

NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Narrative Assessment Tools for Career and Life Clarification and Intentional Exploration:
Lily's Case Study

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Narrative and storytelling-based methods for career counseling, advising and coaching are gaining more attention as the career management field shifts from traditional matching assessments to storytelling approaches and life design (Savickas, 2012) principles. Narrative assessment offers an opportunity to fully engage clients by honoring their past, and building their psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2006) necessary to navigate a life of transitions. Narrative methods, tools and techniques to bridge theory and practice have been emerging with greater frequency from Cochran's (1997) textbook to Brott's *Storyed Approach* (2001), and from Severy's (2008) techniques to Stebleton's (2010) careful analysis of the strengths and limitations of narrative methods.

One such narrative approach, the CareerCycles method of practice, with its conceptual model, suite of tools and holistic definition of "career" comprehensively includes the many human and systemic variables shaping a client's experience. This method of narrative assessment also provides a concrete framework and set of practical and engaging tools to support the career counselor and specialists' ability to engage in useful practice.

Introducing a career counseling social enterprise that uses a narrative method of practice

A jobless recovery, corporate reorganizations and problematic underemployment among college graduates create challenges for clients. Yet CareerCycles, a busy career management practice, continues to attract clients seeking to make career choices that lead to increased meaning and purpose in their lives. Don, a CareerCycles client, captured what many clients feel as they search for their next steps, "I don't want to just job search and run around with my resume, I want to know what I want to do with my life."

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Don, a 55-year old sales manager, was recently terminated due to a business downturn. Career counselors and specialists know that Don isn't alone. Scanning the daily headlines, job loss and transition are increasingly prevalent. What's different is that Don, like many career management clients, is starting to see termination, disengagement or instability as a blessing in disguise (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Like many clients, at first Don was distressed about his situation and future employment prospects, though after engaging in career counseling Don began to identify and get excited about future possibilities more aligned with his emerging interests. He had been interested in horticulture, and as a means of exploring this career interest he traveled to Scotland to spend time at a world renowned ecovillage, which was a very positive experience for him. With the help of narrative assessment methods, career changers are finding opportunities to make career and life choices that finally "connect their self-concepts to work roles, fit work into life, and make meaning through work" (Hartung, 2013, p. 11).

This article reports on a suite of narrative career assessments grounded in a method practice created within a successful private career management practice based in Toronto, Canada. The assessment suite helps clients tell and transform their career and life stories so they can make choices leading to greater possibilities. Yet the question remains: how do clients thoughtfully and successfully make these choices?

Amundson's (2003, 2008) notion of a backswing provides an apt metaphor for the narrative process.

Sometimes the best way to rebuild energy is to go backward to build momentum... Whether we are swinging a golf club, a broom, or a hammer, there is a need to have a short, focused backswing to build energy. For someone who is unemployed, this might mean a review of past accomplishments and the identification of transferable skills. ...Of course, a great backswing doesn't amount to much unless there is also a clear focus on a goal and follow-through afterward. (Amundson, 2003, pp.149-150)

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In career and life, taking a backswing means reviewing the road one has taken to get to the present moment. Through this reflection, clients can assess what has been learned and gained in order to refocus and move forward. The backswing metaphor is relevant during periods of unemployment, career disengagement and economic instability when people have a natural tendency to withdraw, often losing confidence and momentum. Asking clients to reflect before formulating career plans and engaging in job search activities does not work without creating readiness and internal motivation to move forward (Feller, 2014).

Career and Life Clarification as “The Backswing”

The backswing metaphor closely matches the first process within the CareerCycles narrative method of practice (Franklin, 2014; Zikic & Franklin, 2010), used successfully with thousands of clients who present with important questions about ‘what’s next for me?’ The CareerCycles method of practice comprises a suite of tools including a practitioner methodology, the Who You Are Matters! interactive discovery game, and an online storytelling application. Promising results of an outcome study (Franklin, Yanar, & Feller, in progress) are moving this method into the realm of evidence-based practice.

In the CareerCycles method of practice, clients are accompanied through an experience of telling career and life stories as a form of positive, focused, self-reflection (Poehnell & Amundson, 2011). From clients’ stories, elements are gathered and organized into a written document called a Career Sketch. This narrative Career and Life Clarification (CLC) process, like a backswing, helps to ensure that forward motion is effective and satisfying.

The CareerCycles CLC process reminds clients of who they are and helps them to discover hidden future possibilities. One CareerCycles client affirmed that, “The backswing metaphor makes total sense to me. It made sense for me to step back and see what decisions I made in the

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past to see what I've cared about all along." This CLC process is followed by the second process of the CareerCycles method of practice called Intentional Exploration. The complete CareerCycles method of practice shown graphically in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of the CLC process and the Intentional Exploration with the client's initial question and the use of key narrative tools.

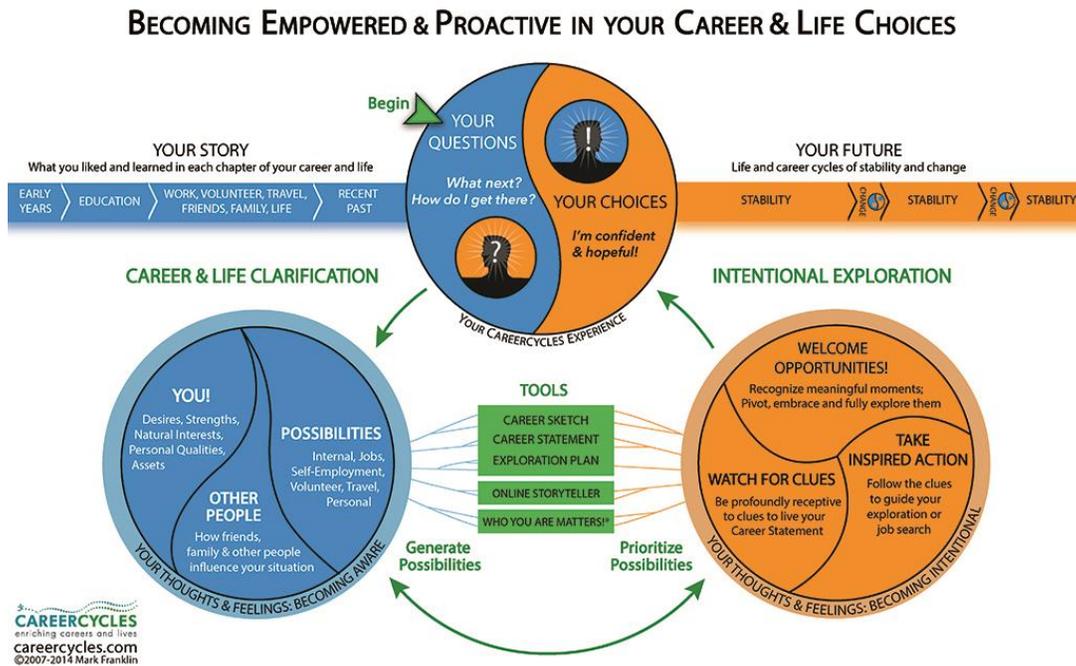


Figure 1. CareerCycles graphical model

Forty documented interventions within those two processes include working with tools, client handouts, and a training program. Each intervention includes a description of its use, expected outcomes, career professional actions, and resources, in order to holistically and thoroughly support practitioners in their work with clients.

A Client's Perspective: Lily's Case Study

When she first came to career counseling, Lily, 23, was working as a retail store manager in the apparel sector. She had been in the workforce for two years after graduating with a university

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degree in cultural studies, but found herself dissatisfied. "I want work that's more fulfilling, engaging, and intellectually stimulating," Lily shared, referring to her retail work.

Many people who find themselves in "career pain" assume there's some magic test that will tell them what to do next. In the authors' experience, career tests and assessments often leave clients with lingering unanswered questions: "So what?" and "Now what?" Lily was referred to CareerCycles through personal contacts. Like many clients, she too, did not know what to expect from a career management service. After a first session in which she experienced the narrative approach, Lily began to share her stories and started to construct her Career Sketch with the eight elements as shown in Figure 2. Working collaboratively with the career professional, she came to understand the value of the narrative approach for her situation and chose to continue in a five session program.

Career Sketch				
<p>DESIRES What you want & what's important to you (DD)=deeper desires</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organization that runs well, organized, stable Fulfilling, engaged, intellectually stimulating More money! >\$16/hour Treated with respect Work with people at my level, more put together, collegial; an org that's a big enough sandbox to play Be in the arts world Be a renaissance woman and make money from it, have variety or maybe intrapreneurial A good place to live in. happiness creativity challenge/advancement which means I'll be out of my comfort zone aesthetics results 	<p>STRENGTHS Skills & knowledge you want to use (D)=want to develop</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writing work with people being expressive, assertive, confident, think critically, analytical customer/client service teamwork multitasking, fast paced environment staying current managing people, delegating, giving direction mediating and resolving conflict attention to detail creative; "good eye" 	<p>PERSONAL QUALITIES Personality & how others describe you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have a bit of a bite Mature positive mindset Put up my own obstacles. Can be lazy. Adaptable, meticulous 	<p>NATURAL INTERESTS emerging passion, evolving identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrated interest in the arts: film, literature, fashion feminist literature and thought 	<p>POSSIBILITIES YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT</p> <p>INTERNAL to your organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No! <p>JOB with another employer</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> HI marketing firm HI advertising agency; Art Director, Media Buyer; Advertising Account Executive MED curating, fashion, gallery, art, e.g. Magazine, Image Consultant, Critic LO arts world that connects to kids HI writing / communications. E.g. entry level position that moves up quickly MED volunteer administrator <p>SELF-EMPLOYMENT</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> MED writing – my own ideas, kids books LO my own store <p>VOLUNTEER / SERVICE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>LIFELONG LEARNING / EDUCATION</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> wait until I really need it to advance; or short courses <p>TRAVEL / LIVE ELSEWHERE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>LEISURE, PERSONAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">
<p>YOUR THOUGHTS & FEELINGS, GEMS & INSIGHTS: pressured, anxious, stressed, wanting direction. excitement, hopeful 5 out of 10 (though 3 or 4 when I am at work). Afraid.</p>				

Figure 2. – Abridged Version of Lily's Career Sketch

Positive, focused, self-reflection using a narrative approach helps clients learn what they want from their lived experience. Job loss, career dissatisfaction, business collapse, academic failure, a relationship breakdown are all emotionally significant experiences. When expertly debriefed, clients gain clarity around what they do and don't want. This clarity makes it easy for clients to identify their desires moving forward. From there, clients can be supported to find possibilities that align with their desires.

To enact the paradigm shift already occurring within the career management field toward more narrative or life design approaches (Savickas, 2012), a consistent framework is needed to elicit an individual's career and life story, gathering relevant data and organizing it into a concrete and user-friendly aggregating document. The goal is to come up with the two essential building blocks of a client's individualized process: a reliable and complete snapshot of who the client is today, and a list of future possibilities he or she is most curious about before they begin Intentional Exploration.

During this process, Lily shared, "I felt anxious and stressed, and wanting direction. I knew there was something else out there but I didn't even know where to go to figure it out." In the CareerCycles method of practice, clients are asked to name their career question. Lily asked "What direction might be good for me longer term, and what can I do in the shorter term that gets me out of my present position, and makes some more money?"

Career & Life Clarification: Life Timeline and Storytelling

Like most people in transition, Lily wanted a quick answer and solution so that she could move forward in her career. The paradox is that to move forward in a satisfying direction, clients first need to step back. In the CareerCycles method of practice, the client is asked to create a

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timeline of their lives, either manually or using an online storyteller application. When using the online application, the client constructs a timeline of their career and life stories, and then the storyteller prompts them with context-sensitive questions about each story. Short responses to the questions are added automatically to the client's growing and interactive Career Sketch. This step highlights what clients have liked and learned in each "chapter" of their story. "Walking through my story gave me the freedom to see that anything was possible. There were no bad or impossible ideas," Lily shared after completing this step.

Like many clients, Lily couldn't see how her desires and the skills previously developed could transfer into other possibilities. Lily possessed strong managing, teamwork and client service skills, but exclaimed that, "I didn't realize that using these skills, I could do something really different."

Beyond evidence from case studies where clients tell their story to gain insight, research on positive emotions further validates this approach and its influence on job search outcomes (Burger & Caldwell, 2000; Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Stevens & Seo, 2013; Turban, Stevens, & Lee, 2009). Experiences of positive emotions and moods such as excitement and enthusiasm play an important role in successful job search (Côté et al., 2006). In the CareerCycles client experience, when clients tell their stories focusing on what they liked and learned, they amplify positive emotions, get excited and enthusiastic, and successfully find ways to enrich their careers and lives.

The Significance of Feedback

Encouraged to ask for feedback Lily approached a few trusted allies. Responses from her acquaintances, co-workers and friends were reviewed and debriefed with the CareerCycles professional. The new and relevant content was entered into Lily's Career Sketch. Lily remarked that, "It made me feel great hearing what others said about me, and knowing there were options. I

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didn't realize there were so many possibilities. I had the power within me to do those things and didn't have to go back to school." Feedback is a significant step of the narrative method within the CLC process. These insights provide a fresh perspective of the client's strengths and possibilities, which has the effect of reducing negative thoughts and feelings, and generating new possibilities.

Writing a Career Statement...and Then Living It

After Lily and the career professional collaboratively gathered and organized relevant data from her story, she was encouraged to draft her Career Statement. A Career Statement is a brief, positively worded statement highlighting seven key areas covered in CLC process: desires, strengths, personal qualities, natural interests, influences of other people, assets, and possibilities you're curious about. For further clarification, see Lily's Career Statement in Appendix 1.

The CareerCycles team of career professionals repeatedly observes how much a client's mindset influences career search outcomes. Clients with a worried, anxious or negative mindset typically find clues that reinforce their worries, whereas clients whose thoughts and feelings center around hope, optimism or faith in good outcomes find clues that help them discover new opportunities. A positively worded Career Statement can help nudge clients in the right direction, especially when an experienced career professional compassionately confronts the client's negative thoughts and reframes them into empowering thoughts within their Career Statement.

In Lily's case, she verbalized her internal self-talk as, "other people are much better than I am, in writing and other things." This phrase was added to Lily's Career Sketch in the Thoughts & Feelings section so she could see it written in black and white. Working collaboratively, Lily and the career professional rewrote the self-talk as, "I'm expressive, creative and work well with people and have faith in myself." Lily was encouraged to notice her self-talk shift during the week, and

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began to replace her negative thought with the more positive one. This is an example of becoming aware and then becoming intentional with one's thoughts and feelings, as depicted in the circular bands around the two main processes in Figure 1.

Swing Forward – and Taking Inspired Action

Armed with her Career Statement, Lily was ready to enter the Intentional Exploration process which comprises of watching for clues, taking inspired action and welcoming opportunities. The first step in this process, “watch for clues,” means to become attuned to both internal and external clues related to one's Career Statement. Earlier Lily clarified that she wanted stimulating, engaging and challenging work in a business or corporate environment that would provide stability. An external clue came in the form of a suggestion from her mother that Lily speak with an acquaintance who worked at an advertising agency. Talking to the acquaintance was a good example of taking inspired action.

Lily's first internal clue was that she felt excited about taking inspired action. She summoned the courage to call her mother's acquaintance at the agency and, much to her surprise, was offered a job interview for an account supervisor position. Several days later, the newly confident Lily received a job offer from the agency, which she felt comfortable accepting based on the new insights she had gained within her CLC process and forward movement into Intentional Exploration.

The effectiveness of Lily's reflective experience was in the rekindled energy, good feelings and positive mindset that flowed from the fun and engaging process of telling her story. This, and writing her Career Statement, made her intentional exploration—the follow-through—easier, and almost effortless, compared to the dread so many people attach to traditional job searches.

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In the CareerCycles team's experience, when clients go through the CLC process they generate hope, optimism, confidence and resilience. Collectively, this psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2006) ultimately leads to more clarity and more satisfying career and life choices.

Narrative Suite of Tools for Career and Life Clarification & Intentional Exploration

Career counselors and specialists are hungry for practical tools that bring to life the theories and ideas that form the foundation of their professional training and personal experience. The CareerCycles narrative method of practice provides a framework for counselors and specialists, including practical and easy to learn tools and assessments. At the time of writing this article, over 250 career counselors and specialists across North America and Europe have been trained and licensed in this method. The suite of tools includes the following seven groupings:

1. The CareerCycles graphical model, Figure 1, acts as a roadmap for the client experience. For career counselors and specialists, it is a framework that guides practice and communication.
2. Career Sketch, Career Statement, Exploration Plan, Getting Feedback, and more than 20 other tools and worksheets to guide sessions and between-session tasks.
3. Who You Are Matters! is a group discovery experience in the form of a board game. Small groups play together to gain clarity, share narratives and write their own Career Sketch and Career Statement. The game provides a means to efficiently reach large numbers of clients within the CLS process. To date the largest group has been 125 players concurrently playing at 25 tables.
4. CareerCyclesOnline allows users to construct a timeline of their career and life, and debrief each chapter or story via an online storytelling experience. As clients debrief stories, their Career Sketch is constructed. They can then use the application to automatically create an editable

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Career Statement, and then use the Exploration Plan tool to create a plan for each of their priority possibilities. An administration dashboard allows career counselors and specialists to launch and supervise any number of end user client accounts.

5. The method of practice includes 40+ written interventions which engenders trust in clients that there's a 'method to the madness,' and guides career counselors and specialists through the process.
6. A learning program divided into two levels is used to train career counselors and specialists and provides for initial learning and an ongoing 'playbook.'
7. A definition of the word 'career' enlarges the scope of the CLC process from job to life. It is used directly with clients to create a common understanding. Career is defined as: The full expression of who you are and how you want to be in the world. And, it keeps on expanding as it naturally goes through cycles of stability & change (Franklin, 2014).

Career Counselors and Specialists: Roles and Processes

Guiding a client, one on one, through the stories of their lives using the CareerCycles method of practice draws deeply on counseling skills, including active listening, probing, reframing, and empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, hallmarks of Rogers' (1951) client-centered therapy. Many career professionals, who are not trained counselors have been trained in the CareerCycles method of practice and possess these skills. One does not need to be a certified counselor or have earned a graduate degree to work within this framework. The authors have seen career educators, certified coaches, job search coaches, academic advisors, guidance counselors, and HR professionals use the framework with confidence after training.

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When the online tools are used, some of the more time consuming CLC process become automated, freeing the career counselor or specialist to focus on offering higher level support to clients (Hooley, Hutchinson, & Watts, 2010). In this case, the role of the career counselor or specialist can more easily be played by a trained and competent, though differently credentialed coach, educator, or advisor.

Another effective pathway into the narrative methodology is via the Who You Are Matters! Career and Life Clarification game. The game experience can be facilitated for one game table of four or five players or for multiple game tables, for example, a workshop setting of 25 concurrent players at five tables. In these cases, a CareerCycles trained and certified helping professional can effectively facilitate the group and introduce the online tools as a follow-up deepening experience. While counseling skills are an asset for game facilitators, skills in group facilitation, public speaking and curriculum delivery are more relevant for this task.

One other key role in the CareerCycles method of practice is on the front end of the experience, when a prospective client wants to learn more about the expected outcomes of the process. This is an important communication requiring excellent listening and probing skills, strong communication skills to explain the processes and outcomes, and an ability to contain the wide variety of emotional reactions that clients exhibit. In the CareerCycles practice, this role has been filled by career specialists with an associates or bachelor degree in human services or career and work counseling. Typically, in a 20 minute phone conversation, the career professional queries the caller about their career question or problem, and probes to find out more about triggers, future possibilities and recent career history. They do this while being mindful to constrain the conversation to a limited timeframe and reflect the caller's feelings without the call becoming a full

counseling session. In the authors' experiences, any career management practice offering a free or low cost introductory session needs a well-trained helping professional to serve in this role.

Summary: From Backswing to Follow-through

In summary, to move forward in a career, a good backswing makes forward motion effective and satisfying, setting clients up for success. Below are four steps to the backswing of the CLC process:

1. Name your question: is yours a 'what now?' question, or a 'I know what I want, now how do I get there?' Be specific.
2. Timeline your story: what did you like and learn in each chapter of your story? Chapters can be early years, education, career portfolio, or recent past.
3. Gather and organize: examine everything from your story and categorize all elements into eight categories: a. Desires: What you want and what's important, b. Strengths: Skills and knowledge you want to use, c. Personal Qualities: The kind of person you are, d. Natural Interests: Emerging passions. e. Other people's influences, f. Assets: Education and credentials, g. Possibilities you're curious about, h. Your thoughts and feelings about your situation.
4. Write your Career Statement: Highlight the most important elements of your story that you've gathered and organized. Summarize in a succinct paragraph.

A career counselor or specialist can then help clients bring their Career Statement to life, using it like a compass to direct their Intentional Exploration following four steps, for each of their priority possibilities:

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1. Watch for clues: List all the reasons why you'd like this possibility and how it aligns with your Career Statement. Then list all the related external clues in the form of people you've met, organizations you're familiar with, websites you've visited etc.
2. Take inspired action: Name all the steps you want to take to explore this possibility more. These may be on your own, e.g. Internet research, or with others, e.g. 'field research' to talk to people involved in similar work or activities.
3. Welcome opportunities: Be open to seeing more of what you have been expecting. Sometimes unexpected opportunities arise, in which case, be prepared to pivot and fully explore these new opportunities.
4. Become intentional with your thoughts and feelings: Career exploration can be exhilarating, and it can be scary or discouraging. Continuously realigning one's thoughts toward the Career Statement, with a focus on desires, helps regenerate positive affect and engage the broaden and build phenomenon (Fredrickson, 2001).

Narrative assessment methods are gaining in popularity, and storytelling is helping to shift the career management field in an exciting direction. The work completed at CareerCycles and reported here builds on previous theoretical principles, delivers a promising conceptual framework, and utilizes a suite of engaging tools to help clients discover what to do with their life, rather than simply to complete a job search. Through the illustration of the eight elements of the Career Sketch, the writing of the Career Statement, and case study of Lily one can see the power of using practical tools and a tested framework to guide practice. This article holds the potential to inspire others to utilize narrative assessment to deliver concrete outcomes connected to psychological capital, while helping clients to complete career and life clarification as well as intentional exploration.

Appendix 1 – Lily's Career Statement

I want to work in a creatively charged environment that provides me with stimulating work that does not merely busy my days, but keeps me engaged and challenges me intellectually and emotionally. I would like to work around others that are also passionate about their line of work and have the same spirited energy that I possess. I will most likely be working for a company, as I want to have stability that an organization can provide (as opposed to freelance work or starting my own company). I would like to be treated with respect, although I do not mind working long days, as I have a good work ethic and become absorbed in whatever project I take on. I am very interested in writing especially in relation to pop culture. I would also enjoy working beyond the brainstorming level by acting as a leader for projects. I am a great delegator, am incredibly organized and feign self-confidence. As long as my career offers me mobility and variety, as well as an opportunity for a life outside the workspace, I will be quite satisfied. The possibilities I'm most curious about are working in an advertising agency, or something to do with writing or journalism.

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