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Comic Ritual in a Tragic World: Lessons in the Metaphor of Drama

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I. The Metaphor

Metaphor and drama share an essence: transformation. A metaphor carries one world of meaning to another, enlarging what it comes to by what it brings along with it. What is at stake is a meaning, which is transformed to something quite beyond its original state.

Drama takes an action done by characters, and transforms it from the mundane to the meaningful, carrying meaning from the realm of its factuality to wider worlds. Seen this way, drama transforms all action to the act of understanding, of putting some sort of prop under mere fact, of supplying--by some combination of rational, imagistic, associative, and poetic means--context, explanation, cause, meaning, analogy, connection, relation.

The fact of death, transported by metaphor in one ancient vision of the world, sees death not just as the opposite and terminus of life, but also as order turned to disorder, ambition turned to destruction, strength and wisdom turned to weakness and foolishness. And this in turn is transported into (that is, becomes a metaphor for) a world where sudden changes of fate, mediated by the gods, are the barometers of wisdom. This is the world of tragedy, in which our most luminous visions and most courageous efforts to understand, to preserve, and to improve may be reversed into chaos, destruction and death. The irony could not be more profound or more total. A world where this can happen is a tragic world, where our fates are an agonizing mystery, death is imminent, violence is capricious, maiming, and deadly, striving can be dangerous, and pain is permanent.

Similarly, imagine a domestic world, concerned only with patching up its problems and moving on with life. Surviving, getting the best of the person next to you in a competition for food, money, or a mate, is transported to (becomes a metaphor for) getting ahead in society, wanting to learn from mistakes, overcome problems, and promote harmony in the widest possible circle. This, in turn, is transported into (becomes a metaphor for), a world where these are the sole concerns—where peace reigns and lives continually improve, uninterrupted and unaffected by the sober uncertainties and heavy burdens of the tragic universe.

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In comedy, a world where the essential action is domestic, there is a moving together, a healing, a joining of the once separated couple who are to create the new generation and continue the flow of life. The ironies of this world are those of ignorances, stupidities, foibles exposed, and dignities deflated. In this world, the defective and the guilty are not dangerous or deadly, but merely ridiculous. They can recover and learn, and re-integrate into the community. This world is protected from violence. If violence occurs, it is not serious (a slap, a punch, a fall) and the wounds heal. Even bruised egos heal and the characters learn what they need to learn to change their ways and get along.

Comedy is healing, accommodating and including, while tragedy is explosive, destroying families and even civilizations for the sake of enlarging vision. That is, if the comic vision is the building or repair of a community, affirming domestic custom and the wisdom of social virtue, the tragic vision affirms only that we can strive to understand, strive to choose wisely. This latter vision is achieved ironically, in an extreme encounter with limits. We learn how large our deeds, human understanding, ambition and striving can be by watching those much larger than ourselves exceed their limits and get crushed.

II. The Comic Mirror

Within this tragic vision, there is an implied comic mirror, lurking on the other side of the deepest ironies. This comes out most eloquently in farce. Farce approaches tragic vision by being the opposite of realism, eschewing the mere factuality of things, and the flat ironies that accompany them. In realism, things are what they are, and only what they are. Whatever implication or meaning we may assign to them has a tendency to collapse, to be patently ironical (it is what it is but nothing more) in a world of mere factness.[1]

In farce, however, fact functions in a world wildly distorted, working by a logic which may be clear, but which is wacky and impossible. "Is man no more than this?" Lear asks. If man is but a "bare, forked animal," he is a lot less than we took him for. This is, or can be, deeply ridiculous, deeply amusing. When Laurel and Hardy's determined politeness and civil

[1] The essentials of this view of realism can be found in Northrop Frye's account of the dramatic forms in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957).

good manners turn suddenly to infantile rage, causing them to wreak methodical destruction, piece by piece, on whatever object attaches to the person they are angry at (automobile,[2] grocery shop[3], house[4]), the destruction is funny. In defense of their dignity and respectability, they tear apart something valuable which belongs to whoever impugns that dignity, like a child tearing apart another child's teddy bear. And the offending party retaliates, creating new destruction and new humiliation. With each round of the battle, the destruction, and the fun, escalate.

Looked at literally, this is pathological. Laurel and Hardy, and whomever they are fighting with, are committing felonies. Looked at metaphorically, the violence is transported to a world in which the threat of violence and destruction is displaced into something far less dangerous and more familiar. It is like our primal response as babies to the game of peek-a-boo. In the first instant, the emergence of a face from a hidden place is frightening. But an instant later, it is recognized--that's Mommy or Daddy or Uncle Harry!--and the fear is replaced by recognition and vented by laughter. The whole process is so much fun that, as we all know, if the child is young enough it can be repeated almost endlessly. Thus in farce, the metaphor allows us to recognize that this is, after all, only dignity and property that are being destroyed, not lives and civilizations. While the world is being torn apart, in small, it is being affirmed in large. We can feel that momentary twinge of horror--he's tearing the walls of that house down!--then laugh and indulge ourselves in the infantile fantasy without ruining the larger world of meaning we think we see and persistently count on being there. And in fact, the ritual of farce is in part a ritual invocation of that larger world, an implicated order, held in abeyance, banned for the evening by agreement, vital by virtue of its absence. It may be possible to claim that the farce is the sacrifice to the tragedy, as if by performing the farce, by admitting this level of fabulous destruction and disorder, we stave off the necessity of the tragedy.

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[2] *Two Tars,* 1928.

[3] *Tit for Tat,* 1935.

[4] *Big Business,* 1929.

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The cruelty of lots of comedy counts on this. The cruelty is funny because it assures us that even if we cross the line, even if our violence somehow becomes heinous, even if we might perpetrate a holocaust (or fail to stop one), the meaning revealed by the consequent ironies will not fail us, as bitter as it may be. This is not the homey comfort of some interpretations of savior religions, but the grit of Greek irony, filtered through the vision of Lear--the world may share nothing of our values and visions, and may trample us; but we can see that, can understand it, can appreciate the gap between the importance we think we have and the triviality or inconsequence that attaches to even to the largest of our accomplishments, failures, or visions. "As flies to wonton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport." In some perspective, no matter what the horror, we are comic, ridiculous. This is the vision of the abyss, the darkness made visible by tragedy, but made bearable, brought back to human dimension by comedy, especially by violent comedy. We come together in the recognition of the larger, more frightening world, through the much smaller domestic world of houses, cars, slapsticks, and rolling pins.

Let me offer two illustrations. The first is from one of Laurel and Hardy's films, *Tit for Tat*,[5] in which they are just setting up an electrical appliance shop and run into trouble with the grocer next door. The grocer thinks, erroneously, that Ollie has made advances on his wife. He marches into their store, insults them and breaks something. "Take that." Then, with an harumph, he leaves. Laurel and Hardy go to his shop and retaliate, in turn, by breaking something there. Then the war escalates, with the grocer destroying more and valuable items in the electrical shop and Laurel and Hardy doing the same in the grocery, finally pushing the grocer into a basket of eggs and dumping another basket-full over his head.

But the kicker is that every time Laurel and Hardy decide to retaliate for the grocer's latest raid, and leave their shop to invade his, an anonymous man in a double-breasted suit and fedora enters their shop and steals something from it. Each time, when Laurel and Hardy return to their shop, they encounter him leaving, appliances in hand. Unfailingly, he greets them politely, and they unfailingly return the greeting, never taking notice of the fact that he is carrying items out of their store. Finally, the man returns with a large truck and completely empties the store! While the form of this sequence is the old reliable running gag, the

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[5] Produced by Hal Roach, directed by Charles Rogers, 1935.

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metaphorical effect is horrifying. It is as if the universe had it in for our heroes. Just when they are down and under attack, everything is taken from them! Why isn't this devastating? I suspect it is for the same reason that in cartoons, when a character is ironed flat by a steamroller, he always re-inflates to chase again. In this farcical word, no loss is permanent. Healing is magical, and our dignified gents will be back again soon to do battle with the next assault on their pretentious dignities. This whole process is frightening. This world is nasty and vindictive and destructive. But it's frightening in the same way peek-a-boo is frightening. For a moment, deep down, it might look like tragedy, but we quickly recognize our old friend, farce. The sacrifice is offered, made, and accepted.

The second illustration is from Charlie Chaplin. Michael Wood, reviewing books by Joyce Milton and Kenneth S. Lynn on the life and work of Chaplin, repeats Milton's quotation from Chaplin about his theory of comedy: "An idea going in one direction meets another idea *suddenly*....You shriek."[6] Chaplin illustrates his theory by describing himself as the tramp, dignified and serious, approaching an easy chair, spreading his coat-tails with an elegant gesture, and sitting on a cat. "Nothing funny about it, really," says Chaplin, "especially if you consider the feelings of the cat. But you laugh." And Wood recalls Chaplin as Adenoid Hynkel in *The Great Dictator*, playing both Hynkel, the ranting Hitler parody, and the tramp--this time a Jewish barber--who, when he gets his chance to speak about fighting for democracy, starts modestly, but gets swept away by his enthusiasm and also ends up in a rant. Says Wood, "Ranting is ranting....An idea going in one direction meets another idea, and Chaplin plays both ideas, [making] the meeting ground...his [own] face."[7] We laugh, but it hurts to remember who Hynkel really stands for, and the torture and genocide of the Nazi era, just as it hurts to think about the feelings of the cat, or the feelings of the poor sap who had that basket of eggs dumped on him, or his house torn down, board by board.[8] Laughing at destruction is the sacrifice to the God of Fear. Wood ends his article this way: "Chaplin's movies, and indeed his life, remind us of all the tramps and others who *don't* make it to Easy Street, who get to dress up only as themselves, and whose roles do become destinies, because

[6] Michael Wood. "Perseverance to the Point of Madness." *New York Review of Books* XLIV:12 (July 17, 1997), 8.

[7] Wood, 10.

[8] Laurel and Hardy, *Big Business*, 1929.

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the play they are in is endless and all there is."[9] Thus the metaphor of farce reminds us of the real circumstance it distorts. It hurts to think of the ironies of ordinary life and hopelessness many of us face. But whether it is violent destruction or entropic decay, it is precisely the comedian's art to release the laughter, to make us laugh anyway, to help us rise above the seriousness of it all and see it as ridiculous. When we agree to watch, we have sealed the bargain with the sacrificial victim. When we laugh, the sacrifice has been accepted.

III. The Ritual Dance of Offer and Sacrifice

In David Mamet's *Oleanna* we can see tragedy and comedy doing this same intimate, mirrored dance of offer and sacrifice.[10] Mamet's play is particularly interesting in this context because it begins as a relentlessly domestic problem. There is a dispute between a teacher and a student, and an effort made to heal it. But the teacher, John, is often condescending, and obtuse. For a teacher, he is a remarkably poor listener, arrogant and self-absorbed. The student, Carol, is confined by a kind of learning disability (or developmental stage) that allows her to understand only formulaic, true-or-false answers to questions and explicit instructions about what to do next. The result is that when she asks her very literal questions, John's

[9] Wood, 10.

[10] It is important to note at this point that contemporary literary theory makes it difficult to discuss this dance. Brian Richardson ("Beyond Postructuralism: Theory of Character, the Personae of Modern Drama, and the Antinomies of Critical Theory," *Modern Drama* XL:1 [Spring 97] 86-99) argues that contemporary poststructural literary theory, since it denies representation, cannot give a full account of character in modern drama. "...the presentation of character in modern drama remains not only undertheorized but in principle incomprehensible as long as reigning theoretical constraints are observed (87)." The same might be said for action, plot, and theme (what Artistotle called "thought"), since each, in the poststructuralist mode, is deconstructed to the fragments of hegemonic, or subversive ideologies, or to other fragments of ideas seen to be more crucial than action or character or comedy or tragedy--like gender, race, body, performativity and power. Sandra Tomc points out ("David Mamet's *Oleanna* and the Way of the Flesh." *Essays in Theatre* 15:2 [May, 1997], 163-175) that numerous critics have asked whether Mamet has ruined the play by using the first act to tell us what he thinks is "the truth" about who John and Carol are and what happened between them, loading the case for John and against Carol. This assumes, of course, that what is at stake in the play is summed up in the question of what sexual harassment is, whether it really happened in this case, and by extension, whether it happens at all. Could the play be as much about the failure of certain ideas about teaching and knowledge, about study and learning, as it is about sexual harassment and the anti-intellectual depredations of political correctness? Could it be about a connection between the two sets of ideas, each illuminating the other? Could it be about what happens when two people trap themselves in conflicting, stereotypical roles that flow from the institutions and social structures in which they live? One could argue that such a description is useful for understanding hundreds of plays across centuries and cultures. Richardson argues that we need the capacities of poststructuralist analysis, but that it should be combined with elements of humanist and formalist criticism to derive a cogent analysis of the shifting and sometime contradictory representations of character in contemporary drama. In pursuing this analysis, I have used largely the humanist and formalist modes, preferring those traditions that see works of art of art as real entities, and forms as wholes with power to make meaning out of their parts.

misplaced attempts to reason with her become lectures, ever more one-sided, more convoluted, and more impossible to understand. She becomes more confused and desperate, since she understands nothing of his meanderings, asides, footnotes, allusions, elucidations, and explanations. He, blindly believing that more explanation will cure the situation, launches into one line after another of critical exposition, term definition, issue discussion, and even personal anecdote about his own life, past and present. He vainly believes, in the name of patient pedagogy and reason, that this will illustrate the clear truth, produce mutual understanding, and solve the problem.

As we watch, we are probably frustrated by their inability to get together, by their stubbornness and the rather sad incapacities that keep them from a fruitful interchange, digging them ever deeper into a morass of conflict. This is a good setting for a comic turn--a revelation that helps each of them to see the other, to relax and laugh a bit, recognize their limitations and foibles, and start learning from the other. The comic transformation would be toward a student rewarded for her persistence and determination, and a professor satisfied that he has found a way to overcome obstacles to teach successfully. Each would find tolerance for the other's eccentricities, and the happy couple would then achieve their comic union, so to speak, not in sex in this case, but in the good feeling and anticipation of future fruitfulness that crowns any successful relationship.

As we know, of course, things turn out very differently. Carol's disconnected, factoidal memory of the transactions of the first act is apparently laid out for her by her "group" into a picture of a different kind. Each of John's utterances will be decontextualized and reassembled, then hurled back at him as accusations. Harassment and assault appear as the perfect postmodern deconstruction: unpredictable, dangerous, in arbitrary context, and the result of conflicting social ideologies and forces. As Carol, now empowered, now in the driver's seat, presses her charges, John makes an effort to explain to her, to admit his condescensions and other minor failings, to philosophically sympathize with her position about what she is supposed to be learning. He only gradually sees that she is instituting not one, but a whole series of prosecutions against him, first to the full extent of university regulations, then to the full extent of the law. As his situation, both in the university and beyond, grows more desperate, he becomes more and more like the demon she believes she is

prosecuting. Finally, in the end, accused of rape, he knocks her down, stopping just short of smashing her with a chair, screaming that he wouldn't touch her sexually with a ten-foot pole. He has almost become the monster she already sees him as being.

What has happened in this play? The play is, like John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea,* a vision of a tidal wave coming to destroy a person, a family. We see it coming. It comes on relentlessly. It arrives and crashes down. It destroys. It is over. It feels like a random event of nature, like the storms in the sea off the Aran Isles, like the natural storm that catches Lear on the heath and the human one that later kills Cordelia. This latter is the "Great thing of us forgot!" by Albany, who, if he had remembered earlier to rescind the warrant on Cordelia's life might have saved her. But the winds will blow until they are exhausted, and some of us will have to pick up the pieces when it is over and begin again. Inside a comic mirror, an amusing vision of two absurdly limited and flawed people, a tragic wind blew. Like Gloucester's blinding in wake of his misapprehension of the characters of his own sons, injury comes suddenly and with striking cruelty. What's left is really painful and hard to bear.

It seems to me, then, that this play is not about whether Carol or John is right or wrong. It is about the horror of what viciousness, stupidity, and blindness wreak when we mistake them for justice, wisdom, and vision. Carol does destroy John's career, and possibly his family life. But his deafness and arrogance, his pompous self-obsession and obtuseness as a teacher are also damaging. The deepest irony in the vision the play presents is that this is a comic set-up, tending toward farce. We have two narrow creatures whose knee-jerk reactions and drastic limitations, given their chosen roles in life, are quite ridiculous. John is almost a clown, a pretentious pedant-expert, much like Oliver Hardy. Carol is the waif, the nincompoop, the blunderer, all concentration and concern--not dissimilar to Stan Laurel. Like all good comic characters, they take themselves seriously. But what is at stake is not, for instance, pride in the face of a petty insult, but something larger: learning, the truth, the obligation of the teacher, the striving of the learner to understand a difficult and frightening world. Try as we might, we are not quite permitted to laugh. The comic world is there, but it has taken a sour turn. While Laurel and Hardy can destroy a whole car or house without significant consequences, here the consequences, in the second act, come thick and fast. As in Synge's Aran Isles, the breath of fate is constantly soughing in the rafters of the house. There is something about the setting in both plays that suggests to us from the beginning, gives us a kind of foreboding, that

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things will not work out well, that the jaws of destruction will open soon and swallow everything that washes into them.

In Synge's play fate seems to seal the inhabitants of the island in the grip of custom and necessity. Everything is horrifyingly inevitable. In Mamet's play, on the other hand, the context is still comic. These are manners, styles, and social institutions that are being examined. They signal the domestic comedy of manners to the audience in an instant. They carry with them a sense of choice, of the changeability of fashion, of the need for tolerance, learning, and accommodation. In short, they are indelibly comic. Perhaps one reason why the play has provoked so much controversy and outrage is not just that it seems to be a rigged case, but that Mamet won't let us have our comedy, won't let us see these people as clowns whose actions may teach us a little something, but after all, don't mean much. Carol behaves like an automaton, a programmed robot, and so she might be another Stan Laurel, an oh-so-predictable character in the farce. But she is not a robot, and as the stages of destruction of John progress, she looks more and more like a monster. Mamet has offered the sacrifice, but it is not acceptable. The play is as humorless as the characters and laughter does not come. He may have slain the comic god (who is, fortunately, easily resurrected), and this is his sin. He has shown us a domestic world that, as if we didn't know, is unsafe. Something profound, after all, has been lost--not only some faith in what it might mean to be student and teacher, to be learner and scholar, but faith in the comic rite, in the coming together of the loose and ragged ends of imperfect individual transactions into the working, acceptable weave of the social fabric. But I predict that as the social fashions change, and the pressure of the issues raised is eased, this play will seem dryer and funnier. Age will make its characters more and more ridiculous, and the play will be more fun.

IV. Joining the Dance

As we look down at comic characters and ridicule them from a distance, laughing at them for what they have to learn (we are much wiser than they are!), part of us cannot forget (and thanks to Mark Pizzato[11] for reminding me) that they are our sacrifice. They are held up

[11] See Mark Pizzato, "Theaters of Sacrifice: Greek, Aztec, and Postmodern." *Ethnologie und Inszenierung: Ansätze zur Theaterethnologie*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Mark Münzel (Marburg: Förderverein Völkerkunde, 1998), 137-67.

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to us as sacrifices to the household gods, to the gods of survival and security. In the Dionysian mood, without the death of tragic characters, we could not live. And without the humiliations comic characters endure, we could not be assured and confident of our competence and acceptability. The heroes of comedy don't laugh. They are serious. This is the first corollary of the thesis advanced earlier that farce is itself a sacrifice to tragedy, so that comedy can live.

When they are successful, our comedians on the stand-up stage are said to "knock 'em dead." In the tradition of stand-up, the "them" is us, in the audience, laughing at ourselves, at our humorlessness and over-seriousness, at our pretensions, violent customs, and deadly ignorance. Thus the stage-edge, as Pizzato has described it, has nearly disappeared, or works, by mutual agreement, in both directions at once. On the stand-up stage, the threat of comic disgrace disappears when its exemplar, the comedian, takes his bow and exits. On the comic stage, however, the threat is on-going. We need the protection of the comic god to be sure that matters domestic stay that way. The sudden onslaught of disease, war, natural disaster, the depredations of power-seekers, or the hypocritical, murky swamps of political maneuverings, or the welling horror of fear, anger, and violence felt by one individual or one group toward another--all these can rip apart our domestic tranquility not only with a brutal suddenness, but with an equally brutal arbitrariness. If Lear was right about the gods, only comedy can save us, and only then for a while. The sacrifice must be continual, and it must be effective. We must find a way to laugh, for the comic laugh is the expiration of the breath that builds societies. Without that, we spend our time in caves, shrinking in fear.

In the hands of Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter, or the early Tom Stoppard of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* or *Enter a Free Man,* or the David Mamet of *Oleanna,* we find the everyday domestic world of comedy, but without its customary wall of protection, its castle-keep separating it from the ultimate truths and ironies, chaos and destruction of tragedy. Here the walls leak, and seeping into the very warp and woof of that social fabric which is supposed to protect us, into the minor details of everyday reality, which, if they go wrong, we should be able to fix like the plumbing, are the seeds of disaster, of humiliation, destruction and chaos. This is particularly clear in plays like *Oleanna, The Widow's Blind Date,* by Israel Horowitz, *The Visit* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Joe Egg* by Peter Nichols, or *Angels in America,* by Tony Kushner.

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It was Dürrenmatt, writing in 1955, in what was published as *Problems of the Theatre,* who said:

> Tragedy presupposes guilt....vision...a sense of responsibility. In the Punch-and-Judy show of our century....there are no more guilty and also, no responsible men. It is always, 'We couldn't help it'...Everything is dragged along and everyone gets caught somewhere in the sweep of events....Comedy alone is suitable for us. Our world has led to the grotesque as well as to the atom bomb, and so it is a world like that of Hieronymus Bosch...[T]he grotesque is only a way of expressing...the form of the unformed, the face of a world without face...
>
> But the tragic is still possible even if pure tragedy is not. We can achieve the tragic out of comedy. We can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly; indeed, many of Shakespeare's tragedies are already really comedies out of which the tragic arises.[12]

The sacrifice thus leaps over the stage edge in both directions. As we laugh, our world falls apart, and the victim is us. As comedy melts into chaos, what Dürrenmatt calls the "conceit" of comedy, the imaginative idea which built the confident protected edifice of the domestic world of comedy, dissolves into the horrors of tragedy, with no exaltation, no hint of heroism to compensate us for the loss. As the butts of the comedy we take the boot-heel of tragedy in the neck, as Brecht might have stated it. As Pogo said, with an apologetic little grin, "We have met the enemy and he is us." If Pogo, the embodiment of gentle social optimism, Walt Kelly's animal sacrifice to the gods of civility in politics (a possum in a world of raccoons), sees the irony, maybe we can see it. As Li'l Abner put it, "Any fool can see thet...Ah see it!"

If we are doomed as a species, it may be because we have built self-collapsing gods of this kind, and we will continue to chase them round and round, up the tails of our own pretensions. If we are not doomed, it may be that in the laughter we will find the courage to rebuild that stage edge. By taking advantage of the inherently metaphorical structure of drama, by carrying a new set of meanings from the individual to the society, from the gods to humankind, and back again, we can re-stoke the metaphor of the drama, re-invigorate our

[12] Friedrich Dürrenmatt. *Problems of the Theatre* and *The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi.* New York: Grove Press, 1966, 31-32.

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largest sense of the meaning of human action in our expectations of dramatic action. In recognizing the tragedy, we can re-inform a comedy for our time.

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