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Engagement and Spirituality: Reflections from 'Le Jungle'

Fintan Sheerin

Dr. Fintan Sheerin

Dr. Sheerin is a Spiritan Lay Associate who identifies strongly with the Spiritan charism and apostolate. He expresses his Spiritan belonging in his teaching and in serving the local Augustinian parish, in development work in Malawi, and through volunteering with people displaced by war and terror. Fellow of the European Academy of Nursing Sciences, Fintan is lecturer in intellectual disability nursing at Trinity College, Dublin where he teaches primarily on human rights, value systems, anti-oppressive practice, and social justice. He has a keen interest in the interface between theology and social justice. Dr. Fintan earned his doctorate in 2006 from the University of Ulster with a thesis on "Describing the Unique Interventions of Intellectual Disability Nursing."

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ENGAGEMENT AND SPIRITUALITY: REFLECTIONS FROM '*LE JUNGLE*'

Introduction

Unrest in North Africa and the Middle East has resulted in a movement of people that is almost biblical in terms of the numbers of people migrating for reasons of refuge or economics. Many of those who are fleeing war, totalitarianism, or fundamentalism are seeking shelter and the possibility of a new life in Europe, a union of nations founded on principles of equality, cooperation and human rights. The arrival of historically large numbers has posed a significant challenge to the European Union at a number of levels, but it is perhaps perspectives on the cultural and religious impact which is causing most concerns as many are Muslims, a faith so negatively contextualized through Islamophobic and Islamist stereotypes, many of which grounded in 1500 years of conflict between the Christian West and the Muslim East.

Bearing in mind our commitment as Spiritans to "give preference to an apostolate that takes us … to those oppressed and most disadvantaged, as a group or as individuals" (SRL 12), I felt that to not engage with the people displaced by this crisis was not an option. Indeed, Libermann has been described as a "friend to the oppressed...voice on their behalf" (Kelly 13). In this paper, I explore the current refugee/migrant crisis, drawing on recent experiences volunteering as a nurse in '*Le Jungle*' Camp (France) and Lesbos (Greece). I also consider the role of disengagement in the dehumanization of those seeking refuge. Finally, I explore how engagement can redress such dehumanization, and suggest that this humanizing outcome can be considered as evidence of a spirituality grounded in Spiritan values and in the liberation of those who are oppressed.

Disengagement and Dehumanization

Throughout history there has been a focus on sameness and otherness which has underpinned the characterization of some groups of people as deviants (Fanon 1967; Little 1999; Cunningham-Parmeter 2011). Typically, such characterization is based on a specific trait or set of traits and allows for the stereotypic congregation and consideration of these people as being different from "the norm." This, in turn, may lead to a consideration that they are so different as to constitute a deviation from humanity, with the resultant possibility that a power imbalance is created and they are treated in dehumanizing ways.

The effect of such a description is that it creates distance between those in the valued mainstream of society and

those who must be kept apart and controlled. The process of distancing is not only associated with dehumanization and colonialism. Ivan Illich (1977) and Eliot Freidson (1986) describe the manner in which distance has become embedded in the professional roles which dominate Western society at so many levels, disempowering the populous and supporting the growth and overarching power of commercial interests. The creation of such divisions based on power and distance facilitates a dichotomous process whereby increasing power and valuing are invested in a minority of humanity to the detriment of others, with the latter amassing multiple deviations from the values norms and thus multiple jeopardies.

...those experiencing poverty may be called "hobos" and contextualized as "drug addicts" and "beggars";...
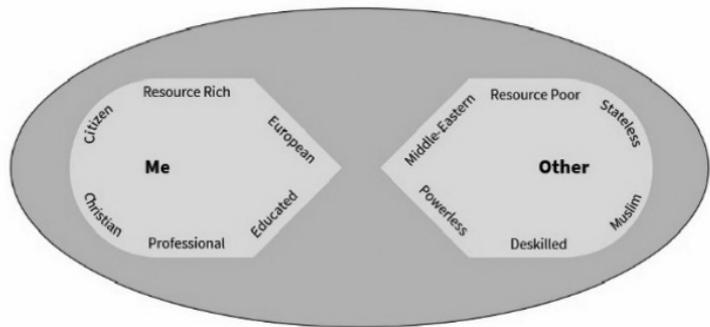
Figure 1. The valued-devalued dichotomy (based on ideas from Wolfensberger 1972)

Iris Young suggests that privilege and power are premised on the existence of a corresponding group who experience lack of privilege and disempowerment. She describes these people as "oppressed" and notes, crucially, that such experiences are often not due to any tyrannical power but rather "because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (Young 1990: 41). The effects of such oppression have been described in respect of people with intellectual disabilities (Wolfensberger 1972), people experiencing poverty (Sobrino 2008: 22-28) as well as in colonial (Memmi 1990: 156-184) and post-colonial settings (Fanon 1967:27-84). In each of these cases, there has been the assignment of negative labels and stereotypes. Thus, people with intellectual disabilities have been called "retards" and it has been suggested that they cannot love; those experiencing poverty may be called "hobos" and contextualized as "drug addicts" and "beggars"; the colonized and post-colonized may be considered to be lazy, indolent thieves, and terrorists. Similarly, the current refugee crisis which has affected many parts of northern Africa and the Middle East has seen stereotypic and dehumanizing characterization of those people who are attempting to escape from the conflict zones. This is evident in the words of the populist United Kingdom

journalist, Kate Hopkins:

> "Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches. They might look a bit 'Bob Geldof's Ethiopia circa 1984,' but they are built to survive a nuclear bomb. They are survivors." (Jones 2015)

The use of such terms is particularly insidious, as it evokes the rhetoric of 1940s Germany and 1990s Rwanda.

What emerges from the various theoretical discourses referred to above is a repeating process of dehumanization (figure 2) with the consequence that the protective norms of human rights have no relevance, because these "people" are no longer viewed through the lens of humanization (Sheerin 2011). Thus, violence can be employed in order to achieve compliance and control. The achievement of obedience marks the removal of voice and the instilling of the voice of the oppressor (Freire 1993). Denial of voice in these people results in a situation whereby true and dialogic engagement is no longer possible.
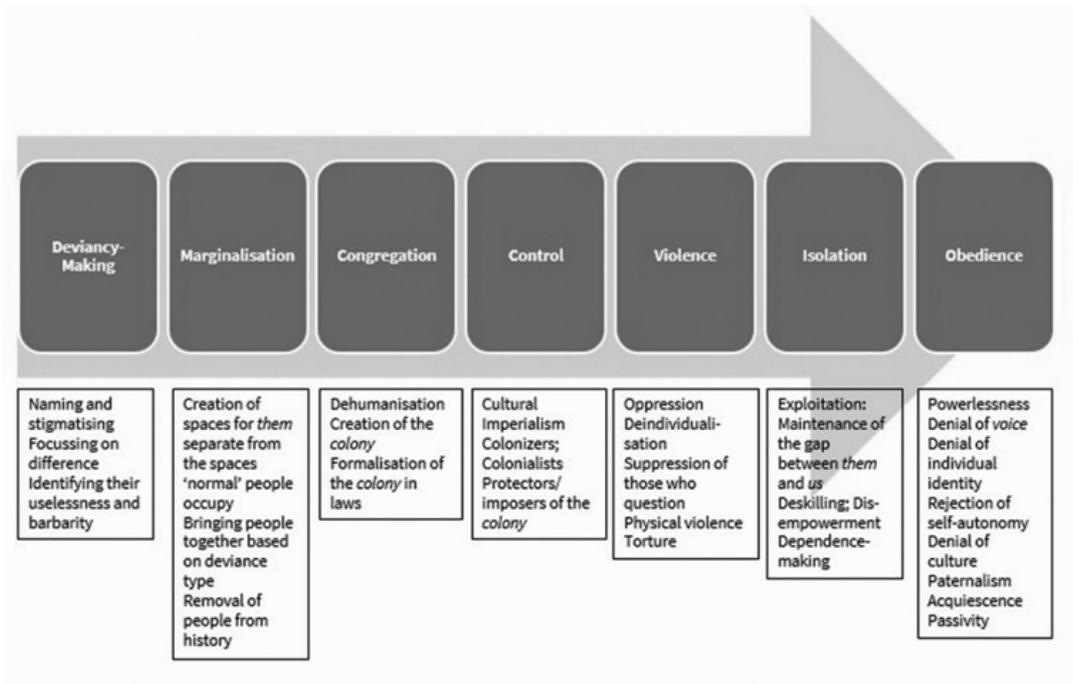

Figure 2. The process of dehumanization (based on ideas from Wolfensberger 1972; Young 1990).

The disengagement associated with creation of otherness is also evident in the professional and commercial spheres which predominate in most of the Global North societies.

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Associated with this is the categorizing of people into groups for the purposes of controlling choices and available options. The role of professions in the formalization of practices which were arguably key to the maintenance of community, midwifery, nursing, and funeral rituals for example, is well documented elsewhere (Illich 1977) as is the manner in which the profession-led creation of need has resulted in global commercialization which wields significant control over economic realities (Sobrino 2008) and contributes to the maintenance of a significant economic divide between peoples and regions of the world, further fueling dehumanization.

I witnessed these processes in action, shortly prior to visiting *Le Jungle* refugee camp in Calais. It happened during a discussion I had with a pharmacist in the context of the refugee/migrant crisis within stereotypic conceptualizations of Islamophobia, terrorist threats and economic migrancy. I had visited the pharmacy accompanied by an academic colleague from Canada - a man of Iranian birth. The pharmacist, who did not realize that we were associated, proceeded to ask my opinions on the refugee/migrant crisis stating that she had heard that "three out of four of them" were infiltrating terrorists, and that "those Syrians" were going to come over to Ireland and "kill us all." She noted my colleague and, looking back at me, made a gesture urging me to look around. When she realized that he was with me she whispered "I thought he was one of those Syrians"!

Such perspectives feed into the processes of disengagement and encourage the avoidance of any understanding or acknowledgement of the realities of others. On the other hand, engagement can facilitate humanization and it is within this that knowing of the other's reality can take place.

Engagement and Humanization

The publication, in September 2015, of a picture of a three year old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a beach in Turkey, brought home to many people a reality which had remained distant and disconnected. As such, it led to the possibility for engagement to be initiated as it connected with the emotional sensitivities of many people. Many people mobilized and sought a meaningful way to respond to what they were becoming aware of. One such response was the organization of an Irish convoy to *Le Jungle*. In early October 2015, I travelled to Calais, along with fifty-two others, leading the health team in their efforts to address some of the medical needs of the camp's 4000 residents. Over a five day period, we treated more than 1200 people for a variety of medical complaints: some population health issues; some injuries caused

by prolonged walking or by falls from trucks; and other injuries inflicted by police. I travelled to Lesbos the following month and returned to Calais in February 2016.

Perspectives on Le Jungle

As I reflect on my recent visits, I do so with a lingering sense of anger at the terrible injustice being inflicted upon our fellow humans, these "children of Adam and Eve," (to quote a camp resident), and realize now that I have spent too much time disengaged from the realities of others, focused, individualistically, on myself and my own world. Indeed, Pope Francis, during his visit to Lampedusa Island in 2013, pointed to humanity's loss of direction and indifference to others' suffering when, drawing on the creation story, he asked, "Where is your brother"? and "Where is the blood of your brother which cries out to me"? (Pope Francis 2013a). He concluded that "the globalization of indifference makes us all 'unnamed,' responsible, yet nameless and faceless."

The margins that exist on the edge of our blinkered consciousness are vast spaces, populated by those whose diversity is often considered by others to be so different from ours such as to be deviant (Sheerin 2011). Such deviancy from our perspective of normality promotes the development of a chasm between us and them, a chasm which separates us from their realities. Too often, these realities represent places where qualitatively different things happen and where the shared values of our society are not applied: parallel realities. As we entered Calais, late at night, I saw young men moving in groups towards the Channel Tunnel and the possibility of escape to the United Kingdom. They moved silently past the French houses, stopping to rest under the motorway bridges…moving in a world parallel to that of the native French, existing, not as part of their reality, but rather as part of another which was in constant movement, seeking inclusion and respite.

Visiting the refugee "camp" was not my first entry into others' realities; I have engaged in those of people with disabilities, of people in rural parts of Africa and in city slums. It was, however, my first entry into a situation such as this, and one which gave me some small understanding of the realities of the people living there. As previously noted, Freire wrote of the need to come to knowledge of the other through dialogue and engagement. He argued that this was the way to becoming solidary with the other and, thus, to achieving true solidarity. I feel that I have come to know something of the reality of these other people and it is in this knowledge that my anger is grounded; an anger which commits me to journey alongside these, my fellow humans.

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Realities of People in the Camp

Le Jungle is described as a "camp" but I use this word guardedly, for it is no camp! My idea of a camp is of a bounded space, with structure, order and facilities. The only boundary I noticed here was that created by the ever-attendant riot police (*Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*) who form something of a ring around it. There is no order or structure outside of that which has been developed by the people themselves and this is under constant threat of demolition. There are scant sanitary facilities, no clean water, little safety and significant public health issues. On the most recent visit, I was told that one has to queue for up to four hours to access a shower, and this is often in freezing or wet weather. That this exists in a rich twenty-first century European country which prides itself on the values of its Republic - liberty, equality and fraternity – lends credence to the idea that different realities can exist, side by side, and be grounded in very different value systems. It is also an indictment on Europe, that it has stood by and accepted the emergence of such spaces, making excuses which have dehumanized these people in its citizens' eyes and justified their exclusion from the values upon which the European "project" was founded.

I am reminded of the many stories which were relayed to me by people within the camp. During my first visit, an older man from Iraq told me of the torture he had endured when held for a month by the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). As he showed me the marks that the hot poker made on his ankles, and described the daily threat of having his throat cut, he explained: "They [ISIS] tortured me and treated me as an animal." Describing his current predicament, he noted that "In Europe, they do not torture me, but they still treat me like an animal." I was to see the effects of torture again, during my recent visit, when an Afghan man asked to see me alone. As he struggled to remove his blood-stained t-shirt, eight circular wounds were revealed; two rows of four, each of about 2cm diameter, each weeping. These were the result of Taliban torture one month before. In Ezekiel 34:16 Yahweh tells us that he will bandage the wounded and make the weak strong. I dressed this man's skin wounds but his real wounds were much deeper; all I could do was to hold him and cry with him. Another family told me of their journey across the Mediterranean Sea; they had thirteen children. I saw only six children in the tent and asked where the others were. The father answered "they are in the water." The horror and pain of these people's realities is palpable and sometimes all we could do was to cry in solidarity. I did not witness the anger and resentment which I felt should have accompanied such experiences and the reality that human rights in Europe are protected only for a valued section of humanity.

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Spiritual engagement has also been found to be associated with relationships, love and participation with others (Penman et al. 2009). It is also central to our Spiritan heritage within the union of heart and mind.

Jon Sobrino (1988: 33) writes that "The poor and impoverished of this world bring the human being face to face either with hope or with despair, resignation or cynicism." He includes "hope" as a possible component of a lived spirituality of liberation which has as its focus the possibility of humanization. Despite their situation, I was humbled to experience the warmth and humanity that the people of the camp afforded me; the welcome, the generosity and the tolerance. It brings to mind the values inherent in the dying words of Francis Libermann, when he spoke of "fervor, charity, and union in Jesus Christ" (N.D. XIII 659). The question as to who is really dehumanized in situations of oppression such as this is a pertinent one! Paulo Freire suggests that the oppressors themselves become dehumanized and that humanization can only come from those who have been oppressed. Indeed, it was in my engagements with these human beings that I felt my own humanity welling up and challenging me to respond. Whereas such engagements occurred in the routine interactions whilst providing health care, I also encountered religious spaces within which I experienced the intense presence of spirituality and of God; living spaces of hope, acceptance and humanization. Among the spaces I visited was a tented mosque and an Ethiopian Orthodox Church constructed from tarpaulin and wooden laths. I was again moved to tears at the creation of such prayerful spaces in the midst of suffering. In both, I was welcomed as a brother and advised that all were welcome irrespective of faith, ethnicity or gender. As the Eritrean elder of the Orthodox Church put it "we are all humans; all are welcome." Such acceptance of the other speaks not to a religious fundamentalism but rather to fundamentally spiritual awareness which offers the possibility of current realities being transformed into ones that are humanizing.

The Relationship between Engagement and Spirituality

Whereas *disengagement* is an important concept in maintaining distance between people, its corollary, *engagement*, is arguably central to interpersonal interactions and is found in the dialogic nature of such interactions. It is in engagement that knowledge of reality is ascertained (Sobrino 1988) and this "orientation toward the other" is suggested by some to be a characteristic of spirituality (Walton 2012) serving to redress the otherness of disengagement. Spiritual engagement has also been found to be associated with relationships, love and participation with others (Penman *et al.* 2009). It is also central to our Spiritan heritage within the union of heart and mind. The widespread nature of this relational aspect of spirituality is highlighted by Donal Dorr (2004: 37) who identifies twelve "ingredients" of spirituality:

1. Ecological wisdom
2. Option for the poor
3. The struggle for liberation and structural justice
4. Reconciliation and peacemaking
5. Respect for cultural differences
6. Leisure, celebration, and contemplation
7. Integration of sexuality
8. Community-building through collaboration
9. Interpersonal respect and love
10. Personal qualities, virtues, and attitudes
11. Vulnerability
12. Openness to enrichment and challenge.

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The struggle for liberation and justice is at the center of Christianity, with *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 187 reminding us that "each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society." This direction towards liberation from oppression and poverty is taken up by Sobrino (1988) in his treatise on a spirituality of liberation. He defines spirituality as "the spirit of a subject – an individual or a group – in its relationship with the whole of reality" (Sobrino 1988: 13). This "relating to reality" is vitally important in the context of those who experience oppression and Sobrino (*ibid.*) identifies four main aspects in this regard:

1) Honesty about reality, recognizing things "as they actually are"; 2) faithfulness to this reality, despite the pain that this may bring; 3) openness to being "swept along" by the possibilities that faithfulness to reality brings, and 4) the experience of a relationship with God.

These provide useful pointers to understanding the relationship between engagement and spirituality in the context of my experiences in Calais.

Honesty about Reality

The spirituality which underlies human engagement is one which is grounded in realities; the lived realities of human beings (Shedrake 1998). As such, it is somewhat phenomenological in nature but, rather than being focused on the experience of *one person* it is actually grounded in the shared experiences of *all persons* who are the participants in the engagement. This is an important concept as the solidarity that is inherent in spirituality precludes the possibility of individualism (Gutiérrez 2005). Thus, there must be an unfettered and honest recognition and acceptance of reality as it actually is (Sobrino 1988). Such considerations harmonize closely with Freire's (1993) thoughts on dialogic engagement for he proposes that true solidarity can only take place when

people move away from abstract perspectives and enter into the honest recognition of the other's reality. The knowledge which derives from such an engagement leads to an uncovering also of the historicity of this reality and of one's role in its genesis or maintenance. Sobrino (1988: 16) proposes that in the face of such reality spirituality demands "that form of love for which the greater part of reality calls out: justice."

Faithfulness to this Reality

Achieving a level of honesty about reality is often a painful process, as it calls all partners to a situation of vulnerability, a *nakedness*, which exposes partners' actions and inactions, activity and passivity in bringing about or maintaining that reality. Roles must be recognized; partners must be identified for the persons they are and not as members of some abstract category; injustice, deprivation of voice, exploitation and lies must be acknowledged; and pious, sentimental and individualistic gestures must be discontinued (Freire 1993). The call for justice arises from this and this further demands action in solidarity and in participation with the other (Sheerin 2011). It is clear, though, that those who stand with oppressed people often find themselves entering into their reality and experiencing the abuses that they have been subject to (Front Line Defenders 2013). Despite this, one is called to be faithful to that reality, to its transformation and to the hope of an alternative possibility. This is in the knowledge that "very often the obstacles we meet make us lose all we had gained and start anew" (Gutiérrez 2001: 194). I have struggled with this each time I left these situations, seeking to achieve balance in my life, yet recognizing the need to remain faithful to my suffering brothers and sisters.

Following my first visit to Calais, I felt "driven" to continue my work and travelled to Lesbos in Greece, to assist those people who were landing after their treacherous journey across the Aegean Sea. Again, after that, I felt compelled to return to Calais. This is, I believe, part of our vocation as Christians and Spiritans: called "to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives…to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor" (Luke 4:18-19). I have been privileged to be allowed to engage in relationships with other human beings who have experienced trauma, personal/material loss, dehumanization and who seek the opportunity to reclaim their humanity in Europe. The pain of these people has become internalized in me to the extent that I don't know how I cannot assist them in their plight. Coming to this situation with a set of values rooted in the basic principle of *caritas,* love and sharing with others (Sheerin 2013), and derived from a Christian upbringing, I feel the need to remain faithful to the

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reality that I have been privy to. To disengage would, I think, be hypocritical and unfaithful.

Openness to Possibilities

An inherent possibility of being faithful to the reality is that one will be opened to the possibility of extending one's actions of justice to others and that the spirituality of liberation will become the underpinning driver for "doing good." Sobrino (1988) writes of a developing conviction that the realities of those who are oppressed can change and that new realities can be achieved. This is consistent with the utopian basis of such a spirituality which is central to the writings of fellow practitioner of liberation spirituality, Ignacio Ellacuría (1989: 1078) who wrote that

Only utopianism and hope will enable us to believe, and give us strength to try – together with all the world's poor and oppressed people – to reverse history, to subvert it, and to move it in a different direction.

It is also in keeping with a growing conviction that I have, that a world of social justice and humanization is achievable, but only if people who share in this vision, in this alternate reality, in this spirituality, work to make it happen (Freire 1994). This is the possibility that can be striven for.

Experience of God

This openness, honesty and fidelity is a basis for the possibility of relationship – a spiritual experience – with God; one that is achieved through historical revelation. Sobrino (1988: 21) posits that "the question of spirituality is purely and simply the question of a correspondence to God's revelation in real history," the lived history and realities of others. This is the "spirituality of presence" that David Smith refers to when discussing Libermann's *practical union*; presence with God, through prayer and presence to others through apostolic works (Smith 2008: 1). The union is also manifested in Jesus' entrance into the reality of the human state and his humanization of those with whom he engaged and those who sought to engage with him: tax collectors (Mark 2:15-17); sinners (John 8:3-11); and those with illness (Luke 5:12-14). My experience is that engagement with others forms part of a spiritual encounter in which God is revealed. This was particularly pertinent for me in the touching of wounds of torture and of anguish which reminded me of Jesus' revelation to Thomas in John's Gospel (20:27-28).

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Conclusions

This paper has considered the spirituality underpinning my experiences engaging with people who are seeking refuge from wars and other difficulties in their home countries. I have proposed that these activities are consistent with an apostolate which is Christian and Spiritan in nature, and that they counter the disengagement which is often seen in the responses to those who are perceived to be "different." As such, they act to redress the dehumanization which is inherent to disengagement: they humanize through engagement (presence). It is clear to me that there is a coherent spirituality underpinning this work and that this is best described in terms of the spirituality of liberation put forward by Sobrino and Gutiérrez. The main tenets harmonize with those set out in the "Methodology of Spiritan JPIC Animation" (*Spiritan Justice, Peace and Integrity in Creation Ministry:* 41-49) which speaks of 1) compassion and response; 2) identification of root causes of injustice and provocation to action; 3) humility in the service of the poor and oppressed and in turn self-discovery and conversion; and 4) solidarity which is manifested in journeying with those oppressed, at their side, much as Jesus took human form to journey with humanity. Such a spirituality may provide a useful basis for understanding similar work being carried out where oppression and marginalization are features of people's realities.

Dr. Fintan Sheerin
Dublin

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