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The secret of giving dignity to trifles



A little plan which I have found serviceable in past years, is to put down every night the engagements and duties of the next day, arranging the hours well. The advantages of this are several. You get more done than if a great part of each day is spent in contriving and considering, 'What next?' A healthful feeling pervades the whole of life. There is a feeling of satisfaction at the end of the day in finding that, generally, the greater part of what is planned has been accomplished. This is the secret of giving dignity to trifles. As units they are insignificant; they rise in importance when they become parts of a plan. Besides this – and I think the most important thing of all – there is gained a consciousness of Will, the opposite of that which is the sense of impotency. The thought of time, to me at least, is a very overpowering and often a very annihilating one for energy: Time rushing on, unbroken, irresistible, hurrying the worlds and the ages into being, and out of it, and making our 'noisy years seem moments in the *being* of the eternal Silence.' The sense of powerlessness which this gives is very painful. But I have felt that this is neutralized by such a little plan as that. You feel that you do control your own course; you are borne on, but not resistlessly. Down the rapids you go, certainly, but you are steering and trimming your own raft, and making the flood of Time your vassal, and not your conqueror. — F. W. Robertson, *The Life and Letters of Frederick W. Robertson, M. A.* (2nd edition, London, 1866), vol. 1, p. 257

The echo chamber



Several times I have found myself in the role of the only conservative at large theological conferences featuring fairly big name speakers. I have known what to expect going in: when the other conference attendees found out my views, they seemed genuinely startled and sometimes a bit embarrassed. Why embarrassed? Because when you suddenly realize you've been all along in the company of someone who completely disagrees with you, the insider talk, the taken-for-granted jokes, the casual put-downs (both in presentations and hallway conversations) that are invisible in a company of like-minded people suddenly show up for all to see.

I can remember wondering as I sat there if these people knew just how predictable and shallow they sounded. What would I say if I wanted to win this crowd's favor? It would be incredibly easy. Perhaps, "If the church would put half as much energy into feeding the poor and fighting injustice as it does snooping into people's bedrooms, the world would . . ." [sentence drowned out by thunderous applause]. Or, "How can we invest so much in destroying people over oil and so little on preserving the fragile environment which we all share?"

I think . . ." [pause for uproar of affirmation]. Or, "God is in Godself beyond gender, and our creaturely task of dismantling heteronormative biases and the structures of exclusion that God hates in God's family . . ." [clapping, hooting, banging on tables]. Or, should things start to go awry and I begin to lose the crowd, some rapid-fire variations on, "George W. Bush sure is stupid, isn't he?" [much full-throated hilarity, spontaneous dancing, several minutes before order restored].

Another group's echo chamber

It is fascinating to wander into another group's echo chamber, but it is rarely flattering for them; when they discover your presence, they get a glimpse of how they look and sound. Nobody is at their best in their own echo chamber. We see this often with comments on blog sites. People say things assuming they're speaking to a friendly audience of insiders, only to regret how it came out when confronted by a friend or co-worker who saw the comments online.

I was with several very liberal pastor friends from various mainline denominations, fellow attendees at these gatherings, people who shared the prevailing views of the presentations but who also knew me and my views, and I sometimes wonder if my presence didn't make things awkward for them as they guessed what I was thinking as easily as I guessed what the speakers were about to say. Even when the speakers said something they substantively agreed with, I think my friends might have winced a little in pondering how it sounded to me.

Presenting on Neuhaus

In January I attended the annual Theological Symposium at Concordia Theological Seminary – Ft. Wayne, and for the most part I thought it was good – interesting topics, well-attended presentations, a hearty campus atmosphere. I have to say that, of course, because I had the opportunity to be one of the presenters, on the topic of Richard John Neuhaus. I was a bit nervous, having received the invitation on genetic rather than academic credentials (Neuhaus was my uncle), but it went well; I was graciously received among the lineup of far more accomplished scholars. All in all a great event, and one I will try to attend in the future.

But it struck me toward the end that none of

my mainline friends, who as a rule are to the left even of their own denominations, would have been able to stomach the conference – not because of the conservatism but because of the lack of genuine engagement. They would have felt like I feel at "their" conferences. I think many of the presentations, scholarly and (I would say) well-reasoned as they were, would have come across to them as very predictable boiler-plate, scholarly red meat for conservatives. With some exceptions, the papers really did more to offer examples of things the entire crowd already agreed with than make a case for a thesis offered to the crowd to consider.

An insider at "our" event

In short, it was something of an echo chamber to my liking; I knew I was listening to people I already largely agreed with, and was only listening for fresh examples and insights. Sure, there were a few non-LCMS and non-Lutheran speakers and not every presentation would fit into my characterization, but for the most part the whole atmosphere was one of comfortable insider-ness and presumed agreement.

And frankly, I'm not sure how it could be otherwise or whether it would really be an improvement if it were otherwise. It was "our" event. Why wouldn't it express "our" take on things? The difference between this symposium and the conferences I mentioned above was that those conferences advertised themselves as pan-Christian and then offered a liberal Protestant echo chamber. "Ours" was overtly "ours."

There is tremendous collegiality in something like that. Many of the graduates use the symposium as a sort of reunion. It is scholarly and informative, challenging and fun – all in all a great event. I don't know if the same clubbable atmosphere could be maintained without some degree of "echo chamberliness," and that atmosphere is well worth maintaining. But it would be nice, perhaps, if that atmosphere were blended with another atmosphere of spirited debate over matters of common concern rather than spirited defense of an already common opinion.

A Trojan horse

One topic I think would fit the bill for a future symposium and which came up overtly as a

main topic or was otherwise referenced or hinted at repeatedly in the presentations was the synod's position on artificial birth control. Dr. Peter Scaer got a good laugh in his presentation about the history of abortion and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod when he put up on the screen “Birth Control: A Trojan Horse?” A nice pun, but more importantly, more than a rhetorical question. Here was a topic on which all the insiders in the echo chamber did not necessarily agree.

And it is a topic that really matters. Our current synodical teaching, or lack thereof, is vague at best. Many of us in the LCMS are sympathetic to the Roman Catholic teaching and would be inclined to adopt it as our teaching as well, but aren't certain about that, at least not yet. Others agree in theory but question the practicality, or agree on the practical application but disagree on the theological underpinnings. Still others probably reject that whole line of thinking and accept advances in artificial birth control as a First Article gift.

Ft. Wayne in January

A symposium dealing directly with birth

control and related historical, doctrinal, and hermeneutical issues would offer the chance for the presenters to present a thesis for consideration and defend that thesis to an open-minded and interested audience. It would have all the good atmosphere of “our” event and all the back-and-forth, give-and-take, and spirited debate of a wider symposium. It would be the sort of thing to which one might invite non-LCMS friends, while still enjoying the benefits of an insider atmosphere.

“Ft. Wayne in January!” Not much for the marketing department to work with there, but I will say it was a great experience and worthy of being on anyone's regular annual itinerary – with the caveat that one must expect a certain echo chamber atmosphere.

– by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

[Editor's note: Pr. Speckhard's presentation at the Concordia Theological Seminary Symposium (“The Church's Place in the Public Square: Can the Shoes of Richard John Neuhaus Be Filled?”) can be found at <<http://media.ctsfw.edu/4044>>. It is well worth watching, even (maybe especially) if that venue isn't your own echo chamber.]

On the unity of Christ's church: two reflections



[Editor's note: Pastor Jason Talsness sent us this thoughtful reflection on the recent papal election and Christian unity; it provoked me to write my own thoughts, rather along the same lines.]

Along with much of Christendom, I got caught up in the election of the new pope. You've got to hand it to the church in Rome; after 2,000 years, they've really perfected ceremony and hierarchy. The papal election united both, making for compelling viewing. The more we learned about Pope Francis, the more most were impressed with the selection.

Our congregation has a sign with changeable letters, so after the new pope was named, I posted “Congratulations Pope Francis, we also are praying for you” on one side and “Hurray for Pope Francis” on the other side. Our church is on a busy road in suburban Atlanta. We have people of almost every faith and denomination passing by, and this

was a time to celebrate with our Roman Catholic neighbors.

An old man with a camera

While preparing my sermon the following Saturday, I looked up from my desk and out the window to see an elderly man taking pictures of our sign. I walked out to say hello and discovered that it was the priest of the Roman Catholic Church down the street about a mile-and-a-half from our church. Our paths don't cross often, maybe once every couple of years, but we know each other and he has always been kind and gracious and willing to engage in conversation. He expressed his appreciation for the sign, we talked about Pope Francis for a while and that was it. I thought little more of this as I prepared for Sunday worship.

On Sunday afternoon I received an email from another connection to that Roman Catholic parish, a man who used to belong to our congrega-

tion but has since converted and is in the process of becoming a deacon. Under the subject “OK you've really done it this time,” the deacon-in-training relayed that their priest interrupted his adult education class to show the pictures of the sign, expressing how deeply touched he was by the gesture, even choking up a bit while talking about it. A subsequent handwritten thank-you note from the priest included the encouragement for us to continue to pray for one another.

The pain of division

This pleasant turn of events raised my awareness of something of which I am usually ignorant: the pain caused by the divisions of the Reformation experienced by those who are in the Roman Catholic Church. The impression I usually get from my rare encounters with Catholic clergy is that they are too big to be distracted by that angry priest from the 16th century. They held the Council of Trent; that was that, and they moved on.

There's no diminishing the differences that splintered Christ's church in the Reformation era, but at this point in church history, we are seeing how common it is among both Lutheran and Roman Catholics to operate out of the assumption that our commonalities outweigh our differences. And if a little Lutheran church's sign can touch the heart of one aged and gentlemanly priest, then we can continue to be hopeful that the breach that has existed for centuries between two groups of Jesus' followers can be narrowed. “By this,” our Lord tells us (John 13.35), “all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Pastor Jason Talsness serves Amazing Grace Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Lawrenceville, GA. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

A response from the editor

I found Pastor Talsness's little reflection on how his church sign announcing their prayers for Pope Francis had affected his Roman Catholic colleague to be very moving, and it reminded me of a somewhat similar incident in my own ministry. Several years ago the *Sacramento Bee* published a piece—I can't recall now whether it was a letter to the editor or an op-ed column of some sort—that criticized the Roman Catholic Church with astonish-

ing asperity. I can't even recall the issue; perhaps it was the pedophilia scandal, or something to do with the church's teaching on abortion. I wrote a letter to the editor defending the church against what I regarded as a scurrilous and ill-informed attack, and it was published.

That kind Lutheran pastor

A few days later, I received a lovely letter from the bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento, expressing his gratitude for my words. It was, I thought, a nice gesture for him to write, but really just what you might expect from a bishop, who probably has a staff person whose job it is to find occasions for letters of thanks.

It was at least a year later that I got a phone call from a sister who worked in the diocesan office. “The bishop,” she said, “asked me, ‘Can you find me a copy of the letter written by that kind Lutheran pastor in Grass Valley?’” She went on to say that she had scoured her files and couldn't come up with it, and wondered if I might have a copy I could send her.

Awful disclosures

When I teach American church history, I do a lecture on nativism—the terrible characteristic in American history that roiled political life through much of the 19th century and extended beyond it. Nativism was, on the surface, a hostility toward immigrants, but it was at heart more a hostility toward Roman Catholicism. Most 19th century immigrants, after all, were Roman Catholic—the Irish in the early part of the century, followed soon by the Germans, and then by Italians, Poles, and other Eastern and Southern Europeans. The hostility that these immigrants faced is almost unimaginable today. A 19th century bestseller was *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, which alleged to be an exposé of the unspeakable things that happened in the dark recesses of a convent in Catholic Montreal.

I actually saw a copy of that book on the shelves of a “Christian book store” as recently as thirty years ago. Those of us who have come of age during the ecumenical era may think that prejudice against Roman Catholics is a thing of the past. After all, since 1960 being a Roman Catholic is a non-issue in terms of political office, and in many communities there are cordial, even warm, relationships be-

tween Protestant and Roman Catholic pastors and congregations.

Our particular vocation

And yet the prejudice and suspicion are still present, not far beneath the surface. I see this constantly in my students at Fuller Theological Seminary. Primarily self-defined evangelicals, these young (most of them) men and women show a remarkable ignorance about – and often antipathy for – the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps that attitude is less pronounced among Lutherans. Perhaps.

Lutherans, it seems to me, have a particular vocation that includes working on healing the breach of the 16th century. There are some “big things” that are part of that vocation; formal ecumenical dialogues and statements on the national and international level are certainly significant. Some of us have the opportunity to take more mod-

est action; I make it my goal to break down hostility and deflate prejudice in my church history classes, and I see some signs of success among the students I teach.

But every bit as important are the very little things one can do for Christian unity: the announcement on a Lutheran church sign that the congregation prays for the new pope, the inclusion of Roman Catholic (or Orthodox, or Protestant) prelates or neighboring congregations at least occasionally in the Sunday prayers in our Lutheran churches, or any of a dozen other things that we might think of to ease the pain of past and lingering prejudice. The 7th Sunday of Easter – if one can avoid the temptations of Mother’s Day – is a particularly good time to preach about the unity of Christ’s church, as we hear our Lord’s prayer “that they may all be one.”

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Evaluating *Forum Letter*



In my capacity as a seminary teacher, I take course evaluations very seriously. I try every trick I can think of to get the students to do the darn things, even to the point of offering extra credit if they complete the online evaluation and send me a screen shot of the final “thanks for doing this” page. I then read them carefully and try to learn from them. Some of this requires some separating wheat from chaff, of course. Students invariably complain about the amount of work in a history class, so I don’t take that comment much to heart; a suggestion that the work be spaced out across the quarter more evenly instead of being bunched up at the end, on the other hand, seems reasonable and so I’ve changed the course structure to try to do that.

The only regular way we get evaluations of *Forum Letter* is from the Associated Church Press “Best of the Christian Press” competition. (That excludes, of course, letters from angry readers canceling their subscription, but those are irregular.) In a note in *Omnium gatherum* this month you’ll see that we did well again this year, garnering a couple of awards.

But along with the awards, the ACP judges

make comments on all the entries (not just the winning ones). I’ve been pondering a few of them made this year, and I’d like to share some of them with you and invite your comments on their comments. *Forum Letter* is, in an important sense, your publication, and I would value your input and ideas.

We don’t quite fit in

Let me preface this by saying that some of the judges’ comments reflect the fact that *Forum Letter* doesn’t quite fit into the ACP contest’s categories. In most cases we are entered in the “newsletter” category, which isn’t quite right. (Compare *FL*, for instance, to your typical parish newsletter.) Yet we also aren’t a newspaper, a magazine, a journal, a news service. We’re kind of in a class by ourselves – at least we like to think so. But ACP requires that you identify your format in some way, and so we have to be a newsletter.

This accounts, I would say, for a couple of comments this year that one article or another was “too long” or “too complicated.” Yes, if an article runs three or four pages, it is “too long” for what one would usually think of as a newsletter. But is it too long for *Forum Letter*?

Do we need more sparkle?

One criticism that has come rather consistently through the years is that *FL* isn't glitzy enough. That's not exactly how they phrase it, but that's what they mean. "Newsletter is way too gray," wrote a judge this year. "No pictures, no illustrations, no graphics, no color." Interestingly, this was the comment in the "best in class" category where *FL* was given the "Award of Merit."

So what do you think about this comment? Would *FL* be improved by any of these things? Do we need to find an evangelical catholic or confessional cartoon artist? (And do you know any?) Or a photographer? When we write snarky articles about liturgical matters, should we be reproducing photos of Mark Hanson from BadVestments.com?

Do we need less snark?

Oh, speaking of snarky, that's another thing. "The somewhat sarcastic (snarky) tone in the article," wrote one judge, "comes across less as humor and more as disrespectful." That isn't the first time we've heard that, of course. But what do you think? Do we need to recalibrate the snarky meter?

The judge who evaluated *Omnium gatherum* commented on the editor's "close, chatty relationship with his readers" but suggested that "the kaffeeklatsch writing style may be good for bonding with existing readers, but it may raise a wall against new ones." Is *Forum Letter* like one of those congregations where people are so friendly that they don't have time to welcome visitors? What do you think?

As an aside, I got quite a guffaw from that

same judge's comment that *Omnium gatherum* is "written from a conservative Lutheran standpoint." Seems to me that the judge doesn't really understand the spectrum and the nuances of Lutheranism if we are pegged as "conservative." But then I doubt *Christian News* enters the competition.

Is this "inside baseball"?

One comment from last year's competition still has me puzzled. "There's a lot of 'inside baseball,' the judge wrote, "making it difficult for any church member outside of Lutheran circles to understand. I would also argue that for uninformed members of the ELCA, this would be difficult to follow." There may be some truth to that, but then on the other hand we aren't really writing for people "outside of Lutheran circles." We're not really marketing to "uninformed members of the ELCA" (or any other church body) either; besides, isn't one purpose of *FL* to "inform"?

Still, perhaps there is a kind of "insider" tone here that makes it difficult for the uninitiated to understand. Is that something that should change? Do we need to try to be more accessible to those who may not be "in the know" about things Lutheran?

Well, that's a taste of what they have said. I am in earnest in asking for your ideas about all of this. I ask my students questions like, "What works for you in this course, and what doesn't? What would improve it, in your opinion?" I'd be happy to hear your answers; email me at roj@nccn.net.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Latest at Luther • It's not only faculty and staff positions on the chopping block as Luther Seminary tries to navigate its financial crisis, but also property. Interim President Rick Foss has announced that at least four and perhaps as many as six homes or apartment buildings owned by the seminary will be sold in the near future.

Augsburg Fortress pension fiasco • Perhaps you will remember the distressing decision by Augsburg Fortress to terminate its defined benefit pension

plan, seriously impacting some 500 past and present employees. Those employees brought suit against the publisher and the ELCA itself, and a settlement has now been reached. According to a report in the *Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal*, the settlement totals some \$4.5 million, of which perhaps 20% will go to the lawyers. The balance will restore to pensioners something in the neighborhood of 27% of what they lost when the plan was dropped.

An interesting resource • If you're not afraid to be in the company of the Reformed, you might find

this interesting. A group called The Gospel Coalition, which seems to be run by some professors and pastors from various branches of Reformed Christianity (from Anglican to Baptist), publishes an online journal entitled *Themelios*. I explored it a bit, and found it very interesting indeed – some good articles, but also a plethora of book reviews from a wide variety of religious and academic publishers. The most recent issue, for instance, includes an interesting essay by Peter Schemm, a Baptist pastor in Virginia who also teaches at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, entitled “The Writing Pastor: An Essay on Spiritual Formation.” That same issue contains nearly seventy book reviews.

Truncated thoughts • Here’s another example. Carl Trueman is a professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary and was for a time the editor of *Themelios*. In one issue he argued that the second century heretic Marcion (who tried to expunge the Old Testament and much of the New Testament from his canon) is alive and well in contemporary evangelical Christianity, as believers neglect the Hebrew Bible and put an emphasis on God’s love “to the utter exclusion of everything else.” “Think truncated thoughts about God,” he writes, “and you’ll get a truncated God; read an expurgated Bible and you get an expurgated theology; sing mindless, superficial rubbish instead of deep, truly emotional praise and you will eventually become what you sing.”

How it’s going • I have appreciated the numerous emails from people expressing thanks for my reflections last month on my retirement – some of them with interesting retirement stories of their own to share, a couple of them reporting the piece moved them to tears. Several also expressed the hope that I won’t “retire” from *Forum Letter*; I have no plans to do so, as long as the ALPB board will have me. I got a nice letter from Bishop Mark Hanson, too. Well, it wasn’t exactly about my article; it was just the impersonal boilerplate sent to every ELCA pastor who retires – you know, “the gratitude of a thankful church for your service,” etc. It came by first class mail, which at least indicates that not enough of us retire every month to send out the letter in bulk. As for me, my days have been full. I’m still unpacking books and scrambling to keep up with a couple of

classes full of seminary students. We spent my first retired Holy Week visiting son in Texas and daughter in New York. On Palm Sunday, we worshiped at First Evangelical Lutheran in Houston, whose pastor is Evan McClanahan, STS. It’s a small NALC congregation, but we were blown away by the music – a dozen or so singers in the choir who sang three or four Renaissance and Baroque era pieces, and did so exquisitely. The Triduum was with our pastor daughter, who enlisted her mother and me to provide music for her Good Friday Tenebrae service. It was a nice way to ease the sorrow of not presiding at Holy Week services. Oh, and I’m appearing in a local concert production of *HMS Pinafore* as Sir Joseph Porter, KCB. I was an unusual child who listened to recordings of Gilbert and Sullivan over and over again, and I’ve always dreamed of playing this role. It’s typecasting, I suppose: Porter is an officious and self-important prig. But it’s a nice diversion, nonetheless, so I haven’t yet resorted to alphabetizing the spice rack.

Misinformed • Speaking of retirement, in the aforementioned reflection I said that ELCA pastors must maintain membership in an ELCA congregation in order to stay on the roster. That’s what I was told by my bishop, who advised me simply to “park my membership” someplace and then attend the local Episcopal church. No less an authority than former ELCA Secretary Lowell Almen tells me that I was misinformed. He cites constitutional paragraph 7.41.17.b, which states quite clearly that if a retired pastor “resides at too great a distance from any congregation of this church to be able to sustain an active relationship with that congregation,” the bishop may “grant permission for the ordained minister to hold membership in a congregation or parish of a church body with which a relationship of full communion has been declared” by the ELCA. Of course that leaves it up to the bishop’s discretion as to what “too great a distance” might be, and it doesn’t address the situation of a retired pastor retiring and staying in the community where he/she served – the assumption being that he/she can’t continue membership in the congregation from which she/he retired, even if that’s the only congregation not at “too great a distance.” That last assumption isn’t in the constitution, of course, but presumably the constitutional provision would be interpreted in light of

it. At any rate, thanks to Pr. Almen for the correction, and I'll be having coffee with my bishop soon.

At the movies • Before retirement, I was generally at least a year behind in watching movies. The other day, maybe for the first time in my life, I went to see something on the day it opened. The film was *42*, the very inspirational story of Jackie Robinson, major league baseball's first African American player. It's a lovely portrayal of a quietly heroic man in a turbulent time. For my money, though, the film's most interesting character is Brooklyn Dodger manager Branch Rickey, whose decision to bring Robinson into the majors arises in part from business savvy, but also from faith-based social concern and a search for personal redemption. Rickey, played by Harrison Ford, puts it simply: "Robinson's a Methodist, I'm a Methodist, God's a Methodist. We can't go wrong." In another scene, Rickey warns a colleague who is adamantly opposed to integrating baseball that when he stands before the judgment seat of God and is asked to account for his actions, blaming them on baseball's traditions "may not be sufficient." The real Branch Rickey was indeed a devout Methodist who refused to attend games on Sunday. Hollywood always takes some liberties, of course, but this is a wonderful film. If you've got a youth group, take them to it.

Associated Church Press awards • Once again *Forum Letter* has grabbed a couple of awards in the Associated Church Press's "Best of the Christian Press" competition. We received the 2012 Award of Merit (i.e., second place) for overall publication in

the category of newsletter, and another Award of Merit in the category of humor for "A Matter of Style" (Sept. 2012). I can now remind my wife, when occasion demands it, that I am an award winning humorist. We are happy to tell you that our companion journal, *Lutheran Forum*, received the Award of Merit in the journal category. Lutheran publications in general did well again this year. I count a total of five awards for *The Lutheran* (including one Award of Excellence, equivalent to first place in the category), four for *Gather* and two for *Café* (including one Award of Excellence for each). On the LCMS side, *Lutheran Witness* bagged three awards, and *Concordia Journal* three (including one Award of Excellence). Another independent publication, *Metro Lutheran*, came home with a couple as well. You may wonder at the disparity in numbers. The awards are given in a plethora of individual categories; some publications are eligible to enter quite a few categories, while others are more limited in terms of what is appropriate. *Forum Letter*, for instance, will not likely be getting awards any time soon for mobile publications, letters to the editor or graphics. Congratulations, one and all.

Kind words • "Articulate, insightful and well-written" – that's what the judges said about *Forum Letter* in the above-mentioned Associated Church Press competition. We appreciate the kind words, and we invite you to take appropriate action, whether that be to subscribe, to renew, or to give the *Forum* package as a gift – perhaps to an about-to-graduate college or seminary senior. They'll be glad you did, and so will we. – roj

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