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Carl Ransom Rogers

"This is Me: Some Significant Learnings"

Portland State University

July 3, 1970

PSU Library Special Collections and University Archives

Oregon Public Speakers Collection

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Transcribed by Ruby Bontrager, July 12 - July 21, 2020

Audited by Carolee Harrison, September 2020

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CARL RANSOM ROGERS: [recording begins mid-sentence] ...I realize I can't, but certainly the other question that goes along with it is: what can I possibly say to an enormous group like this? Some people relish an opportunity to talk at students. I don't like to talk *at* anyone. Some people like to spout their latest ideas to a student audience. I feel that probably only a small fraction would be interested in my latest ideas. Some speakers love the opportunity to exhort students; to sort of set them right. Well, I've developed some kind of an... oriental, philosophical streak in me, such that I seem to lack this desire to set people straight.

So what to do? The only thing I could think of to do is to try to share something of me. Something of what it's like—has been like—to live in my skin. My somewhat aging skin, perhaps. If I can do that, then I think you can take what I say or you can leave it alone. You can reverberate it to thinking, "That's just what I've felt." Or, equally valuably, "I feel entirely differently. My experience has taught me a different lesson." In either case, perhaps, it can help you to define yourself more clearly, more openly. That I do regard as something worthwhile, and something I do hope I can facilitate. So I'm going to share with you a somewhat miscellaneous bag of learnings; things I have learned or am learning about this mysterious business of communication between human beings. I'd like to share about some of the satisfactions I've felt, and some of the dissatisfactions. The reason I call it mysterious is that interpersonal communication is almost never achieved, except in part; yet we find it so valuable

and precious when even to some degree, we've been able truly to communicate ourselves to another.

So the first simple learning I want to share with you is my enjoyment and satisfaction when I can really hear someone. I think this has been a long-standing characteristic of mine, because I can remember back in earliest grammar school days when a pupil would ask the teacher a question, and the teacher would give a perfectly good answer to an entirely different question. [laughter] And the feeling of pain and distress would always strike me. My reaction was, "But you didn't hear him, you didn't listen, you didn't hear him!" I felt a sort of childish despair at the lack of communication which was and which is so common.

I believe I know why it's satisfying for me to hear someone. When I can really hear someone, it puts me in touch with him. It enriches my life. It's also true that through hearing people, that I've learned all that I know about individuals, about personality, about interpersonal relationships, about psychotherapy. There's another peculiar satisfaction in it, and I don't know whether I can communicate this. When I really hear someone, it's like listening to the music of the spheres, because beyond the immediate message of the person, no matter what that might be, there is the universal, the general. In a recent interview, a young woman was telling of her relationship with her father, and how badly she felt about it. Her father had never been able really to hear her or accept her for what she was. She said, "You know, when I talk about it, it feels more flip. But if I just sit still a minute, it feels like a great big hurt down there. I feel cheated." And the tears welled up. Now I heard that message from her as an individual, but I also sensed—I can't put it very clearly into words—I sensed some universal truth that she was expressing. That we so often talk our problems goodly, but if we let ourselves experience them quietly, then we would really feel the hurt and the pain and the suffering. So hidden in all the personal communications, which I really hear, there seem to be orderly psychological laws. Aspects of the awesome order in which we find our universe as a whole. So there's both the satisfaction of hearing this particular person, and also the satisfaction of feeling oneself in some sort of touch with what is universally true.

Now when I say that I enjoy hearing someone, I mean of course hearing deeply. I mean that I hear the words, the thoughts, the feeling tones, the personal meaning, even the meaning that is below the conscious intent of the speaker. Sometimes, too, in a message which is superficially not very important, I hear a deep, human cry—or as someone has called it, a silent scream—that lies buried and unknown, far below the surface of a person. So I'm learning to ask myself, "Can I hear the sounds and sense the shape of this other person's inner world? Can I resonate to what he's saying so deeply that I sense the meanings he's afraid of, yet would like to communicate as well as those meanings he knows?" I think, for example, of an interview I had

with an adolescent boy, the recording of which I listened to just a short time ago. Like many an adolescent today, he was saying at the outset of the interview that he had no goals. When I questioned him on this, he made it even stronger that he had no goals whatsoever, not even one. I said, "There isn't anything you want to do?" Nothing. "...Well, yeah, I wanna keep on living." I remember very distinctly my feeling at that moment. I resonated very deeply to this phrase. He might simply be telling me, like everyone else, he wanted to live. On the other hand he might be telling me—this seemed to be a distinct possibility—that at some point the question of whether or not to live had been a real issue with him. So I tried to resonate to him at all levels. I didn't know for certain what the message was; I simply wanted to be open to any of the meanings that this statement might have, including the possible meaning that he might at one time have considered suicide. I didn't respond verbally at this level; that would have frightened him. But I think that my being willing and able to listen to him at all levels is perhaps one of the things that made it possible for him to tell me before the end of the interview that not long before, he had been on the point of blowing his brains out. This little episode constitutes an example of what I mean by wanting to really hear someone at all the levels at which he is endeavoring to communicate.

I find in therapeutic interviews and in the intensive group experiences—which have meant a great deal to me—that hearing has consequences. When I do truly hear a person and the meanings that are important to him at that moment, hearing not simply his words but hearing him, and when I let him know that I have heard his own private, personal meanings, many things happen. There's first of all a grateful look. He feels released. He wants to tell me more about his world. He surges forth in a new sense of freedom. He becomes more open to the process of change. I've often noticed, both in therapy and in groups, that the more deeply I can hear the meanings of this person, the more there is that happens. One thing I've come to look upon as almost universal, is that when a person realizes he has been deeply heard, there's a moistness in his eyes. I think in some real sense he's weeping for joy. It's as though he were saying, "Thank god somebody heard me. Somebody knows what it's like to be me." In such moments, I've had the fantasy of a prisoner in a dungeon, tapping out day after day a Morse code message: Does anybody hear me? Is there anybody there? Can anyone hear me? And finally one day he hears some faint tappings which spell out "Yes." By that one simple response, he is released from his loneliness; he's become a human being again. There are many, many people living in private dungeons today. People give no evidence of it whatever on the outside, or you have to listen very sharply to hear faint messages from the dungeon.

If this seems to you a little too sentimental or overdrawn, I'd like to share with you an experience I had just recently in a basic encounter group with fifteen persons; each of them in important executive posts. Early in the very intensive sessions in the week, they were asked to

write a statement of some feeling or feelings which they had which they were not willing to tell the group. These were anonymous statements. One man wrote, "I don't relate easily to people. I have an almost impenetrable facade. Nothing gets in to hurt me, but nothing gets out. I have repressed so many feelings and emotions, that I am close to emotional sterility. This situation doesn't make me happy, but I don't know what to do about it." Well, I think this is clearly a message from a dungeon. Later in the week, a member of my group had identified himself as the man who had written that anonymous message, and filled out in much greater detail his feelings of isolation, of complete coldness. He felt that life had been so brutal to him that he had been forced to live a life without feeling—not only at work, but in social groups, and saddest of all, with his family. His gradual achievement of greater expressiveness in the group, of less fear of being hurt, of more willingness to share himself with others, was a very rewarding experience for all of us who participated.

I was both amused and pleased, and in a letter a few weeks later, he included this paragraph. He said: "When I returned from our group, I felt somewhat like a young girl who'd been seduced, but still wound up with the feeling that it was exactly what she'd been waiting for and needed." [laughter] He said, "I'm still not quite sure who was responsible for the seduction. You or the group, or whether it was a joint venture. I suspect it was the latter. At any rate, I want to thank you for what was an intensely meaningful experience." I think it's not too much to say that because several of us in the group were able genuinely to hear him, he was released from his dungeon, and he has come out at least to some degree into the sunnier world of warm, interpersonal relationships.

Let me move on to a second learning that I'd like to share with you. I like to *be* heard. A number of times in my life I have felt myself bursting with insoluble problems or going round and round in tormented circles. Or during one period, quite overcome by feelings of worthlessness and despair, I was sure I was going over the edge into a psychosis. I think I've been more fortunate than most in finding at these times individuals who have been able to hear me, and thus to rescue me from the chaos of my own feelings. I've been able to find individuals... who could hear my meanings a little more deeply than I have known. These individuals have heard me without judging me, diagnosing me, appraising me, evaluating me. They've just listened and clarified, and responded to me at all the levels at which I was communicating. I can testify that when you're in psychological distress and someone really hears you without passing judgement on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good.

At these times it has relaxed the tension in me. It has permitted me to bring out the frightening feelings; the guilt, the despair, the confusions that have been a part of my experience. When I

have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It's amazing that feelings which were completely awful become bearable when someone listens. It's astonishing how elements which seem insoluble become soluble when someone hears. How confusions which seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is understood. I have deeply appreciated the times that I have experienced this sensitive, empathic, concentrated listening.

I dislike it in myself when I can't hear another, when I don't understand him. If it's only a simple failure of comprehension or a failure to focus my attention on what he's saying, or a difficulty in understanding his words, then I feel only a very mild dissatisfaction with myself. But what I really dislike in myself is when I can't hear the other person because I'm so sure in advance of what he's about to say that I don't listen. It's only afterwards that I realize I've only heard what I've already decided he's saying. I've failed, really, to listen. Or even worse are those times when I can't hear because what he is saying is too threatening; it might even make me change my views or my behavior. And still worse are those times where I catch myself trying to twist his message to make it say what I want him to say, and then only hearing that. This can be a very subtle thing, and it's surprising how skillful I can be in doing it. Just by twisting his words a small amount, by distorting his meaning just a little, I can make it appear that he's not only saying the things that I want to hear, but that he's the person I want him to be. It's only when I realize through his protest as through my own gradual recognition that I'm suddenly manipulating him that I become disgusted with myself. I know too from being on the receiving end of this how frustrating it is to be received for what you're not; to be heard as saying something that you have not said and do not mean; this creates anger and bafflement and disillusion.

This last statement indeed leads into the next learning I wanted to share with you that I'm terribly frustrated and shut into myself when I try to express a thing which is deeply *me*, which is a part of my own private inner world, and the other person doesn't understand. When I take the gamble—the risk—of trying to share something that's very personal with another individual, and it's not received and not understood, this is a very deflating and a very lonely experience. I've come to believe that it's that experience which makes some individuals psychotic. They've given up hoping that anyone can understand them. And once they've lost that hope, then their own inner world—which becomes more and more bizarre—is the only place where they can live. They can no longer live in any shared human experience. I can sympathize with them because I know when I try to share some feeling-aspect of myself which is private, precious, and tentative, and when this communication is met by evaluation, by reassurance, by distortion of my meaning, I have very strongly the reaction, "Oh, what's the use?" At such a time, one knows what it is to be alone.

So as you can readily see from what I've said thus far, a creative, active, sensitive, accurate, empathic, non-judgemental listening is for me, terribly important in a relationship. It's important for me to provide it. It has been extremely important especially at certain times in my life to receive it. I feel that I have grown within myself when I have provided it. I'm very sure that I've grown and I have been released and enhanced when I have received this kind of listening.

Let me move onto another area of my learnings. I find it very satisfying when I can be real. When I can be close to whatever it is that's going on within me. I like it when I can listen to myself. To really know what I'm experiencing in the moment is by no means an easy thing, but I feel somewhat encouraged because I think that over the years, I have been improving at it. I'm convinced however that it's a lifelong task, and none of us ever is really able to be comfortably close to all that is going on within our own experience. In place of the term "realness," I have sometimes used the word "congruence." By this I mean that when my experiencing of this moment is present in my awareness, and then when what is present in my awareness is present in my communication, then each of these three levels matches, or is congruent. At such moments I am integrated or whole; I'm completely in one piece. Most of the time of course, I like everyone else exhibit some degree of incongruence. I've learned however that realness or genuineness or congruence, whatever term you wish to give to it, is a fundamental basis for the best of communication, the best of relationships.

What do I mean by being close to what is going on in me? Let me try to explain what I mean as it sometimes occurs in my work as a therapist. Sometimes a feeling sort of rises up in me, which seems to have no particular relationship to what's going on. Yet I've learned to trust this. I've learned to accept this feeling in my awareness and try to communicate it to my client. For example, a graduate student is talking to me, and I suddenly see an image of him as a pleading little boy, folding his hands in supplication and saying, "Please give me this, please let me have this." I've learned that if I can be close to what is going on in me—can express this feeling in the relationship—it's very likely to strike some deep note in him and to advance our relationship.

Let me take another example. I think it's often very hard for me, as for other writers, to get close to myself when I start to write. It's so easy to be distracted by the possibility of saying things which will catch approval, or will look good to colleagues, or make a popular appeal. You must know what I mean because I'm sure sometimes you think, "What will look good to the instructor?" And the question I ask myself is, "How can I listen to the things that I really want to say and write?" It's difficult. Sometimes I even have to trick myself in order to get close to what is in me. I tell myself that I'm not writing for publication, just writing for my own satisfaction.

And because of my Puritan and frugal upbringing, I write on old scraps of paper, or backs of mimeograph materials so I don't even have to reproach myself for wasting paper. [laughter] I jot down a feeling or a thought on one piece of paper and then maybe a paragraph on another piece and so on. Just as they come, helter-skelter, with no attempt at coherence or organization. Sometimes in ways such as these I can get much closer to what I really am and feel and think. The writings which are produced on this kind of a basis turn out to be ones for which I never feel apologetic. And which often communicate deeply to others. So it's a very satisfying thing, and I sense that I have gotten close to me, to the feelings and hidden aspects of myself which lie below the surface.

I feel a sense of satisfaction when I dare to communicate the realness in me to another. This is far from easy, partly because what I'm experiencing keeps changing in every moment. Usually there's a lag; sometimes it's moments, sometimes it's days, weeks, or months between the experiencing and the communication. In these cases I experience something, I feel something, but only later do I become aware of it. Only later do I dare to communicate it, when it has become cool enough to risk sharing it with another. Yet it's a most satisfying experience when I can communicate what is real in me at the moment that it occurs. Then I feel genuine and spontaneous and alive. Such real feelings are not always positive. One man in a basic encounter group of which I was a member was talking about himself in ways which seemed to me completely false. Speaking of the pride he took in maintaining his front, his pretense, his facade, telling how skillful he was in deceiving others. My feeling of annoyance grew higher and higher until finally I expressed it by simply saying, "Oh, nuts!" ...Or possibly it was something stronger but I don't want to start a free speech [laughter] controversy. This somehow pricked the bubble. From that time on he was more real and genuine as a person, less braggadocio, and our communication improved. I felt good for having let him know my own real feeling as it was occurring.

It's a sparkling thing when I encounter realness in another person. Sometimes in the basic encounter groups—which have been a very important part of my experience these last few years—someone says something which comes from him transparently and whole. It's so obvious when a person is not hiding behind a facade but is speaking from deep within himself. When this happens, I leap to meet it. I want to encounter this real person. Sometimes the feelings thus expressed are very positive feelings, sometimes they're decidedly negative ones. I think of a man in a very responsible position: a scientist at the head of a larger search department in a huge electronics firm, very "successful." One day, in such a basic encounter group, he found the courage to speak of his isolation, to tell us that he's never had a single friend in his life. There are plenty of people whom he knew, but not one he could count as a friend. "As a matter of fact," he added, "there are only two individuals in the world with whom I

have even a reasonably communicative relationship. These are my two children." By the time he finished, he was letting loose some of the tears of sorrow for himself, which I'm sure he had held in for many years. But it was the honesty and the realness of his loneliness which caused every member of the group to reach out to him in some psychological sense. It was also most significant that his courage in being real enabled all of us to be more genuine in our communications, to come out from behind the facades we ordinarily use.

I'm disappointed when I realize—and of course this realization always comes afterward after a lag of time—that I've been too frightened or too threatened to let myself get close to what I'm experiencing, and that consequently I have not been genuine or real. It immediately comes to mind—an instance which is somewhat painful to reveal. A couple of years ago I was invited to spend a year as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. The fellows are chosen because they're supposed to be brilliant and well-informed scholars. I suppose it's inevitable that there's a considerable amount of one-upsmanship. Of showing off one's knowledge and achievements. Just little things like, "You've read so-and-so's book, of course? Oh, you haven't? [laughter]. Well, okay." It seemed important for each fellow to impress the others, to be a little more assured, to be a little more knowledgeable than he really is. I found myself a number of times doing this same thing: playing a role of greater certainty and of greater confidence than I really possess. I can't tell you how disgusted I was with myself as I realized what I was doing. I was not being me—I was playing a part.

I regret it when I suppress my feelings too long and they burst forth in ways that are distorted or attacking or hurtful. I have a friend whom I like very much, but who has one particular pattern of behavior that thoroughly annoys me. Because of the usual tendency to be nice, polite, and pleasant, I kept this annoyance to myself for too long a time, and when it finally burst its bounds, it came out—not only as annoyance, but as an attack on him. This was hurtful, and it took us some time to repair the relationship.

I'm inwardly pleased when I have the strength to permit another person to be his own realness and to be separate from me. I think that's often a very threatening possibility. In some ways I've found it some kind of an ultimate test of staff leadership and parenthood. Can I freely permit this staff member, or my son or my daughter, to become a separate person with ideas and purposes and values which may not be identical in my own? I think of one staff member this past year who showed many flashes of brilliance, but who clearly held values different from mine and behaved in ways very different from the ways in which I would behave. It was a real struggle in which I feel I was only partly successful to let him be himself, to let him develop as a person entirely separate from me and my ideas and my values. Yet to the extent that I was

successful, I was pleased with myself because I think this permission to be a separate person is what makes for the autonomous development of another individual.

It makes me angry when I discover that I have been subtly controlling and molding another person in my own image. This has been a very painful part of my professional experience. I hate to have "disciples"; students who have molded themselves meticulously into the pattern they feel I wish. Some of the responsibility I place with them, but I can't avoid the uncomfortable probability that in unknown ways, I have subtly controlled such individuals and made them into carbon copies of me instead of the separate, professional persons they have every right to become. From a number of these things I've been saying, I trust it's clear that when I can permit realness in myself, or sense it or permit it in the other, I find it very satisfying. When I can't permit it in myself, or fail to permit it in another, it is to me very distressing and regrettable. I find that when I'm able to let myself be congruent and genuine, it often helps the other person. When the other person is transparently real and congruent, it often helps me. In those rare moments when a deep realness in one meets a realness in the other, it is a memorable "I-thou" relationship, as Buber would call it. Such a deep and mutual personal encounter doesn't happen often, but I'm convinced that unless it happens occasionally, we're not human.

I want to move onto another area of my learning in interpersonal relationships, one that has been slow and painful for me. It's most warming and fulfilling when I can let in the fact or permit myself to feel that someone cares for, accepts, admires, or prizes me. Because, I suppose, of elements in my past history, it's been very difficult for me to do this. For a long time I tended almost automatically to brush aside any positive feelings which were turned in my direction. I think my reaction was, "Who, me? You couldn't possibly care for me. You might like what I've done or my achievements, but not me." This is one respect in which my own therapy helped me very much. I'm not always able even now to let in such warm and loving feelings from others, but I find it very releasing when I can do so. I know that some people flatter me in order to gain something for themselves; I know that some people praise me because they're afraid to be hostile. But I've come to recognize the fact that some people genuinely appreciate me, like me, love me, and I want to sense that fact and let it in. I think I've become less aloof as I've been able to really take in and soak up those loving feelings.

I've found it to be a very enriching thing when I can truly prize or care for or love another person, and when I can let that feeling flow out to him. Like many others, I used to fear that I would be trapped by this. If I let myself care for him, he can control me or use me or make demands on me. I think I've moved a long ways in the direction of being less fearful in this respect. Like my clients, I have slowly learned that tender, positive feelings are not dangerous

either to give or to receive. To illustrate what I mean I'd like again to draw again on an example from a recent basic encounter group.

A mother with several children who describes herself as "a loud, prickly, hyperactive individual," whose marriage was on the rocks, and who felt that life was just not worth living writes, "I had really buried under a layer of concrete many feelings I was afraid people were going to laugh at or stomp on, which needless to say was working all kinds of hell on my family and on me. I'd been looking forward to this workshop with my last few crumbs of hope. It was really a needle of trust in a huge haystack of despair." She tells of some of her experiences in the group and adds, "The real turning point for me was a simple gesture on your part of putting your arm around my shoulder one afternoon when I made some crack about you—not really being a member of the group—that no one could cry on your shoulder. In my notes I had written the night before: 'There's no man in the world who loves me.' You seemed so genuinely concerned that day that I was overwhelmed. I received a gesture, as one of the first feelings of acceptance of me, just the dumb way I am, prickles and all, that I had ever experienced. I have felt needed, loving, competent, furious, frantic; anything and everything, but just plain loved." She continues, "You can imagine the flood of gratitude, humility, and release that swept over me. I wrote, with considerable joy, 'I actually felt loved. I doubt that I should soon forget it.'" In this material I've just quoted, she is of course speaking to me, and yet I feel that in some deep sense she's also speaking for me. I too have had somewhat similar feelings.

Another example has to do with the experiencing and giving of love. I think of one governmental executive in a group in which I participated; a man with high responsibility and excellent technical training as an engineer. At the first meeting of the group he impressed me, and I think others, as being cold, aloof, somewhat bitter, resentful, cynical. When he spoke of how he ran his office, it appeared that he administered it by the book without any feeling whatsoever. In one of the early sessions when he was speaking of his wife, a group member asked him, "Do you love your wife?" He paused for a long time; the questioner said, "Okay, that's answer enough." The executive said, "No, wait a minute. The reason I didn't respond was that I was wondering if I've ever *loved* anyone. I don't think I've ever really loved anyone." A few days later, he listened with great intensity as one member of the group revealed many personal feelings of isolation and loneliness and revealed the extent to which he had been living behind a facade. The next morning, the engineer said, "Last night I thought and thought about what John told us. I even wept quite a bit by myself. I can't remember how long it's been since I've cried, and I really felt something. I think perhaps what I felt was love." It's not surprising that before the week was over, he had thought through different ways of handling his growing son, on whom he had been placing some very rigorous demands. He'd also begun really to

appreciate the love which his wife had extended to him, which he now felt he could in some measure reciprocate.

Because of having less fear of giving or receiving positive feelings, I have become more able to appreciate individuals. I've come to believe that this is rather rare. So often, even with our children, we love them to control them rather than loving them because we appreciate them. I've come to think that one of the most satisfying experiences I know, and also one of the most growth-promoting experiences for the other person, is just fully to appreciate this one individual in the same way that I appreciate a sunset. People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I can let them be. In fact, perhaps the reason we can truly appreciate a sunset is because we can't control it. When I look at a sunset, as I did the other evening, I don't find myself saying, "Well, soften the orange a little bit... [laughter] a little more purple here at the base..." I just don't do that. I don't try to control the sunset. I watch it with awe as it unfolds, and I like myself best when I can experience my staff member, my son, my daughter, my grandchildren, in the same way: appreciating the unfolding of a life. I believe this is a somewhat oriental attitude, but for me it is the most satisfying one.

So in this third area, prizing or loving, and being prized or loved, is experienced by me as being very growth-enhancing. A person who is loved appreciatively, not possessively, blooms and develops his own unique self. The person who loves none possessively, is himself enriched. This at least has been my experience. I could give you some of the research evidence which shows that these qualities I've mentioned, and the ability to listen empathically, and genuineness, and acceptance or prizing when they're present in a relationship make for good communication and for constructive change in personality. But I feel that research evidence is out of place in a talk such as I've been giving. So I'll just close by saying that in my experience, real interpersonal communication and real interpersonal relationships are deeply growth-promoting. I enjoy facilitating growth and development in others; I am enriched when others provide a climate that makes it possible for me to grow and change. So I prize it very much when I am able sensitively to hear the pain and the joy, the anger, confusion, and despair, the determination, and the courage to be in another person. And I value more than I can say the times when another person has truly been able to hear those elements in me.

I prize it a great deal when I am able to move forward in the never-ending attempt to be the real me in this moment. Whether it is anger or enthusiasm or puzzlement or whatever that is real. I'm so delighted when a realness in me brings forth more realness in the other, and we come closer to a mutual I-thou relationship. And I'm very grateful that I've moved in the direction of being able to take in, without rejecting it, the warmth and the caring of others, because this has so increased my own capacity for giving love without fear of being entrapped,

and without holding back. These in my experience are some of the elements which make communication between persons and relationships between persons more enriching and more enhancing.

[program ends]