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Cover Page Footnote

Nathaniel Teich is now Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon, where he taught literature and writing courses for more than 32 years. He has published on poets and literary theories of the British romantic movement, writing assessment, imagery, and rhetorical theory. In the field of rhetoric and communication, he has focused on non-adversarial approaches to argumentation and problemsolving based on the work of psychologist Carl Rogers. He edited and contributed essays to a volume reassessing Rogers's theory and practice: *Rogsonian Perspectives: Collaborative Rhetoric for Oral and Written Communication* (1992).

The Rhetoric of Empathy: Ethical Foundations of Dialogical Communication

Nathaniel Teich

In contrast to the doubting game, which involves rational, skeptical, critical analysis, and argumentation to persuade or defeat others, the believing game might seem uncritically naive, as an effort to listen, affirm, and non-judgmentally understand others. However, the believing game cannot be dismissed so easily. Genuinely engaged, the believing game can function as a profoundly ethical strategy within a larger conceptual framework of what I have called for some years “the rhetoric of empathy.” The necessary condition for honestly playing the believing game is an empathic stance, and the goal is to engage in ethical dialogue. Peter Elbow’s continual insistence on the value of the believing game, and the fact that it does not go away—given the need for empathic understanding and ethical practice in our private and public lives—calls our attention to the pragmatic and operational usefulness of the dialectical interplay of this constellation of ideas.

When we focus on Elbow’s dialectic of belief and doubt, however, we should clarify the role of *games*. Years ago, I was initially put off by Elbow’s labeling of his strategies for believing and doubting as *games* because this could imply that they are merely play, recreation, frivolous, as in “child’s play.” Yet *game* and *gaming* can be deadly serious, as in war game, or gaming as a strategy, the gaming industries, or the prey in the hunt. And games certainly are taken seriously in regard to sports and on-line gaming, as any player, spectator, fan, or detractor knows. However, Elbow’s games are not in the same league with those based on the cynical or ironic attitudes that call life or politics games. Underlying Elbow’s games there is the sincere, ethical assumption that we play the roles of belief and doubt honestly, openly, and thoroughly. This idea of role-playing in Elbow’s games requires, literally, recreation, in keeping with its meanings of re-creating and refreshing mentally as well as physically. Thus, role-playing in the believing game is literally “to create anew” and “entertain” (a term implying play and civility; see Huizinga 1-27) the thoughts, opinions, feelings of others and suspending criticism or judgment for the purpose of better understanding, even mutual understanding among all parties. For role-playing ethically, empathy is primary. While this could be just a game, it’s also more than just a game. So let the games begin.

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A Genealogy of Peter Elbow's Believing Game

Blake wrote, in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," these cryptic words: "Without Contraries is no progression" (Plate 3). Peter Elbow's ideas of the believing game and the doubting game form a dialectical practice that embraces contraries. However, putting these ideas into practice necessitates a dialogical intersubjectivity that, depending on the situation, may not be easy to attain. Why this is so is a function of the believing game itself. The radical relevance of the believing game and the rhetoric of empathy is that they raise ethical questions that must be confronted in dialogical communication. Psychologist Carl Rogers asked the fundamental question: Can you risk non-judgmental understanding of others' opinions and beliefs to the extent that you are willing to modify or change your own positions? To Rogers, you risk "being changed yourself." And, Rogers continued, "This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face" (*On Becoming* 333; Teich 30).

It is not news that people may refuse to change their minds and buttress their positions with incomplete and selectively favorable supports. However, the current popularity of the term "truthiness" signifies an increasing tendency of people to believe that something feels true enough, without bothering to investigate further (Manjoo 189).¹ In the face of the apparently increasing difficulties for developing shared assumptions about what is true and how to verify the evidence, the believing game and the rhetoric of empathy provide some help. They offer not only theoretical discussions that help explain people's dialogical communication but also practical strategies that help shape new, productive behaviors.

To come to terms with the believing game, I have found it useful to trace a genealogy of Elbow's thinking from psychologist Carl Rogers and philosopher Michael Polanyi, through the thinking of rhetorician Wayne Booth, to theologian Martin Buber and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in the early twentieth century. I do not have space here to go further back to the precursors of modern conceptions of empathy: from such late eighteenth-century views as Adam Smith's "Moral Sentiments" of sympathy and fellow-feeling, to nineteenth-century theorists and poets (Teich 275-76, 284-94). I do not mean to imply that Elbow's ideas and pedagogy are merely derivative, but rather that they can be situated and understood in terms of humanistic rhetorical traditions.

To start with Carl Rogers, I was surprised to learn that, after majoring in history at the University of Wisconsin, he entered the liberal Union Theological Seminary in New York. But, in less than two years, he had switched to graduate study in psychology at Columbia (Kirschenbaum 44-54). So I was not surprised that, later in his career, he reported that he found Buber's ideas congenial, such as the I-Thou dialogical relationship, Buber's concept of inclusion (which is similar to Rogerian empathy), and Buber's confirmation of another (similar to Rogerian non-judgmental acceptance) (Rogers, *A Way* 19, 63). Elbow's work fits directly into this lineage of Rogers and Buber.

After filling in more detail on my Elbow genealogy and the believing game in theory and practice, I will conclude with some practical suggestions for class-

¹Farhad Manjoo, in *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*, surveyed research in psychology and media studies and analyzed recent world events to show how people select sources which only offer supporting evidence for their opinions while ignoring or rejecting equally relevant evidence for opposing views (27-58, 148-63).

room use of the believing game and the rhetoric of empathy. I include some examples of students' topics for an assignment in my advanced composition classes. Using a variety of situations and creative modes and genres, they apply Rogerian rhetoric in order to understand empathically—that is, to believe as well as doubt—various opinions and positions on controversial issues.

Early in my career I began to explore Rogerian rhetoric and issues of empathy and ethics as a result of my dissatisfactions with prevailing theories and practices of teaching argumentation. In contrast to traditional approaches of rational and adversarial debate, like lawyers in court, marshalling your best reasons and dismissing your opponent's views, the Rogerian non-adversarial approach aims for respectful understanding and practical problem solving for mutually acceptable solutions. Throughout my work, I've stressed that each of these approaches—adversarial or non-adversarial—is best employed situationally. Depending on the conditions at hand, it could be counterproductive to limit your strategies.

Years ago, upon revisiting Elbow's early ideas of the believing game and the doubting game, as well as other passages in *Writing Without Teachers*, I identified a core of Rogerian ideas that infused Elbow's writing about acceptance of the other, mutual understanding, and non-threatening conditions that lead to self-awareness and personal growth. However, in the sparsely annotated 1973 edition, Elbow did not mention Rogers in either the text or notes, although Polanyi was referred to in both the text and a footnote.² When I asked Peter in the early 1980s about Rogers's influence, I remember him saying that he was familiar with Rogers and found some of the ideas useful. It was not until later, in Elbow's new introduction to the 1998 25th anniversary edition reissue of *Writing Without Teachers*, that he acknowledged his "intellectual debts" to Rogers and others: "I probably got as many seeds of the believing game from Rogers as from Polanyi" ("Introduction" xxix).

Primarily, Elbow cited Rogers's practice of restatement for mutual understanding, which Rogers and colleagues called Active Listening (discussed below). Next was a core idea of the human potential movement and Rogers's writings on education: the trust that individuals want to learn and grow, especially when they feel the situation is safe and supportive ("Introduction" xxix-xxx). Elbow also mentioned his experience with group therapy, along with other personal revelations of his struggles as a writer in graduate school settings and as a teacher of writing. Thus, directly and indirectly, Elbow formulated strategies for the believing game and for peer response that derive from his experience of the theories and practices of Rogers and the humanistic psychology of the 1950s and 1960s.

Coincidentally, at almost the same time that *Writing Without Teachers* first appeared, Wayne Booth, in his introduction to *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, stressed that both Rogers and Polanyi were important contributors from their various fields to Booth's project of developing a "systematic assent" in the dialectic of his "modern" rhetoric (xvi-xvii). Booth addressed the need to balance the oppositions of doubt and assent, of denying and affirming. Over the years, Elbow has acknowledged Booth's work for his similar concerns and supportive ideas, although they had no connections when writing their books in the 1970s ("Introduction" xxvii). By 1986, Elbow, in *Embracing Contraries*, praised Booth's ideas from two of his books. First, from *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Elbow praised Booth's "eloquent argument" for intellectuals to be-

²For a thorough analysis of Polanyi's influence on Elbow and Elbow's divergences from Polanyi, see M. Elizabeth Sargent 95-113.

come more believing (280-81). Second, from *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, Elbow praised Booth's 1979 effort to define and practice a "methodological pluralism" (257).

Pluralism, for Booth, entailed an expansive rhetorical activity, in which he sought "the possibility of a full embrace of more than one critical method without reducing pluralities . . . or canceling them out" (*Critical* 25). Here is another branch in the genealogy of Elbow's thinking that exemplifies a kind of American pragmatic pluralism, as found in Booth's theorizing and through Rogers to the educational and social philosophy of John Dewey. Philosopher Stephen Fishman took this line back to nineteenth-century ideas of self and society, especially German romanticism. Of Elbow, Fishman stated: "His emphasis on believing—the sympathetic hearing of diverse languages, public and private, professional and nonprofessional, personal and philosophical—is rooted in a romanticism that seeks not isolation but new ways to identify with one another and, thereby, new grounds for social communion" (654; see also Teich 5-12; Bertoff ix).

The key strategy for realizing this pragmatic pluralism in communication, education, and other endeavors is what Rogers and colleagues developed as "active listening." And both Elbow and Booth adopted Rogerian active listening as a methodology for their dialectics. In *Critical Understanding*, Booth reformulated Rogers's strategy, but (as often happens with Roger's influential ideas) without noting Rogers as precursor. Booth called it his "self-denying ordinance": "I will try to publish nothing about any book or article until I have *understood* it, which is to say, until I have reason to think that I can give an account of it that the author himself will recognize as just" (351; emphasis in original).

What Rogers and colleagues called "active listening" or "say back" spread as a strategy from his nondirective client-centered therapy in the 1950s to become a commonplace in all manner of dialogue situations (and often parodied in popular culture). However, it is important to recognize that Rogers soon went beyond the apparently simple saying back what the therapist understood to be the client's feelings and ideas. Rogers preferred the term "empathic listening" to embrace the broader idea of seeking to adopt the client's point of view (*A Way* 14, 50, 116, 137-39). For communication beyond the therapeutic setting, the goal is "to increase the amount of listening *with*, and to decrease the amount of evaluation *about*" others (*On Becoming* 335; Teich 32). "Real communication occurs," Rogers stated, "and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding . . . to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (*On Becoming* 331-32; Teich 29).³

Writing Without Teachers is suffused with Rogerian principles of empathy

³Thus, there is more embodied in this strategy than is apparent in Rogers's shorthand summary: "that you can't state your point until you can restate your opponent's point to his satisfaction" (Teich 60-61). I've called it his "restatement rule," as developed in his often-cited 1951 article, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation":

Each person can speak up for himself only *after* he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker's satisfaction. . . . It would simply mean that before presenting your own point of view, it would be necessary for you to really achieve the other speaker's frame of reference—to understand his thoughts and feelings so well that you could summarize them for him. (*On Becoming* 332; Teich 30; emphasis in original)

and active listening. For example, “if you want to improve someone’s perception or experience, you can’t do it by arguing. The best you can do is to persuade him to share yours. The only way to do this, almost invariably, is to go over and share his” (110). Since “the self cannot be removed” from dialogue, Elbow urged us “to get the feel of your own self-interest and to adopt the self-interest of as many other people as possible” (172, cf. 184-85). So, too, *Writing With Power* contains prescriptions for mutual understanding and peer group conditions of safety and support for sharing writings. For writing response groups, the believing game requires “entering into other people’s perceptions. . . . By trying to see things through the other readers’ eyes you deepen your own reading skills and you help produce an atmosphere of safety and trust that permits others to see and speak better” (270). For example, “If you just ask her to tell *more about* her reactions, it feels more like ‘Help me see the words through your eyes’” (271; emphasis in original).

While Rogerian restatement may have been parodied as well as practiced outside the therapeutic situation, Rogers’s broader aim was to expand empathic listening and understanding to reduce tensions and defensiveness in the process of communication and problem solving. He identified conflicts not only between individuals, but also among groups, such as racial, religious, labor and management, teacher and student, parent and child (*On Becoming* 334-35; *A Way* 115). Rogerian empathic listening and understanding are especially applicable to dialogical situations of negotiation or mediation where the parties are ostensibly on the same level. To charges that his reliance on empathic understanding was idealistic and impractical, Rogers pragmatically replied: “I don’t regard it as a cure-all, although some people say that I do” (qtd. in Teich 58). Clearly, people may hold some positions of belief or opinion that are not amenable to being changed, just as some conflicts may appear irreconcilable as a result of deeply held values and antagonisms of steadfast opponents. However, according to Richard E. Young, “Rogerian argument, in so far as it is an effort to respond to intense dyadic conflict, seems to offer a means for reasserting the dialogic character of rhetorical argument” (118).

By 2002, Elbow and Booth were in dialogue, with companion conference papers that were eventually published jointly in *College English* as “Symposium: The Limits and Alternatives to Skepticism: A Dialogue.” Booth began, with “Blind Skepticism versus a Rhetoric of Assent,” and Elbow followed, with “Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—and Into the Classroom.” Elbow first identified much common ground in their positions, especially the need to expand rhetoric to include not just how to persuade others to change their minds, but also how to consider changing our own minds (389). Elbow then stressed some divergences in their views. Booth wrote about his concern with the broader issues of “how our minds are changed” and “how . . . we decide whether to assent” (382-83). He was “trying to formulate some middle path,” such as “shared ground that would be discovered if opponents really listened to one another” (384-85). In contrast, Elbow opposed Booth’s goal of seeking an Aristotelian “golden mean” for consensus. Elbow expressed his radical and playful side by urging us to play the oppositional games of doubt and belief as “extremes.” “Extreme belief: go overboard and believe everything. . . . Then extreme doubt. . . . I’m arguing for a dialectical alternation over time” (391). “We don’t get the benefits of the believing game unless we make an active effort to believe various

positions, enter into them, dwell in them; merely listening carefully or refraining from arguing with unwelcome ideas is not enough" (392).

In a particularly cogent distinction, Elbow stated that "Booth focuses more than I do on the crucial act of making up our minds—the act of genuinely deciding—particularly on deciding that the other person is right and that we need to change our own minds. Rational assent" (392). In contrast, Elbow admitted that he's not really interested in the criteria for judging or the resolution of a conflict, but rather in the activities of the process of changing our minds. "My believing and doubting games are pictures of what to do *before* deciding" (392; emphasis in original). Thus, while Booth's position must inevitably address matters of epistemology, logic, and validation of truth claims, Elbow confined his "focus more on preparatory or exploratory activities and not on a conclusion." "I'm not against consensus among sensible people. But I'm against consensus that doesn't derive from a prior effort to believe views advanced against this consensus" (392-93).

Booth admitted that practicing the rhetoric of assent could lead to charges of "mere waffling, surrendering to vicious cases that should be fought against" (386). Similarly, these charges of weakness, waffling, and surrender have been brought by feminist and traditional rhetoricians against Rogerian argument for seeking understanding, reconciliation, and compromise, which feminists associated with stereotypically feminine negative traits (Teich 14, 17). Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, acknowledged these gender stereotypes associated with doubting and believing (178-80). But, in his response to Booth, Elbow did not directly address the adversarial charge of weaknesses in the strategy of believing. Rather he asserted: "We can only play the believing game well if we do it collectively or cooperatively." We avoid conflict and disagreement "if we *cooperate* in exploring divergent views" ("Symposium" 393; emphasis in original). Thus, it is the dialogical nature of the believing game that answers questions about its efficacy. Elbow concluded, in effect, that there is parity between the doubting and believing games. Each is "*one kind or one dimension* of good thinking" (398; emphasis in original).

For Rogers, empathic understanding within dialogue, directly or indirectly, became a way to stretch his thinking. In the 1950s he turned to Martin Buber, best known for writings on philosophy, theology, and Jewish mysticism.⁴ According to Rogers, "at the urging of my students, I became acquainted with Martin Buber (first in his writings, and then personally) and with Soren Kierkegaard. I felt greatly supported in my new approach [to the empathic therapeutic relationship], which I found to my surprise was a home-grown brand of existential philosophy" (*A Way* 39; cf. 19). Then Rogers actually met Buber in 1957 for "an unrehearsed dialogue" before a public audience.

Martin Buber wrote about what we would now define as empathy and dialogue in a 1926 essay on education (first published in English in the collection, *Between Man and Man*, 1948). Buber preferred his own term, "inclusion," be-

⁴The earliest dating that I could find for Rogers's interest in Buber is Rogers's announcement for a seminar in spring 1952 (Collection). A new transcription of the Rogers/Buber dialogue, with detailed analysis that corrects previous versions, was published by Anderson and Cissna. This was the first of several public dialogues that Rogers held with major thinkers over a period of years. Coincidentally, similar to Elbow and Booth, Rogers also found Polanyi's thought most congenial, especially in balancing the cognitive and the affective. Their dialogue took place in 1966 (Kirschenbaum and Henderson).

cause he considered the term empathy as a limited act of “absorption” into situations of life outside the self, which led to the negation or “exclusion of one’s own concreteness.” In Buber’s terms, rather than “one-sidedness,” “inclusion” involves the “mutuality” that characterizes “the dialogical relation” (98-101). Inclusion, then,

is the extension of one’s own concreteness, the fulfilment [sic] of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates. Its elements are, first, a relation, of no matter what kind, between two persons, second an event experienced by them in common, in which at least one of them actively participates, and, third, the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other. A relation between persons that is characterized in more or less degree by the element of inclusion may be termed a dialogical relation. (97)

Buber’s centrality in the development of modern dialogical philosophy bears emphasizing. Certainly, Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogism have gained prominence and been adapted by theorists and applied by teachers in our field. The early influences on Bakhtin from Buber and their common milieu are now better known (Clark and Holquist; Emerson; Perlina). Both were influenced by a turn-of-the-century, neo-Kantian philosopher in the German-Jewish tradition, Herman Cohen. The young Bakhtin was introduced to the pre-World War I writings of the older Buber. Then Bakhtin, through his friend Matvei Kagan, became familiar with a variety of “I-Thou” conceptions, including those of Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, who significantly interacted with and influenced Buber.

During this period, a number of writers from different points of view were formulating constructs of self and other. Buber’s development of his I-Thou has been traced in detail by Maurice Friedman, in his *Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Early Years 1878-1923*. When Buber published *I and Thou* [*Ich und Du*] in 1923, according to Friedman, it was not simply the “human I to the Thou of God” but “man, nature, and art were also *Thou*” (409; emphasis in original). In a similar vein, Walter Kaufmann, in his prologue to his 1970 translation, argues for *Ich und Du* to be rendered “I and You” to reflect the less remote formality of the construct. “*Thou* immediately brings to mind God; *Du* does not” (14-16, emphasis in original).

A key problem, which is practical as well as philosophical, lies in defining and describing operationally how various constructs of self and other can accurately represent the intersubjectivity of dialogical communication. For example, Buber’s transcendental dimensions are not present in Bakhtin’s ideas that the other is needed for the possibility of realization of the “I.” However, both thinkers share a model of dialogue involving the interdependency of the formation of “I” and “other.” To Buber, it is the “essential reciprocity” of relationship between two beings that confirms their humanness: “the saying of Thou by the I” (208). Bakhtin’s view has been interpreted to differ “in its insistence on a separateness right up to (and including) the boundary between the two speaking voices” (Emerson 272). Where and how to mark the boundary or circumscribe the space between self and other is indeed a linguistic challenge. Yet, regardless of how it

is conceptually rendered, the nature of that dialogic, existential “space”—which has often been called “the between”—represents the grounds for possible reciprocity in the intersubjectivity of dialogical communication.

When I say, “regardless of how it is conceptually rendered,” I am referring to the many metaphorical or imagistic terms used to signify the act of empathy or rational efforts to achieve the intersubjective relations of self and other. We are familiar with such frequently used words as enter into the world of the other, go over, inhabit, dwell with, indwelling, walk in another’s shoes, put yourself in another’s skin (Teich 237-39). However, in thinking about what these words signify, we would benefit from Theodor Reik’s distinctions among such concepts as projection, introjection, incorporation (Teich 276, 287). Note, Buber stressed that inclusion does not entail a giving up or going out of the self by absorption into the other. Similarly, Rogers, from his clinical standpoint, stressed that empathy did not entail simple identification with the other. “This ability to see completely through the client’s eyes, to adopt his frame of reference” is to experience “*as if* one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition. . . . If the ‘as if’ condition is lost, the state is one of identification” (*A Way* 140-41; emphasis in original).

Unfortunately, Rogers and Buber were distracted from exploring “the between” in their less-than-satisfactory dialogue (Anderson and Cissna 99-105). Buber did trace back to his student days “a certain inclination to meet people, and as far as possible to, just to change if possible something in the other, but also to let me be changed by him . . . as far as it is legitimate” (21-22; my edit from transcript). Thus, while “the between” remains always irreducible and essentially unbridgeable, there is also the possibility of holistic experiencing, like that of Rogers’s empathy, Buber’s inclusion, and, I would add, Elbow’s believing game. They offer ways across, if only temporarily and incompletely. That Elbow and the believing game belong in this humanistic company is evident from this genealogical investigation.

Classroom Applications of the Believing Game and Rogerian Empathic Understanding

To conclude with a return to the pragmatic world of teaching writing, to employ Rogerian empathy and the believing game necessitates different strategies and, thus, can achieve results different from those of traditional rhetorics and their strategy of accommodation. We now have more ways to encourage students. With the prominence of multi-genre alternative discourses, multi-media modes, and creative non-fiction, students can be encouraged to use their own creativity for narration and description of dialogue situations to understand others’ points of view. The universal elements of story are prevalent in non-fiction as well as fiction. It’s not impinging on Creative Writing departments to encourage students to use in their arguments and analyses such elements as personal narrative, dialogue, metaphor, anecdote, vignette, vivid description, and more.

If we expand the rhetorical options for dialogue and persuasion, students will respond positively. In my experience, they show genuine commitment to the task, express natural voice, and explore meaningful personal connections to a problem or controversial issue. In the process, students engage in a practice that

goes beyond reasoning in the cognitive domain to experience a wholeness in their writing that is usually separated in school and academic discourse. This wholeness involves the interconnection of thought and feeling, cognition and affect, mind and body, that could lead to new understandings and new values and behaviors in personal and public spheres.

As I said at the outset, the success of the rhetoric of empathy and the believing game will be a function of the situation. Just as some interpersonal, social, and political situations might call for uncompromising advocacy (because we have some issues that are non-negotiable and some values we will not change), in other situations we might recognize the benefits of cooperation and compromise for a mutually satisfactory solution to a real-world problem. In the former case of intractable issues and unwavering beliefs, at the least, the benefits of ethical, empathic dialogue may yield better understandings of differences and produce tolerance and civility.

Topic selection is crucial, however, since the writer needs to present positions fairly, with empathic understanding even of opinions possibly repugnant to the writer. Accordingly, I have stressed to students that they should not choose issues about which they are unwilling to treat all sides adequately. Here are a few examples from my classes:

- Conservationist vs. Logger: dialogue of two friends meeting years after high school in rural lumber town
- School Librarian: receives letters from two parents, one to ban controversial book and the other to keep in library
- Animal rights advocate vs. research scientist in campus lab using animals for experimentation
- Industrial park development vs. keeping open space for playing fields
- Internal monologue or dialogue between opposing sides of self
- Editorial in newspaper and letter to editor presenting differing views of an issue

For this assignment, the writers need not solve the problem or reconcile the parties, but just practice for the big games ahead. ☺

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