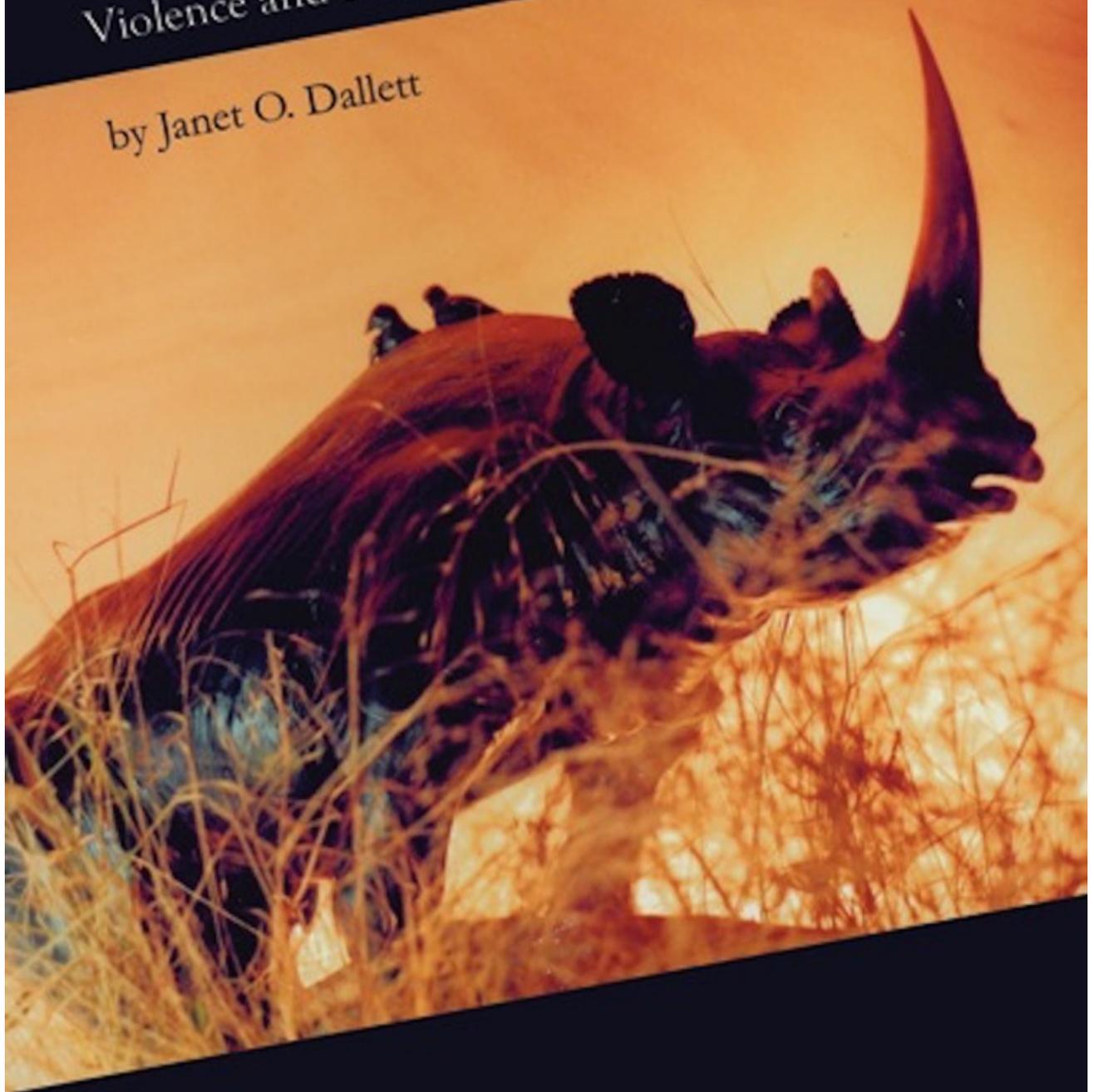


# Listening to The Rhino:

Violence and Healing in a Scientific Age

by Janet O. Dallett



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## CHAPTER ONE

# Freeing the Spirit Trapped in Sickness

“The world of alchemical symbols definitely does not belong to the rubbish heap of the past, but stands in a very real and living relationship to our most recent discoveries concerning the psychology of the unconscious. Not only does this modern psychological discipline give us the key to the secrets of alchemy, but, conversely, alchemy provides the psychology of the unconscious with a meaningful historical basis.”

—C. G. JUNG<sup>3</sup>

Port Townsend, Washington, the town where I live, is noted for its winds. The native people used to say that the spirits stayed in the underworld during the summer, but came back with the winter winds. Then people would go into their long-houses to propitiate the gods with ceremonial dances. Today, locals pay wry homage to the same violent gods when they say that a ritual power outage is required every winter. Fallen trees regularly demolish roofs and block roads, heavy winds interrupt ferry schedules, and every few decades, a bridge blows away.

Port Townsend is also known as a place of healing. Three hundred years ago, the native people sent their sick to a place called Kah-tai to be healed. This is where Port Townsend was built, and today the town’s 8400 people manage to support an astonishing number of health professionals—thirty or forty counselors, as many massage therapists, seven physical therapists, and a Jungian analyst. Among thirty-some physicians are three or more who practice alternative forms of medicine. There is also an impressive assortment of New-Age mystics—astrologers, Tarot readers, psychics, dowzers, channelers, spiritual healers of every stripe, and a woman who markets herbal remedies learned from her Gypsy grandmother.

Is there a relationship between the big winds that buffet my home town and its reputation as a locus of healing? In the world of physical reality, I doubt it. I do not imagine that wind heals people, or that healing energies create wind, or even that a third factor causes both healing and wind. In the inner world, however, where symbolic reality and synchronicity prevail, wind and healing do seem to be linked. The thing that connects them is spirit.

The primitive part of the psyche where both language and dreams originate makes no distinction between wind, breath, and spirit. The English word “spirit” derives from a Latin root that means “breath,” “breath of a god,” and “inspiration,” while in languages like Greek and Arabic, the words for *spirit* and *wind* are identical.

Popular culture often mistakenly equates the word “spiritual” with “nice.” It is true that the spirit can be as gentle as the caress of a warm summer breeze, but it is just as apt to tear into life with the force, urgency, and destructive power of a hurricane or a wheezing, snorting, rhinoceros on a rampage. The Nazi Holocaust was an incarnation of raw, unmediated spirit. So are the outbreaks of adolescent and preadolescent rage that manifest when children of respectable middle- and upper-class families gun down their parents, teachers, and peers. The September 11th terrorist attacks on New York and Washington also exemplify the destruction the spirit can inflict when people are possessed by it, unrestrained by conscience, compassion, or other human values.

In the 1960s, a great wind of the spirit blew away the inhumanly constricting values of the fifties. Long before most of us understood what was happening, Bob Dylan got it right when he sang that “the times they are a changin’,” and “the answer is blowin’ in the wind.”

The raging spirit of the 1960s devastated some lives and swept others clean. For most it was a little of each. I myself lost a husband to drugs. From the perspective of thirty-some years, however, I would not choose to return to the suffocating consciousness of the fifties, even if in doing so I could bring him back. Something had to change, and when necessary changes are not made voluntarily, the spirit forces them upon us.

The spirit enters the world not only through the big winds of collective change, but in individual ways as well. A bitter divorce, an unexpected pregnancy, a psychotic break, a life-threatening illness—all these things can signal the need for fundamental change. How we understand and relate to such happenings is crucial. If we see them as disasters alone, we will scramble to make life look “normal” again as quickly as possible, seeking the comfort of the familiar even when it is harmful to the greater Self within. Jung called the return to old patterns after a psychic storm “the regressive restoration of the persona.” It is an effort to save face, to look good instead of moving courageously forward into an unknown future.

If, on the other hand, we recognize that what has stopped us cold is, in some sense, God, we will try to understand the divine intention, to mediate it in humanly bearable ways, to facilitate the clumsy, half-blind groping of the spirit toward incarnation in our individual lives. This is not an easy task. It is a little like trying to pour the power of a hurricane into an ordinary human body. No wonder the spirit, whose intention seems to be to make us whole, sometimes, paradoxically, makes us sick.

Spirit is, as Jung says, “a most perplexingly ambiguous term.”<sup>4</sup> It refers to an animating principle that, “on the primitive level, [is] felt as an invisible, breathlike ‘presence’”<sup>5</sup> that is the antithesis of matter and marks the difference between life and death. We give the name spirit to whatever is invisible, intangible, and explicitly non-physical that we nevertheless experience as a force to be reckoned with. When we locate spirit outside ourselves, in the cosmos, we may name it God or the devil. Jung, seeing its source as within, called it the collective unconscious or the archetypal psyche.

The words “cure” and “heal” are also complicated. I am going to use them synonymously, in their ordinary, everyday, dictionary meaning of “restoration of health,” or “recovery from disease.” When I say “heal,” I will not necessarily mean psychological wholeness, but only the return of physical health.

Obscure spiritual factors are involved in the healing of physical illness. Why does one person get sick and another remain healthy under conditions that appear to be identical? Why is it that someone we love dies while our worst enemy lives on and on? Even contemporary medicine, slow to recognize the non-physical aspects of sickness and health, has begun to acknowledge that the psyche plays a role under the rubric of stress. Such phenomena as death by voodoo or the placebo effect suggest that a person’s health can be strongly affected by whether he believes he will die or get well; and there is growing recognition that faith in the doctor, the wish to recover, and mood are important

ingredients in the healing process. That is why, for instance, mood-elevating drugs are commonly prescribed after surgery. Even though *Time Magazine* devotes an occasional issue to ideas about “how your mind can heal your body,”<sup>6</sup> there is still little recognition of the role played by the spiritual level of the psyche, the collective unconscious.

Ancient healing traditions, on the other hand, have long stressed that only God can heal. As I see it, science can identify and refine conditions that are optimal for healing, including surgeries and medications appropriate to specific illnesses, but beyond that, irrational factors of which we understand little are decisive.

A profound healing process is rarely any gentler than the spirit itself. I sometimes suspect that the prevailing treatments for cancer—a disease whose psychological component can be quite conspicuous—are effective because they are so violent. As Laurens van der Post said, “soft-hearted witch doctors don’t heal.”<sup>7</sup> A practitioner’s ability to facilitate healing of body or psyche will be quite limited unless she can help her patients contain and carry the spirit’s violence. An example of this is Seth, a man in his mid-fifties. Seth had a dream spelling out the qualities that he needed:

“I’m in a field where underground oil is in danger of exploding. A firefighter, dressed in a large white suit like an astronaut’s, reaches into the ground, then pours something back and forth from one hand to another. It looks like molten metal, and I am amazed that he can do this. He is brave and highly trained, and he wears gloves that allow him to handle the dangerous hot material. Another fireman runs by and demands that the guy move over. He has to check an underground hot spot to keep it from exploding. The man moves over. The fireman does the inspection and makes the necessary adjustments.”

Seth associated the space-suited firefighter with Aquarius, icon of the new millennium—the water-bearer who pours the liquefied spirit from one vessel to another. It is as if only in this newly emerging time has the archetype become available to handle what is heating up in Seth’s unconscious. The job requires tough protective clothing, courage, training, and direct communication. The unvarnished command—“Move over!”—spoken with authority, contrasts with Seth’s gentle, unassertive persona. To integrate the hot molten material inside that he is just beginning to glimpse, he will have to learn “direct male talk,” even at the cost of not looking quite so nice.

Soon after Seth told me this dream, a synchronistic occurrence underscored it. Jung described what he called synchronicity as the connecting factor between events that the psyche perceives as related, even though there can be no cause-and-effect relationship between them. Meaning, rather than causality, is what links synchronistic events. Through synchronicity, the familiar world of everyday reality is opened to the realm of spirit. It is as if, for a moment, the boundary between different realities dissolves and the uncanny becomes visible. In the metaphor of the ancient alchemists, this is a time when the spirit can descend into matter.

On the occasion in question, my husband and I walk to dinner at our favorite Mexican restaurant. There is no sidewalk, so we travel in the nearly empty parking lane, wearing blinking red reflector lights and waving flashlights to make drivers aware of us. It is a dark, rainy, winter evening and I feel unusually vulnerable in spite of our precautions.

Just before we enter the restaurant, we see flashing red and blue lights on the highway

ahead. We are seated at a table overlooking a large parking lot where we have a ringside view of what happens next. On the face of it, practical, scientific, and rational considerations dictate the entire drama, but beneath the surface a primitive, non-rational level of the psyche is engaged. It is as if we were in a dream. Before we finish our meal, we will have taken part in a profound healing ritual.

Four fire engines, several police cars, and an aid car have arrived. Our waitress reports that a man trying to cross the highway was hit by a woman driver. "Poor woman," she says. I am startled, then realize that she is right. On a night like this, the driver is as much a victim of circumstance as the man who was hit.

A rumor that the man is decapitated proves not to be true, but he does have severe head injuries and will be airlifted to Seattle for treatment. The aid car moves him from the highway to the parking lot, and firefighters spread over the area. Like the ones in Seth's dream, they wear space-age coveralls, helmets, and boots. Men and women alike employ "direct male talk," instructing drivers to move their vehicles quickly away from the scene.

Then the firemen and women cluster together near the aid car. By now, the complete attention of scores of rescue workers and passersby is focused on the uncertain fate of an unnamed victim. Minutes later we hear the sound of the chopper. As one, the assembled fire people raise torchlike red flares toward the sky, and the giant bird descends into the fiery light like some latter-day incarnation of the holy spirit.

Suddenly, the rotors stop. In the silence it is as if the big bird has died, and when a white-wrapped figure is laid on the ground I am convinced that the victim, too, is dead. The fire people encircle him, shuffling their feet to move closer and closer until their shoulders all touch and the wounded one, dead or alive, is shielded while medics do what they can. Then, miraculously, a stretcher is transferred to the belly of the bird, the blades begin to rotate, and the spirit ascends once more.

Tears suddenly wet my face. "The last guy they airlifted to Seattle didn't make it," I say, hardly daring to hope that this time the outcome will be different. The comatose stranger has co-opted my attention, my energy, my prayers, and I am only one of a chance community of well-wishers bent on his survival. For his part, he is carrying the consequences of human vulnerability for us all. But for the grace of God, he could have been any one of us.

Two weeks later, the Port Townsend *Leader* reports that the injured man, a 60-year-old visitor from San Francisco, is in satisfactory condition. I feel strangely vindicated. The ritual was successful, my energy well spent.

The ancient alchemists believed that the spirit sometimes comes down from the sky like a rescue helicopter and then cannot get off the ground again. They said it is trapped in matter. As they saw it, the work of alchemy could set the spirit free, thereby healing both body and soul. One text put it this way:

"This birth [release of the spirit from matter] conquers the subtle and spiritual sickness in the human mind and also all bodily defects, within as well as without."<sup>8</sup>

An alchemist's drawing of what he saw in his laboratory flask when the spirit was freed from the embrace of physical matter shows a white dove in a tightly stoppered

spherical vessel. The bird is flying toward the top of the flask, away from a black, malignant-appearing dead animal that is flattened against the bottom. It is as if, within the vessel of the alchemist's psyche, the bird of the spirit has ceased to be trapped in the blackness of exclusively animal existence.

The psychological issues portrayed by this imagery are still alive today and find symbolic expression in contemporary dreams. For instance, a woman artist dreams that birds are confined in a large wooden box and will die unless they are set free. An artist in the dream releases the birds by doing her painting. This suggests that, outside the dream, the dreamer's spirit will die if she stops painting.

In a dream published by Edinger,<sup>9</sup> the dreamer catches a golden-colored fish whose blood he is required to extract and heat. The blood is in constant danger of clotting, and it is essential to keep it fluid. Edinger sees the fish as an image of Christ. I see its blood as akin to the divine essence. Keeping the blood from congealing is similar to keeping the spirit from getting stuck in matter.

A patient once told me that she had long dismissed my references to alchemy as eccentric aberrations, but later she understood that alchemy is "about transforming one thing into something entirely different." In the aftermath of a near-death experience, she realized that the less-than-perfect life about which she had complained for years was actually incomparably valuable. Speaking in the symbolic language of dreams and myth, the alchemists would say that she had finally cooked her feces, vomit, and urine long enough to turn the disgusting brew of her life into gold.

Jung discovered that the chemical reactions that alchemists saw in their vessels served as projection screens for processes deep in the unconscious, specifically those involved in the psyche's transformation. Just as stories about God mirror certain aspects of the archetypal psyche, so alchemical assertions that make no sense in literal reality are symbolic expressions of the mysteries of psychic change. The hard part—as complicated as extracting meaning from dreams—is translating the ancient formulas and recipes into contemporary psychological language. For instance, what does it really mean to say that the spirit descends into matter?

In essence, "spirit caught in matter" is an amalgam of two things that are meant to be separate. It depicts a failure to discriminate between the symbolic (spiritual) and the literal (material) realms. It is a confusion between inner/psychological realities and literal outer-world ones. Both are essential parts of the whole, but problems arise when they are mixed up with each other.

There are many possible applications in our lives. For one, the idea of spirit imprisoned in matter seems related to fundamentalism. The fundamentalist fallacy is to take literally what belongs to the inner, symbolic, or spiritual realm. Thus, for instance, Christian fundamentalism believes that everything in the Bible is true at the most concrete level, even if—like the virgin birth—it is impossible in ordinary reality.

No one is completely free of the fundamentalist psyche. In the United States today, for instance, a common unexamined assumption is that happiness depends on having a lot of possessions or making large amounts of money. We are similarly driven to seek spiritual well-being in material substances such as Prozac, alcohol, or chocolate. Even the Internet

is a concrete recipient of fond inner fantasies, a dynamic that becomes problematical when spiritual life is addictively trapped there.

Something akin to fundamentalist fervor grips us whenever we feel compelled to act out a powerful image or emotion instead of either giving it symbolic expression or holding it inwardly. At the beginning of an analytic process, patients frequently feel intense pressure to *do* something—change the world, change others, change themselves—when containment and self-reflection are needed. When the fundamentalist fallacy grows unchecked it frequently culminates in violence—screaming at a spouse, shooting an abortionist, or crashing an airliner into the Twin Towers—driven by the spirit of divine righteousness misdirected into concrete, outer-world reality. Only when our godlike emotions are freed from such literal misunderstandings of God’s will can we bear them internally and redirect their expression into humanly viable forms, behavior that does not distort or brutalize the soul.

At another level, the idea of spirit trapped in matter seems to describe the psychological aspect of physical illness. In that case, the work of freeing the spirit from matter may heal the body as well as the soul.

In my experience, all sicknesses and injuries have a psychological component, even those that are not primarily psychosomatic. I do not intend to minimize the role of viruses and bacteria, only to point out that spirit or psyche is *also* involved, something our culture, with its bias toward scientific materialism, tends to overlook.

In some cases, the spirit in a disease can be made conscious and transformed into something intangible such as intense emotional suffering, or a living image, perhaps a work of art or an imaginary friend or enemy—divine, human, or even a talking animal. Then the illness may disappear. It is as if what had been stuck in the body were converted into a non-physical form. That is to say that disease itself is a manifestation of the spirit, and consciousness can sometimes release it from its bondage in protoplasm by allowing it to take a different form.

I first became aware of this phenomenon in the late 1960s, when I began to practice Jungian analysis and noticed that patients who came to a session with the flu or a cold sometimes recovered during the hour. Initially, I assumed that they were momentarily distracted from their symptoms. Over the years, however, quite a few people came back the next week and said, “It’s the funniest thing. I was really sick last week, but when we worked on that dream I began to feel better, and by the time I got home my temperature was normal. The flu just disappeared.”

This does not happen every day, but it has occurred often enough to get my attention, and sometimes the illness is more serious than a cold. One patient recovered from an attack of functional blindness when she began to paint the images in her inner vision. Others have been mysteriously cured of such sicknesses as cancer, heart disease, and arthritis as an apparent side effect of analysis.

Note that I said side effect. Intentionally trying to cure sickness with analysis rarely works, but careful attention to the psyche for its own sake affects the body in surprising ways.

At the level of literal, scientific reality, I have no idea of the mechanism for this kind

of healing; but I know it does happen and I find the alchemical metaphor a fruitful way to think about it. In the 1970s, I experienced something of the sort myself when I took part in a charismatic prayer group. One evening I went to a meeting of the group with a bad case of flu, and asked for prayers for healing. Several people formed a circle and put their hands on me, all the while praying in a cacophony of tongues and ordinary English. I felt a jolt, as if an electrical charge had passed through my body. My head cleared and all the symptoms vanished. While I was driving home I began to weep. For the first time, I allowed myself to feel the full impact of my grief for a beloved mentor who had recently been disabled by a stroke. By the time I got home my temperature was normal. The symptoms did not recur.

With hindsight, this is how I see what happened: When I first heard of my mentor's stroke, I was struck as if by lightning. The shock was more than my psyche could bear, and my body took the overload. Somehow, the prayer caused me to re-experience the shock, permitting the spirit to soften into the grief that I was now ready to tolerate.

I do not subscribe to the view, common in New Age circles, that if you get sick you are doing something wrong. Carried to its logical conclusion, that implies that if you did everything right, your body would live forever. As I see it, the spirit expresses itself in many ways in the individual life, some that we see as good, others as bad. Sickness is a manifestation of spirit that we think of as bad, and a person who is strong enough and conscious enough can sometimes find a less concrete and physical way to carry the same material. What happens then, when illness irrationally leaves the body, often looks like a miracle.

Seth, the man who dreamed about the Aquarian firefighters, was raised by a paranoid schizophrenic father and a mother who idealized his younger brother while projecting evil on Seth. By rights, Seth should have gone crazy. I attribute the fact that he did not to the intense and meaningful connection he made to the Catholic church. He paid a high price, however, for the Church taught him to deal with his intolerable life by repressing his emotions, especially the anger, a healthy reaction to abuse.

After Seth grew up, an enormous effort of will, several kinds of therapy, and various spiritual practices enabled him to hold a demanding job for thirty-six years, but his emotions were virtually anesthetized. He was chronically depressed and developed the fatigue and painful muscles and joints of fibromyalgia. In his late fifties, he dreamed that an unknown woman therapist told him:

“We can make progress, but to be well requires rage; that is, it is necessary to be free to release the long stored anger. You must get mad.”

Soon after this, Seth retired from his job, moved to Port Townsend, and began analysis. As the hot material in his unconscious began to surface, he had dream after dream of impending disaster—flood, fire, earthquake, and tornado. Meanwhile, he stopped taking antidepressants and felt an upsurge of energy. With massage in addition to analysis, the stiffness and pain in his body began to disappear, and emotional color gradually entered his life. I imagine that the space-suited firefighter within him—the one who knows how to do the job safely—has avoided a disastrous explosion by releasing the spirit imprisoned in Seth's body bit by bit, a little at a time.

This slow and careful pace reflects the wisdom of the psyche so disregarded today, a path directed from within. We live in an artificial and speeded-up world that demands quick fixes and freedom from pain. However, when a person can learn to love his symptoms, irrational as this may seem, and try to understand and honor the messages they bring, sickness is transformed into a guide that leads, in its leisurely, rambling way, to the greatest treasure to be found: an authentic, conscious, and meaningful individual life.

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