# Future Generation through Global Conversation

## -- in quest of collective well-being through conversation in the present moment

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## Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, in many domains, fashionable "buzz words" are "coming home to roost", like chickens in the English phrase. The significance they were supposed to carry in their heyday is no longer evoked in the ways that had been hoped. Now they tend to inhibit conceptual advances by continuing to enthuse and bemuse the unwary. It is in this context that the theme of this conference should be carefully explored: *Global Conversations: what you and I can do for future generations*.

Is there any possibility of reframing conventional understandings of "future", "generation", "global", "conversation" and "doing" in order to avoid cognitive traps which may be inhibiting the kinds of change sought through use of such terms? It is assumed here that there is a need to avoid defining such terms so as to obscure the possibility of new kinds of action in the present.

## "Global"

The fashionable use of "global" focuses on the geographical dimension: the planet as a whole. This emphasis is the culmination of a century of successful effort towards international understanding --of "thinking globally and acting locally", of "global villages", of "global action plans", of "global ethics", of "global consciousness" and of "globalization".

What has been largely lost in this process is the other sense of global, namely some kind of comprehensible, integrative whole -- of which a geographically bounded planet is but one particular instance. "Global" is too readily taken to mean planet-wide and no more -- a recognition by certain regions that there are others on the planet. "Interdisciplinarity", "transdisciplinarity" and "integrative" have themselves evolved into holistic buzz words because of the essential failure of the initiatives they represented in responding to the fragmentation of knowledge. "Holistic" could even be considered as content-free. "Global understanding" in this integrative sense has become almost a myth in pursuit of which some heroes occasionally continue to quest.

Perhaps it is only in mathematics that the clearest, and most general, distinction is maintained between "global" and "local". Unfortunately that discipline is incapable of taking into account the essential psychological distinction between the two that is associated with broader (rather than narrower) processes of comprehension, communication and learning. It is possibly only in Q-analysis that powerful clarification is given to the relationship between degrees of comprehension (Atkin, 1981).

For those of psychoanalytical orientation, there is also the suspicion that the current fascination with "global" competitiveness could usefully be seen as a projection onto a world scale of the competition of the tiny sperm of the male to reach the much larger female egg to ensure reproduction. The struggle for "globalization" may be partially driven by the oldest of instincts. From this perspective what awareness do those competing to imprint their particular vision on the world have of their global goal? This perspective would completely undermine democratic processes in relation to global governance. It would be reassuring to discover that sperm "cooperate" like migrating geese or like teams of racing cyclists. It is ironic that the preoccupation with globalization should occur in a period of falling male fertility and concern at the "feminization of nature" (through widespread pollution by oestrogen substitutes).

In this paper, "global" is explored in the sense of a potentially accessible cognitive whole rather than as an essentially inaccessible geographical one (although the latter may serve as a metaphor for the former). Just as one can travel around the globe without being able to see it as a whole from any one perspective, so one may perhaps be able to "circumnavigate" a cognitive whole without being able to "grasp" it. It is even possible that the understanding which tends to "grasp" cannot be fruitfully termed "global" -- or that what can be so grasped is not fruitfully understood as a whole of larger significance, or of requisite variety (cf. Ashby's Law).

In terms of the challenges of global governance, the ability of a particular discipline to grasp the challenges of society cannot in this sense be understood as "global". It is

necessarily sub-global, namely local in some way which honours the particular, "local" insights of that discipline. A single finger cannot pick up and hold a ball, just as the ball cannot be completely viewed from a single perspective. In this metaphor, there is also a distinction between "clutching" and the many skills required to play with the ball through a variety of grips and actions. What does this then imply for global "conversation"?

## "Conversation"

Much is made of "dialogue" at the close of the 20th century -- especially in relation to the intractable issues where any success in dialogue is essentially meta-stable or subject to continuing failure: Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Middle East, Kashmir, Taiwan, Tibet, Timor, etc. (to name only some geopolitical examples). There is a recognition that such exchanges need to involve a form of communication which goes beyond the purely mechanical transfer of information along the information superhighway as facilitated by increasingly sophisticated "groupware" packages and "situation" rooms. For some it also involves more than the behavioral rapport and empathy sought, for example, in inter-faith dialogue, as brokered by consultants with proprietary insights on process facilitation.

There is a fundamental gap between meaningful bilateral (or even multi-lateral) conversation amongst different perspectives and the creation (or recognition) of a stable "global" framework for mutual comprehension -- a global reframing. In historical terms, this can be seen in terms of the gap (in centuries of time) between the successful exploration by trading vessels around the world and the collective comprehension of the globality of the planet.

It can be usefully argued that it is not so much the identification of some essentially static "common ground" which is the goal of effective conversation (Judge, 1997b). Rather it is the process of continuing conversation which provides and sustains a dynamic "framework" -- a process reframing, however that is to be understood as a shifting, evolving dance of meaningful exchange. It is a process through which a variety of forms of, as yet unclassified, transformation can take place. They might perhaps be usefully thought of as psycho-social vitamins essential to psychological well-being. Without these the conversation is essentially sterile and fails to nourish. It is the manner of these transformations which imbues the conversation with coherence and significance.

## "Future"

There are of course many ways to comprehend the future. The simplest merely requires a mechanical adjustment to the calendar date -- a process often as suspect as the fraudulent adjustment of the mileage counter on an automobile. The future may be decomplexified by simply making commitments in a scheduler of some kind -- in 1997, there are already international meetings scheduled for the year 2015. Such scheduling, as with the "futures market", is a projection of present thinking onto the future and implies no cognitive challenge or innovation.

How does the future emerge into the present? How does potential become actuality? What are the cognitive traps associated with phrases such as: "where does the future come from" and "the far-distant future" ? (Judge, 1993a). How are present initiatives established as future realities? Why does past understanding appear so quaint from the present and what does this say of present understandings that are taken so seriously now?

Such questions are as puzzling for the individual as they are for planetary society -- if not more so. As safety nets erode, who has a "guaranteed future"? Much is made of future technology and changes to social systems. Far more elusive is any transformation in the way people relate to what they consider reality. As Peter Drucker once said, the most profound and unforeseen changes over a generation are those associated with changes of values -- completely reframing how things are comprehended. And yet it is such changes in the quality of understanding which are part of the individual maturation experience. Sadly they are also the changes which introduce communication gaps between the generations. And what does such change imply for a "global ethic"?

There are curious constraints associated with use of the modern calendar to demarcate future periods. Its essential linearity is a trap. More social change can occur in a brief period than occurs over long periods of years. For an individual, falling in love, a mystical revelation, a major career challenge, a creative insight, or a disabling accident, can all reframe the linear calendar in psychological terms for which non-linear mathematics would provide more appropriate understanding. For those who favour cyclical understandings of time, some form of perigee and apogee might be useful markers. There is every possibility that a linear calendar pointing into the future is totally unsupportive of psychological well-being in a temporal framework (cf José Argüelles, 1996). The dubious consequences of development in this respect have, for example, been explored by Helena Norberg-Hodge (1991).

## "Generation"

In contrast with the calendar, "generation" reflects an essentially biological organization of time. It is only through the succession of generations that evolution becomes apparent. For an individual, this has strong psychological dimensions as concern for elders, or producing and raising children, reflects. This is most marked in those oriented towards their ancestors or having a dynastic perspective. Religious reasons for "going forth" and "multiplying", or those governing Mormon investment in genealogy, are another aspect of this. These reinforce the tragedy of population "over-generation" to which the planet has fallen victim -- a phenomenon which may point to dysfunctionalities in future generation.

There are however other ways of understanding "generation". These are most evident in any form of creativity, especially technological innovation. It has been widely remarked that the number of years required for the emergence of a new "generation" of computers has been steadily decreasing. Such generation is thus proceeding according to a very different rhythm than calendar time. The same may be true of artist-designers valuing their works as "children". Generations of creativity may then succeed each other in ways

quite different from calendar years. People speak readily of an "earlier life" when referring to such a previous generation in their own approach to the world. Perspectives are then shaped by a different awareness of time. This is above all true of learning processes. Peter Russell (1992) has provided a detailed argument showing how the rate of generational change in every field is increasing exponentially within world society -- like Ravel's *Bolero*.

## "Doing"

The special quality of "doing" lies in some kind of strategic action focus in response to issues and reality -- to be contrasted with the creative apathy of a "lotus eater" approach to the future. But decades of development and remedial action in response to the problems of society and the planet call for a new understanding of "doing". Much has been done in the name of positive social change which many would now regret -- and which the "future" may regret to a much higher degree. Current generations may become those most cursed into the far future. More poignantly perhaps, many have acted out of a similar mindset in support of their children -- only to see their initiative become distorted in often tragic ways. The "You and I" of the conference theme are likely to be amongst the many.

There is no lack of recommendations on what should be done. Most self-respecting institutions have filing cabinets of proposals -- often "global action" plans. Providing shiny new answers to old problems has become a highly competitive business -- no respectable consultant lacks answers.Many disciplines need to be able to offer answers to obtain research funds. Most religions perceive themselves as "the answer". There is however an amazing level of ignorance, denial and lack of humility concerning the possible outcomes of such initiatives -- in the light of past experience. New "doing" is essentially dissociated from past learning.

Are there lighter, more delicate, and less presumptuous forms of doing that avoid the tendency to place major obligations upon "future generations" that they may deeply regret and resent? Borrowing from the future in this way might be called the ultimate "crime against humanity". This has been a central inspiration of the green movement -- itself remarkably unsuccessful in creatively adapting its sensitivity and insight to its own social divisions.

What of the subtle approaches of Eastern philosophies to "not-doing" -- totally in contrast to Western understanding of "doing nothing"? (Judge, 1993c). A comparison of French and Japanese cooking makes the point that a French master chef is recognized by what he characteristically does in the way of adding flavours to the food, whereas a Japanese master chef is acknowledged by the impossibility of recognizing any imposed effect on the flavour of the food. What is the "not-doing" of the skilled parent, psychotherapist, spiritual counsellor, community activist or leader? Is it possible to envisage an approach to fulfilling socio-economic organization based on "not-doing" -- if only as a context for "doing" as we now know it?

## "Global conversation"

What then might be a fruitful understanding of "global conversation"? For some this will be limited to what the Internet, and other technologies, can offer in the way of exchanges around the globe. For some of those, the Internet itself is "global consciousness" -- a view specifically challenged by Ken Wilber (1996). There is much to marvel in the ability of a child in a classroom in California to "converse" in this way with one in Sri Lanka. The fact that that child may be quite unable to "converse" meaningfully with another child in the next classroom, for ethnic, language, class, or other reasons, may be considered quite irrelevant (example cited by Stephen L Talbott, 1995).

For some a "global conversation" involves a succession of speeches to an essentially passive audience by eminent authorities from around the world -- possibly even by video or "live" by satellite. Conversation is then a question of "talking to", rather than "talking with", as is often the case between individuals. The audience may then be taught or inspired, but is unable to clarify any learning through meaningful exchange with the authority figure -- bar a few token questions as in presidential "fireside chats". The audience is not exposed to the ineffectual conversation typical of dialogue between such figures and the questions to which this would usefully give rise. Each authority is then merely reinforced in the unchallenged understandings brought to the event -- in an essentially non-learning mode.

What would be the dynamic of a conversation which was global in the integrative sense outlined earlier? Again, the challenge of such a conversation can be highlighted by the geography of the globe. How does communication go "around" the globe -- beyond particular "event horizons" --without "going off at a tangent"? In this sense, conversations of little global significance are all that is possible through the linear, line of sight exchanges typical of most dialogue -- possibly to be caricatured as frantic semaphore exchanges. These are "local" conversations sustained by specialized jargons and interests. As with the properties of a sphere, the search is for conversations which are "finite but unbounded". How are they to be distinguished from conversations which meander interminably?

For the communication to travel meaningfully "around", beyond local horizons, it must acquire non-linear properties. "Flatness" cannot be a prerequisite of such communication. Even radio waves have to be "bounced" around the ionosphere. What is the analogous cognitive "sphere" capable of "reflecting" meaningful communication around to distant perspectives? For the perspective of the recipient may then be oriented quite differently -- metaphorically the sun may shine there when it is dark in the place from which the message emanates. Indeed the conceptual challenges of global meteorology may perhaps best highlight the challenges of understanding global conversation about the future -- as shifting "whether patterns" of public opinion. Global "meet-orology" ?

Such a conversation requires a different understanding of place, of where the conversants are each located (Edward Casey, 1993). It honours those places whatever their characteristics. A global conversation would not therefore seek exclusively to move

people from their places towards the place of the communicator -- the essence of present-day competitive communication in pursuit of conceptual market-share. It would be more concerned with movement in other dimensions at the place of each communicator -- some kind of "transformative" movement, rather than an "amalgamative" movement towards homogeneity of perspective. This is perhaps captured by the sense of "being moved" by a magical conversation.

Both kinds of movement are however required. In global conversation, there is a need to be able to pass from place to place, beyond the horizon of each local perspective -- and to circumnavigate --but also to be able to return, without being trapped at some other place. It is difficult to get "lost" when movement does not go beyond the local horizon of a particular specialized perspective. But the risk is much greater when travelling globally. This is perhaps one reason why such travel is actively discouraged by individual disciplines, belief systems and sects. Like isolated tribes, each calling themselves "The People", they perceive themselves to be providing the only global framework for meaningful conversation. More cruelly some could indeed be understood as communication "black holes" bounded by "event horizons".

A "global conversation" might then be one which is both constantly challenged by diversity and incommensurability and by how these are to be contained within a coherent cognitive space. However this is to be understood in a learning society, such a space necessarily takes on paradoxical qualities that transcend the many particular linear approaches that help to configure that space. The coherence of global conversation would raise issues like the nature of "great circle" communication pathways and how they interlock to sustain that space. How many such distinct pathways are required to sustain the qualities of globality? How might these be related to the songlines of Aboriginal understanding? (Judge, 1997a)

A global conversation would then involve a continuing shift between many local perspectives -- a pattern of shifting whose integrative dimension is perhaps best described in terms of the theory of musical harmony (Judge, 1991). Using a chess metaphor, it might require that participants engage beyond event horizons through "strange" non-linear moves, as for a knight rather than a pawn --evoking understanding such as that for the game of go, or for martial arts such as aikido. In terms of an engineering metaphor, conventional forms of polarized dialogue might be equated with what amounts to "two-stroke" engagement in contrast to those of more complex and powerful engines. Alternatively, from a poetic perspective, "con-versation" would perhaps be meaningful as "verse-making together" -- in which associations resonate to define unforeseen wholes. The fact that poets have not discovered how to compose together with others in this way is perhaps symptomatic of both our cultural limitations and the marginal cognitive role of poets in modern society. Is generative creativity always to be constrained by sperm competing for exclusive access to the egg?

The pattern of physical travel around the planet does indeed give a first sense of global travel, but this easily obscures understanding of the second kind of travel between perspectives. The first is however a valuable metaphor of the second. But it is easy to

travel around the world from one international hotel to another without having the faintest inkling of what is meant by global travel in the second sense. In global conversation "travel" may be quite unrelated, in its integrative significance, to any physical travel around the planet or to "visiting" others via intercontinental videophone calls and Internet chat-lines.

Of special interest is the way in which, from any present condition or perspective, legacy pathways are traced out by the transformation of a conversation as it reconfigures. Such reconfiguration opens (and closes) windows of insight, "breeding" alternatives in the process. It is this multitude of "futures", each partially reflecting the others and providing a vehicle for an individual or a group, which is the ultimate challenge for social coherence -- and for organization of information on the Web.

The question is how the emergence of integrative perspectives is to be understood. What form of transformation, triggered by global conversation, brings about such emergence -- and itssustainability?

## "Future generation"

The sustainability of global conversation or dialogue is therefore viewed as necessarily dynamic rather than static. Insights from chaos theory and strange attractors merit attention (Judge, 1993b). Its meta-stable nature ensures its coherence by engendering "futures". Global conversations thus evolve through "generations", necessarily accompanied by schisms that challenge any previous sense of coherence. "Participants" in a conversation today are the children of those participating yesterday, or an hour ago -- even if they are physically indistinguishable. As with computer backups, one can usefully speak of grandfather-father-son relationships between one's own successive "incarnations" in social intercourse.

How then is the future generated? How does one understand the nature of a future generation from one's current mode of comprehension? How does one comprehend across the generation gap -- and seek comprehension in return -- if only by oneself?

Whilst such questions are challenging for society as a whole, they are even more challenging for oneself. Each person has multi-generational qualities, from the "child within" to the nascent elder. In the process of maturation, the challenges of communication between one's own internal generations become increasingly evident. They can no longer be satisfactorily projected onto the outside world.

How does one engender a future -- preferred or otherwise? Is there some internal procreative process, as suggested by depth psychology's enthusiasm for alchemical symbolism? Reproductive biology certainly achieves a future generation through mating. How does a new generation of reality-handling acquire viability and inspire confidence within one's own psyche? Can what is superseded be truly cast off like a reptilian skin, or must past generations be carried with us into the future --"unto seven generations"?

Whilst there is of course merit in speculating about future generations in centuries or millennia to come, there is another kind of inquiry into future generation which merits reflection. As implied above, a future generation, in the developmental or psychological sense of the maturation of an individual, has its own challenges. But of even greater challenge is the much more immediate focus of how one engenders the immediate future -- over the next hours or minutes.

It is easy to argue that this has nothing to do with the "future" as framed by this conference. But this may be a flaw in the way future studies is understood and a reason for its marginalization. Do futurists suffer from conceptual presbyopia? Failure to attend to how the immediate future is determined by "doing" in the present moment, may obscure modes of understanding vital to meaningful insight into the future of biological generations -- to the epochs in which future studies may prefer to roam. Any sense of well-being is associated with the immediate present, rather than with the distant future. It is now that the help from "You and I" is required by the conference theme, whether for the young or the elderly.

How does future generation occur on this scale -- and what insights does it offer for understanding on the larger scale? As various schools of meditation have it, one attends to a certain complex of events for a while (seconds, minutes or hours), as an act combining mindfulness, empathy and action -- with, or without, others. Then, by distraction or choice, that focus dies and one passes on to some other complex of events. This process can be experienced as a sequence of generations of attention foci -- maybe returning cyclically to a former focus. It is through this process that one engenders a future into which one is then borne (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1994). Any practice, discipline or habit can be considered a form of "meditation" in this sense.

When a generation is understood as taking some 14 "years", possibility of change is perceived as limited by most. But understood as lived cycles of experience many hundreds of "generations" may take place within that same period of years. Such generations may be existentially more significant, and give rise to more variety, than is often associated with conventional thinking about the future 100, 1,000 or 5,000 years hence -- which is usually unchallenged by the reality of experiential change.Focus on the scope for change through psychological generation may well offer vital clues to change over longer periods of years. Greater attentiveness is therefore required to the potential emergence of fundamentally new varieties of significance over such periods.

From this perspective the challenge becomes how creatively to traverse a succession of generations -- the "Wheel of Life" for some Eastern religions (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1994). Various approaches might be taken to this psychological "reincarnation" process through many "little deaths". The generations could be "managed", as attempted by those favouring highly structured schedules (and armed with pocket "organizers"). One contrast would be to live the succession completely spontaneously as a child of the moment. They could be "navigated" with the spirit of an explorer, entrepreneur or opportunist. They might even be "surfed". They could be treated as an aesthetic exercise in composition or design -- "composing" a lifestyle as explored by Mary Catherine Bateson (1990). Or, like

a breeder, focus could be placed on "breeding" better futures by combining suitable quality bloodlines engendered in past experience. The process could even be treated as an exercise in "gardening" a life -- life husbandry. In each case blending constraints from the past with potential distractions by the unforeseen creates pitfalls and opportunities. What strange new insights and disciplines will the future bring to this process?

## "You and I"

An aspect of the modern tragedy is that the bond between "You and I" is eroding fast -- whether in the family, neighbourhood, peer group or work environment. Statistics on divorce and violent crime are but the visible tip of the iceberg. Concern at rising discourtesy and lack of respect is another indicator.

In this sense what "You and I" can do for future generation is to engage in evolving global conversation -- Martin Buber's "*I and Thou*"? It is discovering global conversation which is the guarantor of meaningful procreation through interrelating a diversity of unforeseen insights. Will the future uncover hidden learnings in making love as a process of integrative conversation? It is such conversation which provides a fertile context for the emergence of new insight and a new sense of well-being in the present moment -- a new generation. It is less a question of "doing for future generations" than "enabling better future generation" -- the former a reification, the latter the enrichment of dynamic creativity.

For "You and I" to do anything meaningfully together it seems that we have to remake our images of both ourselves and each other. More than that, we have to discover each other in ourselves. It is useful, but very simplistic, to treat another as a separate thing "outside" oneself -- a kind of psychic apartheid. Like it or not, however, "you" are within "my" psychic space and as such are carrying aspects of "me" of which I do not necessarily choose to be actively conscious. The world in which I perceive you is my world and my challenge as much as your's or "their's". Perhaps the injunction of one of the earliest action-oriented futurists should be rephrased as "Know Thyselves".

## What you and I can do for future generation: global conversation

In many ways the present has been trapped into a mechanistic conceptual framework, exemplified by the structure of budgets/spreadsheets, curricula, conferences and media programmes. These are matched structurally by the sterile architectural developments of modern society -- which notably configure the pattern of rooms in which different "local" conversations are held. This dysfunctionality has been explored in architecture by Stewart Brand (1994). The underlying conceptual framework is antithetical to any form of global conversation in the integrative sense discussed above. It does not engender the future in any process that combines a diversity of memes. It merely extends itself by mechanistic developmental processes towards greater homogenization -- a conceptual equivalent of urban sprawl.

How should Christopher Alexander's (1979) subtle exploration of the quality of a "good place to be" be contrasted with the notion of "quality time"? Good places do not guarantee "quality time" or "global conversation" -- as the privileged quickly discover in elite conference centres. It is only too easy to have a "bad time" in a "good place". It is quality time -- having a "good time" -- which nourishes evenin the unpromising conditions of the traditional student garret. And yet the focus of development is on simplistic, commercialized notions of better spatial habitats in which providing a "good time" is a matter for the leisure industry (and the drug trade). New approaches to dwelling in time (cf Stephan Rechtschaffen, 1996) may provide clues to global conversation of value to future generation. Are meaningful relationships really time complexes with special characteristics?

This paper could have focused on the many dramatic issues (environment, human rights, unemployment, etc) on which "doing" is usually called for, or on the conference's own network issues. These are however widely debated -- but within very particular contexts. They have become "local" conversations -- even within debates on "globalization". It is fair to say (as the "Rio +5" and "Group of 7.5" conferences illustrated in 1997) that these debates are in a state of total conceptual gridlock. There is no understanding of how to make them global in the integrative sense that is the concern of this paper. They are trapped in "thinking locally" and "acting globally" -- unfortunately in the geographical sense.

What "You and I" can do is explore global conversation to create a more fertile cognitive space permitting future generations (including our later selves in moments to come) to determine their own forms of action. As it is the many local conversations merely reinforce a flat earth perception that undermines every "global action plan".

Going round in cognitive circles over a flat earth is far from the cognitive challenge of circumnavigation. We need to establish the "roundness of global" to enable people to circumnavigate the cognitive world. Whatever we do otherwise will be marked by the distinctive style of the 20th century (to which any "flatness" assumption lends itself). This is best described as "sweeping the dirt under the carpet" -- then vociferously acclaimed as beautifully clean in a modern version of the tale of "*The Emperor's New Clothes*".

Future generations will have their own ways of responding to such catastrophic stupidity. They can be best empowered to act by developing global conversation skills and contexts -- the "globalization" or "enwholement" of significance and meaning. The challenges of space exploration are a pale reflection of these challenges of getting into "cognitive orbit" in the present moment -- whether or not some are "beamed up" through revelation or rapture. Trade globalization, sustained by complex communication patterns, is another impoverished, but equally instructive, metaphor through which to explore this possibility. The much sought paradigm shift will necessarily remain meaningless or incomprehensible within present language -- explainable shifts are not paradigm shifts because the requisite "shift" is out of the explanatory plane.

In summary, the essential questions raised by the above arguments are how conversation "in the distant future" will differ from that of the present and how better quality futures might be engendered through subtler conversation in the present. In all probability this will require that "You and I" engage in unexplored, non-linear ways. How might this conversation as a high art be recognized in practice and what varied forms might it take? What are the successes and failures of aural cultures in this respect? What of the central ungraspable "emptiness" inherent in any fruitful understanding of global? Whether geographical or integrative, it is around this essential emptiness that any form of globalization is configured in all its fragility. What in "global consciousness" corresponds to the thousands of kilometres of unappropriated space forming the core of the planet?

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