

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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FEATURE ARTICLES

30 Years of Building Learning Communities

A Dialogue with Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, and Darcy Winslow, Part 2

Choice As a Leadership Capability

Rawlinson Agard

Is Moving Too Fast Slowing You Down? How to Prevent Overload from Undermining Your Organization's Performance

David Peter Stroh and Marilyn Paul

Commentary

Rabbi Marc Baker

From Automatic Defensive Routines to Automatic Learning Routines: The Journey to Patient Safety

Michael Sales, Jay W. Vogt, Sara J. Singer, and Jeffrey B. Cooper

BOOK EXCERPT

Teaming Is a Verb

Amy C. Edmondson

EXECUTIVE DIGEST 13.1

30 Years of Building Learning Communities*A Dialogue with Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, and Darcy Winslow, Part 2*

What story will children 75–100 years from now tell about how our current generation managed the tremendous large-scale challenges we face? And how can we – as individuals and communities – begin to change our trajectory so that the narrative our descendents weave is one of renewal rather than of destruction? In part two of their dialogue on the role of cross-organizational communities such as SoL and the Presencing Institute in a changing world, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, and Darcy Winslow look at the need to renew civilization from its roots rather than attempting to fix our broken institutions. They explore ways we might join together to “open a crack to a future that is different from the past” – and in the process create a genuinely “flourishing” society.

Choice As a Leadership Capability*Rawlinson Agard*

Many people in organizations today live a dual life: they understand the power and importance of new ways of leading – such as those based on the principles of organizational learning – but they are hesitant to rock the boat by introducing these concepts in their organizations. For many years, Rawlinson Agard found himself in this same situation. Even as he worked to bring large-scale change to the complex systems he was a part of, he found that his actions and purpose were out of sync. A health crisis prompted Rawle to reflect on his choices – and set a new course of action that would bring together the two disparate threads in his career. In this article, he asks us to consider our own choices as we strive to make this world better for all.

Is Moving Too Fast Slowing You Down? How to Prevent Overload from Undermining Your Organization's Performance*David Peter Stroh and Marilyn Paul*

Organizational overload is a problem confronting people across all industries and sectors. People have too much to do in too short a time with too few resources to accomplish their goals. The result is that managers find it difficult to sustain focus on and implement top organizational priorities. This article uncovers the root causes of organizational overload and targets the ways in which organizations unwittingly increase overload and crises in their continuous efforts to accomplish more with less. In particular, it exposes the ironies of a “can-do” culture that leads people to work harder at the expense of achieving consistently strong results. The authors conclude by recommending how to build a “results and renewal” culture to achieve higher, more sustainable performance.

From Automatic Defensive Routines to Automatic Learning Routines: The Journey to Patient Safety*Michael Sales, Jay W. Vogt, Sara J. Singer, and Jeffrey B. Cooper*

Patient safety in hospital settings is a major public health problem. Several distinctive challenges combine to create a high-risk environment for patients that can result in grave – and costly – personal and organizational consequences. The authors hypothesize that defensive behaviors among hospital leaders, managers, and staff aggravate the dangers implicit in these settings. In this article, they describe a multidimensional training program, Healthcare Adventures™, in which the exploration of so-called “automatic defensive routines” figures as an important focus. This intervention combines a simulation of a traumatic patient safety event with structured reflection. Taken together, these kinds of learning opportunities support collaborative inquiry and appreciative engagement, which in this case can improve outcomes for patients.

EXECUTIVE DIGEST 13.1

Teaming Is a Verb

Amy C. Edmondson

Organizations thrive, or fail to thrive, based on how well the small groups within them function. In most organizations, the pace of change and the fluidity of work structures mean that success no longer comes from creating effective teams but instead from leading effective *teaming*. Teaming occurs when people come together to combine and apply their expertise to

perform complex tasks or develop solutions to novel problems. Fast-moving work environments need people who have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they appear; that is, people who know *how to team*. As summarized in this excerpt from *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*, four behaviors – speaking up, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection – are the pillars of effective teaming.

30 Years of Building Learning Communities

A Dialogue with Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer and Darcy Winslow, Part 2

What story will children 75–100 years from now tell about how our current generation managed the tremendous large-scale challenges we face? And how can we – as individuals and communities – begin to change our trajectory so that the narrative our descendants weave is one of renewal rather than of destruction? In part two of their dialogue on the role of cross-organizational communities such as Sol and the Presencing Institute in a changing world, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, and Darcy Winslow look at the need to renew civilization from its roots rather than attempting to fix our broken institutions. They explore ways we might join together to “open a crack to a future that is different from the past” – and in the process create a genuinely “flourishing” society.



Peter Senge

DARCY: In late December 2012, Peter and I spent several days in the Yucatan with a group exploring what the end of the 5,125-year Mayan “long count” on December 21 might mean to us. We came from diverse contexts: education, medicine, governance, science, conservation, spirituality, and business. We were connected by our commitment to contribute to the evolution of our own consciousness and the transformation of key institutions that shape our society.



Otto Scharmer

We gathered knowing that December 21 and 22, 2012, represented not only the end of one cycle but the beginning of a new one – a chance for humans to start again. It was a profound experience, and it sparked a profound question. Let’s go out 75 or 100 years and imagine that two children are telling the story of our evolutionary history and of our generation. What would that story sound like?



Darcy Winslow

For our group in the Yucatan, the picture was pretty dire, when you actually put words to the fact that we are killing for oil. The list just went on and on. Then we posed the question, how do we start to change our story? How do we start to change our trajectory, our collective karma?



Peter and Otto, I would love to hear your thoughts on that question and what impact the SoL community and the Presencing community could have on that dynamic over the next five, 10, or 15 years.

Transformation of Capitalism

OTTO: The other day I was in Brazil, invited by a green institute for a talk and conversation about the new economy and the transformation of capitalism. At the end, one guy said, "I have been listening to this conversation here, and it strikes me that what you do in your work is very difficult, because you try to bring together three different discourses or groups of people that usually never meet. The first one is the world of awareness – learning from the future, spirituality, consciousness, and social entrepreneurship."

He went on, "The second one is the world of profound institutional change – the CEOs of the big companies, the governments, and so on. So another set of dynamics, another set of mindsets, another kind of complexity."

He ended with, "There is a third one, which is transformation of capitalism. It is not just institutional change. It is really how you transform the whole system, the economy."

His comment struck me as true, because I have seen it so often. You have these three groups that

usually don't have that much to do with each other. We know that fault lines exist among these three groups. When you tell one story, half the group is excited. The other ones tune it out. When you come to the other part of the talk, then this part of the room lights up and the other ones just roll their eyes.

So, I believe that in the future, we will not be successful in taking our work to scale if we do not bring together these three discourses. In our forthcoming book, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*, Katrin Kaufer and I attempt to contribute toward the integration of these three discourses.¹

Where we can make real progress in the next 10 years or so is by developing the context but also holding the space for different types of conversations that allow these three groups to connect with, rather than rolling their eyes about, each other.

PETER: So are there places or instances that stand out for you where you see those three starting to come together?

OTTO: We have seen small beginnings, for example, in the Presencing Institute Global Forum. The Global Forum, which we held in 2011 in Boston and in 2012 in Berlin, and will hold again in Boston



in 2014, is an experiment in creating an open space. It is not just addressing the smaller community we have been working with lately; it is really an invitation to anyone who is inspired by this transformation of capitalism, institutions, and self.

The response we have received is encouraging. So many people express being annoyed with the current politics and all of that. But underneath is a longing for a different kind of connection with the system, with each other, and with ourselves. So far, we as a global community have not responded at the level of scale and level of creativity that is called for today.

Change from the Periphery

PETER: Otto, there's a puzzle that I'd like to pursue with you a little. One of the things I've heard you say many times, and it always made so much sense to me, is that if you want to find change, look to the periphery. As we talk about reinventing capitalism, most people would say, "You have to go work in the Congress. You've got to go work in the center of power." I'm curious how your thinking about that process is evolving.

OTTO: Well, that question is on my mind almost every day. I would say we are not trying to reinvent capitalism; we are trying to *transform* capitalism. The problem with capitalism is that nature, labor, and money are considered commodities. Case in point: environmental destruction, poverty, inequity, and financial bubbles are all taking place at unprecedented levels of scale. But as Karl Polanyi pointed out in his book, *The Great Transformation*, nature, labor, and money are not commodities. He calls this the "commodity fiction" – we pretend they are commodities, but in fact they are not. We need to rethink the issue and realize that they are not commodities but rather *commons*. Commons that, if cultivated well, could help us to transform our economy from "me" to "we," from "ego" to "eco."

That's the narrative that Katrin and I spell out in our new book. Where do you find the seeds of the eco-system economy? It's exactly where you said,

Peter – in the periphery, in the local living economy. In the local economy, the commons are right in our faces, so it makes sense for us to take responsibility together. For our global commons, it's a much more complex story.

So far, we as a global community have not responded at the level of scale and level of creativity that is called for today.

Part of answering the question of how much you focus on the center and how much you focus on the periphery, of course, is also individual. Where has life put me? What are the opportunities? What are the invitations I'm receiving to create meaningful change? For me, many of these invitations and opportunities have been on a grassroots level, which I have enormously enjoyed.

I also find that when you go inside mainstream institutions such as MIT, global companies, or the Chinese government, and you work with the younger, emerging generation of leaders, they are naturally in sync with a new way of operating and thinking. They look at leadership and transformation from a consciousness point of view in a way that I never would have expected. For example, over the past 10 years, I have never experienced a push back against mindfulness-based leadership practices. And for the past five years, you cannot find a single thinking person who would doubt that, as a global system, we are moving into an era of disruptive change. It's something that we almost take for granted today. But 10 years ago, it was very different.

Those are a few data points that tell us about the opening of a crack to a future that is different from the past. To connect to this opening and to allow a different future to emerge, we need to work from both inside and outside the old system. It's not either-or.

So far, we have not succeeded in creating a platform that gives the next generation of change makers a home base to tap into these communities, to connect with methods and tools, and to advance their own skills in a way that is not restricted by the old skeleton of institutions of higher education. That may be our biggest failure so far. And yet, it is something that is very much in reach and something where we could create a real breakthrough in the next five to 10 years.

How do you feel about that? How can we create a new platform for doing this kind of work – individual and yet also collective entrepreneurship – to shift the system from “ego” to “eco” in real, practical ways?

What if we imagined we were part of an artistic movement?

An Artistic Movement

PETER: When [Mexican arts educator and social entrepreneur] Claudia Madrazo and I were talking the other day, we came up with a really simple way to talk about this. What if we imagined we were part of an artistic movement?

If you look at history, there are few more generative phenomena that occur again and again in history than artistic movements. They are very distributed. They are organized by ideas and practices. They are living embodiments. They are spontaneous. They are full of many individuals who are iconoclastic and do not work together. It depends on the medium, of course. If it's theater, it is different than if it is writing or poetry or painting. Nonetheless, these movements have enormous coherence.

For Christmas, our son Nate's girlfriend got me a book containing all of Gustav Klimt's work. She found it in an old bookstore in Boulder that has all these wild books. She only saw one corner of the book sticking out. She went over and started

pulling on the corner. And what comes out is this book that I think weighs 20 pounds. It's the heaviest book I've ever held.

I became a huge fan of Gustav Klimt when I lived in Austria as a student. I used to go to the Belvedere Museum and spend afternoons there. I thought he was an amazing person.

At the same time, my wife, Diane, got a book on Van Gogh. She loves Van Gogh. And all of a sudden we've got our books turned open to two paintings. In Diane's book was a painting that you would recognize right away. It was a typical Van Gogh painting of a field of flowers. The other was a painting of Klimt's of a bunch of flowers covering a wall of an Austrian country estate. And it was the same painting! They were done about 25 years apart. Van Gogh's was a little earlier, 1890 or so, and Klimt's was from 1912.

But you look at these and you go, this is an artistic movement. Here are two totally different artists, two totally different cultural contexts, who are not connected that much by art historians. You would never confuse Van Gogh's style with Klimt's style in general. And yet you look at these works and say, “Wow! Their ability to manifest light and the vibrancy of something alive with totally different styles is stunning!”

That to me became a powerful example of this field we are a part of. And that is a metaphor I could really work with, the metaphor of being an artistic movement. There is something that is animating each of us, that shows up in our own consciousness, in our own work in particular ways, particular models, particular practices. But it's not coming from there. It's coming from something bigger.

To me, this perspective has so much potential. First off, it totally transforms the individual-collective dilemma. It's very individual and it is very collective. Obviously, it couldn't be one or the other. Neither could be missing from this way of understanding.

Second, it reminds us of something that I think we don't talk about enough, which is the aesthetic aspect of our work. I was with Otto for a conversation in Berlin with people affected by the Holocaust. And Otto, for about 15 minutes at the opening, you exhibited an extraordinary aesthetic sensibility. You just stood there and just kept sensing and expressing what was real for you at that moment until the whole space started to open. And once it opened, amazing things started to come out.

I would call that the work of an artist. That's aesthetic sensibility, in the moment, where you have a lot of ideas but you have to set all of your ideas aside so that you can pay attention, directly and creatively.

Great artistic movements have a kind of epic quality, right? So whatever you would call that movement that linked Van Gogh and Klimt, it's epic. It is shifting culture in real time at a grand scale.

I think we need all of those. We need to harmonize the individual and collective. We need to pay attention to the aesthetic. We need to recognize that this field is kind of an epic thing; it is occurring on a scale that none of us could possibly manufacture because it is not coming from any of us.

Shared Intentions

OTTO: That so resonates with how I understand all of our work. I think I am in the tradition of somebody who tries to create. I have always been inspired by the Bauhaus story, probably the most influential architecture and design school ever. It happened in a similar situation to where we are now – a completely screwed-up environment, when all of the ideals kind of crashed and burned as a result of World War I.

A few people got together and created a school. They didn't agree with each other on everything. They were very individual, yet they had a common set of principles and beliefs and intentions. They teamed up with master practitioners of the various crafts. They changed the paradigm. Their intention



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We need to recognize that this field is kind of an epic thing; it is occurring on a scale that none of us could possibly manufacture because it is not coming from any of us.

was to bring design to the masses, to link advanced design with technology and to get beyond the old artistry, which was just for elites.

The first year was dedicated to the famous *Vorkurs* (pre-course), where you had both theoretical,

abstract classes with some of these masters and also hands-on workshops with all the crafts and materials. So the Bauhaus group created an education that brought together the very abstract and intellectual with the very hands-on and practical in a creative environment that connected these two poles. It happened in a real place and with a real community. People from this community then went out into the world. Even when the Nazis closed down the place, the movement went global and shaped the architecture in cities all around the world.

Science is the religion of the contemporary world in the sense that it is the voice we most often look toward to tell us our current version of “the truth.”

The way in which a small group created a school as a birthplace for a new paradigm that could be learned and applied in practical ways and then brought into the world – and how that movement then shaped and had a deep influence across the 20th century – always inspired me.

In our case, it is more complex. It is not just architecture that needs to be reinvented; it’s the whole of society. But, in a way, it is also simpler, because all the pieces are already there – they just are not put together yet. That calls for another kind of creativity that no single person can do alone. But a few people can do it together when pulling around the same intentions.

PETER: For me, there is an imagery that has a lot of meaning: you start to feel you are in this river and this river is carrying you. You did not create the river, but your intentions and capabilities got you into it. It starts with awareness. This can’t be faked. Right now, I think this awareness is getting more acute. When you just keep paying attention to that river, then at some point you can say, “We think we understand a little bit of what this field is all about.”

I think you are right – this is not the work of just one person but of a group of people who can start building some boats to start to navigate in a different and more effective way. And they share what they are learning with one another.

OTTO: There is a line by Nietzsche that I have always loved: “To see science from the viewpoint of the artist and art from the viewpoint of life.” That’s exactly what we are talking about. It’s a science from the viewpoint of the artist, the entrepreneur, the creative human being, and it’s the creative act as seen from the viewpoint of the river, from the viewpoint of life.

I always thought that little line captured a seed of possibility in science that is dormant. Is that the reason why we hang out at MIT? Maybe we have to look at science and the evolution of science as something that is just beginning and that has yet to take this creative consciousness turn.

A System of Living

DARCY: Peter, if I can pick up on your boat analogy and the example Otto just shared from the architectural world, if we look at critical systems – the economy, education, marine ecosystems, the world of business – what ones do you think we need to focus on in the future, both in and of themselves, the interconnections among them, and the impact that they can make on the shifts we believe need to happen?

PETER: When I consider a question like this, there is an almost automatic frame – systems that matter like education, business, government, and so on. But you could back up and say, “Well, there is a system of science; there is a system of art.” And if you use the word in the broadest sense, you might say there is a system of living. Those really are what sit behind institutional embodiments. So we operate our schools based on a whole bunch of assumptions embedded in our culture. People want to change the school without changing the culture. That is not going to happen.



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It's how we live that shapes all those institutions. Obviously, science is the loudest voice today. It is the religion of the contemporary world in the sense that it is the voice we most often look toward to tell us our current version of "the truth."

Lost is art. It just gets lost because in contemporary culture, we've made it a specialty. We've made it something that just artists do. We've forgotten that for most of human history, our culture *was* our songs, our dances, our stories. That was the heart of everything. What defined a culture was its art. It was participative and it was inclusive. It didn't mean there weren't some people who had certain gifts. It just meant that it was for everybody. It's been so marginalized that we have lost that perspective.

But you might say that art is the system that sits behind the systems of how we live, how we create, how we understand.

OTTO: That's very close to Aristotle, who talked about three ways we can relate to reality: First, *theoria*, which is basically science. Then *poiesis*, or making things, creating. And third is *praxis*, which is another type of action that holds the goal in itself. It is not action in order to make something; it is creative activity, like if you play because of play itself, not in order to accomplish something. So it's that type of action.

PETER: Which is the key to life and it's the key to everything, right? If you want to say, what's one magic change you could wish for that could have the biggest impact on culture, it would be for us to learn how to invest meaning in what we do moment-by-moment. Then we would not have to keep chasing things. Our addiction to consumerism is a big, long, symbolic dance to get meaning and fun and enjoyment by acquiring things, because you no longer have the confidence that you can create meaning and fun and enjoyment by whatever you are doing right here, right now.

That spirit of life as a creative process is itself the root of the word “sacred.” The verb “to sacralize” is to make what’s happening right here, right now, whatever it is, that which matters. And in philosophy, this spirit lies in the difference between an instrumental versus an intrinsic or sacred orientation.

No other generation had this possibility before for making large-scale change.

Instrumental is when you say you do this in order to get that. Everything you do is an instrument to get something else, as opposed to being sacred in itself. Moving from one to another orientation would be a key cultural shift for us. The American philosopher Eric Hoffer said, “You can never get enough of what you don’t really need to make you happy.” We are always chasing after something new, which will never succeed in making us happy because we forgot that the chase itself is all that matters.

Anyhow. So systems sitting behind systems. That’s interesting. Hmm! And a school dedicated to living. I like that!

A “Flourishing” Society

DARCY: I want to pick up on something that you touched on there around the sacred, to sacralize. I was thinking about change and how people deal with change. How do we start to articulate this change that’s required, without it being perceived as having to sacrifice? When we talk about these systems that need to transform or the systems behind the systems, how can we do so in a way that engages people versus immediately putting them on their heels and becoming all about sacrifice?

OTTO: Well, we know how *not* to do it, and that is by scaring people and bombarding them with data about how bad things are. That method is not working. Science is clearly necessary but not sufficient. The answer to your question probably

has to do with the *poiesis* and *praxis*, to tap into a different, more creative energy rather than avoiding something you don’t want.

So that’s, I think, a big challenge. Today we have these global institutions. We have capitalism in a form that has moved into the heart and the center of society and is embodied in and influencing just about everything. It wasn’t like that before. So that’s a particular frontier that we face. And it makes me excited, because no other generation had this possibility before for making large-scale change. We have many of the pieces that you need to really make some headway.

The challenge will probably be one of the most significant undertakings by many, many people over the next years. The question is whether or not we succeed in putting these pieces together and building examples and platforms and momentum to not only innovate at the margin but basically renew what we call civilization from within or from the roots.

PETER: Picking up on that last comment, when Ma Hongda, the man who has run Master Nan’s Great Learning Center in China for many years, and I were talking in October, he said, “We really don’t have civilization now.” I appreciated that comment. There is no civilization now. The things that define civilization by and large have been pushed out of the mainstream of society.

So this is a simple and abstract answer to your question, Darcy. Things will not change until there is something more attractive. It’s that simple. There has to be an emergent sense that it’s not really about “giving up.” Exactly the opposite. It’s about going back to our collective and individual capacities regarding things that matter, the *praxis*, the *theoria*, the *poiesis*.

If you had the option of choosing civilization or no civilization, what would you choose? It has to get to that kind of clarity so that we could actually choose a path of civilization once again. Of course, first you have to build an awareness that that’s an

option. Then, you have to have some ideas how to move along that path. And then you need some communities to support one another. It is what author John Ehrenfeld calls the pursuit of a genuinely “flourishing” society.

I can’t help but think that a lot of what needs to happen is happening now. And part of the job is probably just continuing to get clearer in our expression and in our actions. One simple image for me is that we are at a point where we can no longer waste any effort. That doesn’t mean we have the answer. It just means we can no longer waste any effort.

No matter what we are saying, no matter what we are doing, every single act, every single thought has to be in line with this. You’ve met Dadi Janki. Dadi Janki is the administrative head of the religious group Brahma Kumaris. She is now 95 years old. She says, “That thought. Is that the thought you want? Well, then don’t have it. If it is not the thought you want, then get rid of it.” She has this

100-percent belief that you shouldn’t waste anything. It’s obviously not about effort, that you’ve got to be uptight and tense and get the right answer and all of that. Quite the opposite. You just have to pay real attention.

Ever since I’ve started to understand this concept, I’ve been finding it more and more in different places in Master Nan’s writing. In interpreting one sutra, he says, “If you are having good thoughts that are useful, you should cultivate them. If you are having bad thoughts, you should stop cultivating them. Stop them and go back to their roots and eliminate them at their roots.” That is kind of a transcendent message.

OTTO: Yes it is. “That economy. Is that the economy you want? If not, then get rid of it.” I love that. It’s so true. All our economic problems start with the way we think. That’s where the economic transformation will originate: from between our ears. *[Laughter]* ■

END NOTE

- 1 Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* (Berrett-Koehler, 2013)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter Senge is the founding chair of SoL, a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the author of *The Fifth Discipline*. He is also coauthor of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World*, and the series of *Fifth Discipline* Fieldbooks, including the newly released *Schools That Learn*.

Otto Scharmer is a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the founding chair of the Presencing Institute. He is cofounder of the Global Wellbeing and Gross National Happiness Lab, author of *Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges*, and coauthor of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* and *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* (July 2013).

Darcy Winslow is managing partner of the Academy for Systemic Change and founder of Designs for a Sustainable World Collective, LLC. She worked at Nike, Inc., for more than 20 years and held several senior management positions within the business. Most recently, she served as general manager for Nike’s Global Women’s Fitness Business and as senior advisor to the Nike Foundation.

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Managing Editor
Janice Molloy

Contributing Editor
Deborah Wallace

Publisher
Frank Schneider

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reflections@solonline.org
Reflections: The SoL Journal
PO Box 425005
Cambridge, MA 02142-0001

+1.617.300.9530 (phone)
+1.617.812.1257 (fax)

E-mail: reflections@solonline.org
www.solonline.org/?Reflections



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