

The question of grace



in the twenty-first century

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*Pioneer, driven to start afresh in a new land
Sit . . . Wait . . . Breathe . . .
Breathe in rhythm with the land itself.
Listen . . . listen to the heartbeat.
Listen for the songline.
Sing . . . sing the new song.
Pioneer, invited to live afresh in a new land*

Kaye Twining

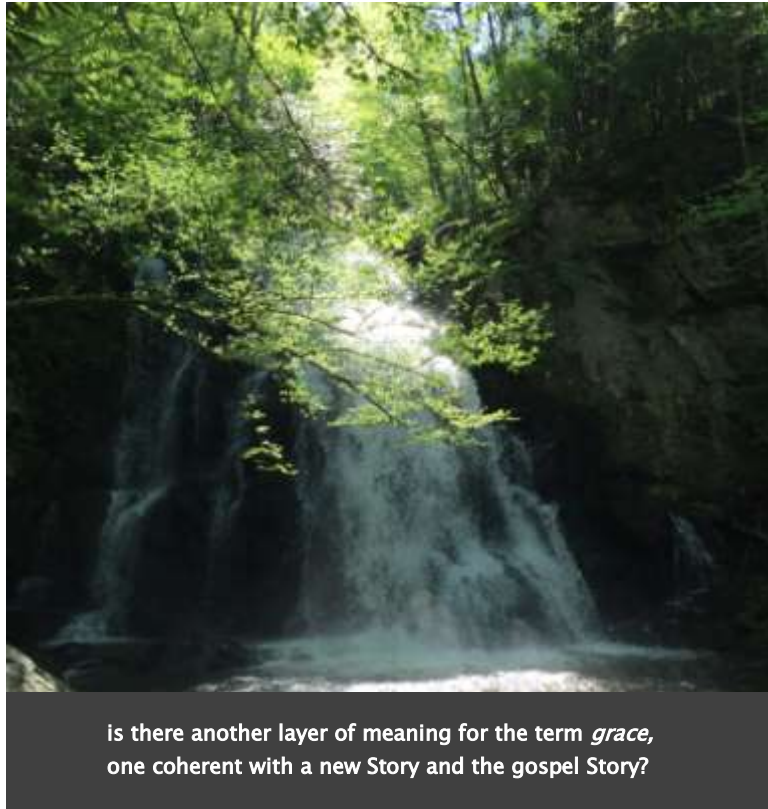
Introduction

Language is more than words spoken or written on a page. Language is a human form of communication and as such, the words we use convey meaning. Meaning is not formed within a vacuum. Rather, meaning is framed by the Story, i.e., the belief system, we are currently living under. Even so, some words are like symbols, in that they represent many layers of meaning. Such symbolic words can even straddle differing belief systems. Could *grace* be a symbolic word?

For countless generations, one Story framing the meaning of *grace* has been a western protestant Christian religious belief system. Such a belief system draws from the 2,000 year old gospel Story. Central to that belief system is: personal salvation through various renditions of a sin, redemption, afterlife Story. Within that belief system, the word *grace* represents: God's free gift of salvation from sin and, eternal life in an elsewhere community. For the many people who continue to share this belief system, such an understanding grounds the way they give meaning to their living and to their dying.

There is a new cultural Story of meaning emerging. The old Story of how we viewed ourselves-in-the-world has been broken open and a new Story is emerging.ⁱ For me, a new Story of human meaning making no longer revolves around questions of sin, redemption, and the afterlife. A new Story revolves around the question: "what does it mean to be human in a living universe?"ⁱⁱ In light of the shift in Stories, does a new Story render the term *grace* redundant?

I have been contemplating the question of grace within a new Story of meaning. I chose to continue to engage with the question, because even though I am one who has shifted Stories, there is still an inner tug towards retaining the word *grace*. In response to that inner tug I set out to discover if it was possible to source another layer of meaning for the term; a layer which drew from the gospel Story and was coherent with an emerging new Story of human meaning; a layer which broke through and transcended the limitations of a western, protestant Christian religious tradition.



is there another layer of meaning for the term *grace*,
one coherent with a new Story and the gospel Story?

After many years contemplating the question of grace in a new Story, I have arrived at the following understanding: grace involves the call to live our humanity fully, within the gentling light of lovingkindness.

**the call to live our humanity fully . . .
within the gentling light of lovingkindness**

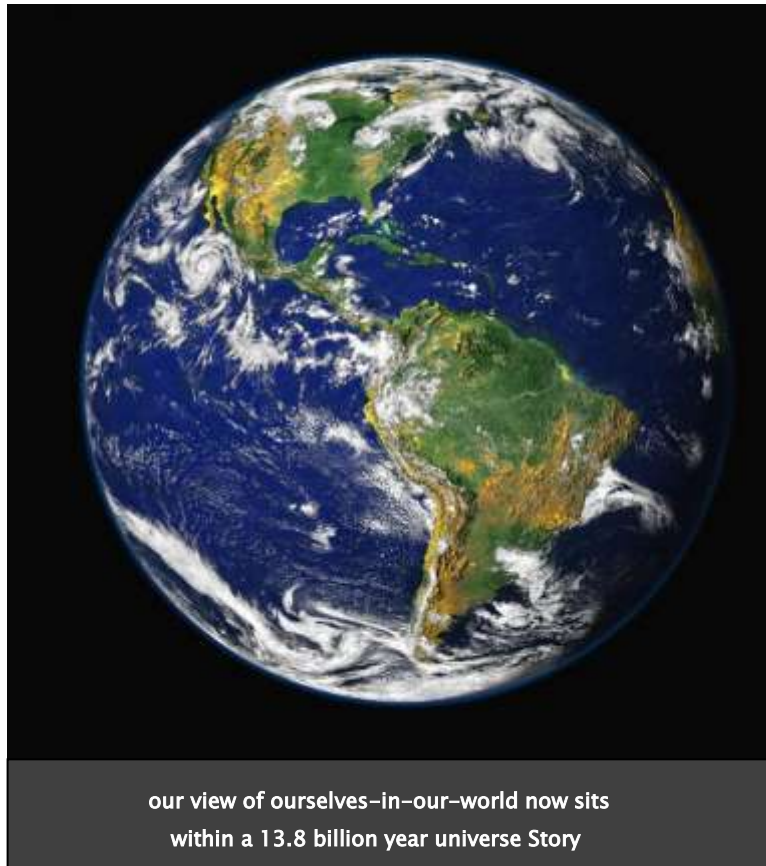
The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of how I came to such an understanding and how such an understanding can take shape in daily living. I write from a post-Christian perspective;ⁱⁱⁱ one which continues to draw from the wisdom teachings (ongoing human values) within Jesus Story. It has taken many years of reflection for me to be able to reconcile and to write authentically from such a both/and perspective.^{iv} I write particularly for those who are perhaps undergoing a similar shift in their Story of meaning and are seeking an entry point and/or springboard for their own deliberations.

In line with the intended purpose, this paper will progress in the following manner: Firstly, it will briefly outline the parameters of a new Story which shape the response to the question of grace. Secondly, it will offer a general understanding of *the call* within Life itself. Thirdly, it will offer an understanding of what it means to live our humanity fully. Fourthly, it will offer a more specific understanding of the *gospel call*. Fifthly, it will

offer an understanding of why lovingkindness is at the very heart of grace. Each of the understandings presented are drawn from the 2,000 year old gospel Story, as viewed through the lens of a new Story.

1. The parameters of a new Story

I have written extensively on a new Story under the overarching theme of: the sacred work of being human. Those writings have been posted on the Tree of Life Spiritual Wellbeing website (www.treeoflife.org.au). For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to state that a new Story revolves around a science based creation theory and a 13.8 billion year evolutionary history. Such a long range view back in time places our present day outlook within a much larger universe Story. It also frees us from believing that humanity is the pinnacle of creation.^v As a result, we are now aware that we are not simply working towards the future of our species. Rather, within the view of Self-in-the-cosmos, we are now aware that we participate in the ever emerging nature of Life itself.



Within a new Story, the universe is viewed as a living organism.^{vi} Furthermore, Earth is now the place we call home. As such, we human beings are called to find our place of belonging on planet Earth. *Belonging* here means: discovering

a clear sense of identity and purpose within the knowledge that we are each interdependent beings within the wider Earth community. As interdependent beings, we are responsible for our actions, because our actions impact Life itself. Can the gospel Story speak into such a new Story?

2. A general understanding of the call within Life itself

Within the evolutionary nature of Life itself is a *call to belong and flourish*. Anne Hillman^{vii} writes of the call this way:

"our call takes place underground, far beneath our awareness. Like a soundless song, it sings to us all our lives, whispering in a wordless way, "Follow". . . I believe this ongoing inquiry into life is the song we are here to learn."

In line with Hillman's declaration, the task of being human involves both attuning to the primordial call to belong and discerning the form of belonging within any given time and place in history.

How do we attune to the primordial call to belong?

Bernard Lonergan's^{viii} transcendental method of conscious intentionality provides a structure for attuning to the call. Lonergan's method incorporates two key principles. The first is the dynamic pattern of human consciousness within the light of the revelation of lovingkindness. Such a foundational pattern incorporates the four precepts of: 1. being attentive to lived experience; 2. being intelligent with rational curiosity; 3. being reasonable with regard to making rational judgments; 4. being responsible in coming to decisions and carrying them out. The four precepts are not hierarchical in nature. Rather each precept is subsumed within the next.

The second key principle is Lonergan's contention that while human beings as a species are no different from the higher animals in terms of substance, the one striking difference is the human capacity to wonder, to question, and to discover responses. Such an ability and desire to question allows a person to break through and transcend the limitations of their current Story of meaning.

In addition to Lonergan's method, we are able to perceive, and respond to the call to belong, because within the very nature of Life itself there is a dynamic Life force which we experience as faith, hope, and love. In this regard, Bernard Lonergan argues: "there is in the world, as it were, a charged field of love and meaning" which is "ever unobtrusive, hidden, inviting each of us to join." Drawing from Lonergan's quotation, it is as if faith, hope, and love echo within/throughout the very nature of Life itself, calling forth and enabling each one of us to discover, and take up, our place of belonging-in-the-world. Therefore, within

a new Story the three energies are recognized as a free gift, in that they are known to be intrinsic to the very nature of Life itself. Our task revolves around dissolving our inner barriers towards living with them as our inner reference point.

The gospel Story ~ on faith, hope, and love

The gospel Story records the centrality of faith, hope, and love in the following manner: "In the end three things remain, faith, hope, and love . . . and the greatest of these is love (Corinthians, Christian sacred text). In response to such an understanding, the human experience of faith, hope, and love reveal that each of the three energies are central to human meaning making. *Meaning making* here refers to: a clear sense of identity, purpose and belonging-in-the-world.

The gospel Story also reveals that faith, hope, and love are like a free gift for humanity. Therefore, we do not have to work to produce them. Also, we have done nothing in particular to deserve them. Furthermore, faith, hope, and love cannot be realized through our will alone. Rather, as with the new Story, the task revolves around dissolving our inner barriers towards living with faith, hope, and love as our inner reference point.

Even though the qualities of faith, hope, and love are central to both belief systems, how the three qualities are understood, depends on the Story of meaning which frames them.



Faith, hope, and love ~ framed by a new Story

Within a new Story, the meaning of faith, hope, and love can now be understood in the following manner:

faith "A way of seeing depth and meaning in the ordinary."^{ix}

Laurence Freeman

Faith is an open state from which we can explore our deepest truths, at any given time and place in human history.^x

hope The possibility of transformation ~ grounded in reality.^{xi} Therefore, we human beings possess the

capacity to break through and transcend the limitations of a current Story of meaning.

love An energy calling forth authentic relationship. The energy of love^{xii} calls forth relationship in the form of an ever deepening experience of connection and belonging within our own selves, within community, and within Life itself.

Drawing from the above understandings, it could be argued that faith calls forth meaning via a Story which is coherent with current knowledge, beliefs, values and lived experience; a Story from which we can source our identity, purpose and belonging-in-the-world. In turn, our Story determines the way we will live within, and act upon, our world. Hope calls forth identity formation and transformation. Love calls forth genuine relationship in all areas of our living. As a result, faith, hope, and love are the three pillars of human belonging.^{xiii}

Summary – the general call within Life itself

The call within Life itself involves discovering our human place of belonging at any given time and place in history. The call is perceived and responded to, via the intrinsic pattern within human consciousness which allows us to pose and discover responses to our meaning making questions, within the light of the three energies of faith, hope, and love, which are intrinsic to Life.

The meaning within the three terms faith, hope, and love, will differ depending on the Story framing them. In this way, they are symbolic words.

3. Returning to the gospel Story through the lens of a new Story: What can it mean to live our humanity fully?

What does the gospel Story reveal about living our humanity fully? The central character of the gospel Story is Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary and Joseph. Jesus of Nazareth lived and died a Jew. During his lifetime, he became known as the Christ; the Christ of the gospel Story. The gospel Story reveals that Jesus of Nazareth lived a fully human life within the conscious awareness of the field of love within Life Itself. (Such a field of Love is named as God within the original gospel Story). As a consequence, Jesus lived with faith, hope, and love as his innermost definer. In response to such an inner orientation, Jesus was able to live beyond ego identification and embody his true identity and purpose; he embodied his unique Self-in-community. Another way of giving expression to the way Jesus

of Nazareth lived is: *the undefended Self-in-love, offered freely.*^{xiv}

The lived experience of *the undefended Self-in-love, offered freely*, is empowering in that it involves naming and claiming personal identity and purpose. Such a stance in life also involves vulnerability.^{xv} Regarding vulnerability, the Garden of Gethsemane Story reveals that it can only emerge through the act of self surrender. Vulnerability through Self surrender does not require a negation of Self. Rather vulnerability emerges as a choice made from a place of inner freedom, in response to the call of love.^{xvi}

In light of the above understandings, living our humanity fully involves living beyond ego identification with faith, hope and love as our innermost definer. In so doing, we discover our unique personal identity and purpose, without being attached to a solid, non-changing, separate impression of self.

Summary – what can it mean to live our humanity fully?

The gospel Story reveals that we live our humanity fully, when we live with faith, hope, and love as our innermost definer. Those three energies call forth true Self-in-community, which involves both the empowerment of naming and claiming unique Selfhood-in-community and vulnerability in the form of self surrender from a place of inner freedom.



4. The specific call within the gospel Story

Looking again into the gospel Story through the lens of a new Story, the specific call is as follows: Jesus, the Christ, awakens humanity to the new consciousness that all are called/enabled to live their humanity to its fullest, in response to the field of Love

within Life Itself; all are called to embody their unique Self-in-community; all are called to embody the *undefended Self-in-love, offered freely*. How can the term *the undefended Self-in-love, offered freely* take form in our daily living?

The undefended Self-in-love . . .

The *undefended Self-in-love* aspect of the phrase entails an interior journey of contemplative Self enquiry within the gentling light of lovingkindness. *Gentling light* here means: a tender, courageous, curious, nonjudgmental, playful awareness which softens our defense mechanisms and pre-packaged/patterned ways of viewing ourselves-in-our-world.

Gentling light: a tender, courageous, curious, nonjudgmental, playful awareness which dissolves our defense mechanisms

The interior journey involves befriending who we know ourselves to be at this moment of time, including our unique talents, our ordinariness and our not so desirable aspects. At the same time as befriending our present moment Self, we remain open to transformative shifts in our view, if and when they emerge within us. As we continue to engage in the spiritual practice of contemplative Self enquiry, we learn to trust the process of not judging whatever emerges. In so doing, we no longer need to metaphorically *hide from, or try to defend ourselves from*, those aspects of ourselves we find challenging and/or offensive. In turn we experience personal wholeness, beyond ego identification.

. . . Offered freely

The *offered freely* aspect of the phrase entails the outward expression of the interior journey presented above. As we continue to befriend ourselves there is a flow-on effect, in that we are more able to befriend others. In this way, the experience of undefended Self-in-love flows into the way we live within, and act upon, our world. Such an outward expression involves the inner freedom to live in accord with values which cultivate the flourishing of all. As a result, we experience authentic communal belonging.

In line with the above understandings, true Self is not a perfected state to be pursued; striving to live on some plane of existence where common life experiences do not permeate. Rather, to embody our unique Self-in-community is to respond to the call to live our humanity fully, with personal wholeness and communal responsibility.

Even though we are all called to live our humanity fully, there is no one-for-all way of doing so. The outward expression of living fully may vary considerably over an individual's lifetime; or within differing cultures and religious traditions; or within

differing eras of human history. So, whilst we may each choose to live with faith, hope and love as our innermost definer, how we live will vary according to the Story of meaning we are currently living within.

Resting in the heart of grace

Responding to the call to live our humanity fully, within the gentling light of lovingkindness, allows us to experience the felt-sense of *resting in the heart of grace*. *Resting* here involves: knowing our true place of belonging. In so doing, we experience personal wholeness, authentic communal responsibility, and joyful humility and reverence for the mystery of participating in a living universe.



resting in the heart of grace

Summary ~ the specific call of the gospel Story

The gospel Story reveals that Jesus, the Christ, awakens humanity to the new consciousness that we are each called to live our humanity fully, in the form of the *undefended Self-in-love, offered freely*. As such, we are not called to imitate Jesus' life. Rather, we are each called/enabled to undertake our inner journey of contemplative Self enquiry towards embodying our unique Self-in-community.

5. Why is lovingkindness at the very heart of grace?

Why is the energy of lovingkindness so potent for living our humanity fully? Teilhard de Chardin declared:

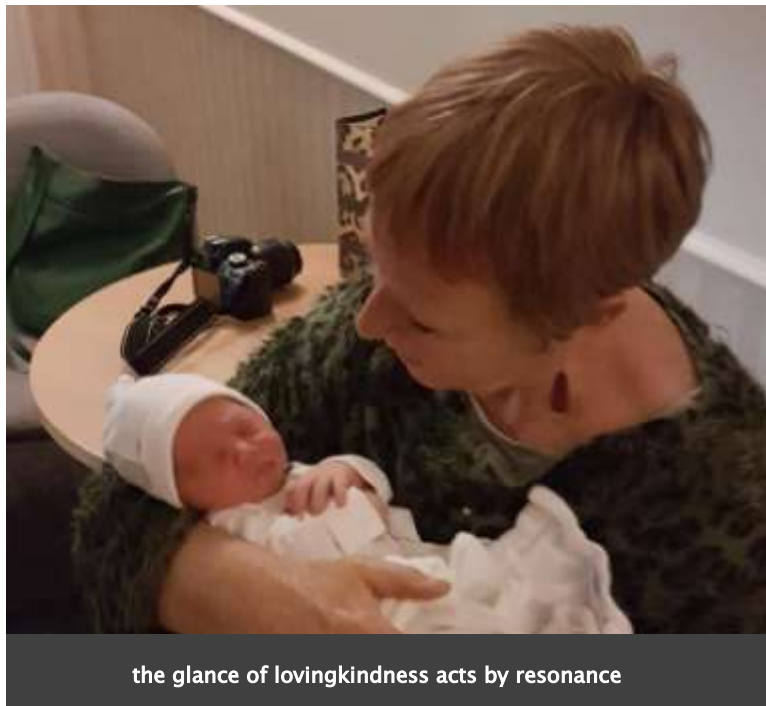
"Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves."

The Phenomenon of Man, 1955.

Again if we turn to the gospel Story, we see that the life and teachings of Jesus, the Christ, reveal it is the qualities within

lovingkindness which allow us to participate in the act of living fully. Such qualities include: wisdom, forgiveness, mercy, acceptance, compassion and self surrender.

John O'Donohue^{xvii} wrote of such a dynamic in this way: those who love are able "to see beyond image" and in so doing "affect the deepest change." And again, in the words of a modern day Sufi teacher, Pir Zia Inayat-Khan,^{xviii} "the glance of lovingkindness acts by resonance, to see beyond the roles we live by." Therefore, with lovingkindness as our inner orientating reference point, we are able to metaphorically *see ourselves and our world* beyond a stereotypical view.



Some examples in the gospel Story of how Jesus' glance of loving kindness affected profound change in individual lives are: 1. the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-16) 2. the story of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) 3. the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20; Luke: 8:30-39). Each of these characters was an outsider in their own community. Each lived with their own stigma. However, the gospels recount that when Jesus, the Christ, met with them in love, he saw beyond their persona and in so doing, transformation took place. In response to being viewed through the gaze of lovingkindness, they were each able to break through the limits of their persona and experience inner healing in the form of transformational shifts in their view of their Self-in-their world. In so doing, they were each restored to communal belonging.

In light of the above paragraph, it is clear that lovingkindness is not a weakness. Love is a transformative power. Love is a

Love is a transformative power

dynamic Life force, which dissolves our defense mechanisms and calls/enables us to know ourselves as Self-in-love. As such, when our living is consciously animated by lovingkindness, transformation takes place within our inner being and outer world. It is therefore, lovingkindness which allows us to live our humanity fully. Thus, lovingkindness is at the heart of grace.

Summary ~ why is lovingkindness at the heart of grace?

Lovingkindness is at the very heart of grace because love is a transformative power. The energies of love call us into authentic relationship on all levels of our living, by dissolving our defense mechanisms towards transformative shifts in our view, if and when they emerge within us.

Concluding remarks

The 2,000 year old gospel Story can continue to inform and inspire those who identify as Christian and also those who are exploring a new Story of meaning in the twenty-first century within a post-Christian context. Therefore, it would seem that gospel Story is in itself a symbolic Story, in that it holds layers of meaning which can straddle differing belief systems.

In terms of *grace*, the life and wisdom teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, as recorded in gospel Story, communicate another layer of meaning within the word, beyond that of the sin/redemption/afterlife Story. Viewed through the lens of post-Christian, Self-in-the cosmos perspective, the gospel Story reveals the new consciousness that each one of us is called to live fully in the here and now, within the gentling light of lovingkindness. Living fully requires a robust sense of Self-in-community, beyond ego attachment; with faith, hope, and love as the innermost reference point. As such, *grace* is a symbolic word, which can straddle differing belief systems. Is that not good news to be celebrated!

The gospel Story also reveals the new consciousness that we each are called to live our humanity fully, in the here and now, within the gentling light of lovingkindness.

RESOURCES

- ⁱ Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth & The Great Work*
- ⁱⁱ Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*
- ⁱⁱⁱ A new Story of meaning does not necessitate a post-Christian perspective. Many people from the world religious traditions are exploring a new Story from their perspective.
- ^{iv} A western Protestant Christian worldview is my heritage. My current perspective draws from an integral framework of understanding. An integral framework takes into account human history as a whole. An integral framework both breaks through and transcends the limitations of previous human knowledge and belief systems, and also includes that which continues to resound within current knowledge, beliefs and lived experience.
- ^v Brian Cox and Andrew Cohen, *Human Universe*
- ^{vi} Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*
- ^{vii} Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love: Discovering Fire for the Second Time*
- ^{viii} Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*
- ^{ix} Laurence Freeman, *Jesus: Teacher within*
- ^x Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*
- ^{xi} Kaye Twining, MA Thesis entitled: *The contribution of a spiritual director to the spiritual journey of a person diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder*
- ^{xii} Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love*
- ^{xiii} Kaye Twining, MA Thesis
- ^{xiv} Rosemary Haughton, *Transformation of Man: A Study of Conversion and Community*
- ^{xv} Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God*
- ^{xvi} Kaye Twining, MA Thesis
- ^{xvii} John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*
- ^{xviii} Pir Zia Inayat-Khan, as heard at the SDI Emerging Wisdom Conference, 2015

For more on a new Story see [www.treeoflife.org.au/the-sacred-work-of-being-human/Finding our place of belonging & Resources/Love is . . . & The nature of Hope & Faith or non-faith: is that the question & The nature of truth in an age of perspectives & A new faith community](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/the-sacred-work-of-being-human/Finding-our-place-of-belonging-&Resources/Love-is-.-.-&The-nature-of-Hope-&Faith-or-non-faith-is-that-the-question-&The-nature-of-truth-in-an-age-of-perspectives-&A-new-faith-community)

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