

# **Chaos and Its Influence on Children's Development**

## **An Ecological Perspective**

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**Gary W. Evans and Theodore D. Wachs**



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## Well-Being, Chaos, and Culture: Sustaining a Meaningful Daily Routine

*Thomas S. Weisner*

The experience of persisting chaotic household, family, and community life is troubling and undesirable for parents and children. A central reason why this is so goes beyond the problems created by noise, toxic air and water, danger, and the other indicators of chaotic settings. Chaotic environments make it very difficult to accomplish a task that is recognizable most everywhere in the world—the project of sustaining a daily routine of life, for oneself and one's family and household, that is reasonably predictable, helps meet values and goals that give meaning to life, fits with the resources available, and keeps conflicts and disagreement relatively low. Chaotic settings do not provide much opportunity for the experience of *well-being*, which is engaged participation in the daily activities of a cultural community that that community deems desirable. Therefore, chaos matters because it can so often make well-being and meaningful cultural engagement very difficult. It disrupts the ability to participate in cultural communities that give meaning to life through the experience of well-being, in addition to the other deleterious effects it has. In this chapter, I contrast chaos with what I think is its opposite—well-being—and suggest a framework for describing chaos and well-being that could be applicable across cultural communities.

It also is important to clearly frame one's conception of chaos so that plural pathways to good development around the world are not mistaken for pathways characterized by deficits and chaos. Some developmental contexts would be universally considered chaotic and undesirable for parents and children. Other social settings might seem to be chaotic, or at least developmentally inappropriate, but in fact they are not because they represent valued developmental pathways for some communities. Many other circumstances are a combination: settings that have elements indexical of chaotic and deleterious environments, yet with compensatory beliefs, values, goals, and practices that in local context are

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not experienced as chaotic, or at least not to the same extent as would be expected.

In this chapter, I first identify features that are good indicators of chaos and deleterious conditions most anywhere, and some others that may appear so but are likely not in other communities. I then outline an ecocultural conceptualization of chaos that is useful for understanding chaos in context. I consider the opposite of chaos not as the absence of chaotic conditions but as the presence of well-being, and offer a definition of well-being that also suggests ways to understand chaos. Finally, I present two examples of research studies on well-being to illustrate this approach.

### **Some Chaotic Environmental Features Are Likely to Be Deleterious Anywhere**

Strong evidence suggests that some known environmental features are not going to be good for children and families most anywhere. Several chapters in this volume identify such bioecological and psychosocial risk conditions. Lustig (see chap. 15) describes the war and refugee experience of mortal danger, deprivation, upheaval, fear, uncertainty, and loss, which are defining features of a chaotic context and experience. Chronically inadequate nutrition, routinely unresponsive social stimulation, and little or no physical protection from threat and attack coming from both inside and outside the home are all clearly deleterious. High exposure to toxic substances and environments, as well as low-quality and dangerous housing, schools, day care, and other neighborhood settings, also contributes to high-risk environments (Evans, 2006). Low income and persistent poverty are associated with chaotic indices such as household crowding, high noise levels, disrupted household routines and rituals, residential and school relocation, and parental partner instability. However, poverty or low socioeconomic status (SES) is not simply a marker of chaos (see chap. 14, this volume; see also Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Selpekar, 2005).

Chronic and persistent anger, conflict, and violence in close relationships are not good experiences for children, families, or communities anywhere. Cold, unsupportive, and neglectful caretaking and relationships are similarly unhealthy, inhibiting self-regulation and social engagement (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002)—if such relationships are experienced by community members that way. However, such care can have compensatory benefits for households facing harsh and dangerous environments by possibly helping children survive in very difficult circumstances (e.g., Goldstein, 2003). Rapid, unpredictable, or unwanted changes in caretakers for children, especially when others familiar to a child are unavailable to buffer change, are not good for children or families. A persistent sense of threat or danger undermining social connections and security does not promote good health and is associated with physiological stress (Taylor, Repetti, & Seeman, 1997). Relative social and economic status inequality, especially where compensatory social communities and social supports are not available, are difficult barriers to overcome. These circumstances are all too

Chaos in contemporary circumstances in the United States has been defined to include situations with little structure or stable routines: noise and crowding in an overly fast-paced world allowing fewer hours for household members to be together, fewer family rituals and ceremonies, and the experience of life as hectic and of things being "out of control" (see chap. 1). These conditions could affect children in various ways. Social exchanges are unpredictable, brief, and few. A sense of competency and effectance may be lower because of the uncertainty of the environment within which one is attempting to be effective. Environmental chaos (noise, density and crowding, lack of structure) can have similar deleterious effects in non-Western, developing societies as well, though there are mediating influences and different cultural understandings of these environmental features.

### Contextual Understanding of Environmental Circumstances

Strong evidence from the ethnographic record and contemporary studies of children and families indicates that there are many different, pluralistic ways of raising children (LeVine, 2007). These pathways at times may appear chaotic, deleterious, or unacceptable by Eurocentric standards, but they are nonetheless morally and developmentally appropriate in other local contexts. Also, strong evidence shows that these alternative pathways can and do produce youth and adults who are socially competent and capable of contributing to their community and becoming parents themselves, as is true in the U.S. context (DeLoache & Gottlieb, 2000; Harkness & Super, 1996; Kagitçibasi, 1996; LeVine, Miller, & West, 1988; LeVine & New, 2008; Shweder, Minow, & Markus, 2002; Weisner, 2001).

An example of a very widespread practice and model of good child care in much of the world is having multiple caretakers for children. Does socially distributed multiple caretaking of children lead to relational insecurity, emotional loss, confusion, and anxiety, or does it develop a strong sense of empathy, nurturance, social responsibility, social intelligence, and social competence in children? Are children and parents in these socially distributed care settings in fact encouraging affiliative rather than egoistic or individualistic styles of competence and achievement that have important adaptive advantages? Many communities practice one or another form of child lending, fosterage, or kin adoption of children. Is the use of multiple caretakers a sign of deficient parenting? In such communities socially distributed care, defined as the placing of children in settings where others can assist in care and where children will learn to adapt, is a positive goal. This is an expectable, normative, taken-for-granted cultural pathway for children and parents (Gottlieb, 2004; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Keller, 2007; Serpell, 1993; Seymour, 1999; Verhoef, 2005; Weisner, 1996).

Attachment and the development of "security" is another example of good child care in other parts of the world. Is there a single, optimal maternal-child attachment style, or are there plural cultural models of close relationships (between parents, siblings, kin, peers, authorities, romantic partners, and others)? Do these varied cultural models of ways to socialize trust lead to deficits, stress,

and insecurity in children, or do they result in flexible, interdependent relational security (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995; LeVine & Norman, 2001; Weisner, 2005)? "Authoritative" parenting is similarly widely cited in the United States as a putative candidate for an optimal parenting style for children (Baumrind, 1989). Are parenting practices described as "stern," "harsh," or "strict" by Euro-American researchers and on most parenting scales actually negative and deleterious for children, or are structure, respect, clear control, training, and the importance of understanding hierarchy and authority common and effective parenting models in the United States and in much of the world (e.g., Chao, 1994; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Lareau, 2003)?

Placing children and parents into separate, less crowded individual rooms, spaces, and beds provides another example. Is separate sleeping desirable and optimal for the development of autonomy and independence, providing a developmentally essential sense of personal space and security in less chaotic spaces? Does this practice encourage individuation and self-regulation and discourage an inappropriate dependency on the mother while strengthening the parent-child relationship? Or do the various cosleeping arrangements for children that are common around the world, particularly crowded, dense, bed sharing among children, show not only that cosleeping is morally appropriate in a community emphasizing interdependence and "symbiotic harmony" as an overarching developmental goal but also that there are no negative consequences related to the practice (McKenna & McDade, 2005; Okami, Weisner, & Olmstead, 2002; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000; Shweder, Balle-Jensen, & Goldstein, 1995)?

These examples suggest that what might appear developmentally deleterious, dangerous, and chaotic using Eurocentric criteria may not be so to the same degree, or even at all, when considered from the viewpoints of communities with other standards for good parenting and goals for good development. As useful as many current environmental and social-relational indices of chaos or deleterious parenting practices are, middle- and upper-middle-class Euro-American families, children, and their neighborhoods often seem to rise to the top of the positive end of parenting practices, home environments, and child developmental scales. It is likely that some of these measures of parenting, home environments, and chaos implicitly have Euro-American development goals and pathways embedded in them and thus have been defined as more positive. Lichter and Wethington (see chap. 2, this volume), for example, demonstrated considerable change in health, poverty, mortality, and household conditions in the United States over the past few generations, usually in the direction of reduced chaos, poverty and mortality, and improved health. Furthermore, although minority and immigrant children are especially likely candidates for experiencing chaos in the home, the meanings of chaos or of alternative expressions of instability may vary substantially across cultural and racial or ethnic groups. Lichter and Wethington suggested that studies of growing inequality in environments and opportunity require understanding different forms of chaotic situations. Wachs and Corapci (2003) called for better theory regarding the kinds of cultural differences that would moderate or mediate environmental chaos. Strong evidence for the impacts of chaos on children and families will require integrated measures of objective conditions, subjective experience, and

features of the cultural learning environment relevant to candidate indicators of chaos within an environment.

## **Well-Being and Chaos in an Ecocultural Context**

In addition to being sure to conceptualize and assess what might be chaos or deleterious practices in cultural contexts, researchers need to offer a positive contrast to what is chaotic. Order and predictability alone, if defined as the opposite of chaos, are not sufficient; one might ask, predictability of what environment and which practices? A more useful contrast to chaos is well-being. Well-being incorporates the meaning and the sociocultural components of what are desirable everyday routines and activities into an understanding of what chaos, as the opposite of well-being, might be like.

Well-being is the engaged participation of a child or parent in the everyday routines and activities deemed desirable by a cultural community, and the psychological experiences produced as a result of such engagement. Chaos is, in part, the absence of such meaningful cultural engagement.

This conception of well-being can apply cross-culturally and prove useful in understanding what is and is not chaos in the environments of children and families elsewhere in the world (Weisner, 2009). Like chaos, the conditions that promote well-being are likely to have both universal and local aspects. There are already examples of such work in research on quality of life, well-being, and family and child assessment (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003; Brown, 1997). Earls and Carlson (1995), for example, called for the incorporation of the experiences of parents and children in local cultural context into family and child well-being work. Ben-Arieh and Goerge (2005) also included strong assessments of local cultural context in their global assessments of well-being. Vleminckx and Smeeding (2001) showed such variations across economically developed nations. Chaos also could be that set of specific contextual factors that in turn produces low well-being and disengagement (see chap. 1, this volume). Both causal paths (absence of well-being leads to the experience of chaos, or chaotic contexts lead to low well-being and then disengagement) have empirical support. Regardless of the causal sequence, the broader point is that meaningful cultural engagement is negatively linked to chaos.

## **Sustaining a Meaningful Routine of Life: A Universal Developmental Project for Providing Well-Being**

Well-being is a family and ecocultural project. Parents everywhere have a common project: to construct a social ecology that balances what they want for themselves and their family with what is possible given their circumstances. This project involves sustaining a daily routine of life. Sustainability is a holistic conceptualization of how families are doing with respect to this project. Ecological-cultural (ecocultural) theory suggests that sustaining a daily routine is a universal adaptive problem for all families (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Ecocultural family theory extends Super and Harkness's (1986) notion of a de-



velopmental niche for the child to the study of the family and ecological context (Weisner, 2002).

The unit of analysis for studying both sustainability and well-being is the everyday activities and practices in the context of the cultural learning environment of that community (Whiting, 1980). Activities and practices can be described by common dimensions with features that recur and structure life in that environment: a *script* for normative conduct; *goals and values* organizing the meaning and direction of the activity; a *task* and functional goals of the activity; *people* and their relationships that are present in the activity; the motivations and feelings that people have in the setting that influence their *engagement* in it; and the *resources* needed to constitute the activity and make it happen (Cole, 1996; Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; Rogoff, 2003).

Sustainability is an ongoing project, not a one-time end point; it is contextual, embedded in an everyday routine of life, and thus part of some local social context defined by appropriate action, speech, and morality. Sustainability includes both the local resources and ecology of the family and community and the goals, values, and meanings that the community affords and people bring to their practices.

Sustainability of a child's daily routine of activities should enhance well-being because it defines a higher quality family daily routine (which consists of activities prevalent in a community). Barring pathology and more universally chaotic circumstances that can and do prevail around the world, well-being is the engaged participation by children and families in such meaningful activities. Well-being and sustainability are contextual universals. The features of sustainability should enhance well-being in any community, but the local meanings and contexts of that community are a part of measuring and understanding well-being. Contextual analysis is not the same as relativism, or the view that practices can be understood only by using local community standards.

Sustainability links the psychological experience of well-being to those environmental features thwarting sustainability, which are likely candidates for understanding chaos in any community. For example, socially distributed care of children, such as child fosterage or adoption, might be experienced as a high-stress, chaotic family environment in one context in which it is not normative and valued, but is a much less chaotic situation, even a desired pathway, in another community. Describing the cultural learning environment carefully would go a long way toward the evidence needed to ascertain the extent to which an environmental feature that might be detrimental or chaotic in a local community in fact is, and how it affects families and children.

### **Sustainability as a Comparative Standard for Well-Being**

Sustaining a daily routine involves four processes (Weisner et al., 2005): (a) fitting the routine to family resources, (b) balancing varied family interests and conflicts, (c) ensuring meaningfulness of family activities with respect to goals and values, and (d) providing stability and predictability of the daily routine. Routines that have better resource fit, less conflict, more balance, more meaningfulness, and enough predictability are posited to be better for

families, and thus provide greater well-being for those participating in them. If these features are largely absent most of the time, these could be indicators of chaos.

Chaotic conditions are those that significantly interfere with the developmental project of sustaining a meaningful daily routine. To be chaotic, though, not only would these conditions have to be quite extreme and disruptive, but they also would have to persist across time in a child's development and show connections to one or more of the features that would make a family cultural routine of life reasonably meaningful and sustainable. Those candidate features of chaos would include an inability to fit the family routine into the resources available; continual conflict, violence, or threat; lack of fit with goals and values; and persistent unpredictability and instability. Hertzman (see chap. 8) emphasized the many pathways through which temporal and spatial stability can matter to family process and child development. Chaos and thwarting of sustainability are associated; however, the causal pathways can go in multiple directions, including the expectation that some features, such as resource scarcity itself, are antecedents that increase the risk of chaos.

Imagine developmental pathways as consisting of everyday activities (getting ready for bed, sleeping, having breakfast, going to church, sitting in classrooms, going to an after-school program, visiting relatives, playing video games, doing homework, hanging with friends, going to the mall, dating, "partying," watching TV). Those activities and their cultural and ecological contexts are the "stepping stones" children traverse as they move along a pathway through the day and the day's routine. These activities make up the life pathways that they engage in each day. Children not only actively and joyously engage in those activities but also resist and transform them as active agents.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's process, person, context, and time (PPCT) framework describes participants enmeshed in an active, dynamic socioecological system that is analogous to the pathways model of everyday activities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The PPCT framework includes cultural scripts for processes (such as interactional processes or processes of resource allocation), cultural models for understanding the conception of a person (child and youth agency, the self, identity), cultural learning environments for children (context creation, engagement, and meaning), and cultural transmission of these models and scripts across generations. I think Bronfenbrenner would appreciate the importance of the socially situated approach to mind. He commented that mental processes (perception, cognition, motivation, emotion, memory) "are about *something* . . . [and] much of that content is in the outside world. . . . In humans, the content turns out, early on, to be mainly about people, objects, and symbols" (p. 177). The PPCT framework seems more useful, at least operationally, than the perhaps more familiar nested hierarchical model of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In that model, culture, for example, is placed in the macrosystem, far from the everyday settings in which cultural models, scripts, values, and goals are actually lived out (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Weisner, 2008).

Sustainability of family routines differs from stress, coping, and similar challenges, though those familiar constructs are also certainly involved in sustaining a family daily routine. The stress and coping models begin with an un-



usual, difficult perturbation that is a challenge or (potential) threat, and then responses of individuals or families to those perturbations are examined. Resilience or adaptation is the successful response to such threats. Sustainability, however, captures another, more enduring project: juggling ongoing demands in the service of meeting long-term shared and personal goals and developmental projects (Gallimore, Bernheimer, & Weisner, 1999). Sustainability focuses on the everyday accommodations made in a local context that keep life going and keep alive the daily routines expectable and meaningful in that community. Fiese and Winter (see chap. 4) reviewed the evidence supporting chaos as a family-wide construct, closely tracking its impacts on child socioemotional functioning within meaningful family routines.

### **Assessing Sustainability of the Daily Routine: The Ecocultural Family Interview**

Sustainability of the daily routine can be reliably described and assessed over time. The Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI) provides the frame for such a conversation. It begins with an orienting question: "Walk me through your day. From the time you get up to the time you go to bed, what are your activities throughout the day? What does it take to make those activities happen?" The EFI focuses on the activities that make up the day, their importance and salience to parents, and the features that constitute the daily routine (Weisner, 2009; Weisner et al., 2005). The EFI is a conversation, not a question-response format interview. This kind of conversation has long been useful in qualitative and ethnographic research. The data from EFI-type conversations (along with fieldnotes and direct observations of daily routines) can be indexed, rated, and coded for quantitative analysis and comparison.

For example, the EFI has been used to better understand the process of family accommodation to children with developmental disabilities (Gallimore, Coots, Weisner, Garnier, & Guthrie, 1996; Nihira, Weisner, & Bernheimer, 1994). Our research team encouraged parents to "tell their story" about their child and about how they were or were not adapting their family routine, and in response to what or whom (Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007). There were no false negatives; if parents did not bring up topics, we used probes that carefully covered standard ecocultural domains we knew from theory and prior research would likely matter (e.g., income or equity resources, work or career, supports, child services, siblings, work schedules, goals, religious beliefs, kin and friendship connections, transportation, couple supports).

Overall ratings of sustainability in this study are related to family composition (lower ratings for single parents) and SES and family income (higher ratings for higher SES and income). Resources are not a proxy for achieving a sustainable daily routine, however, because there is considerable variation in income and SES. Higher levels of family sustainability are associated with high social and interpersonal kin and nonkin social and institutional connectedness, and with lower family workloads in caring for the child with a disability. However, none of these relationships are linear; how families integrate and balance work and make use of connections is important for sustainability.

Sustainability starts with a holistic appraisal of the family's goals, the context of their daily routine, and the varied features that seem to sustain a routine for that family (e.g., resource fit, balancing conflicts, meaning with respect to goals, and stability and predictability). Traditional measures of family adjustment are useful, but the valence of the items in such measures is predetermined and not considered in relationship to the whole family system. What might be a "good" score for one family on an item may not be relevant or in fact may be negative for another. For example, eating meals together might work for an easier child and be a sign of coparticipation for one family, but for a behaviorally difficult and unpredictable child, the practice may be impossible to sustain and be more disruptive; it may be better for sustainability to have the child eat first. Hence, a higher score on an item such as "family eats dinner together often" might or might not indicate less chaos and greater family sociality and well-being. More participation in support programs or parent training might fit with the time available, resources, and goals for one family, and perhaps benefit the child, but for another family, it might be too difficult to sustain, with too little impact on the child. Therefore, a higher score on an item such as "higher participation in support programs" might or might not be indicative of family well-being (Skinner & Weisner, 2007). For some children with disabilities, having more typically developing peers as friends might be important and assist them in fuller inclusion. For other children, however, having friends who also have disabilities and whom they meet more regularly at school or other programs could be more sustaining and more likely to be related to greater overall satisfaction (Matheson, Olsen, & Weisner, 2007).

Sustainability varied across the families in the disability study, including a group who were "multiply troubled." Many of these families would fit a chaotic environment description. For example, they reported and we observed the sense of being out of control, lack of structure or lack of family rituals and routines, and inability to engage with services. But others with similar difficulties and low SES were "improving/resilient" with effort, grit, and strong goals to persevere and improve their child's developmental course. Their problems in balancing life and conflicts were sometimes high, but their life satisfaction was also fairly high, and chaos was lower or absent.

### **Family Supports, Intervention Research, and Ecocultural Evidence**

Understanding the cultural learning environment also matters for experimental research with applied and policy implications. For example, we developed a version of the EFI for working poor families and children in the United States as part of a prospective, longitudinal experimental intervention—the New Hope program (Bernheimer, Weisner, & Lowe, 2003; Duncan, Huston, & Weisner, 2007; Weisner, Gibson, Lowe, & Romich, 2002; Yoshikawa, Weisner, & Lowe, 2006). The New Hope program included wage supplements, child-care vouchers, health care subsidies, and a community service job if needed. To receive New Hope supports, adults had to be working full-time, that is, 30 hours a week or more. Over 1,300 adults in two zip codes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were

recruited for a study of the impact of work and family supports for working poor families. Half were randomly selected as eligible for New Hope program supports; the control families, as well as New Hope families, were eligible for other available public and private programs. A survey, child assessments, teacher reports, and administrative records were also used in the mixed method design (Bos et al., 1999; Huston et al., 2001, 2003, 2005).

We randomly sampled a total of 44 families from the treatment and control groups and conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study, including the EFI. The EFI focused on how families organized their daily routine in the face of low incomes, often poor and unsafe neighborhood circumstances, limited community services, jobs that were often episodic and poorly paid with few or no benefits, and other difficult work and family circumstances in their lives. How parents learned about and used the New Hope program depended in part on their family sustainability and their prior beliefs and expectations regarding support programs (Gibson & Weisner, 2002). How parents used the child-care vouchers also depended on their beliefs and values about appropriate care, and how such formal care fit into their daily routines (Lowe & Weisner, 2004).

About 15% of families had multiple (more than two) barriers to employment, such as physical or mental health concerns, not having a high school degree, prior incarceration, several young children, drug or alcohol problems, little prior work experience, or very low and sporadic income. Although selected for the New Hope program, they were seldom able to engage with program services. Others led quite difficult, often chaotic lives, and so struggled to retain long enough work hours to sustain use of New Hope supports. Those with fewer barriers to work (one or perhaps two) were the most likely to use New Hope services, work longer periods, and show gains in income. Repetti and Wang (see chap. 12) reviewed the many ways that work issues can influence family well-being, stress, and chaos (parent-child conflict, unpredictable schedules, disrupted family routines, marital tension). Chaotic environments kept some of these economically poor families from benefiting from New Hope supports by preventing regular work. New Hope supports kept other families out of chaotic situations.

Interventions, no matter how well designed and implemented, will not have an impact unless a place can be found for them in the daily routines of the individuals, families, social settings, or organizations they are intended to change. In chaotic family circumstances with few meaningful routines, even the best-designed interventions are less likely to work; it is necessary to first reduce family chaos. The mixed method integration of the EFI into developmental, economic, work, and intervention outcome evidence led to important findings about how the interventions fit into the daily routines and goals of families. Contextually informed interventions will not only benefit efforts to improve chaotic circumstances for families and children but will do so in a way that fully recognizes the plurality of developmental beliefs, goals, and practices in the United States and around the world. Some of the families eligible for New Hope benefits indeed reduced chaotic circumstances and improved family and child well-being by using the New Hope supports. If researchers, practitioners, and parents themselves intend to use strong research evidence to change chaotic circumstances, or simply to support families and children and thereby increase

their well-being, they all will benefit from evidence on the cultural learning environments and daily routines of those families and children.

## Summary

Living in chaotic families and neighborhoods can thwart even the best efforts of parents and children to achieve some level of well-being in life. I have emphasized the importance of well-being for children, parents, families, and communities because it is a contextual, holistic outcome that I think can be widely applied across cultures. In addition to the specific indicators of chaos, and structural conditions associated with it, it is also useful to think about the life projects and goals—pluralistic and varied as they can be around the world—that matter deeply, and that are difficult or impossible to sustain in chaotic circumstances. The contrast to chaos is not the absence of negative conditions but rather something very positive: the well-being that comes from an active, meaningful, sustainable routine of everyday life for ourselves and others we care about.

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