

Letters to the Editor

Harold Widdison's Book Review of *Children of the New Millennium*

To the Editor:

The Summer 2001 issue of this Journal carried two reviews of my book, *Children of the New Millennium* (Atwater, 1999). The first was by Thomas Angerpointner, a specialist in children's surgery in Germany (Angerpointner, 2001); and the other was by Harold Widdison, a professor of sociology at Northern Arizona University (Widdison, 2001). The former was supportive, perhaps excessively so, while the second was highly critical, raising questions that need answers.

I welcome what is now happening in the field of near-death studies. None of the researchers in our field, including myself, has been as unbiased with his or her work as claimed or believed. And I have been outspoken about this for years, in talks I have given, in articles, and in books (Atwater and Morgan, 2000, Chapters 1 and 23), describing the problems and challenges most of us have had to face to one degree or another, and where I believe we have succeeded in our stated goals and where we have fallen short.

There is no question in my mind that the majority in our research community have done their best and have contributed mightily to an ever-growing body of research findings that speak not only to the phenomenon of near-death but to the field of consciousness studies itself—and far too often at great personal cost. As the call to revise and reconsider previous work heightens, it is only fair and proper that I take my turn as the subject of rigorous criticism. I have wanted to set the record straight about the book *Children of the New Millennium* and about my research of child experiencers for some time. Thanks to Widdison, I now have that opportunity.

Entertainment Versus Education in the Publishing Industry

With the incredible success of Betty Eadie's first book (Eadie and Curtis, 1992) and that of Dannion Brinkley (Brinkley and Perry, 1994),

the publishing industry discovered that a lot of money could be made from books by near-death experiencers who were not shy about dramatizing their stories. But the large publishing houses were not interested in books about near-death research unless the manuscript was short, snappy, and provocative. Several turned to “package” agents who could provide professional co-authors for the polish necessary to gain entrée to better contracts and wider appeal, a move that enabled them to triumph in a less-than-friendly marketplace.

This situation has accelerated over the years. Imagine then my great joy when a major publishing house expressed interest in my study of child experiencers of near-death states. The manuscript, titled *Second Birth*, was delivered on time and as promised in 1997. Marketing departments, not editors, by then determined a publisher’s interest; and it was the marketing department, in a sudden change of strategy, that demanded that my book be rewritten as a sales pitch for the new millennium—and either I cooperate or my contract would be canceled. I found out that because of a technicality in my contract that both my agent and I had missed, the house could do what they said, even sue me for the return of my advance if I refused. Their orders were specific: chapters and length of chapters to be cut almost in half, only declarative statements could be used (no qualifying terms like “implies” or “suggests”), and quotes from parents were out. I also had to weave into the text material about evolution and the “new children.” Actually, the latter was not that difficult, as I already had explored the topic in the theoretical model I am building (*Phase II Brain shift/spirit shift: A theoretical model using research on near-death states to explore the transformation of consciousness*; available through my website at www.cinemind.com/atwater).

Widdison’s complaints about the declarative language I used in the book, my over-emphasis on evolutionary aspects, missing material that should have been included, and the overall tone to *Children of the New Millennium* are astute observations and absolutely correct. In consideration of what happened with the book, I comfort myself in the amount of material I was able to save, a range of cases and observations that deserve a closer look from the medical and psychoanalytical community.

A Question of Protocol

I have never at any time called myself a scientist or presented myself as a scientist. Widdison is well-trained as a statistical analyst, even teaching the science at the university level. I bow to his expertise, for

I have no such training. Granted, someone like Widdison could set up measurement studies and use the proper instrumentation that would produce a more scientific comparison of what can be found with near-death experiencers versus what shows up in the general population. Conclusions drawn from this effort appear to be solid; further testing by other researchers using the same method and finding the same results seems to establish validity. Thus, the use of control groups and statistical analysis is the preferred style of study—except with consciousness. Research in this area has, for the most part, failed to encompass the full import of what was to be examined, and I suspect that that is because the scientific method is not designed to address an unknown range of variables. Only a multidisciplinary approach can reveal truly what the near-death phenomenon might tell us. How can we hold to protocols that overlook or miss observations that later prove to be important? Does not our search cover whatever we find, no matter how insignificant that may seem at the time? Is not our goal in near-death research to view the phenomenon from 360 degrees? Must there be only certain ways this has to happen?

The Determinants of Value

Never have I based any of my studies on a questionnaire, for the simple reason that I do not trust questionnaires. No matter how clever the researcher is or how tested the questions are, the language still leads. Yes, questionnaires can be helpful in testing memory and in determining range and content of involvement in the subject matter being investigated. And, yes, there are provisions in the methodology to account for those who lie or exaggerate. Yet none of this puts me at ease. Hence, I remain a fieldworker who holds one-on-one sessions, specializing in open-ended questions and observation of nonverbal cues and body language. I am very subtle in the way I work, seldom announcing myself or my intent so that I can be received as a curious and friendly person who simply listens. There was a time when I labeled myself as a researcher, made appointments, and held sessions. It did not take me long to realize that by doing this I automatically set up barriers that created an atmosphere whereby the experiencer would try either to impress or to test me. The more nondescript I became, the more at ease the individual felt. The more sincerity I projected nonverbally, the greater the flood was of information that poured forth. I did my best to keep to a style and technique anyone else could utilize, so my work could be replicated. I put my own experiences, what I learned from them and

how my life was affected by them, on a “shelf” in the back of my mind so I could be fully present, objective, and clear.

The research in *Children of the New Millennium* is based on my study of 277 child experiencers, *not* the questionnaire. I created the questionnaire for use with people I had already researched as a way to cross-check and challenge what they had previously told me. (I also sent it to experiencers I had not met just to see how they would handle the task of filling it out.) Many of the questions are indeed leading, and if taken out of context from the instrument itself, will appear to be rather foolish. The numerous sections in the questionnaire were designed to enfold on each other, constantly bringing the individual back to that moment of his or her near-death episode, pushing, probing, digging deeper. It is not the questions themselves that set the questionnaire apart, but, rather, the design itself and how it affects the one filling it out. Some said their initial response to the instrument was anger, but once they completed it they found themselves rethinking what had happened to them and the extent to which their lives had changed. For most individuals, my questionnaire took days if not weeks to fill out. I declared the percentages gleaned from the questionnaire *only* because they matched so nearly what I had found in the larger group—and I said so in the book. I also admitted the one deviation I had found and that concerned those child experiencers once grown who were employed in the fields of mathematics, science, or history. In the larger group it was 40 percent, but from the questionnaire it was only 25 percent. All other aspects were compatible between the two groups, and because of this I felt it would be proper to list the questionnaire percentages as I did. The book, then, is a true study of 277 individuals, not just of the 44 child experiencers of near-death states who filled out the questionnaire. Although I stated this in the book, it was explained more clearly explained in the original version, before that explanation was removed in final editing.

With adults and teenagers it is easier to check on the aftereffects, as before-and-after comparisons can be made. This cannot be done with very young children, especially infants and newborns. What I did to compensate for this was hold sessions with parents and relatives whenever possible, usually mothers and aunts. It was the families who verified how different their children were, how they seemed somehow not to fit into the family unit as did the other siblings. Nor did the children match genetic patterning going back several generations. This both puzzled and concerned the families I spoke with. In only a few cases could I link the unusual jumps I found regarding intelligence and abstractions with traits already present in the family.

Nothing would have come from my observations of child experiencers had it not been for a guest appearance I shared with Melvin Morse on a television program in 1994. Several children from Morse's study gave their own unique version of what they had experienced. He left immediately afterwards, leaving me with the children and their mothers. What I heard from both groups was complaint after complaint about what life was like now, in contrast to much of what Morse had claimed in front of the cameras. I asked them if they knew anything about the pattern of aftereffects typical to these experiences. They did not.

I had noticed since my beginnings as a researcher in 1978 that children differed markedly from adults in processing and integrating their near-death episodes. My hesitation in pursuing this centered around my lack of medical training and my inability to conduct the clinical tests I thought would be necessary. I finally tackled the project, an in-depth study of child experiencers of near-death states, thinking that whatever I found would inspire researchers with credentials to cross-check my findings. The real determinant of value, in this case, was the faith it took me to do the job.

Judgment Call

Throughout the years I have spent researching near-death experiences, my strongest supporters have been the experiencers themselves. Widdison was quite right in writing that I do not follow the protocol others do and that therefore it is difficult to measure or judge my work. But I question his reasoning that my books, and especially *Children of the New Millennium*, must be regarded as hardly more than collections of mere anecdotes. What do we gain if our perfected research instruments describe the ins and outs of a phenomenon when a fuller and more detailed picture can be obtained by widening the lens of the microscope we use? Do I toss my findings because I cannot prove them the way others do? What about the experiencers themselves who testify as to worth?

Take a look at some of the things I discovered: half of my research base could remember their birth; a third had prebirth memory and for most of them that memory began at about seven months *in utero*, around the same time medical science tells us that the fetus can feel pain; males and females had equal jumps in spatial ability and intelligence; the majority of those with the greatest enhancement in mathematical ability also experienced an equal enhancement in musical prowess, as

if the regions for music and math in the brain, which are located next to each other, were accelerated together as a single unit; the younger the child when the experience occurred, the more apt he or she was to abstract early and score in the range of genius when old enough to take an intelligence test. What are we to make of these observations? Shall we ignore them?

Linda Silverman, a psychologist who has specialized in giftedness and genius in children, told me in a telephone conversation that about 80 percent of the children she had studied who had IQ scores greater than 160 had experienced serious birth trauma and had gone on to exhibit all of the aftereffects I had described as typical for child experiencers of near-death states—as if they, too, had had such an episode. Because of my discovery that children are six times as likely as adults to repress their episode, I find it reasonable that the pattern of aftereffects that can occur after a close brush with death or the cessation of vital signs can be used as an indicator to suggest that the child may possibly have had a near-death experience.

And in connection with the statements I made about evolution and the Millennial Generation, I quote from a personal communication from Silverman: “Even more remarkable, in the last month, I’ve come across children who are so far evolved beyond anything I’ve seen in my 4-decade career in this field that neither heredity nor environment can explain their advancement, their wisdom, their sense of mission, their adult minds, or their moral development. The only explanation is evolution. They must be what I am calling ‘Evolutionary Outliers’” (L. Silverman, e-mail communication, March 12, 2000).

Where did the experiencers come from in the various studies I have conducted? The vast majority I met through pure happenstance. It mattered not where I was or what I was doing, nine chances out of ten the people nearby would turn out to be experiencers just waiting for someone to whom to tell their story. The experiencers I connected with in this manner were average Americans for the most part; a number were foreign born. They did not know me and I did not know them. Whenever possible I also spoke with their families, friends, and healthcare providers. To augment this, I sent notices to various “New Age,” healthcare, and educational magazines and newsletters to announce my project and my desire to find more experiencers. Other experiencers were present in audiences when I spoke of my own experiences. Once, just as an experiment, I went door-to-door in a residential area asking if anyone in the household had had a near-death experience.

More than 70 percent of the medical practices used today came from observers who questioned, examined, probed, and listened, without benefit of scientific or statistical models. The end results have served the profession well and proved helpful.

Truth at Risk

Widdison objected to a particular notation that appeared on the back of my book. I never wrote those words and was frankly quite embarrassed by the manner my publisher chose to advertise the book. The same thing happened to Widdison himself when Craig Lundahl and he published *The Eternal Journey* (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997). I thought that book contained blatant errors and offered little of consequence to the field; but as it turned out, most of the errors I had objected so strongly to were actually hype created by his publisher to ensure sales.

During the first decade of my work, I was unable to understand or appreciate the criticism I received. I learned, however, that such negatives could be positives if I used them to improve what I was doing. That is why I am not upset with Widdison's critique, and that is why I encourage other researchers to speak up as well. None of us should feel pressured to support what we disagree with; but neither should any of us be on the attack, put down, or threaten lawsuits just to assuage hurt egos.

The stack grows of "authoritative" tomes that are little more than trash, and some mediocre studies are praised beyond their worth. Differing viewpoints must always be encouraged, of course, but so must the honest assessments of knowledgeable parties. At times, even the best in our field have made statements that later proved to be an exaggeration or misleading; while sometimes it is the media who twist things around and in the name of sensationalism fashion tall tales. An example was Raymond Moody's bestselling *Life After Life* (1975). The list he gave in that book of elements commonly present in near-death experiences he never meant to become a model that identified the phenomenon itself, nor did he have any idea that his conclusions would be considered scientific evidence of life after death. He set the record straight in his latest book, *The Last Laugh* (Moody, 1999).

A few years ago, Bruce Greyson, frustrated with the lack of clarity and precision in defining near-death experiences, surveyed a number of researchers regarding a brief, concrete set of criteria that could be used to identify such experiences. Not too long ago I asked him how things

turned out. He replied that there was astonishingly little agreement between any two researchers' lists of features that might define a near-death experience. So here we are, in the year 2002, and we have yet to produce a reliable set of criteria to define the phenomenon. Moody's conjectures in 1975 are still conjecture. Yet the public believes that what was originally described in *Life After Life* is gospel, and that belief has been "verified" by so many researchers that a cultural myth of international proportions has emerged.

A few researchers have now turned to the internet to obtain cases. I have become quite leery of this, since one of the cases I described in *Beyond the Light* (Atwater, 1994) appeared almost word for word under a different name in a recent book by Kenneth Ring and Sharon Cooper (1999). Jeffrey Long and Tricia McGill had interviewed a woman who had contacted them through the internet website of their Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (www.nderf.org), and they had recommended the case to Ring as a remarkable one. When the woman was confronted with the similarity of her case to the one published previously in my book, she confessed to the fraud, leaving Ring and Cooper to offer embarrassed apologies.

Internet aside, I have encountered such a large number of people like this woman in the last five years, along with numerous experiencers interested more in protecting the copyright to their stories than participating in research, that I could not duplicate today what I have previously accomplished. Widdison disagreed with me about that, but I stand by that statement.

Conclusion

One of several determinants I used for assessing the possibility that an individual could have been in a state conducive to a near-death experience was the cessation of vital signs for a minute or more. I did not often check that with attending physicians because most had neither the time nor the interest to respond. The bulk of information I obtained came from relatives, nurses, and counselors, although on occasion I was able to view x-rays and read medical reports. I made no special notation of those who were without vital signs for an hour or more, because I found so many of them that I did not consider the event extraordinary.

But when Greyson was fact-checking a recent article I had written for a regional magazine (Atwater, 2001), he questioned my observation that

many experiencers had been without vital signs for more than an hour, and he challenged me to produce details. Because only a few names came to mind, I withdrew the statement. But the incident bothered me. I felt as if by backing away from the confrontation I had allowed a falsehood to be created. I had encountered exactly what I had claimed, yet my inability to prove this was frustrating. What I learned in reviewing my research shocked me: I have a bias that I never before realized that I had—and it is a big one.

Like the vast majority of other near-death experiencers, I no longer fear death. In my case, death no longer impresses me as anything other than a shift in perception. I am incapable of appreciating death's so-called finality. Because of this I treated individuals who were without vital signs for five minutes as equal in every way to those who revived in the morgue after being pronounced clinically dead one to two hours before. My focus centered instead on what was experienced and any aftereffects that might have resulted versus how this could compare with the individual's previous behavior. I made no attempt to record the identity of anyone "dead" for lengthy periods of time. This is why I have consistently made little fuss about miraculous survivals. How critical this bias of mine will prove to be in future evaluations of my research will be for others to decide. No matter how careful we are as researchers, we all make mistakes, and this one is mine.

The current climate in the publishing industry with the rise of media conglomerates is inimical to educating the public about valuable research findings. Furthermore, what is published in peer-reviewed journals seldom trickles over to media channels. Perhaps it is the flood of information with the advent of our technological age that causes this, or maybe the greed of new media barons lies at the heart of the problem. But I have noticed that with researchers the main guarantor of attention (and book sales) is what I call the "gee whiz" factor of having been personally transformed by the sheer magnitude of what was encountered during studies of near-death experiencers. To what degree does this factor bias conclusions? Is the bias I recognized of late in myself any different? And to what extent can we really cleanse our own field and judge each other?

Last year, while standing in prayer in the Basilica of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, my third near-death experience unexpectedly re-occurred. And I have no descriptive words to offer for what I encountered except to say that I was overwhelmed. Technically, the episode would be classified as a near-death-*like* experience, because I was in perfect health and not threatened. Of my three near-death experiences, the

third one haunted me the most and was the most traumatic in the sense that it stretched me beyond anything I could accommodate to as reality. And it is where “The Voice Like None Other” spoke, outlining the research I would later do. During this return episode the hard-driving, compulsively disciplined energy I was originally given was withdrawn. The energy that replaced it was softer, peaceful. It is almost as if one phase of the life I gained in dying has been completed and another begun.

I know that, by admitting this, my objectivity and my involvement in the field of near-death studies will forever remain suspect. Perhaps that is just as well. The peace that now fills me leaves no room for the approval I once thought I needed.

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Harold Widdison Responds

To the Editor:

When I wrote my review of *Children of the New Millennium* (Atwater, 1999), which appeared in the summer issue of this journal (Widdison, 2001), my intent was to examine the methodology used to collect the materials cited in the book. P. M. H. Atwater had claimed (1999, p. 8) that this methodology raised her book from a collection of anecdotal cases to one of empirical substance. In my review, I pointed out not only that she misused statistical analysis but that her methodology was inadequate and faulty. But somehow Atwater projected my critique of the methodology used in this book to all her other books and research. This I did not do—and I clearly stated so in the first paragraph of my review. My review was not intended to invalidate the conclusions she drew, but to assess the methodology she used. If the methodology were sound, then the next step would be to evaluate her conclusions. If it were inadequate or faulty, then the data she used would not support any conclusions made.

Her response seems less directed toward my review than to a review of her ideology and beliefs concerning children and the impact on them of a near-death experience. Atwater claims to be one of the first researchers of the near-death experience (NDE). But it is not exactly clear what she means by *researcher*. She seems to think the model of “scientific research” is tied to a specific research strategy, specifically that of utilizing a control group to compare with an experimental group. I agree that this type of research does not lend itself well to certain research areas, including NDEs. However, there are two major categories of research: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is usually associated with the collection of cases in which information about the respondents is collected, counted, classified, and analyzed. Tools used to collect this type of data include, but are not limited to, controlled experiments, questionnaires, and interview schedules. Qualitative research is designed to identify and understand various activities as viewed by those that are or have engaged in them. Most research done on NDEs, including that of Atwater, has utilized qualitative research. Which technique is the most efficient and effective depends on what the researcher is trying to accomplish.

In order to advance understanding of a specific phenomena, researchers need to specify what they did and why. In this way, subsequent researchers can build on what has already been done. This makes it

possible for other researchers to identify inadequacies or mistakes, make corrections, and add to the growing body of information. It also helps readers to understand the basis for statements made and the populations to which they apply. Just because someone claiming to be a researcher states that something is the case, that does not make it so. The basis for the statement must be identified and justified. Citing other people who hold the same views does not legitimize one's statements, unless their ideas are grounded in research—which should then be noted.

Now let me address specific observations Atwater made:

1. She claims that the definitive tone of her book was mandated by her publisher. This might have been believable if it were not for the fact that Atwater has always written with definitive statements and spoken the same way when she presents at conferences. Listening to the tapes of her conference presentations, many of which are recorded and made available by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), will quickly verify this fact.
2. Atwater writes that “the scientific method is not designed to address an unknown range of variables.” This is not true. Correctly designed research projects do precisely this, through techniques such as random sampling and statistical confounding techniques.
3. She further states that “Never have I based any of my studies on a questionnaire.” This also is not true. Wherever statistics were mentioned in the book, she reported that they were taken from the questionnaire. Her questionnaire data were used as primary evidence to support her conclusions, not as ancillary support. In this regard, she writes that “The research in *Children of the New Millennium* is based on my study of 277 child experiencers, *not* the questionnaire.” But that is not the way they were presented in the book, despite her disclaimers: see, for example, pages 68–69 and especially pages 105–107.
4. Atwater writes that “It was the families who verified how different their children were,” yet this information was not presented in the book. If it were true that her publisher eliminated this type of information, it was not a total elimination, as there were a number of cases where Atwater cited parents. It would seem that if this type of information existed, any responsible editor or publisher would insist that it be included, not deleted. But given the fact that the majority of the children in the sample of 44 were less

than 5 years old when they had their NDEs, it seems doubtful that even parents would be able to address many items in the questionnaire completely and accurately.

5. Atwater makes the observation that she was hesitant in pursuing an understanding of differences in children's processing and integrating their NDEs because of her lack of medical training. However, one need not be a physician to assess this. Was she assuming that these differences could only be studied as if there were some biological change in their brains after an NDE?
6. Statements such as "the younger the child when the experience occurred, the more apt he or she was to abstract early and score in the range of genius when old enough to take an intelligence test." What was the basis for this observation? I could find no data in her book that even suggested this. Statements such as this need documentation. Also, is there any evidence that the phenomena she is studying are not going on in the general population and are only becoming evident in the NDE population?
7. Throughout the book and in her reply, Atwater used numbers such as "six times," "more than 70 percent," "50 percent," "33 percent," and so on. Nowhere in her book did she show the numbers on which she based these figures. She did state that they came from the sample of 277, but I am sure that not every case was represented in all the percentages she reported. She needs to show the actual numbers making up the percentages and how she collected the data from which they were derived. For example, were the numbers drawn from her sample of 44 (which was the sample identified wherever numbers were listed), or from the 63 individuals I counted, or from the larger sample of 277? It could also be that the individuals that comprised the 277 child experiencers were systematically different from all children who have had such an experience. If that is the case, then one cannot generalize from them to all NDErs. Nowhere in Atwater's book could I find any demographic breakdown of any of her three samples, such as religious background of the child's parents, residence, social class, race, or ethnicity.

Also, does she have any evidence that the children who have had NDEs are any different from those who have not? Just saying that differences exist is not evidence. On page 207 of her book, she quoted William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991) concerning the emergence of a new generation that is different in significant ways from all prior generations. Without questioning how they came up

with this conclusion, if true, there is still no evidence that NDEs are doing more than just identifying a few individuals who are part of this grand evolution. If changes are occurring, we need to know what the children were like both before and after the experience to determine if any change occurred. Then, if differences are discovered, researchers must be able to show that they were *because of* having an NDE and not something else.

8. Atwater makes the statement that “the public believes that what was originally described in *Life after Life* is gospel,” referring to Raymond Moody’s book (1975). This reflects a myopic view of what the public knows about NDEs. It is my experience, from teaching courses on death, grief, and bereavement for more than 20 years, that most individuals have never heard of Moody and are certainly not aware that NDEs are supposed to have stages. Many people do not even know what an NDE is. With all the media exposure over the years, I too, felt that everyone had to be aware of the phenomenon. But in surveying my classes, I discovered I was wrong. An increasing number may be aware of NDEs, but definitely not the majority.

In conclusion, Atwater’s account of her confrontation with Bruce Greyson, when he insisted that she document a point she had made, was important. We should not make definitive statements without being able to support them. We should take the time to record specific cases, observations, and situations to see what they are telling us. Documentation helps us to recognize when our theories need to be modified, expanded, or segments deleted. If we do not constantly keep reading, interviewing, and documenting, we run the risk of projecting blatant errors as fact. It is the researchers’ responsibility to keep an open mind, to avoid premature closure, to assure themselves that what they report is actually what is going on. It is very easy to get excited about what preliminary research reveals and to report it as fact, when, once all the data are in, we discover that a very different picture emerges. We need to keep very detailed case notes recording what we learned about specific ideas, how we came up with specific conclusions, and which tools we used to analyze the data. In this manner, we can backtrack and check out how we got to where we are, locate omissions and errors, and make it possible for others to check the validity of our observations and conclusions. If we are to approach near-death phenomena from the 360 degree perspective—a term Atwater is fond of using—it is imperative that we document what we have done or are doing.

Atwater concludes her response by posing a lament relating to the propensity of researchers to criticize one another: “to what extent can we really cleanse our own field and judge each other?” Judging each other is not a weakness of any field but a sign of growing maturity. We *should* question each other’s research. Then, if we find weaknesses, we can correct them and do more research. So brick by brick correctly placed, we create a theoretical model that fits and helps to understand near-death phenomena. But this is only possible if we let others know where we got our data, how we analyzed them, and how we came up with our conclusions. Constructive criticism is not the mark of weakness and discord, but an opportunity to have others check our work and help us fill in chinks that may exist in our theoretical model.

Because Atwater did not document the fact that millennial children were a product of having NDEs, the contributions of this book to an understanding of near-death phenomena are suggested relationships, hypotheses yet to be tested, and a set of new and interesting cases.

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