

HURRICANE KATRINA: A RETROSPECTIVE

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This narrative chronicles two friends' experiences with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. One lived the experience, the other observed it. Both used their personal agency to cope with the disaster. The survivor of the hurricanes describes her emotional response to the disaster and ways of coping. The other also found the experience emotionally draining, and sought ways to intervene both with her friend's family and within educational and social contexts. They used each other to express their frustrations but also recognized the strengths, resilience, and supports available within communities that enable them to survive. This is a lesson to families about responding to warnings, and about having the capacity to leave and the good fortune to have jobs and benefits to assist in the reclaiming of their lives.

There are few events in life that remain indelibly etched and can be recalled instantaneously at the mention of a name. Hurricane Katrina was such an event. It uncovered people's humanity, strengths, weaknesses, fears, outrage, hope, and resilience. This narrative describes the experiences and emotions of two friends who had different experiences with the hurricanes: One lived through the hurricane and the other showed concern and helped her launch a year-long effort to teach and learn about the events and illuminate the disparities between those who escaped and those who were trapped.

This article presents a story of personal survival, hope for the future, friendship, and the professional response to disaster as viewed through the lens of social justice. Putting personal stories through reflective analysis is an instructive intervention in social work practice. People gain strength from hearing about others' power to overcome adversity. This article exemplifies the importance of the narrative in social work practice.

The Narrative

The general format for understanding the impact of Hurricane Katrina has been that of the personal interview during which people recount their experience or reactions (Ward, 2005). These narratives are a window to the resilience and culture of a people. What follows are the authors' stories. The power of the personal story is clear in news accounts and Spike Lee's recently aired HBO special, "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four

Acts." The narrative featured in this article begins with RD, New Orleans resident. Interspersed throughout are comments from RG, a friend of RD. Both work in academia. Bold italicized wording to emphasize points are made in the narrative.

Hearing is Not Necessarily Believing

RD: The Saturday before our evacuation began pretty much as any other Saturday; I was busy running errands. A very early telephone conversation with my husband centered around four things: hearing the latest update of where the storm was; filling my gas tank; registering my daughter for dancing school; and feeling a degree of comfort that my mom was hospitalized and that would be a safe place for her in the event of an evacuation. Not two hours had passed when I got a phone call from my husband: Hurricane Katrina was headed toward New Orleans. Then I received a phone call from the hospital asking me to come and get my mother, who was being released from the hospital because of the storm. *[My mother was admitted to the hospital the Thursday before the evacuation because she was experiencing a rapid heartbeat; her status was most probably considered non-critical so her cardiologist decided to release her.*



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I believe she would have been released from the hospital the upcoming Monday.] My first thought was: "Oh my God, here we go again." Not quite a year before, we evacuated because of Hurricane Ivan, a harrowing experience in itself.

RG: I had heard about Hurricane Katrina and wondered about it, but wasn't too worried as during the summer months there are frequent news reports of hurricanes. I have had a little experience with hurricanes. In the early 1970s we experienced Hurricanes Agnes and Camille in Virginia. During my graduate studies in Atlanta a tornado occurred, and my most recent experience was in the District of Columbia a few years ago, when Hurricane Isabel left us without lights for seven days. It didn't occur to me to call to check on RD. I thought things would go okay.

RD: My husband picked up my mother from the hospital, and then they went to her house to pack some clothes, unplug all appliances, and turn off any lights. I thought we would be able to ride out the storm just like we did with Tropical Storm Cindy a few weeks before—but not this time. The evacuation was voluntary, yet strongly encouraged. As we prepared to evacuate, we watched the news as the experts tracked the storm and listened to reports that this was the "big one" experts had been talking about for so long. My husband began to board up all of our windows and glass doors, secure objects, and place other objects in the shed. The prescriptions that my mom was given when she left the hospital needed to be filled, and some other personal items needed to be purchased as well. So as I tended to these tasks my husband reminded me: "This is an evacuation, not a vacation," which was my directive to take only the things we needed for a couple of days or until the storm had passed, and that's exactly what we did.

RG: I recently heard Mayor Nagin say that the mandated evacuations were not ordered until Sunday morning, the day before the storm. I think the public were confused about when the evacuation was ordered and whether people had enough time to react.

RD: We left early Sunday morning for Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As we packed the

car with all the things we thought we would need for the next few days, the last item I placed in the trunk of the car was my briefcase, which had the statistics book and notes for the course I was taking. I thought I could do some studying for my class on Thursday. We pulled the cars left behind into the driveway. This time I didn't say "goodbye" to my house, as I had done before. *[Before, in previous evacuations I said goodbye to my house and when I returned, all was intact; this time I did not say goodbye and we suffered a terrific loss.]* We made one last stop before leaving the city to pick up my mother's prescriptions. They were not ready, as had been promised the day before; we remained hopeful that she would be okay for the trip ahead. The ride to Baton Rouge was a long one, lasting nearly six hours; ordinarily it would take one hour and fifteen minutes. One of the main roads in Baton Rouge was Airline Highway, the street that would take us to our son's house. Because that road was blocked, we decided to stop and eat. This was the first time we had gotten out of the car, stretched, and were able to truly breathe for the first time since we left New Orleans.

Displacement or Finding a Home?

RD: We evacuated to my son's apartment, a relatively small one-bedroom apartment in Baton Rouge. And while we were glad to have someplace to go, the apartment was crowded. Now, there were six other people staying with my son; we slept on sofa cushions, air mattresses, fold-out sofa sleepers, and one twin bed (assigned to my mother). Our first few hours were spent without electricity. We tried to manage without power and air; we even had to prepare our meal for that day on the grill. Later that evening, we regained power and spent the rest of that day listening to the news as the storm was tracked. The wait began.

The Actual Event

RD: During the early hours the storm hit our area with high-velocity winds and rain. Seemingly we missed getting the worst of it, as the hurricane was reclassified as a Category 3. Then everything changed! The levees broke

and the water gushed into the city. Three levees were breeched: the levee at the 17th street canal, the levee at Haynes Boulevard (near our home), and the levee at the London Street Canal. Water gushed into the city in a tsunami-like manner from three different points. And then there was the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a waterway that dumped so much water in St. Bernard Parish that nearly every home, business, and school was destroyed. Yet most of the focus was on the devastation in Ward Nine. This waterway also dumped water into a section of Orleans Parish where those homes got as much as ten feet of water and were washed off of their foundations. The entire city was not impacted by the flooding; only those areas that were not considered to be on higher ground and those areas that were in the "saucer" authorities had often spoke about. These areas were most likely to flood, and my home was in one of those areas. Not since Hurricane Betsy had the city been so immobilized, but now the damage wasn't just in one section of town; it was the whole town. Water levels varied from several inches to eight feet, but regardless of the amount of water, the majority of those homes, businesses, and schools were severely damaged.

For the next two weeks we stayed glued to our television and to our computer to find out what was going on in the city. We saw the standing water, house rooftops seemingly floating in water, people standing on rooftops, some with children, some with babies and some with elderly; then we saw the people who were wading in the water trying to find safe ground. They were walking, they were on air mattresses, and most had children. Some even had elderly who were sick or disabled, and they kept coming. I had never seen anything like this before in my entire life.

RG: At this point America was seeing what was happening in the gulf area and particularly New Orleans. It was an amazing phenomenon, and my family and I stared at the television in disbelief. For a social worker, seeing poverty was not a surprise, but seeing the vast number of poor and disabled, primarily Black people, on roofs, at the convention center, on the side of roads was incredible. I thought about RD and told my family I believed she

went to her son's place in Baton Rouge (I then began to get confused). We had talked a few weeks earlier and she told me her son had moved to Baton Rouge to work as a store manager, but I couldn't remember the name of the store. My sister called and asked about RD. I told her I hadn't heard but I called her phone just in case. I then attempted to look up a phone number for her son and could not find one, nor could I find him after calling some of the major retailers in the area. I found a link on the Internet and left messages there for her and her son. No word. I continued to search the Web. This went on for a while and then early one morning I opened my e-mail at work and there was a message from her. I was so excited I e-mailed her right away with the subject line "Hallelujah!" I also called her cell phone. I was relieved to learn of her and her family's safety. RD sounded exasperated and doubtful about what was going to happen and when they could return to New Orleans. Immediately I wanted to help and asked if they needed money. She said they were fine. I was relieved to hear she was fine physically although she said the stress was a bit much.

Around the same time we began dialogue at school and with friends about the events and the issue of poverty and its attendant ills. I, along with several members of the faculty, joined a committee to plan a teach-in about African Americans and disasters as it related to the school's philosophy.

RD: Every day we waited and watched from a distance what was going on in our city. The water was still standing, people were still being rescued from rooftops by helicopters, and reluctant residents were still being almost forcibly evacuated from their homes. We watched in awe from sun up to sun down the city being emptied; the folks who were last to leave were gathered in the Superdome and bused to a point on Interstate 10 where they were then taken to designated evacuation points. New Orleans was dead. Nearly 95% of the population had been evacuated. *[Could we return?]*

The Devastation

RD: Our next concern was to see how our house weathered the storm. Aerial pictures

of neighborhoods taken daily showed how high the water was in areas and the damage the water caused. We were relieved when we determined our house was intact. It did not shift, our shed did not shift, no trees had fallen on our house, and the only thing we could determine was that some shingles were missing from the roof. Other family members did not fare so well: my husband's aunt's house in the Lower Ninth Ward shifted from her street to the corner, and my mother-in-law's house, which was considered to be on higher ground, had 8 feet of water and the inside was literally turned upside down *[not only our problems but family problems]*. It was two weeks before the water was finally drained from certain areas of the city, and my house was located in one of those areas. The standing water in my house contributed to the damage it sustained. When all was cleared and we were able to see the streets, we felt good that our house was still seemingly okay.

Helping Out in New Orleans

RD: My husband had to return to work (he works for the phone company). The rest of my immediate family remained in Baton Rouge because New Orleans had not reopened for residents to return. The television became our link to what was going on. We had to begin reclaiming our lives, which included applying for disaster assistance from our insurance company, FEMA, the Red Cross, and other agencies that were lending aid. We also began contacting our creditors. At that point, the only thing we knew about the status of our financial affairs was that they had come to a screeching halt. All the creditors we contacted were sympathetic and understanding and for the next three months there was a moratorium on our bill payments.

Seeing Our House for the First Time after the Hurricane

RD: One of the first things my husband did when he returned to the city was check on our house. By this time, the National Guard had begun to patrol the city. The police force were exhausted and stretched by the constant demand for their services, and looting of houses had begun by those who had either remained

in the city or were beginning to sneak back into the city and further victimize folks.

The aerial view on the Internet was not enough for us; we needed to see for ourselves just what condition our house was in after Hurricane Katrina. When my husband was able to get to our area, three things happened: he did not go there alone, he was stopped and questioned by the National Guard, and he took pictures. From the outside our house seemed fine except for the markings on our garage door (made by the National Guard when they did area checks of all the residences in New Orleans for people and animals) and the busted door frame *[I suppose to make their entry and search easier]*. But once inside the house, there was the true damage. Since the water was in the house for nearly two weeks, everything was still wet; the water lines on the wall let us know how high the water rose. The mold was creeping its way up to the ceiling. The heating vent on our roof was blown off, causing a big hole in our roof where the water just poured in. The pressure was seemingly so strong and continuous it created a big hole in the den ceiling and we could see the sky. Every room was touched, either from the dampness, the mold, or the force of the water, which caused some pieces of furniture to topple over. *[Everything was ruined and lost.]* We also lost two vehicles; as a matter of fact, water was still standing in them and then there was that smell—one I will never forget.

In the midst of all of this all I could think of was the jewelry and the perfume that I left and since they were high on my dresser, I thought they would still be okay. I had my husband go back and get my jewelry, my watches, and my fragrances. *[Continued to grasp for some level of normalcy]*. We were fortunate the looters had not gotten to those items that were valuable to us *[What were they looking for and who might have been involved? These individuals were just thieves who, for whatever reason, did not leave the city; officials had later suggested that these were drug addicts who were without money and had not had a "fix" in some time and the looting provided them with a method of payment for that "fix."]*

The pictures brought forth the harsh reality of the damage we sustained from the storm. I kept looking at the pictures over and over. ***[First stage of the grieving process shock and disbelief]***

It would be another month before the area was deemed environmentally safe and we could return to the city and work in our home. There was no electricity, no running water, and no sign of any life. When I first returned to New Orleans, after the storms, all I could say was “*Oh My God!*” It was so heartbreaking to see what happened to neighborhoods in such a brief time. I was speechless, heartbroken, and completely bewildered.

Cleaning Up

RD: Before we could enter the house, we had to suit up with masks, shoes that could be thrown away, gloves, caps for our heads, safety glasses, and white disposable jumpsuits. When I entered, all I could do was shake my head. I walked through every room not knowing what I would see; the carpet was still wet, and a slushy mud-like “muck” was in the garage. Most of my books were lost, our clothes in the dresser drawers were wet and smelly, the closets were wet, and all our shoes and purses were lost. And believe it or not in the midst of all of this, someone had stolen one of our television sets. My first response was that they should pay a price for this, and all I could wish was “I hope they catch some kind of fungus or some incurable disease.” ***[I was not angry, just a true declaration of how I felt then and still feel; the looting was a loathsome act.]***

Prior to our seeing the house, my husband was able to retrieve some of our hanging clothes (before the mold got to them), and although we had to sort through them and discard those that were damaged or had the smell of “muck,” we were able to salvage most of them. The clothes in the dresser drawers, where the water and dampness had gotten, were all destroyed and had to be replaced. While we were staying in Baton Rouge, we began to replace some of the basic clothing we lost.

Moving On

RD: It took a while to process all of this but as we struggled to cope we also realized that forward movement was needed. First, we had to accept that the life we had known before the storm no longer existed and that we must begin the rebuilding and recapturing of our lives. And so we did, by first making a plan. Everything inside needed to be taken out so we began the arduous task of cleaning out the house. The feeling was indescribable, watching the mound of all our belongings grow—furniture, appliances, books, clothes, shoes—everything just got swept away. We were able to retrieve some electronics, books, and even some of my lecture notes and old diskettes that were not ruined.

The next step was having the house gutted. Since the mold stains were high on the walls, they had to be torn down. I was able to save some of my dishes and some wedding gifts, but at some point the effort became futile and I just realized that there was no reason to hold on to those items that had meaning but were exposed for months to elements that could be environmentally unsafe. The bottom kitchen cabinets still had standing water, and that’s when I realized it was time to let it all go. I left my house that day and didn’t return for several weeks. When I saw it again, it had been gutted and all that was left standing was the structure; inside, only the studs remained. We had the studs treated to kill any remaining mold, raised the windows, and closed the door. This was in October 2005. ***[Our date to move back into our house was October 2006—exactly one year after we gutted the house.]***

Family Life

RD: My daughters and I had been commuting to New Orleans from Baton Rouge all of this time, except for a brief stay with my sister. At this point, the plan was to come back to New Orleans, live with my sister, and try to find someplace to stay. But, it didn’t quite work out that way. It was very difficult living in a house with my sister and my mother who were having difficulty getting along ***[and seemed to argue all the time]***, as the two men (my husband and brother-in-law) in the house tried to be the peacekeepers. All of this growing

stress and the change in living arrangements were having a negative impact on my daughters, so we moved back to Baton Rouge with my son.

My husband was working seven days a week with every other weekend off, so he stayed in New Orleans (at my sister's house) and visited us in Baton Rouge as often as he could. There were fewer people staying at my son's apartment, and while it was more peaceful, it was still cramped. For nearly four months we slept on air mattresses and alternated in sleeping in the twin bed. In the midst of all of this, we were house hunting, and that was extremely difficult. Seemingly every other day we were coming to New Orleans to follow up on a possible lead. Suddenly, rental property had become a valuable commodity in New Orleans, and rent was becoming ridiculously high.

Finally, we found someplace to stay and we moved back to New Orleans on Thanksgiving Day 2005. The good news is that we were all together, but I had the strangest feeling being back in New Orleans. It had become a ghost town with police patrolling the areas and National Guard soldiers with guns on corners and posted at federal facilities. The streets were dark and deserted. *[The city was under martial law.]*

City Life after Katrina

RD: Not many businesses were open. A very few restaurants opened for limited hours, a few days a week, offering limited menus. Few grocery stores and gas stations were open, but no shopping centers were open. A few large department stores like Target, Sears, Wal-Mart, and some appliance stores were open. The streets were so dark and all I could remember saying was it felt like I was in the "Twilight Zone." There were no traffic lights, no street lights, and no house lights because the few people were living in the city. There was scant mail delivery in the New Orleans area since the main post office was badly damaged and mail was still being processed through Baton Rouge. We received no magazines, no publications of any sort, and no first-class mail. We received mail about once

or twice a week, but there was parcel post delivery, so we were able to receive packages.

RG: I sent a Christmas card, but it was several weeks before RD received it. I was worried because I believed that they would not get the card. After several weeks she received the mail but it was damaged.

RD: Throughout this entire ordeal, we considered ourselves to be among the very fortunate. Our jobs remained intact, and we were able to continue receiving an income, unlike most homeowners and residents who had lost not only their homes but also their jobs, income, and health-care benefits. We had someplace to stay, and we did not experience the "nightmares" in dealing with our insurance companies. They were accommodating and patient and settled. Our insurance company responded quickly to the needs of the hurricane victims employed by the phone company by setting up a "tent city" in Baton Rouge that provided food, clothing, shelter, financial assistance, uniforms, toiletries, shots (tetanus and diphtheria), and on-site representatives from FEMA and Red Cross for several weeks. This group was unbelievable in how they so rapidly responded to this crisis. *[Some things did work well.]*

Efforts to Rebuild the City

RD: But the waiting process continues. Mayor Nagin established a task force to design a process of bringing people home and rebuilding communities. This task force was composed of people from the business, education, and religious communities. The recommendations from the task force's report were not embraced well and were criticized as being racist and classist as they discounted a large segment of the African-American, middle- to upper-class families who resided in New Orleans east (my area) and recommended these areas be the last to redevelop because of the damage. To date, the mayor's office has not responded to this effort, and a new task force has been formed with seemingly more input from the community. However, this effort is not yet complete.

The state of Louisiana had also developed a "bring back Louisiana" plan to assist those

homeowners who were uninsured or underinsured to receive federal grants to assist in the repair, relocation, or replacement of their homes. This program received full federal funding, and there is a formula and application process involved based on insurance monies received, FEMA monies received, and appraised value of home pre-Katrina. A subsequent screening process is involved.

And of course there was the wait to hear from FEMA regarding revised flood guidelines. This affected many people's decision as to whether to rebuild based on the new building requirements. This wait had all homeowners on pins and needles. Questions were raised: Will I have to elevate my house? Will I have to demolish it because of the new guidelines?

Making a Personal Decision

RD: As many other homeowners, we were undecided about what to do regarding our home. Should we try to purchase another home in a safer (from floods) area of town or should we repair or rebuild and take our chances? We then decided that we were too old to start the process of buying another house and that housing is just too expensive especially now. In July 2006, we decided to repair our house. Now that process is underway, we remain hopeful that our city or neighborhood will not experience another catastrophic storm and that the new levee system will protect the citizens of New Orleans.

Helping at a Distance

RG: I called and e-mailed my friend to keep up to date with her. Sometimes she sounded emotional about the displacement, the frustration of getting their lives back together. Yet she showed resilience. Each time I heard from her something had been done although I know she could have become impatient or depressed, or given up hope. Her spirituality seemed to help her. I prayed as well. Both RD and her husband kept their jobs, and her children were able to get back into school. This was a blessing as well. Yet I sensed a very deep loss to her family, as the New Orleans that RD knew was far from recovering and she described the scene as being gray.
[Dismal]

Helping in Real Time

RG: Meanwhile, my church launched leadership efforts with its members and the downtown community. They raised huge sums of money. I donated the special items and the monetary contribution they asked for. They were able to transport one airplane and one tractor trailer full of items. These efforts made us proud at the church.

Meanwhile as a member of our Public Relations Commission at my church, I was asked to chair and plan an event on poverty. We decided to title the forum "Poverty: Invisible in Plain View." On the brochure we had a picture of a homeless person sleeping on a bench in front of the White House. We reached out to get a notable panel to talk to the church and general public about this problem: included Congressman Elijah Cummings of Baltimore; and Dr. Ronald Walters, University of Maryland Professor and noted political commentator. We were able to get a media person from *The Washington Post* to facilitate the panel discussion. The two other members were social service providers whose population was the poor. This panel went well, and we saw this as a contribution to the community.

Dealing with the Big Picture

RG: Meanwhile our university held a number of events, including the acceptance of college students from the Gulf area. Specifically, my school planned a full-day mandatory teach-in for our students, field instructors, and faculty. More than 300 attended. We had a full day of workshops and speeches that addressed the planning for disaster, media response, mental health needs, and poverty, especially as they impact African-Americans. This event was supported by a small grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. An article was written and published in our local chapter of National Association of Social Workers newsletter to share this experience at our school.

As I planned events for our agencies that provide internships to our students, we also planned our mid-year event to address the aftermath of Katrina. We were able to have the Red Cross train 60 people in the Level 1

disaster response; we had a workshop on missing and exploited children; primary trauma and secondary trauma; as well as a workshop on viewing the events from a cultural perspective and dealing with poverty. There was a brief session on packing a "to-go bag."

The Future of New Orleans: Acceptance or Advocacy?

RD: There is a final note to all of this. Hurricane Katrina will be a part of "us" for the rest of our lives. She has caused us to be reflective, forgiving, hopeful, curious, cautious, more observant, more tolerant, more patient, and a bit philosophical. We have all come to realize that we don't have control over much and we have to take each day as it comes. We have also come to realize that while there are efforts to rebuild New Orleans, it won't be the New Orleans that we once called home. The demographics have changed. The city no longer has a majority Black population. The public school system is being overhauled, and schools have become charter, have been taken over by the state, or are being operated by higher education institutions; to date there are only about seven schools that are actually operated by the Orleans Parish School Board.

The economics of the city are changing as well. Real estate is becoming increasingly expensive as housing developments are being torn down with the plan to build mixed-income housing. Neighborhoods are being reconstituted, and renters are being forced to move out because of rent increases. One event that seemingly may have a positive outcome is that businesses are hiring more African-Americans than they had in the past. There is finally the realization that many of the city's residents who have not returned are the service workers, our working poor, who earn minimum wage and are the backbone of the hotel and restaurant industry. In an effort to reestablish businesses, wages in these areas have increased tremendously with bonuses and other incentives awarded to full-time workers.

Remnants of Katrina and Rita still beleaguer the city. Progress is being made but at a very slow pace. Vast neighborhoods still have not begun the clean-up process, and some neighborhoods will probably never return to

the way they were. Infrastructure problems proliferate. There are holes in the streets, power outages, and a power company that wants to increase its rates. The city is so financially strapped that one has to wonder if there is any way to recover.

Schools are not reopening with any speed for our high school students. There were only seven scheduled to reopen for the school term 2006–2007, and the majority of them are either magnet or charter schools. Colleges and universities are dealing with enrollment concerns so much so that their staffs have been reduced and programs have been temporarily shut down or closed down completely. The emphasis is placed, for whatever reason, on workforce development.

The city lost its general hospital to the storm and now has to rely on a MASH unit set up at a former department store with more serious conditions being sent either to local area hospitals (only two in New Orleans and five in the greater New Orleans area) or to a medical center set up about seven miles away from the city.

There is much violence in New Orleans. Many of the residents who are now returning are part of the city's poor. They are returning to old neighborhoods and with much anger, much desperation, and many of the same old habits. Murder rates continue to affect our teenagers, who are being killed and who haven't had a chance to realize life. Most of this criminal activity is blamed on drugs. The police are so overwhelmed and understaffed that the National Guard has returned and the State Police are now assisting local authorities with daily matters.

Summation of the Lived Experience of a Katrina Survivor

RD: As we try to reclaim our sense of home, there are constant reminders of the impact of Mother Nature. Katrina will always be with us; we will see her in the streets that still need repair, the businesses that have yet to reopen, the schools that have been so badly damaged and remain closed, the homes with all their sentimental value that are forever lost, the hospitals that are overcrowded and understaffed, the churches that offer limited

spiritual help, and the playgrounds that have become FEMA trailer parks. But with all of this, we nonetheless remain hopeful and prayerful that all will soon be all right.

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FEMA trailers in front of shotgun houses, 20 months later.



Middle class New Orleans rebuilding.



Upper class New Orleans rebuilding.

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