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Civil Society: Reclaiming Our Humanity

by

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introduction

Recent obsession with the fiscal housekeeping of the nation has taken its toll. Unemployment remains high, social programs have been cut drastically and environmental concerns have all but fallen off the public agenda.

But for all the bad news of recent years, there are some promising developments on the horizon which are attempting to reorder the priorities of the public agenda. Many groups and organizations are engaged in a search to rekindle the desire and capacity of people to care for and about each other. There is a search for civility - for a civil society.

Despite this search, there is no clear statement as to what 'civil society' actually means. This paper seeks to contribute to the debate by operationalizing the concept of civil society. It includes - but moves beyond - a general vision statement. The paper sets out the goals that a civil society seeks to achieve. It also proposes three key routes to achieve these goals.

While the examples presented here reflect Canadian experience, the general concepts they embody have widespread relevance. They are local stories with global application.

vision of a civil society

A civil society sustains and enhances the capacity of all its members to build a caring and mutually responsible society. It means that all citizens - individual, corporate and government - assume responsibility for promoting economic, social and environmental well-being.

A civil society seeks to achieve three major objectives. It builds and strengthens caring communities. It ensures economic security. It promotes social investment by directing resources towards the well-being and positive development of people.

These objectives may not be new. Indeed, a primary rationale of our system of social programs - to reduce poverty and help ensure social and economic security - remains a goal that is very much alive. What is different about the civil society are the means by which these traditional objectives are achieved.

First, a civil society interprets very broadly the concept of resources to include - but move well beyond - the notion of public dollars. Second, a civil society encourages the creation of partnerships and collaborative working arrangements to achieve its objectives. Finally, a civil society understands the connection between the dots; it addresses issues in an holistic and integrated way.

conceptual framework

This interpretation of civil society has been shaped largely by international thinking on sustainable development. Sustainable development is an holistic approach to the quality of life. The concept integrates economic, social and environmental concerns and promotes the wise, efficient and creative use of resources.

This paper focusses primarily upon human well-being. Within the context of sustainable development, it is understood that human well-being cannot be achieved in the absence of a healthy environment and is equally unlikely in the absence of a buoyant economy.

Another principle of sustainable development involves meeting present-day needs while bearing in mind those of future generations. The concept places great importance on intergenerational bonds.

But sustainable development provides direction not only through its prescriptions. Equally important is its influence on problem-solving. The concept is framed on the notion that solutions to complex problems are best addressed through multisectoral dialogue and collaborative approaches. All sectors, including governments, business, labour, education, foundations and social agencies, must take responsibility for tackling economic, social and environmental issues.

goals of a civil society

i. building caring communities

If there is an overarching theme for civil society, it is the concept of citizenship - individual, corporate, organizational and government. Embedded in this concept of citizenship are the twin notions of rights and responsibilities.

Most citizenship efforts have focussed upon rights and entitlements - the 'expectations' of citizenship. But the other half of the equation - responsibility - is equally important. All individuals and sectors have a responsibility to promote community well-being - to act as 'stewards' (to borrow an environmental concept) of each other's welfare.

A civil society seeks ways to sustain and enhance the innate capacity of all community members to build a caring and mutually responsible society. Strong and caring communities start with the citizen as the base.

A group called the American Civic Forum recently signed a Civic Declaration which sets out the principles of renewed commitment to citizenship. It encourages citizens to become active agents of change in their communities and to engage in public problem-solving. The Forum argues that one way to build caring communities is to ensure the health of the third sector - "that vibrant array of voluntary associations, religious congregations, schools and colleges, the free press, professional groups, and community organizations that mediate between government and the market" [Kettering Foundation 1994: 6].

These mediating institutions of civil society - i.e., the places where people come together in communities - need to play strong leadership roles in addressing social problems, such as poverty and crime. These institutions provide the sites for public problem-solving and for skill-building and

experimentation with new, broader civic roles. These 'ties the bind' are sometimes referred to as 'social capital' - i.e., the civic virtue that expresses and builds trust and cooperation among citizens in a society [Putnam 1993: 167].

The National Forum notes that a rich public life rests on three key features: a commitment to build the capacities of individuals and communities; an emphasis on deliberative public dialogue and debate; and a focus on practical problem-solving that, without requiring consensus on values, allows diverse players to collaborate on getting things done [Kettering Foundation 1994: 21].

But the danger in promoting more active citizenship is that it inadvertently can encourage governments to abrogate their responsibility for economic, social and environmental well-being. Yet the opposite is actually required. Governments have a central role to play in supporting citizen involvement in public and community problem-solving. Moreover, governments' role with respect to income redistribution and social investment is more important than ever (discussed below).

ii. economic security

A civil society seeks to ensure the economic security of all members. Resources and efforts must be directed towards reducing unemployment and attacking poverty. A 10 percent unemployment is an 'unfinanceable' exclusion for any society; no society can afford to lose the productivity of 10 percent of its population over an extended period; nor can it afford to finance the lives of 10 percent of the population left idle over an extended period of time" [Saul 1995: 13].

Economic security is pursued through several avenues: job creation and the equitable distribution of existing work; access to opportunities through the social economy and support for microenterprise; and income redistribution to compensate the inadequacies of the labour market. Each of these three routes to economic security is discussed briefly below.

a. job creation and work distribution

Most Canadians derive their economic security from paid employment. While jobs are created primarily by the private sector, governments should ensure a supportive environment for economic activity - including stable and fair macroeconomic policies, an appropriate legal framework, adequate physical infrastructure (e.g., transportation links) and a system of incentives for private investment.

But economic expansion no longer equates with employment growth. One solution to the problem of jobless growth is a more equitable distribution of work. While the redistribution of working time does not create new jobs, it tries at least to apportion existing work more equitably between those working and the under/unemployed [Advisory Group 1994].

Another solution to unemployment lies in creating large job pools in the human service areas, such as child care and personal care for the elderly and persons with disabilities. While human care needs will grow with an aging population, this form of employment could never replace massive job losses in the manufacturing and public sectors. Additional forms of work will be required to supplement and complement the existing labour market.

One option is to support the social economy. Another possibility is to 'create' work by ensuring a highly-trained labour force that is effectively able to generate self-employment through selling its skills

(discussed more fully under *social investment*).

b. the social economy

While both job creation and the distribution of work are important, they are not sufficient in themselves to reduce high rates of unemployment and underemployment. The social economy is a distinct form of economic organization that includes co-operatives and various forms of activity known as 'community economic development' (CED). Private enterprise risks capital to generate an appropriate financial return for investors; social enterprise, by contrast, puts capital at risk in the service of social objectives, such as reducing high unemployment and assisting marginalized workers [Quarter 1992: 3].

But low-income communities need more than financial capital. They require democratic, local institutions to build an economic base such as community land trusts, housing co-operatives, community development corporations, consumer co-operatives and other nonprofit organizations. Communities also need technical information and assistance to embark upon new ventures.

Governments can facilitate access to private capital through regulatory measures and tax incentives, and can promote the exchange of ideas and best practices. Local governments, in particular, can invest resources in three important assets and processes: citizen problem-solving, community plans and local economies. The underutilized economic power of local public and nonprofit institutions can be harnessed for development purposes, including locally-controlled lending institutions and use of existing space and physical resources for community-based ventures [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993].

Another rapidly growing component of CED is the support of self-employment. There is a range of activity under way to promote microenterprise through various forms of 'micro lending' - the provision of small loans to creditors who typically would be considered too high risk by the traditional banks.

But while microenterprise and other ventures in the social economy open the door to new opportunities, they can produce precarious jobs. Small businesses are often associated with low wages, uncertain income and few associated benefits, such as employer-sponsored pensions and supplementary health coverage. The redistributive role of government has become all the more important with the growth of these innovative, but often unstable, forms of work

c. income redistribution

The insecure work that may be associated with the social economy and self-employment, and the changing labour market more generally, underscores the redistributive role of the state. This redistributive role is crucial, given the wide and growing gaps in market income (i.e., income from wages and salaries, self-employment, savings, investments and other private sources).

Poor, modest-income and middle-income families actually have experienced a decline in their market incomes since 1989. Upper-middle-income and high-income families, by contrast, have seen their market share increase somewhat in recent years. But social programs and the income tax system have managed to significantly reduce inequalities in the workforce and to fully offset the growing gap in market incomes between rich and poor. Strong social programs and a fair tax system are needed more than ever to narrow the wide inequalities in earnings created by the changing labour market and the growth of nonstandard employment - part-time, casual and contractual work.

iii. social investment

Social investment is the third key dimension of a civil society. Investing in people is essential to ensure economic development; a vibrant economy requires a healthy and educated workforce. The World Bank has ranked Canada second in the world with respect to wealth as represented by our natural resources. But it also pointed out that the future success of nations depends on the extent to which they invest in human resources. Two key areas for social investment are health (broadly defined) and education.

a. health

In Canada, medicare guarantees access by all citizens to comprehensive medical care. Medicare also can be considered an important redistributive social program; it ensures that lower-income Canadians, who run a greater risk of illness, have access free of financial barriers to health care. Public investment in universal health care has contributed to overall health; Canada ranks consistently at the top of the United Nations Human Development Index - a composite measure of life expectancy at birth (a reflection of the general health of the population and the quality of health care services), the adult literacy rate and average years of schooling.

But health is attained only partly through the provision of health care services which are essentially a form of remedial intervention. The promotion of health is equally, if not more, important to the attainment of health. Health promotion incorporates prevention, especially in the areas of maternal, prenatal and postnatal care. Yet neither health care services nor health promotion can meet their respective objectives alone; they are both premised upon a healthy environment - clean air, clean water and a safe food supply - and adequate housing.

In addition to investments in health which benefit the entire population, there are essential social investments to be made at two stages of the life cycle. The first is during early childhood. There is ample evidence that investing in development at the very early stages of children's lives reaps substantial returns in their overall health and well-being later on. At the other end of the life cycle, resources must be directed towards more home supports that allow elderly Canadians and persons with disabilities to live independently in communities.

To date, most of the spending on children, youth, the elderly and persons with disabilities goes towards 'after-the-fact' services - after child abuse, family break-up, youth have run into trouble with the law or institutionalization. While formal social services are important, civil society is concerned more about ensuring the presence of a social infrastructure whose purpose is to support natural forms of care. These include family resource centres, parent education, respite care, child care services as well as cooperative babysitting arrangements, parent matching programs, foster grandparent programs and neighbourhood support groups.

b. education and skills development

Education and skills development are key to economic security. Higher levels of education are associated with enhanced worker productivity and higher incomes. In order to compete in a rapidly-changing knowledge-based economy, nations must invest heavily in education, training and skill formation. Educational priorities include universal literacy and closing the gap in male and female participation in all forms of education and training.

As in the case of health, there is a need to invest in human resources at all stages of the life cycle. Lifelong learning moves well beyond the traditional notion of education. It includes child development and Head Start programs for very young children, parenting skills, programs that help young people move from school to work, high-quality vocational and skills training, upgrading to help workers renew or change their skills, and assistance in matching worker skills with job requirements.

the road to a civil society

As noted, the goals that a civil society seeks to achieve - caring communities, economic security and social investment - are not 'new' societal objectives. What is new about the concept of civil society is its fresh perspective on the means to achieve these goals.

i. resources

The concept of sustainable development has had an important influence upon thinking about resources. Much of the work on sustainable development typically has focussed upon environmental concerns and resources in the traditional sense: air, land, water, minerals, trees and wildlife. In fact, the literature on sustainable development sets out clear principles regarding the use of these resources. But while these principles apply primarily to the natural environment, they can be interpreted broadly to provide guidance on the financial, natural/built and human capital that can be brought to bear upon economic, social and environmental problems.

The goals of a civil society are vast and require extensive investment. Yet civil society interprets the concept of resources very broadly. The notion of what is available to address these goals moves well beyond the traditional concept of dollars - and dollars from governments.

Equally important, a civil society builds on the concept of 'leverage.' This refers to the use of available resources as the base from which to acquire additional forms of support. The initial contribution acts as an expression of faith in or support for the work which can then lever resources from other organizations. For example, a small grant from a foundation or government can help generate additional funds or other assistance such as sponsorship, access to mailing lists and networks, free publicity or publication space, and donation of space or equipment.

a. financial capital

Financial capital refers to money. While governments are a traditional source of funds for promoting economic, social and environmental well-being, there are other types of financial capital that can be harnessed for investment in these areas. Loan circles - i.e., arrangements which seek contributions from individual lenders, foundations and companies - are in various stages of development in many communities throughout the country [Evoy 1997]. The pool of funds that is generated by a local community organization is then loaned for microenterprise. The funds generally go to people considered by traditional banking institutions to be 'unbankable' - i.e., too high risk.

The Montreal Community Loan Association (described below) is an example of a community-based initiative that addresses issues of access to capital, unemployment and the ownership of wealth. VanCity Credit Union recently has introduced a policy for loans to microenterprise on the basis of character recommendation and business plan rather than level of available assets.

Another example of financial capital is the Funders' Consortium on Women and Economic Development financed by a group of seven organizations including the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, Bank of Montreal, Canadian Women's Foundation, the Kahanoff Foundation, Levi Strauss Inc., Nancy's Very Own Foundation and the Trillium Foundation. The Canadian Alternative Investment Cooperative is also involved as a lending partner. The pooled capital flows to the Canadian Women's Foundation which, in turn, disburses the funds to help local groups of women and girls set up small businesses.

Housing trust funds represent another form of financial capital. Most housing trust funds are financed through five or six different sources of capital. These funds allocate money directly to support the construction or preservation of housing for low-income households or for other housing services.

b. natural/built capital

Natural/built capital refers to the natural resources and the physical assets in communities that can be harnessed as resources for economic, social and environmental well-being.

Community land trusts are an example of natural/built capital. These trusts are nonprofit corporations which separate the ownership of land from the ownership of buildings and other improvements to the land. Their purpose is to hold a body of land permanently in trust for the benefit of the community, help communities gain greater control over land and local resources, and expand access to these resources for lower-income residents [Concordia University 1995].

Work is under way in the US to turn public housing - generally regarded as a liability in most areas - into an asset by using it as equity for financing additional low-cost housing. The Dufferin Mall in Toronto is another example of the innovative use of built capital.

The Mall has six schools in its immediate catchment area and had become a meeting place for many teens during the day. There were growing numbers of disturbances involving crime and store break-ins. The manager of Marathon Realty, the company responsible for the management, realized that he either would have to turn the mall into a 'fortress' with multiple security systems or could address the problem in a creative way. He convened the school boards and 12 community agencies to consider the options. The result of the problem-solving effort was the Dufferin Mall Youth Services which provides individual and family counselling, advocacy, information and referral, job training and community outreach to the young people. The model has been successful in using an existing facility to reduce crime, promote literacy and training, and engage businesses in providing work placements.

South Simcoe Public School in Oshawa, Ontario, had no gymnasium or other gathering place large enough to accommodate the student body and staff. Rather than focus on the lack of available resources, South Simcoe identified an untapped resource only a block away. A partnership was struck with the Royal Canadian Legion that allows the school to hold monthly assemblies, celebrations of student achievement and graduation ceremonies. The sharing of this physical space has helped build a sense of team both in the school and community [Dean 1996: 93].

c. human capital

Human capital refers to the wealth inherent in human resources - the time, energy, skills, interest and commitment - for promoting economic, social and environmental well-being. Knowledge and expertise comprise key elements of human capital; they are particularly important for mentoring and skills

development in such areas as individualized reading, math instruction or literacy training. A fundamental dimension of human capital is the recognition that every person, household and community - no matter how apparently 'impoverished' - has strengths, resources and capacities.

There are countless examples of innovative work under way to harness human capital. The Learning Partnership in Toronto, for example, is a nonprofit organization that creates learning and career opportunities for children. It pools the resources of education, business and the community to increase literacy, reduce the school drop-out rate, motivate young people to learn, enhance their readiness for school and promote careers in science and technology, particularly for girls.

Youth can also contribute immeasurably to the well-being and vitality of a community. Young people are generally defined in terms of their perceived deficiencies rather than their potential capacities and typically are relegated to the margins of community life. Yet youth can be employed to do research, conduct interviews, sit on boards of voluntary organizations, renovate parks and playgrounds, and carry out other essential community tasks. Projects that connect young people productively with other youth and adults are now seen to be the foundations upon which healthy communities are built [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993: 29].

Seniors represent another vast, untapped resource with respect to their collective knowledge, skills, experience and expertise. They generally are viewed as a group that drains the income security, health and social service systems. But seniors can make an important contribution to addressing many social problems. A substantial proportion of the Canadian population, for example, is considered functionally illiterate. Seniors' time and resources can help provide individualized reading instruction as in the partnership between the Volunteer Centre of Ottawa-Carleton and the Ottawa-Carleton Learning Foundation. Under this arrangement, 125 seniors volunteer an estimated 20,000 hours to share skills, experiences and interests with students of all ages.

South Simcoe School in Oshawa places special emphasis on involving older people in its programs and activities. Seniors are encouraged "to utilize their expertise, make a contribution and once again find meaning in their lives" [Dean 1996: 92]. Members of Sydenham Kiwanis, a seniors' service club, have a small band which comes to play at the school. Members also teach the students how to play various instruments. South Simcoe contends that "this positive interaction between the old and the young gives community its deepest meaning and strength [Dean 1996: 92]. This example of intergenerational work is also consistent with the concept of sustainable development which attempts to strengthen the links between generations.

The Parent Rap Group is another example of how South Simcoe has tapped human capital. The group began with three parents in the first year and has since grown to include more than 25 percent of the parent population. Parents attend these sessions to share information, discuss issues and participate in planning, problem-solving and decision-making regarding the school code of behaviour and the hiring of staff. The parents worked with a social worker and the school team to develop a Community Agency Directory which promotes access to community services for drug/alcohol abuse and other problems. Parent morale is now much higher and many parents are themselves returning to school. "The creation of the directory is an excellent example of utilizing untapped human resources to contribute to the well-being of the community [Dean 1996: 92].

ii. partnerships and collaboratives

A civil society encourages partnering and collaborative work arrangements. These alliances among

disciplines, sectors and community members help forge comprehensive solutions to economic, social and environmental problems. Collaborative relationships create new value by bringing new resources, insights and expertise to the 'table.'

A wide range of partnership arrangements is now being tested throughout the country. Caledon is currently involved in a Social Partnerships Project (supported by the Trillium Foundation) to build knowledge on the concept and practice of social partnerships. These refer to strategic alliances between business and nonprofit groups for the purpose of promoting economic and social well-being.

The various forms of partnership include social marketing, employee volunteerism and direct involvement in economic and social change [Pante 1996: 29]. Despite their differences, all partnerships imply - at the very least - an understanding of, commitment to and direct involvement in the issue being addressed.

Social marketing refers to arrangements in which a business agrees to promote a social cause in its own marketing strategy. Employee involvement helps raise awareness about the social problem and, at the same time, creates a positive image for the business which is seen to care about the issue by virtue of its adoption and promotion of the concern as a problem.

An example of social marketing is the Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF) and Tambrands Canada Inc., distributors of Tampax tampons. In 1992, the Canadian Women's Foundation approached Tambrands and began discussions about developing a relationship. The first result was the printing by Tambrands of a bilingual flyer announcing the start of the Canadian Women's Foundation, and including it in 600,000 boxes of tampons distributed across Canada. Building on this base, the Canadian Women's Foundation proposed that it could implement a national grantmaking program for shelters for assaulted women on behalf of Tambrands. After discussions, the company made a three-year commitment to the Foundation of \$100,000 a year, total \$300,000, to establish the CWF Tampax Trust Fund in support of shelters.

The first year of the program also included a cause-related public marketing initiative that resulted in an additional \$43,000 in donations from more than 700 individual donors across the country. Tambrands challenged individuals to donate through a 'you donate, we'll match' strategy, with donation coupons in magazines, boxes of tampons and coupon envelopes received in homes. Several hundred thousand dollars of free advertising was donated by various media in support of this initiative [White and Wybrow 1996: 64].

Workplace volunteerism is another example of emerging partnerships. Employee volunteerism is a business strategy for community involvement that complements traditional contributions of financial donations, event sponsorship and in-kind gifts. Volunteer activities include sharing professional skills and expertise, delivering services and programs, providing active leadership on boards and committees, and mobilizing community support.

Chevron Canada Resources is one of the most advanced forms of this type of partnership. Company policy allows employees to volunteer eight hours per year on company time. In addition, Chevron Canada Resources will make a donation of \$100 to an organization of the employee's choice and will pay the fees for employees who participate in events sponsored by the company. Chevron Canada Resources also helped spearhead the Calgary Workplace Volunteer Council launched with nine corporate members, the membership of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce and the full membership of the Volunteer Centre of Calgary [Seel and Ramsay 1996: 104]

Finally, some social partnerships seek fundamental change. Areas of focus include the alleviation of poverty through housing, job creation and access to capital; promotion of social justice through advocacy; and growing local control over community assets and the process of economic and social development.

The Montreal Community Loan Association, for example, works with borrowers, individual and institutional lenders, and existing financial institutions to bridge the gap between those who need financial capital and those who wish to invest in community development. Low-interest loans are accepted from investors and the funds are then used to make affordable loans to people usually denied access to capital from conventional financial institutions. Welfare recipients, single mothers, immigrants and refugees, and unemployed youth employ the capital to start small businesses. Loan recipients are also provided with technical assistance to support the development of business plans and the repayment process [Evoy 1997].

Partnerships are important for several reasons. They help raise awareness of pressing social problems, such as poverty and family violence, and broaden the range of sectors taking responsibility for economic, social and environmental well-being. These arrangements harness previously untapped resources in new and creative ways, thereby increasing the amount of total investment in a given concern.

The resources that two or more partners can bring to bear upon a given problem are usually greater than one organization can harness on its own. This is especially true in times of tight dollars. But resources include far more than money alone. Partners can contribute staff and volunteer time; information, knowledge and expertise; contacts and networks; space, equipment and other forms of income-in-kind.

Partnerships and collaboratives also embody a clear and important message: Economic, social and environmental issues are the concern of the entire community - not simply of governments or social agencies. Moreover, all sectors are responsible for addressing these problems - preferably through a planned and coordinated approach that combines resources and expertise in new and sustainable ways.

But private arrangements are no substitute for a solid public sector. Partnerships and collaboratives both complement and supplement the public sector. They can never and should never be expected to replace the role of government in redistributing income, making essential social investments and building caring communities through the promotion of citizenship.

iii. holistic approaches

A civil society understands the interrelationships among various aspects of human well-being. The satisfaction of economic needs requires a strong social base which promotes social well-being; the satisfaction of social needs, in turn, requires a solid economic base.

Social well-being also depends to a large extent on good health which is influenced by both education and income security. Educational attainment is affected by many factors, including health, self-esteem and income (especially at the postsecondary level) [CPHA 1997: 18]. Civil society sees these issues as a set of interrelated factors rather than as discrete categories - the approach typically employed by governments to deal with problems.

work in progress

The search for a civil society sounds like the quest for the Holy Grail. And while the goals it seeks to achieve are monumental, the actions that can be taken to meet these objectives are quite attainable. In fact, there is already considerable activity under way to build a civil society.

The foundation world has been on the leading edge of this thinking and will continue to play a leadership role through its bold strategic investments. The Trillium Foundation, for example, supports a broad range of collaborative initiatives that address economic security, promote citizenship and build caring communities. The 1994-95 Annual Report of the Foundation was entitled *In Search of the Civil Society*.

The Atkinson Charitable Foundation has supported a variety of projects that focus on building community capacity. The Laidlaw Foundation has acted for many years as a pioneer in supporting work on early childhood development. The Kahanoff Foundation has commissioned a multi-year research initiative directed by Dr. Paul Reed; a principal objective is to begin the design and construction of a set of civic accounts and a formal knowledge base for the civic sector. The McConnell Foundation recently funded a project on civic engagement which, among other activities, is conducting an assets inventory in the NDG community in Montreal. McConnell will also be investing in a national strategic initiative on community economic development.

There is plenty to learn from these foundations which have embraced and are exemplifying through their work the building of civil society. But the fact that foundations have assumed this lead role in no way minimizes the vital roles that must be played by business, education, social agencies and especially government - which is needed more than ever to counter poverty, invest in people and support caring communities.

conclusion

Civil society seeks to ensure that all citizens - individual, corporate and government - assume responsibility for promoting economic, social and environmental well-being. It reinforces the fabric of communities and of the entire nation by fostering a spirit of collective responsibility. Most important, civil society seeks to reclaim - and rekindle - our humanity. The author would like to acknowledge Julie White and the Trillium Foundation for inspiring this work.

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