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This is the text of a talk I presented at HaMakom in Santa Fe on 16 February 2017.

America Needs Artists: Ten Reasons Why

In my book *The Culture of Possibility: Art, Artists & The Future*, I argue that here in the United States, we are suffering from a plague of greed and indifference, and that the antidote we need turns on art. To heal whatever is broken—our economy, climate crisis, racism and all types of fear and hatred of the other—we must heal our capacity for self-knowledge, empathy, imagination, and social creativity. We need to change the story to change the world. And to change the story, we need artists.

I'm not talking about any art experienced in any way. If that were true, just being an artist would provide inoculation against the distortions that have gripped our culture. There would be none of what the Buddhists call hungry ghosts, perpetually devouring in hopes of filling a bottomless void—there would no hungry ghosts among art stars and celebrities. I'm also not talking about art made for purely commercial purposes, with no larger intention. Through choice or necessity, many artists devote their gifts to creating advertising images or jingles, to CGI for video games, to writing or acting in the next episode of a forgettable TV series, to designing luxury goods for Ivanka Trump.

The antidote I am talking about is specific: deep engagement with art that awakens, connects, and sustains awareness and compassion. If we understand its true value, if we nourish its roots, the healing we need will be set in motion.

Are you skeptical?

Whenever I hear the voice that says, "Really?"—and I hear it just as often on the news or in some journal or on a website as in my own mind—I am reminded of the biblical story in Second Kings of Na'aman, a brave and victorious captain of the Aramean army who happened to be a leper. A young Israelite girl Na'aman had captured for a house-servant told Na'aman's wife that Elisha the prophet, living in Samaria, would heal her husband. Na'aman set out to ask Elisha for healing, trailing an entourage of horses and chariots loaded with gifts. Elisha refused to see him, instead sending a message: "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

Na'aman was offended. He expected a remedy commensurate with his own importance. "I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the afflicted place, and cure the leper." In contrast to this, bathing in the Jordan seems a little *declass *. "Are not Amana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean?" Na'aman stormed off, insulted and furious.

His servant, daring to follow, put a question: "Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more should you do it when he has only said to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'" Reluctantly, Na'aman dips himself seven times in the Jordan. The story tells us that "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

I love these ancient wisdom stories for what they reveal about modern humans. How often do we make the same mistake, rejecting the simple truth out of an inflated sense of our own importance?

Here are ten reasons why America needs artists, each grounded in a simple truth.

- 1. My first answer, and always my foremost, is *empathy*, the capacity to put ourselves in the place of the other, to feel something of the other's feelings, and to allow compassion to flow.**

The ability to feel empathy is encoded in our physical beings. Scientists have identified an "empathy gene," a receptor for the hormone oxytocin, which promotes social interaction and the ability to enter into bonds of friendship and love. They have also found "mirror neurons" in the human brain. When we observe someone else (or imagine ourselves) feeling or enacting something, nerve impulses fire very much as if we had performed the same actions with our own bodies. Athletes commonly train this way: when they cannot be on the field they watch videos of past performances.

But just because we have the *capacity* for empathy doesn't mean we'll use it. Most people's bodies come equipped with everything we need to dance or sing, but quite a few of us do neither. Moving from the latent capacity to the practice of compassion must be learned. When I sit in a darkened theater, opening my mind and heart to stories very different from my own, the tears, laughter, or perplexity I feel set that learning in motion. The more opportunity I have to feel empathy for characters different from myself, the more my potential understanding and compassion grow.

It isn't only theater, of course: our hearts can just as easily open to a photograph, a song, a piece of writing. The installation artist Antonio Daniele created a video project called

“This Is Not Private.” A viewer could stand before one of eight screens showing individuals speaking different languages. Facial recognition software slowly merged the viewer’s own face with the one onscreen. This work embodies a universal truth of empathy.

“Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of your wings,” reads Psalms 17:8. Literally, though, the Hebrew text reads “*bat ayin*,” “daughter of the eye,” greatly resembling the English word’s Latin original, *pupilla*, a diminutive for child. Why? When we gaze into another’s eyes, the etymologists say, we see our own image in miniature reflected there. The Golden Rule, the rootstock of empathy, is inscribed in the apple of each person’s eye.

Art, more than any other human enterprise, can actuate empathy. America needs artists to counteract the empathy deficit that is poisoning our common culture.

2. America also needs art to *open our minds to possibility*, seeing social arrangements as changeable through human intervention.

Every social order generates a steady stream of messages from the center to the margins, asserting its rightness and permanence. Some broadcast louder than others—the Roman Empire, the Thousand-Year Reich, the Soviet Union, the Present Occupant of the White House—but all do their best to convince most of those listening that resistance is futile, that those in charge know better, that we shouldn’t worry our pretty little heads about things we can’t change.

These self-reinforcing messages try to give the impression that social institutions and policies are givens, like rocks and trees. But in reality, they are human creations. Look at history. Even the most timeless-seeming empires have crumbled. Even the social arrangements we most take for granted can be changed by human intervention, just as humans created them in the first place.

One of the most powerful ways to convey this essential truth of participatory democracy is through art.

Remember the original “Star Trek?” As time goes by, the episodes that live at the forefront of my memory bank always involve a kind of cultural anthropology: Captain Kirk and his officers go through a time portal and find themselves tasked with enacting the customs of a very different culture, which teaches them something about their own. Cultural Relativism 101. Or two aliens are locked in struggle on account of some difference we TV viewers can’t even perceive. Do you remember the episode where two mortal enemies were colored like black-and-white cookies, divided straight down the

middle? It turned out that one was white on the left while the other one was white on the right, and neither of them could tolerate the difference. Racism 101. I learned a lot from “Star Trek.”

How many artists have taken us through the time portal to a past or future that casts our consensus reality in a new light? The Surrealist painters and poets, for instance. The photo montages of John Heartfield. The whole Steampunk phenomenon. The AfroFuturist movement that is generating so much notice now, riffing off the sci-fi novels of Octavia Butler.

America needs artists to show us possible realities, thus revealing our vast potential to catalyze change in institutions that no longer serve.

3. Opening our eyes to possibility invites us to take the next step and *cultivate social imagination*, the capacity to envision alternative futures and to see roles for ourselves in bringing them about.

Once we experience that flash of possibility, once we begin to see that things don't have to be as they are, we have a choice: will we try to change them? And how could we?

Commercial media is working overtime to stock our social imaginations with dystopian visions. This has long roots, to be sure. *Zombie Apocalypse* isn't so different from the cautionary prophesies of the prophet Jeremiah: the people's sins shrivel the skin on their bones, blood runs in the streets, and mothers devour their children. The prophet believed that the prospect of a hell on earth brought about by our own actions would inspire us to align ourselves with right. But with today's capacity for vivid, instantaneous, and repeated dissemination of horrific images, the effect is more often to make people feel it is futile to even imagine a future of healing and possibility. Why bother?

I have the pleasure of serving as Chief Policy Wonk in the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture—not a government agency but a people-powered department, a grassroots action network inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging. (Find out more at usdac.us.)

Most of our projects engage artists and other community members in dreaming out loud of a future we actually wish to inhabit. For example, our annual civic ritual, the People's State of the Union, is going on right now. People across the U.S. hosted Story Circles designed to assess the state of our union, then uploaded stories to a web portal. An amazing group of poets is coming together to write a collective *Poetic Address to the Nation* which is published, and on March 11th, performed, and live-streamed to inspire others.

Here are a few lines from poet Trapeta Mayson's contribution to last year's *Poetic Address*:

Oh give me shelter in this fractured Union
Give me shelter in this fractured Union
Stitch up these worn bones
Open my mouth
Rip this silence from my foreign tongue
Move this wedge of indifference
Show me a sign that I am home
Take away our boxing ring of conflict
where we bloody each other with pride and prejudice
Put out a welcome mat

Oh give me shelter in this fractured Union
For I too am a sister and a prodigal son
I've walked the earth and need to settle
Give me space to be
Let me be
let me be in this United Place of America.

Rick Lowe, the artist who founded Project Row Houses in Houston, has done a series of major projects in Texas and beyond that invite people to apply social imagination to their neighborhoods. For example, in Lowe's 2013 project, "Trans.lation, Vickery Meadow," the Nasher Sculpture Center supported Lowe and colleagues in working with a Dallas community of 30,000 residents, many from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. The goal was to craft a new collective vision of public space and interaction. It was unveiled in the culminating element, a series of Pop-up Markets in which neighbors were able to share their artistic talents and cultural traditions, get to know each other, and foreshadow a possible future in which they would rejoice in their differences and share their commonalities without barriers.

America needs artists who know how to stimulate, invite, and embody social imagination, nurturing a skill that is essential to a livable future.

4. America needs artists to *bring the power of beauty* into our world.

In *Parshat Vayakhel* the Israelites are commanded to make the portable sanctuary, the *Mishkan*, they will carry through the wilderness for decades. The instructions Moses

imparts are visually evocative: “blue, purple, and crimson yarns”; “gold, silver, and copper”; “lapis and other stones,” “acacia wood” and “dolphin skins.” Elsewhere in Exodus, very precise instructions are given for patterns and dimensions: a priestly robe is to be made with decorations of “a bell and a pomegranate” repeating all around the hem. Bezalel is singled out to supervise, having been “endowed...with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft and...inspired...to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of designer’s craft—and to give directions.”

I have sat in Torah study groups where people complain of the boredom of this *parsha*, as if it were merely a detailed work-order for interior design. But it always blows me away. I find myself thinking, *In this vast story, from creation to the the promised land, why is so much space given to these minute descriptions of beautiful objects?* The meta-message, it seems to me, is the power of beauty to embody the sacred. There are heaps of postmodern art criticism denigrating beauty, and that *chutzpadikh* idea pervades academia. I have in my head the experience of a graduate sculpture student I once met who was criticized by her professor for being interested in “mere beauty.” But the truth is that human history makes an irrefutable argument for the collective necessity of beauty.

Making art is the essence of being human. We do it in marble palaces and grass huts, at every moment of history, every time we mark the unfolding of our lives, and even under the worst possible conditions. I am awed when I recall that Herbert Zipper, the founding director of the National Guild of Community Arts Education, led a clandestine orchestra in Dachau.

Beauty is also necessary for individual survival. Consider how people nourish themselves with favorite music or poetry, gaze for hours at a drawing or painting they love, watch a beloved film over and over again. Five or so years ago, after an encounter with the critical voice that denigrated “mere beauty,” I was inspired on a plane ride to write an essay entitled “The Question of Beauty.” Here are a few lines:

My heartbeat is loud right now, remembering this airplane ride. I would like to be able to make you feel it, the way the blood in my veins began to jump and sparkle, how my brain felt like a handful of moonlight, carelessly tossed on the tide. How beyond all else of which we are capable, our potential for kindness and generosity, for moral grandeur, for ingenuity and resourcefulness and so much else—our aptitude for beauty is what ties me to life, what makes me want it to go on and on.

America needs artists to nourish the body politic with beauty.

5. America needs artists to *stimulate the perpetual flow of creativity, the state in which we are most ourselves and most godlike.*

Many years ago, I wrote a drash on my birth parsha, *Va-era*, in which Moses tries to get out of the assignment to intercede with Pharaoh on his people's behalf. HaShem tells Moses not to worry, everything will be alright, because the whole encounter will be choreographed and stage-managed for him, right down to the trick of a wooden staff that becomes a serpent, the waters of the Nile that turn into blood, and more.

In my drash, HaShem speaks to all of us (using a voice that sounds a bit like a movie director). These are a few excerpts from the final section:

“You were created in My image, so I made you artists. The impulse to dance when you might have shuffled or trudged—this is merely part of the deal. When you're babies, you smear food of all colors on any surface you can reach. Children, you sing to yourself as you play; you hear music and begin to dance. In the most extreme situations, you create—in war, you write poems, in prison, you scratch pictures on the wall or make figures out of hoarded bread....”

“You were created in My image, so you love music: ‘It has pleased the Lord to deliver us, That is why we offer up music all the days of our lives at the House of the Lord.’” (*Isaiah 38:20*)

“I want you to comprehend that the world is My work of art, and to make yourselves in My image. I want what every artist wants: to be understood, to be met. ‘O you who linger in the garden, a lover is listening; Let me hear your voice.’” (*Song of Songs 8:13*)

America needs artists because we require every iota of the creativity—of the innovation, generativity, overflowing *chesed*, loving-kindness—we can muster to emerge from the wilderness of destruction our misdirected energy has wrought.

6. America needs artists to *teach us all the resourcefulness and nimbleness required to thrive in a world of limited resources.*

It may be a cliché to say the world is changing so fast that it's hard to keep up, but some clichés are true.

From time to time, I like to check out what's hot in how-to books dealing with business—marketing, entrepreneurship, business publishing is an industry all by itself. For the last few years, a huge amount of this advice and analysis has been about the futility of old-

style planning. Why invest a ton of time and money in creating a five-year plan if the technology you're using now will be obsolete, or if world conditions will have necessitated a relocation? The smart advice now is to get good at improvisation, cultivating the ability to face a situation that has no precedent, no blueprint or master-plan, to retain a sense of perspective and a connection to a central core of values, and to dance your way through whatever challenges may arise.

Which is exactly what every artist knows. Our general comfort with accidents, our embrace of fruitful mistakes—all of that may have its roots in a social truth. Many artists grew up as oddballs, feeling misunderstood, outside, possessing that double vision that may be alienating in childhood: the inability to enter wholeheartedly into ordinary reality because we were always both doing and observing, in it but not of it. That doubleness becomes a powerful skill for the practicing artist. I like to say that artists are people who have learned to make something beautiful of our alienation.

America needs artists to teach everyone the nimbleness and willingness to learn from experience needed to navigate a world in which the ground we are standing on is moving.

7. American needs artists to *console our spirits*.

The great 18th century teacher Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov said, “The antidote to despair is to remember the world to come.” This is a paradox in that we can't remember what has not yet occurred. I think he meant that the antidote to despair is a glimpse of a perfected world, available only in imagination, in the realm of sacred play.

What are the consolations of art? Last year I interviewed Carol Bebel, head of Ashé Cultural Center in New Orleans. This was part of my research for a toolkit the USDAC is creating to help artists respond to natural and civil disasters. Here's a snippet about her experience after Hurricane Katrina, getting back into the city seven or eight weeks after the storm:

People needed something magical to help them feel better enough to face the next day. Every day was a reminder of irreversible loss. Probably most of us never had imagined what happened. People always talk about the perfect storm. There was a way in which—like death, you leave that out there as something that could happen, might happen. But when it happens to you it kind of strips you of your security blanket because you know that it's real. So we had art as a healing force: music, the opportunity for people to be together and to find creative ways in which to interact. This became the work that we did.

There are so many things that anchor our existence. To lose them all leaves us on a sea without an anchor. So people were dealing with identity issues. They were dealing with disenfranchisement issues, they were dealing with homesickness. They were dealing with loss in a huge fashion. What we really came to appreciate was the necessity to get some air in the room first before you try and do something else, to get them some oxygen so that they can start breathing. So art became the oxygen.

And not only in New Orleans. I love the way people use music nowadays to console themselves. It is commonplace to prescribe music almost as an apothecary compounds an elixir for a specific ailment. *I've got a playlist for that.*

Commentators bemoan the perpetual presence of earphones on the street—they see it as a sign of isolation. But to me, it means exactly the opposite. We are self-medicating, prescribing music that attunes us to precisely the support, inspiration, beauty, and meaning that will sustain us through life's challenges. This is so deeply true and so often overlooked that I made it a centerpiece of my novel, *The Wave*, in which one character opens a chain of shops that look like Apple stores. But instead of Geniuses selling computers, Virtuosos consult with customers to prescribe images, music, films, readings, movements, tastes, and scents that speak to their needs.

America needs artists to provide the consolation that can sustain a vision of the world to come despite the losses we have experienced and afflicted, the losses we've survived and those we cannot anticipate.

8. America needs artists to *embody the freedom of an integral personality.*

We artists are as easily prey as anyone to the distortions of ego, just as likely as anyone to fall into the idolatry of worshipping our own creations. But those who recognize the temptation to idolatry our ancestors cautioned against so strongly are more able to avoid it. They have more potential to show up in their fullness, as integral personalities present in body, emotions, intellect, and spirit, because they have practice: bringing all these dimensions into focus at once is the essence of art.

The artist is an ambivalent figure for our society. A small class of artists is worshipped as gods. Paparazzi stalk them, hoping to glimpse glamor or clay feet, anything to feed the gaping maw of the gossip industry. Celebrities are paid fabulous sums, and purveyors to the rich and famous vie to reward them with perks in hope of a few frames of free publicity. The work of big-name visual artists is traded for millions, and the writers and directors attached to box-office success and best-seller lists are fawned over by talk-show hosts.

Virtually every other artist is commonly regarded as a member of a highly dispensable group: people who expect the world to reward them for playing, those who are understood to contribute nothing to what is seen as the serious work of society.

There is censure in this, to be sure, and also envy and resentment. The people who hold these notions have been trained to accept suffering—boredom, constant self-censorship, duty that forecloses choice—as an inevitable consequence of work. Those who enjoy their work, especially those whose passionate enjoyment is evident in their demeanor, cannot be allowed get off scot-free.

I meet so many people who are afraid to live. They don't want to be hurt, and that makes them fearful of risking vulnerability—and without an open heart, we are merely surviving. The suffering this entails is ironic. People fear getting their hopes up because they don't want to be disappointed again. So they avoid risking hope. They pre-disappoint themselves, like one who complains of never winning the lottery without actually buying a ticket. "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart," said Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. To get a whole heart, we have to choose the risk of heartbreak. It's a gamble, yes, but only if you buy a ticket. The one certainty is that people who don't get their hopes up will never see their hopes realized.

So when an artist who has done the hard work of acquiring self-knowledge and resisting the seduction of ego-worship shows up fully in a classroom, leading students on a playful journey of discovery and mastery, it is very likely that artist is the only integral personality the students will have met that week. It is very likely that students will find the encounter enlarging, and that as a result, they will begin to perceive choice where many adults in their lives had seemed to be acting without it.

America needs artists to live fully into the birthright that is every human's, but so often denied.

9. America needs artists to *inhabit radical amazement*, questioning assumptions everywhere.

"The greatest hindrance to knowledge is our adjustment to conventional notions," Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is, therefore, a prerequisite for authentic awareness...."

A few years ago, I wrote an essay about a remark that Van Jones made in the midst of protests against the union-busting of Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin. "Don't adapt

to absurdity,” said Jones. He was making the point that over time, if we let it, even what seems preposterous becomes normalized. We adjust to the new normal simply because we can. Flexibility is one of humanity’s best qualities, allowing us to adapt and advance. But it also works against us, because we often find it just as easy to adapt to what harms us, going along to get along until what has been imposed feels “natural.”

In a state of radical amazement, we remain aware of this pitfall of human consciousness and vigilant against its temptations. We keep asking questions. In fact, in our tradition, questions are far thicker on the ground than answers. Consider the famous trio of questions Hillel the Elder posed two millennia ago as a guide to life:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, who am I?
If not now, when?

Artists ask as many questions as four year-olds wondering why the sky is blue and what makes rainbows. *What is happening? How did it get this way? What would happen if I tried this? What will this word sound like next to that word? What will I get if I mix this color with that one? How close can I make this character to the Present Occupant of the White House and get away it?*

The public artist Candy Chang, dealing with the impact of a loss in her own life, created an interactive, participatory project in New Orleans called “Before I die.” It’s a question without a question mark. The sentence “Before I die, I want to _____” was stenciled on the black-painted wall of an abandoned house in New Orleans. Anyone was invited to take chalk in hand and complete the sentence. It attracted so much interest that Chang created a how-to website, catalyzing more than 1,000 walls in many countries. It’s what they call a *memento mori*, reminding participants of the inevitability of death; but also a *memento vivere*, “remember to live.”

Some friends and I used to have a game of checking in every new year by sharing with each other three questions which, like Rabbi Hillel’s, seem to sum up one’s approach to life. Back in the day, my old friend Tom’s questions were “Am I having fun?” “How long will this last?” And “when can I do it again?”

The questions most important to me change over time, but not all that much. I admit to a certain serious and messianic through-line. “What is really going on here?” “Who benefits and who pays?” “How can I be a more powerful instrument of light in this world?”

America needs artists to propagate questioning, exposing the assumptions that uphold all that is damaging in our society.

10. America needs artists to *find what's beautiful and rich in our differences without sacrificing the commonality that makes empathy and cooperation possible.*

Here I am at the tenth reason and you are again hearing that word, *empathy*. When it comes to empathy, conscious artists who wish their work to matter have a leg up, because it is part of our work to seek beauty and meaning in places others avoid, to move toward contrast and intensity rather than sidestepping it.

Every faith tradition has a version of the Golden Rule: “Do not unto others that which is hateful to yourself.” In 2010, I wrote a catalog essay for an exhibit by artist Beth Grossman called “All The Rest is Commentary.” It was subsequently published in *Zeek*, which is now part of *The Forward*. Here are a few lines:

“The Golden Rule governs the creation of community, and also the creation of art. Its realization requires the two skills that make both possible: imagination and empathy,” I wrote.

“To apply the Golden Rule, we must be able to put ourselves in the other’s place and to imagine how a sensibility very different from our own might perceive the actions we are about to take. Its precondition is awareness of our own feelings: how else are we to know what may be pleasing or hateful to ourselves? And that awareness must be matched with the ability to imagine the other’s feelings as if they were our own, as described in the Shinto text Beth Grossman has chosen: ‘The heart of the person before you is a mirror; see there your own form.’

It should be easy for Jewish artists to practice this engagement with otherness, as it is one of our tradition’s primary exhortations. In Leviticus (19:33-34), we are commanded not to taunt the stranger in our midst. “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you,” we are told, “and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

America needs artists to learn how to embrace and welcome the stranger.

Years ago, at a challenging, confusing time in my life, a wise friend asked me this: *How seriously can you take yourself? What would it look like to take yourself one hundred percent seriously?*

My first response was defensive. “What do you mean,” I asked, “how seriously can I take myself? You want me to take myself more seriously than *this*?”

My friend explained that he was asking me to reject the powerful and pervasive invitation to identify with the world as it is. We are expected to take into ourselves the tacit assumptions and agreements that sustain an order which is in many ways absurd. We are expected to treat that order as normal, even natural, and in some sense right and proper. We are expected to learn our place and to follow the path that has been laid before us. If there is conflict between our own perspective and this received version of reality, we are expected to adapt to absurdity (to borrow Van Jones' formulation) rather than ignore or demolish it.

How seriously can you take yourself? Taking yourself one hundred percent seriously means investing in a process of self-interrogation that reveals your deepest truths, what matters most, your heart's desires. Taking yourself one hundred percent seriously means releasing your identification with the absurd world because it is blocking your view of possibility, of how things could be. It means freeing your mind to see much more of what is really present, rather than whatever others say you should see. For artists, it means embracing and inhabiting one hundred percent of our potential as artists and the value that holds for the world. Here's how James Baldwin put it:

Millions of people whom you will never see, who don't know you, never will know you, people who may try to kill you in the morning, live in a darkness which — if you have that funny terrible thing which every artist can recognize and no artist can define — you are responsible to those people to lighten, and it does not matter what happens to you. You are being used in the way a crab is useful, the way sand certainly has some function. It is impersonal. This force which you didn't ask for, and this destiny which you must accept, is also your responsibility. And if you survive it, if you don't cheat, if you don't lie, it is not only, you know, your glory, your achievement, it is almost our only hope — because only an artist can tell, and only artists have told since we have heard of man, what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it. What it is like to die, or to have somebody die; what it is like to be glad.

Why does America needs artists? Take that question seriously and it answers itself.

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