



The International
DYSLEXIA
Association

Promoting literacy through research, education, and advocacy.

Hawai'i Branch

October 2011
Special Edition

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HIDA's mission is to increase awareness of dyslexia in our community, provide support for dyslexics, families and educators, promote teacher training and improve literacy for struggling readers.

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HIDA CELEBRATES THE OTHER SIDE OF DYSLEXIA

Not all great minds think alike. Not all brains are “wired” the same way. People with dyslexia think and process differently: different, not disabled.

Relatively little is known about the strengths of persons with dyslexia. The few articles touching on the subject, such as Thomas West’s *Dyslexic Talents and Nobel Prizes (2001)*, have primarily consisted of anecdotes describing their special qualities. Similarly, in *Journey into Dyslexia*, Oscar-winning filmmakers Alan and Susan Raymond describe how many entrepreneurs view their dyslexia as a gift and say they discovered their strengths while struggling in school. Carl Schramm (the CEO of the Kauffman Foundation who is interviewed in the film) says he believes dyslexic entrepreneurs have an ability to see things others do not – that they “create their own world” because they do not easily fit in typical societal norms. Mr. West, in a follow-up article, *It Is Time to Get Serious About the Talents of Dyslexics* (reprinted on page 2), says it is time to study the “up-sides” of dyslexia.

Fortunately, a number of researchers want to understand the talents of successful dyslexics and study how these talents are important for education, work and life. In 2007, Professor Julie Logan of Cass Business School in London, released the results of a study of 102 entrepreneurs in the United States showing that a disproportionately high number – 35 percent – identified themselves as dyslexic. Professor Logan theorizes that many of the coping skills people with dyslexia learn in their formative years become best practices for the successful entrepreneur.

Most recently, learning disabilities experts Brock and Fernette Eide argue that dyslexia is an alternative way brains can be wired – one with many advantages. They describe four major strength profiles, each of which reflects a different but related way in which dyslexic brains are especially good at putting together big pictures, seeing larger contexts, or imagining how processes will play out over time (Venton).

HIDA knows there is more to dyslexia than reading problems. After all, Albert Einstein could not read until he was age nine, and General George Patton and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller had trouble reading all their

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lives. Richard Branson's and Whoopi Goldberg's reading problems have not affected their success (*LD Online*). Instead, they are defined and driven by qualities such as:

- creativity and imagination
- dynamic reasoning using incomplete or changing facts
- three dimensional spatial reasoning
- thinking "outside the box"
- intuition
- perseverance

In *Music Lights the Way for Shawn Conley* (beginning on page 5), HIDA introduces a talented musician who is similarly defined and driven by special qualities and does not find dyslexia to be an obstacle.

Also, HIDA invites you to a **free panel presentation** with five individuals – each of whom has dyslexia – who will discuss strengths and special qualities that help to survive school and succeed in life. They are **Rechung Fujihira** and **Tony Stanford**, co-founders of The Box Jelly, an innovative coworking entrepreneurial community business in Hawai'i (where people rent desks in a shared workplace that fosters social interaction and collaborative working), **Christopher Obenchain**, a college counselor at Punahou School who was recently diagnosed with dyscalculia, **John Brad Peebles**, a recent University of Hawai'i graduate with a degree in geography, and **Amy Wessberg**, a 5th - 6th grade classroom teacher at Assets School. Questions and comments from the audience will be welcomed and appreciated. Call Margaret Higa, at (808) 538-7007, or email her at mhiga@dyslexia-hawaii.org, if you want to attend this event on **October 11, 6:30 p.m., at the Hawai'iUSA Federal Credit Union.**

October is Dyslexia Awareness Month: celebrate the other side of dyslexia.

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IT IS TIME TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT THE TALENTS OF DYSLEXICS

by Thomas West, Author

"I knew I was different in the way that I thought, but I didn't realize why I was so dumb at spelling . . . and rote memory and arithmetic. . . . The first time I realized how different . . . brains could be . . . was when I bumped into Jim Olds at a dinner party back in the late sixties. Jim . . . was a professor here [at Caltech] . . . famous for his pleasure center work. . . . A speaker talked about the way we think and compared it to holography. Jim was across the table from me. I said, "Oh, yes. When I'm inventing an

instrument or whatever, I see it in my head and I rotate it and try it out and move the gears. If it doesn't work, I rebuild it in my head." And he looked at me and said, "I don't see a thing in my head with my eyes closed." We spent the rest of the evening . . . trying to figure out how two professors—both obviously gifted people at Caltech in the Biology Division—could possibly think at all, because we were so different. So then I took this up with Roger Sperry and I realized that I had some amazing short-comings as well as some amazing gifts." (Interview with William J. Dreyer, Ph.D., by Shirley K. Cohen, 1999)

The above is a passage from the oral history project at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. The speaker is the late William J. Dreyer, Ph.D., who is increasingly known as one of the major innovators in the biotech revolution that is now washing over all of us. Last year, one of his inventions was placed in the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, DC—the first automated protein sequencer, which he patented in 1977.

A strong visual thinker and dyslexic, Dreyer developed new ways of thinking about molecular biology. Sometimes he was almost entirely alone. He (with his colleague, J. Claude Bennett) advanced a new theory and new data about genetics and the immune system that was 12 years ahead of everyone else in the field. They all had to learn to think the way he did. Then, it was obvious.

Because of this heresy, initially Dreyer could not get funding for his inventions from academic or foundation sources. His department head would get irate phone calls from other professors complaining about Dreyer's paper and talks. These professors could not see, until much later, that Dreyer had to be right. Consequently, Dreyer went to private companies to make his instruments—something quite unusual and discouraged at the time but now wildly popular among universities hoping for a share of large royalty payments.

Having a hatred of administration and corporate politics, Dreyer was the idea man for seven new biotech companies (including Applied Biosystems) and bought himself a high-altitude small plane with some of the proceeds. Years later, when Susumu Tonegawa was awarded a Nobel Prize (Physiology or Medicine, 1987) for work he had done in Switzerland, it was for proving (through experiments that were illegal in the United States at the time) that Dreyer and his colleague had been correct in their predictions many years earlier.

Dreyer taught molecular biology to a dyslexic grandson who was clever with computers but was having a very hard time in high school. Working as an apprentice to his grandfather, the grandson skipped the latter part of high school, most of college, all of graduate school. He is now doing post-doc level work writing computer programs that use sophisticated scientific information visualization techniques to help link various human traits to sections of the genetic code. He is not only doing high-level work; some argue that the grandson is in fact working at the cutting edge. In recent years, he co-authored three peer-reviewed journal articles. One of the grandson's work colleagues got his own Ph.D. only because the grandson was able to explain the significance of the colleague's work to the review committee.

To succeed with such extremely mixed abilities, one needs to have a deep reservoir of confidence and fortitude to carry on in spite of the judgments of others that you are slow, lazy, and stupid.

Dreyer, never one to read many books, did read *In the Mind's Eye* and telephoned this writer to explain—"this is the way I think—this is my life—let's talk." This contact led to many discussions and a long-term friendship. When Dreyer died of cancer in 2004, one of the enduring passions of his later scientific research was to try to understand the relationships between dyslexia, visual thinking, and the

high levels of creativity he had experienced in his own life and work. This writer's second book, *Thinking Like Einstein*, is dedicated to—"William J. Dreyer, 1928-2004, molecular biologist, strong visual thinker, prescient inventor, instrument maker, who loved to fly high to see what others could not see, frequently alone."

Success Hidden Beneath Failure

The story of the life of William Dreyer and his grandson, Brandon King, brings into sharp focus the considerable advantages of the dyslexic kind of brain—at least in certain variations within the great diversity of dyslexic brains. (It also suggests what sometimes might be possible with non-traditional education.) We can see that this kind of brain—seemingly so magnificently ill-adapted to conventional education—can be a powerful engine of insight and innovation—raising some rapidly to the top, pushing forward past the many who are conventionally successful students but find it hard to conceive of anything really new. These visual-thinking dyslexics see the world differently. They think differently. They see things that others do not see. Yet these same individuals have great difficulty with things that are easy for almost everyone else—especially at the lower levels of education.

To succeed with such extremely mixed abilities, one needs to have a deep reservoir of confidence and fortitude to carry on in spite of the judgments of others that you are slow, lazy, and stupid. To maintain the required drive and sense of mission in the face of almost constant failure and humiliation is often nothing short of miraculous. Only a comparatively small number survive these early days with enough confidence and drive to press on, against all odds, to find success in some area of special knowledge and passion.

We need to help dyslexics find and develop their own talents, large or small, so that they cannot be beaten down . . .

Those of us who are trying to help dyslexics must understand that academic remediation is only part of the job—and perhaps not the most interesting or important part. We need to find ways to help dyslexics find and develop their own talents, large or small, so that they cannot be beaten down—defensively hiding their talents along with their disabilities. And, I for one, believe that one of the best ways (perhaps the only really effective way) to do this is to study the lives and work of successful dyslexics (in all their great diversity)—to allow other dyslexics to see what can be done, as well as showing how it can be done.

The Smartest Lad

In the first description of developmental reading disability in the medical literature, in 1896, it was noted that one student could not learn to read in spite of "laborious and persistent training." However, his headmaster observed that this student "would be the smartest lad in the school if the instruction were entirely oral" (Morgan, 1896, p. 1378).

From the time of Pringle Morgan and Critchley to Orton and Geschwind, the central puzzle of dyslexia has always been the linkage of high ability in some areas with remarkable and unexpected disabilities in other areas. For more than a century we have recognized this pattern, but have generally focused on only one aspect. With the best of intentions, we have learned much about how to fix the problems that dyslexics experience but we have done almost nothing to develop a deeper understanding of the varied and hard-to-measure talents that dyslexics possess.

Highly successful dyslexics nearly always say that their accomplishments and special ways of seeing come from their dyslexia—not in spite of their dyslexia as is often believed. Most professionals in the field agree that talents are important, but eventually they come to focus almost exclusively on the serious business of reading remediation alone. We need to change this.

The Other Half of the Job

I believe the time has come to be serious about trying to understand the talents of dyslexics—to do the other half of the job—and try to understand the puzzle that so fascinated Bill Dreyer to the end of his life.

Accordingly, I propose that it is time to build a bold and ambitious program that will focus primarily on talent. The major objectives of this initiative would be—

- To build a program with its primary focus on understanding and developing the strengths and talents that dyslexics have—rather than focusing on areas of remarkable weakness. As dyslexic real estate entrepreneur Barbara Corcoran says, “Use what you’ve got.” We would be supplying the missing half of what dyslexics need in life and work—about aspects of their lives that are not yet well understood but should be.
- To build a bold program which would, in time, be as large as all current remediation programs in effort, resources, and impact on the lives of dyslexic children and adults—including funding, research, training, and development of best practices. It took over 100 years for us to arrive at our current position. Now that we know the importance of what we are doing and what is still urgently needed, we should plan to deliver substantial results in, say, one tenth of the time, that is, 10 years.

As a dyslexic myself, I feel a growing sense of personal responsibility to dyslexics as a group. I feel the need to substantially change the course of what we are trying to do. I feel we need to seriously embrace a radical change now or there will be no change at all—allowing another generation of dyslexics to suffer needlessly, wasting talents that are greatly needed. We have done much good over the years, but we have been doing only half the job. A small group of us have been talking about these things for many years. But almost nothing has happened. Indeed, on the whole, in most cases, it has gotten worse.

In the 1980s, talents were often discussed at Orton conferences—especially by the old timers, such as Roger Saunders and Margaret Rawson. In my view, we need to rebuild what we do so that at each step of the way we are helping dyslexic children and adults see themselves as capable and valuable—rather than as wounded, broken, needing to be fixed. As we have learned, sometimes the best intentions can lead to further problems.

Looking Again at Old Ideas

Focusing on talents is fundamental to the perspectives provided by Samuel Torrey Orton and Norman Geschwind. But most of us have focused on remediation—on fixing problems—not developing new understandings of special talents—especially talents that seem to have nothing to do with school and conventional academics—but may have everything to do with success in work and life. While all agree that talents are important, usually almost nothing is done. And of course, there is almost no money for research of this kind. We need to change this.

As many of you know, in my talks since *In the Minds Eye* was first published in 1991, I have long advocated a focus on the special talents seen among dyslexics. Through case studies, I have tried to understand how these special talents are linked to dyslexia and how we can help dyslexic children and adults to lead better lives by learning from the lives of highly successful dyslexics.

The areas of weakness are now well enough understood. But when we look at high success in entrepreneurial business, artistic creation, technological design, or scientific discovery, we need to focus on what it is that the dyslexic brain is doing much better than those around them. I do not think we know this yet. How do we identify it? How do we measure it? How do we develop it once

identified? One thing seems clear, it is quite different from reading books, listening to lectures, and memorizing long lists of names and facts.

We do not yet understand it—but I suspect it has something to do with having a global view, having strikingly unusual insights, being able to build complex mental models, being able to see over the horizon to see things that others do not see, seeing patterns in nature that others cannot see. These are not easy things to measure or understand. But we have whole families of new tools and technologies to do the job. We just have to be convinced that it is important. As Albert Galaburda pointed out years ago, the brain research done in the 1980s could have been done some 40 or 50 years earlier if only it were thought important to look at the structure of the brain. Orton had lamented in his day the same lack of interest in the structure of the brain. Sometimes old perceptions are more important than new technologies.

Time to Get Serious

I think we need to start dyslexic-centered programs—as if the talents of dyslexics really did matter. We must not be mainly school-centered, as we are now. It is time for all of us to rethink what we should be doing in schools and colleges to prepare students for today's global economy. Often our thinking is imprisoned by our deep assumptions about what is essential for success in education, life, and work. Careful investigation of the life and work and accomplishments of highly successful dyslexics—where insight and creativity are usually more important than book knowledge—will show us how wrong we can be. Technological change is redefining the kinds of things that need to be learned—trends completely ignored by conventional educational debate. Dyslexics frequently excel at high market value creative and entrepreneurial skills while they often fail on low market value school-based skills.

We need a serious and systematic study of distinctive talents among dyslexics. We need new tests and measures. These would apply to all but the dyslexics would force us to think differently. We may have to deeply reconsider what we think we know about intelligence, talent, ability, and creativity. We should also note current trends in business and economic development literature that emphasize the growing awareness of the high value of the innovative and entrepreneurial skills that many dyslexics exhibit. (See Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* and Daniel H. Pink's *A Whole New Mind*). We need to develop new assessment tools, using new technologies and new perspectives to measure capabilities not possible to measure before. It is possible that we will come to measure things we thought unimportant previously. I hope we will come to understand surprising results, such as the great relative speed dyslexics could recognize “impossible figures”—especially when they are usually much slower at other things.

We need to recruit creative workers who understand non-conventional areas of technology and talent and use them in their own work every day. We need to design conference programs that will be of interest to those working in these fields, such as engineers, designers, architects, scientists, computer graphic artists, and specialists in scientific information visualization. We need to do outreach to occupational groups that contain many dyslexics and fully appreciate the kinds of special talents that many dyslexics have. For example, we could provide talks for engineers, scientists, and architects at their own professional conferences.

We need to establish special grants for highly gifted individuals who exhibit great talents but also have areas of weakness or disability that would normally result in their exclusion from conventional forms of grant support. We need to develop mentor programs targeted to dyslexics of several subtypes. We need scholarships designed for talented dyslexics—not to compensate for their low performance but to take advantage of idiosyncratic high performance, that is, to bring out high levels of hidden talent.

We need to assess the institutional changes required so that dyslexics with markedly mixed talents can still work within a larger institutional structure. We need studies of how this works and does not work. For example, we could look at the relationship that dyslexic paleontologist John R. (Jack) Horner has with the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana. The museum staff modified its procedures to allow Jack and his students to do high-level work, making dramatic discoveries, while designing innovative museum displays to communicate with the public.

Finally, we need to be convinced that it is indeed time for substantial change. We need to see the truth of Jack Horner's observation (in this issue) that dyslexia is "certainly not something that needs to be fixed, or cured, or suppressed!" Indeed, we need to see that, as Jack says, "maybe it's time for a revolution!"

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This article is based on research by Thomas G. West for a new book, currently in process, with the working title: Seeing What Others Do Not See—Visual Thinking, Dyslexic Talents and Creative Pattern Recognition in a New Era of Scientific Innovation. In addition to Dreyer, the new book features material on MacArthur Prize winner John R. (Jack) Horner and Nobel Prize winner Sir Lawrence Bragg, among others. Copied with permission from the International Dyslexia Association's Perspectives on Language and Literacy Summer 2008 issue. If you would like to receive Perspectives quarterly publication free of charge, please click www.interdys.org to become a member of the International Dyslexia Association.



2011 IDA CONFERENCE



Topics Include:

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Working Memory Assessment, Intervention, and Classroom Applications

Spelling: Development, Assessment and Intervention

Seminar for Heads and Lead Administrators of Independent LD Schools

Leveraging Literacy Legislation for a Literate Nation

MUSIC LIGHTS THE WAY FOR SHAWN CONLEY

By Patricia Jenks, HIDA Board Member

Honolulu-born Shawn Conley is a self-described “bassist, composer, dude.” He is also a young musician on the rise. In 2007 he finished third at the International Society of Bassists Scott LaFaro Jazz competition - the same convention that had fueled his passion for playing the bass. Then, in June 2009, he took first place at that same competition. I was fortunate to meet this amazing young man when he visited his family in Hawai‘i.



There are people who come into your life for a brief moment and yet leave a lasting impression, creating a memory that may gently tug at your heart or inspire you to do or be something more. Shawn Conley is just such a person.

Shawn is a bassist – a very talented bassist – who has settled in New York City and is truly living his dreams. After recently sharing coffee and conversation, I return to his words and feel his passion for music, enthusiasm for playing the bass, eagerness to grow, and confidence that all things will work out for the best. What an amazing understanding of life, especially considering he is still in the twilight of his twenties. And, by the way, Shawn happens to be dyslexic.

Shawn’s musical journey from Hawai‘i to the east coast began as a fifth grade Punahou student who traded study hall for a music class. He picked the bass to play thinking it looked “pretty cool” and because the bass player was always positioned at the back of the room, far away from the teacher’s desk – all good reasons for a ten year old to try something new.

It was not long before music classes were much more than an excuse to get out of study hall. When he was in the eighth grade, he listened in amazement to the world’s greatest bass players at his first International Society of Bassists Convention, and was inspired to become a part of their world. Shawn worked to develop his gifts and talents during high school in studies with master teacher, George Wellington, Sr. During this period he won awards at both the State and Southwest divisions of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) solo string instrument competitions, and a position in the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra.

After high school Shawn earned a Bachelor of Music degree at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, under the tutelage of Paul Ellison. He was awarded a Wagoner Fellowship to study a year in Paris, where he received both performance and teaching diplomas from his hero François Rabbath, the legendary Syrian musician and composer who sees no traditional limits to music. He places François Rabbath alongside his parents as the greatest inspirations and influences in his life. Shawn returned to Rice University and was awarded his Master of Music degree in 2009.

Shawn has moved to New York City and jumped into building a career as a musician, composer, and arranger. His life now is filled as a freelance musician managing a range of classical and jazz projects including teaching, playing in concerts, scoring for movies, joining in short term gigs – whatever opportunity pops up, he is ready to tackle.

So, where is the dyslexic Shawn Conley? According to Shawn, he remembers being diagnosed sometime around the third grade. He credits his mother with wisely seeking more information about his reading difficulties and assuming the role of tutor, scribe, and encourager. His father was by his side as well, sincerely accepting Shawn's learning differences and supporting his efforts. At school, Shawn's teachers provided interventions in class and the communication necessary to link efforts between home and school. As he gained understanding and acceptance about dyslexia, Shawn learned how to take responsibility to talk to teachers about accommodations and to define supports he needs to be successful.

The academic side of school soon fades in our interview as he begins to talk excitedly about the technology tools now available to address his challenges with organizational skills and to access information to grow as a musician. When asked about the tools he uses, Shawn quickly rattles off a long list of supports starting with familiar apps such as *iCal*, voice memos, and *Sticky Notes*, then continuing with everything necessary for today's musician "on the go" – tools to download scores, or to use a tuner or metronome, voice notes to keep track of thoughts, and sound generating software to build on creative ideas.

Shawn is not sure what the future holds. However, he is excited to continue doing what he is doing and building on what he knows. He is passionate about the opportunities to make the music he loves with people who inspire him to grow, and cannot wait to write more music and develop his own projects. He is comfortable, confident, and eager to take risks and he is open to all outcomes.

I am uplifted by his enthusiasm, passion, and readiness to take on whatever comes next. He does not realize he is a model and inspiration for any dyslexic individual – actually any individual – who needs a shot of confidence and level of comfort about being different.

Although dyslexia may have interfered with school, Shawn certainly does not allow its challenges to interfere with pursuing his life's dreams. He learned from parents and mentors that there are no limits in life and unique differences are qualities to be embraced and celebrated. Those qualities can be keys to doors others cannot open. Stay tuned, there is more to come for Shawn Conley – talented, passionate, bold and, by the way, dyslexic.



Shawn with Charlie Perez



Shawn and friends

Shawn is one of the two children of Herb and Nancy Conley. Herb is widely known for his legendary, highly successful real estate career in Hawai'i. Nancy has been active in the community, working for many years as the librarian at The Contemporary Museum and currently serving on the Board of St. Andrew's Priory. The Conleys enjoy art collecting and traveling to see Shawn and his older sister Liz, both of whom live in New York. They have been generous supporters of HIDA for many years. This year they graciously offered their house in Nu'uauu for HIDA's fall fundraiser.

Open the Door 2011 Fall Fundraiser



HIDA's 10th Annual "Open the Door" event will be held on Friday, October 21, 2011, at the beautiful Nu'uauu property of Herb and Nancy Conley.

The evening will feature a silent auction and drawing and music by Ron Miyashiro and Wela Ka Hao! (Whoopie!).

As always - merriment, wine and martini bar, and fabulous food will crown a special evening.

Prior Newsletter Articles Capture the Strengths of Hawai'i People with Dyslexia

Clark Little, photographer, in *Photography + Surfing + Entrepreneurship = Clark Little* (September 2009)

Calvin Sakata, educator, in *Cal Sakata – HIDA Volunteer Extraordinaire, In Memoriam* (September 2009)

Kahi Ching, artist, in *Find Your Strengths: The Art of Kahi Ching* (March 2010)

Dr. Richard Kelley, businessman, and his granddaughter, Kelley Heyer, student writer, in *A Pair of Kelleys* (March 2010)

Andrew Lewis, professional sailor, in *Andrew Lewis: Dreams Do Come True* (May 2011)

Noah Jacobs, Zachary Mattera, Tim Olkowski, and Paris Starn, student poets, in *Captured in Poetry* (May 2011)

Oren Ashkenazi, writer, and Lillian Ripley, visual artist, in *Graphic Novel Set in Hawai'i Showcases Talents of Dyslexic Learners* (September 2011)

Andy Bumatai, comic and entrepreneur, in *Andy Bumatai Makes Dyslexia "Cool"* (September 2011)



"Perhaps my early problems with dyslexia made me more intuitive: when someone sends me a written proposal, rather than dwelling on detailed facts and figures, I find that my imagination grasps and expands on what I read."

Richard Branson, 1998

"I've always felt that I have more of an ability to envision, to be able to anticipate where things are going, to conceive a solution to a business problem than people who are more sequential thinkers."

Charles Schwab, 1994

Famous Persons with Dyslexia



Albert Einstein



Thomas Edison



Leonardo da Vinci



Charles Schwab

James Earl Jones

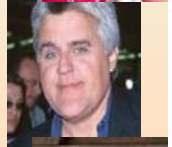
Bruce Jenner



Greg Louganis

Magic Johnson

Jay Leno



Erin Brockovich

Jewel

Jackie Stewart



Salma Hayek

Richard Branson

Whoopi Goldberg



Orlando Bloom

Danny Glover

Henry Winkler



George S. Patton

Ansel Adams

Dwight D. Eisenhower



Avi



Robert Kennedy

John Lennon


Patrick Dempsey



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