



Disabilities, Responsibilities, Possibilities

Working to Complete the Harvest

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Abstract

This paper was the Keynote Address for a conference on disability issues held on August 3-4, 2015, at Pan African Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya. The title of the conference was “Disabilities, Responsibilities, Possibilities: Working to Complete the Harvest.” This address set the theme for the several papers presented by a university professor, a medical doctor, a physiotherapist, and a special education teacher, respectively. Those in attendance were pastors, church leaders, and administrators from PAC University.

Keywords: *disability, inclusion, marginalization, ministry, responsibility, wholesight*

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Introduction

In John 9:4–5, Jesus said, “We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned to us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.”¹

That may seem an unusual passage given the theme of this conference and address but, hopefully, the connection will become clear as we begin to reflect on disabilities, responsibilities, and possibilities in working to complete the harvest.

Disabilities

The word *disability* describes the effect of a condition or impairment which limits a person’s ability to engage in basic life activities, such as education or employment, or which hinders the opportunity to participate in socially valued activities. In this basic sense, *disability* is a neutral term, a statement of fact that does not carry positive or negative moral valuation. But for many people, *disability* is a “bad” word—something considered undesirable or unfortunate. If that is your perspective, it may surprise you to learn that many people who have a disability do *not* share that opinion. This negative judgment may contribute more to a person’s “disability” than her actual impairment! Arne Fritzen and Samuel Kabue (2004), both men with disabilities, suggest that because disability is common to human experience, we would be right to consider it simply one of many ways to live, even suggesting that disability can contribute positively to a person’s life. We will come back to this point later.

When people think of disability, most do not bring factual knowledge into the equation; their thinking is driven more by fear and folklore. People *think* they know what disability is, but their ideas are often more mythical—based on stereotype, biased judgment, cultural tradition, and misinformation rather than empirical evidence or practical experience gained through association with people who are disabled. Most are unaware of the many factors that can lead to an impairment-caused disability (such as genetics, illness or other medically-related issues, accidents, and aging).

When they see someone who has a disability, people are often curious about how the person became disabled. They may ask themselves “*why?*” or wonder what the person did to become disabled. These are natural questions; being created in the image of God, who does not act randomly,

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, *New Living Translation*, © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House. Used by permission.

we have an innate need to see or construct order in our world. But these are the wrong questions.

Many people still associate disability with sin, as did Jesus' disciples: "Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, 'Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?'" (John 9:1-2, *The Message*). The disciples' theology envisioned a direct, causal connection between sin and disability. This was the common perception in Israel, and it remains a common thought today, even among Christians. The disciples' theology led them to see sin—the man's or his parents'—as the only possible explanation for his blindness. In effect, they blamed the man (or at least his parents) for his condition.

Accounting for his blindness in this way allowed the disciples to feel self-justified. Though they may not have claimed to be without sin, the fact that they could see led them to consider themselves less sinful than the man born blind. But in asserting their own "righteousness," they marginalized him. Rather than expressing compassion toward a fellow human being, they distanced themselves spiritually from him and erected a wall of pride around themselves. We can assume they would have done the same to persons having *any* disability, or a disease such as leprosy (or, today, HIV/AIDS). They saw the man's blindness, but not their own.

The same marginalization of people with disabilities is seen in John 5, where Jesus encountered a man who had been physically disabled for thirty-eight years. The man was lying by the Pool of Bethesda, probably along with many others who had a disability or a serious disease. Tradition said that the first person into the pool when the waters were stirred would be cured. When Jesus asked the man if he would like to be cured—a simple "yes" or "no" question—his response conveyed his loneliness and despair: "I have no one to help me into the pool." He had been abandoned by his family as well as the civil and religious society, perhaps for the entire thirty-eight years he had been disabled.

The attitude demonstrated by the disciples has been called a "normate bias" (Yong 2011): an unquestioned worldview which leads "able-bodied" persons to assume their experience and perception of the world is the norm against which others can be judged. This view has two effects: it devalues persons who have disabilities and invalidates their experience, while also allowing able-bodied persons to hide or deny their own limitations and vulnerability. Many see disability as a tragedy, leading them to consider people with disabilities "victims" to be avoided or disposed of. Fear of the ways in which becoming disabled could impact their life may even lead some able-bodied

people to see death as preferable, on the assumption that disability prevents the enjoyment of a happy or favorable quality of life. Isolating or eliminating people with disabilities furthers the able-bodied person's feeling of being self-righteous or spiritually "whole." So, as a way of protecting themselves, many will seek to avoid encountering someone who is disabled, to the extent that persons with a disability have become "invisible": "if I can't see it, it can't hurt me."

The marginalization of people with disabilities is evident in the language we use. Many labels emphasize the difference of persons who are disabled from able-bodied persons, as if the disability label captures the essence of the person. The disability often is stressed, leaving the *person* to take second place. For example, we may speak of:

- *the blind boy*—rather than Christopher, a 13-year-old singer and instrumentalist, who happens to be blind and have autism;
- *the cerebral palsied woman*—rather than Jenny, an elementary school library media specialist completing her doctoral degree in education, who has physical limitations due to cerebral palsy;
- *the autistic woman*—rather than Temple, who earned a Ph.D. despite dealing with autism;
- *the retarded man*—rather than Chris who, although having a cognitive impairment, became a regular cast member on a popular television program;
- *the dyslexic man*—rather than Nelson, who became Vice-President of the United States.

These seemingly innocuous medical terms acquire a different, albeit subtle, meaning when used as descriptors of the person. Even the word "disabled" takes on negative connotations when applied to a group: "*the disabled*." The implication is that "the disabled" are all alike. We may not even perceive differences between people with the same type of disability; they are simply lumped together, as if to know one is to know them all. This tyranny of language often prohibits people from seeing the individual with a disability as a person with something to offer others.

When able-bodied people first encounter someone with an obvious disability, their attention is drawn to the difference and assumed limitation, rather than to the similarities between that individual and themselves. But their assumptions are based on incorrect or insufficient information about

the individual and/or the disability. Unfortunately, being aware of the cultural bias favoring able-bodiedness, many people with a disability become discouraged or depressed, leading some to want to remain unnoticed. They may not venture out of their home because of how they have been treated, and fear being verbally or physically abused or exploited. Parents may keep a child who is disabled indoors out of fear that the family will be negatively regarded by their neighbors. And, because people who call themselves Christians may share this negative mindset, people with disabilities—and often their immediate family—may be averse to coming to church. Suspicion as to the church’s motivation may lead them to resist or reject the church’s efforts to minister to their needs.

The Bible teaches that God is a God of love. It is out of that love that his justice flows. God’s justice demands that those who are neglected or oppressed—widows, orphans, impoverished people, strangers, and individuals and families affected by disability—be respected, cared for, and shown hospitality, mirroring God’s hospitality in welcoming us into his family. God made clear in Micah 6:8 how we are to live: we are to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. In the biblical context, justice is not a “thing” we experience; it is an activity in which we engage. Christians are to display a lifestyle characterized by justice and mercy toward others, and humility before God, which includes not thinking of others as having less importance or value than ourselves. Paul gave similar instructions in Philippians 2:3-4: “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” Peterson’s paraphrase says it more bluntly: “Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand” (*The Message*). Everyone wants to feel valued and their life validated. Christians are to make God’s justice visible and believable. This implies *responsibilities*.

Responsibilities

Let’s go back to the events recorded in John 9. John did not say whether the disciples saw the man first or if Jesus called him to their attention, leading them to ask about the cause of his blindness. Perhaps there are people in your geographic area God wants to bring to your attention but who have remained “invisible” to you. Pastor Charles attended a seminar on disability ministry I led in Cameroon. On his way home he ran past James, a man

with a physical disability who uses a hand-driven tricycle to move about town. Charles stopped a few yards after passing James, realizing that James had also been at the seminar. Since they were both headed to the same place, Charles walked alongside James and learned that they were brothers in Christ. Charles testified that if he had not attended the seminar, James would have remained “invisible” to him.

It is impossible to read the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry without recognizing his unshakable commitment to inclusion. The scope of Jesus’ ministry crossed barriers of gender, race, ethnicity, poverty, and ability. That brought criticism from the Jewish elite, but was a welcome relief to the majority of the people. Jesus’ openness to those who experience rejection and oppression has clear implications for our responsibility as Christ-followers.

The second part of Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question in John 9:4 is important: “We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us.” Who is Jesus referring to when he says “we”? What is the task assigned? Who is “the one who sent us”? Each of these questions relates to responsibility.

As for the meaning of “we,” Jesus was not speaking only to the twelve, but to *every* follower of Jesus. His words are an invitation (really a command) for all Christians to join him in ministry. We are to become Christlike in our character, completely surrendered to God, displaying—especially to those weighed down by neglect, rejection, and oppression—the same godly love and compassion which Jesus displayed and which we ourselves have received. Being a Christian is more than having a personal relationship with God. There must also be a public, transformed relationship with a world of individuals and families affected by disability. We have not just been saved *from* something; we have been saved *for* something: to continue Jesus’ work of bringing restoration, release, comfort, and hope to people in his name.

This is the task to which we have been appointed. It is a continuation of Jesus’ mission which he explained in the synagogue in Nazareth when applying the words of Isaiah 61:1–2 to himself:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come (Luke 4:18–19).

Jesus did not merely proclaim the message, but acted to meet both the spiritual and physical needs of the people. Likewise, our responsibility is not just

to proclaim the good news, but to accomplish whatever God enables us to do that will liberate those who are held captive or are oppressed, including those oppressed because of cultural bias or theological misunderstanding regarding disability. This means working to break down attitudinal, architectural, communication, and theological barriers which separate able-bodied persons from those who have unconventional minds and bodies. It means freeing *both* people with and without disabilities from their captivity and opening pathways to God. The question for our churches, schools, and communities is: can we make room for differences, for people who have been marginalized? Can we, through our words and actions, testify to the sacredness of all human life by welcoming and including people with disabilities into our churches, schools, businesses, and homes—into our lives?

Who is the one who has sent us? Jesus, who stated in Matthew 28:18-20 that God has given him all authority in heaven and on earth, authorized his disciples, past and present, to go in his name, giving assurance of his continued presence as *we* take up this task. There is no qualification in Jesus' command which allows the church to limit its focus to people who are able-bodied (though, shamefully, relatively few churches have an intentional ministry to persons with disabilities).

Our primary responsibility is to obey Jesus' command to minister his grace, love, and acceptance to all without waiting for people to approach us, but going out of our way to connect with others. We must willingly cross cultural and traditional barriers, as Jesus did in meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) or interacting with the man lying by the pool of Bethesda (John 5).

Living in obedience to Jesus' command means we also have a second responsibility—to others, not just those who are “like us,” but also including within our purview people with disabilities. People with disabilities have a similar hunger for worship, growth, direction, and support as do able-bodied people, as well as the same longing for community, relationships, and belonging (Carter 2007). We help meet that hunger and longing by loving, welcoming, and serving them as Jesus would, by doing what we can to satisfy their spiritual and physical needs, and by discipling them and helping them discover and use their spiritual gifts in ministering to others. Paul taught that even the weakest parts of the body are necessary (1 Corinthians 12). The gifts of people with disabilities are as varied as those of able-bodied people but tend to be underestimated, under-encouraged, and frequently ignored or thought nonexistent. For the church, the body of Christ, to be complete, we need to welcome people with disabilities as an essential part

of our fellowship. If they are not part of our church body, *we* have not fully understood the good news which we proclaim. A person is not a disabling condition; he or she *has* a disabling condition. But that person also has God-given abilities, gifts, and talents that can contribute to the good of the community to which he or she belongs. The Bible makes clear that the worth of all persons, disabled or able-bodied, is not determined by their actions, but by their having been created in the image of God (Webb-Mitchell 1993).

A third realm of responsibility is our community and culture. Including persons with disabilities in the social and political community is a matter of justice essential to the gospel (Senior 1995). Our open relationships with people who are disabled speak loudly to others. An inclusive church serves as a model to the community by recognizing the value of all people, regardless of ability or disability. An inclusive school helps to remove barriers between persons who are disabled and able-bodied, which can lead to change in cultural understandings of disability. An inclusive community recognizes that differences in ability are natural, and that we are all interdependent.

Beates (2012, 72) speaks directly to the disparity between cultural or traditional views of disability and the biblical model:

[C]ulture says, “Avoid the broken and the disabled. Hide your weakness and blemishes. Act as if they simply aren’t there.” But the Scriptures give story after story and proposition after proposition saying instead, “Understand that you—all of you in some sense or another—are broken. Stop avoiding the truth and embrace it.” For in that embrace we begin to grasp the power of God through his grace made manifest in human weakness.

As a Christian community, we have a God-given responsibility to demolish walls that separate people from Christ, from one another, and from society. We have a responsibility to encourage the restoration of people whom society and even families have cast aside. We have a responsibility to promote *shalom*—wholeness and well-being, healing in the biblical sense. We work with people who have been dispossessed of the truth as to who they are and may believe they are worthless or that God is either powerless to help or does not care.

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal God’s use of people who are weak or flawed to carry out his work. Paul explained the principle this way:

God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to

shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

As we work to promote *shalom* and restoration such as Jesus spoke of in describing his mission in the synagogue of Nazareth, the possibilities are many.

Possibilities

Once again, let us return to Jesus and the disciples in John 9. Do we, like the disciples, approach someone with a disability based on stereotypes about the person or on a wrong theology of disability (and an incorrect understanding of God)? Do we secretly—or openly—wonder what they did to become disabled? Do we feel superior to people with disabilities as did the disciples, the Jewish people, and many today? Do we patronize people with disabilities, pity them, ignore them, oppress them? Do we see only their disability, not their abilities or possibilities?

In response to the disciples' search for a reason why the man was born blind, Jesus dismissed their reasoning, saying his blindness was not a result of his or his parents' sin. Jesus refocused their thinking by challenging their theology, telling them that the man's having been born blind was so the power (or work) of God could be seen in him. Rather than looking for a *cause*, Jesus told them to look for a *purpose*. He said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do" (John 9:3, *The Message*).

Jesus did cure the man of his blindness, but that is not the "work" of God to which Jesus referred. The greater work of God was in bringing the man to faith, curing his spiritual blindness. John 9 details the progression in the man's understanding of who Jesus was: he first saw Jesus as 'the man,' then as 'a prophet,' then as 'a man from God,' and finally, as 'Master' (Lord). (It is interesting that the rather hostile interrogation of the Pharisees indirectly helped him to come to this conclusion.) But even beyond that, the work of God in this man's life portrays Jesus' breaking down barriers between people, opening the kingdom of heaven to all, bringing reconciliation and restoration. Note that God's purpose was set even *before* this man was born!

If we choose to ignore or push aside people with disabilities, we may cut ourselves off from seeing and experiencing the work of God being made

manifest. The man's cure from blindness is not the point of the story; his reconciliation with God and with others is the point. The miracle was a confirmation that Jesus was who he claimed to be—the promised Messiah of Isaiah 61:1–2. The man became a living testimony to Jesus and to God's work of reconciliation.

Engaging in ministry to and with persons with disabilities is replete with possibilities. There is, of course, the possibility of church growth as families are reached with the gospel. Gaining a deeper understanding of God is also possible as we search the scripture to understand God's view of disability and people with disabilities. "Disability is a dramatic reminder that God's ways are not our ways. God is not what we expect" (Block 2002, 91).

The possibilities also include what we can learn *from* brothers and sisters in Christ who, though disabled—or, perhaps *through* their disabilities—can teach us about peace and joy that flows from open dependence on God. Fellowship with people who have unconventional minds or bodies can lead us to deeper humility and love as we experience the blessings of interdependence. Sharing their spiritual gift—even if it is nothing more than a smile—can bring encouragement and contentment to all as we share life together. People with disabilities help us discover God's presence in brokenness, in weakness.

We need "redeemed eyes" to see the possibilities within each person, whether disabled or able-bodied. We need to see them with the eyes of the heart, not just the eyes of the mind. We need what Parker Palmer (1993) called "wholesight," which allows us to see beyond assumed facts and theories of disability and enables us to see the beauty of the individual. Redeemed eyes allow us to discern the humanity and dignity of persons with disabilities—to see them as God does: created in his image and possessing a worth and value equal to that of able-bodied persons. Redeemed eyes allow us to see them with the same love and compassion Jesus had for all who came to him for cure or deliverance from oppression by the community. And through redeemed eyes we recognize our own vulnerability, weakness, or limitation, freeing us from the assumption that we are perfect, healthy, and invulnerable. Wholesight liberates us from cultural bias regarding disability so that we are able to appreciate the uniqueness of each person and learn from those who are disabled—to treasure them, not fear them. Only when we set aside culture's ideas of beauty and perfection and of what makes a person valuable are we able to see the radiance of God in the face of the person, not just his or her disability. Through wholesight, we come to understand that people with a disability may have a spiritual advantage in that they more readily

sense their dependence on God and interdependence with others. Thus, they become our teachers and help us focus on what is truly important.

“Ministry is spirit to spirit. It does not depend on the state of a person’s eyesight, hearing, ability to walk, talk, or sit still. Nor does it depend on one’s intellect. It depends on one’s heart” (Sieck and Hartvigsen 2001, iii). It is the inner, spiritual character wherein beauty lies. Let me share with you a few exemplars that illustrate what can be learned from people who are disabled. This will help us see the possibilities.

Adam was a severely disabled young man who had much to teach others about love and humanness. Henri Nouwen’s (1997) initial anxiety dissipated as his relationship with Adam grew and wholesight enabled him to see Adam as a human being rather than a “disabled man.” In Nouwen’s words, Adam “by his very life announced the marvelous mystery of our God: I am precious, beloved, whole, and born of God” (36). Nouwen came to understand that God reveals himself in and through even the most disabled of persons.

Mike Cope (2011) wrote of how his daughter Megan, a cognitively impaired and medically fragile child who lived only to the age of ten, altered his world and what he thought was important. Despite, or perhaps *through*, her weakness, Megan taught him that “what really matters has to do with the heart: keeping promises, seeking justice in a brutal world, learning to see those in greatest need, and living with courage, joy, and unconditional love” (29).

Chuck Colson wrote of his grandson Max, who falls on the autism spectrum. Colson spoke of how Max brought joy and love to others, even in his fascination with commonplace items like vacuum cleaners. Though at times disruptive, Max shows complete openness and honesty. Said Colson, “Max truly sees the world more as God intended—he’s not judgmental or impressed by looks, status, or finances” (Colson 2010, 190). The manner in which some children with disabilities interact with the world serves as a model for able-bodied people who have lost the sense of wonder at all that God has created and do not understand that what is essential can only be seen with redeemed eyes.

Virginia Breen’s daughter also falls on the autism spectrum. Breen described how her daughter, Elizabeth, has helped her to think differently about life, faith, and relationship (Bonker and Breen 2011). Though unable to speak, Elizabeth writes poetry that reveals deep spiritual insight which most people would not expect from someone who has autism. In her poetry, Elizabeth shares her desire to help people improve their lives, and be happy and healthy. Her daughter’s perseverance and poetry has helped Breen to

appreciate the beauty of nature and, presumably, the beauty of her daughter. She came to understand that autism “makes a mind that is *different but not less*” (206, emphasis in original).

Cordell Brown (1996/2003) asked, “What purpose can be higher than to reward others, to bring joy to others, to show others the value of a smile?” He speaks of how God has given persons with disabilities “a gift to teach others patience, the value of concentrating on simple things, the value of just being together. A gift to teach joy” (221). Cordell is the founder of Echoing Hills Village, which runs a camp and twelve residential facilities throughout the state of Ohio for persons with disabilities. Echoing Hills Village has allowed thousands of individuals with disabilities to live in less restrictive or unrestricted settings. I have partnered with Cordell in teaching about disability ministry to pastors, church leaders, and teachers in Ghana. Sharing time, teaching, and meals with Cordell makes his awkward gait, shaky hands and arms, drooling, and sometimes difficult-to-understand speech (because of his cerebral palsy) disappear as he draws me into his stories and infectious laughter.

Mariamou was born without arms. Most able-bodied persons either pity Mariamou or simply turn away because she does not meet their definition of physical attractiveness. The traditional religious thinking in her village probably led people to regard her condition as a curse from God. They would have liked to see her be hidden or eliminated. But Mariamou has learned to use her feet to write and cut with scissors, and she can blow up and tie a balloon. Her lack of arms does not obscure her true beauty, displayed through her warm smile and her eagerness to serve more severely disabled children at the Christian center where she now lives. Holding a spoon with her toes, Mariamou gently feeds those unable to feed themselves. She uses her chest to push children who use wheelchairs from room to room. During worship, as her peers use their hands and arms, Mariamou raises her legs and claps with her feet to praise God. Visitors to the center respond with amazement, but Mariamou is behaving “normally.” Her physical and spiritual beauty outshines her disability.

One further example is Elliot. Elliot’s cerebral palsy allows him little voluntary control over his awkward, spastic movements. Like Mariamou, Elliot knows the Lord and, though unable to speak, readily praises God by “dancing,” “singing,” and leading others in “prayer” using words (sounds) only the Holy Spirit can understand. Elliot is able to draw others more deeply into the worship experience. Elliot and the others I have mentioned have much to teach to those who have redeemed eyes.

Working to Complete the Harvest

As we make ourselves available to God and open ourselves, our churches, and schools to people affected by disability, seeking God's direction for specific ways to minister and share his love, we cooperate with the work of God in the world. In Matthew 9 we read of Jesus and his disciples traveling from village to village ministering to the spiritual and physical needs of the people. As they walk along the road, Jesus sees people coming toward him, some on the road ahead, others coming through paths among the wheat or corn growing in the fields bordering the road. His heart overflows with compassion, and he compares this disorganized mass of people to the crops in the fields, ready to be harvested. Jesus tells the disciples, "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields" (Matthew 9:37-38). His words reveal the depth of his compassion toward all who are distressed, discouraged, or disenfranchised, people who have been driven away, without care or attention, even cast aside by the spiritual leaders of Israel. They are like sheep without a shepherd, pushed to the margins of society.

Many of those making their way toward Jesus were physically exhausted, broken by the hardships of daily life, or weakened by disease or disability. All were burdened by oppression from those in positions of power or authority. They were marginalized, assigned a place at the outer edges of society, hidden from view, just as are many people with disabilities today.

Compassion for the oppressed such as Jesus demonstrated calls for a response from all who follow Jesus, a response which brings comfort, lightens their load, seeks justice on their behalf, and upholds the cause of those in need. The words of Jesus challenge us not just to pray for, but to respond to the call for workers to bring in the harvest. A significant part of that harvest has been neglected by the church—individuals and families affected by disability. Some Christians are guilty of overlooking this harvest; others are guilty of intentionally turning a blind eye, pushing them aside as unimportant. Neither response is pleasing to God. To engage in the work of the harvest, we need an inclusive worldview, intentionally reaching out to those affected by disability, welcoming them into the fellowship of believers, and equipping them to use their spiritual gifts and natural talents to serve in the kingdom as an integral part of the body of Christ.

Disabilities, responsibilities, possibilities. May God open us to the opportunities he presents to share his love with *all* he brings across our path. May we neither deny our responsibility nor be blind to the possibilities. The possibilities are also life-changing opportunities.

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