

“I wasn’t raised to take care of myself!”

The Enabling of American Youth

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It was the fall of two thousand nine. I was in session with a 33 year old male client who three months prior had presented himself with an eager to please manner, as a “professional patient”. Now that same young man was exhibiting symptoms of an anxiety disorder bordering on panic; gasping for air, running his fingers anxiously through his hair. His therapy of late had been focused on his inability to get a job, any job. He was an only child and his parents who had been supporting him his whole life had been trying to launch their son from their care for the past seven years. I thought to myself that he was indeed a “professional patient”, who up to this point, would show up and use the whole session for dumping his feelings rather than processing them, when redirected.

“I wasn’t raised to take care of myself,” he collapsed on the couch in a pool of tears. It struck me that I was dealing with a young man who may have looked age appropriate, but developmentally was a mere twelve years old. I wanted to help him. I was aware of a strong transference to be protective of his helplessness.

I will call him Brian. Brian would seem to most people like someone who was very sophisticated, very compelling. He knew how to endear himself to others, play the fool, and then in the next moment say something provocative that kept the attention on him. What he deeply felt, was that he was owed a financially successful life. Not his own, but that of his parents. Today the true feeling that surfaced was fear.

He certainly sounded entitled in session when he would proclaim that either his parents were going to take care of him or he would.....not finish the sentence. He was self centered and immature. All of these things he was, but those feelings had been supported and nurtured from a very early age by two parents who had lived a very comfortable lifestyle and increasingly made him feel that he was not only “special, gifted and talented”, but that they would always be there to support him. He was made to feel like he was an equal member of his mother and father’s successful life. His father was the insecure alpha male, who would exert his control over his only child by having him stand up straight and verbally scream and belittle him only inches from his face. Yet, he adored his father, refusing to believe that he could ever be truly angry at him for long. His mother in response to the anger of her husband would stand silently through these tirades never interfering. Her message to her son had always been that she would always take care of him and that it was only a matter of time before “the world”, would figure out how special, how gifted he was, setting him up with a great job in whatever he was “special” in.

Brian’s mother and father divorced when Brian was ten. Brian’s mother married another financially sound man who could support her in the lifestyle that she had come to expect. Brian remained with his mother and his step-father. He bonded easily with his step-father, spending weekends with his father, until, bored, he would pretend he was sick, favoring his mothers

unconditional love to his father's efforts to toughen him up. In this way he was able to stay with his mother, and visited his father less and less.

This obsession with illness had started at the same time his parents separated and it became one of Brian's tools to get what he wanted from his parents and his step-father, so Brian became a sickly child, and as an adult was still filled with anxiety and unfounded fears.

After Brian left, I compared the notes of his to similar clients who were exhibiting comparable feelings in their sessions. There was no specific age or sex, with most of them falling between twenty two and forty. To the individual, not one of them had found the outside world in agreement with their own parent's assessment of them. Raised to feel special, they were now being forced to confront the painful realization that their "specialness" rested solely on the opinions of their parents, a small group of friends and no one else. They were unprepared for the changes in the economy that had made their diplomas, for the most part, useless. The only comfort for them was that most of their friends were in the same dilemma. Some had excelled in college as class presidents, heads of various committees, homecoming queens and star athletes. However, not one of them had any "real" life experience outside of structured activities like music lessons, ballet, or soccer games on perfectly landscaped green fields. As they got older blind dates were set up by mutual friends with similar backgrounds. Pocket money and credit cards were expected, not earned, and spending was a birthright. Now they were appalled that the very people who had woven this silken cocoon around them their whole life were trying to hold them accountable for their spending or cutting them off completely!

That day, in October, I understood that this particular client, along with several of my other clients, in various degrees, had all been groomed to be viewed by the world of their parents as special and entitled. For the most part, with few exceptions, there was nothing special, or gifted about any of them that could be parlayed into a career!

With the economy being "flipped" on its head, Brian's parents, along with many others, had suffered severe financial setbacks that left them unsure of the future and now forced them to cut back on spending in areas that had not needed their concern before. Currently, as their accountants pointed out, the major drain on their resources was the lifestyle of their children that they could no longer afford.

A twenty five year old son raged at his parents when asked to return the keys to the new Fiat they had recently bought for him as a gift. It had to be sold immediately. The credit cards that these parents had given all of their children when they reached the age of sixteen were revoked, along with some of their own cards. Surprisingly these parents were not prepared for the scale of outrage that was flung at them from their now adult children, who were being asked, politely at first, to get a job and support themselves.

It was at the beginning of this extremely unstable time that I began to see a new kind of client. Young men & women with a check from their parents' for a set number of sessions in order to work out in therapy what they were now going to do with their lives. They were expected to

not only make an effort but to take any job that they could find to help support themselves. For the most part they were a well-groomed, studied lot who knew more about fashions and software applications for their phones than they knew about creating a resume, much less balancing a checkbook. Having lived their lives in the glow of the newly moneyed generation of their parents, they found that what was being asked of them was synonymous to being homeless. When asked how these new demands were affecting them, some of their replies were:

“It’s like Dad thinks I should walk up and down on Melrose Street [a distasteful idea] and sign employment sheets or something! Right, like I’m going to work at Banana- Republic!” (College graduates, 29, female, raised by a nanny and other help)

“I can’t go out and see my friends at night anymore? They took away my Amex and gave me fifty dollars! What am I supposed to do with that?” (College drop-out, male, 31 who also struggled with an eating disorder).

“My mom said that I could have my old room back, but only until I get a job.” (College graduate, male, 28, substance abuse problems, who partied every night with his friends).

“I am not about to go to Kaiser and find a new doctor. I want my old doctor back. Kaiser treats you like shit! Everybody knows it’s just for poor people”. (Male, 32, who only saw specialists and never the bills that went to his parents).

“My mom lost her job; now she’s banging on my door in the morning, telling me to get up and go look for a job!” (Male, 20, who rarely saw his dual income parents, but who received from them a hundred dollars for lunch, that was left on his bedside table every morning.)

“Sage” was twenty-nine when her wealthy father gave her the ultimatum of finding a career or employment within two years time or risk being cut off. At our first meeting I felt she held all the cards. Her father had driven her to my office and expected to be included in the first session. When I told him that Sage’s appointment would be private, he was upset but followed my directions and sat in the waiting room while his daughter related her history to me. She had finished Columbia as an art major and then traveled the world on and off for the next two years. On returning, she told her father that she wanted to work in antiquities and asked him if he could find her a position at the Getty? He made some calls and soon she was hired as an intern and would be guiding groups of school children through the museums galleries for her first three months. Her claim to being excited in fact translated to coming in late three out of the five days that she was supposed to work, and by the second week she had been fired.

“They had to let me go. That’s what they told me. They said that I was overqualified. It wasn’t a good fit from the beginning. I didn’t want to be a tour guide.” When I mentioned to her a beginning position usually came with something that no one else wanted to do, she laughed.

“Oh please. I’ve been to Europe and toured the Vatican extensively. I knew by first glance how much they were showing and it wasn’t really all that good. It wasn’t the right job.”

So in session we began to work on what her expectations were of the job market, people and the world in general. She had formed some rigid opinions for someone so young, which would hardly endear her to any future employer.

"I would do that, but only for a short time. I need my vacations. My family depends on me to go with them wherever they go. My family means everything to me.

"I don't think any employer would agree to an arrangement like that, and you did promise your father that you would stay with something that you liked,"

"Well, that's true. I just haven't found anything I like yet. I read this article that a buyer for a top clothing store shops all over the world."

I didn't have to guess where this was going.

"And you?"

"I've traveled everywhere. That has to count for something."

"But your major was in art history, not in marketing and retail."

"I'm a quick study. All I need is a chance. I'll talk to some friends of mine. They all say that I've got great taste."

It went on like this for a year. Sage allowed me to give her father any reports he wanted. She knew he loved her, and she felt she had nothing to hide from him. He was obviously frustrated first with me, as if the referral had not been good advice, and then with himself for spoiling his daughter all these years. "She thinks money grows on trees! What can I do? She's a nice girl."

In our last session Sage had decided, with her father's backing, she would start a line of clothes for the globe-traveling woman.

"I sketch beautifully. I am sure, really sure about this move. Thank you, you've been a great help and Daddy loves you."

The new prosperity of the 80s and 90s that had nurtured their lifestyle now lay far behind them. Their parents, having lost a bundle in the recession, were now struggling themselves and trying to divest themselves of these young adults who had always been costly to maintain, but who now, more than ever, represented just another large bill at the end of the month, and one that they could no longer afford to pay.

These young adults, for their part, had never been prepared for the real world of personal responsibility, self-reliance, anxiety-management and foregoing instant gratification for a greater goal. Confused now by the mixed social signals provoked by their present behavior in the world, many of these young adults found going home not only a difficult choice but the only one. Home was a perfect place to heal their wounded feelings from a very different world than the one described by their enabling parents. Mom and Dad would take care of everything, and this adjustment, they were being forced to make would soon be in the past.

Many of the young adults who had left home to strike out on their own had come into direct contact with a very different social order. For some of them in the work place it was problematic. The choice was to learn the social cues of this new majority or risk being ostracized. Some were able to adjust quickly, appearing almost shy and timid for the first time in their lives; others, seeking a defense for a frail ego would fly into a rage, and were systematically fired (if they did not first find an excuse to quit with the hope that something better would come along.) These “unemployables” were the most vulnerable to marginalization in a quickly shrinking job market.

Practically speaking, natural fears aside, what was *their* investment in not growing up, and leaving home to strike out on their own? What could I do as a therapist? If they had never balanced a checkbook, I taught them how to balance a checkbook. If they had never written a resume, I could teach them how to do that. Often I would introduce them to making a “to do list” that would provide the needed structure for the following day.

A young male client who had been born into the “business” produced this list:

1. Get up by nine.
2. Do some abdominal breathing, exercise, etc..
3. Go over list at breakfast, and glance through the business section of the paper.
4. Work for an hour on the wording of your resume.
5. Go over different sites on your computer and fill out applications for employment.
6. Clean your own room.

These six items were only part of his list, and whatever was not finished or attempted one day was carried over to do the following day.

Much of the work done in therapy centered on holding the clients accountable for their lists and praising (empowering) them for what they had done. Much of my role could be described as remedial re-parenting.

Not surprisingly some of my clients had been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, phobias, and some addictions. Their treatment was more challenging. One young man I’ll call Doug appeared to suffer from panic disorder and social anxiety. He wanted to get off all medications because he thought they were making him sick, but whenever he would attempt to cut back on them, he would spiral down into anxiety/panic and call his mother. She would drop everything and come to rescue him by taking him to another specialist or simply out to lunch at a good restaurant. It appeared obvious to me that Doug had an investment in keeping his parents involved in his care as much as he could. When taking his history, I discerned that he had been running this con most of his adult life.

In session he would often drift from the subject at hand and talk about the wonderful parties that his parents had when he was a child, attended by the brightest young actors,

writers and producers. A picture I'd seen of Doug at seven is of a good-looking child in a white silk suit with a wide striped tie, smiling broadly to the camera between his parents. Life was good.

"Some weeks we would go out to dinner every night and Dad always made sure he got the best table. Mom was always dressed up, and rarely wore the same dress twice."

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Doug thought he was a bright young man who just needed to write "The Book" or manage someone's business, or design something that everyone would need. Besides owing money to his parents, he had also groomed a number of friends to help him out financially. When I confronted him on this behavior, he replied quite naturally that someday, he would be in a position to help *them*. Besides, he would do favors for them by house-sitting their homes in Malibu or Brentwood, and that would be his *job* for a week or a month. It was all a dodge to avoid growing up.

Twenty-nine-year-old "John" put a lot of effort in being the "perfect" client. He would do all the home-work assigned and would try and engage me on whatever was happening in the world. I saw a young man who wanted to be liked. In telling me his "story" he mentioned that he changed gym memberships constantly when he felt that he was being slighted or if the gym was dirty. His parents thought that keeping their son in therapy was a small price to pay to keep him motivated. But, John was lazy. He couldn't get "well" too fast, or his parents might cut him loose. He wasn't the first client nor would he be the last to want his parents to come into therapy with him, but I recognized the dilemma I might face by allowing them to intrude in his individuation. I also knew, from meeting many sets of overwhelmed parents that they were quite relieved to leave the job of raising these adult children to me! Their agenda was at cross purposes with their sons and daughters.

Many parents insisted it might go faster if the client saw me three times a week. To them I was a glorified babysitter, and I received many referrals from other similarly frustrated parents. Often I found myself calling the client's parents (with the clients permission) when I found out that they (the parents) were failing to carry out their agreed-upon roles by caving in to their childrens histrionics and undermining what we were trying to accomplish in session.

Most of their placating responses were done by one parent without the knowledge of the other parent. A mother or father most often compromised in trying to correct a past slight or error, whether real or imagined that they had done to their son or daughter and to compensate would give the client cash or privileges without the others knowledge.

"I can't stand it when he starts crying!" one parent reported. "I could've been a better father/mother, had I paid more attention to him, but I was out making money. What could I do?"

Harry Reid, age 43, is the child of a famous TV star. Raised in his father's shadow, he recalls a past nurtured by nannies and servants with time spent in boarding schools and summer vacations in the Poconos. He remembers being brought out once on the stage by his

father on his fathers daytime variety show and being introduced as his son. "That was the happiest day of my life. I really felt that he loved me and was proud of me."

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Some thirty years later he sat in my office, crying that he was down to his last one hundred thousand. Having never worked a day in his life, he did not believe that he would ever have to work. His inheritance had been significant, and with proper management it would have served him well throughout his life. But, hard as he might have tried to save, he hadn't counted on the hit his stock portfolio would take from an unsympathetic economy. Harry admitted that he had little skill or training in anything. Although he had wanted to be a producer or a camera man, he lacked any experience in the film industry. Now he wanted to start as an intern but quickly learned that his age ruled that experience out. He bemoaned the fact that despite his desire to change and having been given the tools and homework to make it happen, he would come in every week and report that he had done nothing on his "to do list". "It's just too hard," he would lament, week after week. After two years of treatment, his diagnosis was still generalized anxiety disorder with low grade depression. He was resistant to treatment, stalled developmentally somewhere in his teens, still expecting direction, but too crippled by fear for any chance of real change to take place.

The clients who had moved back home were now being told that it was time to get a job and meet their own expenses on those things that the parents had paid for in better times. Many of the parents would eventually regain some financial stability, because they themselves had built their careers or businesses the first time; but sadly their children had only known their parents prosperity and had never learned how to build their own financial futures.

The psychic and emotional muscles that a child develops gradually on their own, guided and taught by well adjusted parents had not been the experience of this particular group of clients. Normally in a child's first sixteen years they learn how to adjust to unexpected anxiety, disappointment, lack of fairness, and the uncertainty of life while under their parents care. Parents usually don't hover over every movement a child makes after the age of two. Healthy childhood development includes plenty of free time, for the child to explore and experience the world around him without a parent there to overly intrude upon that child's time. In this the child learns that when he falls, he's able to get up without the help of his parents. He's allowed to push and challenge the boundaries that the parents have set, but with that challenge also come consequences. This is what parents teach their children, making them ready to leave "the nest" by the steady day to day role modeling that they demonstrate. A parent serves as the most important "role model" that a child has. When you watch a child/parent interaction as many of us do in public, you see the child look to the parent first for their response to any given situation. From that response, whether it is correct or not a template is formed that forms the child's responses to his world.

I was a witness to an example of this behavioral stamp as I like to call it, a few weeks ago, while standing in the check-out line at a neighborhood supermarket. A woman was exchanging her coupons with the cashier. Her child, a little girl, was close by her, and was at that very inquisitive age of two or so. The order behind the woman was myself, holding my quart of milk,

and just behind me was an elderly handicap gentleman holding the leash of this beautiful blond Labrador retriever. It was obvious that the dog was well trained as he shifted his body so as not to crowd his owner, and was sitting upright and alert, waiting for the line to move. I had exchanged pleasantries with the owner about his dog's appearance, when the toddler, spying the dog, walked over to him. The animal very affectionately licked her face. The toddler screamed in her excitement and proceeded to pet the dog as the owner nodded. In that moment at the sound of the child's excitement, the mother's attention was drawn to her. It was at this time, that the mother made a horrifying face and raised her voice at her child. The child looked from her mothers reaction and then back to the dog that she was playing with and then back at her mother. The little girl gave a scream as if she had been bitten and ran to clutch her mother's leg. The mother, had she been more aware, might have taken in the innocent situation and perhaps would have touched the dog and smiled at her daughter showing her that not all dogs were dangerous.

The world that my clients had been raised in was the adult world of privilege. The client was honored, cherished, smothered with gifts, kept safe and also lied to and crippled emotionally by their own parents. In many cases this would continue into the clients twenties. Having learned early on that there was no wriggle room for discussion or opinions that were not tolerant of their parents own, the child developmentally, stayed a child, as his body continued to grow.

The parents of this particular type of client were either born wealthy or earned a great deal of their wealth before they had any children. Some might have worked very hard to climb out of a lower economic level and now with their new found wealth, did not want their children to suffer as they had, so to make sure of this, everything thing that the child could possibly want from toys and the best schools to a new car at age sixteen was made available.

An example of the danger of this constant barrage of gratuitous gifts was witnessed when my wife and I had been invited to attend a Christmas Eve dinner by some friends. The parents had married late in life after both had been successful in their perspective careers. The mother had earned her PHD in Business, and the father was a producer of reality shows. Now after twelve years of marriage it seemed that both were happy. They had twin boys, followed three years later with a little girl. They both loved their children and showed how much by giving them most of what they wanted. We were given front row seats that boarded on a huge amount of presents, all carefully wrapped beautifully with ribbons and cards. What followed next, surprised both the parents as well as it did us. The children presented with so much, were told by their mother to open each gift carefully and read who it was from before they started on another gift. From the very beginning it felt like it was a chore for the children that they just weren't up to as they attacked each gift more savagely than the last. The mother, clearly thrown in her attempt to please her children, tried calmly at first to exert control over the rampage, but it was all to end badly with the children crying, falling down amongst their gifts exhausted and perplexed at their mothers despair.

Some parents stay overly involved in their children's lives as the child grows to young adulthood. The attempts of a child leaving the nest always seemed to be in agreement with the parents plans as the parent or young adult would find an apartment close, but not too close

and mom and dad would pay the rent and expenses for their child until he or she figured out how they could support themselves. A monthly allowance kept the children dependent well into their twenties and thirties.

Most in this group were raised with help from of a nanny or a staff of two. The young were groomed and fawned over like rare hybrid orchids. They lived in the best neighborhoods, and shared similar interests with their childhood friends. As they got older their parents threw lavish birthday parties for them or bar mitzvahs which caused several of my clients to remark that these were the happiest times of their lives. The costly parties would include semi famous singers; serve every variety of food from chocolate fountains to burger stands with huge tents and large staffs to help. The clients wore couture, were filmed, photographed, and no guest left without a sumptuous gift bag with the clients initials engraved on each bag. Many of these parents went without their own vacations, to be able to send their children on vacations with their friends. Vacations away from school were rigorously scheduled to fill the child's time with every kind of activity from surfing schools, horseback riding, private French lessons and tennis at the parent's local country club. Very few of my clients can ever remember when they were left on their own. For many, on an unconscious level, there was no thought of ever making any of their own serious incomes, for that might stop the checks from coming from home. Why risk when something came so easily from their parents? They knew next to nothing about how the real world worked. College was an extension of high school with many of their old friends at the same school. There was little talk of their futures and even less about finding their own jobs. For many, the ever intrusive parent would make a call to a friend in the business for the graduates first interviews and possible jobs.

"I always felt that my life was on a track that had been produced by my parents. It was talked about in my house for as long as I can remember. There would be a promise of a job that would be waiting for me when I graduated. I never really thought that it would take me very long to find employment, because it was always assumed that my parents would never let me down, so why should I worry?" Replied one client when asked what his plans were to find work.

When these initial jobs did not pan out many continued to party as if they were still in college adding addiction to an already overwhelmed dependency.

"I just wasn't worried. I thought that my parents would fix things and open the doors for me with their contacts and their positions," replied a client when asked about his job plans. I asked another client what he was doing to get employment. He responded;

"I'm just chillin with my friends. We go out and party every night, play some tennis during the day and play games (computer) when we get bored. I figured there is nothing out there for me right now, so I'll wait until the economy gets better, then go out and ask around."

There seemed to be no sense of urgency in this client's life other than the anxiety of getting into the popular clubs. This client was twenty eight years old. He had graduated from college five years ago, and had only come in to see me when his parents insisted that he get some coaching, not therapy. A check came from those parents once a month, and except for one phone message, none of them called me with any other concerns.

I was the next professional that would “fix” their child and launch him into whatever career that we would figure out together. Through all of this the client was doing some serious drinking on a regular basis, and was usually on some medication that the family doctor gave him for anxiety or depression.

At times I would call the parents in (at the client’s request) for something that felt very much like a parent teacher meeting. In these meetings I would find out more about the clients childhood and ask those tough questions about accountability, boundaries, and consequences in the household when the client as a child acted up. The average consequence was that as a child, the client was sent to his room to play games as a sort of time-out. The parents, to their credit, after a little more prodding on my part, began to see what damage they had done by not creating healthy boundaries, or giving chores or responsibilities as an attachment to that generous allowance they had given every week.

Eric was twenty two when I first saw him. A likeable young man with an easy smile, an accomplished track star who was afraid he was not going to get scholarship to the prestige’s school of his choice, because he didn’t like doing homework. Both of his parents had made a bundle in the real estate market and were never home. The only constant in this boy’s life had been the game culture. He remembered playing “Mario Brothers”, followed by Nintendo and now was playing sometimes for eighteen hours; “The Gods of War”. When I asked him about reducing that time, so he could do homework or play some basket ball, he replied in shock, that he couldn’t do that, for he had built his position in the game to a point where “his team” depended on him if they were to reach the coveted number one position. Here was a striking young man at the beginning of his life who had never been on a date before. His social skills were limited to the gaming lingo, overnight beer blasts and notes from his parents.

“My parents are great! I wake up at around eleven, and there is always around a hundred dollars for lunch money on the table, usually with a note from Dad or Mom.”

When I asked him about his parent’s awareness of his gaming, he laughed and said that as far as they were concerned as long as he was happy at home in his room, then how much trouble could he get into? It turns out the trouble that he was in was developmental. Here he was a happy twenty-two year old guy, who socially, was all of twelve years old!

Like many young men that I see in session, their only diagnosis is that of missing role models. The term “Helicopter Parents”, means parents that are removed from the day to day raising of their children, and are not there to teach them anything other than to get up and go to school, and don’t swear. So the “work” for someone in my position is more re-parenting than anything that Freud would approve of.

It’s part of this groups missing piece that there was no one around besides the nanny, or the sitter, and when they out grew her, they were pretty much treated like they were adults, and were expected to act like one.

We’ve all heard of children who have been smoking pot with their parents since they were fourteen. In this group, that is very much the norm. It’s as if the child has come of an age that

the parent feels comfortable relating to. This is a danger when a parent relaxes normal adult/child boundaries to try to be more of a friend than a parent. The affect this has on a child is to parentify them at an early age. Now they have this adult/parent who suddenly changes the hierarchy in the family, and for the moment gives responsibility to the child who is not prepared for this role reversal. It's more confusing when later on the child who has adjusted to this new position in the family speaks out or takes an action in which he or she is not prepared for the consequences that would follow.

Teens still need their parents to be parents. What they don't need is another "best" friend. So in session I start by gaining their trust. For the most part it's a very heady feeling for my clients to have another adult's attention for more than a few minutes. A lot can be done in a fifty minute hour. They are, after all, no matter what the age, wandering around in the adult world with missing pieces of pretty important information

The offspring of this type of parenting had only known their parents when they were flush and had never been taught the skills necessary to take care of their own needs without the parent to fall back on. Their anxiety and temper tantrums were now met with the stoic faces of their parents who were not about to start at square one again, even if they could. How many more compromises would these parents have to make now? How many more years did they have, if any, to stay in the work place and build another income?

The children on the other hand seem to be worse off than their parents. What do they know of budgeting? Were the stresses they are feeling normal? They had never learned to be responsible for anything other than showing up for Sunday dinners or attending school. The few that had managed to secure an entry level position had been among the first that were cut from their prospective companies. They felt that they had tried and failed. What did they know about perseverance against rejection?

Now at all ages they were being set afloat in a world that they had no training for. Like vulnerable baby sand crabs running to the sea under a full moon, they had little chance of ever achieving what their parents had, much less pass them as wage earners had done in the previous generation.

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