Women's Theological Center



Quarterly Newsletter

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In this issue:

Stories from the Grassroots

by Louise Dunlap

on BEING and DOING
by Donna Bivens,
Renae Scott
and Meck Groot

Center Updates

AND MORE

Fee for 4 issues: **Individuals** - \$10 (more if you can, less if you can't) **Libraries** - \$35



The words *empowerment* and *spirit* take on new meaning as I work with the low income tenant movement in Cambridge.

Picture the setting. A huge mansion at the head of a short street lined with brick apartment buildings. To the left, an undeveloped area, formerly a lawn with shade trees and lilac bushes where tenants gardened and sat out summer evenings when I first lived here. Ten years ago the landlord tried to pave it over for parking — without a zoning permit. Neighbors joined tenants to fight that battle and won. Last summer the space held verdant vegetable plots and wild motherwort laced with deep blue morning glories.

Picture the never-happy-looking young man who lives in the mansion. He is coowner of the second largest real estate firm in the city — a "family trust" that controls the homes of 450 families citywide. Since two years ago when a state referendum denied cities the right to control rents, the value of his family's holdings has risen sky high. Our tenant group has done research. We know, for instance, about a leap in equity of some \$4.9 million in this one set of buildings

alone. Although there are still leaky toilets and landlord relations verging on abuse, our rents are doubling, and some new tenants paying triple what we paid two years ago. Harvard University is the largest landlord in this city, but Harvard has yielded to public pressure and will continue rent

protection for low income people and sell some holdings to the city for permanently affordable housing. We know the large private landlords can afford to do the same.

Cambridge needed rent control in order to keep its diverse low income population. Picture what has happened in the past two years, the grace period for "protected" tenants. Marches, outrage, deliberations at city hall. But many of the most affected tenants remained silent. A single mom on a tenuous income with children in the Cambridge schools told me, "Well it's his building, he can do whatever he wants," though she knew she'd lose her home. Many have had to leave the city in which they were born. Some said their lives were too full of other pain to get involved unemployment and job searches, serious health or family problems. All the pieces of disempowerment.

But where I lived not everyone gave up. There were Sonia and Lloyd — from Puerto Rico and Barbados respectively. Both of them with plenty of problems on the side, like Sonia's mother slowly dying of Alzheimer's. With their Section 8 rental subsidies, they were even more vulnerable than "protected" tenants like myself. Along with skills and political



Friends of Craigie Circle march toward landlord's house.

savvy, both had what I can only call a spiritual sense of the group — an interest in the deep-rooted growth of others. It was Sonia who found, and gave us, a

poem about a flock of geese in the sky — sharing the leadership, supporting each other with the air currents of their wings. Together Sonia and Lloyd and I could reach out to Deborah and Michele and Libia and Julie and the Perez family with their two sons (one of them just the age of Sonia's Joaquin). And there was



Tying signatures to the landlord's door.

Fontenel Pointjour — a Haitian sculptor working as a cab driver to support his elderly mother and other relatives — in all we were a rainbow group of over twenty households.

Friends of Craigie Circle we called ourselves. Those who came month after month to our meetings — in time torn from brutal schedules balancing part-time jobs — often went away frustrated with the stress but also energized. I remember when two women returned from city hall with print-outs on the buildings' history. "We feel empowered," they said with big grins. And the night group members first spoke on Cable TV before the city council. We encouraged each other. We held a garden party and art show for neighbors and politicians; we gathered signatures on a petition. We wanted to take advantage of city programs to get our homes into social ownership — to run our part of Craigie Circle as a non-profit or co-on. But there were no assurances, and people often spoke of how it felt to live in complete uncertainty. As we

worked together we developed deeper connections. Deborah shared her beloved backyard garden plot with Percy Perez, who was showing his kids how to grow hot peppers from seed. I learned some Latino herbal remedies and a few words of *Kreyol* to greet Mme. Pointjour at the recycling bin.

Just before Sonia's mothers' wake, I wrote in my journal: "People in the Friends are so much like the family I do not have — the multi-cultural, working class family, the children growing up, the people who share my true interests. That is why it is so hard to tell them I am leaving." Because I knew, now, that I would have to move. Even the "protected status" rent was more than I could afford without a university job, and I had been invited to join a low income co-op on the other side of town. The Friends teared up, as I did, when I told them. We knew, that even though we would continue to work together, the love and the synergy would never be the same. They told me they needed me to move to remind them that life was possible outside this nightmare and to throw them a lifeline. But I knew my opportunity had come through networks they didn't have, vestiges of white privilege. It was a very difficult move to make.

Before I left, we held one last great action. A press conference on the rainy Sunday at the beginning of Yom Kippur when we delivered 400 signatures to our landlord's doorstep urging negotiation. We had planned something "positive" with prayers by housing activist Reverend Vernon Carter (Little Arrow) and tenants explaining the precariousness of their situation. We asked for community support and heard from neighbors and city politicians who had signed our petition. One activist from another neighborhood took time out from family to explain the meaning of Yom Kippur and to urge landlord compassion. Then we all took umbrellas and followed the children in procession down to the courtyard for the short walk to the landlord's mansion at the head of the street. Although we weren't singing, I think all 40 or 50 of us felt the spirit of a civil rights march, of South African rent boycotts, or marches for the Disappeared in Central America. We walked proudly and joyously in the footsteps of our predecessors all over the world.

At the head of the street, we gently tied our huge envelope of signatures to the landlord's door and, as a final gesture, with Little Arrow's prayers hallowing the ground, sowed "Seeds of Compassion" on the ragged lawn. This was a detail of the event that we had worked out carefully, rejecting the idea of rice (like at weddings) as too messy and birdseed as harmful to plantlife. This was expensive Kentucky bluegrass. The one member of the press who was present — a young photographer for both local Cambridge papers — took pictures, as did my friend Skip. We left with a sense of rightness and peace. We had done something momentous and we had done it together from our hearts.

But this was not yet the great transformation. Though the landlord agreed to negotiate when an article came out the next week, there were soon



Sowing "seeds of compassion."

objections and delays. There were loud, shouting visits. And one week later, the day after I moved, when I returned for a few last plants from my own garden plot, I saw the full response. The entire community garden leveled. Not just Percy's peppers and my zinnias, but a Greek family's tomatoes and eggplants carefully budgeted for winter means. And

Deborah's flowers, dahlias and lilies she'd been tending — and also painting

— for several years. Plants that had roots in her heart.

Why did the landlord attack the land? He told one reporter it was because the community garden was "a mess." But we believe his response came from his own personal history and was designed to intimidate. What can open the hearts of those who make fortupes by controlling the lives of others? We believe our "positive" activism, the press, and political attention helped to moderate rent increases for some vulnerable elderly and Section 8 tenants (concessions the landlord has touted in recent press). However Sonia's contract (with a different agency from the others) has not been renewed, and there has been no gesture, like Harvard's, toward permanently affordable housing. Pressure from individuals and church or community groups may still be helpful. (Readers can make their views known to the Stu-Lin Realty Trust at 925 Mass Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139, or call 617-547-6559, but be prepared to be told that the company has already "done the right thing.")

Beyond these appearances of concession what did we gain? Sonia and her son were interviewed in the local paper. She and Lloyd and others - still living in uncertainty — continue the effort to negotiate. We talk on the phone, visit, and participate together in a city-wide Campaign to Save 2000 Homes, combining legislative pressure with support for tenants who are resisting the huge rent hikes of January 1. We invite everyone in the Boston area to our weekly Concerts for Housing Justice in Cambridge, where bands and clubs are donating proceeds to eviction defense. (More information at 617-643-7121.) It's another single mom with two part time jobs who's organizing this series. her rent has risen by 70%. She and many others are not paying the increases. The struggle continues and all of us continue to grow as we engage with it. ♀

Photos by Skip Schiel.



Last Quarter's News

CONSULTATIONS, TRAININGS, AND VISITS

Donna and Meck have been very busy this quarter doing consultations, frainings and making visits. They are currently working with students of color and white students at the School of Education at Boston College, exploring how racism and internalized racism operate at the school itself and how 'racism and internalized racism may impact both the educational and counselling settings which these students are in preparing for. On Valentine's Day, Donna and Meck went to Madison, NJ, where they met with the faculty of the School of Theology at Drew University to look at how issues of race, racism and internalized racism might be better addressed there. They also continue to work with the management team at Emerge, a counselling center for men who batter. And Donna has begun some ongoing work with the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. Finally, Donna and Meck also visited Renée Hill's class at Episcopal Divinity School on feminist ethics and Cheryl Giles' class on cross cultural counseling at Harvard Divinity School, to talk about the work we do in relation to the subject matter addressed in these courses.

END OF YEAR APPEAL and GRANT INCOME

Our appeal for donations at the end of the calendar year brought in \$9,425.50. That was in addition to the \$9,068.45 annual fund donations that came in at the year's end. Thanks so much to everyone who generously and faithfully supports our work! We also received \$1,000 from the United Church of Christ Board for Homeland Ministries as well as \$3,000 from the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church for our work with Women United. And for the expansion of our *Loves Herself. Regardless.* program we received \$5,000 from the Boston Women's Fund. As always, we are enormously grateful for the support of funders.



LOVES HERSELF. REGARDLESS. NEWS

Leadership was the theme of the January Loves Herself. Regardless. retreat. Discussions and reflections brought out all the contradictions and issues around leadership that arise for African American women, including internalized racism that gets in the way of being both a leader and a follower. It was great to have a circle of women to hold the contradictions and the discomfort that comes up for us in exploring these issues.

And, hot off the press is the second issue the *Loves Herself. Regardless*. newsletter, a publication that will now be a quarterly newsletter for African American women. If you or anyone you know would like to receive this publication, please let us know. Use the form on page 7 of this newsletter. You might also get your school or library to subscribe.

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The board of the WTC welcomes three new members: Irene Monroe, Vashti DuBois and Nandi Varris. We are collectively thrilled by their insight, wisdom and energy. Welcome aboard!



DONNA BIVENS

My faith in my People comes from the fact that I know them and am a product of them — as the Afrocentric saying goes "I am because we are." Our being together is the foundation of our Peoplehood. *Doing* together does not make a people — that comes from *being* together, honoring your connections and equality before God, and deciding what you will or must do to celebrate and uphold that connection, then doing it. It involves a constant recommitting to each other's survival.

Black people soar highest and grapple most deeply with our issues when we move out of our best habits of self/community-care and then extend that generosity and the Spirit it generates to others. Most people will admit that the spirit of Black community provided much of the fuel for the movements of the 60's. The thing that was the power of these communities was the ability to "be together" in deepest values or God. All doing came out of that grounding. Those women and men so neatly dressed getting hosed down with firehoses or attacked by police dogs were not activists looking for something to do. Nor was Fannie Lou Hamer or Malcolm X, Martin Luther King or Diane Nash. They were beings who lived a history together and who God moved brilliantly from one perfect moment to the next. Faith made that

Spirit said to them as it says to us: you can either attach to each experience as an identity and get lost in ego or you can see it holistically as part of the many things that find you and demand your commitment. With the second, it becomes simply a part of the quest to figure out how to live as God (however we name or image that) would have us live. If we are really prepared to surrender, we may even be conscious of when we find the very work we were sent here to do.

The places that our Peoplehood has been most dangerously sabotaged the last two decades have been the places where we just *are* together. The "rest" of a doing culture is not the same as the holding space of a *being* culture. Too often instead of being with our deepest selves, we have found ourselves lost: in ridiculous TV shows, drugs and emotions to escape into, shallow notions of love, endless possibilities for consumption and date books for meetings and third jobs

The places that our Peoplehood has been most dangerously sabotaged the last two decades have been the places where we just *are* together.

needed to make a living wage, the plethora of indignities to react to. Often these are the things that make us neglect to tune in to God among and within us to find out what we need to be and thus to do next. We can really fool ourselves into thinking the answer is in our feeble reactions to the world out there and not in the sacred spaces we create within ourselves and for each other to just be.

There is a lot of work Black people have done in this country and not gotten compensated for, but the biggest is in our ministering to this country. We have washed it, cried for it, felt for it, dreamed for it, held it to its highest ideals. We have prayed for it, sung to it, preached daily, insisted it consult its own Bible which is the truth of its history and

(no offense) allowed ourselves to be hung on many a cross. What good ministers know and walk us through is how arduous it is to be a decent human being. In our ministry as a People, we have become a living monument to that very fact. But the stress of the job is starting to show.

My Dad told me about a minister we know who overspent himself and was out of control in the church. The Church "sat him down" — demanded he take a break to get back to God. And that's what we need to have a mechanism of doing for ourselves and each other. So many things are screaming at Black people and other people of color to sit ourselves down and bring our energy back to our selves. You can't do effectively until you can be effectively. It's like that Black feminist slogan "We cannot live without our lives." We only get them back by taking them.

I am not in any way advocating idleness or a shirking from duty. But sitting in stillness as a people to discern what this time is trying to say to us. Where will we put our collective energy and where are we just throwing good energy after bad? This is what I think Loves Herself. Regardless. models in its work

The only time I can remember my paternal grandmother using physical force to control me was once when I was about 13 years old. I was running around screaming, playing and trying to get away from my cousin during a thunder storm. Suddenly, with a force she had never used against me, Nana grabbed me, pulled me to a seat and said "Sit down! The Lord is talking!" Maturity was having the sense to listen to storms, listen deeply and to hear.

Of course, many in our community have had the good sense to continually tune into the storms of our lives or our political reality. Not just think and analyze but really sit with what could

otherwise be terrifying or off-centering to listen to a deeper wisdom. But the challenge to us when we get away from ourselves and the Spirit of true liberation is to learn again that powerful and loveinspired movements are born out of of a centered presence like my Nana's and not from reacting or acting out or denial of the fear and anxiety lurking just beneath the next clap of thunder. A big part of that is supporting or re-creating and then, maintaining places for us to just be. As we do that, the "action" will surely heat up and we will get a new movement not through our will but the same way any that have lasted have come to us. 9

RENAE SCOTT

The theme of *being* as a way of doing the work has come up recently at the WTC. The idea raises many conflicts and tensions in our work and in our everyday lives. I think the being side of our work is grounded in our spiritual side. How are we present in the moment? How are we being in the experience, being in the emotion? What do we bring to the work?

At these kinds of meetings, we often feel or express dissatisfaction that we didn't produce more, that we don't have a product, an end result.

How are we in our work?

I want to use agendas to show the tension between *being* and *doing*. For most of our meetings, we prepare an agenda. That is a *doing* activity. How we implement or carry out the agenda is the *being* part. The prep is the *do*; the carrying it out, the *doing*. The work is the *doing*, the product. How we are in the meeting is the *being*.

The meetings that we allow to unfold, that are not structured to theminute, the meetings in which we allow our creativity to flow, the meetings in which we use reflection—these meetings have a different feel and expectation. Paying attention to our *being* side can be done, by reflection, meditation, silence, letting the process flow from the group. Centering or grounding ourselves before we begin our work, assessing where we are and being flexible enough to adjust if necessary are some ways to recognize our *being* side.

At these kinds of meetings, we often feel or express dissatisfaction that we didn't produce more, that we don't have a product, an end result. I do not advocate this process for all our meetings, but I use this as an example of one of the many ways *being* is difficult to hold. Because it doesn't feel like work, it does not have value.

Even thinking about *being* as a way raises my anxiety to another level. I'm in the process of learning about letting go, trusting my instincts. This way bumps up against my Enneagram Two self that has to help, to fix it, to make it work. Being with my being self is difficult because I am out of touch with my feelings. I'm learning to be quiet, to use silence as a teaching, and a way, and lastly, getting in touch with my feelings.

I'm moving to a place of advocating for the inclusion of more ways of being in our everyday work. I see this as a way of getting in touch with our spiritual selves as we do the work. ♀

MECK GROOT

For some reason, I thought it would be easy to reflect on *being* and *doing*. The more I think about them, though, the more I can't make out the difference between them. I think I know something about how dominant culture categorizes activities into these two. *Doing* is associated with action: working, moving, teaching, organizing, fighting. Masculine stuff. *Being* is associated with passivity: waiting, preparing, resting, playing, learning, healing, nurturing. Feminine stuff. Spending time with the children,

for example. Unless you get paid to do that, in which case the *being* becomes *doing*. *Doing* is what counts. It's what we get paid for. Sometimes even waiting is doing (as in "they also serve who only stand and wait"). Sometimes preparing is doing if the results are tangible (a dinner, for example, or a report).

...what do we do when we don't know what to do or how or with whom?

I have never given this much thought before, but it seems to me that every doing has a being, and every being has a doing. There are being ways that we do things. We do things with care, for example. Or we do them carelessly. With care or without care is the being part. How are we in our being when we do?

In learning t'ai chi I am learning a great deal about the balance of passive or yin energy and active or yang energy. Yang energy is the energy of motion. Yin energy is the energy of holding. When you kick with one leg, the other leg holds you. If there is only yin energy, nothing moves. If there is only yang energy, you fall over. Yin. Yang. Being. Doing.

I grew up in a working class Dutch community that valued the ability to "see work." It was considered a serious flaw if someone couldn't see, for example, that the table needed to be cleared or that the floor needed sweeping. We were trained to look out for work and to do it as we noticed it needing to be done. Not only that, but we were trained to do everything with as much speed and efficiency as possible. From childhood, we were trained to be good workers, worth the wages we would some day earn.

I am only beginning to see what effect this scoping for work and doing it quickly has on a person. Since there is in fact always something to do, one never really rests. Everything is always moving

forward. One is always thinking ahead. Planning. Noticing. As far in advance and as quickly as possible. Even on

A friend told me that the worst example of this in her family came on the day of her mother's funeral. The car her partner was in had taken a different route to the cemetary and they'd gotten lost. My friend's family waited for a while, but it was clear that "we needed to hurry up and bury Mom." Her partner and friends had better show up soon.

What is this lunacy?

What is so important that we can't do it calmly and mindfully? What is so important that we are willing to sacrifice relationships in order to get it done?

I consider this craziness a product of white/European culture, where product is more important than process, where ego is more important than spirit, where value is counted in dollars and cents.

I worry about our collective efforts as white people at what we consider "alternative" politics and "alternative" agendas. "Alternaive." "Left." "Progressive." Whatever. We seem so intent on fightintg the enemy. In these circles, trying to convince someone who disagrees with you is considered work and is therefore valued. Trying to nurture someone who may agree with you or not is not valued and is therefore not considered work. "Organizing" people, "mobilizing" them. That's work. That's doing something. It's the "against" work. Working against war. Working against poverty. Working against racism. This is masculine work, and even white feminists are very determined to be engaged in it. We thrive on actively reacting to things. We don't have an identity when we don't work against something. We are lost when it isn't clear who the enemy is.

The Dorchester Women's Committee, of which I am a member, recently hosted its 20th annual International Women's Day Celebration. We did a 20 year retrospective of organizing for social change in the Boston area. The first half of the history seemed to be about building organizations and coalitions. The second half of the story seemed to be about their disappearance.

Most of us are tremendously

disturbed by this pattern and we try to think of what we can do to fix this problem. We hear the line in our head: "Don't just sit there, DO something!" But what do we do when we don't know what to do or how or with whom? What do we do when it's apparent that we can't take on the issues alone, yet we don't have sisters and brothers to call on to help us because everyone's feeling overwhelmed and exhausted? We haven't learned how to regroup in ways that sustain and hearten us. And we haven't even really grieved our losses, most probably because we think we don't have time. But we haven't taken the time. Nor have we taken the time to work through the knots in our relationships with each other as individuals, as groups, as organizations,

> There is a white fear that we'll get stuck in Zen time and nothing will again be accomplished.

as communities. Alice Walker writes, "The patriarchal world - meaning the white man, basically - deals with knots by just cutting through them which never teaches you anything. Whereas untying a knot teaches you because you really have to work at it."1

This is not an easy time to keep an organization such as the Women's Theological Center going. Not just because of money — that has always been a shakey proposition — but because our work is so invisible, often even to us. WTC board and staff, as participants in WTC programs and projects, we sit around a lot. Processing. Documenting. Untangling. Nurturing. Encouraging. Listening. We do women's work. Invisible. Unrecognized.

The question is, can we support each other in this work? Do we dare counter all the dominant culture's messages to be active, rushed, pushed. Do we dare become centered, balanced, grounded?

It is especially hard for white people to hold onto the importance of whatever we do not immediately associate with doing. There is a white fear that we'll get stuck in Zen time and nothing will again be accomplished. It is better not to appear idle. Better not to be caught thinking or waiting. Better not to be wondering where to go from here, just keep moving. But where are we going to go?

I was told recently that the path that the Israelites took from Egypt to Canaan is a two week walk. It took them forty years. Getting places takes as long as it

1. Cited in Walking on Alligators: a book of meditations for writers by Susan Shaughnessy. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) page 50.

Brown Papers

published this quarter

VOLUME III, No. 3 & 4 A two-part set by Patti DeRosa entitled Building Blocks: My Journey of White Racial Awareness from Childhood to College. A helpful model for white people's exploration of our personal histories with regard to racial awareness.

> \$3.50/1 set or \$2.50/set for 5 or more sets

Volume III, No. 5 The Heart Cannot Express Its Goodness by Marian Meck Groot. A look at why white people collectively are spiritually weak and afraid and an attempt to stir them toward spiritual rootedness in order to confront the racism they perpetuate.

\$2.50 each or \$1.50/each for 5 or more

To order back issues or to take out a subscription to The Brown Papers, use the form on page 7 of this newsletter.

Coming Up in the Next Quarter

WTC CELEBRATES ITS FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY!

On Friday and Saturday, April 11 and 12, the WTC will celebrate its 15th anniversary with a festival and revival. The our annual income. We hope you all give generously and thank event will be held at Roxbury Community College at 1234 Columbus Avenue in Boston. Festivities will include music, poetry, meditation, body movement, preaching, and testimonials.

"We hope the event will be an opportunity for all of us to join our hearts and minds, our bodies and spirits, our politics and faith, our histories and hopes, our difference and connection to celebrate the miracle that is all of us all together.

LOVES HERSELF. REGARDLESS.

As part of an effort to make the Loves Herself. Regardless. program accessible to more women, Donna and Renae will be offering the program for a second time at Project Hope, a residence and educational center for young mothers on public assistance who are working toward their GED.

The next Loves Herself. retreat will be May 16 to 18. Sign up soon!

ANNUAL FUND APPEAL

The Annual Fund Appeal will kick off in April. This appeal is a very important one each year, as it provides up to a third of you in advance for sending in contributions.

. DONNA BIVENS IN THE LIME LIGHT

On April 12, Donna Bivens will receive a Women of Justice Award from Network, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby in Washington, DC. The awards are given to women who work toward changing systems that keep people poor and maringalized. Unfortunately, since Donna will be attending our , own-festival and revival, she will not be able to attend the

Then, on May 22, Donna will receive an honorary Doctor of Ministry degree from the Episcopal Divinity School, in Cambridge, MA. We'll have all the details next issue!

ANTI-RACISM GUIDE IN PROGRESS

WTC staff has stepped up efforts to finish an anti-racism

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guide that has been in the process of being written for some time. The title chosen for the book is *Loving Between History and Hope*. The first draft is almost completed and the date of publication is estimated to be early Fall, 1997.

The book can be used by individuals who are looking for materials to help them clarify the issues, though it is meant to be used by small groups who are working together to help their institutions and organizations — churches, classrooms, schools, social-justice non-profits, etc. — and their communities to live out of their deepest values.

The guide brings information, inspiration, and analysis together with practical exercises to help groups apply what they are learning.

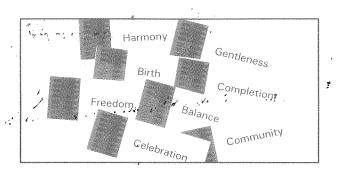
We ask that you send energy our way toward the completion of this project.

WTC Gets On-Line!

Thanks to the generosity of Letty Russell and Shannon Clarkson, the WTC received a refurbished Pentium computer that gives us access to the Internet. Our e-mail address is:

WTC@WORLD.STD.COM

Also many thanks to Veronica Lopez for donating her computer which has opened up word processing options.



ANCESTOR CARDS,

Perhaps you've heard of "Angel Cards." Now the WTC Loves Herself. Regardless. community has created a set of cards especially for African American Women. The cards come in their own velvet pouch and are printed with a multi-colored African cloth design. If you're looking for something to affirm, inspire and guide you, get your own set today.

To order, please use the order form on page 7. All proceeds go to *Loves Herself*. *Regardless*. retreats and programs.

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