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The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
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BEYOND ENCLOSURE: PEDAGOGY FOR A DEMOCRATIC COMMONWEALTH
By Romand Coles and Blase Scarnati

This article is based on a sixty-page research paper entitled Democracy Education Beyond Enclosure: Reflections on Liberal Education, Engaged Democracy, and Vocation. The authors would like to thank the students, faculty, community members, and administrators at Northern Arizona University and Flagstaff that made this work possible.

Enclosure and Democratic Commonwealth
We live in a time when higher education (along with democratic institutions and practices) is under severe assault. This attack has many different, yet overlapping, fronts, advancing in the name of austerity, efficiency, privatization, consumer preference, technocratic expertise, outcome-based metrics, continual assessment, and culture war. In this context, some faculty members are sliding toward despair and cynicism. Meanwhile, some of the most visible responses to the shrinking box of higher education have been primarily defensive: letters, rallies, and protests calling for a return to previous levels of funding and tenure density, renewed support for the traditional disciplines, and rather anemic calls for faculty governance in resistance to top-heavy administrations. While we are sympathetic to many of these calls, we note that, in their most common forms, they seem to lack sufficient resonance to alter broader political dynamics. Moreover, insofar as they assume primarily reactive articulations, they fail to address aspects of higher education that have long been intimately involved in the decline of democratic culture, public goods, and educational quality.

It is easy to view this mix of attack, despair, and reaction as a sign of dark times, but inventive possibilities exist that are largely ignored by the leading protagonists. There are possibilities for an emerging confluence of vision, interests, and power that harbor significant promise for altering interconnected cultural and political dynamics in higher education, democracy, and work. Gathering steam is a series
of initiatives that may deepen and broaden traditions of democratic engagement, freedom, and commonwealth.

How shall we characterize the dominant tendencies that shape the academy today? We believe that it is useful to understand them in terms of the history of enclosure (our reflections here are informed by Polanyi 1944 and Wolin 2008). The story of enclosure is centuries old, beginning with early moves to enclose and privatize the common lands upon which most ordinary people depended for their livelihood. While the enclosure movement started with land, in the ensuing centuries it spread to many other domains: to corporate charters that were once tethered to public purposes, to agricultural seeds, to the knowledge commons, to medicine, to the genetic code, to the airwaves, to education, to government itself. Movements toward enclosure typically aim to seize and rearticulate spaces and practices that have had significant public governance and purposes. These movements seek to curtail or eliminate public involvement, enhance comparatively narrow private interests, and limit people’s freedom. Advantages gained in one arena are typically used to enhance one’s hand in other arenas, in a process that tends to generate a system of interconnected and sometimes runaway power. Though enclosure often involves walls, exclusions, and limitations, in contemporary times enclosure works in tandem with privatization. It works in ways that tend to intensify plutocratic oligarchy and restrict the freedom, governance, and commonwealth of democratic publics.

In almost every case, movements of enclosure have been challenged by movements to defend the commons, and in some instances the latter have made advances that significantly contribute to the growth of democratic knowledge, cultures, power, freedoms, and commonwealth. Transformations in higher education—reforms brought about by the American Revolution, land-grant and historically black colleges in the nineteenth century, the GI Bill and other post-World War II programs, and democracy and diversity initiatives in the 1960s—all contained significant elements that have advanced commonwealth and democracy, even as they illustrate the messy complexities of political development in the United States.

But recent decades have seen a remarkable curtailment of initiatives for democratization and commonwealth in higher
education. While the system of enclosure that is at work here has a recognizable logic that serves the interests of very few at the expense of many, the actors who are implicated in this highly erosive process are a multifarious and cacophonous crew. They include:

- corporate powers that seek to restrict education according to the imperatives of private industry;
- legislatures that dogmatically pursue ideological agendas;
- university administrations that seek their own advancement by conforming to imperatives that have little to do with the goods of education;
- faculty so limited by the enclosures of hyper-professionalized disciplines that they increasingly mirror narrow interest groups, and find it difficult to connect with broader public interests;
- students molded by a consumer culture that misconstrues education as a form of shopping;
- angry publics enflamed by culture wars, fueled in part by billionaires;
- and those who resent perceived manipulation and humiliation by the technocrats they associate with higher education.

Most of us would need more fingers than we have to target all those who are implicated in the assault on higher education—including some that curve back to the bodies from which they extend.

At the same time, there are numerous initiatives that are beginning to generate some of the vision, coalescence of interests, and political dynamics needed to revitalize quality education, democracy, and commonwealth. Initiatives at Northern Arizona University (where we teach) and other institutions are re-envisioning pedagogical practices in ways that appear to be resonating with faculty, students, and members of diverse communities, as well as with the university administration, local government, and business community. There are heartening trends in the nationwide education movement that are being explored by networks such as the American Commonwealth Partnership, Imagining America, CIRCLE, the American Democracy Project, the Kettering Foundation, and the
New Economy Institute. Though relatively young, there are promising signs these initiatives may lead to a more diverse and powerful public that supports the type of high quality education for vocations that contributes to democracy and commonwealth.

In this article, we sketch a theoretical framework that pushes the accepted model for liberal education into deep articulation with vocation and engaged democracy. On a practical level, we also begin to see ways in which this framework is having substantial democratizing impacts on the culture, practices, and institutional spaces at Northern Arizona University and among our community partners. In particular, we focus on theorizing and on cultivating the fertile intersection that is emerging among liberal education, civic agency through democratic pedagogy, and vocational formation. We believe that the space where these three overlap is the most promising location for democratic reformation of higher education. It is at this intersection that we find some of the richest and most engaging ideas about education. It is also here that we find a confluence of emergent interests among diverse constituencies, one that holds the potential for cultivating a powerful network capable of fostering deep and broadly democratic institutional and cultural change in higher education.

A Frame for Democratic Pedagogy, Institutional Culture Change, and Commonwealth

Many faculty embrace liberal education in the hope of breaking through the complex dynamics of contemporary enclosure. Education for human freedom involves far-ranging inquiries through which we may, on the one hand, critically illuminate, and liberate ourselves from, dogmas that serve antagonistic interests and, on the other, discern more genuine paths toward personal flourishing. Liberal education has always had the latent capacity to promote activities of public freedom that involve inquiry, collaborative work, and political action—through which we shape and generate the basic conditions and commonwealth of our polities. We believe that the academy can open liberal education to a more profoundly interdisciplinary dialogical process, widening the dialogue to include faculty in collaborative groups, students, and community members. Moreover, this sort of liberal education can bring disciplinary
knowledges into dialogue with other knowledges—especially community knowledges—as students, faculty, and community members collaborate to develop democratic capacities and agency. This mode of radically dialogical liberal education can create a thick braid of activity and articulation, with diverse participants sharing their problems, aspirations, and knowledges on how to co-create a complex and diverse commonwealth. The university thus becomes a dialogical catalyzing agent in the community, rather than a locus of research that is segregated from the community and its concerns.

Learning is broadened, deepened, and vivified by practices of liberal education that replace the enclosures of disciplines, narrow interests, and the academy itself in favor of profound dialogue across differences. It is a vision for liberal education that can cultivate the democratic agency that many hunger for. Such agency does not involve “dumbed-down” disciplinary knowledge (as some fear), but rather enriches these knowledges through conversation about the complexities of the world and the diversity of our communities. Through such engagements, many participants—particularly “first generation” students—newly discover the profound pertinence of academic learning, and become passionate about higher education. Democratic pedagogy instills a sense that learning and scholarship aim to not only understand the world, but also to change it for the better, despite the profound problems we face. This conjunction animates educational practices and democratic agency in a reciprocal process.

In this context, conceptions and practices of vocational education are profoundly enriched as well. The call for vocational education resounds from many quarters today, bringing the hope that students may acquire good jobs and good wages. At the same time, many in the academy fear that the focus on vocational education will truncate and narrowly instrumentalize the broader aspirations of liberal education that have informed post-World War II visions of higher education. Much of the technocratic rhetoric around vocational education does, indeed, feed this concern. Yet in the context of deepened liberal education and democratic pedagogy, we find that the implications are far brighter.

With theorists such as Max Weber and Richard Sennett, we seek to recover and amplify the more profound dimensions of
vocation, particularly those evoked by the German word *Beruf*, which “contains two resonances: the gradual accumulation of knowledge and skills and the ever-stronger conviction that one was meant to do this one particular thing in one's life” (Sennett 2009, 263). Consider each of these in turn. For Sennett, drawing on the craftsperson tradition, engaged pedagogy and the complex sorts of agency that are cultivated in democratic pedagogy are integral to a rich sense of vocational knowledge: “The craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged” and illuminates how both “understanding and expression are impaired” when the “head is separated from the hand” (20). For “all skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices,” on the one hand, and “technical understanding [that] develops through the powers of imagination,” on the other (10). Our engagement with the world is indispensable because “materiality talks back, it continually corrects our projections” with experiences of complexity that resist, puncture, and spill beyond our simplifications (272). Vocational education, thus understood, is a process of enlightenment that breaks out of enclosures. It exceeds privatization insofar as it facilitates the discernment and cultivation of one’s “calling,” which emerges through the profound inquiry flourishing at the intersection of one’s deepest gifts and significant public purposes. A rich conception of vocational education is both enhanced by and implicated in similarly rich understandings of liberal education and democratic pedagogies for civic engagement.

In dialogues with scores of faculty and students, we have found that there is a fertile intersection that resonates with people from a wide range of academic backgrounds, aspirations, and political ideologies. Many hunger for a conception of liberal education that connects the flourishing of individuals to the complex commonwealth of our communities—one that prepares people to pursue meaningful work and political action that extends, rather than terminates, the existential journeys initiated in higher education. Many are drawn into the work of serious teaching, learning, civic engagement, and institutional change in this context.

Each institution in higher education has its own specific contexts, cultures, traditions, and “brands.” Organizing for change has always involved making connections between transformative
frames and the dimensions of one’s context. In the following section, we briefly discuss how we have sought to make these connections at Northern Arizona University.

**Connections for Action at Northern Arizona University**

Northern Arizona University (NAU), like most institutions of higher education, readily articulates values and aspirations in our institutional mission and strategic planning documents. These statements ostensibly embody values the university community has established over time—much like the curricula that actualize these values—as well as other values embraced by the faculty, even if those are not formally stated by the institution. NAU’s strategic goals include student success, excellence in research, global engagement, a commitment to Native Americans, sustainability, and “diversity, civic engagement, and community building.” The latter is a recent addition, and a very important recognition of the impact our civic engagement and democratic pedagogy initiative at NAU has had on the institution and, increasingly, on the national scene. This initiative has been able to gain rapid and widespread faculty and administrative support because we have connected it with NAU’s commitment to quality, face-to-face interactive undergraduate education and efforts to increase student success. Indeed, this focus on undergraduate education is central to what distinguishes NAU among the three four-year public institutions of higher education in Arizona. Our civic agency and engagement initiative framed democratic pedagogy and civic engagement as powerful ways to enhance NAU’s identity and effectiveness in promoting student success. Its effectiveness has been supported by quantitative and qualitative data, as we discuss below. The initiative places hundreds of students in First Year Seminars (FYS), linked to action research teams (ARTs) working in the community on such issues as sustainability, Native American concerns, diversity, local economics, and regional impacts of globalization. As such, we have quickly become one of the most visible initiatives to support NAU’s strategic goals and its identity as an institution that seeks to be a responsible steward in the region.

This collaborative work resonates with the university and the region because it is grounded in practices of civic agency and
engagement that involve students, faculty, and community members in a thoroughly democratic pedagogy. In courses in the FYS Program, Second Year Seminars (SYS), and soon in NAU’s new Civic Engagement Minor (sponsored by the Program for Community, Culture, and Environment and the FYS-ARTS Program), students, faculty, and community members engage together to generate vibrant, creative, and non-hierarchical educational learning spaces in a radically expanded concept of what higher education can be. We seek to provide a powerful frame for intellectual learning and public research through democratic pedagogy—indeed, one that is reminiscent of the frame used by historian Gordon Wood to argue that there is a false dichotomy in attributing either ideas or passion as means by which change was effected in the American Revolution and early republic (Wood 2011). We adapt the term action research and connect to the powerful passions of our students, faculty, and community members to bring about change.

Democratic pedagogy begins in the first class meeting between our faculty and first year students, where many collaborative decisions are made on the direction that the course will take—including projects, assessments, and ways of interacting with one another—and that all agree upon. A key democratic pedagogy that is deployed in the first week of the FYS is the Public Narrative. Based upon the classic narrative framework developed by Marshall Ganz of Harvard University, first year students begin to find their voice and develop agency through several steps that explore the individual's story (self), connect with others, then motivate the group (us), and provide an opportunity to strategize for action (now) (Ganz 2009). Additionally, faculty, peer teaching assistants, and graduate mentors help build the students’ democratic capacities and skills through the process of organizing; developing relational capacities by practicing effective one-on-one meetings, developing analytical and power-mapping skills as taught by the Industrial Areas Foundation and other community organizations, cultivating practices of mutual accountability, and learning how to strategize action.

By conceptually reworking the educational experiences found in liberal education courses in the first year, we seek to unleash the potential for cultivating more engaged, agentic, and change-oriented practices of democracy, as well as richer visions of vocation. We
must foster learning experiences that prepare our students to build broad coalitions to actively bring about change. Developing these skills will help students build political support for higher education that encompasses a much wider range of constituencies than are presently represented. Democratic pedagogies and these active learning experiences must engender dialogues and collaborative public work that produce appropriately complex understandings born at the intersection of many different communities and forms of knowledge.

For liberal education, democratic pedagogies seek to develop diverse knowledges embodied in the community, like the knowledge K-12 teachers or members of diverse traditions bring to the table. In addition, we seek to democratically develop knowledges engendered by those in occupations that connect deeply with craft and vocation—knowledge that is formed by those who struggle to survive on the undersides of particular forms of power, and knowledge of those who wrestle with the radical specificities of particular places and ecological circumstances.

As demonstrated by the example of NAU’s recent adoption of civic engagement as a strategic goal, democratic pedagogy through action research can both draw upon and inform the brand of the institution by making civic engagement a key signature undergraduate experience. By situating public work at the heart of the discourse about what the institution is and what it aspires to, we seek to not only frame action and drive institutional transformation, but also to expand what the possibilities are for a democratic space in the academy. This becomes not only a learning space for students, but also a deeply collaborative and creative space for commonwealth. Through the learning experiences of democratic pedagogy, much like those of the Public Narrative, students move from self to the community—moving from the singularity of the individual into a larger dialogue with the community, or broader frame of commonwealth. As students move beyond the self, they begin to engage vocation in its larger sense, asking not just “who am I?” but “what do I see for my life?” and “how does my life articulate with broader communities and ecosystems of which I am a part?”
Discussion of NAU’s ARTs Movement

Students at NAU are working non-hierarchically and collaboratively to build new alliances with community-based partners in order to create dense rhizomatic webs of practice called Action Research Teams (ARTs). Each ART includes a diverse mix of members: first year students enrolled in FYS-ARTs courses, sophomores and juniors who want to continue in the public work of the ARTs and assume leadership and organizing responsibilities for initiatives within each ART, sophomore or junior peer teaching assistants from the FYS-ARTs Program who work with the students in each seminar, graduate student mentors assigned to an ART, and multigenerational community partners, including K-12 students and their parents, community members and organizations, political leaders, sustainable business entrepreneurs, and Navajo elders.

In the fall of 2009, after spending a year primarily listening and building relationships both on campus and throughout the community, a leadership collaborative consisting of the Program for Community, Culture and Environment (CC&E), FYS, and the Masters of Sustainable Communities Program (MSUS) launched an initiative in which students in a MSUS core course served as facilitators of Action Research Teams made up largely of students in an FYS course. Students opted into one of the following ARTs: Public Achievement (coaching teams of K-12 students on the theory and practice of grassroots democracy); Weatherization and Community Building; Immigration; Water Conservation and Rights; Urban Gardening and Alternative Agriculture; Food Security; and Public Spaces for Civic Engagement. During that semester, ARTs participants catalyzed numerous projects, from coaching teams of children in democratic organizing and organizing with the immigrant community against abusive policing to working in urban gardens. Forums led to action plans for a Sustainable Café, community organizing around residential energy efficiency, and hosting an educational/celebratory event that drew five hundred people to Flagstaff, an event that longtime residents said was the most diverse large gathering in the town’s history. At the end of the semester, most of the students involved were very enthusiastic about the emerging transformative possibilities. The ARTs continued into the next semester,
largely led by graduate students, faculty, community partners, and some undergraduates who stayed involved.

A vortex of excitement gathered the following fall, as the FYS Program recruited more faculty to offer seminars connected with the ARTs, the MSUS Program doubled its incoming class and provided more facilitation and mentorship (aided by stipends for graduate assistants from CC&E), and our collaborations with community groups strengthened. In each year since, the number of FYS-ARTs courses has grown, as have enrollments of first year students engaged in the ARTs, which totaled 450 in fall of 2013 and are expected to nearly double this fall. Many new ARTs have been added to the mix, and have developed sub-teams focused on different modes of public work and political action in relation to the problems they address. For example, the Immigration ART engages in humanitarian work on border issues with No More Deaths, broad-based community organizing strategies with Northern Arizona Interfaith Council, radical abolitionist democracy visions and strategies with Repeal Coalition, and educational events with a variety of campus and community partners.

Other ARTs have multiplied their sites and projects. The number of partnering organizations and social movements has burgeoned, and it is fair to say that the ARTs movement is an energetic participant—or catalyst—in most of the major initiatives in Flagstaff for sustainability, social justice, and grassroots democracy.

**University Resources for Democratic Pedagogy, Civic Engagement, and Public Work**

While initial funding for faculty and graduate student involvement in this initiative came from the three programs that formed the core leadership, we have since gained substantial funding from the NAU President’s Innovation Fund, a Dean’s Faculty Development Grant, the National Science Foundation, and others. Increasingly NAU is channeling significant resources toward this initiative, and research is beginning to confirm the previously hypothesized effectiveness of democratic pedagogical practices and civic engagement. One vital measure of the power of such pedagogy can be seen with respect to first-year students engaged with the ARTs. NAU students have very high dropout
rates, with roughly 27 percent of students leaving NAU before the second year. A recent assessment study of the FYS-ARTs found significant increases in retention rates from the first to the second year among students who take one such seminar. Minority students who took a FYS-ARTs course showed increased retention rates of 17 percent; women's retention rates increased by 9 percent; and overall rates were up 7 percent. These findings strongly suggest that students who connect their education with public engagement, purposes, and agency not only “turn on” to education, but are also less likely to “turn off.”

We have been fortunate to receive significant institutional investment in our civic engagement initiative at NAU. The FYS-ARTs Program budget has grown from $70,000 in 2007-08 to nearly $900,000 this academic year. We have also seen growth in personnel, from utilizing tenured and part-time faculty on loan from other departments to teach individual sections of FYS-ARTs courses to 6-1/2 lecturer positions and two full-time staff coordinator positions dedicated to the program. Two tenure-track searches are currently underway to fill positions directly linked to this work. One is for a scholar in community-based sustainable economics, and the other is for a civic scholar whose focus is on water and food with the ability to work with diverse food-producing communities across the Southwest. We also fund and hire 167 undergraduate peer teaching assistant positions, as well as 8-1/2 graduate assistant positions to work with the ARTs.

The civic engagement curriculum offers courses developed from individual faculty research and interests in each of the four distribution areas of our liberal education program (serving first and second year students). We have recently established a Civic Engagement Minor at NAU that will begin enrolling students in the spring of 2015 in courses jointly offered by the CCE Program and the FYS-ARTs. Students in the minor will explore the relationships between the discipline that they study and a comprehensive knowledge of civic engagement history, theories, practices, and experiences. The minor will combine scholarly knowledge and research with a variety of experiential opportunities in which students become involved in action research with community organizations aimed at creating more democratic, just, and sustainable communities.
The premise of this minor is that grassroots democratic theory and practice can and should mutually inform one other, as should the scholarly and various other knowledges and traditions in the wider community.

Students who complete the Civic Engagement Minor will acquire a broad education in democracy, power, and the skills that bring about change to enhance commonwealth—from the local level to national and transnational scales—through a series of intentional and sequenced learning experiences. Experiential and leadership training will provide students with a deep understanding of a career in which personal flourishing and broad public purposes are intertwined. This will enhance students’ employability, vocational connections, and relationships, as well as their capacities to work in diverse, complex, and dynamic situations. The minor enables students to participate in a transformative initiative in which the NAU community participates in numerous partnerships with surrounding communities in order to become better stewards and citizens.

As we have focused on developing and growing the numerous collaborative projects associated with the ARTs initiative, the deans of several of NAU’s Colleges—along with leaders of service, deliberative dialogue, and civic engagement projects on campus—invited us to become founding members of a campus-wide Civic Engagement Consortium. To date, the consortium has focused largely on coordinating efforts and communicating among its members. We believe the consortium has great potential, and we seek to help it become an active agent for catalyzing new civic agency and engagement work in the university-community realm.

Finally, the FYS-ARTs Program faculty have been the most valuable of all resources. They deployed the democratic pedagogy used in their courses to organize with one another to collectively draft a new differential load policy for the program that was approved by the provost. Beginning this fall, FYS-ARTs faculty will receive four units of load credit for each three-unit course taught, due to the significant investment of time in civic engagement and democratic pedagogy by each faculty member involved with the ARTs. This differential loading applies to both full-time and part-time faculty. Based on this successful organizing experience, the FYS-ARTs faculty
self-constituted themselves as a Faculty Steering Committee for
the program, where they will have an active role in determining
the direction, growth, funding priorities, staffing, and curriculum
of the FYS-ARTs Program. We see this as a particularly exciting
and hopeful moment, as do many of the faculty themselves. Much
like our faculty, who co-create horizontal learning spaces with
students and community members through democratic pedagogies
that push back against the non-active and hierarchical pedagogy
of the traditional lecture, faculty self-governance in the FYS-ARTs
Program will push against the tenured/non-tenured class structure
and the viciously hierarchical department/college structure to foster
faculty agency and self-determination.

Looking Ahead

In all of this, we are beginning to discern a set of self-
perpetuating dynamics that are promising, even if they are still
somewhat precarious. Perhaps most significant, faculty who are
engaged in or otherwise experience the democratic pedagogies,
practices, and outcomes of the ARTs movement increasingly appear
to be bringing their insights and enthusiasm to other locations
around NAU. Thus, growing numbers of departments and pro-
grams are beginning conversations on how they might ramp up
their own civic engagement pedagogical practices. More faculty
are beginning to think of themselves as civic scholars and active
agents of change with broader communities. An atmosphere of
cynicism and despair among faculty, students, and community
members is giving way to an ethos we might call “visionary prag-
matism,” as we encounter myriad examples of people working and
acting together to create positive changes and commonwealth in a
new horizontal space that draws together campus, community cen-
ters, K-12 schools, burgeoning gardens, community markets for
cooperative entrepreneurship, and others.

Many of those who engage in and witness such work become
ambassadors for it, and growing numbers of faculty, staff, and stu-
dents are publishing articles on this movement, presenting at con-
ferences, producing videos, and engaging in dialogue with others in
civic engagement, sustainability, and community economics net-
works across the U.S. and beyond. As the work deepens and as
the networks expand, many of us sense the dawning of a new, powerful, and diverse movement to reclaim genuinely public forms of education, in tandem with efforts to reclaim and rebuild a genuinely democratic polity. Of course, the challenges are numerous and the hurdles are high. Yet as one student said in a breakout conversation at an Action Research Team Symposium at the end of the fall semester in 2013, “You know, I used to feel that everywhere that I found problems, there were walls blocking the way to solving them.” He raised his forearm vertically, elbow on the table, to represent the walls. “But coaching elementary students in Public Achievement this semester, seeing the amazing things they can do together when they learn how to collaborate democratically—now everywhere I saw walls, I’m beginning to see pathways for change,” he said as he lowered his forearm to the table to represent paths of possibility. There are no concluding words that could be as eloquent and promising as these—and none that make this journey more worthwhile.

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CONTRIBUTORS

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