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HUMAN CONDITION AND THE SACRED IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract: We have entered the digital era without a clear understanding of the metamorphoses of spiritual experiences lived by those who inhabit the digital world. To understand what exactly is happening in the registry of these expectations, I have used a few of Mircea Eliade's ideas. To reveal the way in which the digital era human keeps a series of behavioral and thinking mode patterns of *homo religiosus*, I wished to posit beyond religious representations and practices typical of a certain cultural space or of a single religious option. It is the reason for which I called on an ontology of the sacred like the one present in Mircea Eliade's analyses. Such a philosophy of the sacred can help us understand the way in which the sacred functions like an organizing element of the entire existence, beyond its particulars depending on stage division of cultural development or on content evolution brought about by the human imaginary. Such an option enabled noticing the need for meaning, significance and authenticity of the digital era human, seeing the way the symbolism of the centre functions as an essential symbolic structure in the understanding of contemporary man's situating in the network. It also permitted revealing the archetypal premises based on which is the tendency to give an axiological significance to virtual space and technologies determining a rapid dynamic of digital world development, as well as deciphering the significance of the ever growing importance of storytelling in today's communication and motivational discourse.

Key words: Mircea Eliade' ontology of the sacred, *homo religiosus*, digital society human, virtual space, network structure, technological transcendence, storytelling as experiences of the digital era, the society built on communication, communication with the transcendent

Humanity entered the digital era without producing a new form of spirituality. Postmodern human brought into the new era the traditional religious behaviors, even if already marked by processes like modernity secularization or remythicization phenomena typical of postmodernity. The digital era human does not seem to be interested, for the moment, in building a new type of religious experience. There is no discernable concern for the creation of a new religion starting from a technological transcendence, a transcendence conceived in digital experience terms. He/she feeds on the contents and behaviors received by tradition and emptied of the authority they used to have in the previous stages of their cultural manifestation. Such a minimal religious experience is built, however, on structures that we note *homo religiosus* cultivated in the history of religions. To penetrate this universe, we called on a few of Mircea Eliade's ideas, as a thinker who can provide significant solutions to understand the archaic man, the modern man, the postmodern man and even the man of the digital era, beyond controversies that thought and personality may summon (Idel 2014; Rennie 1996; Ginzburg 2010; Ellwood 1996).

1. A philosophy of the sacred for the human of all times

The digital era human still lives in a universe based on an ontology of the sacred as described by Mircea Eliade. We are still beings living in a dual world, having a double existence and feeling urged to be a total being. The model of such a philosophy was identified by Eliade both in Plato's philosophy and in the world perspective of traditional religious societies. The idea to participate in a transmundane world giving reality to the objective world inhabited by man is a platonian idea revealed for the archaic man. Even if it undergoes certain changes, such a duality of the world may be functional also for the digital era man. It seems to me important to note the emphasis the historian of religions attributes to the experience of participating in a higher ontological status dimension, irrespective of the possible worlds' level this dimension is taking. This philosophy of reality reconstruction becomes increasingly important in the society built on communication, especially due to digital technology development.

To understand the last spiritual significance of man's behavior in the digital society, I believe it is useful to reflect on the way Mircea Eliade highlights the existence of an ontology of the sacred in the religious man's mentality and its metamorphoses in the life of man living the experience of modernity. When in the opening of the study *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade dwelt on the special importance of Rudolf Otto's work, he was not seeking to diminish the importance of approaches leading to a God of

philosophers. In fact, he was pointing out to the need to call on a new mode of thinking on religion. The idea of God was only complementary in this endeavor. Religion was conceived as a way to valorize man and his lived experience. In such a perspective, man becomes the subject of a religious experience in which God is offering Himself as a gift, an experience opening the possibility of tasting the fruits of divine presence. It is not about the experience of a presence, but rather about the presence of the divine per se, sensed as reality and normality (Eliade 1992a). In this way, Eliade succeeds to go beyond the disputes between the rational and the irrational in the religious experience, giving us a philosophical integration of these lived experiences in the form of a total revelation of the human being. Thus, when we talk about religion in the generic sense of the term, we have in view a wide variety of experiences lived by the human being as *homo religiosus*. Religion is not created by the human mind, and we cannot state either that it can be separated from man. As much as it cannot be separated from the idea of the presence of God, although we speak about experiencing this presence, calling on the mental experience in which the individual is engaged as a total being.

Such a vision is linked to the idea of the sacred conceived by Mircea Eliade as an originary dimension of the human being's mental structure. More exactly, man is attributed, as a given, a cultural construct engaging three dimensions: unconscious, conscious and transconscious. Representations of the sacred may be deemed to be a projection of this unifying structure of conscience which is responsible for everything pertaining to the experience, life and creation of the religious man. Thus, religious man does not represent merely a particular mode of human manifestation, does not belong only to a traditional cultural framework, but rather subsumes the very mode of being in the world of the human being. The sacred is intrinsic to human conscience and thus becomes a defining element of the human condition. This reference to the *homo religiosus* condition is the base for the philosophical perspective developed by Eliade. Consequently, religious discourse no longer focuses only on the man of traditional societies or of particular groups. Religious man is the very one that delivers this discourse and reposes it in a philosophy of the real. He is the guardian of reality and guarantees the solidity of boundaries while situating himself in its centre (Codoban 2011; Sztajer 2013; Cioveie 2015; Fernandes 2015). Man's thirst for the sacred is determined by the fact that the sacred means „*the real* par excellence and at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity” (Eliade 1992a, 28).

Religion should be conceived as an intrinsic value, situated beyond particular languages expressing it. It may privilege words or gestures, powers or images, symbolic mediation or the technological one, it may be manifested in the median space of objective experience or of the one perceived in the virtual space. Human condition is the ultimate reference of this type of experience. For this very reason, even if it cannot be

estranged from theological discourse, it is rather suited for an approach in terms of a philosophy of the human. A humanist approach will always be aware of the fact that religion is important as long as there still is something human in human nature. No matter how much one is alienated from oneself, as long as one is still a man, one keeps something of the mystery and of the way *homo religiosus* is situated in his symbolic world.

2. Seeking the centre and situating in the network

From the perspective of a new humanism, to which Mircea Eliade himself would aspire, his vision is nowadays more real than ever. His philosophy of the *homo religiosus* has never been more inspiring to understand man and reveal the ontology of the sacred, on which the human condition of the digital era individual is built. One of the most revelatory statements in this sense is Carl Olson's who says in connection with the symbolism of the centre that „to be at the centre means that one can see everything as interconnected” (Olson 1992, 167). The quest for the centre is with Mircea Eliade a quest for his own being. Religious human seeks and finds oneself in various registers as an inhabitant of the centre. Situating in the centre enables the connection not only with manifestations of the sacred, with the metamorphoses of transcendence, but also with the other human beings and with cosmos. It becomes an organizing factor to the entire reality, cosmos being built around it in an act of revealing and consecrating reality.

Human centrality may be sensed both in the archaic image of man, and in the one of digital era human, placing oneself in a network. Centre multiplication in the network occurs according to a principle that is similar to the multiplication of centres under the sacred. The sacred has the same force in any manifestation of the centre, and the multiplication does not diminish at all the central role of each symbolic structure. This centre model always functions here and everywhere where authenticity is claimed and reality is regained. It may function like some kind of metaphysical or spiritual justification of a structure that seems to avoid any need for spirituality. Such a structure may appear beyond any need for transcendence because it appears as the embodiment of transcendence without a transcendence. The network, seemingly infinite, constituting the virtual space, functions according to this model of a universal connection. It appears to be stronger than the cosmic interconnection of centres by which the sacred gives itself to us totally. The symbolism of the centre helps us bring together the elements of a metaphysics of alterity, nourished constantly by an ontology of the sacred.

As Carl Olson noted, a special contribution to the understanding of human condition is given by the fact that „Eliade claims that *homo religiosus* possesses an ontological thirst for the real and sacred. In fact,

Eliade equates religion with ontology” (Olson 1992, 41). Such an understanding of religion may be justified through the very mode of human genesis, described through the *orientatio* phenomenon. The phenomenon expresses the originary human experience as a vertical being, organizing around oneself the whole environment and finding oneself as an *axis mundi* that connects the above with the below, uniting the entire existence around one’s body represented by the four cardinal points. It is about each human being, not an anthropological structure as such. Each individual participates personally in this symbolism and in this way carries the sign of the originary centrality. This archetype of man continues in the human situating in the world and in the terms of digital society in which the centre seems to multiply indefinitely. This very infinity reveals the value of everyone on a quest for the centre, which is in fact within oneself. Eliade presents the originary human being as a wakeful being, as a reflexive being, finding balance in the world representation as cosmos, divided into the areas of the real it dominates. The wakefulness supposed by the *orientatio* phenomenon gives us the image of a being under the sign of reflection on the mode of being, and on the other hand under the sign of dominance (Eliade 2000, 15). This duality is found in all human development stages as represented by the need to be and the need to have. It pertains to human condition. The difference between to be and to have disappears, as in the terms of postmodern reflections on alienation. When one states that „our purpose should be *to be* more than *to have* more” (Fromm 2013, 30) an already assumed ideological position is considered as a fragmentary option. And we are in the realm of meaning, significance, participation in the real and taking possession of one’s life in a quest for being which supposes rediscovering the total being and asserting it. The constant horizontal transcending provided by the network comes to the aid of such nostalgia of transcendence to the infinite in which *to be* and *to have* get to be a unique reality. In the perspective of the digital era human, there is no possibility for a dilemmatic choice between to be and to have. We may justify in a philosophical manner the priority of one over the other of the two structures in the human becoming of the various stages of personal growth, but we can establish a chronology of one against the other. Such a mode to unify the two is a constituent of an ontology of the human explaining the existence of the present individual in the proximity of *homo religiosus*. They are joint together in the very existence under the sign of human condition. The philosophy of *homo religiosus* is construed on the premise that existence precedes any essence, and the manifestations of *to be* and of *to have* concern human existence as such. At the same time, this vision discloses the sacred as an existential given, inseparable from human condition.

To Eliade, „it is certain that everything man handled, felt, encountered or loved might become a hierophany” (Eliade 1992, 30),

might be identified as a manifestation of the sacred. Such a reconstruction of reality is possible due to the double human attitude towards the sacred. On the one hand, we have the visible attitude in the desire to live in the sacred, to participate in the objective reality, to experience the benefits of authenticity. On the other, we are shown the human attitude to be fulfilled in eternity and reality as well as in one's historical, daily life, as part of one's becoming and personal development. The two types of have individual manifestations at the crossroads of authenticity and escape from authenticity. The two existential attitudes converge in what Eliade believes „could be translated in the vocabulary of contemporary metaphysics into a road to the centre of one's own essence and escape from inauthenticity” (Eliade 1992, 420). It is the desire to live in a real, effective, significance-full world, beyond illusion, into the realm of an ontology of the sacred (Eliade 1994a). Reality is sustained by the connection between centres making up the infinite fabric of existence under the sacred. Such fabric involves for Eliade both the sacred and the profane as modes of being. Privileging the sacred means privileging being. Religious man has a thirst for being as he wakes from the beginning not only as a centre of his own cosmos but also as a centre of his social interactions. He is not only a cosmic being but also a community being.

This fabric, revealed by the world of myths and rituals and constantly nourished by the symbolic conscience is the one helping us understand what is happening with man in the digital era. Meant to live in the science empire rather than in the religion empire, contemporary man remains within the boundaries of his humanity as long as there are the vibes of ordinary structures that define religion man. Eliade believes that irrespective of how degraded our perception of these structures, or how diminished their energy, they operate as an existential given of which man as such cannot be separated.

One of these structures intrinsic to human condition (defining the mode of being in the world of individuals who belong to the world built in the spirit of scientific conquests and technological development) is the network development of intersubjective relationships of human beings. May they develop in the objective world or on internet space, interhuman relationships belong to a logic of social networks based on the idea of centre multiplication by stimulation of connections in the network. An interesting perspective on social networks is provided by Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler. Engaging in an anthropological perspective on interhuman relationships, they note that typical of members of the human species is the fact they do not live in groups but in networks. The presence and permanent proximity of the other human beings are not man's choice, but they have a genetic conditioning (Christakis, Fowler 2015, 214). If with religious man we have an archetypal conditioning, in this case we have a structural conditioning of a biological nature. It is obvious that in a world in which the body has taken over the position that

the soul once had as regards the central element of man's self-definition (Codoban 2013) the fundamentals are no longer conceived as reference to transcendent realities, but rather immanent or of the human order. It is worth noting in the two thinkers' interpretation that there is no possibility to abandon the network. Networks are deemed to be a given to be passed over in generations and amplified by each generation. Technological development has a special contribution to the growth and consolidation of networks. Technology makes network importance grow and determine a better development and accomplishment of the human being. The highest compatibility degree of networks developed in time is set in the online environment (Christakis, Fowler 2015, 214). In this view, to understand relational structures of human beings, common features pertaining to a group are not important, but structural connections are. We remember that in terms of the ontology of the sacred as described by Mircea Eliade, the individual having a religious experience is not important but his quality as a person joining a relationship is, as religious man is a relational being par excellence. For this reason, in its turn, the network supposes a relational matrix that may be associated through its functions to the archetypal structures that once shaped the existence of *homo religiosus*. These relational matrices are the ones that make possible situating in the network. They are the ones ensuring human beings uniqueness and make possible understanding interpersonal connections (Christakis, Fowler 2015, 14; Tang 2018; Grad 2017).

3. Sacred space and virtual space

Because it is evident that „religious man cannot live but in an atmosphere impregnated by the sacred, we have to expect a multitude of techniques to consecrate space” (Eliade 1992a, 28). We may note all through Eliade's work the importance he gives to various techniques of consecration and initiation. They are part of the need to ritualize human behavior and to live a meaningful life, in a significant universe. The use of techniques may be associated with what postmodern thinking terms the need for developing the technologies of the self (Foucault 2013), to facilitate personal development. In addition to personal important techniques, archaic man was developing a multitude of techniques to consecrate space and time. When we state that man can make a space holy, we should think too that space may lay its mark on man. Consecrated space may be benefic or perilous at the same time on account of the ambivalence of the sacred. As regards space, it is worth noting that benefic elements are often doubled by some less benefic or even malefic, that lights is accompanied by shadows or darkness, that the sacred is unseparated from the profane. Here it is relevant the presence of the taboo as a mode of setting interdictions. The taboo has survived to a great

extent in Western man's life in the context of communication, more exactly of limitations imposed by public communication about what cannot be discussed, told, broadcast among various public categories. The taboo as a structure concentrating and censoring interdictions, supposes, however, transgressing interdictions. This transgression involves a symbolic context, a dynamic of the worlds. A passage between worlds is possible only by keeping differences clear, if the worlds at play are never confused. Eliade tells us that „the taboo mechanism is always the same: certain things, persons, places participate in a different ontologic regime, and consequently contact with them causes an ontologic rupture that could be fatal” (Eliade 1992, 35). Through taboos, hierarchies are set, opening this way the world of choice and options. Man may choose to valorize his ambivalent attitude towards the sacred: on the one hand to live in a consecrated space, in a world conceived as a microcosm representing reality itself, and on the other hand to transcend his situation by transgressing interdictions – which should lead him to losing reality. A regain of the realm of the real may only be done through recreation not through reparation. It is necessary in this sense to return to primordial structures, to restate the cosmogonic myth which means reinstating the originary harmony (Eliade 1963, 30). This way, a reiteration of a creating act occurs as also a stimulation of creative energies. Creation leads to the realm of the real. Creation supposes the mechanism through which everything taking place in our world is the result of participation in a reality transcending them. In general, we know that with all human acts „their significance and value is not linked to a gross physical given but to their quality of reproducing a primordial act, to repeat a mythical model” (Eliade 1991, 14).

Sacred space often means a mythical, symbolic geography, in which there is a centre or a plurality of centres that may be set through a hierophany or ritual acts (Eliade 1994, 50). The symbolism of the centre is a symbolism of inhabiting space. Proof of this is the fact that most of Eliade's examples are about organizing space as consecrated space, as location of the divine or as a benefic place for man. On the one hand, space is consecrated, transfigured, singularized through hierophanies, on the other man is permitted to penetrate the sacred space and enjoy the benefits of sacred manifestations, „the communion of sacrality” (Eliade 1992, 338).

The dialectic of the sacred and the profane enables explaining the way the two modes of human being in the world operate as well as the way the sacred and the profane space differentiate, intersect in connection points, keeping always their specificity. Religious man lives between the two worlds in the sense that he inhabits profane space but partakes in the consecrated space. He fully enjoys what the objective world in which he lives has to offer and at the same time assumes experiencing the symbolic world. The two worlds are worlds in a dialogue. But they are hierarchical

worlds between reality and illusion, the authentic and the inauthentic, the thirst for being and the fall into chaos. The two worlds always force choices and the choice involves man as a total being.

When one places oneself in the centre of the universe or when one states that one is the centre of a universe that he/she reconstructs perpetually in communication, the digital era human participates in a duality of the world similar to the one we find in the religious man's situating in the world. The symbolism of the centre places the individual this time not in the centre of a sacred space but at the interference of objective reality space and the virtual reality space. Increasingly, digital era human tries to diminish the difference between the objective space and the virtual space. Moreover, there is a tendency to attribute a greater dignity to the virtual space through the value set it is attributing it. Virtual space is conceived as one of total freedom, rapid inexhaustible knowledge, rapid connections and efficient communication. To understand as much as possible how much virtual space intervenes in the creation of the meaning of existence and of authenticity, it is enough to mention the essential role of asserting one's own identity and personal image. Digital era human defines oneself first of all through the mode of constructing oneself in virtual space. If for my generation there used to be a clear difference, even a rupture between real space and virtual space, the new generations no longer operate with such a duality except to limit certain areas of reality they deem to be rather unique. Virtual space is consecrated through its positive attributes. However, as it functions according to an ambivalence inspired by the ambivalence of the sacred, the virtual is attributed also negative features. We note that there are authors warning on the negative consequences of the excessive use of the Internet.

But, in this case, a kind of transgression is practiced that makes everything negative be camouflaged into the choice possibility, given the freedom to posit in the comfortable zone of reality. Together with the rapid dynamic of communication development in the digital world we note that a totally special experience that virtual space offers by means of gadgets and communication instruments. This fascination functions in a manner similar to the attitude that Eliade included in the dual attitude represented by the need for extended consecration and resistance to the sacred. The fascination brought about by social networks development makes the individual and community cultural spaces be dominated by this double attitude: while we feel a insatiable desire to be connected, we also feel frustrated at the possibility that our whole life should be confiscated by technologies that keep us captive in the virtual space.

4. Myth and storytelling as experiences of the digital era human

When Eliade mentions that for homo religiosus the essential precedes existence, he does not mean it generically. He does not mean that religious man is thirsty for being because of his desire to participate in the being. Eliade targets the present existence, which, in its dynamics, participates in the general framework of existence, accessible through return to the origins mediated by myth recital. Consequently, the essential no longer targets the grounds of a philosophy alluding to ontology, but is in solidarity with a history that may be at once human and divine (Eliade 1978, 102).

Myths play the role of a linkage between an ontology of the sacred and a history of the sacred that should encompass both man and God. As Vasile Nicolescu states, „myth expresses events, relations, connections; myth expresses characters, models or otherwise hostile, repugnant types. Myth expresses collective psychologies, archetypal structures or individual voices that remain unknown. It is hard to imagine the history of culture, of human spirituality values, without myths” (Nicolescu 1978, XI). Therefore, even if it does not always tell a true story about what happened in an originary time (Eliade 1978), myth is indispensable to human beings, manifesting in various existential situations. Myth recital and storytelling of characters and significant events stay with us in the communication based society. We can note how important is the cultural fashion of storytelling in the consumption society nowadays, a tendency considered by many as a new practical orientation in public communication. It is in fact as old as our humanity. It does nothing but take over in forms of the needs typical of digital era human life, the desire to attain meaning, significance, desire for authenticity that was once stimulated by myth recital.

Storytelling is en vogue nowadays because digital societies rediscover myths with their role of telling about significant things for human life, they bring to our eyes the real, values and meaning, and invite us to participate in them with the enthusiasm of our own life. It is true that a storyteller no longer has the role of an officiant because current stories have greatly lost the extraordinary initiating force that myths had once. It is a phenomenon revealed by Eliade both in his studies on the „fairy tales” as in those linked to the diminished initiation force in modern man’s life. Even in archaic cultures there is a demythicization phenomenon by transforming myths into legends or stories having no originary efficacy (Eliade 1978; Eliade 1995).

We may note what is happening in the demythicization process in ancient Greece. Eliade shows that the demythicization of the Greek culture, that made possible the development of the philosophies of Socrates, Plato or Aristotle, did not lead to myth elimination. The works of

the great philosophers, despite the fact that they proposed a different thinking mode, did not eliminate mythical thinking. Additionally, we may note that there are lots of mythical-symbolic elements that Plato calls on in his works or that in Aristotle's cosmology or in other thinkers later, we have remnants of mythical thinking (Eliade 2017; Asãvoaie 2018). Even if there is a continuity solution between the Greek mythology and ancient Greece philosophy, we cannot leave aside the fact that a series of myths that Plato consecrated serve even today as support of our symbolic thinking or as forms of our own mythological contents' encapsulation. We find an excellent collection of such myths in Cristian Bãdiliã's work: the myth of the androgyny, of Eros's birth, the cave myth, the Atlantis myth, the Demiurges myth, and others (Bãdiliã 1996). The mythical modes of the existence signification come back today as a necessity for a philosophy of life according to which one can act, grow harmoniously, and reach personal fulfillment. This attraction to forms of mythical imaginary recovery, even if myths appear degraded, is based on the fact that „something fundamental returns in various cultures: a secret of the universe which is also the secret of human condition” (Eliade 1990, 113).

As archaic societies would transmit myths, nowadays stories are transmitted at community and especially at personal level. Although the story no longer has its originary function as in traditional societies, this transmittal in the context of digital era human may play a self-disclosure role, a dialog establishment one, a social relations or cultural functions related to education part, a value transmittal or motivational energies stimulation. Increasingly today, one believes that „storytelling is an integral part of what distinguishes us as human beings ... telling stories is the only way we can create meaning in our lives and make sense of the world. We need them in order to understand ourselves and communicate who we are. And by sharing stories of our experiences, we can better understand the conflicts of our daily lives and find explanations for how we fit into this world” (Fog, Budtz, Yakaboyle 2005, 16).

5. Instead of conclusions: beyond the nostalgia of origins

Digital society human keeps a series of *homo religiosus* inclinations, even if beyond assuming a nostalgia or origins that would keep him captive in a religious type of behavior. He wishes to live meaningfully, to explore the dimensions of existence that he controls as areas of the real through which participates in a reality of a privileged ontologic regime.

At the same time, we note that digital era human has a special relation with space and the mode of organizing the world as familiar cosmos. From Eliade's analyses on the sacred space, we may note that, in terms of a symbolism of the centre, „it is not about a geometric space but an existential and sacred space that has a totally different structure, being

susceptible of an infinity of breakthroughs, and consequently, of communications with the transcendent” (Eliade 1992a, 55). Although there is no conscious mode, visibly connected to transcendence, situating in the virtual space and the bridges built between the objective space and virtual space showcase a transcending tendency, under most complex forms, that speak about human need to control ritually, without a symbolic force, access to reality.

The new modes of thinking space – as a network structure on which the relational world of human beings transcending overlaps – stimulate digital era human’s need to stand in the discursive universe once provided by participation to a mythical conscience. In this way, contemporary man connects to the human condition which always implies a sacred component, irrespective if it is imaginary. It is not at all accidental that today we can read in a commercial communication book, statements on the importance of storytelling as a self recovery mode and as a mode of situating in the world: „Since time began, religious stories have provided people with deeper meaning in life, offering insight into why we are here and how we should live, and providing comfort in our darker times” (Fog, Budtz, Yakaboğlu 2005, 16). We have to note that such a perspective is important note theologically but in a context of what we term today „religion after religion” (Wasserstrom 1999). Thus, living a sacred experience may occur without the one living it being aware of its religious character. Most often, religious symbolism pluralism is manifested in a multitude of experiences whose common place is the fact that the human being senses them as being significant in personal life (Rennie 2007; Fomin 2013; Paraschivescu 2010).

We should not imagine that digital era human’s tendency to tell stories will lead to reborn gods, or extraordinary characters or miraculous events achieved in the mythical atmosphere. Without showing an a historical tendency, the present human uses this context to regain his/her self in harmony with the others, in a relational universe to be made familiar, to conquer and treat responsibly. Stories are a necessary ingredient to feel we live a better life.

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