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Breathing Enlightenment and Necessary Change into English Language Programs with Creative Writing

ABSTRACT
Employing a number of crucial discoveries in neuroscience and drawing from years of valuable teaching experience, I show that creative writing is the most effective and natural kind of writing to help English language learners (ELLs) develop their writing skills. Based on over 25 years of language teaching experience, I argue that creative writing helps students find their unique writing style and voice, nurtures confidence in the craft, creates a genuine relationship with the skill, and successfully articulates their feelings and thoughts to a desired audience. Core writing problems for ELLs are addressed and creative writing is suggested as a powerful solution to many of these issues. A very successful creative writing workshop developed at an American Intensive English Program is offered to illustrate how essential the various genres of creative writing are for ELLs. This creative writing program developed the ELLs' writing skills significantly more than any of the traditional kinds of academic writing activities or assignments. In most cases, the ELLs improved 30% to 45% on their writing exit exams after completing the creative writing program. The exit exam results for the academic writing course were considerably lower when compared to the creative writing program results. The article concludes by showing how discoveries in neuroscience and cognitive psychology support the use of creative writing over other forms of writing used in Academic English Programs and Intensive English Programs.

KEYWORDS
creative writing, holistic, observation-focused, ownership, creative thinking, inner personhood, educe

"I am the poet of the body,
And I am the poet of the soul."
Walt Whitman,
Leaves of Grass

1. Introduction

In this article, I will first discuss the general need for creative writing. Next, I will touch on the frequent problems English language learners (ELLs) encounter in Academic English Programs (AEPs) and Intensive English Programs (IEPs) and the obstacles that both native users of English and ELLs face in academic writing.

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I will, then, offer creative writing as the logical solution. I will reinforce this claim with support from higher education and the results from a successful creative writing program I established at an American university. I will conclude by offering discoveries from the neuroscience and cognitive psychology communities that also favor creative writing as the most useful, natural, and powerful tool for helping students become successful writers. This is based on decades of research regarding how our brains learn, employ information, and perform skills in the most effective ways possible (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Sousa, 2011).

2. An Overview: The Need for Creative Writing

The general opinion held by most U.S.-based AEPs and IEPs is that ELLs need to focus on academic writing (e.g., academic essays and research papers) because that is what will be required of them in their undergraduate or graduate programs. These same AEPs and IEPs, however, fail to realize that in order to learn how to write and write well, students (either native or non-native users of English) need to practice writing *a number of different genres*. Interestingly enough, it is creative writing which can best meet this need of employing *multiple kinds of genres* and *tools* (e.g., poetry and prose; similes and metaphors) to help develop the ELLs' writing skills and foster a natural development and marked progress in the craft. This is why so many forward-thinking language programs around the world (e.g., the Czech Republic, Germany, Russia, and Spain) use creative writing activities, methods, and techniques as fundamental language learning tools for their respective writing programs (Randolph, 2020). Moreover, Zinsser (2001) correctly points out that "[y]ou learn to write by writing. It's a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it's true" (p. 49). I would also argue, based on the number of successful and effective creative writing workshops and programs I have set up, that it is creative writing which helps students write better. These workshops and programs are deemed "successful and effective" because a number of the IEP directors supported my method, as it helped the ELLs improve their writing test scores more than the traditional academic writing classes. This is, I believe, primarily because the ELLs connect immediately with the creative writing topics and techniques. It is a more natural way of expressing oneself than that of the traditional grammar-based and template-driven writing styles (for more on this, see Nash, 2004 and Fanselow, 2014).

Creative writing styles are developed *internally* from "within" the students' own personhood whereas academic writing styles are *external* in nature; that is, they are often a forced style of writing based on an assigned textbook or an English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) program agenda. Furthermore, as we will discuss below, creative writing helps because it has a number of genres and techniques that enhance the ELLs' writing styles. In essence, creative writing develops multiple kinds of writing, not only creative

writing. Students learn natural methods of argument and persuasion through writing dialogues; they learn reflection and description through writing character monologues; and they develop summary and analysis by creating genuine plots in their short stories and narrative poems. In short, it is creative writing that nurtures a sense of comfort, control, and confidence in enhancing the students' writing development, ownership, style, and voice (Randolph, 2012; 2014; Randolph & Ruppert, 2020; Urbanski, 2006).

If I use a sports analogy to support my argument, it becomes very clear. Let us take volleyball as an example. Volleyball players do not practice one skill to perform just one function on the court or make just one kind of play. Each player (save the libero) works on passing, setting, blocking, spiking, and serving. In terms of physical conditioning, they do yoga, run, stretch, and lift weights. Doing only one training activity or practicing one kind of drill would simply not work. The same is true for writing, especially for those learning *how* to write. A learner's brain needs to be flexible, and it develops by using multiple tools and methods (Eagleman, 2015; Sousa, 2011; Willis, 2006).

It should be noted, as I mentioned above, that I have set up many successful and long-running creative writing programs in the States and abroad. Unfortunately, neither time nor space will allow me to detail each one here. I have selected the specific program below as a model because it had the most significant impact on the ELLs who were preparing to directly enter that American university as full-time students in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Other creative writing workshops and courses that I created surely helped the students' writing, but those particular students were not necessarily preparing to enter an American college or university. They merely wanted to improve their creative and critical writing and thinking skills before returning to their home countries, and the creative writing workshops met this need.

3. The Basic Issues ELLs Face with Academic Writing

According to Anderson (2022), the four major challenges that ELLs encounter in academic writing are: 1) a limited proficiency in the language (e.g., they lack the needed vocabulary to paraphrase and write high level papers); 2) a lack of understanding and use of the various conventions and rules of academic writing (e.g., when and how to properly use sources); 3) a limited ability to do the needed research and use what is learned (e.g., not being aware of appropriate sources); and 4) a limited capability to write at a university level due to their personal history (e.g., not being trained in their home culture about the basic structure of academic paragraphs) (Anderson, 2022, paras. 3–14).

Throughout the years, my ELLs have shared their own issues about academic writing. Below is a list of challenging problems that I gathered in 2016 from two advanced writing classes. The ELLs felt strongly that they were a) not able

to produce developed arguments in research papers; b) not comfortable with the topics because of a lack of cultural knowledge; c) not able to relate to the abstract nature of the topics; d) not able to express adequate knowledge of lexical items to paraphrase and to persuade the reader; and e) not able to write from multiple perspectives (Randolph, 2016).

It appears, then, that my ELLs have observed, in addition to the actual skill of writing, that the writing topics also present a problem because there is often no, or very little, relation or connection with the students' interests or personhood, and the topics are abstract in nature. Moreover, as mentioned above (Anderson, 2022), the various kinds of writing (i.e., analyses and research-based writing) present issues because many ELLs are not trained to write these kinds of papers prior to coming to study in AEPs or IEPs. Even those international students who complete their senior year at an American high school often struggle. The fundamental stumbling blocks point to these two issues: We are not only asking ELLs to think and write in a non-native language about topics of little interest or understanding, but we are also asking them to use certain styles and techniques which are equally challenging (Randolph, 2012). Instead of simply writing and learning how to write, they are met with a myriad of other issues, which are often unhelpful, unmotivating, and frustrating (Urbanski, 2006).

4. Support for Creative Writing in Higher Education

Despite the current reality that substantial research in higher education (Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008; Fanselow, 2014; Harper, 2015; Hecq, 2015) and the neuroscience community (Erhard et al., 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2006; Immordino-Yang, 2016) support creative writing and argue that the techniques and tools used therein are helpful for all writers, AEPs and IEPs continue to emphasize academic writing in their courses because they believe it to be the most important kind of writing. In addition, they contend that it will be most helpful for their students' undergraduate and graduate careers (Randolph, 2012). For decades now, I believe that directors at AEPs and IEPs have misunderstood the essence and value of creative writing.

It is ironic, however, that many other departments on university campuses share a different opinion; they sincerely honor and greatly value creative writing. What I find particularly significant are the results of a survey I conducted regarding higher education faculty members from 14 distinct departments and their views on creative writing (*N=25*). The departments ranged from accounting and pre-medical programs to engineering and religious studies. I asked the professors to choose "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," "strongly disagree," or "other" concerning the following statements:

- I think that creative writing ought to be taught in ESL programs.
- Creative writing enhances students' minds and helps them with critical thinking.

- I use creative writing in my classes.
- I think if students had creative writing, they would write better papers and more critical pieces in my class.

The support for using creative writing to foster ELLs' writing skills was robust. 88% either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that creative writing ought to be taught in ESL programs. 96% either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that creative writing enhances the students' minds. 57% used creative writing in their classes; these included the professors from the engineering and philosophy departments. Those who did not use it, reflected on revising their own pedagogy and were willing to incorporate some creative writing activities in their classes. And lastly, 80% either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that creative writing would help the students' writing performance in the professors' respective courses (Randolph, 2012, p. 72).

What stood out as most intriguing were the professors from the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs and the philosophy and religious studies departments, as they were the strongest supporters of creative writing. In my follow-up questions, they responded that creative writing, more than any other kind of writing, gets students (both domestic and international) to write with more confidence, develop their own style and voice, and consider topics from various perspectives (Randolph, 2012, p. 73). The professors from the MBA programs claimed that creative writing is essential because it encourages students to think outside the box and develop both critical and creative ways of approaching various challenges in the field. In addition, they felt the tools that creative writing nurtures are pivotal in order to prepare the minds of their students for the changing dynamics in both domestic and global business ventures.

I would like to note that it is not my intention to belittle academic writing. If we carefully examine creative and academic writing, we can see that they share a number of common attributes (Nash, 2004; Randolph, 2019). For instance, both require a logical and coherent development of ideas, both depend on sound grammar and syntax, both clarify and communicate concepts, both require paraphrasing ideas and using citations (albeit in different formats), and both, in one way or another, tell a story to the reader or researcher. In fact, what I am suggesting is to use more creative writing techniques in all levels of AEP and IEP writing courses so that our students become better academic writers. Each kind of writing is important, and each can help ELLs become stronger thinkers and writers. That said, creative writing ought to be used more as it is simply the better tool of the two in terms of skill development.

There are, however, significant differences between the two kinds of writing. The most striking one is that creative writing employs a wide array of genres such as poetry, fables, flash fiction, short stories, novels, drama, and creative non-fiction. In addition, creative writing uses a number of effective tools such as alliteration, dialogue, foreshadowing, metaphors, similes, and symbolism. Creative writing

also strongly involves the emotions, the senses, and personal experiences, all of which are deeply supported as crucial learning elements by the neuroscience community (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Lieberman Doctor, 2015; Ratey, 2002). We must always keep in mind that ELLs are not only learning how to write, but, in many cases, they are still *learning the language*. So, we must ask, is a formulaic, rigid style of writing more suitable for them, or one that nurtures their acquisition of the language, promotes a discovery of their immediate and intimate self, and helps enhance their writing as creative writing does? Is a relatively shallow and uncreative template-driven style of writing helpful or one that pushes the ELLs deeper into understanding who they are as individuals and encourages them to follow the path of education, which is to "educe" or "pull out" their own inner wisdom and knowledge? Are we training them to become masters of writing, or are we forcing them to become slaves of a formulaic and limited style of writing?

At this point, I would like to offer my working definition of creative writing. I believe it will shed light on just how useful and powerful it is. I define creative writing as the following spiritual activity that promotes continual personal enrichment:

> Creative writing is a way of embracing, observing, experiencing, thinking, and writing about the past, present, and future through tapping into one's soul, spirit, mind, body, brain, consciousness, and art of mindfulness. Creative writing is a holistic activity that includes using emotions, senses, memories, ideas, experiences, and insights in order to learn from these as well as learn from one's immediate and surrounding environment. That is, creative writing is a state of mind and a way of life. It is highly observation-focused which allows for constant growth. (Randolph, 2020, slides 13–15)

Academic writing, on the other hand, is usually strictly structured, highly formulaic, and often deals with topics that are either too abstract or far removed from the ELLs' personal life or cultural understanding. It does not promote ownership, nor does it really inspire development of a style or voice. In fact, Nash (2004), a professor at the University of Vermont in the School of Education and Social Services, claims that academic writing can be very limiting in that "it's mostly just a matter of understanding how to fit some new pieces of the knowledge puzzle into the old research templates; a matter if you will, of knowing how to pour new research wine into the same old format bottles" (pp. 54–55).

For ELLs to understand that writing is not merely a skill but a state of mind, a way to view life, a journey of self-expression, and a way to learn, there must be meaning and ownership in what they write. Allen (2000) discusses critical issues he faced with an academic writing course that he taught to domestic Canadian undergraduates, and he touches on the same issues that many ELLs face in AEPs and IEPs. Allen's students wrote adequately enough to pass the course, but they did not appear to be learning much. They were really not learning how to write nor

develop a style to foster their own voice. According to Allen (2000), "[t]heir work lacked authenticity. They had no idea how to engage meaning around the kinds of topics they found in the *Norton Reader*... Their writing was make-believe... They focused on 'not making mistakes'" (p. 250). In addition to not improving their writing skills, Allen was concerned because his students were not developing any sense of style that expressed their personalities or experiences.

Allen pinpoints an underlying problem by exposing that most kinds of academic writing do not allow students (both native and non-native users of English) to find meaning in their work, nor are they really able to internalize or personalize their writing. Allen (2000) suggests

> [t]he "writing problem" in our universities is really a humanism problem. We teach humanism and dodge its practice. We ask our students to study and understand meaning at the same time that we offer little opportunity for them to make original meaning. (p. 287)

After a few semesters of realizing the academic writing-based classes were not working in terms of developing his students' skills, Allen substantially restructured his course's content and had his students do creative writing. It was then he noticed a dramatic transformation. His students found meaning in their work, developed their own style, and also—perhaps most important—significantly improved their craft. Allen's students even reported his writing class was helping them write better in their other university courses (Allen, 2000).

If the above cases of Nash and Allen show us the problems that academic writing can often pose for native users of English, then how do we rationally expect our ELLs to fare any better? Again, I do not wish to suggest we completely eliminate academic writing in AEPs or IEPs. However, it does not appear to be the most effective kind of writing for our ELLs.

5. The Natural Solution: Creative Writing

As mentioned above, I have created and implemented creative writing activities (both in EFL and ESL contexts), and I have designed and taught intermediate and advanced level creative writing programs, workshops, and capstone courses for AEPs and IEPs in the States and abroad. The inspiration for the activities and courses was the result of observing the frustration that my students felt because of their lack of a command in writing papers on abstract topics that were either program or textbook driven. They were also dealing with some basic language issues. I quickly noticed that my students were struggling just like Allen's undergraduate students had struggled due to similar reasons.

However, once I introduced the creative writing activities or started the creative writing classes, I observed an immediate change in both the students' attitude *toward* writing and the *actual* writing being produced. I will now discuss

one specific program that truly transformed the students and the way writing was taught and understood at an American IEP.

One of the best recorded success stories regarding my advocacy for and implementation of creative writing took place at the Center for English as a Second Language at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. In 2010, I was asked to teach writing to an advanced section of ELLs (level five) but was surprised that they could not adequately write a solid paragraph. I consequently inquired what the students focused on at the high intermediate level (level four). I was told they wrote paragraphs and three to four academic essays on U.S.-related topics; for example, the U.S.-Mexico border issue and same-sex marriages. I was immediately astonished by two points: First, the content of the writing topics seemed unrelated to that group of ELLs; and second, these students were still struggling with the basic idea of a paragraph.

After observing the same issues with my advanced students for two eight-week sessions, I asked the director of the IEP if I could restructure our high intermediate section (level four) and turn it into a creative writing workshop. This, I felt, would better prepare the students by developing control, comfort, and confidence in their writing, and I knew–based on other programs I had created–it would help them with the academic writing in their higher-level courses.

The tools used in creative writing are numerous. For instance, the students learn how to effectively use a myriad of new lexical items and various kinds of sentences that help in pacing, tone, and effect. They also begin to play with the language which allows them to take risks and develop more quickly as writers and users of the language (Maley & Duff, 1989, p. 9).

I was granted permission to implement the creative writing class in the spring of 2011. During the eight-week session, my ELLs worked on short forms of poetry, flash fiction, persuasive personal letters, children's stories, dialogue-focused stories, and short autobiographical narratives. We also worked on developing well-structured and coherent paragraphs. These paragraphs were important because we used them as our *evaluation tools* to critique and reflect on each other's work. That is, in addition to peer reviewing the poetry, prose, and letters, the students wrote paragraph-length critiques, focusing on one strong point and one point that needed work regarding their creative writing pieces. In short, the ELLs used both creative and critical writing in this workshop.

As we moved along through the eight-week session, my ELLs' sense of clarity, detail, comfort, cohesion, and unique style became noticeably developed. What also stood out was the *joy* they exhibited in the writing process and in sharing their work with the class. The reason was simple: They were writing about experiences, memories, and concepts that they knew about, and this gave them confidence to write and write better.

We also did a great deal of modeling in the program. That is, my teaching assistants and I modeled the creative writing activities and concepts for and with

the students. Such a practice is crucial in order for the students to embrace writing, play with the tools and techniques, and see that writing is a complex process of discussing ideas, brainstorming, writing, rewriting, peer reviewing, editing, and proofreading (Urbanski, 2006, pp. 26–30).

Because of its success, the creative writing seminar was permanently adopted and implemented into the IEP curriculum. The decision was based on three significant factors (Randolph, 2012, p. 73). First, the students in the program were required to take exit essay exams in order to move from one level to the next. On average, before implementing the creative writing seminar, 50% to 60% of the ELLs passed from level four to level five; however, they still struggled with paragraph structure and continuity in essays. In contrast, after implementing the creative writing seminar, 80% to 95% of the ELLs passed the exams. The writing instructors in the program who graded the exit exams noticed an overwhelming difference in the quality of sentence and paragraph structure. They also noticed more attempts at risk-taking and experimentation with the language (e.g., a creative use of metaphors and effective alliteration). Second, the instructors teaching the other skills in the program, like reading and grammar, noticed a marked improvement in their ELLs' coherence and depth in writing. Their grammar use was reported as much improved as well. And third, the students reported to the director and on class evaluations that they became more engaged in the writing process. They no longer saw writing as just a skill, but they discovered it to be "a way of thinking" and "a new way of observing life." Moreover, they felt their creativity was accepted and this motivated them to blend their creativity with their critical thinking. This experience was paramount in the developmental process, as its effect on the learners was both inspirational and motivational. The synthesis of critical and creative thinking, in general, is a great benefit for all learners because it promotes confidence and control in acquired skills and activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013).

According to the students, "creative writing helped them learn to 'play with the language,' 'appreciate the language,' and 'view it as a living thing that grows'" (Randolph, 2012, p. 73). With the new student enthusiasm, the faculty and director's support, and the added energy from the graduate assistants teaching the additional sections of level four, creative writing found its way into the IEP and helped the ELLs with the academic-based writing that awaited them in level five. These students all went on to succeed in their pre-medical, nursing, engineering, and education programs; and, they received high praise from their advisors on their ability to write well, focus on the topics, and pursue the various arguments from both sides of the issues covered in these classes. This, I believe, was solely due to their training in creative writing, because the decades of academic writing at this IEP did not yield the same results.

6. Support from Neuroscience and Cognitive Psychology

If there is one field that the English language teaching and learning community ought to work more closely with, it is neuroscience. Discoveries and deeper insights are being made daily about the brain and how we learn best. I would thus like to make four arguments for using creative writing in AEPs and IEPs based on recent research done in neuroscience and cognitive psychology (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Randolph, 2019; Randolph & Ruppert, 2020; Ratey, 2002).

6.1. Emotions

Perhaps one of the strongest reasons to use creative writing in AEPs and IEPs is the fact that it promotes the use of the emotions in learning far more than academic writing. Immordino-Yang (2016), in her book, *Emotions, Learning, and the Brain*, goes into great detail about the impact that emotions have on learning. She shows that "[i]t is literally neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion" (p.18). If we reflect for a moment, we see the need for emotion in learning is built into our evolutionary DNA, for emotions have ensured that we encode, store, and retrieve information that has helped us to survive throughout human history.

The topics we use in creative writing are guided by an effective balance of reason and emotion (Randolph & Ruppert, 2020, p. xi). Reason is used to make the poem or story coherent, ordered, and genuine. Emotion is used to make the reader feel the situation and help the author communicate his or her thoughts on a very genuine and humanistic level. In short, reason and emotion work hand in hand to make the writing clear and tangible, understandable, and intriguing.

6.2. Flexibility and Variation

In her cutting-edge book, *Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning*, Willis (2006) explains the importance of flexible learning or approaching learning from various techniques and methods, and she asserts that

> [t]he more ways something is learned, the more memory pathways are built. This brain research discovery is part of the reason for the current notion that stimulating the growth of more dendrites and synaptic connections is one of the best things teachers can learn to do for the brains of their students. (p. 3)

As above, academic writing tends to be formulaic and template driven which is fine for advanced writers; however, our ELLs are in a dynamic and fragile process of learning English and how to write. Creative writing, on the other hand, gives students a myriad of ways to write and communicate their feelings, insights, and thoughts through poetry, prose, drama, and creative nonfiction. That is, writing in

various ways ultimately enhances our ELLs' writing and thinking skills and helps them become versatile in the craft.

6.3. Personalization

Willis's (2006) work suggests that the more teachers allow their students to personalize the content or skill, the more their students learn and find meaning in the process. Eagleman (2015) compares human brains to snowflakes in that each is intricately unique; as a consequence, the way we perceive reality is unique. "You don't perceive objects as they are. You perceive them as you are" (p. 33).

Highly academic topics or abstract concepts have their place in English language learning, to be sure. However, while our students are trying to learn the language and develop a very demanding skill like writing, we need to allow them to write based on who and what they are. This includes their inner personhood and their unique memories and experiences. If we allow them to use their own self as the subject of their work, they not only foster a challenging craft in an intimate way, but they also undergo a unique self-discovery. And ultimately, in personalizing the content of the writing, they make it their own, they give it meaning, and this becomes the natural segue into developing their own style and way to play with and manipulate the language and the craft. Thus, creative writing, through personalizing the content and the skill, allows ELLs to become the masters versus the slaves of the writing process.

6.4. Enjoyment

The fourth argument is perhaps the most essential: We need to do creative writing because it is simply a great deal of fun. The ELLs enjoy it, and it gives them a chance to actually create and contribute to their own language development. Furthermore, given how I have observed the students engaging, experimenting, and taking risks with the creative process, it truly appears that creative writing produces more positive neurotransmitters that create happy students. Immordino-Yang (2016) has shown that happiness is chemically produced by eliciting dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin, and serotonin. Each of these is responsible for creating a happy mental state, and each is elicited during the creative process and sharing the work in a classroom community. Of these four, dopamine (the motivation neurotransmitter) and oxytocin (the comfort, safety, and trust neurotransmitter) are perhaps the ones most responsible for the fun and happiness produced while doing creative writing and sharing the poems and stories in the class. Again, if our ELLs are emotionally engaged in the content and the craft, reacting positively to the flexible nature of the genres, internalizing the topics, and using their personhood, then great joy and enthusiasm will naturally motivate them. It is this joy, this valuable creative instinct that makes both writing and learning inspiring endeavors.

7. Conclusion

Writing is no easy skill to master, and it becomes even more burdensome for learners who are working in another language, addressing topics that are abstract in nature, and writing in a style that is equally unfamiliar. Creative writing, however, can help our ELLs build a strong sense of comfort, control, confidence, and ultimately joy in writing because they are inspired to use what they are familiar with in order to communicate their feelings, ideas, and thoughts. The topics come from their personhood, and they learn to develop a unique style based on who they are. I thus encourage AEPs and IEPs to consider using more creative writing as a tool to help their ELLs learn to write. This will motivate them to genuinely enjoy the writing process, and it will develop their writing skills for their university level classes as well as their life beyond the classroom. Through this enlightening experience, our ELLs will feel the rich and vibrant energy of Walt Whitman; they too will understand the meaning and importance of his insight, "I am the poet of the body, And I am the poet of the soul" (1855/1986, p. 44). By following the path of creative writing, our ELLs will embody its definition and truly connect with the reality that it nurtures a unique way of embracing life and allowing the spirit and the mind to grow with the simple yet profound offerings of each passing moment.

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