Death in a Religious Community

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Within the experience of all religions, death and loss are a constant of the human condition. Most religions have developed strategies for helping members who are experiencing the pain of loss. Within Ethical Humanism, a non-theistic religion, the reliance on community has been the major source of support and coping for members within each Ethical Society. This article explores the concept of community within Ethical Humanism, developed and articulated through the pastoral role, and applies it to the experiences of two prominent members of the Ethical Society.

Within the experience of all religions, tragedy and loss are a constant as members within the movement and their religious leaders work to help those in their care who are in pain. This focus is central to the pastoral role. This article will explore the experience of members of the Ethical Culture movement, a non-theistic religion, and the pastoral and membership response to the painful and tragic loss of one of their members. As Ethical Culture cannot explain life and death through theistic belief, the actions of the members of the Ethical Culture Society and the powerful sense of community that is fostered within the Society, were essential in helping those who suffered this loss. It is hoped that the experience recounted in this article will be modified and adopted in other religious groups to assist in the task of loss and healing.

Ethical Culture

Ethical Culture (also known in some areas as Ethical Humanism, a title adopted in the 1960s) was founded in New York City in 1876. While Christianity, Judaism, and Islam take God as the primary focus of religious concern, the Ethical Movement takes the welfare of human beings as its central tenet. It makes no truth claims regarding the supernatural or the hereafter. In this regard it is officially non-theistic, leaving aside theological concerns as matters of personal conscience. It makes no binding metaphysical claims upon its adherents and instead upon ways in which people interact with other human beings so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in oneself. While no truth claims must be adopted by members of the Ethical Movement, for all practical purposes since the death of the founder Felix Adler in 1933, whose founding principles were based on a modified Idealism, the guiding philosophy has been that of John Dewey's pragmatism and the underlying metaphysics of naturalism. What has remained unchanged

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since its inception is Ethical Culture's view that human beings are social by nature and discover their spiritual sides through ethical interactions with both the social and natural world. The religious life in Ethical Culture is expressed through the network of connections that tie people to each other, to the social world via the institutions that are created, and to the natural environment. From this perspective, community is something that is achieved by the cultivation of ethical relationships that tap the well-springs of spiritual development.

Ethical Culture understands that the fulfillment of one's humanity is in and through the web of relations that define the boundaries of our existence. The self is understood as a social construct built upon the foundation of the natural world and that self is realized through the quality of the relationships the individual encounters. Ethical relationships are tested against the extent to which the various elements have furthered their uniqueness, a uniqueness that can be found only through the relationships. This is a kind of process "theology" that places Ethical Culture outside the current mainstream philosophy of individualism.

The implication of this metaphysical grounding is that meaning is found in and through the social and natural environment. Furthermore, the naturalist approach provides solace for many at times of trauma and loss. It is an acceptance of the world as it is, a kind of comfort that comes from feeling a part of all that is around. The other source of comfort is the feeling of connectedness to the chain of humanity extended into the distant past and one is able to project into future generations. The outward focus of religious humanism, therefore, can accept gratuitous evil as a freak of nature without needing to attribute a hidden meaning.

While not offering an alternative realm of existence, Ethical Culture places Ethical Societies function much like traditional religious organizations in that they provide pastoral services for its members and the broader community. The title for the functional equivalent of clergy in an Ethical Society is Leader. The Leader, the person responsible for the spiritual life of the membership, is central to the spiritual life of the community. As such, the Leader speaks at Sunday meetings, officiates at welcoming ceremonies for infants, presides at coming of age ceremonies for teenagers, and conducts wedding, funeral, and memorial services. In the pastoral role, the Leader makes hospital visits, calls on those confined to home, consoles the bereaved, counsels members on a short-term basis, provides advice on making ethical and life decisions, makes referrals to professional therapists, and visits those in jail. Many Ethical Leaders are active in neighborhood clergy associations.

Of all the pastoral roles played by the Leader, perhaps the most important is that of articulating a worldview with an implicit metaphysics. This is addressed formally at Sunday Meetings which center around an educational/inspirational lecture/sermon. Life matters, both personal and social, are spoken about from the platform. Humanist values and virtues are articulated, as they are again in ceremonial settings. This statement of Ethical Culture outlook is most focused at funeral and memorial services. The following points are stressed at such services: 1. life and death are mysteries but the greater of the two is that we have a part of the natural world and all reality are formed; 2. feelings of loss and grief are our way; 4. immorality is achieved by the individual and the world in which we live; 5. we not but we do know that it is brief; 6. we have ourselves in love and service.

Depending upon the nature of the deceased, the gratuitous nature of evil. "The human life is brief, the sorrow is a common sorrow, returns us to this life. . . We are a part of religious humanism is a position which finds its entirety." 6

Like many other religious groups, for Ethical Culture pins of cohesion is the social relationships. In fact, as a humanist group, the defining most realized in the quality of relationships and human connectedness within an Ethical Society, from a religious humanist perspective but with the philosophy of religious humanism as their best, as the essence of the spiritual life.

The Ethical Humanism Society of Long Island that address end-of-life issues. In wedding a period of silence to remember those who have gone. At the Long Island Society there is a ceremony, the former, members announce important events. The death of a loved one is often included. The Ethical Life at the Sunday meeting. The Leader helps them design their own memorial services, proper documents in case of death, such as a durable power of attorney.

The Long Island Society sponsors a bereavement group sponsored by the Red Cross of the Ethical Society. A short while later, she joined the Ethical Society. When she met Lou Beck, she introduced her subsequently joined as well. They were married in an Ethical Culture ceremony to the Board of Trustees and served as president. The Ethical Life at the Sunday meeting. The Leader helped them design their own memorial services, proper documents in case of death, such as a durable power of attorney.

\[\text{Arthur Dobrin, } Ethical Humanism in Brief (Garden City, NY: Long Island Ethical Humanist Society, 1999).\]
but the greater of the two is that we have been born at all; 2. human beings are part of the natural world and all return to the elements out of which we are formed; 3. feelings of loss and grief are real and we experience these in our way; 4. immorality is achieved by the affect we have on other people and the world in which we live; 5. we never know when our lives will end but we do know that it is brief; 6. we have a responsibility to extend ourselves in love and service.

Depending upon the nature of the death, there may be comments about the gratuitous nature of evil. “The humanist hope is the hope centered on this life. Our sorrow is a common sorrow and the acceptance of that fact returns us to this life... We are a part of the earth, the soil and the sky. Religious humanism is a position which finds comfort and acceptance of life in its entirety.”

Like many other religious groups, for Ethical Societies one of the center pins of cohesion is the social relationships fostered within the community. In fact, as a humanist group, the defining feature of Ethical Humanism is most realized in the quality of relations amongst members. The stress upon human connectedness within an Ethical Society isn’t a gloss upon religion from a religious humanist perspective but rather is something consistent with the philosophy of religious humanism that views social relations, at their best, as the essence of the spiritual life.

The Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island has a series of programs that address end-of-life issues. In wedding ceremonies, there is sometimes a period of silence to remember those who are present only in spirit. Each Sunday at the Long Island Society there is a period of memorial silence. In the former, members announce important transitions in their lives and the death of a loved one is often included. The second is designed for mourners who want to remember the deceased in a community setting, either by sitting or standing silently. The first Sunday of the New Year is dedicated to the public remembering of those who are no longer with us. This is done in the context of a re-dedication to four prime humanist values: love, peace, freedom, and hope. Several times a year, a presentation on living wills is part of the Sunday meeting. The Leader meets with members to help them design their own memorial service, ensure that they have the proper documents in case of death, such as a will, a health care proxy and a durable power of attorney.

The Long Island Society sponsors a bereavement group that is composed of both members and non-members alike. In 1976, Fran Lerner came to the Ethical Society. She had been recently widowed and in a bereavement group sponsored by the Red Cross where she met a member of the Ethical Society. A short while later, she joined the Ethical Humanist Society. When she met Lou Beck, she introduced him to the Society, which he subsequently joined as well. They were married by one of the co-authors of this article in an Ethical Culture ceremony in 1978. Fran had been elected to the Board of Trustees and served as president for two years. Lou was the chair of the refurbishing committee and an active committee member. The Becks played a central role in the organizational and social life of the Society.

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4All names and identifying characteristics of the individuals have been changed to protect anonymity.
The Experience — Tragedy Strikes

Central to understanding the impact of the Beck experience on the members of the Ethical Society is the recognition that the death or impending death of one member touches all others in the community, setting off feelings of vulnerability, loss, and bereavement. Thus, when Lou Beck was diagnosed with liver cancer in June 1999, a shock wave went through the Ethical Society membership. How could this be happening to them? Lou is so vital and strong, his energy belies his 70+ years; and Fran had been down this road with her first husband and now she has to deal with this again.

The first round of medical consultations did not offer a specific diagnosis; Lou was having stomach problems and they were investigating. But as the tests became more specific, and the specialists were called in, the diagnosis was confirmed and the malevolence of liver cancer and the havoc it creates was unstated. The stages of depression and acceptance require that psychological deals are cut usually for more time. It was hard to see this stage in operation with the Becks; perhaps much of the bargaining was stated. The Kubler-Ross paradigm of stages of loss is helpful in understanding some of the reactions of Lou and Fran and those close to them. The denial stage serves as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, it allows the counselor and good friend, for support and solace. For Fran, that meant—gaining was unstated. The stages of depression and acceptance require that the patient and caregiver acknowledge the reality of death. For many this is the most difficult period and yet, there is also some measure of relief. It was in these stages, especially, that the impact and power of the Ethical Society membership and the pastoral influence of the Leader was expressed. But we must go back somewhat before exploring this part.

For Fran, the primary caregiver, there were many layers of concern. She wanted to remain in denial for as long as possible, riding on the optimism generated in this stage. It was short-lived, however, and as the denial crumbled, both she and Lou began to face some of the tasks of the later stages. Lou started to meet regularly with the Leader of the Society as pastor and friend, for support and solace. For Fran, that meant—aside from seeking support from well wishers and friends in the Ethical Society—consulting with a social worker (also a member of the Society). skilled in working with oncology patients, to try to prepare herself with a vision of the reality leading to Lou’s death.

Kastenbaum defines the terminal facts are recognized and communicated when the patient realizes or accepts that something must be done for the patient. It is with the recognition of death, that hope, while still remaining untrue must be faced that the work of the grieving is just beginning. For Fran and Lou, that meant—being able to reverse the course of the malignancy in his liver.

In late November, Lou was hospitalized, he was deteriorating and he had lost a pound that he had lost identified his liver. While in the hospital, Fran and Lou (including family, the Leader of the Ethical Society and the authors of this article) and friends, discussed and mobilized plans. This discussion was especially difficult for Fran and to still do as much as possible. In mid-December, Lou was released from the hospital bed, hospice care and an uncertain future had become clearer, was in more pain, had to sleep more. As this was close to holding a New Year’s party that was to have included Lou, there was no way that Lou would be able to reverse the course of the malignancy in his liver. The gathering was planned, and the enlivened the minds of all that attended. We gathered in an auspicious living room surrounded by many small objects, all seated toward the middle of the room, again as both pastor and friend, suggested that Lou, words of appreciation, this to Fran. Everyone knew that there would be no more parties that night, Lou. Fran and Lou began to die at home, the need to discontinue a vigorous chemotherapy protocol that he had lost identified in the terminal phase. Lou said, “I am ready.”

The Leader commented on Lou’s work of art and sense of adventure. Lou listened. Fran and Lou responded with comments. As we went around the room with each person, Lou, he responded to each person. The calm and appreciative of the many years of friendship was spoken, the love between the two was so strong that we had been part of and moving experience. Soon after, Lou.”

vision of the reality leading to Lou’s death. In their way, each was arming themselves for the time ahead.

Kastenbaum defines the terminal phase of life as beginning when the facts are recognized and communicated to the patient and caregivers, when the patient realizes or accepts the facts, and when nothing more can be done for the patient. It is with the acknowledgement that a life is ending, that hope, while still remaining, has dwindled and the inexorable truth must be faced that the work of dying has begun. This happened at different times for both Lou and Fran.

In late November, Lou was hospitalized with fever. His condition had been deteriorating and he had lost a lot of weight. Not a large man, the pounds that he had lost identified him, visually, as a critically ill person. While in the hospital, Fran and Lou were frequently visited by many including family, the Leader of the Ethical Society, and a social worker (co-authors of this article) and friends. During one of those visits, with the Leader there, Fran and Lou began to grapple with some of the issues inherent in the terminal phase. Lou was able to express to Fran his wish to die at home, the need to discontinue any heroic efforts on his behalf, and his articulation of his gratitude for having had a long and good life. Hospice was discussed and mobilized; plans were made for his return home. This discussion was especially difficult for Fran, who needed Lou to rally and try to still do as much as possible. For Lou, he was letting go.

In mid-December, Lou was released from the hospital, went home to a hospital bed, hospice care and an uncertain, certain future. Lou continued to become weaker, was in more pain, had more difficulty eating and was sleeping more. As this was close to holiday time, plans had been made for a New Year’s party that was to have included the Becks. In his deteriorating condition, there was no way that Lou would be able to attend. Yet there was a strong feeling that it would be wonderful to gather all those who would have attended the party and have a gathering that would “celebrate Lou.” The gathering was planned, and the ensuing evening remains etched in the minds of all that attended. We gathered and settled down in the Beck’s spacious living room surrounded by many of Lou’s paintings. Lou was comfortably seated toward the middle of the room. The Leader of the Society, again as both pastor and friend, suggested that we consider saying something to Lou, words of appreciation, thoughts about him, whatever came to mind. Everyone knew that there wouldn’t be another New Year’s Eve with Lou.

The Leader commented on Lou’s wonderful approach to life, his love of art and sense of adventure. Lou listened attentively. Before the next person spoke, Lou responded with comments of appreciation for the Leader. As we went around the room with each person saying something special to Lou, he responded to each person. The comments were intensely personal and appreciative of the many years of friendship and connection. When Fran spoke, the love between the two was expressed but even before then, we all knew that we had been part of and witness to a most extraordinary and moving experience. Soon after, Lou excused himself and went to his room.

For the next several days individuals visited with Lou and Fran. This was the last time we would see Lou; he died in his sleep just hours after the dawn of the New Millennium. His funeral service was conducted several days later at the Ethical Society.

Different Views

There are many ways to conceptualize the period of time from diagnosis to death as illustrated by the experience for the Beck family. Weisman formulated the concept of an "appropriate death," a death in which the individual is relatively at ease. The components are that: a) conflict has been reduced—the internal conflicts of the patient such as loss of control, have been addressed, discussed and worked through as much as possible; b) compatibility with the "ego ideal" is achieved—the person's basic sense of identity is maintained through the dying experience; c) continuity of certain relationships is preserved or restored—unfinished business has been attended to, and d) consummation of a critical wish/concern is achieved.

A death is appropriate if it is consistent with what a person has been, if it continues to promote what is meaningful and important to the individual, and if it maintains important relationships. All of the requisite components were in place for Lou and Fran.

For the Beck family, embedded within the context of the Ethical Society, each of these components was addressed both personally and through the context of the Ethical Society. Through home hospice care, physical concerns about loss of control were addressed, and through frequent pastoral meetings with the Leader, some of the deeper conflicts for both Fran and Lou were acknowledged. The maintenance of identity and continuity of relationships were maintained and contact was heightened during the most difficult times through constant updates and interactions with members of the Ethical Society that focussed on both Lou and Fran. The New Year's party was a celebration that helped Lou to know how he was valued and loved throughout the Ethical community. Through pastoral intervention, as mentioned earlier, his wishes were expressed at a Sunday morning service. The expression of reassurance that Lou felt from the community, which included the belief in the possibility and that degrees of control are inherent in their choice.

Therese Rando, Grief, Dying, and Death (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 1984).

When Bad Things Happen

RabbI Kushner in his book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, offers an alternative perspective on the period of time from diagnosis to death as illustrated by the experience for the Beck family. He stresses the individual's role and must be facilitated within the context of the Ethical Society, recognition of death and dying experience as the deceased are at peace. Death is openly discussed with others are constructed for members. Remember of each new year Communication about the Ethical Society. The emphasis on dignity is important that supports our belief that the person who is struggling to cope.

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Through the pastoral role, this approach is fostered within the community and individually. Lou and Fran lived a life that was forged and defined by their interactions with people. Their religious life grounded them in the belief in the dignity and worth of all people. When faced with Will’s dying, they chose to fill the “dying script” as they had chosen to live, surrounded by friends, with dignity and integrity, by sharing and leaning in and on others, and with as much knowledge as they could glean about his condition. The community in which they had been embedded was supportive, nurturing, available and accepting.

In a more recent conceptualization, Corr rejects the stage model of Kübler-Ross and stresses the individual experience that he believes is not linear or universal. Corr stresses the need to make the dying experience as open for communication as possible. This mandate falls within the pastoral role and must be facilitated within the membership community. It is essential to understand that the dying person remains a living person who is attempting to cope as resourcefully as possible. For members of the Ethical Society, recognition of death and dying are part of the Sunday morning experience as the deceased are acknowledged during a moment of silence. Death is openly discussed with the Leader as individual care plans are constructed for members. Remembrance Sunday marks the beginning of each new year. Communication about death is part of the life of the Ethical Society. The emphasis on dignity is a core value in the Ethical Movement that supports Corr’s belief that the dying person remains a living person who is struggling to cope.

Rabbi Kushner offers another perspective.

**When Bad Things Happen To Good People**

Rabbi Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, raises questions related to the fairness, wisdom, benevolence and existence of God. As his own son was diagnosed with and subsequently died of progeria (rapid aging), Rabbi Kushner, a religious man and a believer in God and the goodness of the world, wondered how this could be happening. “It is not how the world is supposed to work. Tragedies like this were supposed to happen to selfish, dishonest people?” Kushner lamented, “How could God treat us and abandon us in this way?”

Kushner’s book does not sound a defensive tone, nor does he dictate an answer to his own question. Instead, the volume describes the struggle to understand tragedy from a different perspective. Not blaming but trying to reframe time honored beliefs about the existence of God and how the universe, which includes this belief, is structured. He concludes that God can’t do everything. He states: “I no longer hold God responsible for illness, accidents, and natural disasters ... God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws?”

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How then did Rabbi Kushner find the strength to go on, to maintain his belief and continue to instill it in others through his work in the synagogue? In spite of all the terrible things that had happened and much that has happened in his life and the life of his family, where did the strength and stamina come from? He concludes that "In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened." 

For Rabbi Kushner, and more so for members of the ethical culture tradition, many of the answers reside in the power of the community and how we respond to tragedy.

Ethical Humanism — Community

Sherwin Nuland commented that "The dignity that we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives... The art of dying is the art of living. The honesty and grace of the years of life that are ending is the real measure of how we die... Who has lived in dignity, dies in dignity." It is within the realm of the community that this dignity can be found. Lou’s death with dignity was greatly enhanced because of the unique pastoral presence and shared relationships and experiences within the community of the Ethical Society. In the Long Island Ethical Society, community is fostered in many ways: Sunday morning meeting, shared social and political experiences, ritual celebrations, shared intellectual challenges and a communal governing body. Young and old are encouraged to have and use their voice in issues related to the community. While the membership is physically spread over a large suburban county (unlike a parish) members gather and join together on many occasions. The community asserts itself politically whenever possible through the voice of the Leader and as a collective as well. The Sunday morning platform is the major forum of exchange both philosophical and spiritual. As mentioned earlier, when faced with the fragility of life, the importance of each life is heightened. There is an atmosphere of spirituality, support, caring and openness within portions of the Sunday service where members are encouraged to share their accomplishments and concerns.

Lou and Fran were open about his illness and prognosis, shared their concerns with all and their hope and despair with many. In the fall, when Lou was still able to attend on Sunday mornings, he publicly thanked members of the Society for their concern and support and hoped that the membership would extend themselves to Fran after he was gone. This type of statement could only have been made in a community that allowed for this type of interchange and encouraged an openness about death through many of the programs and interactions between and among members.

As the community began to rally around the needs of the Becks, support from many quarters of the Society was forthcoming. The women’s group of the Society discussed and created a network of support around the family, offering time, meals, driving etc. as needed. An e-mail network was established which kept members informed of Lou’s condition and allowed Fran the discretion to answer or not, the dozens of phone calls that came in every day expressing concern for relieved Fran whenever possible, and needed.

To Conclude

Ethical Culture may be unique among its near-exclusive focus upon human experience of Lou Beck’s “dying well” and widowhood can be instructive to all religious communities. It is the contention of the authors that the ethical humanist community, whatever its theological heritage, can find the strength to respond to the experience of dying. A widow's moment of silence and once each year of remembrance.

The reality of death is further reinforced by the presence of a bereavement around end-of-life issues help in a practical way for their mortality. The experience of mindfulness and dialogue about death, review of health care proxies and living will, own memorial service, may reduce some thoughts of death. Perhaps some of these issues are more a part of this life reality.

Pastoral Concerns

Rando comments on the role of clerics and members of their congregation. She writes: "Ideally, clerics will first of all be concerned for their own anxiety and fear, and be honest in their own fears and concerns, and be not so self-concerned as to provide the best transition an is that they do what is necessary to meet the family’s needs, and be flexible enough to do so.

Kushner, op. cit., p.147.
Sherwin Nuland, How We Die (New York, NY: Knopf).

Rando, op. cit., p. 321.
every day expressing concern for both Lou and her. Friends visited, relieved Fran whenever possible, and were there in whatever capacity was needed.

To Consider

Ethical Culture may be unique amongst religions in the western world with its near-exclusive focus upon human relationships. Nevertheless, the experience of Lou Beck's "dying well" and Fran Beck's coping with the onset of widowhood can be instructive to all religious institutions.

It is the contention of the authors that in a culture that denies death, a religious community, whatever its theological orientation, needs to legitimize the experience of dying. A widow stated this soon after her husband died. Several years before Lou's death, Doug died at home after a brief bout with brain cancer. He, too, had friends and family at his bedside until the very end. Barbara wrote, "I felt the love of sharing with him, and the love and support of a group at the ceremony that was almost overwhelming. Without that I could probably not have had the strength to face what was inevitable... Instead of closing off a dying person, I will forever be grateful for the very special way in which he is enfolded into my life. I can't express too strongly the importance of the inclusion of dying people, for them and the family, in life." The pastoral influence and the humanist focus on relationship, prepared the way for Lou to accept his death by offering several opportunities to reflect upon death. As with all religious societies, there is an on-going program to remember and honor the dead. In the case of the Ethical Humanist Society, this occurs each Sunday with a moment of silence and once each year with a Sunday service devoted to remembrance.

The reality of death is further reinforced in a positive and supportive way by the presence of a bereavement group. Educational programs around end-of-life issues help in a practical way to prepare a person/family for their mortality. The experience of the Society indicates that an open-mindedness and dialogue about death, preparation of legal documents, a review of health care proxies and living wills, as well as plans around one's own memorial service, may reduce some anxiety associated with the thought of death. Perhaps some of these suggestions may help in the acceptance of this life reality.

Pastoral Concerns/Directions

Rando comments on the role of clerics in managing the dying/death of members of their congregation. She writes:

Ideally, clerics will first of all be concerned caregivers. They will support patients with their presence, and be honest in their responses... They will try to transcend their own fears and concerns, and be nonjudgmental and accepting. Clerics should work to provide the best transition and safest passage to death... The issue is that they do what is necessary to meet the human, including religious, needs of the patient, and be flexible enough to do so in comfort.


Rando, op. cit., p. 321.

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The authors agree with Rando regarding the importance of the role of the clergyperson. The experience of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island supports her claim. It should be added, however, that the minister cannot carry out this task alone. The ongoing educational efforts around matters of death and the involvement of the community in support of a family undergoing the experience of dying are critical to ensuring that the death of a member and its effects upon survivors be as positive as possible.