

# Reinvention vs. Transformation: Transforming the Personal Reinvention Process

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## Introduction

*We begin to see that with very small movements, at just the right time and place, all sorts of consequent actions are brought into being.* (Jaworski, 1998, p. 13)

Those who know me, tell me they marvel at my ability to reinvent myself. Little do they know that I do it because I get bored easily. However, it recently occurred to me that what I really love is the *process* of reinvention. I enjoy how that process keeps my life fun, interesting, fulfilling, and how it has helped me get through some really difficult times in my life. I also realized how much I loved teaching others how to use this process to relieve suffering and to give them a sense of well-being. When people consciously use a reinvention process (it doesn't necessarily have to be mine), they generate new life experiences and new knowledge, which ultimately contributes to the universe's expansion. Also, adopting a process helps when they get blindsided by events outside their control.

In 1981, my grandfather, M.R. Zigler was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. He didn't get it, but the fact that he was nominated had a huge impact on me. He once said to me, when he was 87, he wished he had written his life story before he started. That way, he said, he would have gotten more done. This really struck me, because I knew what he had accomplished in his lifetime. That year I began a process of writing my life story in advance. I discovered when I wrote my goals down, I reached them. I also noticed that when I stayed focused on my goals, I managed the conflict in my life better. Over time I refined my process and eventually codified it in 1993, so that I could teach others how to use it.

At the time, I was very active in the Society for Technical Communication. It concerned me that, often, technical writers have a victim mentality, feeling unappreciated and isolated in the workplace. I wanted people to know that they could take charge of their lives, both personally and professionally. I began to teach my workshops for free at Society chapter meetings and at Annual Conference out of concern that so many members seemed lost and out of control in their lives and careers. I also taught the process to chapter and Society leaders, because, I believe you cannot lead effectively if you do not know who you are at your core, that is, why you are here and what your life goals are. Many people have been through my workshops over the years. People who attended these workshops tell me, years later, that the workshop exercises changed and continue to change their lives. (Of course, the exercises didn't change their lives, the people did.) Over the years, I changed the workshop as I changed and discovered new ways to manage and direct changes in my own life. Workshop attendees are constantly asking for updated workbooks.

I love doing these workshops. Time stands still for me when I'm teaching this process. I decided to use the workshop as the central theme in my Masters Thesis: "The Utility of Authenticity Training in the Implementation of Conflict Management Systems." While I didn't prove definitively that people who have a reinvention process in their lives reduce the amount of

conflict they experience, there was enough evidence to continue the work. Combs (2002) reminds us that “process thinking is not new” and points out the teaching of various wisdom traditions, such as Buddhism and Taoism and the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, which tend to be subjective. “What was missing was a way to translate the process perspective into diverse practical and theoretical applications,” which can be used in the everyday world (p. 14). In 2006, I resolved to make teaching others how to transform their lives my life’s work.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama and H.C. Cutler (1998) wrote in *The Art of Happiness*, “I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness” (p.13). This, too, is my belief. I believe that when each of us as individuals consciously makes decisions based on knowledge of what makes us happy, we make the world a better place to live. Ultimately, I would like to re-design my workshop to teach people how to consciously and continuously transform their lives. This paper explores the idea of “personal transformation” as a step beyond what I have been calling “life reinvention” in preparation for the re-design of my workshop.

I will begin by giving a brief description of my current workshop and the reinvention process. I will explore the ideas that led me to changing the focus of the workshop from “reinvention” to “continuous transformation.” I will follow this exploration with the description of an existing model on which to potentially base my new workshop. I will close with some ideas for the new workshop, which I hope to make available online.

## **“Strategic Planning for Your Life” Workshop**

My current workshop is instructor-led. Attendees sit at tables of four to six people. I provide a workbook for them to use during the workshop. I give them a brief introduction that begins with a quote from Gary Zukav’s *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1979): “*Who is looking at the universe?...How is the universe being actualized?* The answer comes full circle. We are actualizing the universe. Since we are part of the universe, that makes the universe (and us) self-actualizing” (p. 79). I encourage the attendees to begin with a mind open to the possibilities. I show them side by side pictures, one of space taken from the Hubble space satellite and the other from a particle accelerator. I do this to illustrate that, at the quantum level, we cannot see where one person begins and the other ends. In other words, we are all connected and that our individual decisions impact others, even when we are in isolation. This is based on the idea that “[per David Bohm]...people create barriers between each other by their fragmentary thought. Each one operates separately. When these barriers have dissolved, then there arises one mind, where they are all one unit, but each person also retains his or her own individual awareness...” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 100).

The first exercise is designed to elevate and become aware of their emotions and to illustrate their uniqueness in the world. I ask them to write what tasks they like to do, what they don’t like to do, what they are good at, what they are not good at, and, finally, what gives them absolute joy. The next exercise is designed to help the attendees develop a personal mission based on how they want to be remembered. This becomes the basis for all other life decisions. This is followed by an exercise to help them determine, at a high level, what they want to accomplish in their lifetimes. To free their minds a bit further, I ask them to, without limitation, make a Wish List of things they want to acquire, places they want to visit or live, people they want to meet, and so on.

I ask the attendees to share their lifetime goals and their Wish List with others at their table. What happens then is quite magical. Attendees find that when they share their goals and

dreams with others out loud, their goals seem more doable. They find these people, often total strangers, are not only supportive and encouraging, but forthcoming in resources. Attendees are surprised at this dynamic.

The next bit of work is project planning. Attendees determine what they need to do, by when, to achieve their lifetime goals. We break each lifetime goal down to the level of what can be done today to meet that goal.

At this point, we discuss the monitoring process. I present my personal process as the model, but tell them that they need to determine what works for them. The only thing that is critical for success is the consistent, regular monitoring of their goals. My process goes like this:

1. Every January 1 and July 1, go through the entire process (the workshop) from beginning to end. This generally takes me all day.
2. Every month, on the first, determine what I have to do for every lifetime goal in the next six months to stay on track.
3. Every week, on Monday morning, determine what I have to do for every lifetime goal this week to stay on track for this month.
4. Every day, first thing in the morning for five to ten minutes, determine what I have to do for every lifetime goal today to stay on track for this week.
5. Act: Do the tasks you have identified.
- 6.

This process keeps my attention on my goals. I rarely stray from my path, although occasionally new projects appear on the list and others drop off, either because I am no longer interested or I have completed the goal.

The next step in the workshop is dealing with anomalies. What do you do when you get blindsided? I always receive a 100% positive response when I ask the question: "How many of you are at a crossroads in your life right now, in this moment?" That could be why they took the workshop in the first place, but it is a strong indicator to me that workshops such as this are needed.

While this workshop does a really good job of showing people a process for reinvention, it really doesn't address the issue of transformation. According to the Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, to reinvent is "to re-make or re-do completely;" to transform is to "change in composition or structure...to change in character or condition." As humans, we are comfortable in our habits and our cultures. It is difficult for us to take the steps to reinvent ourselves, much less transform. A further investigation of what transformation means is required.

## **Paradigm Shift: Reinvention vs. Transformation**

There have been two primary influences in my life in 2007 that have fed my passion for transforming my workshop: (1) my continuing study of cybernetics and quantum theory through my readings for school, and (2) my recent introduction to Buddhism. This section describes how these ideas feed into my ideas about transforming the workshop.

### **Everything is a System**

My workshop has its basis in systems theory and in quantum theory. While I am not a physicist, I have always loved reading physics books, especially those about quantum theory.

I'm drawn to quantum physics because, according to Rosenblum and Kuttner (2006), to date, it has never been wrong (p. 3) and it applies to everything (p.15). They write, "If you dig deeply enough into any natural phenomenon—physical, chemical, biological, or cosmological—you hit quantum mechanics" (p. 51). While Rosenblum and Kuttner stop short of applying this same logic to consciousness, I believe that it is only a matter of time until we find that quantum mechanics is also tied to consciousness.

I have been in "systems" for 30 years designing and documenting computer systems. I was introduced to systems theory in my undergraduate studies where I minored in information systems. During those years, I read Heisenberg (1958) who defined a system as "a complicated tissue of events in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole" (p. 107). In other words, everything is a system, from the micro-level to the macro-level, from the internal to the external. When systems (or subsystems within higher-order systems) are closed, that is, there are no inputs or outputs, they eventually die. These systems cannot morph or evolve without external inputs and feedback loops, which ultimately cause them to be in a state of nonequilibrium where transformation can occur.

Laszlo (1996) tells us that the process of evolution is full of possibilities and is never predetermined or predictable. "...[E]volution is nevertheless singularly consistent: it brings forth the same basic kind of entity in all its domains. The entity is a system of a particular kind—a system that we may best identify as 'system in the third state'...the state far from thermal and chemical equilibrium" (p. 23). Briggs and Peat (1999) describe a process for heating water "in just the right conditions below the actual boiling point [until] a transformation takes place and the water self-orders into a pattern of geometric vortices. For this to happen, first what is called a 'bifurcation point' (point of departure) is reached; then the system transforms itself" (p. 14). When autopoiesis is replaced by critical instability, bifurcations occur. (Laszlo, 1996, p. 111). In other words, bifurcations are necessary for transformation. We can apply this same concept to individuals as systems. However, the difference is that people have consciousness; we have the ability to choose. And, in any given moment, we have an infinite number of choices.

Laszlo (1996) describes three varieties of social bifurcations: (1) T-bifurcations (triggered by technology), (2) C-bifurcations (triggered by conflict), and (3) E-bifurcations (triggered by economic conditions (pp. 114-125). I would like to suggest two more varieties: F-bifurcations (triggered by conditions beyond our control, that is, forced, for example by extreme weather conditions or by receiving a diagnosis of cancer) and P-bifurcations (proactively triggered by the individual). P-bifurcations are consciousness-based.

Let's go back to the definitions of reinvention and transformation as applied to individuals. Reinvention implies the ability to completely change within the current structure. When people reinvent themselves they tend to bring their history and worldview with them through each iteration.

Transformation goes beyond structure and worldview. Transformation itself is a cybernetic system, alternating between stability and change (Keeney, 1983, p. 177). We have no control over an F-bifurcation. Briggs and Peat (1999) write, "Going through the death of a loved one, a divorce, or a period of self-doubt is painful, but often those are the very experiences that bring us to a keen sense of the truth beyond words and a new path in life" (p. 22). However, consciously effecting a P-bifurcation takes vision (a knowledge of the outcome you want), a belief that all will be well in the end, and continuous awareness of feelings and emotions, which act as barometers. It requires a courage to move into the unknown and a

willingness to let go of control, your worldview, and whatever supporting structures hold you to allow the autopoietic and bifurcation process to happen naturally while staying focused, in your mind, on the end result.

Laszlo (1996) writes, “Evolution is not fate; to evolve is not to meet one’s destiny...We are actors with will and purpose, and the power to vary the script—at least our part in it. We can vary it wisely or foolishly, to the extent of our wisdom...or our folly” (p. 139). We have control in our decisions.

My personal experience with this occurred when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995. My sister, who was going through chemotherapy for the second time at the same time I did, told me that I would have to learn how to “sit and be,” because the chemotherapy was so physically debilitating. She was right. It was much like being in a river in a boat without the oars. While the cancer diagnosis acted as an F-bifurcation, I was able to be proactive in the way I handled it, effecting a P-bifurcation. Looking back on that time, I realize that I consciously chose to continue living; my sister, who was deeply committed to her faith in God, at some level of consciousness, chose to “go home.”

As a side note, it is interesting that much of the literature uses a river metaphor to describe the idea of “going with the flow” (Briggs and Peat, 1999, p. 53). Jaworski (1998) writes “...[thinking with everything we have] is a flowing process which also goes outward and inward and makes communication possible” (p. 82). Briggs and Peat (1999) also write, “A vortex is a distinct and individual entity, and yet it is indivisible from the river that created it” (p. 28). Combs (2002) writes about Heraclitus, who “observed that it is not possible to step into the same river twice” (p. 14).

A P-bifurcation allows us to break cycles of negative feelings. We can use deliberate creation, which involves being aware and making a conscious choice to feel better. Combs (2002) says that “if we want to break this cycle, we must disrupt the circuit and apply new patterning forces, or control variables compelling the system to seek a new attractor” (p. 56). In describing his decision making process for knowing what to do and when to act, Jaworski (1998) says that he listens first. It is out of the “listening” his “doing” arises. “Sometimes the greatest acts of commitment involve doing nothing but sitting and waiting until I just know what to do next” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 12). When the moment of decision comes, “it was as if I had no real choice. It was not so much a decision about what I ‘ought’ to do—rather, I could not do otherwise. At this moment, says Rollo May, one arrives at a point where freedom and destiny merge. It was at this point that my words became action” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 75). This is the P-bifurcation point.

We get what we put our attention on good and bad. When we ask (the universe, Source, God?) for guidance in the form of quiet listening, meditation, or prayer, we are putting our attention on what we want. Rosenblum and Kuttner (2006) report a theory by Henry Stapp, who describes the “quantum Zeno effect,” which refers to a claim such as “a watched pot never boils.” “When a quantum system decays from an upper state to a lower, the decay starts very slowly. If it is observed very soon after the decay has started, it will almost certainly be found in the original state. The decay then starts over again from the original state. If the system is observed almost constantly, it almost never decays” (p. 191). This is a controversial theory, but it speaks to the idea of actualizing that on which you put your attention.

## **The Buddhist Concepts of Love and Compassion**

On October 20, 2007, I attended the Mind and Life XV Conference at Emory University, where I heard His Holiness the Dalai Lama speak. I also heard many scientists reporting on the positive effects of mindfulness meditation. Soon after the conference, I discovered the Drepung Loseling Buddhist monastery in Atlanta and began to attend their “teachings.” The Dalai Lama’s message is simple: The path to happiness is to (1) show loving compassion for others, and (2) do what you do in this life for the good of humanity.

*Compassion* is defined as a “non-harming” mental state that observes an entity or being in suffering or in a difficult situation and wanting to relieve the suffering. It is a response to the witnessing. It is natural that we want to see relief for the suffering being. *Love* is defined as observing a being without happiness and wanting happiness for that being.

The benefits of love and compassion are many. When we cultivate love and compassion others will be loving toward us. This is a universal law of love and compassion reflection. As we practice love and compassion, we will find an increase in the number of other people showing love and compassion. I believe this is actually the phenomenon of actualizing what we are putting our attention on. We will receive less harm from others. We will experience the sense of well-being in the future as well as in the present. We will overcome destructionist temptations. In short, if we are practicing love and compassion, our lives will be better.

## **An Existing Model**

Just this fall, I discovered an existing model that facilitates and supports continuous transformation within human beings. I begin with a story. Then I will expand on the model.

### **The Story**

My brother-in-law, Steve, is the Battalion Chief for the Prince William County Fire Department in Virginia. He told me this story originally right after it happened. Back in early September 2007, his unit was called to a house fire. Two other units were already on the scene (a “three-alarm” fire). The firefighters on the scene had information that led them to believe the family was still in the house. They made the decision to go in, even though the house was already engulfed in flames. One of the firefighters became trapped, and was ultimately killed. It turns out the family had gotten out of the house and were safe prior to the firefighters going in.

The entire department has had counseling over this. Since September 11, 2001, fire departments all over the country have improved their abilities to help their personnel deal with the grief of losing a firefighter in the line of duty. However, in this particular incident, even though everything was done by the book, the communications system, which was state-of-the-art, failed.

There was a rookie firefighter monitoring the panel that controlled the flow of water from the pump. He was sitting in the truck. Someone came to the window and told him (prior to the firefighters going into the house) that the family had gotten out. The rookie couldn’t leave his post. All he had was a walkie-talkie. He tried to get the word to the other firefighters. However, the situation was so critical and chaotic, the commanders on the ground had overridden the normal channels. His message wouldn’t go through. He had to listen to the trapped firefighter’s screams as he was burning, knowing that he had information that could have prevented this tragic loss.

Since that day, the rookie has gone steadily downhill in his performance. The department has taken him off active duty. He has taken up drinking. He got angry when Steve suggested that he go on antidepressant medication. The department is very worried about this firefighter's state of mind.

Here is an individual who chose a career where he could help people on a daily basis. His worldview was shattered by this incident. I believe in the ability, through awareness and mindfulness, to *choose* better thoughts when you feel "bad." But how does one, in the face of such soul-shaking adversity, reach for the better thought?

## The Model

I spoke with Vickie H. Taylor, LCSW, Division Manager for Youth, Adult, and Family Division of Community Services for Prince William County, Virginia. Ms. Taylor has a Masters degree in Social Work and has been in community service for 27 years. Her husband has been a firefighter for 20 years. After September 11, 2001, Ms. Taylor and Sybil Wolin wrote a small book, *The New Normal*, based on the lessons learned by the New York Fire Department. The name of the book refers to the transformations that occurred with the firefighting profession after 9/11.

The primary purpose of a firefighter is to protect lives and property, which "provides satisfaction and a sense of focus" (Taylor & Wolin, 2002, p. 8). The authors divide the book into three parts: (1) protective shields, (2) the qualities of a winner, and (3) moving forward.

Protective shields refers to the "external support" that firefighters gather around them: family; a collective sense of purpose; and the history, traditions, and rituals. Firefighters think of each other as family. This feeling is "linked by the bonds of a noble calling: to save lives" (Taylor & Wolin, 2002, p. 6). This bond serves as protection from the emotional hazards of the job. Firefighters extend the "family" designation to the family members of individual firefighters and to family members who have lost a loved one in the line of duty.

Firefighters are bound by a sense of purpose and by the history, traditions, and rituals they have honored over the years. Old traditions survive to this day, including white gloves, bagpipes, "Amazing Grace," and so on. New traditions and rituals are added as appropriate and are as varied as there are numbers of firehouses. The one constant, however, "has remained the same throughout: taking care of their own" (Taylor & Wolin, 2002, p. 11). Traditions connect firefighters to one another and to their common past.

Firefighters are winners. They exhibit the qualities of insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. Firefighters understand the fragility and preciousness of life. They put their own on the line every day. They are realistic and practical. They live each day as it comes, but they stay prepared to live it to its fullest (Taylor & Wolin, 2002, p. 15).

Firefighters exercise both individual and collective independence and honor each other for their decisions. They make "lasting and meaningful connections that provide friendship and a sense of belonging...[which provides] a good source of practical help, emotional support, and understanding." They recognize when things need to get done and take the initiative, both individually and collectively to creatively solve problems and come up with solutions. This

“engages your skills, focuses your mind and helps you feel competent and useful.” Creativity and humor provide an outlet for tension, pain, and sadness. They use these outlets as a way “to gain a healthy perspective on life” (Taylor & Wolin, 2002, p. 18-25).

“A firefighter’s job has deep moral roots...you do the job because you are committed to helping others.” This speaks to the idea of the power of compassion mentioned earlier. This trait helps the firefighter “believe that life is good and worth investing in” (Taylor & Wolin, 2002, p. 26-27).

Moving forward, post-9/11, Taylor and Wolin (2002) refer to the “new normal...knowing things will never be the same, firefighters are looking for constructive and hopeful ways to approach life as it is now—in the firehouse, on the job, and at home.” The new normal is honoring the feelings of loss and “focusing energy on the future as a way to honor your fallen friends[, and]... struggling to recapture the joy in life...observes firefighter Joe Finley, ‘Firemen have an intuitive way of dealing with this. We know what needs to be done’” (pp. 28-29). September 11, 2001, was an F-bifurcation for firefighters across the United States. They have effectively turned this into a P-bifurcation by *consciously* changing core processes and through increased support for those emotionally impacted by the events of that day.

## Teaching People the Process of Transformation

My goal for what I want people to say when they complete my workshop is, “I get it.” I want them to *know* what it takes to be happy in their lives. We create the world as we live it. Jaworski (1998) describes the new “biology of cognition [as]...‘knowing how we know’...cognition is not representation of the world ‘out there’ but rather a ‘bringing forth of the world through the process of living itself’” (p. 175).

The basis of this workshop must be a discussion of love and compassion. Everything else builds on this framework. Some of the needed elements already exist in the workshop, such as visioning (that is, determining a sense of purpose), planning, and monitoring goals. However, the following elements need to be developed to enable people to get to that *knowing* that is necessary for them to recognize when to proactively transform their lives and how to do it:

- Meditation practice
- Lessons in creativity
- Lessons in building community
- Practice in attending to emotion and feelings

The ultimate goal is for each person to understand what it means to live an authentic life and to be committed to that end. It is fine for there to be differences among us. Living an authentic life is about honoring your own life, while honoring others’ right to live their own authentic life. Briggs and Peat (1999) describe the “wall” that separates the inside from the outside as the “vortex...[which] suggests the paradox that the individual is also the universal: Our creative moments—whether it is looking freshly at a tree or coming to a new understanding about our lives—are moments when we are in touch with our own authentic truth, when we experience our unique presence in the world...the experience of a unique presence is also often coupled with a sensation of ourselves as indivisible from the whole” (p. 28).

Another way to demonstrate this interconnectedness is through the metaphor of Indra’s

Net, provided us by Hua-yen Buddhism. Indra's Net, which covers the entire universe in all directions, contains a glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net. Each jewel reflects all of the other jewels (Keeney, 1983, p. 139). If each individual represents an "eye" in the net, we each are connected and reflect all other individuals. When anyone of us is impacted, positively or negatively, we all are impacted in the same way.

In prior workshops, I've found that not everyone is interested in learning about quantum theory. Those who will enjoy the conversation that provides scientific proof may be turned off when the summarization of the implications of quantum theory starts sounding mystical (Rosenblum & Kuttner, 2006, p. 12). Those who resonate with the mystical, may be turned off by the scientific proof. I must develop and/or direct a balanced conversation that satisfies both needs.

## **The Impact on Society**

Laszlo (1996), writes, "To the best of our knowledge there is but one system in all the universe of which the parts are conscious while the whole is not, and that is human society" (p. 138). His Holiness the Dalai Lama and H.C. Cutler (1998) postulate in *The Art of Happiness*, "...it's important to recognize that if human conflicts are created by misuse of human intelligence, we can also utilize our intelligence to find ways and means to overcome these conflicts. When human intelligence and human goodness or affection are used together, all human actions become constructive...we can learn to respect other's views and other's rights" (p. 55). How content we are with ourselves and our situation often dictates how we deal with others (p. 22).

We cannot force others to be the way we want them to be. We can only influence. If each person takes responsibility for their own happiness, we will be more inclined to be tolerant of others (Briggs & Peat, 1999, p. 9). Mischel and Desmet (2000) report that people who exercise self-regulation through the setting and pursuit of flexible goals tend to make decisions that impact them positively, even in the midst of conflict. When people believe in their ability to control their situation, they are better able to cope, "even if the perception is illusory" (p.258-259).

Laszlo (1996) encourages us to "consciously and purposely evolve society, the carrier of human evolution in our age. The threat is that the rapid evolution of increasingly complex structures in society may stifle the individual, locking him into relations that, while eminently functional in assuring dynamic stability in society, may be inhuman and constraining for its members" (p. 138). It is critical that each individual understand the process of personal transformation to provide what the firefighters call "a shield" against individual destabilization. It is also critical that each person take responsibility for his or her own happiness.

When we live authentic lives, we have the power to influence. Humans "desire to have an impact on others and feel connected to them" (Briggs & Peat, 1999, p. 34). When we influence from a place of compassion and love, "if we're genuinely happy, positive, thoughtful, helpful, and honest, this subtly influences those around us" (Briggs & Peat, 1999, p.41).

## **Conclusion**

How we are as individuals—how we feel, behave, interact—impacts society as a whole in subtle and not so subtle ways. Briggs and Peat (1999) write, "In a chaotic system, everything

is connected, through negative and positive feedback, to everything else...the total feedback begins to amplify the small into the large and suddenly the unpredictable takes place” (p. 34). When we are conscious about the subtleties of life, our options become infinite and “our lives deeper and more harmonious” (Briggs & Peat, 1999, p. 9).

There are two pieces to the puzzle of the authentic life that I have failed in the past to focus on in my workshops. First, the idea that we must be conscious and aware of our feelings and emotions to more effectively make decisions. Jaworski (1998) tells us, “Consciousness is what gives attention... We have to think, as Einstein said, with feelings in our muscles” (p. 82). Second, the idea that happiness comes from showing compassion and love toward others which results in the building of a supporting community. The Dalai Lama wants to secularize mindfulness meditation. I hope to become a part of that effort.

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