

"From Conflict to Connection, Social Healing Through Waldorf-Inspired Practices— A Principle-Led Journey as a Social Healing Impulse" by Eyal Bloch & Thom Schaefer

1) Abstract

Three decades of field work in conflict zones have revealed the transformative potential of social healing initiatives rooted in Waldorf Education principles. This paper presents "**A Principle-Led Journey as a Social Healing Impulse**," drawing on experiences from diverse conflict environments and inspired by Rudolf Steiner's holistic educational philosophy—focusing on imagination, creativity, and community building—to foster resilience, empathy, and democratic engagement among children and communities living amidst strife.

Our central case study is the "**Peace Olympics**"—festivals organized by the OlymPeace movement founded by Eyal Bloch—which brought together over 250 children from eight conflict-affected regions, including Kosovo, Belgrade, Israel-Palestine, Cyprus, Turkey, China, Greece, and France. These events created neutral spaces for children of diverse backgrounds to encounter one another beyond conflict boundaries, planting seeds for a possible alternative future. The profound wisdom emerging from these encounters, encapsulated in our set of principles, is captured in participants' poetry: "We are different but the same/In our hearts a common flame/Through our games and art we see/The world as it could truly be." Such authentic expressions reveal children's capacity to transcend deeply entrenched societal divisions when given the appropriate environment.

Our work is grounded in the conviction that social healing begins with transforming memories of past traumas into impulses for a better future. The Peace Olympic festivals integrate Waldorf-inspired practices like Spatial Dynamics, experiential learning, and social artistry, enabling participants to encounter the "other" and develop empathy. As one 11-year-old Palestinian participant wrote: "Yesterday enemies, today friends/Where hatred ends, healing begins." Longitudinal research, including Schaefer's Master's thesis, (**Overcoming Negative Stereotyping and Prejudice Through the Use of Movement, Art, and Games with Prepubescent Youth From Cultures in Intense Conflict**) documents significant reductions in negative stereotyping (83%) and increases in self-esteem and tolerance among participants. Olympic Pentathlon events are currently celebrated throughout the Waldorf world and beyond.

The initiative's impact extends beyond children to institutions, exemplified by partnerships with military organizations like the Greek Air Force repurposed as vehicles for peace. Additionally, the festivals' celebration of marginalized leaders—such as Blind Zulu who ran from Olympia to Delphi (240 kilometers)—has spawned the extrAbility movement, redefining heroism and leadership. In the words of a young Greek participant with disabilities: "Not by sight but by heart I ran/Showing others what truly can/Be achieved when we dare to dream/Beyond limits, beyond what seems."

We present this "**From Conflict to Connection, Social Healing through Waldorf-Inspired Practices**" as a proven, adaptable model for the future that transforms discord and promotes grass roots education, while offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and civil

society actors seeking to address community conflict and strengthen democracy in the 21st century.

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2) Opening

Under the blazing Greek sun, the ancient stadium of Delphi lay quiet for a brief, suspended moment. From the far end of the track, a small group began to appear: Zulu runners from South Africa, all blind, entering the arena after running the long road from Olympia to Delphi (240 km). Around them, in the stone terraces of the stadium, 350 people—about 250 fifth-grade children from communities in conflict, together with their teachers and youth leaders—rose to their feet. The welcome that erupted was not polite applause; it was a wave of recognition that swept through the crowd and lifted everyone present.

Up to that moment, many of the children had lived in societies where people were defined by what they lacked: a missing sense, a different body, the “wrong” nationality, the “enemy” religion. As the blind Zulu runners crossed the stadium, that logic silently cracked. Here were people whom the world might call “disabled,” yet in this place, in this deed, they were clearly extraordinary—athletes of courage, perseverance, and inner sight, heroes to those assembled. The children watched as supposed weakness turned visibly into strength; as limitation became a source of inspiration.

It took twelve years to fully understand what had happened in that instant. Only later did it become clear that this was not just an emotional highlight of a festival, but a seed moment for an entirely new way of seeing the human being: the beginning of the ExtrAbility model. Instead of defining a person by what is missing, ExtrAbility invites us to ask: what is present, what is strong, what is uniquely mine to give? The focus shifts from disability to extra ability—from deficit to potential, from stigma to contribution. In that stadium, a society built on ableism, on ranking and excluding, briefly gave way to a different social imagination.

Today, in the age of artificial intelligence, that same shift in perception must take place around our tools. Just as the blind runners transformed the crowd's view of "disability," ExtrAbility calls us to transform our view of AI. Rather than treating AI as a cold system we must endlessly adapt to—a technology that measures and replaces us—we can reimagine it as IA: an Intelligence Assistant that helps each person fulfill their deeper capacities. Like a good guide on the running track, IA is not there to run for us, but to help us see our path more clearly, to turn our values into concrete actions, and to support our well-being in body, soul, and spirit.

The same impulse that turned a "disabled" runner into a model of human greatness can turn a potentially dehumanizing technology into a tool of humanization. When society learns to look first for the extra ability in every person—and to design its technologies in service of that discovery—moments like that entrance in Delphi are no longer exceptions. They become the blueprint for a future in which education, community, and even AI are organized around what makes each human being irreplaceably whole.

3) Peace Olympics

In the summer of 1999, a group of socially motivated activists met in the Negev Desert. Eyal Bloch put forward the idea of an Olympic International Peace Festival that used a model of the Olympic Pentathlon event created on the East Coast of America by Jaimen McMillan and on the West Coast by Thom Schaefer. This group of activists and trainers began working together in the summer of 2000. The rest is history. Now the celebration of the Pentathlon has been going for 40 years in Waldorf Schools. Most recently Jaimen McMillan and Thom Schaefer put on a country-wide Pentathlon with 350 Chinese fifth graders from 19 Waldorf schools throughout China. The form was largely shaped by the AllinPeace/OlymPeace Festivals put on in Olympia and Delphi, Greece in 2001 and 2003. The OlymPeace Festival (**Note: Olympeace and Allinpeace are used interchangeably**) brought together a rich and diverse group of children to build community through a holistic approach featuring athletic, artistic and communication experiences. What defined these children was the fact that they were raised in conflict areas and had been taught to oppose and think stereotypically about the children in the 'other' community they were paired with, for example, the children from Bethlehem and Jerusalem, from Belgrade and Pristina, from Famagusta and Nicosia. They possessed a disability that was "learned stereotyping." Likewise, the blind Zulu runners had a physical sightless disability that became an extra-ability and provided an inspirational model for all the participants in the Festivals.

To understand this event, let's recall its historical context. During a particularly dire time in Greek History, the Dark Ages, internecine warfare resulted in widespread blood feuds. King Iphitos of Elis sent a messenger to the Oracle of Delphi to ask for divine guidance. The Pythia spoke emphatically, "**Turn warriors into athletes.**" The ancients believed that the Olympics could only take place in an atmosphere free of conflict, aggression, war and destruction. Consequently, a total truce was observed in the whole of the Greek World before and after the games for 1200 years. This practice was enshrined in the Olympics (started in 776 BCE) as the Sacred Truce or **ekecheiria**, (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/truce.html>). The AllinPeace

Festival revived this spirit and inspired youth and communities to build bridges beyond flags and countries, through the universal language of harmonious, athletic movement and the arts. Seeds of empowerment, mutual respect and understanding, building toward solidarity, were cultivated between participating communities encouraging sustainable local peace projects. Educators and youth leaders met and exchanged experiences and expertise to develop aesthetic values, skills of non-violent, effective communication, and respect for cultural diversity among these international communities. The games and activities invited participants to actively experience the ideals of peace, dignity, self-esteem, and mutual understanding. The vehicles for this work included the Pentathlon, the five disciplines (running, jumping, wrestling, discus, and javelin), which formed a complete, holistic training of body, soul, and spirit for the youth of antiquity and today; also the Arts, which allowed expression of deeper feelings, empathy and healing for the individuals and the group. The aim of the Steering Committee, composed of members from each of the communities, was to expand the experiences of the youths and to improve these qualities bringing together more varieties of educational experience and raising greater awareness among students, parents, and communities, in these conflict areas. The children came from many communities in conflict such as Bethlehem (Palestine), Jerusalem (Israel), Belgrade (Serbia), Pristina (Kosovo), Maubeuge (France), Ireland, Olympia (Greece), Alexandria (Egypt), Smolensk (Russia), and Nicosia and Famagusta (Greek and Turkish Communities in Cyprus). In Greece the children were joined by Zulu sight-impaired youngsters from South Africa, who ran 160 miles from Olympia to Delphi. Most of the children were flown to Olympia by the Greek Air Force. The Airbase Commander said: "For a few hours, an instrument of war has been transformed into an instrument of peace!" Teachers and youth leaders were trained to create a movement of non-competitive, holistic peace education that was taken back and utilized in their home communities.

The participants, young and old, came together to discover new ways of relating to one another and form a dynamic vision for a better world. At the heart of the festivals two important groups ensured the success of the AllinPeace Program, the youth leaders and the Spacial Dynamics practitioners, who spearheaded the athletic training of the youths. Youth leaders formed the core of the internal leadership and were chosen by the communities and by the AllinPeace Steering Committee. Ages of youth leaders ranged from 13-21 years and this core was composed of young people who had participated in the past games. Youth are the most effective leaders as peers in working with other youths.

Slide show of the basic principles uncovered by experiences gained through Peace Festivals:

 AllinPeace Principles.pptx

These basic principles have become the stepping stones for an approach that has taken us into the future. They have informed the social healing work of the authors over the past two decades that include peace festivals, international Olympic Pentathlons (using the PACT model), creating jobs in Kenya with coffee farmers and empowering women as small business owners, founding a public Waldorf charter high school in Northern California, and the founding of the ExtrAbility Movement.

4) Credo High School- An Open Enrollment Public Waldorf High School

Using the principles uncovered in the Olympic Peace Festival work, one of the authors embarked on another journey of discovery that aimed at cocreating a Waldorf high school that was accessible to all who wished to matriculate and have a Waldorf Education. After three years of working collaboratively with a development team, in the fall of 2011 in Northern California, Credo High School opened its doors to 40 students. Using a threefold model, Credo was founded as a public Waldorf School with open enrollment, a One Planet Living sustainability school, all with a college prep approach. Imagination, truth, and a feeling of responsibility, as Rudolf Steiner said, serve as the very nerve of education. These elements became the foundation of a fully realized Waldorf high school, Credo, "I believe." Imagine a world where everyone, everywhere lives happy, healthy lives within the limits of the planet's resources leaving space for wildlife and wilderness. With these principles, the sustainability curriculum emerged. Envisioning that Credo's Waldorf standards would meet or exceed the application requirements for the University of California and California State University systems, the school intended that every graduate would qualify for admission to these two systems. This triad of concentrations has resulted in the creation of the largest Waldorf high school in North America. The initial 40 students in 2011, has swelled to a 9th through 12th grade enrollment of 486 students in 2025. This tuition-free independent Waldorf Charter, recognized by the state as a California Distinguished School, will launch its twelfth graduating class in June 2026.

Many Credo graduates are pursuing green jobs and also starting sustainable entrepreneurial companies in line with the basic tenets of One Planet Living (Equity & Local Economy, Sustainable Water, Local & Sustainable Food, Travel & Transport, Zero Waste, Zero Carbon Energy, Regenerative Agriculture, etc.). These tenets are in line with the principles uncovered out of the Peace Festivals (access for all, an integration of social and emotional learning through academic and artistic endeavors, a sense of global responsibility, and an imagination of an alternative future that addresses existing problems and proposes a new sustainable paradigm) have guided the creation and manifestation of an ongoing social healing community at Credo High School.

This serves as a prototype for the development of Waldorf and other high schools in the future by integrating aspects of Credo's unique Waldorf approach with the model of One Planet Living. (<https://credohigh.org/>)

5) Reading The Future- Theory U

It has been 100 years since the death of Rudolf Steiner. His research, which has been shared in over 6,000 lectures and 40 books, has largely been validated by research in the areas of neurology, medicine, education and agriculture. In the next 100 years, we will need to create a body of research that uses his methodology and insights to further develop an organ of perception that pierces the veil of the suprasensory world. The key here is to use these potential results as a story and imagination of the emerging future. How do we use the wisdom of Steiner's research to transcend perceived limitations? How do we create possible solutions

when our collective task is to read the unfolding signs of a complex and unpredictable situation dealing with planetary environmental, technological, and existential challenges?

In a similar way, we have used the principles developed out of the work of OlymPeace/AllinPeace to move our work into the two decades that followed its inception. We need to continue this unfolding. The work of Scharmer's Theory U is most relevant here. In our quest for pertinent ways to predict and imagine the future, we have been impressed by Otto Scharmer's book, **Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges**. Scharmer doesn't use orthodox methods. His framework for creating a future that is trying to emerge involves a change in consciousness often based on prescient intuitions displayed by cutting-edge leaders and organizations.

Described as a **U-shaped process**, it involves a three-part sequence. First, a "**co-sensing**," in which a suspension of judgment takes place such as letting go of habitual, past oriented processing. The key is "**listening**" in a new way by observing places of greatest potential and moving beyond downloading (the known) to fact-based empathic listening. Then sensing with an **Open Mind** (judgment free) and an **Open Heart** (cynicism free) to connect with the experiences of others.

Secondly, "**presencing**" allows one to access the blind spot, what stands in the way, of achieving one's highest potential, a letting come, through letting go of the old self and then diving deep through empathy. To do this one must adopt an **Open Will** (being fearless) and experiencing the **Source** (well of deeper knowing) through intuitive and empathic sensing to draw inspiration and unlock innovative ideas. Doing a daily review (ruckschau) one can get in touch with the essential operatives and move forward by identifying daily goals.

The third phase centers on "**Co-Creating**," which brings potential into reality by "**Crystallizing**" insights and "**Prototyping**" or creating future versions, evaluating them, and through the use of feedback, making adjustments to another iteration. This becomes an exploration of the future by doing or "**Co-Evolving**" an innovative newly perceived and constructed reality.

In summary, Scharmer shows that to create or "predict" a better future, one must first cultivate the inner capacity—the **Open Mind, Heart, and Will**—to deeply sense what is trying to emerge, rather than simply recreating what was.

Theory U

6) The Challenge of AI

The Next Great Conflict in today's future involves: Reclaiming Our Humanity in the Age of AI. AI use is complicating the matter. We stand at a critical juncture, facing a conflict as profound as any climate or political crisis: the tension between human consciousness and Artificial Intelligence. As a recent dialogue revealed, this is a battle not for technology, but for the very essence of what it means to be human—our capacity for critical thought, our unique voice, and our dignity.

The challenge of AI has resulted in many beneficial and enriching developments. Physicians, for generations, have resisted new technologies that threatened their authority or unsettled established practice. But artificial intelligence is breaking that tradition by sweeping into clinical practice faster than almost any tool before it. Two-thirds of [American physicians](#) – a 78% jump from the year prior – and 86% of [health systems](#) used artificial intelligence as part of their practice in 2024. “AI will be as common in healthcare as the stethoscope,” [predicts](#) Dr Robert Pearl, the former CEO of Permanente Medical Group, one of the largest physician groups in the country. New innovations are being utilized and forecasted to emerge throughout medical science.

The challenge of AI and the Internet has also surfaced with broad effects. In our schools, the early skirmishes are already being fought. The convenience of AI, which can effortlessly produce a sophisticated essay on heroism, is quietly eroding a student’s ability to think for themselves. As one speaker noted, students are "taking away their voice, taking away their ability to think critically" because they are handing over the most pivotal part of the learning process to a machine.

Digital distraction is terrible for academic performance. The more time college students spent doing something else on their laptops during class, the lower their exam scores, even after accounting for academic ability. This also applies to teenagers around the world. A 2023 UNESCO report concluded that too much device use can hurt academic performance, mostly because of increased distraction and engagement in nonacademic activities. In a study published in October in *The Journal of Adolescence*, standardized test scores in math, reading and science fell significantly more in countries where students spent more time using electronic devices for leisure purposes during the school day than they did in countries where they spent less time. The situation in Finland, once known for having one of the best school systems in the world, is telling. In 2022, teenagers in Finland admitted to using their devices during the school day for noneducational purposes for nearly 90 minutes. Perhaps as a result, the test scores of Finnish students plummeted between 2006 and 2022.

7) The ExtrAbility Movement

When the blind Zulu runners entered the ancient stadium in 2001 during the Olympeace/Allinpeace Festival, they upended previous ideas of ability and disability. What society labeled as lack appeared, in that moment, as courage, endurance, and inner strength. This turning point was the seed of the extrAbility view: that every human being carries extra capacities which can become visible when the environment allows.

Today, that seed is growing into a new relationship with technology through dignity digital platforms such as extrAbility IA and TOPLisha. These are not generic AI tools; they are designed to mirror and strengthen the user’s own dignity, potential, and values, turning artificial intelligence (AI) into Intelligence Assistance (IA) that serves the human being. Our approach to this challenge must not be one of rejection, but of “transformation.” Like the ancient Greek Olympiads that turned the "tool of war into a Tool of Peace" by changing the

question—'not how far you throw, but how beautifully'—we must raise the standard for engagement with AI. As Einstein has pointed out, the problem cannot be solved in the dimension in which it was created; we must add a **"Third Dimension."**

The new question is: How can AI be used to maintain and further our humanity?

At the Jerusalem ExtrAbility Center, Efrat is one of many educators with extrAbility who are being trained and supported in their professional path. Each evening, she sits with the extrAbility IA to review her day in kindergarten. The IA helps her remember concrete moments, name what mattered, and clarify what she wants to do differently tomorrow. This daily practice strengthens her sense of professionalism and independence: she feels herself growing, "opening up worlds," and her roommates notice she is flourishing. The platform does not do her work for her; it helps her see her own work more clearly and take conscious next steps.

Yaara, another educator with extrAbility trained by the Jerusalem center, uses the same dignity digital platform in her work with young children. Reflecting in the evening, she describes a boy who never finished his tasks. Through the IA-guided reflection, she understands the situation more deeply and plans a new approach. The next morning she meets him with intention and support—and soon he is not only completing the activity, but asking to repeat it. Here, IA is not replacing the educator; it is sharpening her attention and care for a specific child, turning a "problem case" into a success story that builds confidence for both.

This is the foundation of the "Extra Ability Paradigm": which leverages AI as a resource that focuses on what we 'have'—our unique values, connections, and creativity—rather than what we lack. It is a fundamental shift from using the tool for mere task completion to using it for human development.

<https://extrability.org/en/about/extrability/>

8) TOPLisha

A similar dignity-centered design guides TOPLisha, which serves low-income women in Kenya. TOPLisha (TOP = Tapping Our Potential, Transforming Our Problems; Lisha = nourishment) (<https://www.toplisha.com/>) offers women access to digital tools and markets, while its IA component helps each woman articulate her values, skills, and aspirations. Women who were previously confined to local, informal trade begin to see themselves as entrepreneurs with the capacities and tools of a medium-sized business. They experience not only economic opportunity, but also belonging to the digital era and a renewed sense of self-respect.

The educator with extrAbility in Jerusalem, and the women using TOPLisha in Kenya, are just a few among many people with extrAbility who show that the revelation of Olympeace 2001 can become a daily norm. When technology is shaped as IA in service of dignity—supporting reflection, conscious action, and the discovery of one's extra abilities—it stops being a cold system we must adjust to and become a partner in spiritual development. In this way, extrAbility IA and TOPLisha exemplify a new standard: digital platforms that nourish body, soul, and spirit, and help human beings move closer to fulfilling their potential.

Rudolf Steiner taught that technology and spiritual development must advance together, or technology will dominate and diminish the human being. ExtrAbility IA and TOPLisha show this is possible: we can develop and design technology so that it supports our spiritual development,

uplifts us to fulfill our potential, and helps us become more fully human.

The revelation of 2001 whispered: another world is possible.

Educators with extraAbility and the marginalized women of TOPLisha are now saying: this other world is already here. The question is: will Waldorf educators, technologists, policymakers, and communities scale it? Will we commit to designing every digital tool, every classroom, every business platform through the lens of extraAbility—seeing first what each person has to give, and building systems that help them discover and share it?

The seed planted in Delphi can become the forest. But only if we choose, consciously, to tend it.

9) From Digital Profiles to Real-World Change

This vision is already being realized in the world's most challenging communities. By implementing programs based on these principles, AI is serving as a catalyst for human dignity and real-world transformation:

Through the implementation of Dignity Digital Profiles, AI is used to help marginalized individuals—from special education teachers in Mombasa to women in Kenyan slums—articulate their identity, skills, and aspirations. By crafting a digital profile that is more eloquently stated than they could have done alone, these individuals gain a sense of belonging and a dignified self-representation. The use of Transformative Assignments is reshaping the educational landscape. Academic exercises are being replaced with real-life assignments that require students to engage with their community and solve tangible problems, such as addressing local deforestation or developing a small business plan. While AI can offer advice and efficiency, the students must ultimately demonstrate their real life solutions, ensuring that learning remains grounded in action. The system becomes a "triangle": the person, the mentor, and the AI, all working together to foster a sense of self-being and creativity.

 From_Disability_to_extraAbility.mp4

10) Reclaiming Our Attention- How the Reader Can Move into Action in One's Own Community

At its deepest level, the conflict with technology is a battle for our "attention." Social media and endless notifications have fractured our focus, harming our capacity to listen to nature, ourselves, and one another. The Extra Ability Paradigm provides the key to taking back control.

It is in developing our capacity for deep listening and focusing our attention—practices that people with extra abilities often master out of necessity—that we can truly harness AI. We must use the tool to help us put attention on the meaningful moments of our day, on the subtle changes in a child's demeanor, and on our core values.

This work is a movement from the temporary **"idea of power"**—the fleeting strength of kingdoms and armies—to the enduring **"power of idea."** By changing the question and ensuring that our tools are aligned with our highest human principles, we can transform the

challenge of AI into an opportunity for an unprecedented elevation of human consciousness and connection. The future is not about surrendering to the machine; it is about using the machine to become more profoundly, fully human.

How do we read the latest signs of the times as the zeitgeist, Michael, would want us to proceed? By consciously using the principles of the Olympic Festival as ideals, strategies, and tactics for community action, we can apply the wisdom learned from the past and harness these insights for immediate implementation. Through a dynamic collaboration of Waldorf educators and other interested parties working on real life conflicts and problems, a healing social impulse can be envisioned, fashioned, and implemented now.

11) Our Conclusion

The path traced in this paper began with a concrete experiment in Olympeace: a small group of Waldorf teachers partnering with educators from conflict areas to ask a disarming question—what unites us, regardless of background, nationality, or ability? Through the Olympic Pentathlon, fifth-grade history curriculum, and festivals arising out of them, they discovered that sport, art, and story can become a common language strong enough to carry children beyond inherited enemies and fixed identities. In Delphi and Olympia, this took form as real encounters between communities in conflict and as the moment when blind Zulu runners transformed the meaning of “disability” for everyone present, planting the first seed of the ExtrAbility model.

Over the following years, that seed grew into a clearer social principle: anyone who sees even one step further—any teacher, youth leader, or parent—can become a bearer of social healing if that step is offered in service to others. The Waldorf teachers involved were not solitary heroes; they worked “shoulder to shoulder” with local educators from Kosovo, Palestine, Israel, Cyprus, and beyond, co-creating spaces where the question shifted from “what is wrong with you?” to “what strength is waiting to emerge here?” This is exactly the move from an ableist society, which defines people by what they lack, to an ExtrAbility culture, which looks for what is present and can be shared.

This same shift is needed not only in classrooms and festivals, but also in relation to technology. The festivals that spawned the idea of ExtrAbility IA and platforms like TOPLisha show that the 2001 Olympeace impulse can live on in the digital age. Instead of adjusting ourselves to a cold, external AI, we must shape an Intelligence Assistant that serves our values, aspirations, skills, and extra-abilities; that helps us turn inner intentions into outer reality and care for our well-being. The question for the Waldorf and anthroposophical movement is whether it is ready to welcome this seed back consciously: to recognize Olympeace not as a beautiful episode, but as a prophetic beginning.

Are Waldorf schools and anthroposophical initiatives willing to let this social-healing impulse challenge their habits and expand their forms? Can the fifth-grade history block and its Olympic festival become, everywhere, a festival of peace? Can high schools embrace Credo’s progressive attention to an evolving future? Can we allow people with so-called disabilities, and

now IA itself, to stand at the center as co-teachers, in learning what it means to be fully human? If the answer is yes—if there is enough openness of mind and heart to honor the seed of 2001 as it blossoms into ExtrAbility and IA—then the vision of Isaiah, son of Amos, ceases to be only a distant prophecy. It becomes a practical horizon for Waldorf education: swords into ploughshares, enemies into partners, tools of power into technologies of peace, and every human biography recognized as a bearer of an extra ability the world urgently needs.

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