SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE MYTHOLOGY OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

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> *And then to Sam's utter surprise and confusion he [Aragorn the king] bowed his knee before them; and taking them by the hand, Frodo upon his right and Sam upon his left, he led them to the throne, and setting them upon it, he turned to the men and captains who stood by and spoke, so that his voice rang over all the host, crying:* "Praise them with great praise!"
>
> —J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, respected philologist and revered fantasy writer, is subtly underpinned by the lifestyle and spirit of servant-leadership. Throughout his fictional Lord of the Rings [LOTR] trilogy (*The Fellowship of the Ring* [FOTR] [1954a], *The Two Towers* [TTT] [1954b], and *The Return of the King* [ROTK][1955]), and the trilogy's prelude, *The Hobbit* (1937), the seminal work of twentieth-century fantasy, the choices of his characters to embrace or avoid servant-leadership and the outcomes of their decisions illuminate Robert Greenleaf's teachings in a unique and extremely influential way.

INTRODUCTION

How does servant-leadership, which arose in response to modern corporate culture, relate to Tolkien's fiction, which the author developed partly as an attempt to interpolate a national mythology for England (Shippey, 2000)? This question is important because, 34 years after his death, Tolkien's literary legacy of books and essays is deeply significant and very

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popular. If servant-leadership is promoted through its connection to Tolkien, such a connection will have had, perhaps in a subliminal way, a significant effect on propagating Greenleaf's teachings, an effect that is well worth exploring. Many of the precepts of servant-leadership are implicit in Tolkien's writings, and his books and the consequent movies have disseminated Greenleaf's ideas to a much larger audience than Greenleaf otherwise could have hoped for.

During his career, Robert Greenleaf worked with people in highly varied situations. He helped to develop managers at AT&T; guided leaders of the counterculture during the 1960s and 1970s; and counseled nuns who transformed a conservative women's college into a dynamic, proactive institution (Greenleaf, 1996). The common thread in his life story is his work with others. In describing his motivation, Greenleaf explained, "I don't think anything in my life is detached from the idea of wanting to serve, which, as I said, I got from my father when I was very young" (Greenleaf, 1996). The key qualities he tried to reveal and nurture in others are values, goals, competence, and spirit. Tolkien's literary mythology thematically addresses and celebrates these elements.

In LOTR, a mythical world known as Middle Earth is populated by various fantastic beings and monsters, as well as by men and man-like creatures. A magical ring forged by the overarching evil character, Sauron, was captured long ago by an alliance of men and elves, but was then lost. Recently re-discovered by one of the "hobbits" (small, man-like creatures modeled after rural English folk) who live in the bucolic, peaceful Shire, the Ring is now sought by Sauron and the traitor Saruman in an attempt to complete their domination of the free peoples. A fellowship of nine then attempts to take the Ring back to the volcano where it was created, as that is the only place where its destruction can be realized.

The Fellowship consists of Gandalf the Wizard, two men (Aragorn and Boromir), four hobbits—Frodo (the Ringbearer), Sam, Merry, and Pippin —, an elf (Legolas), and a dwarf (Gimli). Their journey begins well, but the corruptive effect of the Ring's presence soon becomes manifest, and

Boromir attempts to forcibly take the Ring from Frodo, scattering the Fellowship. Frodo and his servant, Sam, take the Ring east, still planning to destroy it. Boromir is killed by soldiers of Saruman, and the other two hobbits are captured. Aragorn and his two friends pursue their captors. After great difficulties, Frodo and Sam reach the volcano, but Frodo is unable to resist the Ring's seductive lure, claiming the Ring for his own. At the last second, Gollum, a pathetic gangrel who once possessed the Ring, rushes up, bites off the Ring, slips, and falls into the fire, and so the Ring is destroyed.

The Fellowship's early success is due to the willingness of its members to serve each other and to co-exist in a cohesive community. Ambition, egotism, and addiction eventually unravel this interdependence. Yet despite the breaking of the fellowship, two of the characters eventually overcome deep-seated racial prejudice and find friendship. Another one even becomes transformed through his own betrayal and repentance, and finds a kind of grace and martyrdom. Frodo, however, becomes so wounded by his contact with evil that he can find rest only by leaving Middle Earth. Because he still yearns piercingly for the destroyed Ring, he is unable to enjoy the victory his suffering made possible.

THE SUCCESS OF LOTR

In 1996, Waterstone's, a British bookselling company, held a readers' poll of 26,000 English readers: J.R.R. Tolkien's LOTR was voted the greatest book of the century. Follow-up polls were conducted to check this surprising result by the *Daily Telegraph*, the Folio Society, and a 1997 BBC television program, "Bookworm." All had the same result: Tolkien's book placed ahead of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies,* as well as many other highly recognized books. Likewise, in 2003, in a BBC survey, LOTR was voted "UK's best loved book." Tom Shippey (2000) quotes a commissioning editor at a New York publishing house who said, "Only fantasy is mass-market. Everything else is cult-fiction. That includes mainstream." Tolkien's influence and legacy are vast. Through LOTR, Tolkien almost

singlehandedly created a new genre of literature: twentieth-century fantasy (Belz, 2002). The three movies based on the trilogy grossed nearly $3 billion and received critical acclaim; ROTK received 11 Academy Awards, including Best Film (MSN Encarta, n.d.).

All of this success and influence suggest that, in his own way, Tolkien may be one of the most important implicit proponents of servant-leadership. Some of his characters will now be examined who respond to the pulse of servant-leadership as though it were the very heart of their world.

LOTR CHARACTERS WHO MODEL SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Tolkien's heroes are not autonomous or individualistic, but communal (Duriez, 1992). Each member of the Fellowship has unique character gifts that prove useful to the group. The Fellowship is guided by Gandalf. Frodo is helped by Sam. Aragorn–although he is a legendary sort of figure—has gentleness, humility, and the gift of healing. As described below, several of Tolkien's characters display key traits of servant-leadership.

Sam – Sam Gamgee, Frodo's helper, is a traditional English servant. Sam is unflagging in his loyalty to Frodo during their quest to destroy the One Ring. But we should also note that Sam's service in this phase prepared him for a pre-eminent leadership role later in the course of his growth. This leadership training progressed when Frodo was imprisoned or incapacitated on their journey, and Sam was forced to come up with ingenious, courageous responses to perils or else the two would have perished. This degree of initiative, driven by his fundamental sense of loyalty, enabled Sam to help lead the hobbits back home in a battle of liberation against the wizard Saruman.

The scope of Tolkien's epic is vast, and it includes classically drawn heroes such as Aragorn, highly realized mythical races and creatures, extensive genealogies, and invented languages. Yet the salvation of Tolkien's world comes down to two simple friends, Frodo and Sam, traveling through a dark land to an apparently hopeless end, held together by friendship. Greenleaf wrote, "Virtue and justice and order are good, but not good

enough–not nearly good enough. In the long run, nothing really counts but love and friendship" (1996, p. 338).

As Ursula LeGuin suggests, in Jungian terms Sam is in part Frodo's shadow (1979). Sam is more simpleminded and limited in his vision and in his sizing up of others. Sam is more suspicious of and less merciful toward Gollum than is Frodo. His interest in their quest does not extend much beyond protecting Frodo, but this interest is so deeply felt that it is enough to provide a guiding mission for Sam during their journey. Sam carries Frodo's pack, makes a stew of rabbits and herbs in the wild, and skips meals so Frodo can eat.

Sam is also the steadier and more persistent of the two. When they embark on their journey into Mordor, Frodo pessimistically doubts that they will ever see their friends again. Sam responds, "Yet we may, Mr. Frodo. We may" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 423).

Sam sometimes is a fool, included in scenes for comic relief. In fact, Samwise means "half-wit" (Duriez, 1992). Yet Tolkien said that Sam is "the genuine hobbit" and, as such, "the chief hero" (Duriez, 1992).

As Greenleaf said, "The forces for good and evil in the world operate through the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of individual beings" (1996, p. 290). And so Sam's carrying Frodo up the mountain to complete their quest is one of the simple acts by a single figure that tips the scales in favor of a positive outcome.

Denethor – Denethor is Boromir's father and is lord of the most powerful remaining city of men. He is the hereditary steward, holding the throne in trust until the kingship is restored. Arrogant and grasping, he desperately and resolutely holds fast to the position he should relinquish to the new king. Denethor derides his younger son, Faramir, comparing him unfavorably to Denethor's older son. He then sends Faramir off on an extremely dangerous mission, not caring if his son lives or dies. Denethor personifies the antithesis of servant-leadership.

Aragorn — Greenleaf wrote, "The simplest definition of a leader is

one who goes ahead to guide the way" (1996, p. 294). The elements essential to leadership are:

- Values, including friendship, loyalty, love;
- Goals to accomplish the mission;
- Competence: self-discipline that leads to success; and
- Spirit: the inner force that can help one persevere in hopeless circumstances.

Aragorn demonstrates all of these features during the two long journeys in FOTR; in the long run to rescue Merry and Pippin in TTT; and in the assault on Mordor in ROTK.

This character's life progression is indicated by a series of names: he is known as the lowly Strider when the hobbits first meet him; as his heritage becomes known he is referred to by the mytho-historical name Aragorn; the elves call him Estel, meaning "hope"; and once crowned king, he is Elessar Telcontar.

His service to the hobbits begins at their first meeting: "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can serve you, I will" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 183). In the opening quote of this paper, King Elessar bows to Frodo and Sam, a gesture of humility.

At one point Aragorn leads an army against Sauron, but many give up along the way and refuse to continue. Instead of punishing them, Aragorn gives them a lesser objective so they can keep their pride:

> "Go!" said Aragorn. "But keep what honour you may, and do not run! And there is a task which you may attempt and so be not wholly shamed. Take your way southwest till you come to Cair Andros, and if that is still held by enemies, as I think, then re-take it, if you can; and hold it to the last in defense of Gondor and Rohan!"
>
> Then some being shamed by his mercy overcame their fear and went on, and the others took new hope, hearing of a manful deed within their measure that they could turn to, and they departed. (Tolkien, 1955, p. 162)

After the War of the Ring is ended and Aragorn assumes the throne, he holds a sort of truth and reconciliation hearing. In his merciful judgments during the hearing, he tries to restore the broader community rather than to seek retribution. These acts underscore Katharyn Crabbe's assertion that "mercy is an essentially creative act" (1988, p. 82).

At one point the Fellowship of nine breaks up after an attack by enemies. Aragorn must decide whom he should try to protect: Frodo and Sam, who have continued on the quest on their own, or the other two hobbits, who have been kidnapped. There is little hope in either choice. Finally he decides to try to rescue the kidnap victims and rallies his two remaining companions to the cause: "Yet we that remain cannot forsake our companions while we have strength left . . . we will press on by day and dark!" (Tolkien, 1954b, p. 21). And the three charge off on a marathon chase.

Frodo – The primary hero of the trilogy, Frodo takes on the central mission: "I will take the Ring . . . although I do not know the way" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 284). Perhaps Frodo's greatest leadership quality is his willingness to subsume his personal wishes in order to save his world. He undertakes a harrowing, dangerous, yet unglamorous journey to dispose of the Ring.

What Frodo's early dreams and goals are we are never told, but he ultimately does not get to lead the peaceful life he later wants. Near the end of his life in Middle Earth, for a time his existence resembles a kind of Dantean hell: he yearns for the Ring, which now he will never have. Furthermore, he is largely ignored by most of his fellow hobbits, who instead shower Sam, Merry, and Pippin with laurels and praise. Sam is pained by how little people appreciate Frodo's sacrifice. These scenes are an echo of the saying of Jesus that a prophet is never honored in his own country. Frodo is like an old soldier who has been given brief, obligatory recognition and is then pushed aside to be forgotten.

When Frodo spares Gollum's life at the pool in Ithilien, his compassion toward the Ring's former holder makes the final victory possible. Frodo senses that Gollum has some further role to play in the mission.

Beyond this premonition, Frodo cares for Gollum, partly out of empathy since they are both to various degrees addicted to the Ring, and partly out of pity. In talking to Frodo about Bilbo the hobbit's sparing Gollum's life, Gandalf says, "It was Pity that stayed his hand" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 68).

Frodo is willing to sacrifice himself to preserve those things he values (Crabbe, 1988). He tells Sam: "I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me . . . some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (Tolkien, 1955, p. 309).

Sauron, Saruman, and the One Ring – The similarity of the names "Sauron" and his deputy "Saruman" is apparent, even though the names have different origins in Tolkien's philology. Both show tendencies toward megalomania and destruction, and a willingness–even eagerness—to exploit nature as well as other beings.

In LOTR, the One Ring is not a simple, inanimate object, a priceless piece of jewelry. The Ring is in effect a character. The Ring reflects its master Sauron's purpose and personality, which involve domination and control of others. Possession of the Ring is highly addictive to most people (Shippey, 2000), which is why it must be destroyed.

Bilbo – Bilbo Baggins is the uncle of Frodo. Bilbo's adventures are told in *The Hobbit*, which happen before the action of LOTR. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is recruited by Gandalf and a band of dwarves to travel with them to Erebor and take back a hoard of treasure stolen from the dwarves by a dragon. The story unfolds as a heroic quest tale, with Bilbo, the hero, surmounting various difficulties, overcoming enemies, and acquiring magical objects (a sword that glows in warning and a magical ring) and, more importantly, developing his character and leadership ability along the way.

The Hobbit starts out with Bilbo and the dwarves acting as dependent children and Gandalf as their parental figure. In time, through the process of his adventures, Bilbo starts to grow and mature, whereas in contrast the dwarves remain at a lower functional level. Eventually, the dwarves look to Bilbo for leadership and ideas. Near the end of the story, the dwarves still have a petty mindset: they refuse to donate some of their recovered treasure

to help the people of Esgaroth who are now homeless due to the dragon's depredations.

On the other hand, Bilbo sacrifices his friendship with the dwarves to try to create a compromise that will prevent armed conflict. Bilbo's action –giving the dwarves' prized Arkenstone to the elves so that peace may be maintained between dwarves, men, and elves—is a key development in a larger sense. If a fight had erupted at this point, the three races would not have been able to withstand the impending onslaught from their true enemies, the goblins and the wolves. So self-sacrifice in Bilbo's personality in *The Hobbit* is as important a quality as it is in Frodo's character in LOTR.

The Hobbit was intended as a children's book, and Bilbo's initially childish nature is obviously designed so that children will identify with him. While children may identify with Bilbo's fear when dealing with trolls or giant spiders, they also intuitively understand his watershed moments of courage and inner growth, such as the time in the mountain tunnel when he searched for the dragon:

> Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterward were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait. (Tolkien, 1937, p. 226)

But no one grows up all at once. There are later moments when Bilbo shows dependency and passivity. When Gandalf prepares to leave the group at the edge of the Misty Mountains and go on his way, "the dwarves groaned and looked most distressed, and Bilbo wept. They had begun to think Gandalf was going to come all the way and would always be there to help them out of difficulties" (Tolkien, 1937, p. 124). But Gandalf knows that in parenting or mentoring, a time always comes when the child or protégé must be allowed to find his or her own way.

> This thing all things devours.
> Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
> Gnaws iron, bites steel;
> Grinds hard stones to meal;
> Slays king, ruins town,
> And beats high mountain down. (Tolkien, 1937, p. 88)

"Time!" is the answer to the above conundrum, one of Gollum's riddles in the dark. Throughout the LOTR, as the story progresses a gradually escalating sense of urgency drives the action. This steady change in tempo can be gripping for the reader. I can remember my first reading of LOTR when I was 15 and having the sense that my hands were glued to the book. In the early chapters of FOTR, Frodo's departure from the Shire is somewhat leisurely and haphazard. He wanders from adventure to adventure in a semi-casual way that is reminiscent of Bilbo's peregrinations in *The Hobbit*. But as the enemy pursues him, the pace accelerates. This sense of urgency marks the LOTR as an inherently twentieth-century work.

In a way, the LOTR universe is a pre-Christian, animistic one. There is a worshipful attitude towards nature in some of the characters. Tom Bombadil and his wife, Beorn the berserker/werebear, the Ents, and Sam all evince love and worship toward the natural world. So it is understood that it is folly to set oneself up against nature. Thus, Saruman's destruction of ancient trees in Fangorn and his industrialization of the Shire eventually lead to his decommissioning, ruin, and death.

If time can be thought of as an element of nature (Halpern, 1990), then on a personal level one may decide whether to cooperate with or work against the flow of time. The fundamental modernity of LOTR is shown in how some of its heroic figures deal with urgency and manage time in their lives. This theme is another point of convergence between Tolkien's LOTR and Greenleaf's servant-leadership approach.

To succeed, the characters must use their skills, knowledge, experi-

ence, and luck. They must also manage time; this is a rather modern theme. For instance, Aragorn rallies the phantoms of the Paths of the Dead and brings them to the climactic battle in the nick of time. Sometimes managing time involves letting events unfold on their own, with a minimum of personal intervention. Other times an all-out effort is needed to try to change the course of events for the better.

How can one be a servant of *time*? Perhaps at times by letting the action take its own course: "going with the flow." Aragorn does this by allowing Sauron to continue in his delusion that Aragorn has the Ring and plans to supplant Sauron. Nothing could be further from the truth; Aragorn does not want to become omnipotent. But Sauron's delusion serves a good cause: when Aragorn leads an army in a feint against Sauron to buy time, Sauron takes the bait and sends his forces into battle. This act allows Frodo the time he needs to accomplish the primary mission of destroying the Ring.

Another gamble for time appears in Frodo's desperate flight to Rivendell. Aragorn manages time there through humility, by letting an elf take over the mission and speed Frodo to safety. Again Aragorn submits to a supporting, diversionary role, this time in lighting a fire to ward off the enemy.

In the pursuit of the kidnapped hobbits in TTT, Aragorn "made time," as the modern expression goes, by running around the clock for several days. Initially it seems that he fails when he finds a pile of burned carcasses and assumes the hobbits are dead. His at first fruitless marathon has the feel of modern life, as described by Henry David Thoreau: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." But ultimately the speedy journey once more puts Aragorn and his friends in the right place at the fortuitous time, and the greater cause is served again by his stretching time by hurrying along.

By the end of FOTR, Aragorn is an overstressed executive who has recently made several unfortunate, though understandable, decisions: he dithers at Amon Hen, allowing the enemies to more easily find and attack the group; he loses track of Frodo at the critical moment when Boromir

decides to rob Frodo of the Ring; and he loses control over the entire Fellowship when Frodo disappears. He says that "an ill fate is on me this day, and all that I do goes amiss" (Tolkien, 1954b, p. 15). These misfortunes are really traceable to the overwhelming power of the enemy, not to a particular shortcoming in Aragorn. In fact, were Robert Greenleaf to counsel Aragorn, he would probably find an abundance of positive values, goals, competence, and spirit that Greenleaf often cultivated in others.

More than all of the other characters except perhaps Gandalf, Aragorn is like an entrepreneurial manager in a very competitive marketplace. Time management is an essential part of his mission. "Always my days have seemed to me too short to achieve my desire," complains Aragorn (Tolkien, 1955, p. 48). As the action unfolds, Aragorn's succeeding despite having very limited knowledge beyond his own senses stems from his ability to make time work for his side. He arrives where he is most needed just in time, gaining an element of surprise, and thereby leverages his small military force into a strategic victory.

Time management is important for other characters as well. Gandalf must repeatedly juggle multiple priorities in FOTR. First he attends Bilbo's party; then he heads to Minas Tirith to do academic research; then he rushes back to the Shire to test Bilbo's magic ring; and then he heads off to Orthanc to meet with his superior, Saruman. Sam would like to settle down with Rose Cotton, but is too shy, and the time is not ripe until much later. King Theoden balances the conflicting priorities of protecting his capital city, securing the safety of his people, and riding to the aid of his ally.

An important aspect of successful time management is knowing when to wait. Waiting may seem like a passive activity, but actually can require considerable effort and will. For example, Sauron begins to worry that his enemies will use the Ring against him. In his impatience, his initial military stroke falls too soon. Some of the dwarves make a similar error in their affairs by being too hasty. The Fellowship travels through the Mines of Moria and find the ruins of a failed recolonization attempt by the dwarf, Balin. In Moria they find an old journal and discover Balin's tomb. Gandalf

says, "So ended the attempt to retake Moria! It was valiant but foolish. The time is not come yet" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 337).

CONCLUSION

When an instance of servant-leadership is first recognized, one gets the momentary feeling of awkwardness, that there is something different here—and then a feeling of lightness and liberation, of transcendence. The earthly limits seem to be suspended.

The same feeling occurred when the British army under General Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown. According to legend, the British military band then played "The World Turned Upside Down" (Trevelyan, 1964). The same refreshment of spirit occurs when a leader shows humility and respect to followers. When Aragorn the king bows to Frodo and Sam (see the opening quote in this paper), it evokes the response of feeling that his gesture is lovely, generous, creative, and humble.

In Tolkien's understanding, in climactic situations this sense is called "eucatastrophe," meaning a good catastrophe, unexpected but nevertheless anticipated on the deepest level (Drout, 2007, p. 176). Even in the much larger story in which LOTR is contained, the characters fight a "long defeat," and ultimate victory is hopeless. Suddenly a eucatastrophe occurs, and a miraculous–but not ultimate–victory is attained. Tolkien clearly cherished the concept of eucatastrophe and the role he believed it plays in human history. Eucatastrophe is similar to servant-leadership in that both form a bridge of unexpected miracle between mundane, embattled reality and the possibility of a better life. Yet servant-leadership is more a process than a single, transcendent event.

Another characteristic of Tolkien's servant-leaders is that they heal. "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer," one wise old woman declares (Tolkien, 1955, p. 136). A point of origin for this feature of Tolkien's own theological background is that Jesus often healed through miracles. The word salvation means "healing." This property underscores

the holistic aspect of servant-leadership, the fixing what is broken, the making whole of what was incomplete.

We might consider the Robert Greenleaf quote that appears at the front of this volume. How does LOTR rate against Greenleaf's criteria for servant-leadership? Do those around the servant leader become wiser? Gandalf counsels Frodo through the whole trilogy, and the hobbit eventually becomes the wizard's equal in wisdom, empathy and mercy. Freer? Frodo's destruction of the ring frees people from domination. More autonomous? Sam's campaign of liberation scours the Shire homeland of despots. Healthier? The children born in the Shire after the War of the Ring was won had an exceptional vibrancy and health. Better able themselves to become servants? Sam uses his gardening skills to repair environmental damage done to the Shire. Will the least privileged of society be benefited? Political prisoners locked up during the War are freed; people are no longer bullied by local politicians or terrorized by military hegemony. Although LOTR is not an allegory of servant-leadership (the concept had not yet been formulated when the LOTR was being written), there is a surprising resonance between Greenleaf's teachings and Tolkien's mythology.

Tolkien was a devout Catholic. Partly through his religion, he understood the sublime power that a leader accesses when serving his or her followers. The quintessential moment of servant-leadership in the synoptic gospels of the New Testament, aside from the Crucifixion itself, comes in the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus:

> He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." (John 13:6-10 NIV)

When a leader serves his followers, he completes the circle of integrity by gaining insight into what it means to be a follower. An interesting historical analogy is that Moravian missionaries once sold themselves into slavery to

better witness to and to convert those who were already enslaved (Marshall, 1999). As Jesus goes on to say later in John 13:16, "No servant is greater than his master." And, through his books, Tolkien's greatest service to his readers is his vast and original illumination of a deeply spiritual worldview.

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