

AND EVERMORE, SOUL

The Josephine Gould Discourse

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...let us do what we can to rekindle the smouldering, nigh quenched fire on the altar.... I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms. All attempts to contrive a system are as cold as the new worship introduced by the French to the goddess of Reason.... Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address", Wright, p. 111)

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There are two kinds of people in the world, states an old saw, those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. - A saw, in this sense meaning a maxim or proverb, is derived from an Old English word meaning 'discourse.' A discourse in itself has come to mean a formal and orderly, and usually extended, expression of thought on a subject. A brief etymological expedition revealed that this word is derived from Latin and means

"to run about." - I propose this evening to run about more than I shall be formal and orderly, for I will attempt to speak about the Imagination, and I can think of few things less formal and orderly, and more given to running about.

Specifically, I wish to explore the role of the Imagination in our lives and how it pertains to religion, particularly our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Of those who find that there are two kinds of people in the world, I am with those who believe in a fluid duality of human existence: i.e. those who find seeing things in pairs a useful framework in which to understand things, yet who try not to confuse this framework with whatever it is that we imagine to be Reality. In this sense, I want to be as clear as I can about the context in which I will be trying to understand what we call the Imagination.

On one side of the Imagination pairing, we find people who say that Imagination is a human function that kicks in after the perception of something 'real'. For instance, a person sees a tree, or touches one, or smells the fragrance of its blossoms, and as a consequence has an image of it in his/her mind. The image of the tree is the secondary result of some sensory input - be it sight or touch or smell - that has given rise to the image of the tree in the mind of the individual. In short, Imagination is derivative; it is derived from sensory perception and is secondary to perception. Philosophically, in this sense, Imagination is understood as a re-presentation of something 'real' that has been seen, touched, smelled, tasted or heard. In and of itself, Imagination is not real, but derivative of 'reality'.

On the other half of this pair are people, myself among them, who say that Imagination is a phenomenon that exists in and of itself. For instance, when I see a tree, or touch one, or smell its fragrance, my perceptions of the tree are filtered through the lens of Imagination. Imagination is the lens through which I perceive

the world; it is the creator of the image I perceive in my mind. As such, my consciousness has no direct relation to any material objects. This side of the pairing understands that, in a radical and basic sense, our initial and primary perception is that of images, transmitted to us indirectly by our complex and complicated nervous system. (Jung, CW 8: 745) Between our physical, sensory functions and the image that appears in the mind, there is an unconscious process which transforms (in the case of seeing) the physical fact of light reflected off the surface of a tree into the mental image of tree. This process is what I understand to be the Imagination.

What this implies is that our immediate and direct contact with 'reality' is not with our physical world, but with the image that appears in our minds. We live our immediate, direct, and most personal lives in contact, not so much with what we call physical reality, but with the images in our minds, with psychological reality.

Simply put (if this can be simply put), there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe that the Imagination is a secondary function of our perception of the 'real' world, and those who believe that the Imagination is the primary function which constitutes the only reality we experience in an immediate, direct sense. (cf: Jung, CW 8:748)

This way of understanding the Imagination has its historic roots, in part, in Renaissance humanism and the philosophy which flows from it, and has been articulated by Carl Jung and post-Jungian depth psychology. Richard Tarnas, in his book, The Passion of the Western Mind, comments on the current epistemological work going on which is "rethinking of the nature of Imagination, [and is being] carried out on many fronts - philosophy of science, sociology, anthropology, religious studies.... Imagination is no longer conceived as

simplistically opposed to perception and reason; rather perception and reason are recognized as being always informed by the imagination." (p. 405)

Imagination is being understood more and more as that which processes the images of our lives, attaches meaning, creates relationships, and provides whatever synthesis of experience our lives will have. In a poetic/spiritual sense, Imagination is not merely a function, but a Presence.

The poet, Wallace Stevens, described the Imagination as

"the intensest rendezvous"...

"A light, a power, the miraculous influence."

He wrote:

"We say God and the imagination are one...

How high that highest candle lights the dark."

("Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour")

God and the Imagination are one.... Not only do I find this a very 'unitarian' view, it also expresses the primacy of the Imagination in human life, the centrality of it, the pivotal point it holds in human living, by equating Imagination with what theologian Paul Tillich called the Ground of Being, and what others call the Ultimate, the Holy, the essence and the eminence of Life Itself.

This bit of running about leads us now, as a matter of course, to the image of Emily's tooth.

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Emily Dickinson imagined the Imagination to be a Species that stands beyond the visible (read: physical) world. She wrote:

This World is not Conclusion -

A Species stands beyond -

Invisible, as Music -
 But positive, as Sound -
 It beckons, and it baffles -
 Philosophy - don't know -
 And through a Riddle, at the last -
 Sagacity, must go -
 To guess it, puzzles scholars -
 To gain it, Men have borne
 Contempt of Generations
 And Crucifixion, shown -
 Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -
 Blushes, if any see -
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence -
 And asks a Vane, the way -
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -
 Strong Hallelujahs roll -
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul -

(#501, c. 1862)

As the poem moves along, her image changes from an abstract notion of a Species to a more specific and experiential one. Imagination becomes a tooth, the Tooth that nibbles at the soul...Emily's Tooth, the Imagination, is the tooth that nibbles at the core of our very being, and is perhaps The Primary way in which we 'know' our world and ourselves.

James Hillman, a renegade, free-thinking psychologist who runs about with ideas and images quite a bit, is also one of these Imagination people. He says: "...the primary activity of the psyche is imagining." Human beings are "primarily acts of imagination, images. Jung says, 'The psyche consists essentially of images.'" (p. 62) Essentially, i.e. the essence of who we are. Human life, says Hillman, is the actualizing over time of (what he calls) the seed image, the image in the heart of the individual, in their soul. Like an acorn, it strives to grow into the image contained within this seed, this heart, this soul. The job of life is to be guided to as great a degree as possible by this image, what author Robertson Davies calls the Daimon, or what is sometimes referred to as one's Guardian Angel, or the Genius within.

Still, some say that the image is a mere re-presentation of what is real, a middleman so to speak, not real in and of itself, but a (re)presentation of the real. Yet, in his poem, "The Plain Sense of Things," Wallace Stevens notes that we cannot get beyond Imagination even if we discount it.

"...the absence of the imagination [he says] had

Itself to be imagined."

(Hillman/Ventura, p. 63)

A circular argument? Perhaps, it does run about. But the Imagination apparently moves in circles, as well as linearities and ellipses, sometimes even in hyperbolies.

With all this running about, it is not easy to get a clear view of the Imagination. And yet, the Imagination is often described with images of seeing. "Reality is always coming through a pair of glasses," writes Hillman, "a point of view, a language - a fantasy." (p. 39) "Imagination is the eye of the soul." (Joseph Joubert) I cannot escape speaking of the Imagination with its own images - blushing, perhaps, if any see....

Such inescapability, such pervasiveness, is a bothersome notion for many people. Dickinson's use of the image of Narcotics would indicate the many ways in which women and men attempt to escape the Imagination, or at the very least, to numb it. Narcotics, as an image, is any escape attempt or numbing effect such as admitting only the rational, 'explaining away' the unexplainable, or becoming immersed in some constant activity. One way or the other, narcotics of any form are a way of denying the Imagination, of dismissing it because we cannot describe or circumscribe it.

"Western society," writes Roberts Avens, "while paying lip service to its artists and the assorted crowd, has excluded imaginal experience from its culturally and religiously sanctioned vision of reality. [It assumes that] life is best lived by denying all that is not amenable to neat logical categories." (Avens, p. 11-12)

Mary Watkins, author of Waking Dreams, has observed: "we live out the imagination in everything and yet we are against the very notion of it...." (Avens, p. 12)

It has also been said that Imagination is nothing but metaphor - that great reductionist, wave-it-off phrase, 'nothing but.' It is all nothing but metaphor, so as to say, insubstantial, fanciful, gossamer. Yet, as linguist, George Lakoff, and philosopher, Mark Johnson, note in their study of metaphor, metaphors are pervasive in everyday life; they govern our everyday functioning; they are the structure of what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to others; metaphors play a central role in defining our everyday realities. "What we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor." (Lakoff and Johnson, p. 3)

Yet, we tend to dismiss the metaphoric nature of our perceptions, and thereby the Imagination itself. We may accept it Invisible as Music, but are want to admit it positive as Sound. Dickinson's poem suggests that creative action, such as Music, is evidence of the Imagination. Music is the creative action; the sound it

produces is the positive evidence of its reality. Following this, we could go on to suggest that it is also evidenced in other creative endeavors: poetry, novels, short stories; art of all types, dance, theatre. The Arts in general, in fact, are where Western society has nominally placed - that is, located - the Imagination. Culturally and religiously, we have circumscribed - sort of cordoned-off - an acceptable area in which we will admit the Imagination as existing.

Like Dickinson, retired Unitarian minister, Arthur Foote, sees the Imagination in "the constructive or creative faculty. While 'fancy flits about the surface and is airy and playful, sometimes false, imagination is deep, essential, spiritual. It goes to the heart of things, and is earnest, serious, and seeks always and everywhere for essential truth.' . . . We need to keep alert to life's overtones, attuned to those 'authentic tidings of invisible things'...." (Foote, p. 30-31; his quotation may be from Emerson)

Attuned to the authentic tidings of invisible things.... Foote echoes the advice of the 13th century Persian mystic poet, Jelalludin Rumi, who said: "Work in the invisible world at least as hard as you do in the visible." (Barks, p. 38)

But what of other areas of human life and endeavor? Is there not creativity, that is to say, Imagination, in science? in research? in engineering?... Even in politics, civics, and other areas of the social arena, is it not creativity, the Imagination, that most excites us and draws us to those people in whom we sense its activity and presence? Be it in the political sphere of legislation and leadership, in the aesthetics of architecture and urban planning, in the social and civic organizations that nurture and embody our sense of civilization and culture, do we not find ourselves most drawn, most excited by, most enlivened in those areas where we could identify the Imagination as being alive and well...positive as Sound?

In her poem, "Spring Azures," Mary Oliver reminds us of that hosier's son of late 16th century London, who fought against every restriction of the Imagination, who believed the Imagination to be the one Reality of all, and who died the same year as Ludwig von Beethoven - as isolated as Beethoven was deaf, as unknown at the time as Beethoven was known..., Oliver reminds us of William Blake, who wrote, among many other things: "The imagination is not a State; it is the Human Existence itself." (quoted in Bachelard, p. 19)

The Human Existence itself. As French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, writes, "Images are primary...realities. In experience itself, everything begins with images." (p. 84) Our most exciting, most creative, most helpful, most useful endeavors originate in the Imagination, in the ability, in the willingness, in the humility to see beyond the apparent, to admit associations and relationships hitherto unconsidered, to accept and be guided by a Vision that is not ours, but which seeks to flow through us, animating and encouraging human existence itself.

With Dickinson and others, we may readily see the evidence of the Imagination, its effects, its products, its results. -- But what of the Imagination itself? "We say God and the imagination are one." (W. Stevens) Many have asked and speculated about the location of God. What of the location of the Imagination?

David Miller suggests that the "imaginal world...is a realm between that of the mind and that of experience, between idea and reality, between ideal and real, between infinite and finite.... It is a 'middle realm,'..." (Miller, p. xxii-xxiii) Jesus once told some Pharisees, who were looking for the kingdom of God, that it was in the midst of them, inbetween them. (Luke 17:20-21, RSV)

Henry Corbin, an Islamic scholar, also argues that the world of the image, and hence of the Imagination, lies in this middle realm, in the midst of us. Many Arabic scholars, he notes, use the simple illustration of a mirror to describe this phenomenon. "The material substance of the mirror...is not the substance of the Image.... The substance [of the Image] is simply the 'place of its appearance.'" (Corbin, Spring 1972, quoted in Avens, p. 38) The Imagination has no substance per se; it rather takes on substance in the mirror where it is reflected.

Roberts Avens comments that, just as images are not contained in mirrors, so are they not contained in the mind (i.e. the mind is not a container of images); but rather, images are the mind just as it is, constantly imagining. The 'place' of the mind/psyche is identical with the 'place' of its imaging.... (p. 38-9)

"When you look in a mirror," said Rumi long ago, "you see yourself, not the state of the mirror.

"The flute player puts breath in the flute, and who makes the music? Not the flute; the flute-player!...

"When you finally see through the veils to how things really are," he concluded, "you will keep saying again and again: 'This is certainly not like what we thought it was!'"

(Barks, trans., I Want Burning)

The Imagination is often not what we think it is. It appears in the images we perceive; yet it is not contained in our minds or psyches any more than a face is contained in a mirror. - We are not the location of the Imagination. We are not the source.

What we refer to as a more 'primitive' consciousness (meaning a person who lived, or who today lives, in a world absolutely animated by the Imagination instead of computer games and television) would not say "I think a thought", but rather, "A thought thinks me." Many thoughts simply appear in consciousness, in

the mirror of awareness. They come to us; we do not will them into existence. -
We are not the source.

Avens suggests that one of our human tasks, one of the tasks of our 'less primitive' consciousness, is to see the ego, the 'I', our sense of I-identity, our perceiving consciousness, as an image among other images. "In our ordinary states of wakefulness we act as if we are the center of all that is to be perceived; we appear distinct from the circle of images around us. When, however, the ego is perceived as an image among other images, it recovers its predestined place on the circumference of the circle." (p. 39)

Mary Watkins likens this change in perspective "to the one which occurred when people realized the earth was not the center of the universe, or that humans were not the first, and thereby most important creation." (Avens, p. 39)

Liberal religion has prided itself as being on the cutting edge of human thought and knowledge, not only in the sense of accepting the scientific advancements of our culture, but going as far as to consider them to inform (and even modify) scripture, to be equal with the most profound insights of mystics and prophets and teachers of antiquity.

Why our reluctance, then, as we enthusiastically embrace the advancement beyond the anthropocentric worldview, to exploring the apparently and equally momentous advancement beyond the egocentric worldview?

This shift, I would suggest, is really no shift at all. It has always been in place every bit as much as Earth has always spun around the Sun, every bit as much as ours has always been one Galaxy among a Universe of galaxies. We are not the center. We are not the source. As mystics and poets of ages and cultures gone by have said, we are vessels through which Life flows, mirrors in which we may one day see the face of God and understand our place in the family of things. (Mary Oliver)

Our egos are not Conclusion,
A Species stands beyond -

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The Imagination is quite beyond us and yet lives with an immediacy in our everyday lives. It exists, is expressed, finds reflection and substance, in our very words and language, to reflect our experience to us so that we may contemplate and understand and realize the astonishing world in which we live and move and have our being.

Imagination lives with an immediacy in our suffering, in our joy, in our loves and in our difficulties, in our relationships, in our fantasies, in our dreams, and in our religion.

Imagination lives in what I would characterize, following Corbin and others, as 'the spaces in-between', in that place in-between what we call 'reality' and our image of reality -- the spaces in-between, where there seems to be nothing, nothing, and yet where so much seems to be happening.

The legendary Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, described this centuries ago:

Thirty spokes converge on a single hub,
but it is in the space where there is no-thing
that the usefulness of the cart lies.
Clay is molded to make a pot,
but it is in the space where there is no-thing
that the usefulness of the clay pot lies.
Cut out doors and windows to make a room,
but it is in the spaces where there is no-thing
that the usefulness of the room lies.

(Mair, p. 70)

I suggest that the Imagination is the no-thing that creates the usefulness of perception, that mediates reality and even creates it for us. Its place, its location is in all the spaces in-between; we live both with it and within it. It is that which makes carts, clay pots, rooms - which makes our joys and sufferings, our longings and loves - which makes Life itself - useful and lively, exciting and encouraging, meaningful and worthwhile, and - ultimately - real.

This is not to say that the Imagination does not have its dark side, that it cannot be superficially manipulated and used in ways that are destructive and discouraging, fairly meaningless and unworthwhile. We have a lot of places dominated by what might be called the Image Industry: from much of cinema to most of advertising, from how-to books to tabloid journalism, from marketing strategies to political campaigns, from talkshow-radio half-truths to television sound bites -- we have a booming barrage of images that are coming at us everywhere we turn, attempting to manipulate us rather than stimulate us. Indeed, we have a lot of manipulation and very little Imagination. There are few places where the Imagination is honored, and fewer places still where we may attend to it, be open to the Imagination and move with its insights further and deeper into our lives.

I believe, however, that Church is a unique place where the Imagination can be honored and attended to. Granted, most aren't, but that is not to say it can't be done. I believe that our Church can be a shelter for the human spirit, a sanctuary for the Imagination, a place where we may manage our fear and discover the courage to live lives with an integrity which honors the Imagination, as the poet, Shelley, honored it - as "the great instrument of moral good." (quoted in Sells, Spring, p. 56)

Church is a place wherein the imaginative mind may be sheltered, nurtured and encouraged, thus widening the compassion of the spirit and deepening the understanding of the soul. A place where we acknowledge that which is not us, but which is Other, something which is not "ours," but in which we live.

James Hillman reminds us, as do others, of this very important perspective, which it is the unique position of Church to affirm and promote and remind us all. That is, the recognition that the Imagination is not ours. It doesn't belong to us; it is not something we control or manipulate to our benefit. "We're in it," he says. "We're in it. It's the medium in which we live." (Hillman, p. 221)

Imagination is the Source which forms and informs our actual experience of the everyday world. It is that which forms and reforms our faith and religion, the medium in which we live, our lives and the spaces in-between, the connections and that which connects, the mother and the maker, the form and the meaning of form, the One and the All.

In our culture, however, it is all too easy to assume only the single vision of our Protestant forefathers, the deadening literalism of single, simple, solid and stable meanings. Along with the bombardment of the Image Industries, the Imagination is often degraded and frequently dismissed.

Church, however, is here to provide a shelter for the human spirit in relationship with the Imagination; it is here to remind us of that relationship, that we are in it, and need to ally ourselves in such a way as to participate with the Imagination as instruments of moral good; it is here to encourage and to entrust us to see beyond the veils of the apparent, to see deeply and act compassionately; it is here to send us forth, that we may evermore return and return again in humble need, with open hearts and curious minds.

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It is not surprising to me that all this has been said before, and said within our own tradition. In his address to the senior class of the Harvard Divinity School, 15 July 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke eloquently of the soul, that is to say, of the Imagination.

He said, in a manner of speaking, that there are two types of people in the world: those who merely repeat what others say and claim that as true religion; and those who speak from their souls, from their own immediate experience of God, "without mediator or veil." (Wright, p. 108)

Of the former, he was speaking of those who merely reiterated the words of Jesus and all the prophets, and who believed that the experience of God, the experience of the Holy, of the soul, of the Imagination, was confined to the legendary figures of biblical history, and available to us only through their experience. He spoke against that single vision of our Protestant forefathers, against the deadening literalism of single, simple, solid and stable meanings.

Emerson argued throughout his Address for the primacy of soul, what I interchangeably call the Imagination. He focused his argument on two subjects: Jesus, and the experience of God.

Emerson saw Jesus as "the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a [human being]." Emerson understood Jesus as a prophet "who was true to what is in you and me," who "saw with open eye the mystery of the soul," who saw that God lives in the human soul, who saw that the very life of every woman and man "was a miracle." (Wright, p. 96-97) Following this, he understood the experience of God as being something which is immediate and available to everyone, present in Nature and in the human soul.

Much to the chagrin of many of his listeners, Emerson went on to list two mistakes made by the liberal Christianity of his time. The first was to dwell "with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus." (Wright, p. 98) That is, to hold

up the person of Jesus as the source of all good, rather than as an example to everyone of what The Good can be. The second mistake was what he called "the stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed.... None believeth in the soul..., but only in some man or person old and departed.... men [and women] can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine.." (Wright, p. 107-108)

It seems to me that we are still guilty of these mistakes, but in the opposite way. Instead of dwelling upon Jesus, noxious or otherwise, we avoid dealing with him and his teaching to almost as great an extent as others deal with it exclusively. The second mistake is the assumption that the age of inspiration no longer includes the Bible much at all, thereby relegating it, and to a great degree the experience of God, to be the sole property of religious fundamentalists.

In his address, Emerson asked the rhetorical question: what can be done? what is the remedy? and answered his question: "In the soul...let redemption be sought." (p. 107) What was true then is equally true today. We may ask, what can be done? and I would reply: In the Imagination, let redemption be sought.

"Let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive [i.e. animated by the Imagination], you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The remedy to their deformity is first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul." (Wright, p. 111)

Our western religious heritage is deeply ingrained in our culture and must be addressed. There are those who use it to restrict and judge; but we can use it to liberate and encourage. Part of our own heritage and tradition has been to breathe new life into these forms, to be the ongoing (Re)formation, to proclaim flexible and new interpretations and understandings of the ministry of Jesus and the teachings of the Bible. In a word, to acknowledge the free flow of the

Imagination in and through these old forms, a flow which makes them new and (re)forms them into images which inspire and renew.

Liberal religion often goes to great lengths to separate itself from the mainstream. We need to separate ourselves from deadening literalism. Yet too often we simply cut ourselves off from those sources and forms through which our own lives may be enlivened, and from which we may then proclaim a liberal gospel that speaks to a great number of souls today who are seeking just such a message. By breathing the breath of new life into these forms, we honor our heritage and offer the invigorating worship Emerson sought, where every man and woman is encouraged and reminded that they are an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens pass into their minds; that they drink forever the soul of God. (Wright, p. 102)

Other faith traditions inform our journey, as they have in the past, as they certainly did with Emerson himself; they inform my own. We acknowledge these traditions in the "sources" section of our UUA Principles. But to ignore that part of our own heritage upon which we now stand, and which has made our being here possible, is to cut ourselves off from an important aspect of who we are and who we may become.

As Emerson noted, we have inherited two great forms from Christianity: the Sabbath and preaching. Through the disciplined observance of the Sabbath, of worship, we have the opportunity to be reminded that we are not the source, not the center of existence. We may then be renewed in the good news that Life does flow through us, that each of us is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens pass into our minds; that we drink forever the soul of God.

Through the form of preaching, we may be reminded that we relate to an Other through the forms which exist and which can come alive when we let this Other flow through us, animate us, enliven us, support us. We may know how

the examples of the great ones who have gone before, and through whom the Imagination flowed unhindered, might inspire and encourage us today, as we struggle in our lives to be the best instruments of moral good as we are able.

Emerson spoke in support of the soul; I speak in support of the Imagination, as the enlivening force, the animating Presence in our lives. Emerson spoke of Jesus as an exemplar of the soul; I speak of Jesus as a tragic example of the Imagination deeply lived, yet ultimately rejected. Emerson spoke of the experience of God as the experience available to every human soul; I speak of the experience of God as the experience of the Imagination, equally available to any who would humbly receive it. With Emerson, I believe that all attempts to create something new and meaningful by simply adopting new forms, new words, new rituals, are as vain and cold as setting up Reason as a new goddess.

Let the breath of the Imagination be breathed through us; for if once it does, we shall be made flexible and new. Let the breath of the Imagination be breathed through the forms now existing; for if once it does, they shall be made flexible and new. Let the world be seen to be the mirror of the soul, and the Church its sanctuary.

I say, God and the Imagination are One; and how high that highest candle lights the dark! May its light increase in each of us, now and forevermore.

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