

IN NATURE'S REALM – ESCAPE OR ESCAPISM?

Bill Krouwel

Research and reflection persuades me towards the conclusion that a fresh start – or another paradigm shift – is required if development training is to slough off its dollar-driven complacency and become a more radical, less compliant, force for human development.

A justification that it should is provided by Reynolds, citing Reed and Anthony (who were writing in a development training context):

“Reed and Anthony (1992) regard management teachers and trainers who intentionally perpetuate morally impoverished programmes of management education as deserving of contempt and working against their own interests. They contend that management educators should work to help managers: . . . to an awareness of their own significance and responsibility by encouraging in them a consciousness of the difficulties with which they are engaged. They must be encouraged to think about the unprogrammable complexities which face them without the distracting and specious assistance of codes, competencies, catch phrases and mission statements”

This eerily sums up how I feel about the current state of Outdoor Development, as well as what it might be – a veritable means to “help managers (and others) to an awareness of their own significance and responsibilities”.

One method which I know from close experience (see appendix B) might be a way to achieve these goals is the method practised in the Czech Republic by Prazninova Skola Lipnice (Vacation School Lipnice/VSL) and in Slovakia by Studio Zazitku (Studio of Experience). These organisations are part of Outward Bound International, but have roots very different from those provided by Kurt Hahn.

As a result, I revisited the Czech Republic to add to my experience of VSL (the larger of the two organisations) and to interview its members.

By visiting VSL I was seeking to find clues as to:-

- Philosophy and methods
- Practice – what was the view of those involved in the day to day operations of VSL of its philosophy. What were *they* trying to achieve?
- Organisation – how did practice of the Czech method work out “on the ground”
- Outcomes – what did trainers see as desirable outcomes of the method. Did delegate-testimony support this?
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- Current applications of the VSL method to DEVELOPMENT TRAINING, particularly by the development training arm of Outward Bound Czech Republic (OBCZ), Česka Cesta (ČC), which shares offices and staff with VSL.

Background and Logique de Mondes

Enquiry into the roots of VSL reveals an interesting root-world. The British root can be seen to originate from adult educators interested in the development of young people. The Czech root seems to have been set up by the young people themselves. Neuman and Brtnik inform us that:-

“In the beginning of the 20th Century an interesting movement happened in this field – the tramping. It was in many ways inspired by similar movement in USA (the stories of J. London, woodcraft..)”

Marek and Kössl expand upon this, giving details of the world and the philosophy of tramping:-

" The Czechoslovak movement of tramping...has no analogy in the history of European nations... The Czech camping concerned above all a week-end movement of the Czech youth for a stay in nature. That movement was inspired in the main by American literature of adventures (J. London, Z. Grey, B. Hart, E.T. Seton,, J.O. Curwood... The Czech campers produced a specific culture with their own habits, dress, slang and above all songs...The campers always protested against bourgeois mentality and social hypocrisy and therefore they were more or less persecuted – both by gendarmes in the period between the wars and by the communist police after the year 1948. In spite of it, that movement continues to live in the Czech countries even today preserving its specificity." (p21)

This root is interesting for many reasons, of which three are apposite to its role as the root-world for VSL:

- 1) It was a spontaneous movement with its own values, attitudes and (at least implied) philosophy.
- 2) Its members tended to reject the bourgeois mentality. This contrasts strongly with the Establishment positioning of Hahn and the other founders of British Outward Bound (which even now strongly values its royal connections).
- 3) Its adherents espoused an intoxicating compound of radicalism and romanticism, combined with a strong sense of community.

Marek and Kössl also significantly note that after the Communist coup d'etat:-

"for a considerable part of youth, outdoor activities became....one of the [few] possibilities to escape from the "totalitarian reality". Although persecuted in the fifties and seventies, camping continued to be living.....(p22)

Ota Holec, head of VSL into the late 1990's, provided the link between the trampers and VSL. This was that trainers in "nature stays" – the techniques and philosophy of tramping – had been forced by government to decentralise their organisation, with VSL emerging from that decentralisation, commencing operations in 1977.

I conclude that the root-world of VSL is very different – indeed even alien - to the British root world. It is a root which challenged the *status quo*, rejected conformity for its own sake, and embraced the attitudes and values of community, these no doubt finding reinforcement in the harassment to which it was occasionally subjected by the authorities.

The public school ethos which I have implied is a strong root for British Outward Bound is divorced from tramping. For the British we have Tom Browne as a model. For the Americans, Davie Crockett. For the Czechs, the nearest I can come is a persecuted socialist/anarchist singing hobo. Perhaps Woody Guthrie – but (I hope) without the selfish egoism.

Although I visited the Czech Republic to conduct 1:1 interviews with VSL trainers, formal interviews formed only a part of the research: I was able to engage in many informal conversations and interactions with VSL people. These often proved at least as valuable as the formal interviews, giving a wider perspective and involving several-person discussions which by their very nature were dynamically more active than 1:1 interviews.

Some of the findings are included below:

Philosophy and Methods

Holec asserts that the philosophical roots of VSL are very deep indeed, citing Hellenistic ideas about the body and soul:-

"...vacation School, cut off from foreign experience and methods was seeking its own way. The philosophical roots of its programme were far reaching to the ancient world: at the background of many experiments was kalokagathia¹ as an idea of the beauty of body and soul"

In describing VSL methodology, Martin and Leberman allude to the balance implied in kalokagathia:-

"...its peaks and dynamism are based on interweaving a balance of effort and relaxation, physical and mental activities, individual and group events"

VSL's philosophy runs counter to the idea of frontloading or of using developmental methodology in the service of pre-prepared learning objectives, instead idealistically seeking to help people discover solutions to their own issues within themselves:-

"All the problems and conflicts of the world are reflected in each of us and the world is a reflection of ourselves. Therefore we must seek the key to their solution from within.....by inducing powerful experiences and intensive human relations, our objective is to help everyone find within themselves unsuspected sources of energy, self-confidence and spontaneous creativity....."

The aims of the training are succinctly put by Martin and Leberman as being to enable people:

" To understand themselves and their world; to discover the power and meaning of relationships; to improve citizenship; to develop power of thought; to "go against the flow"

Methods:

1) Dramaturgy

A method peculiar to the Czechoslovakian-rooted training organisations is termed dramaturgy. This has been described thus:

"This term, known rather from the sphere of theatre, film and TV, became one of the most often used in the recent years. Dramaturgy is a method of selection and time order of the programmes with the aim to reach the maximal pedagogical effect. It integrates, within itself, the questions (and also answers) concerning the participants of the course (their age, mental and physical maturity,...) time and space. The key thing for all dramaturgical consideration is to determine and realize the pedagogical, educational, recreational and other aims, which the course wants to reach"

As Holec implies, this term has been borrowed from the theatre. It is more than a catch-all term for a course design process however, conferring on the Czechs a unique mental framing of that process.

My own (and many others') working experience is to design programmes to meet the needs of delegates (as expressed by whomever is the buyer), moving systematically forward in an orderly manner so that I can demonstrate at each stage how my proposal will meet the expressed need. Very professional. Very systematic.

The paradigm is one of logical positivism – seeking to find the "right" answer to the need expressed by the client.

Move the paradigm to a theatrical one and the logic changes – it becomes more important to produce an event which will stimulate and touch the heart than to produce one which will fulfil training needs. A kind of relativism is introduced where all is open – actual objectives and ways of achieving them may change on a daily – or even more frequent – basis, and it is acknowledged that there is no universal "right" way to put a programme together. What is right is what is felt to be right for each individual at the time – and is subject to long and sometimes painful debate, within the training team and the delegate population.

¹ From the Kalokagathia website: "Kalokagathia is a Greek word made up of two others: kalos-beautiful, agathos – benign. In ancient Greece Kalokagathia stood for an ideal nurture concept that featured harmonious development of outward merits and inner world based on spiritual moral principles" .

Formal interviews with VSL trainers confirmed that dramaturgy was seen as vital to the work, displaying an understanding of the process (one went so far as to take me through a flipchart presentation of the sequence of events!) and excitement when talking on the subject:

"...its taken from the theatre theory and it's all about the fact...what to put on the programme, how to do it, and why to do it, and maybe when – exactly – to do it. So it's like an art of putting pieces together so that it's a balance of activities – so that it's on the right place at the right moment for these people who come on this course, and it has to be flexible so that you can change it...."

"Dramaturgy is the way how to put different programmes together to have in a whole picture a balanced result. creating the course is, can be, is an art thing sometimes"

"...the most important thing is the theatre – it's dramaturgy in a course as well as to design it. The dramaturgy is in the course as well as before it"

A key point regarding dramaturgy that emerged from the interviews is that it allows for – even encourages - changes in programme content. A different sort of professionalism is at work, one which constantly re-examines what the goals might be and rewrites the programme (sometimes on a nightly basis) to meet those objectives.

One of the interviewees was able to point out the difference the dramaturgical approach made in practice, having worked in France on a course in which the staff were drawn from centres around the world. She was very clear that working with the trainer-to-delegate ratio expected elsewhere limited the ability to change the dramaturgy, and was a little critical of the "standard" process, with its early evening shutdown and low staff ratios. The VSL approach is one of very long days, followed by extremely long staff meetings at which the next day's tasks may well be totally rewritten, followed by preparation of whatever has been finally agreed.

Another feature of dramaturgy is that it is not exclusive. It allows - even encourages - the use of as wide a variety of training media as possible, and promotes the use of imagination in the delivery of training. The outcomes, in terms of exercises employed warrants more detailed examination and forms the body of a later section.

It is important to understand that dramaturgy is **not** theatre. In the VSL context it is a process for conceiving and perceiving courses. It may involve theatre, but the unrolling plot of a programme (see it more as a dramatic event) is not the same as, for example, the increasingly popular use of actors *qua* actors in training courses in Britain. Neither is it the same as teaching managers theatrical techniques to help them with presentation skills. It is the wholesale adoption of a paradigm in which each course is viewed through the lens of drama, and by which courses have the potential to be infinitely varied in terms of content and outcomes. This is *not* seeing the course as a play or as a theatrical production, any more than the "outdoor" paradigm means that every course in a British outdoor centre is seen as a replica of a Himalayan expedition.

In attempting to describe dramaturgy, I feel a certain frustration. Many people immediately think "ah, Theatre!" but that's not correct. If you mention "Outward Bound", another picture can pop into people's heads. These terms are used as convenient mental pigeonholes. Dramaturgy runs that risk, even in the Czech Republic. An interviewee put it plainly - *"you cannot really tell them what it is about unless they come and have the experience...."*. It comes as no surprise when she also tells me that VSL relies largely on word of mouth to promote its courses. A pictorial outline of the dramaturgical approach is attached as Appendix "B". I found it useful, when attempting to clarify the difference between the dramaturgical and outdoor approaches to contrast them in tabular form (see following page)

No standard programmes: VSL has no such thing as a "standard" programme. Interviewees were emphatic about this:

"There are not standard people!"

"Well, one of the things which is interesting is every course is unique, it's original which is created by a team of three instructors which only comes together for the purpose of this course...."

DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH	TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING APPROACH
Multiple media – art, outdoors, music, , video, drama, audio, "happenings"	Dominated by outdoor media, others also used.
Constant on-course staff reflection and redesign of programme, based on evolving perception of delegates' needs.	Constant on-course staff reflection on whether the course is meeting its pre-agreed objectives.
Multiple (changing) objectives and programme subject to constant change as objectives change	Objectives clearly fixed beforehand and programme subject to some change if change is seen to meet objectives better
Long, indeterminate days. Often unreasonable hours	Duration of days determined beforehand. Usually reasonable working hours.
Surprises expected. Unpredictable outcomes expected	Predictable outcomes valued
Very high staffing ratio (about 1:4)	Staff ratio 1:8 or thereabouts
Staff (unpaid) drawn from all walks of life	Staff (paid) often outdoor or group work full time trainers.

The effort put into preparing each and every programme is striking. Interviews and conversations revealed that to prepare for one programme the team for that programme (all of whom hold down full-time jobs outside VSL) will meet for around *eight weekends* in the preceding year, designing the pre-course dramaturgy.

B) Wide choice of media: In British development training, the outdoors is seen as the main medium, although others may be used from time to time. In VSL the outdoors is just one option. Others are particularly art and drama, but anything may be brought into play: The reason for this multiplicity of media is that:

"We think that every person has something which is easy for them to do and other things which are beyond their, you know, zone, whatever you call it..... we don't do it only for the art or, you know, it's not art itself; it's finding creativity in people....."

"I think our philosophy is that it's not important what the person creates exactly, but the process. And some people, they're afraid of the result.....so they don't like – or think they wouldn't like – the process as well"

This wide use of media has other benefits in that it allows instructors and delegates to exercise their imagination. This mind-opening approach seems to me to be increasingly important to any development training with pretensions beyond compliance with competency-dictated demands. The ability to learn specified sets of behaviours only equips managers to deal with the immediate demands of their current (and maybe next) job. Provoking the imagination may well be infinitely more useful, helping them to think (and see) for themselves, not to simply behave as they've been programmed.

Interesting that such an approach should come from a nation whose main contribution to the world's vocabulary is the word "Robot".

C) Exercises – "No-one expects the Spanish Inquisition!...."

"It was like a lifetime of experiences/lessons compressed into two weeks. It was like an experiment where I experienced tests of every capability I thought I had as a human being, and more. I used every sense, every skill, every limb, every milligram of energy in the shortest space of time possible"

During discussion with trainers and former delegates, details emerged regarding some of the exercises designed and used by VSL. I am reluctant to give too much detail, as dramaturgy requires that each exercise (commonly called "games" by VSL staff) is only part of a whole. Nevertheless, it is fair to record that much energy and creativity goes into them. A common factor seems to be to aim for the unexpected, with the result that a kind of surrealism often features. A dance at which delegates find themselves interacting with people and events from earlier generations, experiencing world war,

pogroms, the roaring twenties. A concert in the middle of a forest. A garden party populated by iconic characters from fiction. A "blind walk" ending in a planetarium. Exercises based around the milieu of science fiction novels (Fahrenheit 451, the Day of the Triffids). I speculate that this surrealistic approach may open the mind. Some delegate rhetoric seems to confirm this:

"..... I used neurones I knew I had, and created connections between neurones that have never been used.."

"...you don't know what's going to happen next.....it kind of makes you more alert...to expect the unexpected and just cope with it" (delegate interview)

It may not work well with everyone. Another delegate expressed irritation, seeing them as "mind games".

Nevertheless, I speculate that the emphasis on variety and surreality, when combined with the intensity of the experience, may have beneficial effects in terms of allowing people to address a multiplicity of abilities and talents. In the rhetoric of development training, to employ multiple intelligences. Gardner makes a case for this approach to education as being more effective at helping people to cope with the complexity of life than what he terms the "single chance" method (See appendix "C" for a summary of the "intelligences" listed by Gardner).

Some critical thoughts

That the programmes can have a strong impact is clear from testimony:

"The critical element is that this "experiment occurred in a cocoon of safety/support/compassion/caring, allowing me to play full out. The cocoon allowed me to go on this emotional rollercoaster of the highest highs and the lowest lows without wanting to get off. I wanted to stay on because I knew that during this journey of 2 weeks I was learning what would possibly take me 2 years or more in my "normal" life...."

It is also clear that such impact can have a lasting effect, as a delegate who attended in 1993 testifies:

"I think it changed the way I look at things – to be positive about what I can do about them, and to have fun"

Nevertheless, conversation and reflection during and after the Czech visit left me with some grounds for critique. Summarised, these concern:

- 1) The place of review in VSL
- 2) The universal applicability of the method
- 3) The ability to deliver the method within a "professional" framework

1) The Place of Review

Formal and informal discussions with VSL staff strongly tended to focus on exercise content, programme design, and the dramaturgical method. These elements provoked excitement and energy – there was no difficulty in triggering streams of interesting, animated, intense discussion and debate. Review was slightly different and tended to figure in conversation as a difficult area about which they were keen to learn more from me. Sessions with the full group provoked discussion along the lines of "how can we do this better?". I hope I was able to help, but for me it highlights what may be a weakness in the VSL approach. The exercises are so exciting and full that review may become an afterthought. It may not even be utterly necessary –over twelve days of intensive, surreal, constantly modified activity the lessons may emerge in an unforced way.

It may be my conditioning ("always review everything"!) that causes me to see this as an issue, but certainly when talking with trainers about Česka Cesta (ČC) management programmes which last around three days and are offered on a commercial basis, there was an anxiety about how best to review. As ČC is entirely staffed by VSL instructors working on a paid freelance basis, is part of the same organisation (OBCZ) and sees VSL experience as necessary in its instructors, this may be a weakness.

More than one interviewee mentioned the need for more complete "psychological" training, which may also imply a perceived weakness in the review/group process field.

2) The universal applicability of the method: In discussion it became clear that VSL recruits its instructors (of whom there are over 100) exclusively from the ranks of delegates perceived as having had a successful course. One interviewee estimated that about ten percent of delegates were approached. Only a very small core of full-time staff exists, so the voluntary instructors are absolutely vital to the continued provision of training.

It seems possible, therefore, that an unconscious social Darwinism may take place. This could be characterised as "They liked and benefitted from what we provided, let's ask them to join us so that they can provide more of what they – and we – provide". Which may lead to amplification of the talents and values already in place. This is fine if those values meet the needs of delegates but may be problematical when other values are encountered.

Evidence that this may indeed be so is provided by a course which struggled to succeed. This was a brave effort, combining Czech youths who volunteered to attend on an individual basis with a young people from a housing estate in Northeast England. The latter had a pre-existing history as a group, being from the same school and having worked together for some time before the course. The resultant clash of values and attitudes led to an extremely difficult time for the instructors, although they did feel that the course was eventually successful. There is no plan to repeat the experiment and when probed, one (highly idealistic, articulate and intelligent) instructor responded that the VSL method was best for those judged to have the potential to be active in society. The interviewee saw this as a counterbalance to the recent past (when quiescence was an effective survival strategy) and to the disillusioned present. This may be so, but it seems to me that another anti-quiescence strategy might be to work with the most, not the least, disillusioned.

3) The ability to deliver the method within a "professional" framework: The level of preparation for a VSL programme is awesome. Interviewees talked of the full training team working for eight weekends to prepare one course which would never be repeated. I find this exciting – everything is tailor-made – but extremely daunting, and cannot imagine such a level of preparation being financially viable in a commercial setting.

Summary of Critique (and a way forward)

VSL demonstrate its roots in all of the above areas of concern. I reflect that I too demonstrate mine in raising them. Nevertheless, if the lessons that VSL can give to providers of development training are to be taken on board, they will need to be addressed.

A conclusion - benefits of VSL methods to British development training

Reflection leads me to the conclusion that development training in Britain could benefit from incorporating some of the Czech methods:-

1) A wider range of exercises

I have indicated that I think British development training is in a blind alley. This is partly due to the adoption of a narrow range of media and the acceptance of an almost standardised range of tasks. Release from the confines of the outdoors into a wider use of, for example, arts and drama as an experiential tool may help to reintroduce the element of the unexpected which once featured strongly in development training.

2) The tailor-making approach

In the mid-late 1970's, development training was a new method. Consequently practitioners were inventing exercises on a daily basis to meet new needs as they presented themselves. As time passed, the repertoire of exercises grew and people wrote less and photocopied more. This leads to professionalism, but the "edge" so necessary to exciting and effective programmes may have diminished. One thing VSL people do (brilliantly, but expensively in terms of time) is to maintain that edge. If development training can genuinely offer tailor-made development, that inventive energy can

be recovered. The principal leaf from the book of the Czech approach seems to be the ability and willingness to redesign “on the hoof” – the benefits are:

- for trainers – a much more flexible, energised approach and
- for trainees – the benefit of programmes aimed exclusively at them as the people they are, not as functions, vessels for competencies, or whatever else someone else wants them to be.

3) Self-development

Part of the blind alley in which development training finds itself is in the demise of self-development (as defined by Rogersⁱⁱ, described by Mossman and promoted by Chapman and Lumsdon in the early 1980's, and bemoaned for its absence by Dainty and Lucas in the early 1990's). The VSL approach is, at root, focussed on self-development (although without fulfilling all of Mossman's criteria). In particular, the surreal nature of exercises at least broadens – and opens - the mind. I believe this surrealism neatly avoids the trap of isomorphic framing - one doesn't pretend that a rope spider's web is a distribution network at VSL. The skill is to make these highly colourful exercises act as a blank sheet onto which delegates project themselves as they are, opening them up to self-examination and the counsel of others.

Difficulties with applying the VSL method in a British Context

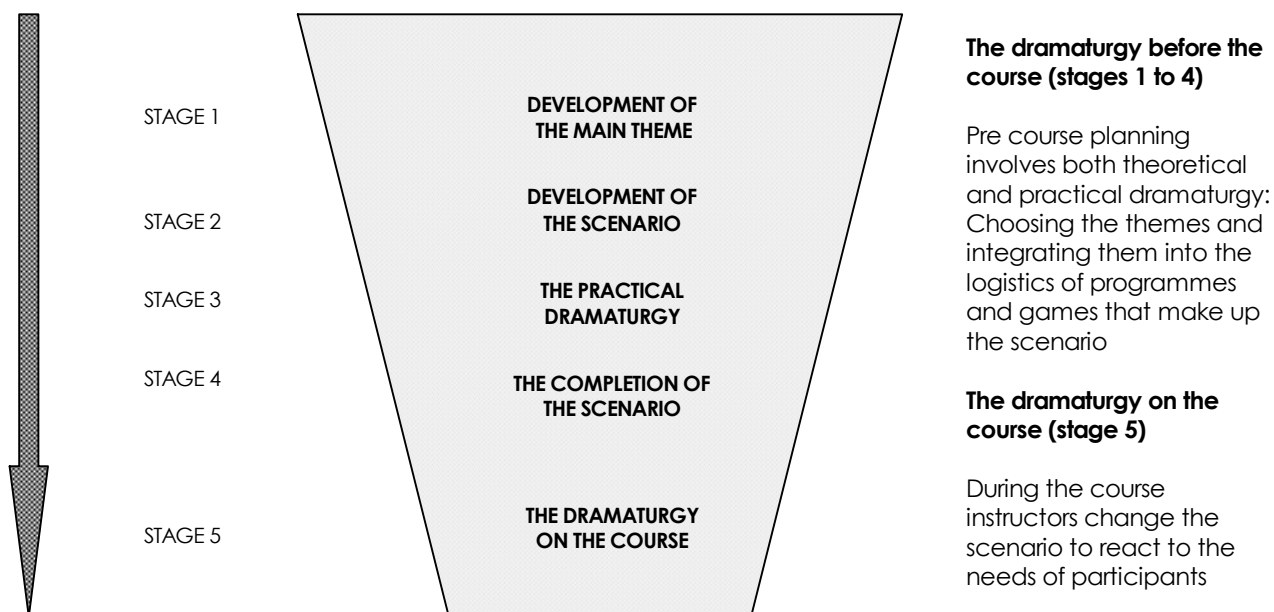
1) “Educating the Customers”

There seems to be no ready market for self-development in Britain. The easy sales are in team-building and (to a lesser extent) leadership. If self-development is to be a realistic item on the agenda, there would need to be a very serious effort to promote its benefits to the customer base. As Dainty and Lucas point out, “The development of self and other awareness is possibly the least straightforward.....yet potentially the most important” outcome.

APPENDIX “A”

The five stages of developing dramaturgy

(With acknowledgement to Andrew Martin and Sarah Leberman (see bibliography))



APPENDIX "C"

A summary of Gardner's seven intelligences

Logical-Mathematical: An aptitude with numbers which transcends the mere ability to accurately record them and includes the facility to see and understand relationships between them.

Linguistic: A sensitivity to, and ability with, the meaning, order, sounds, rhythms, inflections and meter of words.

Spatial: The ability to recognise resemblances that may exist between seemingly disparate forms and the differences in seemingly similar forms.

Musical: Music is so pervasive in human culture that to paraphrase the anthropologist Lévi Strauss, a failure to take music seriously weakens any account of the human condition. Music is, at least, a way to endeavour to capture and transmit feelings.

Bodily/Kinaesthetic: The evolution of humans has been characterised by increasingly sophisticated manipulation of tools. So the exercise of bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence affects many parts of our lives

The personal Intelligences: Of which there are two - one outward-facing (interpersonal) and one turning inward (intrapersonal). These are much more closely linked to each other than are the other intelligences. Summarised, they are:

Interpersonal: The ability to make distinctions among other individuals, in particular their moods, temperament, motivations and intentions.

Intrapersonal: The capacity to access, discriminate among, label and control one's own range of emotions. At one level, this amounts to no more than the ability to distinguish between feelings of pleasure and pain. At another level, it allows one to detect and symbolise highly complex sets of feelings.

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