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Intergenerational Dialogue and Inquiry for Collective Healing, Social Justice and Communal Well-Being: A Reflection on Conceptions, Processes and Practices

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This paper explores how intergenerational dialogue and inquiry (IDI) may help break the silence about past brutality and contribute to collective healing, social justice and communal well-being. The specific historical contexts that it is concerned with are transatlantic slavery and colonisation, and the continued legacies of contemporary racism. Global communities impacted by these tragedies often experience silence between the generations about the trauma resulting from the atrocity, often exacerbated by present day discrimination. In considering the case study of IDI in communities on four continents, this paper further analyses the processes involved in breaking the cycles of silence, and remembering cultural wisdom and place-based resilience. It thus highlights practices such as trust-building, active listening, questioning, re-storying, deep dialogue and co-inquiry across the generations as key to understanding systemic dehumanisation and re-imagining the structural conditions necessary for the flourishing of all.

Keywords: breaking the cycles of silence, intergenerational dialogue, collective healing, communal well-being, structural justice, positive peace.

> *History [...] does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.*
> --- James Baldwin, 1965: 47

Introduction

Currently, humanity is confronting crises so catastrophic that global peace, human flourishing and the thriving of our planet are at risk (UNESCO, 2021a). To better grasp the complexity and the opportunities these crises present, it is necessary to first consider how humanity has arrived at our current situation. One way of understanding the past is through remembering (Beardsworth, 2009), which provides the contexts within which to investigate how the present has emerged and continues to assume meaning. By re-engaging with the past, the present can become coherent and the future possible (Gill, 2023). This reflection is key to addressing the roots of current global crises. Without comprehending the root of our moral failures and learn from our collective tragedies, catastrophes may be perpetuated, if not accelerated.

This paper is located within the contexts of prolonged trauma and damage in communities caused by historical mass atrocities, such as transatlantic enslavement, and colonial occupation. In these cases, violence was made possible through systematic exploitation, ideological distortion and economic instrumentalisation (Gill, 2021). As noted by Baldwin, the history of transatlantic slavery, trade of enslaved people and colonisation is very much *present* in the memories of people of African and indigenous descent, and in their everyday lived realities. Indeed, black and indigenous communities around the globe have continued to bear the scars of systemic dehumanisation to varying degrees, and their lives are affected adversely by the

continued legacies of structural racism and discrimination.

Many writers and commentators have used both historical and global analyses to point out that the West rose to economic dominance through dehumanizing acts, structural violence and injustice (cf. Beckert, 2014; Baptist, 2016; Wright, 2020; Stelzer, 2020; Williams, 1944). Past dehumanisation has established and consolidated instrumentalising economic and financial systems, at the core of which lie the practices of exploitation, competition, oppression and alienation (Thomson and Gill, 2024). Such violence has been extended beyond the exploitation of human labour to now include the damaging extraction of nature, devastating the ecological integrity upon which all lives on Earth depend (Mbembe, 2022). Without addressing these crises from a global perspective, current challenges have been treated as mere isolated problems, unique to particular groups, countries or regions. Hence the cycles of violence have persisted, and unaddressed traumas are passed from one generation to another.

Most recently, the Black Lives Matter movement and stories of indigenous communities in south America reclaiming their guardianship of lands have prompted a renewed interest in connecting the dots to bring the past, present and future together. However, there remains a widespread silence among generations about the harrowing past. Hence, breaking intergenerational silence about trauma and remembering cultural wisdom and resilience become part and parcel to embarking on collective healing journeys towards social justice and communal well-being.

This paper explores these topics through three main parts. The first is a literature review that aims to investigate silence, remembering and healing, and discusses how related conceptions and practices may contribute to communal well-being and peace. It then reflects upon the impact of Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry (IDI) programme through active listening, deep dialogue and co-inquiry on communal healing. Lastly it explores how global communities might integrate IDI in their continued efforts to seek peace, just society and well-being for all.

Literature Review

This section investigates some of the salient questions. Why is there often collective silence about the pain of the past? How might communities break such silence and reveal the wisdom of resilience? What are the recent arguments on the imperative of remembering? How might ethical practices of memories help heal the wounds of the past and strengthen the interconnections between the past, present and future? How might breaking the silence and remembering contribute to collective healing?

Silence

For communities torn by historical mass atrocities, silence is a common symptom of trauma for survivors and their descendants (Richter, 2017; Broussard, 2013). For some, silence is a form of self-protection and defence against the effects of sharing traumatic memories and emotions (Danieli, 1998). For others, silence is part of their coping mechanism, where collective 'forgetting' allows the community to feel that they can move on from the past, with the assumption that if kept secret, these pains will not affect subsequent generations (Prager, 2003). For others still, they may stay silent for fear of evoking re-traumatisation, and provoking division and antagonism (cf. Chandler, 2007). To end the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, testimonies must be given about the experiences of wounding and of witnessing the effects of harm. This tends to entail risks for both parties, because telling and hearing about the harms of dehumanisation and their damaging effects can indeed be retraumatising (Caruth, 1996). Owing to these risks, voices about past brutality, enduring

trauma and present alienation might be re-silenced (Noble, 2008). Thus, in the silence, trauma has been transmitted from one generation to another, prolonging the pain and suffering of those who must deal with the relevant traumatic effects of the past, while also being subject to continued structural violence (DeGruy, 2017).

Silence has also been common among the perpetrators of violence and their descendants (Bar-On, 1989). Likewise, for those whose ancestors and successive generations have seemingly benefitted from the tragedies of other groups economically, socially and politically, silence may extend the shame and guilt, and cause younger generations to experience inexplicable anxiety and stress (Hirsch, 2008). In the context of American chattel slavery, however, white people from both the north and south were silent about slavery 'because there was nothing to be gained by speaking up, and often a great deal to be gained by saying nothing' (Naish, 2017: 3). Furthermore, as all documentation of slavery tends to belong to or be kept by the enslavers, their silence about enslavement and its harm can be 'deafening' (Pairault, 2020).

While silence following historical atrocities and transgenerational trauma is complex and can be paradoxical, when continuing, silence can result in the communities' missing not only the truths about dehumanisation, but also the traditional wisdom and communal resources typically passed from one generation to the next (Weil, 1952/2012). These are central to the identity formation of younger generations, as well as their sense of belonging, both of which are essential for shaping the community's future. These insights suggest that breaking the silence about trauma must involve sensitivity and the ethics of remembering.

Remembering

While research and practices have long stressed the importance of integrating past trauma as part of collective healing and communal well-being, how it can be achieved requires the arts and ethics of remembering (Gill, 2023). When individuals and groups remember collaboratively, they can bond and form a community of memory (Booth, 2006); and in remembering, people can also draw collective wisdom from their embodied, emotionally attuned and inspirited experiences of healing (Menakem, 2021).

According to ideas and practices in traditional communities, remembering the past is key to finding the paths to the future. For instance, The Akan tribe of Ghana uses the word '*sankofa*', translated as 'go back and get it' (Slater, 2019). The word is portrayed as a bird with its feet on the ground and its head turned backwards, with a piece of treasure in its beak. Here, remembering can be understood as a methodological approach to reconstruct from a 'fragmented past' and seek coherence (Temple 2010). It suggests that remembering is a path to drawing lessons from the past, and recovering and restoring wisdom and knowledge of previous generations. In turn, remembering the past is the basis for a community to progress into the future. *Sankofa* literally advises turning back in order to move forward. Similarly, in indigenous traditions, it is believed that the past, present and future are interconnected in a continuous cosmic process and movement (Rameka, 2016). The past, and our learning from the past, is essential to build the strength of individuals and communities. This process will not only benefit the present, but can also guide the collective journey of all generations into a better future (Hübl, 2021).

Acknowledging and bearing witness to other people's humanity must be a central feature of remembering. In a South African Bantu language, there is phrase '*umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu'*, which is translated as 'a person is a person through being witnessed by, and engaging in reciprocal witnessing of other persons', or 'a person becomes a human being through the

multiplicity of relationships with others' (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016: 116). It points out that a person's existence depends on their being witnessed by others in the community, through the reciprocal caring and complementarity of human relationships. Remembering involves a mutual recognition of our humanness (Tutu, 1999).

Despite these potential benefits of remembering, in practice, it takes courage and trustbuilding to attempt such a shift – from silently living out past pain and suffering, to remembering, listening, telling and bearing witness to scars and their causes (Corcoran, 2010). When remembering takes place and such a shift is made, it can mean that the deeply tragic personal and communal stories, as well as the inspirational tales of survival and triumph, are no longer dissociated from the continuity of the community's collective narrative. As articulated by Kimmerer (2013), it is effectively restoring by re-*storying*. Remembering, restoring and re-storying can have healing potential for all generations.

Healing

For a long time, there has been no agreed upon definition of healing beyond the physiological processes related to curing (Egnew, 2005). In terms of etymology, the word 'healing' comes from an old English word '*haelan*', meaning 'whole'. So, as a noun form of a verb, healing is defined as 'making whole' or 'restoring (a sense of) wholeness' to a person. It further implies that any wounding would tend to make the wounded experience some kind of brokenness or fragmentation.

Healing thus conceived presupposes that as people we are always already whole. Only a whole person can be made to feel broken and fragmented. Therefore, healing as a process of making whole assumes that the brokenness or fragmentation is the result of wounding (Thomson, 2021). Furthermore, the notion of wounding refers to a special kind of harm inflicted upon persons through dehumanising acts (UNESCO, 2021b). Hence the kind of healing discussed here only applies when persons are *wounded* by acts that deliberately deny people's humanity. It is a failure to recognise what matters most about being human in a normative sense (de Ruiter, 2023). In this sense, only persons can be 'wounded' in a dehumanising way, owing to a special kind of intrinsic value of being human, which defines persons as dignified (Weil, 2012). Most spiritual traditions echo this claim that being human has a sacred core, and thus being human itself is intrinsically valuable and dignified. Both point to the same conclusion: no person should be treated as less than human, and any such act violates a person's intrinsic value and dignity.

Accordingly, when people are wounded by dehumanisation, they may feel a disconnect from their own intrinsic value as a person. Being denied the opportunities to engage in such valuable activities as learning and work is a form of ill-being. Pain, anxiety, fear, anger and sadness are forms of ill-being. Being discriminated against and being treated as less than equal is also a form of ill-being. Likewise, being excluded from a society's economic–political processes also counts towards a person's ill-being. Dehumanisation is perhaps especially harmful in terms of a person's relationship with themselves, and damage to their sense of dignity and their sense of wholeness in a person's emotional self-awareness. Thus, healing happens when the wounded can transcend the psychological and social obstacles towards their self-consciously seeing themself as a dignified whole person.

Collective healing has been regarded to be part of positive peace, conceived to be beyond the absence of violence (Gill and Thomson, 2019). It argues that peace is not merely the absence of war and violence, because peace also has positive attributes. In this case, peace itself is a set

of complex qualities that are intrinsically valuable. In other words, positive peace involves the presence of meaningful contents, such as the peaceful qualities in our inner state of being, and in our lived experiences with others in the world. Conceived in this way, the content of positive peace is truly the multi-dimensional flourishing of living a human life. Positive peace is also a relational concept as it recognizes human's intrinsic value as persons, or as souls, as articulated in many indigenous cultures and spiritual traditions, and that at this 'soul' level, all are interconnected in a state of peacefulness, where there is the enriched relationship with the self, other people and other beings in the world.

Collective healing is consisted in and contributes to peace precisely through enriching human well-being including peaceful relationships at the 'soul' level (Marongwe, Duri, and Mawere, 2019). Positive peace determines that when others are violated and hurt, we are equally violated and hurting. This is the nature of being part of a WE. Healing is an active striving towards wholeness through love, care, friendship, respect and resilience which are all in part positive peace (John, 2021).

Summary

Literature review has shown that collective healing starts with acknowledging the acts of dehumanisation, and recognising the harm they have caused. The acknowledgement of brutal violence and the recognition of continued damage, such as the resulting transgenerational trauma, involve breaking the silence with courage and conviction. It requires an awareness that to move forward it is necessary to collectively look back. When community members come together to look back, they both condemn the brutality and identify the communal 'treasures' in the resilience and strength to confront dehumanisation and challenge structural injustice.

Intergenerational Dialogue and Inquiry (IDI): A Case Study

Intergenerational dialogue has long been integrated in processes aimed at breaking the silence following atrocities. Dialogue across the generations can bring to light both insights into the community's past experience and the wisdom of older generations in enriching resources for well-being (Bell, 2021). Research has identified that young people are key to driving these processes (Fromm, 2022), and that it is important to break the silence between generations and sustain cultural continuation through intergenerational dialogue (Wallace, et al., 2014).

Over time, many communities have employed intergenerational dialogue in their processes of truth-telling, healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding. For instance, throughout truth and reconciliation commissions, intergenerational dialogue has been a key element to truth-telling and mutual witnessing (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016). Similarly, intergenerational dialogue was integrated into the healing process following the Holocaust (Roth-Howe, 2007), genocide in Cambodia (Cooke, Hodgkinson & Manning, 2023) and the Rwanda Tutsi genocide (Wallace, et al., 2014). In Canada, to heal from the harm of residential schools, the First Nation elders and young people have also engaged in story-sharing and listening in the hope of fostering dialogue and healing (Archibald, 2008).

Although community forums, educational programmes and public spaces such as museums have provided opportunities for narrative and memory sharing, few have intentionally integrated intergenerational dialogue to heal the wounds and address the legacies of the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, enslavement and colonisation.

In 2022-2024, a pilot Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry (IDI) programme was launched in global communities formerly impacted by the history of transatlantic slavery and colonisation.

The IDI processes were carried out by grassroots organisations and their professional facilitators. In total, 150 young participants (aged 18–34) and close to 500 adults and older participants (aged 50+) took part in the IDI pilot in nine communities on four continents. The IDI aims to co-create intergenerational spaces for dialogue, cultural continuation and collective healing. Communities are encouraged to draw on their own cultural traditions and practices of intergenerational dialogue, rather than taking a uniform approach. The pilot results showed that IDI participants of all ages experienced mutual affection, affirmation of cultural identity and dignity, and, above all, healing and well-being. More importantly, they developed better understanding of the systemic violence and discrimination underlying the community's ill-being, and explored the structural conditions necessary for all to flourish.

IDI processes

The IDI programme aims to offer facilitated spaces to achieve the following: 1) enable mutual listening and dialogue about historical atrocities, and their continued legacies in people's everyday lived realities; 2) identify cultural wisdom and communal resources for restoring a sense of wholeness and sustaining resilience; 3) deepen relational bond amongst the participants and expand solidarity to other stakeholders; and 4) co-construct common visions for a humane and caring world, including proposing institutional conditions for a just society and the well-being of all.

The programme understands that creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue in communities suffering historical atrocities and continued structural brutality requires skilled facilitation and involves caringly and sensitively holding spaces for listening and sharing. IDI also depends on the trust and relational bond between older people and young adults, and respects each community's traditional practices of intergenerational dialogue. The seven steps described below are recommendations for grassroots partners of what constitutes a systemic approach to achieving the programme's aims and objectives.

The programme takes a number of steps, including welcoming, trustbuilding, (1) one-to-one process involving the elders' remembering and re-storying, intergenerational listening, dialogue using youth prepared questions; (2) focus-group process where participants share insights and communal 'treasures'; (3) stakeholders' process to involve major change-agents in the community. Each step builds upon the previous one so that the IDI takes the listening, dialogue and inquiry to a deeper level, resulting in the stakeholders envisioning the future of the community in 10, 25 and 50 years. In doing so, all will be involved in conversations that explore the structural conditions and institutional processes required for the collective vision. With the communal wisdom and resources as the basis, and with the renewed relational bonds in the community, the stakeholders can begin to co-inquire into the possibilities for systemic transformation towards a peaceful and just society, and the well-being of all.

IDI practices

The IDI starts with breaking the silence about past atrocities and recognizing the ongoing traumatic experience of historical dehumanization. By explicitly focusing on remembering and recollecting cultural wisdom and resources of resilience, IDI serves to reaffirm participants' dignity and help to restore a sense of wholeness at an individual as well as communal level.
There are several practices that seem to contribute to participants' healing. Although they are reviewed one by one below, they are intertwined rather than separate.

Trust

Trust between the generations and amongst the participants is a key to IDI and trust does not

necessarily arrive naturally just because people share similar social backgrounds such as ethnicity, geographical location, skin colour or class. Instead, time, space and pace are required to establish, enrich and sustain trust. IDI builds trust mainly through three steps: (1) by helping younger participants become more emotionally attuned with the elders (Hubl, 2023), through engaging in activities such as a visit to a significant historical site, communal hospitality practices, or spiritual rituals; (2) by strengthening the sensitivity of younger participants to the generational differences in terms of experiences, perspectives and wisdom through an openness, genuine curiosity, and appreciation of what the elders have to share; (3) by nurturing the growing trust, through providing time and space for continued intergenerational encounter. With these elements in place, intergenerational trust emerges and continues to deepen, alongside increased self-trust, mutual trust and a culture of trust in the community (cf. Covey, 2006).

Active listening

Throughout the IDI process, when young adults listen to elders, and elders listen to the young, stories are invited, created, (re)narrated, curated and transformed. Listening and storying are intertwined relational moves: without one, there cannot be another. In IDI, the practice of listening is active. Listening is regarded as an art that can be learned, nurtured and further developed. Active listening is particularly important for young adult participants who initiate the intergenerational dialogue. Listening starts with positive curiosity (following trustbuilding), which suggests that young participants believe that there is something meaningful to emerge from the intergenerational dialogue, and therefore they attend to it and take responsibility for its emergence.

Questioning

Active listening is supported by meaningful questions, which can help the older people become more open and more caring in their sharing. Questions allow intergenerational dialogue to acknowledge but not dwell on the trauma following past brutalities such as the history of slavery, the Middle Passage, and the loss and suffering of ancestors. Instead, young adults use questions to bring out the older generation's strengths, resilience and practices of well-being. This has been the IDI's strategy to avoid retraumatisation – through the process-design, and through the young and the older adults attuning to each other's needs and building on interconnection and interdependence (Hubl, 2023).

Remembering by re-storying

IDI gives voice to the silenced. Remembering enables the stories to rise above the typical narratives that Africans, African diasporas and indigenous people are subject to. Instead, remembering brings to the fore stories where the Africans, African diaspora and indigenous people are actors and agents in their own scenarios. Remembering in this way can help the community to understand better their own stories. Stories flow from the older participants to the young, and later in the other direction, from the young participants to the older. In amidst of storying is re-storying. Re-storying is like threading, stitching and weaving until the re-storying allows the community to reclaim the past and reaffirm the strength of the community, revealing the communal 'treasures' long hidden, but now recollected and re-storied. Re-storying fills the participants with emotions of gratitude and feelings of heightened dignity. Additionally, these treasures reconnect the community with qualities such as tenacity and resilience, but also with traditional rhythm, movement, songs, dance, food and so forth. Young participants suggest that in times of adversity, remembering and reconnecting to these precious gifts from ancestors and older generations have allowed them to restore faith in the community, and in the possibility of healing.

Deep dialogue

Dialogue goes beyond superficial exchange, and has served as a gateway to new understanding, including understanding the historical 'truths' from the perspectives of the elders and their ancestors, but also from the younger generations. In such a dialogue there is a movement, from each party knowing the historical facts better, to understanding what it means to live a present life defined by a common history. Both young and old can see that history is not just about the past, as Baldwin points out, history is even present in the ways that each person embodies and enacts the implication in their everyday life (Baldwin, 1965). Furthermore, through dialogue, the young and the elder partake in each other's lived experience emotionally, allowing each to step outside of their individual cocoon, into the space of communing. Dialogue thus transcends the intergenerational gap and cultural distance owing to the modern ways of life. In doing so, dialogue becomes deeper and is no longer an exchange of stories, but rather dialogue becomes a relational process through which people can live a common life together. Dialogue in this sense is community-making in an inclusive and caring 'WE' space (Gill, 2016). More importantly, deep dialogue seems to inspire (co)action.

Co-inquiry

For IDI, trustbuilding, active listening, re-storying and deep dialogue are practices that serve to strengthen a relational foundation for co-inquiry. Co-inquiry is not linear, however, but intertwined in all the steps of IDI. Co-inquiry takes place when the young and older participants, and other stakeholders of the community come together, through caring curiosity (rather than mere critique), pose questions and inquire into the community's past, present and future. Co-inquiry thereby gathers perspectives across differences – generations, backgrounds, identities and places of origins. Multiplicity of ideas emerge simultaneously, allowing IDI participants and stakeholders to become more consciously aware of the need for collective healing and systemic transformation. At such a communal level, co-inquiry helps direct collective energy away from waiting for individuals in power to act, towards imagining the architecture of a just society.

IDI thus builds on collective memory and promotes common action. For IDI participants, listening, storying, questioning, dialogue and co-inquiry are all, in part, community action. According to a young participant: '*Being part of an IDI circle is our action. The circle gives us hope.*'

Conclusion

The IDI processes and practices examined in this paper have much to contribute to a community's renewed sense of wholeness, resilience and well-being. The comments and experiences of participants in the IDI pilot suggest that collective healing is not as an end point, but as an ongoing process. Here, healing is linked to well-being and flourishing in a holistic sense. In this concluding section, this paper reflects on the IDI further in order to gain a better understanding of the different dimensions involved in collective healing, and the interconnection between healing, systemic transformation and positive peace.

IDI demonstrates that for healing to be in process, the historical wounding or the act of dehumanisation must be fully acknowledged and the damage recognised (see Gill & Thomson, 2021; Androff, 2022). This is followed by sharing cultural wisdom and communal resilience as 'antidotes' to dehumanisation, an awakening (Olcoń, Pulliam & Gilbert, 2022) and a form of resistance (Du Bois, 1903; Camp, 2004). Becoming aware of the communal 'treasures' and resources has been a central dimension in the collective healing process. It reinforces a sense of forbearance and continuity, emphasising a renewed sense of wholeness. Re-appreciating a

sense of wholeness is part of an ongoing healing journey. For the indigenous community, for instance, this renewed sense of wholeness applies to individuals as whole persons, humanity as a whole, which includes beings-other-than-human in nature, and the past–present–future as whole continuum. According to one elder, healing is making the past-present-future into an interconnected whole: '*healing the dead, our ancestors, healing the living, and healing those who are yet to come'*.

By re-affirming a sense dignity and reclaiming a sense of wholeness, healing proceeds to engage the third dimension – the relational. Being in a community, or *'in this circle',* or being embedded in the intergenerational spaces, family networks, and wider alliances and associations with others, is constituted in collective healing. Community is especially important for young adults because the communal or relational space can nurture their positive self-identity and intrinsic self-worth. Communing and healing are mutually constitutive – the more we experience interconnectedness, the more we experience healing, and vice versa. This is because unhealed trauma can separate a person from their innermost self, from others, and from the world (McClintock, 2019). Healing thus requires the relational process to reconnect with self, others and the world, and transcend the sense of isolation and victimhood (Duran, 2006). In addition, healing circles must be enlarged to include those from both sides of the wounding, including the actor(s) of dehumanisation and those complicit with and benefiting socio-economically and politically from dehumanisation, and the recipient(s) of dehumanising acts, in advocating and demanding for systemic transformation.

However, to truly transcend the pain, trauma and continued oppression, healing must involve a fourth dimension: transformation at a systemic level. Healing involves everyone's understanding more fully and more consciously the structural conditions and institutional practices that have perpetuated dehumanisation. With such an enhanced awareness, healing can engage all persons in challenging the unjust system.

Given the four dimensions of healing identified, the question remains: can healing take place while systemic injustice is prevalent? At first glance, the political possibilities regarding this question appear to be limited because only the relevant actors can stop dehumanisation by reconstructing a peaceful system that respects the equal intrinsic value of persons and cares for the well-being of all. Therefore, processes such as IDI, although potent and restorative, cannot alone shift structural injustice. Injustice must be prevented and resisted through political transformation. Communal healing cannot serve as a means to such political restructuring, partly because the illnesses of a society cannot be treated by healing those who suffer the harms of the social ills. However, through moral imagination and resilience of the community stakeholders, collective healing may inspire the co-creation of just society, first at a local level, thus emanating positive peace from ground up.

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