



Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2020, Vol.17, 34–44



Applying Gustav Heckmann’s Version of the Socratic Method and the Hawaiian Talk Therapy to Students with Developmental Disabilities: an Intercultural Case Study

Alexandros Colombos

Doctoral Student of Educational Psychology (EdD program), California Coast University, USA

Special Issue: Interculturalism in Second Language Teaching

Received 19 December 2019 *Accepted 25 March 2020*

Abstract

This is a case study of a Greek-American young adult and a New York City non-profit Day Habilitation consumer who was diagnosed with various developmental disabilities. The methods used for therapeutic and educational interventions included Gustav Heckman’s version of Socratic Method called Socratic Enquiry used in individual sessions (one-on-one) for teaching Greek as a Second Language and English Reading and Writing along with social/behavioral skills group therapy sessions of five consumers where Hawaiian Talk Story was used. An intercultural approach was provided, as both methods were very appropriate for studying the intercultural dynamics of groups as well as individuals of diverse backgrounds in multicultural settings and the intercultural meaning of the results of those therapeutic and educational interventions.

Keywords: *Socratic Enquiry, Talk Story, Greek as a Second Language, Day Habilitation, Developmental Disabilities, Intercultural Approach*

Introduction

“John D.” (all names used here are not real for confidentiality reasons, though the persons are) is a 22 year-old Greek American male, of Greek Orthodox Religion (Eastern Christianity) diagnosed with Mild Intellectual Disability (IQ 65) and Expressive Language Disorder living with his father at a small apartment in Astoria, NY. He is the only son of Greek immigrants, both

Amphiklos11@aol.com

diagnosed with depression and his father also with sleep disorder. He is fluent in both English and Greek with a better command of English as his first language. He doesn't have obvious signs of his condition, except that he does not speak very clearly or confidently express himself in any language, though his problem is mostly in written rather than oral language.

John is very sociable, and a high functioning consumer. He has friends of his age, he participates in his local church's activities and religious services, and he even has a girlfriend, though they recently did not get along very well and finally they broke up. John is able to pay his bills, independently take care of his grooming, and he successfully displays telephone and computer skills, such as writing simple business letters, taking care of personal and family matters on the phone and using the Internet or playing video games. He has been also trained by his father, who is a building superintendent and a painter, in doing handy work and even to a professional level, since his father has taken him with him to construction jobs.

John's mother passed by, a few months ago. He found her dead one Friday midnight, laying on the bathroom floor half-naked, which was very traumatic to him. Doctors attributed her death to a heart attack. Her profound obesity and her movement problems may have contributed also to her death since she could hardly move in the very narrow bathroom. Her movement problems, as well as her husband's mental disabilities, had resulted in the poor maintenance of their apartment, which was very frequently the main reason for quarrels in the family and repeated requests for finding a new home since that one was very dirty. John is also very obese and does not have a good diet since he drinks too much soda and eats junk food. John is a brave young man, very courageous and full of life and although the recent death of his beloved mother, he did not show any sign of depression, melancholy or withdrawal or any phobia, which is quite common to occur to people with Intellectual Disability after having a death in their family.

John has already rich history of job experience, as a security guard and also as a helper and bag boy in supermarkets and retail stores. He was already a Medicaid Services coordination consumer at our small Medicaid vendor & volunteer agency located in John's neighborhood, when he joined our new Day Habilitation/Job Training Blended Program, where this writer was the head teacher and MA (Master's level) psychologist, specializing in the therapeutic ad educational interventions. This writer was one of the program's three psychologists, a doctor of clinical psychology and clinical supervisor, a master's level diagnostician ("Suzan"). Also, he had been recently promoted to head day lab teacher and MA (master's level) psychologist after being already a Medicaid Service Coordinator for a few months. John had expressed the desired to seek for Supported Employment in our agency. At the same time, he would be able to attend a series of educational activities within the Day Habilitation program, such as English reading & writing remediation courses, Greek lessons, since he wanted to learn how to write and read in Greek. Also, lessons in social and behavioral skills were added to his schedule, since John has to work intensively on his procrastination and punctuality progress. For instance, he has the tendency to come very late to the center and he quite often doesn't even show up without any notice. He is also somewhat naïve when it comes to friendship and relationship with his peers. He cannot use his judgment effectively to understand the group dynamics of peer friendly and/or

romantic relationships and he feels frustrated with peers who “use” him as he says and do not care about him and at the same time they do drugs and tend to juvenile delinquency, though he insists that he has no involvement in such activities and stay away from them when they do so.

Theories, Methods, and Procedures

The methods used for the therapeutic and educational individual and group interventions for John were Socratic Questioning/Socratic Method, Gustav Heckmann’s Socratic Enquire model, and the Hawaiian Talk Story. For individual educational intervention in teaching Greek as a Second Language and Basic/Elementary English Reading and Writing, questions modeled by the classic Socratic Method used in US public schools was used while for the social and behavioral skills group which John attended in the day habilitation center, Heckmann’s Socratic Enquire and Hawaiian Talk Story were used. Next are the theories on which the methods and procedures were based. This is a single participant case study using qualitative methods of participant’s educational and therapeutic records.

Socrates (470-399 B.C.) is esteemed as the turning point in Western philosophy as he brought humans from the physical world to the world of thought and morals (Lageman, 1989). Lageman believed there were four suppositions Socrates reveal to the world of philosophical cognitions. First, Socrates believed that goodness was knowledge and that evilness is ignorance. Second, the Socratic Method of questioning questions or probing is the best way to find truth and to develop awareness. Third, one needs to Know Thyself. Fourth and last, Socrates believed that the unexamined life is not worth living. Thus is the concept of *elencus* (Gr. control, examination, monitor). Heckmann, like many of his multiple of followers expanded upon Socratic Dialogue and developed his six measures to use in the classroom (Brickhouse, 1994). Gustav Heckmann, a German educator and critical philosopher mentored by Leonard Nelson, another promoter of the Socratic Method of Dialogue in education in the Europe after the Second World War. However, Heckmann, unlike Nelson, emphasized group dynamics in the Socratic Dialogue, instead of individual thinking processes. Talk Story is a traditional Hawaiian folk activity of locals and neighbors gathering in common places or in the street and spontaneous rambling about everyday concerns and narrating about experiences, memories and happenings in the form of free associations (Taosaka, 2002). Next, the steps for applying those theories using applied methods for the classroom and the group therapy room at a Day Habilitation center will be examined.

In collaboration with “Suzan”, a certified Mental Health Counselor and the Medicaid Service Coordination team, this writer and John came up with a series of Valued Outcomes that he approved and liked. When this writer teach John first grade Greek as a Second Language and thrd grade English reading & writing (literacy skills) one-on-one sessions, this writer narrated a story to him, either a Greek myth, a fairy tale, a folk story or a story form a picture book. He looked at pictures while listening to the story. This writer asks John open-ended listening comprehension questions to see how much he retains form the story and how he processes information. Then, he draws and colors on a paper using crayons or markers on a topic related to the story. Then, using the picture he draws, this writer ask him what he draws and how that

relates to the story. Using Socrates' questioning for inner meaning, a method called "Socratic Inquiry" or just the "Socratic Method", this writer focus on the rationale or moral lesson of the story and this writer engage him in a higher thinking process, making sure that it is not too abstract or inappropriate for his mental capacity. For instance, this writer may ask him about what makes a good friendship or what makes somebody be a good friend. Then, this writer ask him questions confronting and reflecting directly on his responses, thus leading him gradually to the point of realizing contradictions between his previous statements or between his words and his actions. He, for instance, may say that he doesn't like his friends, because "they are bad kids and they do drugs and shoplifting" and yet he continues to hang out with them. This type of question is called in Greek elenchus, which actually means refutation or examination (Brickhouse& Smith, 1994, p.5).

Beside the individual sessions, there is an hour of "social and behavioral skills" group therapy session, where all five consumers in our new small Day Habilitation program come and sit in a circle, where in the form of group therapy, this writer introduce a topic that concerns community, health, behavioral or social issues and using the Socratic style of making questions, this writer guide the group, after each and everyone says his or her own story related to the topic or if there is something of relative urgency to be discussed or shared with the group for support, the consumer is encouraged to talk a little bit about it before the discussion of the current topic of the day's agenda. This sharing of –personal information leads to encouraging empathy and sympathy being expressed by all members of the group, thus facilitating communication and building community bonds and cultivating interpersonal and intrapersonal skills for each and every consumer.

For the group sessions, this writer used Gustav Heckmann's version of Socratic Enquiry modified to suit the needs of groups and real classrooms. Socrates (470-399 BC), the famous Greek philosopher, one of the most influential ever, came up with a method of asking questions based on two basic ideas: "know thyself" (self-awareness) and "an unexamined life is not worth it" (need for self-examination) (Lageman, 1989, p.222). Heckmann's version consists of six pedagogical measures of Socratic facilitation: i) content impartiality (here Hawaiian Talk Story gets integrated to the process in order to initiate dialogue); ii) working for the concrete; iii) mutual understanding; iv) focus on the current question; v) striving for consensus; vi) facilitator interventions. Everyone comes up with a personal story and shares it with others, as contributing a part to the impartial whole of the group process. Then, the facilitator has to make sure that, feelings, thoughts, and ideas are expressed in a concrete way and that everybody has mutual understanding of the process and that the dialogue does not stray from the current question that is been observed, especially if the group consists of people with Intellectual Disability and other Developmental Disabilities. Finally, the facilitator guides the group toward reaching a closing, which more than reaching a mere conclusion or summarizing, but is even more, about reaching a consensus, as everybody needs to be on the same page with the others in the group and thus they all discover a common truth after the dialogue. The facilitator must intervene when needed, especially when the dialogue prolongs inconclusive and derails from the question observed or

when there are disruptive side talks, negative arguments, conflicts, and contradictions (Heckmann, 2004).

The Socratic Method is also called Philosophical Midwifery, since like a midwife, the counselor, teacher or philosopher extracts rational thinking, repressed thoughts or desires and finally leads to self-awareness, including cultural identity and awareness of current strengths and weakness in interpersonal, community, and intercultural & multicultural skills, and inner peace and congruity with one's thoughts and actions. This method helps us pinpoint the *pathologos*, as Pierre Grimes calls it, which is the pathological or abnormal logos or reasoning, expressed in thoughts, inner speech, daydreaming and oral and written words. This abnormal or irrational reasoning/thinking impedes and backfires every day relationships and it is quite frequently the source of miscommunication and family pathology (Grimmes & Uliana, 1998). Pierre Grimes, a professor of philosophy and philosophical counselor and Regina Uliana, a clinical psychologist, run together a clinical study of patients who coped with everyday problems, ranging from emotional and family problems to vocational and academic performance and career choice problems and who were treated with a series of sessions where the Socratic Method was integrated in cognitive therapy. They found out that from their data that not only this therapy tremendously helped their patients, but it also stood at the same level of effectiveness and function as Rational-Emotive Therapy. Thus they named it "Grimes' Dialectic Rational Psychotherapy" (Grimmes & Uliana, 1998). The Socratic Method has also been successfully implemented in regular classrooms, of both elementary (Delgehausen, 2004) and secondary schools (Saran, 2004), originally in England and Germany and now everywhere in the world.

In addition to the Socratic Method, this writer also used Talk Story, a traditional Hawaiian method of informal conversation that may take the form of storytelling in a group of, at least, two or more participants. The content of the talk may range from something interesting one saw or heard to mere gossip in the local grocery store line on a beautiful exotic island complex of Hawaii. The intercultural and multicultural value of Talk Story is also very significant. Hawaii is home to a complex multicultural and intercultural dynamics of native, Japanese, and other communities coexisting together, all considered American, as it is a US territory with English as the primary language. A definition of talk story might be "rambling personal experience narratives mixed with folk materials" (Taosaka, 2002, p.1). Talk story requires cooperation and collaboration from the participants. In the therapeutic process, however, talk story may most likely resemble an informal and flexible model of group therapy or group counseling. This writer found the talk story quite suitable for John since he prefers informal and friendly contacts rather than structured therapy/counseling. Besides, talk story has some affinities with the Socratic Method, since it requires a lot of asking questions (Taosaka, 2002, p.10).

Cultural sensitivity is an important factor in talk story and that is also why this model was also appropriate for John. John is a Greek-American, whose native language is English, but he also has a good mastery of Greek, as well. He is the first generation of American and because of his close tight with and his dependence on his family, due to his condition, he reflects a lot of typical Greek or Mediterranean cultural characteristics. This can be easily deduced from his food

preferences, his favorite music, his values, his interests, and even the fact that he likes to come late or he needs more privacy especially during religious observance at the Easter, which is of very great importance for the Greek Orthodox faith.

In talk story, the questions may help each party understand the story and internalize some of its meanings or moral lessons, but it also shows cooperation and collaboration and it is a way to express sympathy and care to the speaker who wants to share his/her experience or problem with you. The Socratic component into this process might be the reach of common ground, a mutual understanding of universal reality. So, every time John would report to the center, this writer engaged in an informal 30-minute talk with him, where he would just tell me how was his day, “what else is new” or what current issues may have emerged in his life. From the most irrelevant experience, something that he saw on TV or on the Internet and captured his attention to some memories of his mother who just died a few weeks ago and were rekindled by her clothes or personal accessories he accidentally discovered in the closet. All these free associations, as Freudians would say, may emerge during the talk story and transform it into a more therapeutic or cathartic entity.

Results and Observations

After six months of using this teaching and therapeutic modalities of the Socratic Method and the Hawaiian Talk Story, me and my colleagues at the center noticed that John was more eager to report to the center in time, he felt more responsible and sensed the consequences and the impact of his absence of tardiness to the others and became more aware of himself and less prone to giving cheap excuses for his mistakes. He spoke both Greek and English with more confidence. He also gained confidence in his English writing and he learned the Greek alphabet and the reading, writing and spelling for some simple Greek words and phrases he used often in his everyday life. He also built trust and care for the center, its staff, and his fellow consumers. He learned to listen carefully and not interrupt others while talking. The small size of the group helped also a lot. It shouldn't be ignored that Socrates' circle of disciples in his dialogues recorded by Plato was actually small and everybody was familiar with or related to each other within that circle (Brickhouse & Smith, 2004).

Heckmann's model was used for the six-month time frame. *First Measure: Content impartiality.* A main task of the facilitator is to nurture participant's own capacity to hold judge by monitoring his subjectivity and holding back or withholding his own opinion about the question being discussed (Heckmann, 1994). This is very important when working with people with developmental disability, since they easily get confused when processing information or they have challenging in learning new information and processing it. Therefore, they may often face social stigma and discrimination, since because of their cognitive and thinking deficiencies due to their developmental disabilities (Heckmann, 1994). John may be less embarrassed for his confusion in processing certain bits of information and may feel more respected and welcomed as a Greek-American in the group and as a person with Developmental Disabilities, especially since there are other Greek-Americans or members of the group who are familiar with Gree-

American culture, since the Day Habilitation center in this case is located in the Greek-American community of Astoria, NY.

Second Measure: Working from the concrete. The facilitator needs to guide participants in making their thoughts concrete and not too abstract and to ensure that they link to the concrete always in people's minds by investigating participants' personal life experiences (Heckmann, 1994). For the person with Developmental Disabilities, who may easily get confused with abstract and vague patterns of thinking, working from the concrete might be essential. Also, it is important to focus on the life experiences' participants with Developmental Disabilities, because they want their voice to be heard without being embarrassed or being considered less intelligent or less serious. Some of them have articulation problems, difficulty expressing themselves, and their communication with others may be quite problematic. But they need also to hear themselves talking about life experiences, that is because many of them may feel that a great deal of pieces of themselves is missing and that they have a rudimentary picture of themselves, which is a metacognitive skill. Also, they may exercise empathy, active listening, and intercultural skills. John as a Greek-American may feel more proud and more aware of his culture if he is able to express concrete experience in an easily understood way and receive respect and understanding from others in the group. The Socratic Method or Socratic Dialogue follows this very important principle of self-directed learning and aims to a quest for self-discovery and coming in piece with yourself (Heckmann, 1994).

Third Measure: Mutual understanding. Facilitator has to watch and check if all participants follow both directions of mutual understanding: putting enough effort to express themselves in a clear and understandable way and second grasping other people's thoughts when talking (Heckmann, 1994). Again, people with Developmental Disabilities want their voices to be heard and they need to regain the ability to both express themselves clearly, especially those with learning disabilities, and being able again to successfully focus and process information when listening to others and keep remembering those bunches of information. John and other Greek-Americans may feel more cozy and more familiar with other members, understand each other and accept each other and feel they are at the same level and on the same page as well as understand their challenges, their advantages and disadvantages, their differences and similarities.

Fourth Measure: Focus on the current question. Facilitator needs to focus the group's attention back on the current question whenever the dialogue digresses into irrelevant or adjacent questions. Participants with Developmental Disabilities may feel uneasy to observe the current question or derail from their train of thought or digressing to things they just come on their mind eventually and be or motivated to attend to the question and stay focused. That helps improve self-discipline, critical thinking and metacognitive skills.

Fifth Measure: Striving for consensus. Participants engaged in a Socratic Dialogue need to get beyond mere opinion and go beyond the purely subjective to strive for valid inter-subjective statements, so that we discover the truth of the subject, as we do in philosophy. Not statement that emerges can ever avoid the need for further revision, since inductive conclusion is reached

on the basis of experience with reasoning. Consensus helps us comprehend our erroneous statements, thus leading to a truth or an error-free thought. This concept of reaching a consensus in an attempt to observe an error-free, common-sense truth is a very important exercise in reasoning and cognitive skills (Heckmann, 1994). This very important for John would tends to feel disengaged, alone, or resistant to follow directions, and procrastinate and deviate from practices other group members follow. His behavior has improved drastically, as he now feels a member of the group and beyond, a member of the community and on the page with others. He learns to be more positive and ask for other's consent and group consensus.

Sixth Measure: Facilitator Interventions. Facilitator stresses in guiding the dialogue in fruitful directions rather than having the need to defend his own statements. It's a dialogue and his its "referee" after all. His job is to ensure a smooth flow of the dialogue and, the most important, that significant questions are observed and tackled masterfully and contributions to the dialogue are successfully taken up (Heckmann, 1994). That is an essential role for the professional who is in charge of taking care of people with Developmental Disabilities in a type of group therapy, let's say. Group therapy could be a way to see Socratic Dialogue when it is done with people who have been living with Developmental Disabilities.

The positive results of Talk Story were that John became even more motivated to show up in time, thus becoming more punctual, as he would not like to miss a meeting with a good friend. He confessed that although he has some friends, he felt different and alienated from them and he thought that they may have used them or they may have not taken him seriously. Also, he didn't like the fact that his friends smoke marijuana, and he stated with emphasis that this is the reason he avoids them because he is not a user and he would not like to become one. John seemed to be more dependable and responsible after a number of sessions and invested genuine trust in this writer who was his instructor and group therapist, thus making their rapport really positive and solid.

In particular, the following learning objectives were met at a satisfactory level: There were certain learning objectives for John which after six months were quite satisfactorily met, such as 1) learning the Greek alphabet and basic decoding and reading and writing of some basic Greek words for everyday communication at a first grade level Greek as a Second Language series of six-month lessons; 2) improving spelling, reading, and writing of third grade English Reading and Writing; 3) improving attendance and punctuation and preventing procrastination; 4) improving social and behavioral skills in a small group; 5) John became aware of his need to stop hanging out with the wrong crowd and stop being the victim of emotional and financial abuse in friendships and intimate relationships; 6) start accepting the idea of the need to avoid bad influences and peer pressure that may lead in smoking marijuana and possible future mild forms of juvenile delinquency and as a matter of fact, he claimed that he broke up from his abusive and shady girlfriend who emotionally and financially abused him and started avoiding his abusive friends who took advantage of his mind intellectual disability, as claimed by John in multiple group sessions and testified by his father. Both John and his father claimed that John didn't smoke marijuana at present, broke up with his girlfriend and stopped hanging out with his

financially and emotionally abusive friends who were a bad influence and peer pressure for at risk behaviors such as marijuana abuse and imminent mild forms of juvenile delinquency.

It was evident that learning first grade Greek as a Second Language Reading and Writing and also practicing some one-on-one speaking significantly improved John's confidence and intrinsic motivation for learning his parents' language. He was proud of being able to decode simple Greek words and phrases which was noticeable by his father and his Greek-American environment. His English reading and writing improved which, as he claimed in individual and group sessions, made him more confident of his abilities and less embarrassed in his daily activities, social interactions and transactions at the Day Habilitation center and outside of it, especially in his personal life and his work, as he worked part time with his father in construction painting. That would help him overcome labeling and special treatment that often may lead to bullying and abusive relationships.

Discussion and Limitations

Although many studies have been published on a vast array of theories and methods based on the Socratic Method, Dialogue, Empowerment, or Enquire as coined by Heckmann (2004), studies on Hawaiian Talk Story, as are rather very few. The combination of the Socratic Method with Hawaiian Talk Story is rather a unique or at least rare endeavor. Heckmann's Socratic Enquiry model was used by this 19th century German philosopher in the classroom and it has been adapted here for its use in a day habilitation center with the population of diverse, but mostly Greek-American young adults with special needs for the improvement of social and behavioral skills. Heckmann's Socratic Enquire in this group was combined with Hawaiian Talk Story where natives of Hawaii ramble about everyday life and thought associations in a spontaneous way connecting to each other through listening and empathy. John was part of that group and was exposed to those methods. Socratic Questioning or the classical Socratic Method of asking questions for critical thinking and metacognitive skills has been used here in individual sessions with John for his educational interventions in learning very basic elements of Greek as a Second Language and English reading and writing (Delgehausen, 2004).

This is a single participant case study using qualitative methods of participant's educational and therapeutic records. More specific quantitative data as well as measured objectives should be used in future studies. A quantitative study or mixed methods study should in the form of study cases would shed light on the validity and reliability of the combination of the theories and methods used, such as those of Socrates, Heckmann, and Hawaiian Talk Story. Also, an entire group should be studied in terms of group therapy as well as case study for each member of the group for the same educational interventions for both first grade Greek as a Second Language and third grade English Reading and Writing provided that all participants are on the same grade for Greek and English and all have both diagnoses of mild intellectual disability and Expressive Language Disorder. Also, all of them should be participants or consumers of a Day Habilitation center. Also, there should be a mixed group of Greek-Americans, at least one and members of other ethnic backgrounds, all native speakers of American English and second language learners

of reek. Their intercultural and multicultural interactions and group dynamics should be studied more systematically with specific examples of dialogues and specific qualitative and quantitative data of their academic progress in first grade Greek as a Second Language and third grade English Reading and Writing as a native/primary/first language. John's improvements in his group behavior were observed as his interruption of others talking was decreased and his active listening and empathy were increased. His attendance and punctuality improved for both individual and group sessions. Still, there should be more quantitative, numerical and empirical data collected and a baseline would be very useful. Also, he reported that he broke up from his abusive girlfriend and stopped hanging out with his abusive friends. However, there is no solid evidence of what he claimed and that is only his words to trust. A specific documentation for his social interactions and a timeline of his social interactions or a journal would be very useful to record evidence and use it for creating a baseline to spot continuity and changes in his behavior. The only indication that what he claimed may be true is only his father's testimony.

It's easy to realize here that it might be difficult to fulfill all these criteria. Comparison with other similar studies in different languages and participants of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds would be interested. However, there is a lack of studies combining these three specific methods for the population and interventions described. Future studies in such combination for theories and methods for people with developmental disabilities focusing on an intercultural perspective would be very interesting and useful for Day Habilitation and young adult special education and beyond. A longitudinal study of similar individuals should be very helpful in order to study log-term effects of such interventions.

Conclusion

In combination with the Socratic Method, another ancient one and very traditional in its nature, but still very fresh and commonly used, is the Hawaiian talk story. As a technique of alternative healing rather than a mere family or tribal ritual of getting together and sitting around the hearth, Talk Story has been integrated in counseling and psychotherapy and it is used in cultural events, community centers and other public places in Hawaii, not only as a demonstration of Hawaii's rich cultural heritage and spirituality, but also for the practical benefit of those who practice it. The combination of both the Socratic Method and Hawaiian Talk story in term of interculturalism make up a very strong and impactful intervention for bicultural and bilingual students and consumers, such as in the case of John, a Greek-American young adult. It helps him gain self-awareness, self-control, his cultural identity, improve his academic skills, including language, and also his behavioral and social skills, and build healthy interpersonal relationships with his peers in his community and the day lab setting. As it is obvious in the aforementioned case study, both the Socratic Method and the Hawaiian Talk Story can be used, the first in individual sessions in the form of individual counseling and the other in group sessions in the form of group counseling. From this writer's own experience both work with real clients. We live in the age of loneliness and alienation from our inner self and the others around us, and when the true values of humanity are put aside in favor of easy money and no-brainer solutions

offered by technology. It is, therefore, the right time for us to return to our roots and start making use of traditional and ancient methods that the eons have tried and prove effective for the best of humanity and the future generations to come.

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