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With Your Host

Jody Moore

I'm Jody Moore and this is *Better Than Happy*, episode 377: Stages of Faith.

Did you know that you can live a life that's even better than happy? My name is Jody Moore. I'm a master certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And if you're willing to go with me I can show you how. Let's go.

Alright everybody, so last week I had Christine Cook on the podcast. I hope you enjoyed that conversation. She's an amazing coach who specializes in helping people who are struggling with or questioning their faith, but want to get to peace around it, want to stay in their faith. And today I want to add on to that conversation that Christine and I had with some tools that I have learned and some of them I have created and thought through on my own, some of them I've learned from other experts but I found them to be so powerfully helpful with regards to this topic.

So, whether you are questioning and having angst and discomfort around your faith or you have loved ones, or friends, or family members who are, this is helpful for both people. And if you don't have anyone in your life who is struggling with it right now you probably will in the very near future because I believe that due to the massive information sharing and ability to connect and learn from one another on a global level in a much faster way than we've ever been able to, information sharing, seeing what's happening in people's lives.

I think the increased speed of communication has increased the timeline at which a lot of people will go through a process of questioning their faith. I don't see that as a bad thing. I'll tell you why as we go through this episode, but I think it's something that we need to become better informed about and better equip ourselves with. So, I'm going to base my thoughts today on a meeting that I recently taught, we call it a fireside in the LDS church because I think at one day and age we all sat around the fire and had these discussions.

So, at any rate I taught a fireside recently to the members of my stake on this topic and it was very well received and I felt like an important message that we get out on a broader scale. I also recently taught a class in Be Bold on this, if you're in Be Bold you know we've been studying this and doing lots of coaching on it.

So, I want to begin by sharing that when I first started my coaching practice eight ish years ago, one of my first real clients, meaning someone who wasn't just a friend of mine or family member of mine who said, "Okay, you're a new coach, that's cute, I'll humor you and be your client." A real client who found me, wanted help and was struggling. And wanted to see if coaching would help her. What she came to me with, she was a member of the LDS church then she knows who she is. Hello my friend if you're listening.

She and her husband had been married in the temple many years before, I want to see maybe 12 to 15 years prior. They had kids of varying ages. And her husband in the last couple of years from the time I was coaching her had decided that he didn't believe in the LDS church anymore. And he had chosen to distance himself from it. He had stopped attending church. He didn't believe in the doctrine, And now they were navigating how do we be a family in this new situation?

And I'll tell you what, coaching was so powerful for addressing that situation. And I've coached many, many people in that situation who have a spouse, or a child, or children, or what have you, leaving the church or struggling with the church. I've also coached a lot of people who they themselves are struggling with it. And here's what I want to say.

It's easy for someone who's not questioning their faith to think that that person must be doing something wrong. They must have stopped reading their scriptures or praying, or doing something that we are told helps us stay close to God. Or maybe they have started doing something that would lead them away from the spirit, making some poor choices or what have you. It's easy to move into judgment and think they must be in this situation because of some poor choices they have made.

And that could be for some people but everybody I've ever coached, that's not been the case. It's not the case. It's not that this person is doing something wrong or stopped doing something they should be doing, not to any greater extent anyway than all the people I know who aren't questioning their faith. None of us are perfect at doing all the things we want to doing, or not making mistakes. So, I don't see a pattern in all of the people I've coached of they're just being disobedient.

I see amazing, loving, good righteous people who are suddenly struggling with their faith. In fact, it's often because they're so good and loving that they are struggling with their faith because suddenly they see opportunities in the world where other people are suffering and struggling and they don't see an answer for them within our faith. And in fact, they see those people not being loved and accepted within our faith. That's not the only reason but it's often the purest of hearts that go through this challenge.

Just last week I coached a woman who's a bishop's wife who's struggling with her faith. I coach all kinds of people. And so, I want you, if you don't have this situation happening in your life, or maybe you do but you have an idea of who those people are. I want you to try just setting that aside for a minute and let's try on the fact that maybe they're just like anybody else who isn't questioning their faith, except they're having a different experience.

And I'm going to talk to you more about that experience in a minute. I'm going to take you through what James Fowler calls stages of faith. But I want to begin with a story from the LDS faith tradition, a story from the Book of Mormon which is the story of the tree of life. So, Lehi has this vision, Lehi is a prophet in the Book of Mormon. He has this vision of the tree of life, the story of the tree of life, then he tells his family about it. And his son Nephi says, "Huh, interesting, dad. I kind of want to know this for myself. Are we sure about this?"

And so, he goes to the Lord and says, "Could I know this for myself?" So, let's just pause and notice that this story that which is told to us by Nephi after the Lord shares a more in depth vision of the tree of life with Nephi.

That it began with Nephi questioning. I don't know to what extent he questioned, if he didn't believe his dad or maybe he did but he just wanted to know for himself. But it begins with questions with wanting to know for one's self. This is a very healthy thing that good righteous people do. Nephi did in this situation.

So, I'm not going to spend a long time on the tree of life story. If you're not a member of my faith and you want to hear it more in depth go to churchofjesuschrist.org and Google it because it is a great story. I'm going to give the really quick version. And again, this is a dream, a vision of Lehi and later Nephi which is there is a tree and the people in the vision are trying to get to the tree, most of the people. And we're told that the tree represents, Nephi tells us that the tree represents the love of God and that it's desirable above all things.

So, it makes sense that everyone's trying to get to that tree. We're all just trying to feel good enough. We're all trying to feel loved and that's represented as the love of God. The fruit of the tree is eternal life which is the greatest of all the gifts of God. And so, we want to get to this tree. We want to have eternal life but we want it in the context of feeling loved. So that's what we all want.

Then there's another component of this vision which is the iron rod. The iron rod represents the word of God, meaning all the things that we're taught, the commandments that we are recommended to live by. Those things get us to the tree. It's a direct path, if we hold onto the iron rod, we get to the tree. So, we have those three components of the story that are just sort of are in this story.

Then we have two things in the story that are ways that we sometimes fall off of the path, things that cause us to let go of the iron rod or to wander away from the tree and to get distracted and not feel the love of God. One of those things is in the vision, it's called the mist of darkness. So, it's like a dense fog is kind of how I picture it. And that represents the temptations of the devil. So that's one of the things that will take us off the path.

Unfortunately, we can't ever get rid of that in this lifetime. We can try to navigate it as best we can but that's just a part of our experience that we're going to be tempted. The last thing that takes us off the path is what's called the great and spacious building. So, the great and spacious building is a building full of people who are laughing. It represents the pride of the world. There are people laughing at those who are trying to get to the tree or who do get to the tree and partake of the fruit. They're mocking them. They're making fun of them. They're calling them names.

And then people feel so ashamed that they walk away or they never get to the tree in the first place. So, it says in the scriptures that the people in the great and spacious building are in an attitude of mocking. So, who are those people in the great and spacious building that might take us off the path, or that might influence our loved ones to fall away and not feel God's love? Who are those people?

I don't know about you but when I hear the tree of life story I always thought those people in that great and spacious building, they're not very nice. They're not good people. They're bad people. They're mean people. Why are they so mean? Why can't they be nice? What I never considered until recently was that maybe I'm those people sometimes. Maybe I am one of them. Maybe I sometimes hang out in that great and spacious building. And I don't mean to but I think I might sometimes at least hang out in the lobby.

So, let's take a look at it. If the great and spacious building represents people who are in an attitude of mocking, let's put an attitude of mocking on the far left side of a continuum, if you will. So mocking is pretty extreme. It's making fun of people, calling them names, telling them they're stupid, that they shouldn't be doing what they're doing, that it's dumb, it's not cool, whatever. So, what's on a opposite side? What would be on the far right side of that continuum? What would be the opposite of mocking? Can we agree that it would be love?

That if it we're not going to make fun of people and tell them they're stupid and they're doing it wrong then we would just love people, we would embrace them, we would accept them, we would trust them.

So, I am guessing that most people who listen to this podcast are not on the extreme left side with mocking. You're probably, if your loved one says, "You know what? I think that I won't go to church anymore. I don't feel comfortable going." You're probably not making fun of them for not going to church. But what do we feel, who do we become? Do we have a little bit of judgment sometimes, judgment about what they should be doing?

Do we get a little bit passive aggressive sometimes? Do we just try to manipulate them and tell ourselves it's coming from love because we know what's best for them? But it's actually a little bit passive aggressive, or manipulative, or controlling. Do we try to control people? I don't know about you, but this is how I hang out in the lobby of the great and spacious building as I just try to control people, or just kind of disapprove, or even from afar you just have thoughts, and ideas, and judgment of people.

Wouldn't we say that all of that falls more are on the side of the attitude of mocking than on the side of love? And if that's true then according to this metaphor, this story, this vision then I am leading people away. As far as my influence on people, I'm not responsible for people's choices. But what influence am I having? if I'm in an attitude of mocking, I am influencing them away from feeling the love of God, we are.

Now, let's take also worry and sadness. I have a lot of people I coach who are parents or spouses and sometimes they say, "I'm just worried for these people that I love. I'm just sad." And there's nothing wrong with being worried and sad, it's a human condition. In fact, whenever somebody makes choices that we think are not in their best interest, we're going to have some grief and a part of that is going to be worry and sadness. So, I'm not telling you that you're doing something wrong.

I don't want you to start judging yourself if you're worried or sad. But does worry and sadness fall more towards the mocking side or more towards the

loving and trusting side? It falls just slightly to the mocking side. So, it's not to say that you're mocking them. It's just to say that my influence when I'm worried and sad about someone's decisions, I am less useful to that person. I am less able to influence them in a useful way than when I fall on the right side of the continuum which is the love side.

So, I'm telling you this because I want to give you permission to not worry and not be sad. You don't need to be. It's not useful and it's not necessary. And if you are, give yourself some time to process it. But at some point you can decide, I don't have to be, I have to be worried, I don't have to be sad. So, what's on the right side then, more on the love side would be things like curiosity, openness, empathy, compassion, trust, appreciation, and love.

That is how we get out of the great and spacious building and back to the tree where we're saying, "Okay, come on down here. It's really nice at the tree. Come and taste of this fruit." Okay, so how do we do that then? How do we get out of the mocking side and over to the love side, not only for the sake of those that we love, but for our own sake? Because it feels a lot better over there.

I want to talk to you now about Fowler's stages of faith because understanding this has been really, really helpful for me and all of the people I've ever taught this to, which has been a lot lately. And again, I'm going to also be talking to those of you who are like, "I am the one questioning and struggling." And I have a few thoughts and suggestions for you to consider as well as we go through this.

So, Fowler breaks down, and by the way, let me just tell you a little bit about Fowler before we dive in. Let me read you his bio here briefly. It says, James W. Fowler 1940 to 2015 was an American theologian who was Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University. He was director of both the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development, and the Center for Ethics until he retired in 2005.

He was a minister in the United Methodist Church. He is perhaps best known for his developmental model based on faith which he wrote about in

his book, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning.

Okay, so Fowler says that this universal quality of human meaning making, that's faith is used by people at all times. It's a natural human condition to want to make meaning of things. We typically hear the word faith to describe a religious tradition but according to Fowler this can be any set of beliefs that helps you make meaning of the world around you. So, the first three stages I'm not going to give a lot of detail on because these have to do with the natural developmental process of the human brain and of human beings.

So, he starts with what he calls stage zero, which is the primal undifferentiated faith. This is the stage that babies are in where they are incapable of doing things without the help of an adult and their sweet little brains aren't having very complex thoughts at this stage. Then we move into phase one right around the toddler age, like two year old's, three year old's or so are in this stage one of intuitive projective faith. And then around age five or so, five to maybe 11, we move into stage two, the mythic literal faith.

So again, I'm not going to go into detail in those stages because they just have to do with basic development of understanding object permanence, and the level of self-centeredness that we operate from, and things like that. Those are in my mind like childhood development phases. And still interesting if you want to go read Fowler's book. But the three phases that we're going to focus on the most, well, four phases I should say but mainly three are going to be stages three, four and five. And then I'll tell you about phase six briefly.

So, phase three is what Fowler calls synthetic conventional faith. And according to Fowler, we typically arrive at this level of faith around our teenage years or so and on into adulthood. So, phase three, Fowler calls synthetic conventional faith. Now, I love actually the title of this because synthetic implies that it's fake, but that's not to say that it's wrong for

someone to be in phase three. I don't mean fake in like wouldn't it be better if it were real?

Fake meaning, I didn't develop this idea of how the world is, or who God is, or who I am, or the value of human people. I didn't create it from my own heart and brain. It was handed to me by someone else. Like if I have synthetic breasts, I didn't grow these breasts, they were given to me by a doctor. I don't have synthetic breasts obviously but you get what I'm saying. Synthetic meaning it was given to you by someone or something outside of you and that is not a bad thing.

Conventional meaning it follows the conventional traditional way that this faith has been taught maybe for a long time or at least the way many people understand this belief system, this way of viewing the world, synthetic conventional faith. So, in this phase, Fowler says that your faith will create a good portion of your identity, you identify as a member of a certain faith group or as having a set of beliefs that drives you. It creates for us a sense of right and wrong. We start to have moral ideas about the way the world works, about the most ideal way for people to be etc.

In this phase of faith, we tend to place really high value on our faith rituals, and routines, and ceremonies. I love how Fowler describes this in phase three. He says, "Sometimes we see these faith routines, and rituals, and ceremonies as almost having a magical quality." Like if my child is going to church then he's okay. And if he stops going to church we're going to be in trouble. If he serves a mission then he's going to have this transformative experience.

And if he doesn't serve a mission this feels like such a crisis, it's so disappointing. These faith rituals and routines feel really heavy, you may be in phase three, which is again not a bad thing. It's just the way that we view the world in phase three. Often in phase three we really do appreciate the sense of belonging to a tribe. We value the community piece, we put a lot of trust in our leaders and have this high sense of value for obedience.

Now, according to Fowler, I think he says 75% of people in any given faith tradition will just stay in phase three forever and it's a beautiful thing and works really well for people. But 25 to 30%, I don't know if maybe that number would be higher if Fowler were to research this today or if anyone researched it today. But at the time when he wrote this he said, 25 to 35% of people will move from phase three into phase four, which is called individuative reflective faith.

Individuative meaning individual, I start to in phase four, somebody in phase four will take on personal responsibility for their beliefs or the interpretation of their faith tradition. I am no longer just accepting the way it was handed to me. I'm asking really what are challenging questions and sometimes painful questions like, wait a second, what does this mean in this situation? What does it mean in that situation? What does this really mean for me? Not just, what does anybody think I should do here, but what do I feel I should do here?

And which part of this resonates for me and which part of it doesn't feel right to me? Reflective, individuative, reflective, we're reflecting on things. Now, according to Fowler, in this phase, often there is a great deal of angst, a great deal of discomfort. It starts to feel like what was so safe and somewhat simple before is actually complicated and are much more imperfect than we realized, that there are much more unanswered questions than maybe we realized in a phase three type situation. Spiritual beliefs become more complexed, nuanced or grey, things are not so black and white.

Fowler says that individuals in this phase experience a lot of cognitive dissonance where we have conflicting beliefs that both feel true or something that we thought was true doesn't align with the actions that feel right to take, so that's cognitive dissonance, if you will. In this phase we become more open to counter beliefs or other faiths. We start to consider things that either directly go against or just are different faith traditions. This often feels like a loss of identity or a lack of a tribe because often the people around us don't know how to respond to us in this phase.

And again, in phase four we're questioning assumptions and there becomes a lot of questioning of authority. So, here's what I want to say about phase four before I go on to phase five. This is remember, according to Fowler who did a lot of studies to come up with this theory, a natural normal developmental process that 25 to 30% of people in any given faith tradition will go through. It's natural just like it's natural for children to go through a developmental process, it's a natural psychological process for many people with regards to their faith tradition.

There is a conference talk by Dieter Uchtdorf from our faith who has a line in there are about doubting your doubts. And I noticed that people love to throw that out. "Well, remember what President Uchtdorf said, doubt your doubts." But that's not all he said, that is an incomplete reciting of his words. This is what he actually said. He said, "It is natural to have questions. It's natural to have questions. The acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding.

There are few members of the church who at one time or another have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions. One of the purposes of the church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty. Faith is to hope for things which are not seen but which are true. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, my dear friends, please first doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith. We must never allow doubt to hold us prisoner and keep us from the divine, love, peace and gifts that come through faith and the Lord Jesus Christ."

So, I love that statement and I will say, I want to speak to both somebody who says, "Maybe I'm in phase three", and somebody who identifies as being in phase four. Listen, this is according to Fowler the danger that is possible for us in these two phases. If I'm a phase three person, it's tempting to look at someone in phase four and judge them as being unrighteous, or making poor decisions, or again just lacking in faith for some reason, not useful and according to Fowler not even true in most cases.

And if I'm in phase four, and I'm struggling and questioning, or I'm trying to individuate, that's the word Fowler uses, so I guess it's a real word, it's tempting to look at people in phase three and judge them as naïve, out of touch with the world today, asleep, not educated. According to Fowler also not true. You can been very well read, very well educated and still be in phase three of your faith. It is not better to be in phase three than phase four. It's not better to be in phase three, it's just different. They're different experiences, both of them have pros and cons.

And actually, I will say this, most of the people I've coached who are in phase four ask me, "Is there any way I can go back to phase three? That was more peaceful. Can I just not know what I know now?" Often what sends us into phase four according to Fowler would be some kind of life experience, maybe something you read, something you learn, something someone tells you, a circumstance in your life changes, somebody has a challenge or struggle and you don't know how to answer it with your typical faith tradition, things like that.

So often people in phase four say to me, "Can I just, can I go back to phase three?" And according to Fowler, no, you cannot. You can't unknow what you know and you can't unsee what your brain and heart have seen. But this, don't worry, I have good news, stay with me. Now, I do want to say, if you're in phase four, remember, phase four is sort of like, I think of it like a tiger in a cage. You're sort of thrashing about, you're trying to go this way and that way and nothing is seeming to bring you peace for a while.

Here is what I recommend. I get that people in phase three, especially if they're really close to you in your life, mean well, but it might feel like they're trying to be manipulative because they might be. They might be trying to manipulate you. They wouldn't call it that. They're trying to help you and influence you, and they're worried that if you stray, which I hate that word, stray, or I hate the word, wayward. Nobody's wayward here. But they're afraid that if you leave the faith tradition then you're going to somehow suffer and make your life harder or worse, either in this life or the next.

So, they mean well, but I get that you don't want to feel manipulated. So, you don't have to talk about this with anyone that it feels like can't have the kind of conversations that you need. But go towards what feels good, go towards what helps you feel more loving, more expansive, more trusting. If you still believe in God go towards what helps you feel God's love. If you don't believe, you're not sure if you believe in God then what do you believe in, the power of the universe, or do you believe in love? Go towards those good things.

Because just like some people who mean well within your faith tradition might not be able to hold space for you to question it, there are other people outside your faith tradition that also aren't able to hold space for you because they have an agenda as well. And again, those people also probably mean well. But if you're going towards people or groups of people that make you feel more bitter, more angry, that are trying to help you find blame and point fingers, or get mad, that's not going to get you closer to peace either. That's just going to be a different flavor of upset and discomfort.

Find people, coaching is a really great tool for this I will say, but whatever you like, go towards people that help you feel loved and love, that help you expand yourself, not limit or minimize yourself. That's my recommendation for anyone in phase four.

So, let's talk about what's available on the other side of phase four. On the other side of phase four is phase five of course. And phase five, Fowler calls this conjunctive faith. What is a conjunction? Do you remember back to high school English class? A conjunction it's used to connect words, and phrases, and clauses.

Conjunctive means joined together. So, you begin to figure out how to make your faith tradition or whatever faith tradition you choose, to work with the other things that you believe in the world, the other tools, or resources, or faith traditions, or practices, or beliefs, or teachings that have brought you peace. You figure out how to make it all fit together and it doesn't fit together neatly but you become comfortable with the messiness of it.

So, Fowler says then in stage five, the struggle that we have, gives way to peace. We become comfortable with paradoxes, comfortable with the idea that two opposing beliefs can both be true. And actually, our religion is full of paradoxes. You become comfortable with that, you find answers to some of your hard questions and you have increased comfort with the unanswered questions.

Now, here is one my favorite things about phase five, and this is my interpretation of what I've learned from Fowler, that one of the most magical shifts into phase five is you stop thinking that your faith tradition exists outside of you. You recognize that you are your faith. When people say, "The church." I learned this from working closely with Bill and Susan Turnbull who are beautiful, amazing people who founded Faith Matters.

We talked about that when people say, "The church", they mostly picture the leaders in Salt Lake and their brethren and what the church is, is me and you, we are the church. And so, you stop asking questions in phase three or even in phase four we're often asking questions like, which ward will be best for my family? What's the best ward with the most people that we would be friends with or that my kids could be friends with? And in phase five you start asking questions like, which ward needs us? In which ward can I contribute the most?

You'd have to be getting a lot from your faith tradition and your faith community to want to stay. But you also recognize that an equally powerful reason to stay is because of what you can contribute. So, when I coach people in phase four there's a lot of verbiage like, "I just wish they wouldn't say this at church. I wish that our church", oftentimes what it comes down to is they agree that the doctrine is right. It's just people interpreting it in ways that they don't like.

"I wish they didn't do this at church or say this at church." And I say, "Well, we have to be the ones to bring that, people of our church are also going through a faith journey. And our understanding hopefully gets better all the time and we become more informed, more knowledgeable, more wise about the best way to help people feel the love of God in their lives. And yet

we're going to have to contribute to that change. We can't sit outside, view ourselves of outside of our faith and wait for it to change. It is us.

We have to bring the change, we have to be the ones to raise our hand and add to the conversation, add to the lesson, contribute what we want our faith to have. And that's a phase five way of viewing your faith and viewing the world. It's not outside of you. You're a part of it. In phase five we also use the knowledge of other faiths, not to distance ourself from our own faith but rather to deepen and better understand our own faith.

So that's what's available on the other side of phase four. And I have found again as I've coached people that when you stop judging the people outside of you and start contributing, it helps you move through that phase four into phase five. It's one thing, there can be a lot of things and it might take a while and that's okay. On the tail end of Fowler's stages of faith, we have phase six which again I'm not going to spend a lot of time on.

Phase six is called enlightenment and the reason I'm not spending a long time is because according to Fowler, most of us will never get to phase six in this life and that's okay. Only a handful of individuals will reach this phase. Think people like Gandhi and Mother Teresa. But in this phase we are at peace with all faiths and all stages. We cherish life but we don't take it too seriously. We can interact with people from all stages without being at all condescending.

And in this phase, this is what I find interesting is that what we become most interested in is putting our faith into action. We're done sitting around thinking about what's true or talking about who's right. And we are just out there making a difference in the world, challenging the status quo, working to create justice in the world. And I don't know, I would like to think that maybe we can get to more of that in our lives.

But what I hope that you'll take away from this message and what I have really taken away from it is first of all, the judgment that happens at any phase, of people in other phases is doing the opposite of what we're all trying to do here as we go through a faith journey. It is not helping us

become more loving beings. It is not getting anyone to see the world in a more useful way or to feel the love of God. It's doing the opposite.

There's no place for judgment and that it's a natural normal thing. It doesn't mean if everyone of your kids – I anticipate that every, most of our kids I should say, will go through phase four. Again, Fowler used to say 25 to 30%. I would guess that that number's going to be a lot higher now and that it's going to happen at a much younger age because of the changes in the world that I discussed earlier. So, it doesn't mean you failed as a mother. It doesn't mean that your marriage has been a lie and that your spouse has dishonored the vows that you made when you got married.

It doesn't mean any of that my friends, it means that we have complex dynamic human beings who are continuing to learn, and better themselves, and expand their world view. And this can be an amazing thing because phase five and phase six is a deeper experience. Nothing wrong with staying in phase three forever, but if you do get to phase five and six, it's a different kind of faith.

And I think it's a kind of faith that we're ready for. Within the LDS faith, I think we're ready for more of that and I think our world in general is ready for that. And what I do know is that our Savior loves every one of us, whether we ever go to church again or not, doesn't change His love and the love of our heavenly parents. I really do believe that.

Thank you for joining me today. If you have questions or comments on this I'd love for you to come and talk to me. I'm on the Instagram, I am on TikTok now. I'm on Facebook. I'm all over. Come and interact with me, I'd love to hear your thoughts and questions, and otherwise thanks for joining me today, have a beautiful rest of your day, bye bye.

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