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John Edgar Wideman's Hurry Home: The Confused World of Black Intellectual

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Abstract:

Wideman's second novel, Hurry Home, is the story of a black intellectual confused in defining his self, and uncertain about his relationship with the family and the community. As a black writer, Wideman himself appears to be ambivalent about the psychological make-up of his protagonist, the black writer-intellectual. The uncertainty of Wideman's inner faculty percolates down the psyche of his protagonist whose alienation from his own black community is the central idea Wideman desires to analyze. While A Glance Away happens to be a narrative from the perspective of a white intellectual, Hurry Home is the story unfolded from the point of view of a black intellectual. This way, it can be said that the present novel is a narrative in which the writer analyses the alienation of a black intellectual from his own community, and makes him pivotal in the present scheme of the narrative. Additionally, Wideman, as black intellectual, has a candid propensity to use the technique of mainstream modernism. Therefore, the alienation of the black intellectual has also been given mainstream voice of the modernist tradition.

1. Introduction

In the beginning, the black intellectual creates a world of fantasy wherein exists confusion and confrontation, fear and frustration, and horror and hazard. And seemingly, he loves to confine himself to the isolated sanctuary, completely insulated from the very black community association of which gives strength to its members. The narrative very rarely talks about the traditions, rituals, and cultural propriety of the black community in the perspective of Cecil, who is alienated from his community. There are other protagonists for whom cultural outreach could prove quite useful in harmonizing their relations with the black community. But the narrative has its own design. The alienation of Cecil could have been eased out in that case. Wideman has his own scheme of things. Since black tradition does not produce a black voice, therefore alienation of the black intellectual lasts too long, and he has to suffer although he endeavours considerably to get back to his self, family, and community. However, unlike in *A Glance Away*, here is a black guy with proven intellectuality as the main protagonist, and the central figure around whom the entire story is woven. And hereafter begins Wideman's direct encounter with the black community and black culture through his narratives. Himself a black intellectual, Wideman's narrative of the black tradition through the portrayal of the black intellectual who is alienated from his community is spectacularly gripping and thought provoking.

Wideman makes the theme quite effective by infusing a sense of uncertainty and confusion in the mental set up of the main protagonist. In addition, similar ambivalence and confusion over brims across the contours of the story-line. Naturally, paradoxes, thus created, sensitize the theme of relentless search of the protagonist more effectively. The first and the foremost paradox is created when the narrative empowers itself to condemn its protagonists because of their dwelling in the world of confused fantasy, and at the same time it forgives, if not appreciates, them for their efforts to do the best in the given situation. In the second paradox, the main protagonist, a black intellectual, intentionally allows himself to be isolated from the black community in order to grow as a successful intellectual. On the other hand, isolation from the community makes him fall in the gorge of mental anxiety, pain, and immense suffering, and memories of the past association with the community continues to haunt him. And therefore, he persists with his search for the family and the community. He tries hard to come out of self-solicited isolation, and re-align himself with those who were affiliated to them traditionally and by inheritance.

Cecil Braithwaite is the chief protagonist. Like Wideman himself, Cecil is also torn between his individual self as a black intellectual and his black community. He lives in his imagined sanctuary away from the realities of his black community. It is a non-physical, non-existing world where Cecil loves to dwell with non-real isolatedly guarded fantasies. In his fantastic imagination, he believes that he can alter the realities of his life, and can give proper shaping to it according to his own whims. Sometimes he indulges in self-

torturing activities, and extracts pleasure out of such nightmarish experiences. Cecil thinks that he can change the realities of the outside world that influences his life and experiences. Subjective fulfillment is not the only objective of Cecil. Instead, he wants to go beyond it.

Tragedy of his son's death at the age of infancy brings in a drastic change in his life and attitude. He begins to enhance his knowledge in diverse fields. He studies law, history, and literature of the white-skinned writers, European art and paintings. In particular, he observes universally-acknowledged painting of Hieronymus Bosch titled, *The Garden of Delights*, and studies the finer aspects of the painting that makes it a precious creation. He masters the viewpoints of Stephane Mallarme by studying his books. In studying all these books of art and literature, he has one objective to grow above his black community so that his blackness gets transformed into whiteness. Whatever is white is loved by Cecil, and blackness gets a chastising snarl. Indeed, Cecil has only two areas where his mind works tirelessly – to concentrate on whiteness and to keep it insulated from the blackness.

The intellectual perspective in *A Glance Away* has placed the black community on the plateau of secondary affiliate. But here in *Hurry Home*, Wideman has designed the format in such a way that Cecil considers black community as loathsome, burdensome and disgusting. His alienation from the black community is so perfect that he wants to live insulated from it. Isolating himself from the black community he sees to it that he is ostracised. But, such artificial break from the society makes him conceited and eccentric. Cecil thinks that an educated and versatile intellectual of his calibre cannot survive intellectually in his black community, because black community is so backward and uncongenial that intellectual activity cannot be pursued. He believes that black people do not have intellect to indulge in any creative pursuit, and have predilection to shoot down any glowing star. He gives immense credit to his learning in the white tradition, and believes that whatever he is it is only because of the training he received in the company of white intellectuality. Thus, he always tries to escape from the realities of the black community by submersing himself in the fantasy world of white legacy.

The novel sets the tone quite early. Cecil's personality and his alienation from his own black community are emphasised. In his fantasised existence, Cecil uses every tool to escape from the reality of black tradition. The parameters that define his black legacy are brutally demolished by him. In the very first section, Cecil is portrayed as a character who is prepared to do anything to transform himself from black inheritor to the pursuer of white civility. He prefers to define himself in such a way that no one may ever call him a member of the black community.

Mirror said time was Cecil when you could not see your face unless someone lifted you to broken glass above the sink ... then one day saw woolly hair and dust that wouldn't wash off you saw coloured boy Cecil and really surprised you saw something you had no way of knowing different or worse you saw your face and knew the dust would not change and now you see all things go away but that doesn't go woolly hair creeps back on your forehead, but only reveals more dust beneath you will always be dying Cecil but that will not die ... He wondered why he hadn't thought of libraries before [he has described his wife and, then temporarily, taken refuse in a library for a day]. Perhaps they were rooted too deeply in the other element – books and silent cubicles, alcoves stale with page dust and nervous, muffled breath as word kindled in dry heatless extinction. Word become flesh become Cecil become invisible opener of doors, lightener of burden, of care, of pigmentation even, transforming mirror Cecil to that which only if you try hard can you find between black parenthesis of mortar board and gown.¹

From the above quote it is clear that Cecil is a very strange person. He revels in the realm of imagination and fantasy. He wants to get rid of his black complexion, which is nothing but a foolish desire of a fanciful individual. By thinking so, Cecil makes himself ridiculous and comical. He is increasingly sad because of the "dust that wouldn't wash off". It means his blackness is inerasable, and it hurts him. He is again sad because word cannot transform, otherwise it could "become flesh become Cecil". If word could create an imaginative fantasy where Cecil could forget his black inheritance, then he would be able to get rid of his black complexion. Having exaggerated faith in his intellectuality, he believes that he can manipulate words in such a way that a new secure place is created – "black parenthesis of mortar board and gown". The fantasised longing of Cecil is similar to that of Eliot's Gerontion, when he desires to multiply "variety / In a Wilderness of mirrors". The last few lines of the quote taken from Wideman's *Hurry Home* are similar again to the lines Eliot has written in "Gerontion": "Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!' / The word within a word, unable to speak a word, / Swaddled with darkness." Thus, Wideman's Cecil in his approach to imagination is similar to Eliot's Gerontion. Both of them are pretentious, ridiculous, and dreamy.

In order to exhibit Cecil's aversion to black community and also his own blackness, Wideman has used some images. For instance, Cecil, at one point of time, reminisces a drawing of St. Barbara whose robe is spreading and of green-colour. He thinks about her dress as "a lush growing thing on the hillside, [as] she gazes up from a book, quill in hand." Just after that he reminisces about a black woman who is seen from a lighted room through the window, "naked, not giving a fuck, guzzling whisky from a bottle. Life's done this to me she said and life is your eyes taking me in." Two reminiscences are quite telling. In the first reminiscence, Cecil opines that white one is contemplative, vibrant, rich in taste and tradition, and efficiently productive. The second reminiscence elicits the fact that black one is clumsy, unattractive, repulsive, unproductive, and creatively unimaginative. Again Cecil sees a black family at the same spot where he seen the black woman, we have talked about earlier. The family is waiting at the railroad station for the arrival of the casket of another member of the family. Cecil watches the black family sneeringly. He thinks sarcastically that the members of the black family would soon begin to sing. It means that reaction of the black family is a useless and foolish exercise when reality of black life and death is known to it. In same the section, Cecil appears to have very poor opinion about humility, faith, and perseverance of the black people. In particular, he thinks about the faith Elder Watkins, an old black fellow, has in scripture, black church and Reverend Reed. Remembering the old age and poverty of Elder Watkins, Cecil describes him as a "tattered shade of a black Polonius,

of ignorance [he cannot read or write] and desperate dignity done to death like a rat." Cecil has high opinion of white tradition, while he looks down upon the black tradition. Comparing and contrasting the Reverend Reed, Elder Watkins, and Easter service at the black church with the Easter service at the white Presbyterian Church he advises Reverend Reed and Elder Watkins, "German you should have known. Heinrich Schutz, who would surely recognize that Jesus shuffle of yours beneath a cross of dignity." Cecil had gone to the Presbyterian Church only to hear the sermonic singing of St. John Passion of Schutz. It shows his deep affiliation for the white people and their custom, and he takes pleasure in mocking his own black brethren.

Even when Cecil has to interact with the community members, he conducts himself as someone superbly educated, and superior in all respects, while the black people are uncivilized, savage and not befitting civilized treatment. About Cecil, James Coleman writes:

He has educated himself to the point where he can understand and appreciate the Van Eyckian drawing of St. Barbara and the music of Schutz; this appreciation for high culture makes him reject black vulgarity and mock grass-roots black religious belief and practice.⁷

If we look at the narrative, we find that, although the author's approach is ambivalent, the tone is not disapproving of Cecil's conduct. In one of the passages, Cecil looks sees the naked black woman he has been seeing for long through the widow, and the narrative expresses with Cecil who feels he is unwanted in the society as that exploited black woman only because of his blackness. Cecil and the black woman have similar problem, and that is their blackness. The narrative appears to sympathise by saying that both of them are victims, and, unfortunately, it is not in their hands to change their destiny of taking birth in the black family. Cecil's interpretation of his destiny and his presumption that blackness is a curse on him, the narrative's tone is supportive rather than mocking:

Cecil knew he would see her again. As he approached a rare lighted window each time he thought she would be there again. Something moved her in endless visitations through the rooms of the narrow row houses just as it moved him along the Black pavement that was a ribbon around them. She was the fat, pink owner and the exploited tenant just as Cecil was the echo and sound of his night wanderings. No one had wed them, no one had even introduced them and echo, landlord and tenant.⁸

It is very strange to note that Wideman is confused about his opinion on the mental status of his protagonist, Cecil. Sometimes he criticises Cecil because he feels his blackness is a curse, and it has put him in an inferior set of social components. But the very next moment, the writer suggests that Cecil has no control over his destiny, and he does not have any choice but accept the situation and the colour of his skin. Thus, Cecil and his creator, both, are precariously placed in the scheme of things. From the above quote, it is evident that Cecil is an escapist, who tries to run away from his inherited self, the black legacy. He feels that he is exploited as the black woman is.

It is true that Cecil's show of pompous vanity, and his belief that he is different from the black niggers makes him an object of derision in his own black community. And Wideman sympathises with him. He calls Cecil a Christ figure in the entire black community, as he is excessively sneered at, and mentally tortured or "crucified by his own people." But the above passage does not outright conclude that the black people are only at fault, and Cecil is a victim with no fault of his. The crowd's response is certainly vindictive, nauseatic, and replete with insensitive overtures. It is also true that one should try to rise in civility and generosity. But Cecil's attitude is very different towards his black community. His pretentious and conceited behaviour is responsible in instigating the community members to exhibit their wrath against him.

Wideman's use of language, his structure, his use of idioms and phrases are all indicative of degraded way of interaction which is in vogue in the black community. The passage, quoted above, is the speech of a black voice other than Cecil. The entire piece is replete with grammatically poor construction of sentences, elliptical language which presents a contextuality related to the black community. Educated in the white format of education system, Cecil finds it quite disgusting and excessively repulsive which he exhibits through his conduct and social interaction. Thus, his alienation with the community is complete, leaving him isolated in his backyard.

As described in the beginning of the second section, Cecil undertakes a journey to Europe. It happens just after the harassment caused by the black community as described in the last few passages of the first section. It simply means that Cecil's decision to go for an European tour is definitely the after-effect of that harassment. In all probability, Cecil wants to leave America in order to get rid of his blackness and his black community. Cecil himself admits that he has "so little past I know of" and also that he is scared of "the mystery of my own past". Being an intellectual, he knows the genesis of his Afro-American past, and also that his own inheritance. In addition, it is evident from the last few passages of the first section that he continues to be a natural inheritor of the Afro-American legacy. From the textual delineation, it is also clear that Cecil was born and brought up in Afro-American community, and has never ceased to be a member of the black community during his entire life. Whatever he is in the present is nothing but the elongation of his historical past. It is again a fact that Cecil lives in the world of fantasies, which contradicts the genesis of his Afro-American reality. And under the immensely potent influence of his fantasies, he tries to run away from the reality of his Black community, and the effort in this regard takes him to the European countries.

However, his journey to Europe does not give relief, and it does not relieve him of his mental agony. In fact, the journey brings him to greater pain and frustration. The turmoil that had taken deep roots in his personality becomes more terrific, and the struggle with his Afro-American experience that had become a part of his active life becomes more intense. He goes farther from his own self and from his own identity. His alienation from his historical past happened to be of his making, but now the same feeling of alienation relieves itself from his control and he becomes a slave of his cultivated beliefs. The intentional denial of black legacy and compulsive realization of his inheritance puts him in utter confusion, and he finds it excessively difficult to come out of it. When he denies his black heritage and when he says that he is not burdened with a historically irrefutable legacy of black community, he exhibits his

sense of confusion. Every activity he is involved in through his physical presence or through his oral submission is indicative of his denial of his black genesis. The journey to Europe reveals many facts about his Afro-American origin which he has been hiding with his false pretensions and fantasised realities. It is an irony of situation that many a time he has to accept his Afro-American legacy. Again, it is very pertinent to note that Cecil's tour to Europe does not give him relief from the pains of Afro-American experience. Instead, it burdens his mind more heavily with the newly experienced fear, frustration, agony and suffering of greater intensity and of greater potentiality.

Cecil's mind remains perturbed because of persisting fantasy, nightmarish and tortuous, about slavery and reality of his blackness continues to torment him even more in the new atmosphere than it did when he was back home amidst the members of his own black American community. He fantasises most often about his Afro-American historical past. He endeavours hard to make his mind realise that it is merely "black crap inside [me]" but his mind fails to dissociate itself from the historical past of the black legacy. The reality of the black genesis never allows Cecil to rest in peace even for a moment, and he shares his feelings with the other members of his black community. Thus, he keeps his association with his Afro-American community intact, even when he remains disgusted at the very thought of being a part of the much disfigured, much humiliated, and much harassed black community.

Cecil's sexual affair with the white harlot Estrella is also an attempt to get rid of his blackness and form association with the white skin. But the association with whiteness that he achieves through his relationship with Estrella proves to be short-lived and formidably agonizing. The relationship further intensifies his agony of being black. He knows it well that the affair with the white lady is ultimately nightmarish to him, and he resolves many times not visit her place, but his determination proves short-lived:

Each day Cecil had promised himself he would not go to Estrella, but at some point during the night he would find himself in a taxi rushing to her. Once in a drunken dream he had mounted her, ripped the sore of her from within his bowels, heaved up his rage and need in one humiliating assault after another upon her flesh. He had awakened sweating and impotent in her bed to the reality of her laughter and her fingers kneading the dough of his sex. ¹⁴

Cecil undertakes a journey to Africa. In no way, this journey is different from that he had undertaken to Europe. This journey also streamlines Cecil's confusion and uncertainty about his blackness. Cecil fantasises about his journey to Africa saying, "I rode a white horse, my beard was thick and my sword studded with jewels. Then I was a doctor; I looked to the stars and learned all manners of things of mind and body". There is a host of critics who believe that the journey to Africa was not real but merely a fantasy and took shape only in the Cecil's faculty of imagination. However, it is immaterial whether the journey to Africa was real or imaginary. The moot point is that Cecil left his black American community in search of a soothing place in European white assemblage. But he remains confused, frustrated, and disquiet in the midst of white members of the European community. And, again he finds it essential, at least psychologically, to take up another journey into the land of his original self, the blackness.

Thus, Cecil, the main protagonist, is alienated from his black community, and tries to look for solace elsewhere. However, he remains utterly confused, disturbed, greatly agonised. He fails to define his own self and his psychological being. His search remains incomplete and futile. Living with the sense of alienation, thus, has become his way of life.

There are other prominent characters, who live in similar isolation. Like Cecil, they too remain alienated from others, and their relentless search for a defined self, a well-carved family, and a community which could fill their hearts with a sense of belonging remains persisting. Such characters include Charles Webb, Al, Cecil's wife, Esther, and her aunt, Fanny. Isolation and alienation are the key-words in the lives of these characters. And all these characters are, in one way or the other, intertwined to each other only through their isolated existence and alienated self. For instance, Charles Webb is a white intellectual who meets Cecil in Spain. Webb is immersed in confusion while living in fantasy of his affairs with the black woman, Anna and his black son Charles. Incidentally, he meets Cecil and strives to make Cecil a surrogate. As a confused of existence as an individual and also as a member of the community, he tries to define himself and also his relationships. He maintains two black notebooks and a red notebook for his use. In his efforts to define reality, he notes down almost everything in his notebooks. Wideman writes:

The red notebook had begun as fragments, and its shapelessness had frightened Webb. It had been too real. Knowing Anna, knowing himself equal impossibilities. So what could the words do but mirror inadequacy. First the red notebook had contained only his words, but later with an ocean between them, it had gradually been filled with Anna's letters, his answers sent and unsent, his impressionistic snatches of verse. Webb remembered how seldom he had reread the pages after they were covered with his words. Fear again. Anna lost somewhere in the words, himself smothered.¹⁶

Like Cecil, Webb too looks for pleasure and satisfaction at a location different from the destined spot. Webb has desire to control reality through his words and fantasy. The narrative fails to define the personalities and the psyche of most of his protagonists.

There is no comprehensively framed information about Webb, but the way he remains isolated and alienated, of course, through his fantasy gives much hint about his experience and ambivalent state of mind. Notwithstanding his failed relationship with Anna, Webb tries to remain composed in the midst of utter confusion and undefined state of his own psyche.

Other characters, such as, Al, Esther, and Fanny are also treated by the narrative in similar fashion. Confusion and uncertainty persists. Al lives in fantasy, and loves to lead the life of an adventurer. However, he is, in reality, a swindler who exploits the confidence of the people. As a con artist, he presents himself before Webb as someone willing to help him in getting back his son Charles. Al knows it well that Webb will never be able to find his son. Al is self-deceptive in his games, but he continues to indulge in adventurer fantasy. Al is a non-serious, non-realistic individual. He deceives himself, and knows only to deceive others. He helps Webb only in making him live in the world of fantasy and illusion.

Esther is another character who lives in the world of fantasy and self-illusion. Wideman portrays her as a deeply religious woman prepared to be in relationship with Cecil in spite of his conscious infidelity towards her. Abuses, lies, and even desertion by Cecil does not deter her from considering Cecil as her saviour. In her relationship of abuses, insults, psychological violence, she continues to be in preparedness for her search of a definitive existence with the family and the community. As Coleman opines, "Cecil's abuse, lying, and desertion mean nothing: to Esther, Cecil is the saint who delivers her". ¹⁷

Esther is forced by circumstances to have little say in her affairs. So, she does not care to define her existence. Although she lives in a world of confusion, delusion and isolation, she does very little to free herself from circumstantial compulsions. Alienation of Cecil from his black community has automatically passed on to Esther because of her relationship with him. To the black community, her relationship with Cecil is a stigma on her, and therefore, she, for all practical purposes, lives isolatedly within her own confines. And alienation from the black community with shared genesis forces her into the world of fantasy and illusion. Moreover, the world of fantasy that she has created for her own sustained existence provides her a deterrent against the abuses and lies of Cecil.

Esther's aunt, fanny, is another character who lives in her world of illusion. Fanny, without a well-defined self and with the loss of her husband and sons, lives in the countryside alone only with her past. Completely detached from the world outside, she lives with her imagined realities. Nobody ever thinks of her, and she remains immersed in her world of imagination. But her search for the self, family, and community continues. Fantasy and imagination certainly keeps her busy in her alienated confine, but reality haunts her whenever she is in her normal self. Her sticking to her past when her husband and sons were alive reinforces the conclusion that she is still eager to get back to her old family and the community she is detached from.

Thus, there are protagonists who may not be black intellectuals, but they are portrayed as escapists alienated from the family and the community. Esther and Fanny are the characters who have alienated themselves from the black community by preferring their isolated world of fantasy and illusion. On the other hand, Cecil being black intellectual considers himself superlatively white in black skin, and remains aloof towards his own black community, as he opines, the black community is uncivilised, arrogant and unsociable.

Cecil continues to create fantasies so that his existence remains noncommittal and ambivalent. In the beginning, he appeared to have committed himself to whiteness, but, by the time narrative closes, his commitment to whiteness also becomes doubtful. He exclusively talks about his fantasy and illusion. As the novel reaches culmination, Cecil finds himself in the state of abstraction with mind and psyche resting in the realm of nothingness. He appears as a person who does not commit himself to whiteness, and who does not abhor blackness as he happened to do earlier. And it is a situation even more horrific than his intentional escape from his black community and his simultaneous temptation for the white civility.

Split between his ego and the alter-ego, Cecil becomes a fragmented self and disjointed psyche. While talking to his alter ego, Cecil appears to be a person relentlessly searching for a meaning of his life and his existence. In an utterly confused state of mind, he fails to understand why he left Esther, and why he ran into the world of fantasy. Now he attempts to find answer to his question from his alter ego – whether whatever he did throughout was right and justifiable, and what he wants to do hereafter. He gets the advice, strange, abnormal in tone and incomprehensible to some extent:

I once knew a dwarf. Well not exactly a dwarf, but a child who was not really a child but an old man who had grown up too fast, in a matter of months fro twelve to fifty then died of old age right there in bed. He said they called it progeria, growing up too fast, all life passes like a film at the wrong speed, days are hours, months, days, a year might stretch to a week. His mind was storm but some days there was calm, he could talk a moment. I lost my job at the hospital because I did nothing but hang around at his bedside waiting for the lucid minutes. His voice would come from far away, a man's voice from the wrinkled old, new bundle of flesh he had become. 19

Tone and content of the advice of alter ego gives one very clear message that Cecil is not in his normal self. The weird and strange advice that Cecil receives from his alter ego makes it amply clear that Cecil's psyche is disjointed, alienated, and not in natural rhythm. Cecil fails to identify his real motive, perhaps, because his search for the self, family, and the genesis remains incomplete.

In me all things occur with unbearable intensity. Never a pause for my emotions to rest, for some experience of my blood's growth to become quiet and calm before the next tumult begins. My whole being races, is scourged by time. Always losing and dying without even the illusion of possession. I cry because I cannot have this illusion, because it is an illusion, a nothing, and yet you are blessed because you have this nothing. I cry for an illusion, for a lie to deceive me. I cry because I must tell myself this lie would be better than my body's truth. I cry because I am not made to live the lie.²⁰

Cecil's mental agony is very visible in his abstraction. But he realises that his escape into the world of fantasy gives him a little peace which he cannot get anywhere else. And it is this illusory world that gives him strength to retain his black experience and to continue to be a black intellectual.

2. Conclusion

Cecil's return to Esther after an interval of three years may be interpreted as the outcome of his relentless search for the family. Of course, culmination of his search proves, ultimately, to be a transient affair, as he continues to live in the same world of darkness, illusion, and fantasy wherein he lived earlier. And the search persists. When Cecil returns, Esther is in sleep, and a moonlight magic appears to be in vogue. Wideman writes that Cecil enters the Esther's room where "harsh theatrical moonlight framed by the narrow window [made] all things [seem] possible". By returning to same darkness and aura, Cecil seems to be making peace with the fantasies and illusion which, in the opinion of Uncle Otis, make the life worth living. Thus, Cecil finally decides to continue to live in the world of fantasies, illusion, and darkness. And his return to Esther, in fact, fails to bring in any change in his life pattern. The search for a meaningful rehabilitation with the self, family, and the community still goes on.

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