

Article

The Shock of the Old A Narrative of Transpersonal Experience

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Abstract

Here I present a description of some transpersonal experiences that occurred as a result of meditation practices as well as reflections on those experiences. I connect these experiences with some historical precedents, particularly to sources in the Eastern Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition, but also to contemporary sources as well as some 20th century philosophical ideas. Lastly, I describe how these experiences ended up shaping a new worldview, the most significant and lasting being a deep sense of interconnectedness with the world. This sense of interconnectedness further lends support to an inclusive rather than an exclusive understanding of religious belief, and correspondingly a mystical sense of the world and humans' place in it.

Keywords: transpersonal experience, narrative, self-discovery, spiritual practice.

Introduction

This essay, thanks to the editor of this issue of *Journal of Consciousness Exploration and Research*, has given me the pleasurable opportunity to revisit some of the most formative episodes in my life, and to reflect on the experiences from that period as well as to contribute, in some small way, to the work of consciousness research. I'll be writing about some experiences I had as a result of meditation practices I engaged in during a few years in the early 1990s. I've always suspected that these experiences played an integral role in shaping my outlook on the world and life in general, but to date I have never reflected much on them at all. This essay gives me the opportunity to do so almost 20 years later.

The primary sources will be my memory of those experiences and the journals I kept at the time. Seeing as how what I am going to share here took place almost two decades ago, the narrative will undoubtedly be a mix of a partial reconstruction of actual events as well as elements almost certainly added in hindsight which may not be an entirely accurate reflection of the conscious experience at that time, but may reflect more the attitudes developed after the experiences themselves. A lot of this exercise, of course, will be one of constructing a narrative out of a few "data points." So naturally there is a great tendency towards smoothing out the rough spots in the narrative arc. But if I am as honest with myself as I can possibly be, then I think I can

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reconstruct fairly faithfully not only what was happening at that time but also how these experiences impacted my life.

The decision to record some of these experiences was likely due to their uniqueness and novelty and the fact that I was attempting to figure out just what exactly they meant and how they fit into my life at the time. Only later did I begin to discover the common elements that my experiences shared with those who lived centuries before my time.

The experiences I'll be describing took place during a period of time from the summer of 1991 to about the summer/fall of 1992, during which time I was a fairly typical college student in Cleveland, OH, formally studying engineering and its attendant math and science, together with a budding interest in philosophy and religion. I was just beginning that journey of self-discovery and the corresponding doubt and questioning of the accepted truths and worldview I'd grown up with and into which I was socialized. Prior to the summer of 1991, I didn't engage in any meditative or spiritual practices. However, after the summer of 1992 I did continue to practice a personalized style of meditation, although I didn't mention the experiences in subsequent journals.

In addition, my ethnic background bears mentioning as it most likely had an impact on why I became interested in meditative practice in the first place. Both of my parents are of Serbian descent and were born in Yugoslavia, which at the time of these experiences was beginning its descent into break-up and civil war. I am a first-generation American who was raised in a closely-knit community of Serbian immigrants, speaking fluently the language of my parents and their homeland while becoming increasingly aware of the isolation and provincialism that that upbringing could engender and even encourage. In addition, as the civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia began and family and friends became much more interested in the happenings in the region, and especially became more and more nationalistic in their outlook and expressions, I felt myself becoming somewhat isolated, existing apart from these feelings of solidarity with ethnic Serbs back in Yugoslavia. Consequently, it's probably fair to say that at least a part of why I took up meditation in the first place was to create for myself an oasis of calm and dispassion in the desert of heated emotions that I couldn't entirely understand nor accept.

The Experiences

I'm not quite sure when I first began to meditate, but the best estimate I have is sometime between December 1990 and the spring of 1991. And the primary impetus at the time was finding a way to alleviate the new-found stress I was experiencing as a result of my father's illness and subsequent disability when it was not clear what my future would hold, i.e., whether or not I would continue college or drop out and find a job to support our family. The result of this stress was muscle tension in my shoulder, neck, and jaws. I didn't know at the time what the cause

was, but a trip to an ENT specialist revealed that it was simply stress and a prescription for Valium quickly relieved the symptoms.

After the prescription ran out, my doctor suggested techniques to alleviate some of the stress, one of which was deep breathing exercises. A friend of mine mentioned that he, too, had had some experience with breathing exercises and meditation and that it had helped him calm down and better manage some of the stress in his life.

So the first form of deep-breathing/meditation I tried was what my friend had suggested. It took the form of lying down on a bed on my back, legs stretched out, arms at my sides, palms facing down and eyes closed. I begin by taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly and consciously. By “consciously” I mean being mindful of the act of exhaling. A useful way to stay mindful was to say to myself the words “in” as I was drawing breath in, and “out” as I was exhaling. That’s it. Just those two words: “in” and “out.” Even when the mind wandered and other thoughts entered my mind, I would recognize what was happening and slowly again begin to focus on the words “in” and “out” and gently steer the mind back away from any distracting thoughts.

I practiced this technique a few times a week with some moderate success. During the act of meditating and focusing on those words, I was indeed calmer and more relaxed than in my normal waking state. And even after the meditation period, which would last anywhere from 15 minutes upwards to an hour or longer, I was generally more relaxed and noticed that the familiar muscle tension in my jaw, neck and shoulder area was gone. This state of relaxation would last anywhere from an hour or so up to the rest of the day or evening.

However, one result of this technique was that I would often fall asleep, sometimes for an hour or two. Not wanting to fall asleep, I decided to try a different posture. This is where I began to meditate and practice my deep-breathing exercises while sitting upright in a chair. The posture here was sitting upright, feet flat on the floor, back straight, head facing forward, elbows bent, arms resting on either the arms of a chair or palms down on my knees. From this position, I would begin with the deep-breathing exercises again; saying to myself the words “in” with each inhalation and “out” when exhaling.

After practicing these exercises for a few months, and experiencing the kind of relaxed, lower stress states that they produced, I entered a different or new phase produced by these meditation and deep-breathing exercises. (Actually, calling them “meditation” is probably not accurate at this point because strictly speaking I was not meditating *on* any particular subject, theme, word or mantra. It’s probably more accurate to refer to this first or introductory phase as simply the beginning of some deep-breathing and mind-clearing exercises to alleviate symptoms of stress.)

The first recorded instance of this new phase comes from a journal entry dated July 22nd, 1991. As far as I can make out, this is the first such experience I had while in this meditative state, and, as such, being so new and different from anything that I had experienced previously, I thought it was worthy enough to be recorded. Here is the entry from that day:

While in a meditative state tonight, I reached the point in my meditation in which I almost lost consciousness of my physical body and was only conscious of my mind (or soul, or spirit.) ... Once out of my meditative state, I felt an overwhelming feeling of joy and love at this brief encounter with my soul.

A little more than a month later, I recorded a similar experience. This one is dated August 25th, 1991:

While meditating tonight, I experienced a complete loss of realization of the existence of my body and the only thing that existed was my mind (soul). After this, I felt as if the only thing existing was my mind and the room. It was a really strange feeling to say the least, and it can't even be described fully...

Note that in the first experience I explicitly stated that I "almost lost consciousness" of my body, while in the 2nd description I go further and describe the complete loss of body consciousness. Also, in the first experience I mention the post-meditative feeling of "joy and love" while in the 2nd description there is only a mention of the strangeness of the experience of losing consciousness of my physical body.

Then, not long after the experience of August, there is a transcription in my journal of a well-known and often-cited passage from Blaise Pascal that is said to have come after a profound mystical experience he had one night while praying/meditating. I can't recall where I found the quote, but here is what I wrote down at the time:

In the year of grace 1654 Monday, 23 November:
Fire

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
not of the philosophers
and the learned

Certitude. Joy. Certitude.
Emotion. Sight. Joy.
Forgetfulness of the world
and of all outside of God
the world hath not known
Thee, but I have known
Thee.

Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears
of Joy
My God, wilt Thou leave me?
Let me not be separated
from Thee for ever.

When I encountered this passage it obviously made a big enough impression on me at the time that I thought it worthy of copying into my journal. I probably felt that way because at some level it must have sounded a lot like what I had felt during some of the moments of ecstasy that I'd experienced during my own meditative practice. And I was excited that somebody else, living almost 350 years ago, would have described, in tone anyway, the experience that I just had myself.

After transcribing the quote from Pascal, there follow several pages of transcriptions from various sources dealing with spirituality and mysticism. Some of the sources include St. Augustine and writers in the Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition most likely from *The Philokalia*, a compendium of Eastern Christian spiritual writings.

While I don't know what the direct link was, I can mention that during the summer of 1991 I bought two books that influenced my continuing meditative practice. One of them, *The Art of Meditation* (1990) by Joel S. Goldsmith, I purchased at a small "New Age" store that sold incense, crystals and gems, and what one might call occult books and resources. This book had to be one of the first (if not *the* first) that I encountered which offered direct instruction on how to meditate, including everything from physical posture and breathing to what to read before beginning to meditate.

The other book was *Introducing the Orthodox Church* (1982) by Anthony M. Coniaris. I'm sure that the reason I got this book is because in my mind there was an obvious religious and spiritual component to the experiences I had had and so I was trying to discover what the religion that I was raised in had to say about these experiences. And there was one chapter in particular which focused on prayer, in which I'd underlined quite a few passages referencing the results of prayer and the need for prayer in human life. A lot of what I found in these passages seemed to me at the time to match up with my meditation experiences; the emphasis on the body and correct posture, the experience of being in a state of active prayer, the results of prayer, and a metaphysical framework with which to understand and interpret the meditative experience itself.

A few more direct quotes from the journals. Here is one with some more details dated January 16, 1992:

While meditating tonight, I experienced what I believe to be some sort of "vision" of light or some "light." This came totally involuntarily and at the

instant that I was aware of the light (which lasted for only a fraction of a second) I felt a sort of “energy” or “peace” or “relief” pass through my whole body. To be more specific, I cannot find a right word for the feeling I had, just that it was a pleasant almost “heart warming” feeling which could only have come from God. (The peace that passeth understanding.)

A few weeks later, on February 4, 1992, I recorded another experience:

While meditating tonight (for about 30 min), I again experienced that direct “light” or presence of a power far exceeding any of mine. It was so short, that it could be described as a flash of lightning, instantaneously accompanied by an undescrivable [sic] feeling of warmth and peace that filled my entire body and soul. Although these experiences are ineffable and to a large degree indescribable in words, I feel that still my rational side seeks something to put into words...

About 2 months later, on April 1, 1992 (no joke), I describe for the first time something of a roadblock in my meditative practice, even going so far as to cite a passage from Goldsmith’s book as a possible explanation:

While attempting to meditate tonight, I realized that I could not achieve that silence or peace very easily without trying to put forth an effort. My only possible explanation for this would be the saying from the book *The Art of Meditation* that our periods of meditation go through stages or cycles (ups and downs) where at one time we might be in a valley where we cannot meditate or remain in silence but that this valley is usually an indication that we are ready to move on to another plane of meditative experience. This seems to be happening to me at this present time.

Then, a few weeks later on April 16, 1992, I transcribed a passage from *The Philokalia* attributed to St. Maximus the Confessor:

The highest state of pure prayer has two forms... The sign of the second is when, in the very act of rising in prayer, the mind is ravished by the Divine boundless light (emphasis in the original) and loses all sensation of itself or of any other creature, and is aware of Him alone, Who, through love, has produced in him this illumination. In this state, moved to understand words about God, he receives pure and luminous knowledge of Him.

There follows no commentary on this passage. I’m sure the understanding and connection was complete for me and there was no need to state explicitly just what this passage meant for me, in light of the experiences I’d had over the past several months and being aware of, for the first time, this mysterious “light” which St. Maximus references in the passage.

Explanations: Frameworks of Understanding

Already toward the end of the last section, some amount of interpretation has begun to creep into the descriptions, which means that I was already reading spiritual and philosophical literature and attempting to interpret these experiences and assimilate them into either my existing worldview (whatever that may have been at the time) or to discover what role these experiences played in some new understanding that I was groping toward and which was very likely becoming more obvious to me every day.

Two sources were instrumental in beginning to shape my understanding of these experiences; the Goldsmith book and the Coniaris book which led to other sources of Orthodox Christian spirituality.

The Goldsmith book promoted a fundamentally New Age/Self-Help metaphysic. His was not an Orthodox Christian understanding, but a wider ranging interpretation which one might say encompassed a pluralistic Hickian view that all religions share some aspect of the Truth, and that no one religion has sole access to the Truth. This is evident in his speaking of “the Christ” not so much as an historical figure but rather as a kind of state of consciousness which the historical Jesus himself tapped into (and which is often referred to as Christ consciousness) and which anyone who practices meditation in earnest can also attain.

Complementing the Goldsmith book was the work by Coniaris, which led me to other Orthodox Christian sources that would be consistent with my upbringing and the religious world I knew most intimately. The most important of these was *The Philokalia* and another book I referenced at the time, *Christian Spirituality*, a collection of essays from theologians and religious scholars from both East and West about the origins of Christian spiritual practice from the beginnings of Christianity through the 12th century. Also, later, in about 1993, I began reading the classic of Russian religious spirituality, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which tended to confirm what I had already picked up from reading other spiritual works.

Later sources would include some of the writings of philosophers who could generally be classified as existentialists as well as a few foundational theological ideas from Vladimir Lossky (1989), which remain to this day embedded in my integrated understanding of those experiences with my life and the larger world around me.

One of the most obvious things to notice is that from the very beginning, these experiences were understood in a religious/spiritual context and not at all in a scientific one. This is to be expected and entirely in line with my upbringing. However, it is not to say that my parents practiced meditation or that they had the same or even similar views on religion and spirituality as me. In point of fact, some of their views were for me rather foreign and superstitious, focused as they were mostly on rituals and charms and living with a certain fear of not doing the correct things and therefore of violating what they took to be some type of divine order which, if they strayed from it would bring about misfortune.

What I did see from them, especially from my father, was the presence of traits that might be called humility before a mystery. In my father, that showed itself in his daily ritual of morning and evening prayers. My father's side of the family did tend to be more religious than my mother's side, so that while I fought what to me were the overtly superstitious elements of their religious beliefs, the soil was fertile enough for me to begin in but through my own discovery process which drew from my meditation practices, my readings of Goldsmith, and the writings of the early Church fathers through the *Philokalia*, I was able to forge my own understanding of religion and spirituality which melded these influences together.

Later, after these first theological sources were absorbed into a newly emerging understanding of the experiences, I turned to philosophical sources. One of the earliest of these sources was Wittgenstein, probably during 1994. This is the time during which I first came across his writings both in formal class settings as well as on my own. And of course, one of the passages from the *Tractatus* (1922/98) that struck me instantly was the famous "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (p. 74). Saying nothing at all about meditation or spirituality, bringing my experiences to this statement, I understood it to be not only about language or linguistics but about the spiritual life. Particularly, the relation between those things of which we cannot speak (i.e., do not have the words to describe) and the consequent silence that follows that experience of realizing that we are in the presence of something which is a brick wall for our normal linguistic understanding of our world. This is exactly what my experience had been, and it also matched up with the spiritual and religious writings I had been reading and tended to confirm my emerging understanding.

As I read more from Wittgenstein, I began to see an emphasis on two points that lined up with my thoughts and experiences. First, an interest in and sympathy with a kind of worldview that I would call "mystical." This idea of the mystical isn't understood in the negative or pejorative sense of mystifying but rather a realization that our understanding of the world and our place in it, if one was intellectually honest with oneself, was wholly inadequate and primitive. In other words, when confronted with the vast mysteries of our existence and the existence of anything at all, the best we could do was babble as children. And this was expressed in his other saying that "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists" (p. 73). And this I connected with Heidegger's insight that the first and foundational question of metaphysics is *why is there something rather than nothing?*

Closely related to this insight was Wittgenstein's emphasis on the limits of language and what this realization imposes on us. These two points, to me, were the keys to understanding how Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook could serve as a kind of philosophical confirmation of what I had come to know through my various meditative experiences.

After Wittgenstein, two other philosophers were of interest to me: Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Heidegger primarily for the above-mentioned insight into the

origins of metaphysics, but also for his continued analysis of Being. On my emerging interpretation, quite a bit of his analysis of Being could be understood in a religious and spiritual context. In fact, it began to appear to me that certainly in some instances the word “Being” could be understood as a stand-in for some of the traditional aspects of the mystical experience of God. And thus, in a lot of the writing that I read, I got the strong sense of a mystical undercurrent running throughout Heidegger’s analysis of Being.

Then there is Jaspers and his notion of the Encompassing. This again, like Heidegger’s Being, seemed to me to describe one aspect of a certain presence of God, which in my mind was linked with the experiences I had during meditation. However, this “God” was understood not in a popular religious sense as something more or less understandable but as a mystery that we wrestle with and struggle to understand.

Another thinker that was important in this regard was Martin Buber. The crucial link with Buber was that his thought provided me with a vital link *back* to personal relationships and the importance of these, as a kind of being-in-the-world (like Heidegger’s *Dasein*) and not simply existing in a detached meditative state. It is as if he answered the following questions that I’d had trying to fully understand what these experiences *should* mean to me: “OK, now that you’ve had these experiences and felt a oneness with the universe and all creation, what now? How do you integrate this experience with your everyday, everyman existence of waking up, sleeping, going to work, having friends, loving family, eating, celebrating, mourning, dealing with conflict, love and sex, etc.?” While he certainly didn’t answer all of my questions, he at least pointed the way back to a kind of wholeness. And together with the other sources I had read and absorbed, I was ready to integrate these experiences back into my everyday life and my overall worldview.

Shaping of Worldview: Influence on Attitude

So the question now is, what was the most immediate or proximate effect of these experiences on my attitude and worldview? Probably the first and most important effect (and the one most closely connected with those original experiences) was the growing sense of interconnectedness I felt with the world. Now what does this mean exactly? It’s a bit hard to describe, but it essentially meant that I felt a kinship with the alive world; that is, not with buildings and roads and cars, but with the organic, biological, living, teeming world of life – whether dogs or cats, or birds or squirrels, trees, flowers, grasses, bees, flies, what have you. This entire world of life was somehow transformed from an objective out-there world that I had little to do with to a deeply felt kinship in our shared mortality and the sheer joy of wonder of being alive and conscious in this mysterious existence we found ourselves in. And this, in itself, is a mystical understanding of the world.

Along with this new sense of interconnectedness was a new-found sense of empathy with living beings. It is difficult to explain this feeling of empathy fully, only to say

that it is connected in obvious ways with the sense of interconnectedness with all of life explained above. And even here it is not so much explained as it is described. Still, I can try. So, I found myself not categorizing living beings as is usual for people to do, but rather sensing for the first time our similarities and not our differences. Now, this might be open to the charge of anthropomorphizing, but I don't think it's that. Recognizing that one has something in common with other living beings is not the same as ascribing uniquely human qualities to these non-human beings.

So, how did these new found feelings of interconnectedness and empathy reflect back onto my "human" world? As I mentioned above with the relation to Buber's *Ich und Du*, the feelings of empathy and interconnectedness extended out beyond the biological world to the world of human beings and human relationships. For me, this most directly manifested itself in my understanding of the wars in the Balkans. As I mentioned earlier, my immediate family was closely involved with and monitored the situation in the former Yugoslavia but mostly with an assurance (that to me seemed fairly irrational) that whatever was happening in the wars the Serbian side was free of any wrong-doing whatsoever and that they were most definitely the victims. As such, the reports in Western media sources about the actions of all sides, but mostly the Serbian military and paramilitary against the other ethnic groups, including reports of possible war crimes, were either ignored or simply brushed aside as propaganda about the Serbs.

For my part, even if only some of these reports were true, I couldn't bring myself in any way to dismiss them or condone them simply by virtue of an ethnic connection. I have to believe that my experiences in meditation and my change of attitude led me to question these judgments. What I felt most deeply was that it was simply not possible to condone these actions in any way, shape, or form according to my understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. And so I struggled greatly with reconciling the acquiescence of those around me with my inherent impulse to speak out against what "our side" was doing.

In other areas, I began to see how quick people were to condemn or simply excuse the suffering of others as their own fault in some way and to relieve themselves of any moral responsibility to do something about societal conditions. So whether it was poverty or homelessness or drug or alcohol abuse or even people who committed crimes, there was usually a snap judgment and that was it. But something in me felt that this way of thinking and understanding was deeply flawed and inaccurate and could not be squared with the changed moral sense that I was developing.

Now, truth be told, I didn't alter my life immediately in light of my experiences and set out to volunteer and help in some small way to cure society of these ills. Part of the reason, I suppose, is that there was no such history of volunteerism or activism in my family history that would've made such action seem logical and the thing to do. What I did do, however, and perhaps what was the most open or live option for me at the time, was to begin to bring up such themes in social settings with friends

and family and argue about them, which nobody had ever done before. In short, I became something of a disturbance in a cozy, self-sustaining tale of correctness and perhaps moral superiority. And my voice was one of *“Wait a minute, what makes us so sure that we are right? What makes us sure that we are doing all that we can to fully accept other human beings as our moral equals, and not pre-judging them based on our incorrect and unjustifiable prejudices?”*

Lasting Effects

There are two other questions to consider: the long-term impacts of the experiences on my attitude and worldview and how I understand the experiences today, i.e., as phenomena of nature, spiritual phenomena, or largely a mystery.

In terms of long-term impacts, I can identify several lasting effects of these early experiences. The one thing I can say is that I have a strong tendency to see both sides of a dispute, and hence it is difficult for me (or rather largely unnatural) to be dogmatic about the correctness or rightness of one side or one argument over another. So the end result is that I find myself not being dogmatic about much of anything, or at least not reflexively and intensely so.

The really interesting question here is if there is in fact any strong connection between this attitude and the meditative experiences of long ago. One could explain this attitude a number of ways. For starters, my philosophical training may be largely responsible for this attitude and frame of mind due to the critical thinking skills acquired over the course of study and beyond. Another may be that this attitude developed over time organically based on lessons learned in a large and often argumentative extended family.

So why do I mention it here if a number of equally plausible alternative explanations exist? The best case I can make is that those experiences and the flashes of insight I gained from them into a largely interconnected world seemed to me to be the best argument against the narrow parochialisms and the small-mindedness that all too often makes up so much of our daily lives. So for instance, it just didn't seem to make much sense to me to argue vehemently over some largely abstract issue or problem when in the end what really mattered was how we treated one another.

Another belief and character trait that was evolving out of all of this was the importance of human community and sharing, as opposed to what some would say were the virtues of a grandiose and mythical “rugged individualism” or even “selfishness.” Here again, the realization wasn't sudden and didn't express itself in the urge to disconnect with my present surroundings and go off and live in some kind of utopian human community. The best way to describe it is as a gradual awareness or better still as a kind of rearrangement of perception.

In religious matters, I began to adopt a more inclusive rather than an exclusive view of religious beliefs and systems. That is, tied in with the anti-dogmaticism

mentioned above, holding to an exclusivist position with regards to one's religious beliefs, given my interpretation of the meditative experiences I had had, seemed to me absolutely untenable.

As for the question of how I regard the experiences today, i.e., as a phenomenon of nature, culture, the spiritual realm, or simply a mystery, I'm inclined to regard it as being a combination of all of the above. The side of me that was educated as an engineer, with studies in mathematics, chemistry, physics, and engineering principles, can clearly see and understand an explanation in terms of physiological factors such as brain wave activity, endorphin release, etc. However, as I've already pointed out, given my background and upbringing and the predisposition, one might say, to understand such events in a religious/spiritual context, it was no surprise that my first interpretations largely came from this point of view.

Now this isn't to say that those first interpretations were exhaustive. Even after I'd located similar experiences in the descriptions of philosophers and theologians and ascetics of the past, the experiences themselves remained largely a mystery to me. I still wanted to know just how they happened and why. Also, the emotions the experiences stirred up led me to believe that these couldn't simply be the result of some chemical activity in the brain, but that there was some deeper, spiritual significance behind them. The effect may very well have been one of reinforcement; that is, the experiences themselves first served as a stimulus to try to understand them in and of themselves and place them in some kind of context, and then secondarily helped reinforce the explanations that I eventually came to accept.

Once again, from today's point of view, I can easily understand how it is some combination of all of the above explanations. However, for me, I don't feel that it changes those powerful first impressions of long ago, and the way those impressions influenced and shaped my subsequent attitudes and worldview.

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