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# HANDOUT 2: NOT SOMEWHERE ELSE, BUT HERE

Excerpted from an essay by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker originally published in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, eds. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, 171-98. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003. Used with permission.

A good deal of time and intelligence has been invested in the exposure of racism and the horrific results on its objects. . . . It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject. The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters. — Toni Morrison

In 1976 I began a cross-country road trip, on my way to seminary. I traveled with a friend. We had time, so we decided to take back roads. One afternoon the road passed through rural western Pennsylvania. Late in the day, we came down through hill country into a valley. It had been raining hard, and as we neared a small town, we noticed blinking yellow lights warning of danger. We saw fields covered in standing water and passed several side roads blocked off with signs saying: Road Closed.

"Looks like they've had a flood here," we said.

Coming into town, we crossed a bridge over a wide river. The water was high, muddy, flowing fast. Sandbags lined the roadway.

"Gosh," we said, "They must have had quite a bit of high water to contend with here. Looks like it was a major flood!"

We headed out of town, following a winding country road, captivated by the evidence all around us that there had been a dramatic flood. Then we rounded a bend, and in front of us, a sheet of water covered the roadway. The water was rising fast, like a huge silver balloon being inflated before our eyes.

We stopped and started to turn the car around. The water was rising behind us as well. Suddenly we realized the flood hadn't happened yesterday or last week. It was happening *here and now*. Dry ground was disappearing fast. We hurriedly clambered out of the car and scrambled to higher ground. Soaked to the bone, we huddled under a fir tree. No longer were we lodged in our familiar vehicle; the cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present—a present from which we had been insulated by both our car and our misjudgments about the country we were traveling through.

This is what it is like to be white in America. It is to travel well ensconced in a secure vehicle; to see signs of what is happening in the world outside the compartment one is traveling in and not realize that these signs have any contemporary meaning. It is to be dislocated—to misjudge your location and to believe you are uninvolved and unaffected by what is happening in the world.

James Baldwin wrote, "This is the crime of which I accuse my countrymen, and for which I and history will never forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds and thousands of lives, and do not know it, and do not want to know it."

Reading Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* has helped me recognize my experience. Born white in this country, I was gradually but decisively educated into an alienated state of mind. With this narrowing, my capacity for creative participation in my society was stunted, and I became compliant with social forms and patterns that failed to support the fullness of life for others or myself.

To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know and not want to know the actual context in which you live.

I was born into the real world, in a small town at the edge of the rain forest, on the coast of Washington State. The world was a mixture of violence and beauty, human goodness and human greed, tender relationships and exploitation. But I learned to not see life whole. Our town was the white settlement. Up river was the Quinault Indian reservation.

The two communities were separated by a stretch of forest, whose towering trees and thick undergrowth cloaked us from each other. Elton Bennet, an artist who lived in our town and went to our church, was one of a handful from our community who moved in both worlds. His silk screens depicted the land and its diverse people. "They Speak by Silence," he titled one of his silk screens, in which a small band of Quinault moved along the shore between the forest and the ocean. As a small child, I watched Bennet pull the stiff paper from the inked cloth that created the image. It took the alchemy of art for me to know that I had neighbors I did not know.

But in fact, the real world I was born into included richly diverse cultures and communities. In addition to the community I knew—the white settlement of people who logged the forests, fished the waters, and built wood frame houses warmed with steaming coffee—there were other communities. The Quinault, Makah, and Puyallup Indians lived throughout Southwest Washington, preserving tribal ways against all odds. Chinese American cultural organizations in Seattle nurtured Chinese traditions and institutions at the heart of the city. Japanese Americans established temples and churches, landscaped gardens, shaped architectural styles, farmed the land. Farm workers from Mexico harvested the apples in Yakima and Wenatchee and stayed to found Spanish-speaking towns. African Americans established churches, neighborhoods, clubs, and civic organizations.

By the time I came of age, neighborhood and church, economic patterns, cultural symbolism, theological doctrines, and public education had narrowed my awareness of the country I lived in to the point of ignorance. The Chinese, African, Latino/Latina, Japanese, and First Nations peoples had largely disappeared from my consciousness. Nor did I know the history of violence and exploitation that had occurred in my community. Two generations before I was born, Chinese workers on the Seattle waterfront went on strike for fairer wages; the white majority beat back the strikers with sticks and guns. Just before I was born, the strawberry farms of Japanese Americans living on the Puget Sound islands were seized on orders from General DeWitt. Their land confiscated by the U.S. government, the Japanese Americans were taken away to live in concentration camps, uprooted from their homesteads and communities. In our town, the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society supported overt white supremacist agendas. The Birch Society's bright and large billboard on the highway into my childhood town broadcasted hate. And the First Nations people went to court over and over again, seeking to secure the fishing rights and land sovereignty that were theirs.

I inhabited a white enclave that did not know and did not want to know the complex, multicultural history of the land in which I lived. The white-washed world ignored the

violence and exploitation in my country's history, as well as the resistance, creativity, and multiform beauty of my country's peoples. I was cut off from the reality of where I lived, whom I lived with, and what our history entailed of violence and of beauty.

There were moments of exception. During the Civil Rights struggle, our United Methodist congregation got involved. From the pulpit, my preacher father exposed the redlining practices that took place in our town. As a twelve-year-old, I went door to door, along with other members of our congregation, campaigning for open housing. Political involvement was exciting. I felt the importance of civic action.

But that same year, walking down the street holding hands with my best friend, Mary, we were passed by a car of hecklers who yelled profanities at us, words we didn't really know or understand. They turned the car around and drove by us again, calling us names, nearly hitting us as they sped by. Were they offended that we appeared as a black girl and a white girl together? Were they enraged that we were holding hands, laughing and embracing one another, as we walked along the road? I defended my friendship with Mary and stood by my love for her when other students and teachers communicated that there was something wrong with us. But I learned that such love was dangerous. Love became intertwined with fear.

Lillian Smith, probing the experience of being "cultured" into whiteness, describes growing up white in the South as an education into fragmentation and denial:

They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my "soul" taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition. I learned [white racism] the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality. Some learned to screen out all except the soft and the soothing; others denied even as they saw plainly, and heard.

The result of this closing-down process for whites, Smith says, is that "we are blocked from sensible contact with the world we live in."

Smith describes racism as a fragmentation of knowledge—a splitting of mind, body, and soul; neighbor from neighbor; disciplines of knowledge from disciplines of knowledge; and religion from politics. This fragmentation results in apathy, passivity, and compliance.

When I speak of the ignorance created by my education into whiteness, I am speaking of a loss of wholeness within myself and a concomitant segregation and fragmentation of culture that debilitates life for all of us. Who benefits from this fragmentation and alienation? Does anyone? What I know is that I do not benefit from this loss of my

senses, this denial of what I have seen and felt, this cultural erasure of my actual neighbors, this loss of my country. I become, thus educated, less present to life, more cut-off, and less creative and loving. Once I recognize it, this loss disturbs me deeply. It is precisely this loss that makes me a suitable, passive participant in social structures that I abhor.

Smith writes,

Our big problem is not civil rights nor even a free Africa—urgent as these are—but how to make into a related whole the split pieces of the human experience, how to bridge mythic and rational mind, how to connect our childhood with the present and the past with the future, how to relate the differing realities of science and religion and politics and art to each other and to ourselves. Man is a broken creature, yes; it is his nature as a human being to be so; but it is also his nature to create relationships that can span the brokenness. This is his first responsibility; when he fails, he is inevitably destroyed.

I want to inhabit my country, not live as if we did not belong to one another as surely as we belong to the land.

"Not somewhere else, but here" is a phrase from a love poem by Adrienne Rich that invokes love's imperative. The lover is drawn to what is present, to what is real, what is here, what is now, what is flesh. In its beauty and its tragedy, its burden of grief, and its full measure of joy, life is loved through presence, not absence; through connection, not alienation.

The moment my friend in Pennsylvania and I left our car and felt the rain falling on our bodies, soaking our skin, and had to exert ourselves to scramble to safety was a blessed moment—not because there is any virtue in danger, but because it was a moment when disoriented, alienated consciousness was interrupted. We became present to our environment. We ceased being passive observers or commentators. Our whole beings, bodies, minds, and senses became involved with the requirements of the situation. We arrived. We entered in. We left our compartment and inhabited the world. No longer tourists passing through the country, we became part of the place along with everyone else that day, in that corner of western Pennsylvania, in that storm.

I speak of this experience as a baptism because it was a conversion from distance to presence, from misconception to realization. It was an awakening to life, an advance into participation, and a birth into the world.

This is the conversion that is needed for those of us who are white Americans. We need to move from a place of passive, misconstrued observation about our country to a place

of active, alert participation in our country. We need to recover our habitation and reconstruct our citizenship as surely, for example, as those of us who are women have had to learn to inhabit our own bodies and recover our agency when sexism has alienated us from ourselves.

How do those of us who are white come to inhabit our own country? Here are some of the steps in the conversion:

**Theological reflection:** To become an inhabitant of America, whites need to deconstruct the effect on our self-understanding of theological imagery that sanctions innocence and ignorance as holy states. This theological imagery is strong. For centuries, Christian theologians have told the story this way: Adam and Eve in the Garden were innocent of themselves and of the knowledge of good and evil. Within the safe confines of the Garden, all was provided for them. They were to ask no questions and be obedient to the rules outlined by God. In this state of primordial bliss, Adam and Eve were compliant and dependent. They cooperated with the divine ruler and rules. This state was holy. The two were without sin, living in harmony with God.

This interpretation of the Garden of Eden story sanctions innocence, ignorance, and lack of self-consciousness. It teaches that a carefully contained life, walled in by a providential God whom one is never to question, is a good life. In the insular Garden, human beings are in right relationship to God.

This primordial state of innocence was disrupted by the serpent's temptation to Eve. The serpent enticed her with the desire to taste the forbidden fruit and gain knowledge of good and evil. To gain knowledge, however, was to defy God—to go against the will of the divine provisioner. The consequence was a punishing exile. Adam and Eve were sent away from the Garden, cast out from God's presence.

In this interpretation, to know the world, in its goodness and its evil, and to know ourselves capable of both *is to lose God*. To taste reality is to follow the devil. Such a theology is admirably suited to the preservation of compartmentalized, alienated states of mind. It teaches those who have absorbed its message that goodness is aligned with innocence and ignorance. To not know the world is to know God. To know the world is to lose God. Furthermore, it teaches that a social structure in which one is abundantly provided for is not to be questioned. Abundant provision is a gift of God. This image comforts whites who benefit from economic structures that assure their thriving. One is to accept privilege and never ask at what cost the walled-in garden is maintained.

When religion sanctions ignorance, it cultivates alienation from life. It blesses



segregation and encourages people who are comfortably provided for to remain compliant with the created order.

As a white person, I have allowed this theological imagery to shape my self-understanding, even when I have consciously rejected this theology. In practice, I discover myself to be deeply attached to being "innocent," guilt-free, good. If I glimpse any blood on my hands, I will react defensively to preserve my identity and fend off the painful experience of shame that I associate with being exiled from the community that I depend on for my survival and affirmation. Or I may attack myself, viciously trying to deny or destroy that in myself that does not conform to an image of innocent goodness.

This piety of innocence preoccupies me and other whites. I strive to assure my goodness by assuring myself that I am all good, "all-white," and blameless. Conversely, it makes me highly reactionary if I am blamed or confronted with complicity in violence—for my sense of goodness has been constructed on the suppression and exile of my capacity to do harm, as well as on the suppression of offending feelings of love and connection that, I learned early on, didn't belong in the garden.

One becomes "white," and this "whiteness" is a split in the psyche, a loss of consciousness, a numbing to the reality of what one has seen and felt and knows. This alienated state of mind is reinforced by religious imagery that sanctions "not knowing" and curses "knowing."

At the same time, part of us never forgets that we have achieved our goodness at a violent price. We have a guilty conscience. At some level, we know that our pristine garden has been created by what has been exiled and exploited. This primordial violence lies beneath our sense of privilege and security. We are fearful of this deeper violence being exposed. We feel helpless in the presence of our own violence. But theology assists us, even here. The doctrine of the atonement valorizes violence as life-giving and redemptive. The interpretations of Jesus's death on the cross as a saving event speak of the violation that happened to Jesus as the will of God and the source of salvation. When this theological perspective prevails, either explicitly or buried within cultural patterns and norms, the violence and abuse that human beings experience or perpetuate becomes valorized as necessary and good for the salvation of the world. Victims of racial injustice, identifying with Jesus, may interpret their suffering as necessary, holy, and redemptive. Perpetrators of racial injustice, identifying with God, may interpret their violence as necessary, holy, and redemptive.

Most particularly, violating experiences that occur early in life in parent-child relationships can be misnamed as good. In *Learning to Be White*, Thandeka analyzes the violent

shaming experiences that create white identity. Such shaming is theologically sanctioned as God's will. The suffering child is like the suffering Jesus, whose divinity is celebrated as his willingness to endure violation. The violating parent is doing what must be done as the divine enforcer of the "orders of creation."

Thus, the doctrine of the atonement reinforces violating and shaming experiences. Through these experiences, the shamed child preserves his or her relationship to God and to goodness. I learn to interpret the violence that has formed my narrow, "white" identity as holy. If I begin to approach the underlying violence that creates white enclaves and white identity, theology will tell me that violence is holy. Instead of facing my participation in violence, I can feel the pathos of violence with pious gratitude. Thus anesthetized, I will not seek to end violence.

The sanctioning of violence as redemptive is at the center of William R. Jones's theological inquiry, *Is God a White Racist?* He shows definitively that no formulation of redemptive suffering can succeed at ending violence. Such a theology will serve again and again, in its diverse forms, to sustain structures rooted in violence.

To recover and become an inhabitant of one's own life and one's own society, a different theology is needed. A new theology must begin here, a theology that assists in an internal healing of the fragmented self, that supports a new engagement with the realities of one's society, and that sanctions a remedial education into the actual history and present realities of one's country. Theology must direct us, like Eve, to taste the fruit of knowledge and gladly bear the cost of moving beyond the confines of the garden.

A different theology begins with the sanctification of knowledge and wisdom rather than the blessing of innocence and ignorance. The serpent can be re-imagined as a representation of a god who calls one beyond the circumscribed comforts of the garden. To long to know, to reach for wisdom, to taste and see the bitterness as well as the sweetness, to come to know good and evil—these movements can be embraced as movements of God's leading. Leaving the garden, one leaves the God who rules by rewards and punishments, and who offers security and comfort at the price of compliance to divine orders. Leaving the garden, one becomes a sojourner in the world, accompanied by the divine serpent who moves in the earth, sheds old skins and grows new ones as needed, slumbers long, and wakes to strike quickly.

**Remedial education:** The journey to the realm beyond the garden begins with claiming forbidden knowledge. Because my education cultivated in me and many others an ignorance rather than a knowledge of my country's history and its peoples, I can begin to change things when I accept my power and responsibility to reeducate myself.



Resources for such restored knowledge abound. Reading Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, I become acquainted with my actual country. Immersing myself in the primary texts of First Nation's writers, Asian American writers, African American writers, Latino and Latina writers, and more, I begin to be aware of the world beyond my isolated enclave. Multiple voices surround me. I enter a miraculous Pentecost that has been sounding from before I was born. Takaki writes,

Throughout our past of oppressions and struggles for equality, Americans of different races and ethnicities have been "singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs" in the textile mills of Lowell, the cotton fields of Mississippi, on the Indian reservations of South Dakota, the railroad tracks high in the Sierras of California, in the garment factories on the Lower East Side, the canefields of Hawaii, and a thousand other places across the country. Our denied history "bursts with telling." As we hear America singing, we find ourselves invited to bring our rich cultural diversity on deck, to accept ourselves. "Of every hue and cast am I," sang Whitman. "I resist any thing better than my own diversity."

Knowledge is never an individual achievement alone. It is constructed by communities of people, and its construction transforms communities. "Knowledge claims are secured by the social practices of a community of inquirers, rather than the purely mental activities of an individual subject."

Ignorance is a precondition of violence. Once I as a "white" have been cultivated into ignorance of my society, its multiple cultures, their diverse gifts, and the history of cultural conflict and exploitation based on racial categorizations, then I am easily passive in the face of racism's re-creation. But my ignorance is not mine alone. It is the ignorance of my cultural enclave. Most of us do not know more than our community knows. Thus my search for remedial education, to come to know the larger reality of my country, is necessarily a struggle to transform my community's knowledge—not mine alone. As I gain more knowledge, I enter into a different community—a community of presence, awareness, responsibility, and consciousness.

I have learned that as a white American, I must face the conflict that erupts between whites when compulsory fragmentation of knowledge begins to break down because remedial education has taken place. This engagement among whites needs to take place with directness, wisdom, and a sustained commitment to build a new communion not dependent upon violence. It involves a spiritual practice of nonviolent resistance and non-avoidance of conflict.

**Soul Work:** To sustain the journey beyond the garden, those of us who are white must turn inward as well as outward. We must form a new relational capacity, less hindered by the fragmentation, silences, and splits in our souls. We must find the path that takes us beyond the narcissistic need to have people of color approve of us, tell us we are good, or be the prophetic and moral compass that is absent from ourselves.

The construction of white identity involves the suppression of aspects of the self as unacceptable and shameful. This internal violation of the wholeness of the self becomes, for many whites, symbolically represented as the internal suppression of that in oneself which is imagined as dark. This part of the self is the unjustly abused and despised aspect of the white person's own experience. At the same time, it is the suppression, often, of the white person's passionate feelings, sense of connection to others, ability to love, and ability to inhabit one's own body. Whites then project onto people of color the lost part of themselves: the silenced and abused "darkness," and the exiled and suppressed passion, emotion, and body. For whites, people of color come to represent the lost aspects of the self. Ambivalence and need emerge for whites who feel better about themselves if they have intimate association with people of color. But such intimacy may lack the quality of an authentic I-Thou relationship.

The inner journey for whites involves learning to withdraw our negative and positive projections from people of color. Whites must become relationally committed to meeting people of color *asthemselves*, not as symbolic extensions of ourselves. To love more genuinely, whites need to do the internal work to recover and integrate the lost parts of ourselves—to find the silenced, suppressed, and fragmented aspects of our own being and to create internal hospitality to the fullness of our own lives. This work cannot be done by others for us. We must find an internal blessing, not seek a blessing from those we use to symbolize our loss and our shame.

Men who have projected their own exiled capacity to feel onto women need to recover the lost part of themselves rather than bond with women who will carry their emotional burdens for them. Likewise, whites need to accept the personal task of spiritual healing rather than project onto people of color our own loss of humanity, asking people of color to carry the burden of this loss. The soul work that whites need to do turns us to the sources of spiritual transformation that are transpersonal—to the presence of a deep reality of wholeness, connection, and grace that supports us beyond our brokenness and urges us toward a more daring communion.

**Engaged presence:** Racial injustice is perpetuated by the passive absence of whites who are numbly disengaged with the social realities of our time. Conversely, racial

injustice will fail to thrive as more and more of us show up as present and engaged citizens.

Racism is a form of cultural and economic violence that isolates and fragments human beings. Engaged presence counters violence by resisting its primary effect. As a white, the cure for my education into ignorance is remedial education. The cure for my fragmentation of self is hospitality to myself. The cure for my cultivation into passivity is renewed activism. Social activism becomes a spiritual practice by which I reclaim my humanity, and refuse to accept my cultivation into numbness and disengagement.

The narcissistic preoccupation of whites in our present society is a symptom of how well established racism is. Hope lies in our ability to renew our citizenship through engaged action. Meaningful participation is advanced by specific concerns and sustained work. One does not have to take on the whole world at once. Racism takes specific forms in specific fields—education, health care, the justice system, economics, theology. Holistic engagement in any field offers significant opportunities for the sustained address and redress of racism. As a theological educator, I take heart from what is accomplished when students do field work in the community: working on environmental racism, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, cultural survival, youth at risk, the prison-industrial complex, public education, or economic justice. In this engaged work, I see our white students move beyond the limits of their enculturation into ignorance and passivity.

Congregational life can provide a similar base community for the restoration of humanity. In my childhood, the church was the primary institutional setting in which racism was publicly named and its effects actively resisted. When church members took to the streets, we changed an unjust practice in our community. We also changed ourselves. Social action is an incarnational event. It mends the split of mind from body, individual from community, neighbor from neighbor.

A person of faith, seeking out of love and desire for life to inhabit his or her country, needs to be engaged in incarnational social action. Activism returns one to the actual world as a participatory citizen and an agent of history. Through activism, compliant absence is transformed into engaged presence.

**Conclusion:** The struggle for racial justice in America is a struggle to inhabit my own country, a struggle to become a participant in the actual history and social reality of the land in which I have been born and to which I belong. The struggle for racial justice is a struggle to overcome the numbness, alienation, splitting, and absence of consciousness that characterize my life as a white and that enable me to unwittingly, even *against my will*, continue to replicate life-destroying activities of my society. It is a struggle to attain a

different expression of human wholeness: one in which my inner life is grounded in a restored communion with the transpersonal source of grace and wholeness, and the primordial fact of the connectedness of all life.

The struggle is imperative. Racial injustice is not only a tragedy that happened yesterday, whose aftereffects can be safely viewed from behind the glass windows of one's high-powered vehicle; racial injustice is currently mutating and re-creating itself. Its dehumanizing effects are harming hundreds and thousands of lives.

Within the past seven years, we in California have dismantled affirmative action; pulled the plug on public funding for bilingual education in Spanish and English in a state that is more than 50 percent Hispanic, and passed "three strikes" legislation that has dramatically increased the number of people in jail, a disproportionate number of them people of color. New prisons are being built as a high-profit industry, and prisoners are being used to provide industrial labor at below minimum wage. We passed a referendum to restrict immigrants' access to education and health services, and last spring we passed a referendum extending "three strikes" legislation to teenagers. If you are fourteen and you steal a bike, the crime can be counted as a first strike against you. With this law in place, youth of color are most at risk of becoming slave laborers in the prison-industrial complex. Meanwhile, public high schools in the Bay Area show a marked difference in the kind of education they offer. Schools with a majority of students of color provide few college preparatory classes and only a small percentage of their graduates go to college. These statistics are reversed for the predominantly white high schools, where there are many college prep classes and a majority of graduates go on to college.

This is my country. Love calls me beyond denial and disassociation. It is not enough to think of racism as a problem of "human relations," to be cured by me and others like me treating everyone fairly, with respect and without prejudice. Racism is more: It is a problem of segregated knowledge, mystification of facts, anesthetization of feeling, exploitation of people, and violence against the communion/community of our humanity.

My commitment to racial justice is both on behalf of the other—my neighbor, whose well-being I desire—and for myself, to whom the gift of life has been given but not yet fully claimed. I struggle neither as a benevolent act of social concern nor as a repentant act of shame and guilt, but as an act of desire for life, of passion for life, of insistence on life—fueled by both love for life and anger in face of the violence that divides human flesh.

The habit of living somewhere else rather than here, in a constructed "reality" that minimizes my country's history of both violence and beauty and ignores the present facts, keeps me from effectively engaging in the actual world. I have the sensation of

being a disembodied spectator as structures of racism are recreated before my eyes. But involvement in the steps of conversion—theological reflection, remedial education, soul work, and engaged action—moves me from enclosure to openness.

I step out of an insular shell and come into immediate contact with the full texture of our present reality. I feel the rain on my face and breathe the fresh air. I wade in the waters that spirit has troubled and stirred. The water drenching me baptizes me into a new life. I become a citizen *not of somewhere else*, but of here.

The struggle for racial justice in America calls those of us who are white to make this journey. Our presence is needed. We have been absent too long.

If you are here unfaithfully with us,  
you're causing terrible damage.

If you've opened your loving to God's love,  
you're helping people you don't know  
and have never seen.

— Rumi, "Say Yes Quickly," translated by A. J. Arberry and Coleman Barks

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