and to contribute to the common good is discussed. Modern interpretations concerning the spiritual quest for meaning in work both for the self and in relation to others are provided. The benefits of a vocation are briefly described and contrasted with difficulties in actualizing a sense of vocation under current conditions of work and society. Finally, in view of the analysis of the idea of vocation, suggestions for the future of vocational education are provided.

De tous temps, on a opposé l'éducation dite libérale à la formation professionnelle, pour mettre en valeur tantôt l'une tantôt l'autre. La controverse contemporaine opposant les programmes généraux à ceux qui préparent à l'emploi (vocational) fait perdre de vue le sens premier du concept de vocation, c'est-à-dire l'appel à exprimer ses dons personels en les mettant au service du bien commun, à travers son travail. La nature même du travail comme lieu de réalisation de l'individu et moyen de construction sociale est ce qui donne sa valeur et sa raison d'être à la formation professionnelle.

Today an educational controversy is, in part, being played out in a match between academic and vocational programs — with popular enthusiasm now favoring the academic side as more basic than the vocational type of instruction which focuses on specific employment or home functions. However, this either/or mentality is bound to lead to disappointing results because it neglects to address more encompassing questions about the essential nature of work as an individual activity and as a significant societal realm. An underlying purpose of this article is to suggest that the future configuration of basic, common, or general education must include dimensions of vocational as well as academic education. This contention rests on the core word *vocation* which signifies a personal calling.

Unfortunately, whereas the rarely-used noun *vocation* reflects a mystical element of having a special calling (Calhoun, 1935), the quite common mode of vocational education is burdened with association to unrewarding labor (Oakes, 1985) and with a "charity" (Beck, 1981). A person who has a vocation is viewed positively and a person who finds a vocation is considered to be quite fortunate. In contrast,

a person who enrolls in a vocational track or course is granted less esteem than one who pursues an academic program. This idea has been fueled by numerous national studies that claim vocational tracks relegate students to low-status jobs and have little value to society or individuals.

My task in this article is to voice a perspective not often taken: to explore the positive meanings inherent in the idea of vocation as a personal calling and to highlight this core word as one worthy of key emphasis in future vocational education, in view of the totality of learning experiences that contribute to the growth and development of students. Because an investigation into meaning is intended to clarify thinking (Emmet 1968), this inquiry is designed to map out one path of thought toward the educational objective of guiding each child toward a personal sense of work for self and society by leaving the reader with a better grasp of "lost" meanings of vocation. Indeed, in order to merit a place in the educational structure, the positive sense of vocation must penetrate the reality of vocational education.

Vocation in Historical Perspective

Often it is enlightening to trace current meanings back to the original usage of a term. In the case of vocation, the spiritual realm made possible its very emergence as an idea in human life. From a religious beginning to modern associations with social life and life meaning, spiritual meaning has remained a central feature of having a vocation.

The idea of having a special vocation developed in early Christianity when the apostle Paul used the Latin *vocatio* to indicate God's calling, bidding, or summons to practice such spiritual gifts as prophecy or preaching (Calhoun, 1935). A person called to a vocation was inspired by God to demonstrate talents, the manifestation of which gave evidence of the spiritual source and contributed to the quality of the social spirit. That the invisible spirit was made objective in a variety of ways can be surmised from Paul's statements concerning *vocatio*:

> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Col. 12:4-7)

There are several important points about the spiritual that are revealed in the original sense of vocation. First, because the special calling and understanding were believed to result directly from God, early Christians granted those possessing such extra knowledge high esteem and considered a vocation to be a divine calling. Indeed, Paul preached that only a few individuals would be selected apostles, preachers, prophets, and other spiritual workers and he advised that Christians should "earnestly desire the higher gifts" (I. Cor. 12:31). Because the spiritual sense of having a special gift and calling was important to the high value placed on the idea of vocation, the general spiritual nature of human life to

enable fuller understanding of the meaning of vocational calling in modern terms is explored later in this article.

A second point is that the spiritual calling was closely linked to manifest forms of the invisible spirit. Since human personalities are noted for how they act and what they say, the manifest forms were evidence of a spiritual calling. Much like the artist manifests sensuous works to indicate evidence of the content of the mind's eye, the person who sensed a vocation in a spiritual sense gained direct evidence of personal gifts through experience and manifest results. The spiritual gifts were evidenced as distinct and unique to the individual. The manifest forms of gifts will also be examined as those elements of modern vocational callings that occur on the basis of the objectification of personality.

Third, individual gifts were to be manifest not to glorify the individual but for a broader social purpose, for the higher principle of building a common good. We still subscribe to the belief that society is only as good as its people, that individuals contribute their gift through service, and that they work to create a certain quality of life. The purposeful nature of a vocation to better the common good is a third significant element to consider in modern perspective.

Vocation and Earthly Work

With Luther's fifteenth century protest that the gifts of priests and prophets were not higher than the works of common people, the esteem of having a vocation moved from the few with mysterious spiritual gifts to the common people who inhabited what Luther called the earthly system of "offices," "stations," or "occupations" (Wingren, 1957). This is often considered a major shift in the idea of a vocation because esteem was now located in the motives involved in performing common work. Luther advised that ordinary people should still seek spiritual union with God, but he proclaimed their earthly vocation was to do the best they could in their social function. Vocation came to be viewed as a place in the structured daily undertakings of the work in society. All people were to be esteemed if they desired and strived to perform well in their primary offices or vocations. For example, Luther stated:

> So the ministries of the work, the magistrates of commonweals, parents, children, masters, servants are true saints, if first and before all things they assure themselves that Christ is their wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption: secondly if everyone does his duty in his vocation . . . . (Dillenberger, 1961, p. 159)

According to Luther, the first task was now to set good motives in one's common occupations:

> It is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good work follow and proceed from the good person ... his works do not make him good or wicked, but he himself makes his works either good or wicked. (Dillenberger, 1961, p. 70)

Luther's second task was to promote goodness for others, reflecting Paul's idea of work for the common good: Make your gifts freely and for no consideration, so that others may profit by them and fare well because of you and your goodness (Dillenberger, 1961, p. 79).

The main point of interest here is that esteem was now located more in the intentional character of the common individual than in the demonstration of knowledge and special favor from God. The people filling common roles such as child, parent, and laborer were viewed as saints if they intended and practiced love, good, and duty. Luther taught that all individuals called by God to practice any occupation or station were esteemed and high. They were called not to show unusual gifts but to do good in any ordinary station. Because of Luther our concept of vocational guidance includes not only the rare talents of a few but also the everyday attitudes and skills of individuals seeking a place in society's occupations (Bainton, 1950).

A Personal Reward

By the twentieth century the sciences of psychology and economics had become at least as important as religion as social influences. Personal searches for psychological fulfillment and material comforts also came to be viewed as quite compatible, if not essential to the ability to do good and engage in higher activities. Significance to the self was given equal attention to Luther's selfless *giving* character. Dewey (1916) wrote about vocation in light of American pragmatism and individualism: "A vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptively significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates" (p. 307). Further:

> Every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living, and which accordingly make the ties which bind persons together more perceptible — which breaks down the barriers of distance between them. It denotes a state of affairs in which the interests of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent; based on its congeniality to his own aptitudes. (p. 316)

Dewey implied that individuals expect some type of gain when pursuing life activities, gain that has meaning to the self as well as benefits to associates. Although vocation was no longer limited to religious terms, the same spiritual sense of seeking higher meaning than the concrete here-and-now in a larger organizing framework for guiding one's life still filtered through. Although Dewey used the terms *intelligence* and *aptitudes* rather than gifts, he seems to have held to the conception of a calling as a special work in life. Common good and mutuality also were still very much intact in Dewey's thinking about personal vocations.

The term vocation began as a rather infrequent and exclusive way of life. Not until suffrage and civil rights came to be accepted was it even possible to think

that every person might try to find a personal vocation in its full-bodied spiritual, personal, and social sense. On the one hand, we still do not use the word vocation very often, perhaps not so much because it is outdated but because, unfortunately, it implies certain qualities that have in reality proved unattainable by many. On the other hand, and more fortunately, as we near the 21st century, there still is a special quality about having a vocation if we consider it to be a personal calling that illuminates a meaningful direction for developing one's gifts in all their consequences. The spiritual meaning of sensing a call to manifest one's gifts, talents, or good character, along with the social strength engendered by the synthesis of everyone's unique contributions, are too important to dismiss lightly. The fact that individuals live in a career-oriented and a technological society cannot dampen the personal quest for higher principles and long-term directions in the world. We must continually seek to transcend social obstacles through our spiritual personalities and through our work if we desire a higher sense of being (Kovacs, 1986).

By highlighting modern interpretations of our spiritual nature, that which seeks meaning in manifest gifts, social good, and larger principles for the whole of life, we may better understand how a personal vocation can add to the individual's potential and alleviate some of the social problems that tear into future power. The next task is to discover modern meanings of the original qualities of a personal calling, in terms of the ever-present tasks of the work of the self and society.

Vocation in Modern Perspective

Although the mysterious nature of an invisible quality such as the human spirit is not easy to understand, it is an element worth considering in an investigation of the meaning of vocation because of its human significance. The spiritual quest for greater meanings and the understanding of life relations, in terms of self and others, will now be discussed in relation to a modern sense of vocation.

By virtue of being alive, there is continual spiritual activity. Niebuhr (1941) has described spiritual activity as a quest for ultimate meaning that constantly transcends rationality. As a spark of inspiration and quest for higher grounds of life, we can find many insights into the spiritual element of a calling as the special work for one's life. The modern questions of "Who am I?" and "What is the destiny for my life?" are bound up with the active search for the meaning of one's life as a whole. Inclusive of the meaning of this particular experience or that specific thought, the seeking for ultimate meaning attempts to put such fragments into perspective. Since it is the nature of spiritual activity to seek the ultimate meaning beyond the demanding, fluctuating, and confusing here-and-now, spiritual activity in the sense of a calling continually seeks to unify and render coherent what one's life is called to be used for in the world. Since a calling to a special project or work in the common world encompasses the

vagaries of conditions and ideas faced over a lifetime, it offers a stabilizing force of understanding to the constant spiritual activity.

Hofstadter (1967) indicates that it is spiritual understanding that gives greater meaning to pure spiritual activity. Beyond the understanding of truth of ends, by meeting objectives with correct means spiritual understanding knows Being itself as ultimate meaning. Hofstadter (1967) describes truth as the subjective impulse and the form given by will that searches for the meaning of the self:

> Spirit is subjectivity in search of the truth of its being. Subjectivity is, first, will, impulse, blind thrust toward existence; secondly, it is will limited and controlled by itself through the understanding which it develops for the purpose of controlling itself. But something more is needed, namely the transition of subjectivity to spirit, which is made by virtue of the aim at truth of being. There is an element in will, the measuring element, which enables it to aim at truth of being. (p. 174)

Indeed, the spiritual calling of one's life, as the search for the truth for the self and its being, is found by active willing as well as by reflecting upon consequences of will and incident. In an effort to gain spiritual wholeness, gifts and motivations must be inspired by the spirit of subjectivity, tried by will, and reflected upon in search for understanding.

A vocation from its very beginnings has indicated a unifying project for one's life that inspires certain actions and a great variety of skills and consequences. Whether an ancient prophet or modern teacher, the individual's phenomenological sense of a calling guides will and action along meaningful and higher ideas. There is no guarantee that manifest success will occur with every trial, but the individual learns and gains wider understanding of meanings of life. Regardless of the idiosyncrasies that befall, a vocation is a guiding force to find the truth of the work of the self in relation to personality as well as to others.

Totality of Relations: Wisdom. Spiritual understanding added to activity in the search for truth reveals a particular kind of wisdom in a vocational calling. Pieper (1963) identifies spiritual wisdom as the ability to grasp relations that bind unique life qualities and incidents into a totality of being:

> [T]wo together constitute spirit: not only the capacity to relate oneself to the whole of reality, to the whole world, but an unlimited capacity of living in oneself, the gift of self-reliance and independence that in the philosophical tradition of Europe, have always been regarded as the attributes of the human person, of being a person. To have a world, to be related to the totality of existing things, can only be the attribute of a being whose substance is within himself — not a "what" but "who," a self, a person. (p. 90)

Thus, spiritual wisdom requires learning the truth about one's inner relations and one's relations to others. In terms of a vocation, these are analogous to personal gifts and motives and good of the common world.

Parts of the totality of relations within the inner self are the gifts or talents and skills one possesses and develops. Gifts described by Paul's vocation were the higher mysteries, and we still tend to esteem those with inexplicable talent and admire greatly those who have a natural bent. Instead of considering prophets and preachers to be higher, we now esteem great musicians, political leaders, and athletes. And although we now realize that great talent demands grueling practice, dedication, and sometimes compensation for other weaknesses, we still tend to grant an aura of mystery to the gifts that befall only a few. Even the more mundane gifts that stand out of the ordinary, such as infectious personality or dedication to a cause, are given a certain mysterious quality. Today there remains a quality of mystery associated with the truth of each being's inner relations that becomes a self, a person.

Fortunately, Luther and Dewey remind us that we also ought to esteem even the most ordinary person with good motives. The very character of a person in the most humble occupation is significant; a common laborer who willingly and creatively adds good touches while carrying out the occupation could possibly have a vocation. Use of gifts can simultaneously satisfy the self and do good to others. Inner relations of personality, unique intentions, and creative moral insights in work activities are needed to produce any social achievement of good.

Gifts are part of the inwardness of the self, the spiritual person who seeks the truth of a personal calling. These inner qualities we seek to understand and manifest consciously; we want to know and demonstrate what we are good at. Sometimes ideas or insights seem to just come to us. As in a revelation, we sometimes know we must try to make manifest abstract ideas such as a love of family or such concrete desires as writing poems.

Of course, basic knowledge and skills must be learned to use gifts fully through working functions. Beyond revelation or insights, we must exert much effort to execute the idea. If we wish an ideal to become a high quality reality, then we must shape and reshape the subjective desire. We must will, and then reflect upon, experience with abstract insights. Such effort enlightens us further about inner relations which include satisfactions and gifts. Every small insight, if placed in a higher search for meaning, contributes to the sense of calling.

The strength of inner relations is strongly associated with outer conditions that are experienced as a sample and a model of the external world. Spiritual capacity enables us to transcend the present givens of self and environment, promoting the ability to hope and search for what now seems impossible. Still, extremely limited experiences tend to limit spiritual capacity. The more varied and rich the qualities that arise in our interactions with the world, the greater is the opportunity to gain insights, to attempt to manifest gifts, and to excel by gaining knowledge and skill. Thus the external set of relations must be coherent yet rich if the world is to lend the best models to transcend and provide the flexibility needed to incorporate many types of gifts. The relations between inner and outer worlds

logically must lend both flexible opportunity and coherent unity if the person is fully to develop a vocation.

As Green (1968) has argued, a person desires a "work to do" but must find that this "quest for potency" can make a difference. Green writes:

> To take the measure of one's potency, to prove one's self, to discover a sphere for consequential action, these are what are involved in any major process of self-identification, and work is a primary means for doing these things. They constitute the discovery of a work to do. (p. 138)

A change resulting from personal efforts in the external relations must be experienced by the individual. If a change based on personal effort is never perceived, the result is a lack of a sense of calling or life function. Through consequential action, a person sees the common good as a definite example and as evidence of a principle. A person's vocation can only be verified in context of consequences, for both individual identity and commonality come to light in relation to others. A meaningful calling is developed over time as gifts are learned and redefined in light of relations to others.

A vocation, then, is a combination of the spiritual search for meaning and relations, the gifts made manifest by individual searches, and the work of potency as evident by perceived change in the common good. A guiding assumption throughout history has been that it is a framework of relations that provides a higher sense of meaning and esteem for individual life. That vocation meant a calling indicates dependence on hearing a voice that prompts living according to an overarching purpose, a call to manifest personal gifts, and a confirmation of a sense that one's life is important to the work of the world. The personal call to pursue a direction is now often secularized, and the call might be viewed as coming from any source that prompts or nudges a person to follow a certain direction true to the self and which enables fulfilling ways to manifest talent.

Although this knowledge is revealed to the inner person, the establishment and manifestation of inner character in the world does not happen overnight. It is a life process of facing challenge, gaining new understandings, and learning how the self fits into and strengthens the world. Among the basic dimensions necessary for a vocation are a) the spiritual wisdom which Pieper (1963) considers to be the mental capacity to detect relations within the self and the world, and b) the active process of work and manifestation of inner qualities "called for" and "used" by the world. A vocation includes the contemporary ideas of work and career, but it extends beyond them to incorporate a greater meaning than the work alone — the meaning of one's life that is in part revealed in work activity.

Considerations for Education: Ideals and Reality

The positive value for having a vocation, in that the individual has an inner desire to detect and manifest substantial connections between the self and the rest of the world, is replete with suggestions for education. What makes this contention

valid? One reason for educational inclusion of vocation's meanings is that the spiritual quality of wise understanding of the relations that connect each individual to every other seems to have faded from the contemporary replacement terms such as job or career. Career ladders, networking, and professional development often are viewed more in light of getting ahead than in view of promoting the common good. As Greenwood (1981) notes, the goals of consumption and reward have higher priority than the goal of contributing actual productive substance in today's world. Impotency is eventually revealed when the effort of work does not truly produce consequential change, but instead, produces images of following "proper standards."

Another reason why vocation is a valuable concept for education is that, by looking out at the world and seeing the tremendous need, the self can gain a sense of purpose. One of the saddest of phenomena occurs when a young individual finds no place in society, feels a chronic pain of loneliness, and feels of no worth to others. The vocational desire and ability to see how the relations of the world interact would demonstrate how much work and good are needed, how much the self and unique characteristics are needed by others.

A general reason for revitalizing the idea of vocation for students is that severe personal and social problems exist, mirrored in every day's news of suicide, scandal, greed, violence, and crime. Emphasis on individuality and good intent underlying a vocation is essential if education is to help unify the work of many into a dynamic society. Each person must understand the complex relations of society (and societies); each participant must help sustain higher ideals in a quest for potency. The self can contribute more when spiritual quests seek to understand what really needs to be done in the society. As well, individuals reap more depth of meaning and opportunity from an active process and structural quality of social relations. Intelligent examination of the world's entities (person, experience, or value) helps the self find differences and commonalities in life experiences.

Because of the advantages that a vocation gives to the individual and society — a sense of directed purpose in a larger context, a function of doing good to others, an opportunity to develop the self through use of gifts and works to do, and a sense of meaning in life over time — it seems that ways to nurture, cultivate, and polish vocations would be beneficial. The desirability of having a vocation can hardly be refuted. Yet educators must be aware of the delicate tension between the needed sustained activity on the part of the individual and the difficulty in sustaining the efforts in the modern world.

What is unfortunate is that the sustained hope and effort of a vocation might not be possible for all or even for most individuals. Many people do not or cannot hear a call that guides their lives, gives them self-direction, and gives them secure hope of place in world relations. It also is not easy to carry out a vocation, even when a call is clearly heard. Because modern bureaucracy, specialization, and dependence on experts and instrumental policies present great structural

barriers in all areas of life, individuals can fail to manifestly create and use gifts. It is also difficult to keep a sense of direction over a length of time; it is hard to balance several vocations such as work and family. Sometimes the individual simply cannot find a concrete place that allows the freedom to carry out intended good will. Unfortunately for these individuals and for the world, there are many reasons why a vocation is not part of every person's life. Although these complicated reasons are entrenched in social patterns and beyond the limited purpose of this paper, they lead to a new set of questions which demand the best thinking and action on the part of those who consider education to be their vocation. Is it possible for education to create opportunity for each young citizen to pursue a vocation? Even more important, how is it possible to empower each student to become a vital part of the world's spirit and work?

Practical Guidelines and Vocational Education

Whereas the discussion so far has been quite abstract, a few words now must be said about the practical need to help young people understand the meanings of vocation. Since the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 in the United States, vocational education in secondary schools in that country has been legislated to help meet society's specific work needs. Current course offerings range from auto mechanics to family and child development, from printing to office occupations. I will not attend to the current debate about whether or not such specifically defined subjects belong in high schools: Whatever the configuration of subjects turns out to be, I will suggest that all students need some education concerning vocations as related to self and society. Based on the discussion so far, several areas will be considered as substance of vocational education in the future.

Since having a vocation is a very personal endeavor, especially in its search for meaning aspect, vocational education in part should concentrate on the study of self, subjectivity, and personal quests for meaning. Since Luther, vocational guidance has meant the process of matching an individual with the best line of work (Bainton, 1950). Unfortunately, what should be a long-term guiding process has often turned into a simplistic method of tracking by powerful school experts — on the tenuous basis of a few tests for intelligence and personality, class and probable future, and race (Oakes, 1985). A general vocational education based on this discussion would direct much of the thinking and responsibility toward the students. A few possible strategies are evaluating the truth of such indicators as tests, analyzing critically personal goals and ideals of meaning, finding answers to such questions as "Why work?", developing projects to test out beliefs or hopes, and engaging in individual research on the self's work in paid and unpaid areas. While tests and experts play a significant role in education, the important point here is to get students actively involved in planning and discovering their future life directions.

Challenging student activism is necessary in order to reduce a trend in vocational education that:

> . . . keys on activity that will be supervised by others, not by self-directed initiative. The employee receives but a fragment of the education necessary to prepare for a full economic and political freedom . . . It serves to feed a learner a mentality that accepts the notion of limited personal liability and responsibility to employer, government and family. (Buila, 1981, p. 62)

In order to heighten a sense of responsibility, study might include such concepts as responsibility, freedom, development of skill and talent, risk, choice, moral consequences, and invention — all from the stance of the self as a potent agent in society. Thus, vocational education might be viewed partly as a study of the spiritual search for meaning as it relates to the inner relations of the self and to the personal project of work in its broadest sense.

In view of a vocation's connection with the good produced in society, a major portion of study in vocational education should be devoted to social function and structure. If students are to give their own sense of freedom and responsibility a grounding in reality, they must grasp the external relations associated with the varieties of work in society. As Greenwood (1981) notes, our society is facing "incomprehensible change in the international scene and a convulsion of domestic indices that are unsettling and bewildering" (p. 71). Rocking stock markets, scandals that touch political and religious leaders, and inability to protect our own household security tend to ruin our faith in the existence of stable social situations and quality.

Such current social problems can be addressed in various ways in vocational education. These might include studying the history of work; analyzing the social nature of work; identifying the relation of work to other systems of society; comparing varieties of work such as that in the home, community, and paid job; analyzing labor and management conflicts; and practicing technical and communication skills. By expanding the focus beyond job-based skills to include values and concepts of a vocation, vocational education can expand power to prepare all students to perform and fit their work better — whatever it might be.

Indeed, vocational education must expand its knowledge base beyond paid skills to include other types of productive work, for quality life and paid work are not necessarily connected to each other. The workplace no longer offers the majority of people meaningful creativity, freedom, and consequential action regardless of whether they are in professional or labor categories. Green (1968) has argued that most paid work occurs in such specialized and fragmented portions that vocations will have to be nourished in nonpaid types of work in the family, community, and volunteer arenas. Broudy (1972) adds a further ironic twist to our stereotyped assumptions about work and workers: People who are truly able to develop a full sense of spiritual meaning in arts, community, and family are those who are able to constrict work to working hours. These are often the nonprofessionals.

The utmost care must be taken that students headed for paid work do not lack education in the humanities and academics which promotes full living. Likewise,

and rarely advocated, students headed for both the university and the work force must receive a solid understanding of vocational concepts. In times when national sentiment is critical of vocational education, educators and citizens must remember its historically special strengths. Practically and philosophically, vocational education has carried the tradition of nurturing pride of craft, product, service, and willingness to work; it has provided direct student contact with government, business, and industry; it has offered a vivid hands-on approach in training stations or laboratories as a means to demonstrate concepts; and it has encouraged team effort in carrying out work functions (Greenwood, 1981, p. 83). Might all students gain knowledge that is so fundamental to developing personal success in a special calling? Will all students be able to strengthen the nation via pride in craft and substantial contribution? Let us hope that by enlarging the questions about types of education, the positive meanings of vocation will be given a rightful place.

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