

Welcome to Turning Conscience into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire and form action.

Okay, hello and welcome. Welcome to our today's podcast. We are going to have a conversation with Mary Evelyn Tucker, who is the co-founder and co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University. Mary Evelyn has been involved in the Earth Charter movement for many years. First, by offering significant inputs into the drafting process of the Earth Charter, then as a member of the Earth Charter International Council, and now as a senior advisor. So thank you so much, Mary Evelyn, for joining us today.

So nice to be here, Mirian, and we still feel the Earth Charter is one of the most important documents of our time. Great, thank you. So I would like to start our conversation with the following question to you. Could you share with us some highlights of your experience during the consultation and drafting process of the Earth Charter back in the 90s, and your learning from it? Well, it was an extraordinary time. It was a process from approximately 96 to 2000, but starting even in 94 with Gorbachev and Maurice Strong saying we have to launch this.

And so that whole part of the 90s was a feeling of possibility, of something that was needed for the Earth community, a new declaration of interdependence. And the exciting thing for me in working on the drafting committee was we had a parallel project at Harvard, John Grimm, my husband and I, where we were trying to examine the world's religions for their sense of an environmental ethic, for their understanding of ecology, of nature, of how humans fit into nature. And we started this project with Buddhism, and Stephen Rockefeller was part of that conference, and all the religions of Asia, because we also felt that Asia was a period of great transition as it was about to modernize.

So what are values that will have a sense of not overshooting? What is going to be a sustainable future? So we did the Asian religions, the Western religions, and indigenous religions. And this was from a period of 95 to 99, the same time as the Earth charter drafting. And what we did was a series of conferences. It was a series, thank you. It was a series of conferences, and then there were books that were published out of it and so on. And in fact, this one, Buddhism and Ecology, was the first conference, and Stephen Rockefeller came to that, and he has a wonderful essay in here on Buddhism, global ethics, and the Earth charter.

So at each conference, we did a session on the Earth charter in its drafting stage, and we had the religious leaders and religious scholars, practitioners, give feedback on the charter as it was emerging. So these were extraordinary sessions, consultation sessions, and they went right back into the drafting process. There was such an openness that we knew we had to have the integration of the world's religions. So that was the exciting moment. And Stephen, in his chapter, for example, he highlights the virtues and values of Buddhism.

And if we take just the notion of wisdom and compassion in Buddhism, so wisdom speaks to this idea, as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, of interbeing, of interdependence, of the together rising up of things. This is the profound cosmology of Buddhism. And the counterpoint then for compassion, for how we act, is to have immense sympathy, identity, empathy for all beings. And the brilliance of Buddhism is that it's all sentient beings. So this is all life, animals, plants, forests, trees. This is the living Earth community.

So that sense of wisdom and compassion went right into the Earth Charter in a variety of ways. So bringing forward the wellsprings of these traditions, the specificity of each of these world religions into an international document with a large vision and principles that we could all buy into. So the principles and the specifics from the world's religions were synergizing during that period in the 90s. It was very, very exciting.

This was a very important process that you took the leadership to make it happen. In terms of this world religions process at Harvard University that you organized, what do you think is the most important outcome of that?

So what we tried to do was identify, as the Charter was as well, sort of common values of respect and reverence and so on of all the different world's religions. And that idea that while we have difference in different cultural expressions of ethics, we also have something that brings us together for our common values, for a global ethics. And this whole idea is a real change of consciousness that, first of all, that the religions have something significant to say about the environment and about justice was important.

And then the parallel movement that we are at a moment where we're beginning to say we need to declare ourselves as part of a common Earth community. That was the value of the Charter that certainly endures to the very present. It was ahead of its time, but it was prescient in terms of its vision and its values.

Indeed. What sparked your interest to engage in this initiative?

Well, John and I had studied for many years with Thomas Berry, who actually married us. And as you know, he called himself a geologist, but he was a historian of world religions and so on.

And he had this penetrating understanding of the Asian religions, of Western religions, indigenous traditions. And he also had an immense sense, really you could say, of foreboding of what was going to happen if we didn't begin to find restraints and limits, that limits to growth book that came out with the Donnell Meadows around that time. We still haven't grasped that idea. So the inspiration was certainly Thomas Berry, his sense of the urgency of the environmental crisis and how a new human consciousness, I'd like to say consciousness and conscience had to come into play.

What's the difference between consciousness and consciousness?

Well, that we all realize that we're awakening to a new deep understanding that we're in a living Earth community. That's the change of consciousness, right? This film, *My Octopus Teacher*, that's so popular right now, is showing us in a beautiful way how the

alienation of Craig Foster and his reconnection with this marine mammal is just so thrilling for us to see. And that's happening with the nature writers. It's happening in all kinds of ways because we are sick at heart with this deep alienation.

So that awakening, aliveness, it restores us right to our spiritual juices and it gives us the conscience. Our heart action can be moved forward, can be sparked, ignited for the changes that need to happen. So that's what I mean by these two ideas.

That's wonderful. Thank you so much. It makes it so clear when we hear you. What do you think is the uniqueness of the Earth Charter as a document and what is its value for the current times given the fact that it was written 20 years, was launched 20 years ago and 20 years past? Is it still relevant for the current times? What's the uniqueness for now?

So it is absolutely unique and I think unsurpassed in the last 20 years. Without doubt, there is nothing like it. I say that because with great thought, with great effort and yet with a seamlessness in the words and language of the charter, there is an integration that is absolutely unique. The integration is this. It's cosmology, ecology, justice and peace. So in the very opening of the preamble of the charter, we have this marvelous phrase, right?

Earth, our home. Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home is alive with a unique community of life. Those lines represent an evolutionary understanding of deep time that we're part of a 14 billion year unfolding universe process that Thomas Berry, Brian Swim and many others have helped to birth. And that's what we were doing in Journey of the Universe, this film and book. But that is unique in a declaration like this. And in 97, when we were all together in Rio and Gorbachev held up one of the first drafts, completed drafts of the charter in the line right next to me were indigenous people who were weeping with joy because they felt their worldview of this aliveness of the earth was absolutely included for the first time.

So evolutionary science point of view and indigenous cosmo vision. That's amazing, unsurpassed. And you know, to compliment it, the end of that paragraph, I love the protection of earth's vitality, diversity and beauty is a sacred trust. To use the language of a sacred trust in a civil society document like this is also unusual.

What is the difference that that language brings to the earth charter? Sacred trust.

Yes. So sacred trust has this notion that we live, as one of Thomas Berry's books is titled, In a Sacred Universe. This isn't just a collection of objects, as he would say, it's a communion of subjects. This differentiated sentience awareness in this whole community of life from marine life, as we know, to mammal forms, to bird forms, to reptilian forms, to the plant world and so on. So this sense of sacredness, which all the world's religions definitely hold, you see, is not so much part of a secular and environmental movement in quite the same way. So the charter elevates, and you could say goes back to some of the roots of sacred trust, like John Muir had the sense of the sacredness of the Yosemite and so on.

Certainly Rachel Carson did with her sense of sacredness of wonder, the sense of wonder. So that is a unique contribution of the earth charter. And I'd love to just link that up, because in addition to this Cosmo vision that it begins with, there is a profound sense of putting ecological integrity first, you see, because often we put the human and human justice issues first. But this is a reverse, and it's saying, as Thomas Berry said to Leonardo Boff years ago, Leonardo, we can't liberate people without the health and well-being of ecosystems.

Berry would say, we can't have healthy people on a sick planet. And Leonardo completely understood that. And that's why his book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, in 1997, became a signature phrase in *Laudato Si*, the encyclical from the Pope, which we'll also talk about. But what I'm saying here is ecology and justice came together. A new marriage, now called eco-justice or environmental justice. And it is totally captivating the imagination and activism, I think, of the next generation. Our students at Yale, all of us see this as the wave forward of eco-justice.

But many people are still seeing this in a separate way. Here we are, our concerns for the environment and ecology, and there it is, our concerns for the human health and human rights. Here is an invitation for us to shift away from this fragmentation and see the linkages or the synergies between ecology and humans.

Exactly. Eco-justice, that's part of this shift of consciousness. And the pandemic is making us do that as well. And the completion of this, so cosmology, ecology, justice, and peace. And as we are seeing all over the world, without democratic systems, without non-violence, which is part of the charter, thanks to Kamala Chaudhary from India. So the last piece is so crucial, isn't it? Democracy, non-violence, and peace. We need democratic institutions, we need a culture of peace, and a strategy of non-violence, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who brought to bear the most profound spiritual path in the face of incredible injustices. The charter, as you can see, is one of the most integrated visions for the way forward.

Beyond, as you've just said, the silos and the divisions, the integration is what its great value is. Indeed.

Thank you so much, and thank you also for sharing with us some of these key moments that you shared, such as in March 97 at the Rio, Rio Plus 5 Forum, when the first draft of the first charter was launched. Do you remember any other key moments of dilemma in the drafting process, working on a specific word or a moment such as, okay, here we had a tough, interesting conversation on a specific principle of the earth charter.

Can you share with us something that you remember? Yeah, well, there's so many things, and it was absolutely fascinating to see this drafting process and the generosity of people from all over the world, the majority for whom English wasn't their first language. And so the struggle, the dance, the community that we established with one another was just remarkable at the Picantigo Center overlooking the Hudson River, where Stephen Rockefeller brought us all together. But one specific thing I might highlight is in the section of respect and care for the community of life, the principle one and then A

underneath it, recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Now, this is again one of the great change of consciousnesses for us because Western values and religions have been so anthropocentric, human centered, right? So human ethics, how we treat one another and we're still not great at that. And human divine relations and so on. But human earth relations has been a bit in the background, we're trying to bring that forward. But the issue here was, do we say, according to Western Enlightenment thinking, that humans have intrinsic value or inherent value?

And this was a problem for the Buddhists for whom humans are dynamic, changing, vibrant creatures, not static, hard fast beings. And so, you know, the Dalai Lama and others weighed in. And so I think this language was a wonderful compromise, if you will, that says that life has value all life regardless of its worth to human beings. That moved us beyond our anthropocentric sense of values.

The issue here was how to craft the word intrinsic value. Some people wanted the wording of intrinsic values, other groups don't. And then principle 1A is the result of that conversation.

And it relates to B. So I should really complete the thought here because B there right after is a firm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and the intellectual, artistic, ethical and spiritual potential of humanity. So this inherent dignity instead of intrinsic value was, I think, part of that compromise. So there's two things there, how we regard humans, but then how we give value to the more than human world. That's a huge change.

Thank you so much for sharing with us that piece of history. Now I would like to ask you if you could share with us what do you understand by the notion of Earth community? Why is that important for current times? Why was that important 20 years ago? It's clearly articulated in the earth's charter. How that emerged and what does it mean to you?

So Earth community is a beautiful word, isn't it? It feels inclusive somehow. It has that feeling that community isn't just about the individual or family level. So Thomas Berry really came up with that idea many, many years ago, but probably in the late 80s and it fed into this drafting process. And the idea, let's just take an image. It would be something like this. This comes from a Confucian sensibility of the concentric circles that Du Weiming often uses, but it's very inherent to Confucian ideas. And it's this notion the individual is not an isolated being. The individual is always in relationship and the relationships are like this. The family that bursts and holds one, the society around one, the educational systems that cultivate one, the political systems that hopefully give us good ways of living and good societies.

Then the earth is the great circle that contains everything and gives us life and being and food and water and seasons. And the completion of that is the cosmic circle. So the earth community is within a cosmic circle, a universe circle, and it also holds the human community. The earth community is that which really contains the birthing place, the womb of life. And this is why the cultivation of the spiritual cultivation, so many traditions,

is based on the rhythms of the earth, of the death and rebirth, cultivating land, picking out the weeds of your imperfections and so on.

So this notion that this womb of life that gives us food and sustenance, water and air and soil, is that's the earth community that holds not only humans, but all life in its matrix. It's marvelous, isn't it? It is.

It is. It's poetic. It's inspiring. And I think it certainly brings us, elevates our minds and hearts to a new level. But I like the fact that you share it also, from the fact that it also comes from an Eastern world tradition, Confucianism, because we often come across these critics or the concerns of many people that say, well, these principles are so much from the Western world's perspective. But here, I mean, especially with your experience in world religions, and of course it's linked to history, you can, can you affirm that these ideas such as earth community, we can find them across cultures, across regions of the world?

Yes. Absolutely. And, you know, I guess we would all come back with great respect and reverence to indigenous peoples for whom the earth community was also the basis of their rituals, of their passionate performances and music and engagement with their own human community.

Everything was impossible for them without reverence for the earth, for the spirits of the earth, for taking life, be it animal or tree life or plant life. Everything was reciprocal, because that's how you treat things within an earth community. So certainly indigenous peoples have a very profound sense of that kinship within these systems. And we can go on, but I think one of the beautiful things of Confucianism and other systems that see the cosmos as birthing in deep time of our planetary life and all of its brilliance of biodiversity, that when we see that, and the Confucians would say, heaven or the universe, heaven is my father, earth is my mother, and even such a small child has a place in their midst.

That's the western inscription. And the idea then is that you care for all of life and that you are a co-creator with heaven and earth, with the universe and the earth. It's very inspiring. It gives us the inspiration for the perspiration.

Given the fact that somehow I think that the majority of what is nurtured and what is cultivated in the predominant school systems around the world is not necessarily earth community. It's more sort of faithfulness, loyalty with the nation where we come from. What do you think about that in terms of how much is this notion of earth community really being nurtured or cultivated in the different education settings around the world? What's your feeling about that?

Excellent question. So apt, timely. And that's why I like to say we have a declaration of independence in the US, but we need this declaration of interdependence. And the fact that it's moving forward in human consciousness is very, very encouraging on the one hand. But at the same time, as you've mentioned, we have, I would say, the end of an American dream gone mad, which is all about me, not we.

It's all about my life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, right? These values that are so much anthropocentric, so much self-absorbed, and so materialistic that your consumption, your large house, or your clothes, or whatever give you some kind of status. Well, this American dream gone mad is causing great illness, psychological illness, despair, a disempowerment, suicides among youth, and so on. So we cannot live in a hyper-individualized framework. And that's why the Enlightenment period of the French Revolution and the American Revolution gave us, of course, a sense that we need new democratic systems.

We're not going to be part of monarchies and so on. And that was a great liberating moment, and it still is. And this is why we need to take these values, like life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, and say, all life needs to be included. Liberty for a common good, and the pursuit of happiness for all future generations, not just me as an individual. That's the shift that's happening. And I feel confidence that it will, even though we are wrapped up in nationalisms that are very abrasive, very counter-planetary movements.

But my grandfather was a historian at Columbia. And his last book, he was a historian of Europe. And he was trying to understand the causes of the two world wars. And he was a founder of the field of nationalism, because he saw this as preventing our unity that has come forward, the EU, European Union, United Nations. But his last book was Nationalism, a Religion. And that's what we're in the grips of. It's patriotism gone mad. And that will have to break. And it is. And we can't sustain itself, because we're one human community.

We're one Earth community, and one family.

Yeah, indeed. This leads me to my next question to you, which is regarding the notion of interdependence and responsibility that is articulated in their shot. And you know so much about these two notions. What do you think it means, interdependence and responsibility, especially the way in which it is articulated in their shot?

Well, I think these are two absolutely key terms, aren't they? And this is flowing from what we've just been talking about. This is our key realization that we can't live for 15 minutes without air. We can't live for a day without water. Unless we're doing a special fast for a spiritual reason. We can't live for a few days without food. And all of this, this is just a very basic dependence, right? Interdependence. But then we take it to this sense, not everyone has happy childhoods and good families and so on, but for the most part, the nurturing instinct that gives us interdependence to create communities means we can't live alone. It's why living during this pandemic for so many people is very, very hard.

We love being with people. We're social people. We love sharing food and our stories and even the words. Right? Hugs, definitely. Yes. This social nature of humans, the interdependence of the world, of the earth itself, gives us a sensibility towards responsibility. You see? So the sensibility of interdependence urges us towards responsibility. And another way I like to think of it is we respond to interconnection with awe. And wonder and mystery, right? And so that response gives us a responsibility.

I mean, you think of the migrations of monarch butterflies and *Homo arigis*, *Homo erigis*, right? To have helped discover where those monarch butterflies overwinter in Mexico

and try and protect those forests and so on. And as a poet and artist, what he has done ecologically is he's infused with the sense of interconnection. And then you take it all the way up for the migrating patterns all the way up to North America where people are planting milkweed to help these beautiful butterflies. And you take it for every species.

The whales who are being beached, people trying to help the turtles, again in Costa Rica and other places where people are trying to help preserve their breeding grounds. This is the instinct, isn't it, for connection, the encouragement of life? The monarchs, the birds, the whales are not seeing the political voters. Yes. The resources they need or how they move. Of course, they are moving across political borders without seeing it. I would like to come back to the notion of interdependence. Because if we do not feel interdependent, because there's so much effort to cultivate our individualism. Not enough being cultivated for us to understand and feel interdependence.

And therefore, it's almost as if we don't see or there's a predominant feeling around the world that doesn't see or perceive this interdependence. And therefore, as you rightly said, the consequence is that there is no responsibility with something that I don't feel there is any relationship or connectedness.

Yes. Yes. That is the absolute key thing, Mirian. No question. I mean, I like to think we're moving from ego to eco. That's the transition, isn't it, of this individualism that's so highly prized in the west to a sense, no, we're part of an earth community. And communitarian ethics and values is where we need to go, which is what the earth charter represents. And a lot of people, why do we have this tremendous struggle right now? Because people are fearful of giving up what they take to be my liberty, my freedom, and so on. Not realizing that yours depends on others and others depends on yours and so on. We can say this over and over again.

And I do think you're right that there is a blindness for sure that somehow we pick up our food, our meat, whatever it might be in the grocery store. I don't eat meat, but we pick up our food in the grocery store, but there's no relation to where it comes from or the suffering of those animals and the suffering of people cutting them in these meat industries and so on. So I think that's what's breaking down, though. A pandemic has got to say to all of us, we're interdependent. It absolutely has.

So I like to think, though, every movement forward has its movement backwards, its fundamentalisms, angry, populist leaders around the world who are like, no, we've got to bring us backward. But I feel, even though it's an enormous moment of suffering for many, many people, climate refugees and migrants and so on, it's just beyond bearing. But I think we're also, it's breaking down, but we're breaking through to the sense of interdependence and responsibility. Indeed. Indeed.

Thank you so much. Now, you are a religious scholar. You have been working for so many years on the linkages between ecology and religions. The current Pope, Pope Francis, has launched two encyclicals in a very short period of time between them. Just in 2015 and now in 2020. Can you make a comment about what are the key ideas in this encyclical, the value of them for current time and whether there are synergies with the message that these two encyclicals articulate and the earth charter?

Well, we are very fortunate to have a Pope that is extremely popular, beloved in many quarters, because he is so human, isn't he? He's just so human and so caring and so concerned about the suffering in our world. I come from a progressive Catholic social justice background and worked on civil rights and anti-Vietnam war and so on in the 60s. I really felt that when the religious, spiritual and ethical values came forward for civil rights, things changed. Before that it was separate but equal. When Martin Luther King and others came with this passionate voice for justice, things changed. The Pope is similar and so is the earth charter.

It's bringing forward both the charter and the pope, a moral voice that people are responding to. The interesting thing is we just did a webinar with George Henn University on Laudato C. The interesting thing is we just did a webinar with George Henn University on Laudato C. This encyclical five years ago, praise B from St. Francis of Assisi who inspired it. Let me say a few ideas there that the pope is bringing forward. I used to say to my mother, if we have an encyclical from a pope that is understood in the popular, we have a chance for the future of the planet.

That's what I think we have right now. Bill McKibbin, one of the great authors and activist said to us when he came to Yale a few years ago, Mary Evelyn, this encyclical is the most important document of the 21st century. It's incredible and I could give you many other examples but why? Why is it so important and how does it relate to the earth charter? Because coming back to your question of interdependence, it elevates ecological, biological diversity. It links it to cultural diversity and religious traditions.

So it's this ecological and spiritual linkage. It's based in science but it's based in the science of ecological wholeness of the parts for the larger ecosystems. He begins with science in Laudato C and he gives us all of the problems and then he goes to the promise of how humans can be integrated into and respectful of this community of life. And so the, I think the central idea or one of them is integral ecology. And that involves, I think this notion, it involves two things. One is ecology, economics and equity.

And he's saying if we link these up, we've got to have restraints for market economy, gone mad for materialism that consumes people. And so he's very strong on that, a new economics, and he's very strong on equity. The vulnerable are suffering from climate change, from toxicities and so on. So these three ease, ecology, economics and equity. And the way he does this so brilliantly, coming back to you. It's clearly articulated. Very clearly. It's very readable, isn't it?

And do you think it's going beyond reaching beyond the Catholic movement?

Yes, exactly. Yes. And that's what we were talking about in this webinar, which you can, there's a URL for it. You can listen because the whole topic was interreligious responses to Laudato C, a cardinal Ayusa, who's head of interreligious dialogue in the Vatican. He gave a wonderful talk. John and I made some responses and we had responses from the different world religions, which have statements confirming and elevating the importance of Laudato C. And then they're working on their own statements of this ecology and justice and so on.

So it went beyond the Catholic world for sure because it's addressed to all people of goodwill and so on. And that was absolutely unique in cyclical writing. But it's also addressed to, and the response has been amazing from environmentalists and scientists. And we've had talks at Yale on this, which is very unusual because it's a very secular institution. But the scientists, Peter Raven and this Professor Roman Nothman at University of San Diego, has done a whole series of classes on climate change for the UC California system, educational system.

And there's a component that I did on Laudato Si and on the world's religions there. So the science, environmental community and other world religions are responding to this for sure.

How about the second in latest in cyclical?

So this newest one that came out October 4th on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, and the Pope went up to Assisi to do it, say a mass there and so on, his first trip outside the Vatican since COVID. So he's written an encyclical which elevates the human community. And it's called Fratelli Tutti, meaning all our brothers, brothers and sisters, again from St. Francis's writings.

Now, this sense that comes flowing forth, again, is the suffering of people, billions of people around the world, without proper water, without enough food, the basic living standards, without health. And we're talking immense poverty, right, in certain parts of the world. We're talking about migration due to droughts and climate related upheavals, even in our own country, of the fires and so on, and droughts and floods. So this connection of environmental disruption and the social disruption, the Pope is so aware that we must pay attention to this kind of suffering.

And people who feel left out, minorities, and again, in this country, Latinos, blacks, Native Americans, they have responded already to the importance of this for their communities, feeling heard and listened to. It's very, very touching.

So you see these two encyclicals, Laudato Si, in Fratelli Tutti. They're somehow complementary to one another, right? Yes. And how do you see the synergies and similarities with their child?

So they're complementary because they bring back this focus of Leonardo Boff, cry of the earth, cry of the poor. It's one. It's the great mantra of Laudato Si in particular, and Fratelli Tutti elevates the human dimension of this. So they're very complementary. They're very readable. And I think they are game changers, as we know. Many people feel we got the COP agreement in Paris because of the Pope releasing the Laudato Si and coming to the UN to speak. And the SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals, passed in that early September, right after he spoke. So that influence is amazing. But I see this as a continuity with a further development of the Earth Charter.

Precisely because it has, with eloquent language, each word carefully chosen by one of the most inclusive participatory civil society drafting processes ever. Of listening to people from all different communities, from business communities, from education, from the

women's groups and so on. So this sense of interdependence, responsibility of the integration of disciplines and so on that the Earth Charter represents. And an ecological basis for the livingness of life. All of that's part of Laudato Si, you see.

But it's in the Earth Charter. To begin with, an Earth Charter is mentioned in a footnote as well, which is terrific. Wonderful for all of us who care about the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter's there in Laudato Si, in the paragraph 207. Well, thank you so much, Mary Evelyn. Thank you for sharing with us your wisdom, your experience. It's so wonderful to have you. You are a gift to the world, I guess. Everything you have done. And thank you for joining us today.

Wonderful to be with you. You are the gift, Mirian. You have kept the fire burning all these years at the Secretariat. And we are so, so grateful to you. And we're all doing this for your daughter and for all future generations. Thank you so much.

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