

Steiner Waldorf European Masters Programme

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Striking the Veins of Interest: A Review of a Body of Knowledge exploring the role and the function of *imagination* in education, with specific reference to Steiner's pedagogical ideas.

A consideration of the role and function of imagination in education poses more questions than can be answered. It is a wide-ranging theme that is complex and open to varied interpretations. This essay reviews a small selection of material from a large body of knowledge. The review will explore the conceptual basis of imagination and probe the complexity of the concept and its importance in the process of teaching and learning, with specific reference to the story-form as a pedagogical tool.

I have opted to review the work of a small number of authors from the Waldorf educational community, on the one hand, and from the wider academic community in the north-western hemisphere, on the other. I have made this selection for four reasons. Firstly, I wish to explore similarities among writers on the theme and to make critical comparisons. Secondly, as a Waldorf educator, I am interested in reflecting on the thinking that is done in the Waldorf educational community and the resulting educational practice, in the light of some of the research and ideas that are articulated in the broader academic community. Thirdly, I consider the topic - imagination in education and learning – to be a fascinating, complex and fundamental question of principle and method, which, due to its nature, is able to extend an arm into other disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, ethics and anthropology. Fourthly, it seems to me that this theme offers writers of different philosophical and methodological backgrounds and persuasions, opportunities to take part in a vibrant discourse of learning – through questioning, exchange and research.

There are situations in life where a person might be encouraged to 'use imagination'. It might be to solve a problem, to create a new idea, or simply to think beyond the literal and the obvious.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1964) defines imagination as a 'creative faculty of the mind'. Abstract nouns generally, and imagination specifically, are concepts that are open to wide-ranging descriptions and explanations. This makes imagination a potent word, with different levels of meaning. By dint of the close connections between perception, cognition and imagination, it is also a fundamental concern of education and learning.

Betti (1994) takes the Latin word *Imago* – meaning picture or likeness – as his starting point and provides a general definition of imagination as “*the ability to picture things.*” (p. 5) Imagination seems to include a capacity for making mental pictures of the world as it is perceived through the senses and mind of the human being. As such, it can be seen as an innate, universal human capacity and an aspect and indicator of human thinking. Further, imagination would appear to be integrated to another fundamental human trait: the urge to seek, create and establish meanings of the world and oneself.

A link between imagination – in the form of an individual's life-story – and a sense of meaning was a primary focus of Frankl's therapeutic work (1985). In a *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl makes the point that

“striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man.” (p. 121)

From this principle, Frankl developed a psychological therapy called *logotherapy*. The name derives from the Greek word 'logos', which means 'meaning'. Frankl's therapeutic approach concerns itself with the meaning of human existence and, in addition, a human being's individual search for such meaning.

Postman (1996) describes how imagination and meaning are linked by human genius:

“Our genius lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labors, exalt our history, elucidate the present and give direction to our future.”

(p. 7)

By ‘genius’, I understand Postman to mean a nexus of unique and defining qualities which, together, represent the ‘highest’ and the best of human nature and human potential.

Postman acknowledges that narratives are formed by picturing, or imagining human experience in the world and he maintains that:

“The measure of a narrative’s ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ is in its consequences: Does it provide people with a sense of personal identity, a sense of community life, a basis for moral conduct, explanations of that which cannot be known?” (p. 7)

Concerning the form and nature of a narrative, I draw on Bruner’s research (1994) into the process of the making of meaning. Bruner refers to the narrative as a form of discourse and a mode of organizing experience, which contains *“inherent sequentiality”*.

“a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors.” (p. 43)

In his description of the narrative, Bruner appears to rule out stories that do not have a human content or aspect. I would argue that a narrative does not have to

involve human beings directly in order to fulfil the purpose of conveying human experiences and meanings. The fables of *Aesop* would be a case in point. Bruner identifies the *plot* as a key constituent of the narrative. It is the plot that serves to harness the events, characters and happenings into a meaningful configuration. A second feature of the narrative is that it does not have to be literally true and does not have to adhere to facts; a narrative can be ‘*real*’, or ‘*imaginary*’ (p. 44), without losing its power or validity. Postman (1996) concurs with this view, but adopts a more positive perspective when he says,

“The purpose of a narrative is to give meaning to the world, not describe it scientifically.” (p. 7)

Another characteristic, according to Bruner, is the role a narrative plays in creating links between the ordinary and the extraordinary:

“Stories achieve their meanings by explicating deviations from the ordinary in a comprehensible form” (p. 47)

Bruner cites a dramatic quality as a fourth constituent of the narrative form, and locates this tension, or “*dramatism*” in the moral sphere.

“Stories . . . relate to what is morally valued, morally appropriate or morally uncertain. . . . To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances.” (pp. 50 & 51)

Regarding the term ‘story’, I refer to the work done by Wells (1987), in his study of children’s learning of language and literacy. Wells highlights the fact that telling and listening to stories is a universal, timeless and enduring feature of human society. He describes the story as an attempt to grasp and communicate, in a coherent and comprehensible form, what could not otherwise be explained or understood. According to Wells, the same underlying purpose applies to oral and written stories, namely,

“to provide a cultural interpretation of those aspects of human experience that are of fundamental and abiding concern.” (p. 195)

On the basis of these comments, it is unsurprising that Wells argues that stories have an educational role which is more extensive than the acquisition of literacy skills.

“Constructing stories in the mind – or storying, as it has been called – is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning; as such it is an activity that pervades all aspects of meaning.” (p. 194)

If these broad suppositions are valid – that imagination is closely related to the human capacity to think and the human urge to find meaning – then it follows that the fostering of the imagination in education is of primary importance, for the teacher and the learner.

The idea that imagination, or the picturing of the world, is a powerful and potent force in human experience and cognition is widely held. Fisher (1993) quotes Einstein’s view that,

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world.” (p. 31)

Warnock (1976) identifies *“the cultivation of imagination”* as *“the chief aim of education”* (p. 9) and argues that we “have a duty to educate the imagination, above all else” (p.10). Egan (1990) stresses that,

“children’s imaginations are the most powerful and energetic learning tools.” (p. 2)

He derides the *“inappropriately mechanistic way of thinking about planning*

teaching." (p. 1) and argues in favour of a less formulaic approach to teaching and for a proper recognition and respect for "*the power and educational uses of children's imagination*" (p. 1). Egan suggests that imagination is difficult to grasp as a concept and asserts that in the fields of education, psychology, philosophy and sociology, there is very little research on imagination. Notwithstanding this assertion, Egan argues that,

"Everyone acknowledges the importance of imagination in education." (p. 5)

While this claim may be true in a general sense, it does sit uneasily alongside another of Egan's claims that,

"Imagination is a powerful and neglected tool of learning." (p. 18)

From another perspective, Zipes (1995) expresses concern that there is a trend towards,

"rigid standardization of curricula in the name of cultural literacy, and towards increased national and state testing". (p. 2)

As a result of such tendencies, Zipes warns that there is a threat of the "*instrumentalization*" of children's imaginations (pp.2 - 3). Here, I draw on Kelly's (1994) description of the 'instrumental view' of education, whereby pupils are directed towards acquiring specific abilities and values, in order to fulfil pre-determined economic, social and political roles and functions in society.

Steiner (1995) pinpoints the value of imagination, or '*fantasy*' as a pedagogical approach as opposed to an intellectual emphasis:

"The intellect never penetrates as deeply into reality as fantasy does. Fantasy can go astray, it is true, but it is rooted in reality, whereas the intellect remains always on the surface." (p. 118)

Steiner (1988) encourages the teacher to develop pictorial, imaginative thinking.

He stresses that this kind of pedagogical approach meets the children in a way that chimes with their authentic, or innate quality and style of thinking and does not assume that children think in a primarily intellectual mode, as adults do.

“What we must bear in mind is that with the very little child the intellect, that in the adult has its own independent life, must not yet really be cultivated, but all thinking should be developed in a pictorial and imaginative way.” (p. 83)

Elkind (1999) argues that Steiner anticipated a fundamental tenet of postmodernism by emphasising the role of the narrative in human affairs and the power of imagination in education:

“We learn best when material is presented in narrative form. Even scientific theories are now described as narratives.” (p. 9)

In addition to story-telling, there are multiple forms of imaginative expression – drama, visual art, sound, movement, to name some. The use of the narrative form, through telling or reading, enables the teacher to assist the child in gaining what Sacks (1986) describes as a ‘*sense of the world*’ and to develop a footing of ‘*concrete reality*’ in the world:

“It is this narrative or symbolic power which gives a sense of the world – a concrete reality in the imaginative form of symbol and story – when abstract thought can provide nothing at all..” (pp. 174/5)

Apart from providing a sense of ‘concrete reality’, the story-form provides opportunities for emotional cognition and reflection. Whereas a fixed concept, a law or a definition is, by definition, finished, completed and ready for comprehension and assimilation, an image, picture, or metaphor is never the finished article. Likewise, the most important feature of a story or image is the

space that is left – a space in which the learner can be inwardly mobile and active in order to find meaning and create understanding, rather than swallowing knowledge in order simply to regurgitate it later on.

Bock (1997) supports the view of Sacks, that children can gain “*a sense of the world*” through stories, and extends the importance of the story-form to a person’s psychological, moral and emotional development:

“True learning never consists in simply absorbing communications and knowledge from outside; rather it acquires its fruitfulness and vitality only when any incentive from outside awakens and lifts the spell of something that slumbers within the soul. In the process of learning, the part answering from within is much more important than the one that penetrates the human being from outside.” (p. 113)

Schwartz (1997) maintains that stories and images are the most potent and effective way of expressing ideas and moral precepts. This is an interesting point, which deserves careful treatment. Images do play an important role in providing people with a means to make meaning of the world and their lives. This is not to promote the image as a good thing in itself, since images and narratives can also be ideological, rhetorical, immoral and untruthful. Metaphorically-speaking, it is possible to argue that the image is the bread and butter of poetry, product-advertising, political rhetoric and many other forms of human discourse. The concept of nihilism, or meaningless being, is an expression of the imagination, providing a life- and world-narrative, just as much as the utopian optimism advocated by Leibniz, as depicted in the character of Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1975).

Two key points arise from these considerations on the nature of the image.

Firstly, it seems reasonable to propose that all concepts are derived from the activity of mental picturing. Mental picturing activity is a complex process of cognition and thinking which begins with perception and proceeds through stages of observation, recognition, association, knowledge and understanding (Steiner, 1981). The image and the imagination, stand between the observed, experienced, perceptible world and the inner world of cognition and thought activity. Herder (Egan, 1992) encapsulated this process and activity when he said that imagination is,

“in truth the knot that ties body and mind together.” (p. 166)

Egan (1992) distinguishes between image and concept and rejects the idea that imagination is integral to perception of the world. According to Egan, imagination

“is not implicated in all perception and in the construction of all meaning;” (p. 43)

My position here is at odds with that of Egan. A concept is an image, in that a concept is filtered reality. This filtration of reality takes place via the senses, words, symbols and mental associations. The distinction between image and concept is one of degree, not type. The continuum of mental picturing includes the fantastic image, the concrete picture and the abstract concept. The most abstract concept has been imagined. Imagination is integral to the thinking activity. It is the capacity which enables perception, thought and conceptualization. Imagination is present in the process and activity of formulating concepts. It seems to me that concepts – especially those concerned with knowledge – are often regarded as fixed features in the landscape of thinking. However, when images are employed, the concepts are mobile and unfinished and therefore have a tendency to change and evolve.

The second point concerns a distinction between the expression of moral *judgements* and the articulation of moral *concepts* or moral *pictures*. This is not a fine distinction. It is arguably the difference between the answer and the question; between ideology and human freedom, between liberty and mere compliance, or coercion. As such, it is a vital question for education.

Steiner (1979) argues that moral life cannot be understood in the same way as the life of the physical organism. Whereas physical, natural laws are given and require no conscious action on the part of human beings, moral laws are not given, but are inherited, or created. The educational significance of this assertion is far-reaching, since it implies that an individual human being cannot be said to have moral autonomy, or own values, unless he or she is capable of exercising freedom and independence in fashioning conscious moral imagination and developing moral technique. Fisher (1993) is in a measure of agreement with Steiner on this point. After reflecting on how Piaget and Kohlberg connect the development of morality and moral judgement with the development of reasoning, Fisher writes:

“Becoming a moral agent is a process of developing for oneself criteria for distinguishing the better from the worse, and expressing that judgement in action.” (p. 175)

In an important sense I would argue that values that are ‘taught’, or transmitted, are worth nothing, whereas values that are learnt are priceless and immeasurable. Rather than imbibing, or borrowing, a set of values which are espoused by the teacher or society, Steiner indicates that an authentic route to the acquisition and ownership, of values, is the spirit of enquiry which the teacher can endeavour to model and the enthusiasm to question and learn which the teacher can inspire in the pupils.

Smit (1992) focuses on the inner attitude and activity of the teacher in the preparation of a story or presentation and emphasizes the difference between relating a story and reading it from the text.

“he must work beforehand with every subject of the lesson in such a way that he carries in himself an inner picture of it. Then he will be able to speak in a different way to the children and a clear sense of life arises in the classroom, so that one can observe how the children listen in a different way. But if the teacher has merely read something in a book and has perhaps learnt it by heart without having an inner picture of it, then however much he may tell the children he will be at cross purposes with them.” (p. 15)

When a story is individualised by the teacher’s learning and voice and gesture, the teacher becomes a mediator for the child. The values, the feelings, the events on the page are vivified by the teacher’s artistic endeavour. In such a setting the narrator and the listener have the capacity to understand and anticipate integrated pictures of wholeness. The pupils can share the teacher’s outer and inner journey - the journey for meaning which the teacher has made and the meaning of the world which the teacher encounters. Such a task offers the teacher an enormous amount of freedom and responsibility and demands great integrity. A teacher may read a story for quite legitimate reasons - for the quality and varying styles of language and literature. In reading, however, the teacher becomes a second hand reporter, not a partner. The teacher is preoccupied, and less able to embrace the listeners. The ‘book’ is a barrier between the narrator and the listener and the messenger loses immediacy of contact with the listeners. The pictures are related, not created. The direct speech of a story-teller literally injects life into the telling. The story-teller is present; there is no distancing, no abstraction.

Regarding the question of age, or 'readiness to learn', Zipes (1995) stresses that the key phase in a child's learning and the age at which the role of the imagination is at its most potent is the primary school stage:

"the crucial age for children is between six and ten, the period during which they are learning how to read, write, draw, sing and calculate" (p. 4)

Leach (1994) supports the view that this time – from the age of seven onwards – marks a period in which new horizons and potentials – in terms of knowledge and learning – become accessible for the child.

"Whether the focus is on children's feelings, understandings or thoughts, their judgments, beliefs or reasoning, the beginning of middle childhood promises a new maturity and a new desire to learn that is recognised in every culture. All over the world, it is at about seven years of age that children become increasingly aware of a wider society surrounding the family. They want to acquire its knowledge and skills; they need to learn its history; they strive to understand its concerns and aspirations." (p. 146)

Piaget (1969) and Steiner (1988) emphasise that the seventh year in the life of a child signals a major shift in the child's thinking capacity. Piaget describes the movement into concrete, operational thinking, while Steiner talks about the child's readiness for formal instruction and the life of school, as opposed to nursery or kindergarten. Steiner and Piaget point to the period around the seventh year as being a period in which the child is susceptible to, and ready for new forms and modes of learning. Smit (1992) reinforces the point that the

seventh year of life marks a learning threshold:

“if the teacher forms his lessons in such a way that they are superficial or merely convey information, this offers scanty nourishment for the children. When the child is seven years of age, a tender potential for an inner imaginative faculty awakens in the soul, both in the form of memories and of imaginations; and this faculty is different from before the seventh year.” (p. 15)

Steiner (1981) goes further in stressing the particular importance of the *“power of imagination”* (p. 186) in the period of early adolescence. Steiner stresses that between the ages of twelve and fifteen, it is crucial that the teacher works to cultivate *“an intercourse alive with imagination”* with the pupils, to counteract the tendency for the adolescent’s thinking to become *“intellectually frozen”* (p. 188).

In my experience it is true that stories and images are not just for small children. An image that is appropriate for the age and ‘true to life’ speaks from heart to heart, whatever the age. To take an example, at the age of 13, pupils in Waldorf education generally undertake a study of organic chemistry, including the nature and properties of salts. A picture of the primary importance and abundance of salt as a dietary need, the simplicity of salt as basic commodity and the complexities of human affairs is powerfully portrayed in an episode known as the ‘Salt March’ which Gandhi undertook in 1930, from Sabarmati to Dandi on the west coast of India, as a protest against the taxes on salt levied by the British colonial authorities (Fischer, 1982).

In the selection of ‘anthroposophical – Waldorf’ material surveyed, there are certain themes and aspects identified as being of central importance in the

teaching and learning process; in particular, those which concern the development of a child's mental picturing, or imagination.

The question of language and language acquisition is integral to a consideration of mental picturing, imagination and understanding. This question has been a source of intensive research and discussion in the last 50 years, since Skinner and Chomsky debated the environmental and genetic influences bearing on a child's ability to acquire language. Lutzker (2002) reflects on the fact that language acquisition remains a complex mystery, while pointing out that some eighty years ago, Steiner developed the idea that human beings have a "*specific sense for language*" (p. 19) Steiner identified a group of four senses that are integral to all forms of social interaction and communication. The four senses identified by Steiner are the senses of hearing, language, thought and the 'ego' or 'self' of another. Steiner termed this group of senses the '*senses of imagination*', or '*vorstellungsverwandten Sinne*', and he understood these senses as specific human capacities. Steiner's assertion does not exclude the importance of either environmental or genetic influences on the human capacity for speech and language. However, Steiner's identification of the presence of a latent sense for language in the new-born human being provides a radical perspective to understanding language and language acquisition, while prompting a series of research questions regarding the mystery of how we communicate and understand the world and each other.

Questions concerning the role of sleep and breathing in learning, the experience of the human soul during sleep and the significance of rhythm and reflection and recall in the learning process are discussed in some detail in the work of Steiner (1976, 1981, 1995), Betti (1994), Smit (1992), and Schwartz (1997), among others.

Steiner (1981) makes direct reference to the fundamental tasks involved in helping the child to “*breathe rightly*” (p. 21) and teaching “*the right rhythm in the alternation of sleeping and waking.*” (p. 22). These tasks are not concerned with breathing ‘training’, or sleeping ‘techniques’. Rather, the tasks consist of educating with imagination and through imagination. Steiner (1968) stressed that when the teaching of children has a pictorial character, the stories and images foster capacities in the children to think and act in versatile, imaginative and artistic ways. Towards puberty and beyond, these capacities are transformed into independent intellectual activity. This has important consequences for the realization of individual freedom.

“We must strive to educate in such a way that the intellect, which awakens at puberty, can then find its nourishment in the child’s own nature . . . For a human being can only come to an experience of freedom if his intellectuality awakens within him of itself, not if it has been poured into him by his teachers. But it must not awaken in poverty of soul.” (pp. 84-85)

Smit (1992) dwells in detail on the experiences of the human soul in sleep. He stresses the view that sleep is not a void, or a period of low-level, or no activity in the human soul and organism. He points to the fact that the experiences of the day – at school, in the playground; running, drawing, laughing and listening – continue to resonate in the child’s soul during sleep. There is a continuation and a yearning to complete activities and experiences encountered during the day. As such, learning is perceived as a continual process in the human organism; it is not only ‘good’, but ‘natural’ to sleep on a question or an experience and the Russian proverb that ‘morning is wiser than evening’ is not simply an old folk aphorism. According to this line of thought, the content and methods of learning

are internalized in the children and are carried with them when they leave the classroom and the school at the end of the day. One of the implications of this perspective is that when children and teacher are working together, they are not only learning for life, but they are also preparing for sleep.

“The creative properties of the day-night cycle should form the background for all thinking activity throughout the whole of life.”

(Smit, 1992, p. 72)

In activating the child’s imaginative powers with accurate and concrete pictures, and guiding the children through a range of artistic, practical and cognitive tasks, Smit describes how the teacher’s activity seeks to cultivate the child’s embryonic thinking, which, though embryonic, has plenty of room for depth, breadth and originality.

In the ‘non-Waldorf’ material studied – Egan (1990, 1992), Fisher (1993), Wells (1985, 1987), Grudgeon (2002), and Zipes (1995), Egan (1992) talks of the *“logic of the heart”*, while Meek (Wells & Nicholls, 1985) refers to the *“inner world of imagination”* (p. 56) and mentions the *“intuitive belief”*, or sense, that poets and children share, that words have an innate power (p. 44). It is interesting and noticeable that there is no consideration of the aspects of sleep, breathing, rhythm and recall in the ‘mainstream’ material reviewed. One might therefore deduce that these aspects are either unknown, or considered unimportant or invalid in understanding the learning activity and the role and function of imagination in the process of learning.

Perhaps part of the reason for this absence is attributable to the notion that the aspects themselves are what might be described as ‘esoteric’ and therefore, do not appear to lend themselves directly to verification by scientific means, or

challenge by arguments based solely on the criteria of intellectual coherence and academic integrity.

Steiner (1981) acknowledged the radical nature of his research and thinking, while insisting that his claims were derived from *“the objectivity of real insight,”* (p. 179), while the knowledge was *“as true as any other scientific knowledge”* (p. 179).

In *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1979), Steiner addresses fundamental questions of perception, knowledge and thinking. Reason, empiricism and scientific method have been mainstays in the development of human thought and consciousness since the Enlightenment. An educational philosophy and method which embraces the notion that breathing and the experiences of the human soul during sleep are pivotal factors in the learning process, seem either to have added to, or side-lined the empirical, scientific, rational approach.

In exploring the question ‘What is imagination?’ Egan (1990) quotes a standard dictionary definition that imagination is

“the act or power of creating mental images of what has never actually been experienced.” (p. 7)

It would be incorrect, however, to describe Egan as an affirmed empiricist, since elsewhere, he derides what he regards as a prevalent, yet declining, tendency in education to push imagination to the frivolous margins.

“An impoverished view of science has misused the authority of science to promote in education a narrow kind of logical thinking at the expense of those forms of thinking which we see most clearly in children’s imaginative activities.” (p. 18)

Elsewhere, Steiner (1989) makes direct reference to what he termed the 'spiritual world' and described observations, insights and ideas, which he claimed to have made during research into the spiritual world, using scientific method. By dint of this research beyond the physical, material, sense-perceptible world, Steiner (1984, 1989, 1993) was able to extend the description and study of imagination as it relates to human consciousness and human cognition.

Betti (1994) discusses Steiner's idea that a new form of spiritual consciousness is within the grasp of contemporary human consciousness. Steiner refers to a state of *'imaginative consciousness'*, and distinguishes it from earlier forms of atavistic, or mystical, clairvoyance.

Customary forms of mental picturing, or imagination seem to be bounded by the physical body, founded on sense perceptions and are invariably an expression of the bodily constitution and connected to a person's digestion and assimilation of life experiences. By contrast, Betti focuses on Steiner's indication that there is an emergent human faculty of imaginative consciousness that is not dependent on the body, or the senses. Instead, when fully developed, imaginative consciousness

"is capable of becoming a body-free, supersensible experience that can grasp the true nature of the human being and the natural world" (p. 14)

Crucially, this faculty of imaginative consciousness lies in the province of the self-perceiving, self-cognizing, self-directing individual, acting freely and in full consciousness.

It would be too great a digression to extend this discussion here. However, an attempt to grasp what appears to be an essential qualitative difference in the material reviewed – drawing distinctions between an empirical, intellectually-

based approach to understanding human cognition and imagination and an esoteric, phenomenological approach, which recognises the contribution of imaginative and intuitive thinking as a spiritual activity – seems to be necessary and worthwhile.

In the material reviewed, there are areas of broad agreement concerning the importance and worth of imagination in the educational process. Some significant qualitative and philosophical differences concerning the role and function of imagination in education have been identified. These differences appear to arise from the differing perspectives concerning the nature and image of the human being and human consciousness adopted by the authors reviewed. The differences are substantial, but not dialectical, and provide ample opportunities for research.

In closing, it does not seem fanciful to me to suggest that the authors of the works reviewed would be united in their agreement with Einstein's statement that the world is comprehensible, or imaginable, to human thinking and the mystery of the world is that it should be so.

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