Cultivating Spiritual Self-Leadership: A Pathway towards Authentic Spiritual Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Finding ways to promote connection and inclusivity in our increasingly diverse workplaces, and doing so authentically, can often be a challenge for leaders. Being authentic requires leaders who have the ability to lead others towards holistic well-being that mirrors how they lead themselves. Spiritual self-leadership provides one pathway for leaders to know and develop their own inner lives which, in turn, allows them to create space for connectedness and purpose within their organizations. In this study employing narrative inquiry, the lived experiences of 25 Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs), ranging in age from 18 to almost 80, were examined for how spiritual self-leadership can foster identity development and sense of belonging in ATCKs in order for them to elevate their potential and value contribution in the workplace. ATCKs have experienced highly mobile, cross-cultural childhoods and, as a result, bring both benefits and challenges into their personal and professional lives. The objectives of this study were to: 1) identify how ATCKs' professional lives are impacted by their cross-cultural mobile life before the age of 18; 2) explore how the Spiritual Leadership model can foster identity development (inner life) and sense of belonging (membership) for ATCKs within the workplace; 3) examine how ATCKs' deconstruction and/or construction of faith impacts their inner life and, by extension, spiritual self-leadership; and, 4) propose recommendations for how ATCKs can cultivate spiritual self-leadership for themselves and leverage their value within their workplaces. A signature contribution from this study is my Spiritual Self-Leadership model, which arose from the fourth objective and is examined in this paper. This model is an important tool, not just for ATCKs, but for anyone who would like to cultivate their own inner life and spiritual self-leadership, and exercise spiritual leadership within their organizations.

Keywords: Spiritual self-leadership, spiritual leadership, self-leadership, adult third culture kids, authentic leadership.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Canadian societal landscape is becoming increasingly diverse with "23% of the population [being] a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada" (Statistics Canada, 2022, para. 1). This has implications, not only for society as a whole, but also for organizations in understanding how to best lead employees in this new reality (Eboh Cletus et al., 2018; Groenewald et al., 2024; Muktamar et al., 2023).

Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) may be the missing element to this complex challenge. ATCKs have lived highly mobile, cross-cultural lives before the age of 18, bringing a wealth of knowledge and skills into their adult lives, both personally and professionally (Fanoe & Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). Professionally, their knowledge and skills, including an expanded worldview, cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity, and adaptability, could be an answer to solving diversity, equity, inclusion, and connection (DEIC) challenges, as well as filling crucial leadership gaps (Fanoe & Marsico, 2018; Ilijevski, 2024; Kwon, 2019; Nash, 2020; Pollock et al., 2017).

However, ATCKs often struggle with belonging and identity challenges which can hamper their potential contributions and short-circuit their career development (Fanoe & Marsico, 2018; Ilijevski, 2024; S. T. Miller et al., 2020; Norton, 2022; Pollock et al., 2017). Because of their high mobility before the age of 18, many ATCKs find it difficult to define "home" and feel that they do not fully belong anywhere. In addition, as a result of navigating multiple cultures, sometimes ATCKs' valuable skill of adaptability becomes a liability and is a barrier in creating their own identity.

This study's research question was "How can spiritual self-leadership foster identity development and sense of belonging in ATCKs in order for them to elevate their potential and value contribution in the workplace?" The Spiritual Leadership model (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020) provided the main theoretical framework for this study and supported the creation of the Spiritual Self-Leadership model, which will be showcased later in this paper. Additionally, scholarly literature on workplace spirituality and self-leadership informed this study and the resulting model.

1.1 Workplace Spirituality

The rise of spirituality in the workplace first began in the 1980s (Dubey et al., 2020). However, the foundational work of Ashmos and Duchon (2000) brought it to the forefront with their definition of workplace spirituality as the "recognition of an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community" (p. 139). The three elements in this definition – inner life, meaningful work, and community – have been the basis for many subsequent studies. Dubey et al. (2020) further states that "workplace spirituality begins with recognising people to have both inner and outer life and the nourishment of inner life can enhance the more meaningful and effective life" (p. 1494).

Mhatre and Mehta (2023) posit that more researchers are focusing on workplace spirituality "due to its potential to see the greater good for organizations and society" (p. 1186). Studies have shown that workplace spirituality benefits organizations as it encourages innovation, higher productivity, higher profits, and employee engagement and commitment (Bantha et al., 2023; Dubey et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2018; Mhatre & Mehta, 2023; Salem et al., 2023). Employees also find workplace spirituality beneficial, in that, it increases their well-being, reduces their stress, encourages a sense of belonging to their organization, leaders, and co-workers, and allows them an opportunity to work for an

organization that reflects their own values (Dubey et al., 2020; Garg, 2017; Javaheri Zadeh et al., 2020).

Despite the many studies that highlight the benefits of spirituality in the workplace, some scholars and organizational leaders object to its inclusion. One reason is that spirituality and religion are often treated as synonymous, which can be problematic due to the sometimes negative view of religion (Bester & Muller, 2017). Another reason is the arguement that promoting workplace spirituality can threaten "an individual's free expression of beliefs and values" (Cregård, 2017, p. 536). In contrast, others argue that excluding one's spiritual life from the workplace leads to fragmentation and inauthenticity, and prevents workers from "bring[ing] their whole selves to work" (D. W. Miller & Ewest, 2015, p. 306). Smudde (2021) takes the conversation a step further and advocates for spirituality and religion to be "addressed in tandem" as separating them "seems to be done for argumentative convenience" (p. 3). For the purposes of this study, religion and spirituality were not separated, allowing participants to define spirituality in the workplace as they saw fit.

1.2 Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual leadership, built on the foundation of workplace spirituality, was pioneered by Fry (2003) who defined it as "comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one's self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership" (p. 711). Spiritual leadership is often situated under transcendental leadership and is "both leader and follower centered; it expands on existing leadership theories in motivating followers intrinsically, extrinsically and transcendentally through altruistic love, a sense of wholeness, harmony and well being exemplified through care, authentic concern and appreciation of others" (Gotsis & Grimani, 2017, p. 923).

From this theory of spiritual leadership, Fry (2003) developed a model which was later revised to its current iteration depicted in Figure 1 below (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). The model has its roots in Ashmos and Duchon's (2000) definition of workplace spirituality which emphasizes inner life, meaningful work, and community. The model has four components: inner life; spiritual leadership, comprised of the three elements of vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love; spiritual well-being, comprised of calling and membership; and triple bottom line, comprised of commitment and productivity, financial performance, employee life satisfaction, and corporate responsibility (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020).

The two components of the Spiritual Leadership model most relevant to this study were inner life and spiritual well-being. Inner life speaks to who a person is at their core, and what they believe about themselves and what they are doing (Fry et al., 2017; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). It is also the wellspring from which spiritual leadership flows. Spiritual well-being is the output of spiritual leadership and is comprised of calling (purpose) and membership (belonging). Inner life and spiritual well-being correspond to the two most commonly cited ATCK challenges of identity and belonging (Fanoe & Marsico, 2018; Ilijevski, 2024; S. T. Miller et al., 2020; Norton, 2022; Pollock et al., 2017), which was the impetus for using the Spiritual Leadership model to underpin this study.
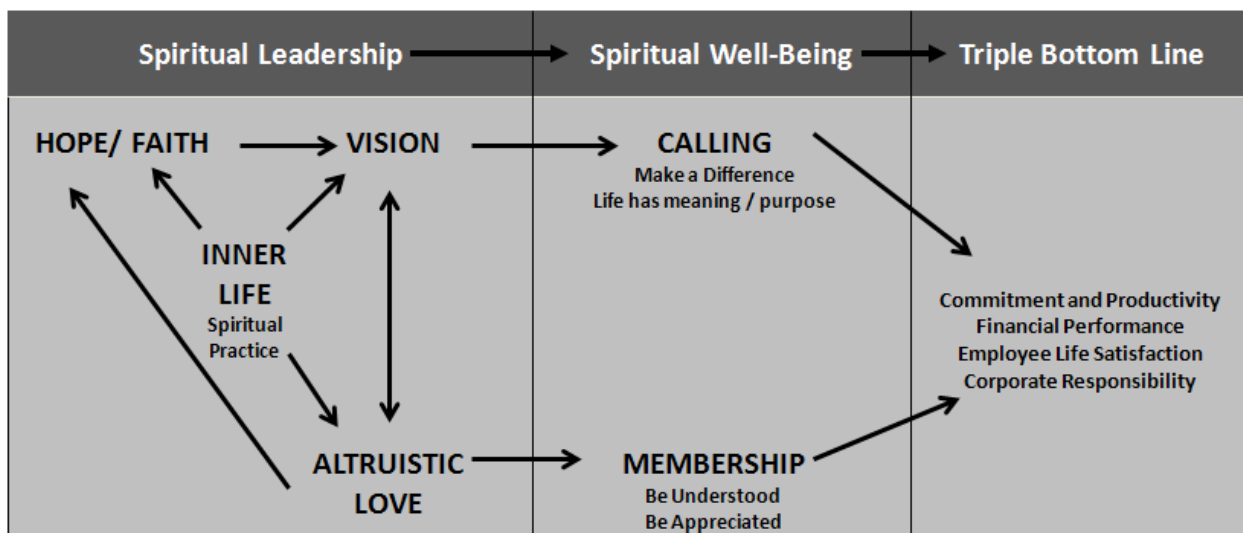
Figure 1 - Organizational Spiritual Leadership Model (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020)

1.3 Self-Leadership

Browning (2018) defines self-leadership as "having a developed sense of who you are, what you can do, where you are going coupled with the ability to influence your communication, emotions, and behaviors on the way to getting there" (p. 15). Hacker and Washington (2018) add to this definition by describing self-leadership as having two parts: "being awake to life"; and, "moving forward in a purposeful manner" (p. 13). Living purposefully involves intentionality, self-reflection, and willingness to foster the evolution of one's life's plan (Dhiman, 2018). Dhiman (2018) relates this journey as that which leads to "one's highest authentic self" (p. 21).

Leading self is a key component to cultivating one's inner life and has implications for mitigating belonging challenges. Palmer (1990), one of the foundational authors on this subject, underlines these points through his two recommendations for leaders: prioritize inner work as important as any other task and engage in this personal journey in community with others. The two goals of self-leadership are to become one's most authentic self and develop the aspects of one's life, and to encourage self-leadership in others (Browning, 2018; Cashman, 2017; Dhiman, 2018; Inam et al., 2023; Tenschert et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2023). Pursuing these goals can both cultivate a leaders' own inner life and motivate them to encourage their followers to do the same.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study employed narrative inquiry, gathering stories of 25 ATCKs, in order to understand their lived experiences and to discover the meaning they place on these experiences (Clandinin, 2023; Daiute, 2014; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Two-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in order to gather rich, in-depth information and allow participants time to tell their story as they wanted to tell it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Frost, 2021; Jiménez & Orozco, 2021).

2.1 Participants

Participants were chosen based on the criteria in Table 1. Participants were divided into two main categories: those whose parents worked internationally for faith-based organizations or non-faith-based organizations. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are those whose purpose is rooted in their religious beliefs, regardless of the work they do. Non-faith-based organizations (non-FBOs) include military, business, diplomatic assignments, and education.

Table 1 Participant Criteria

Participant Criteria
Participants will hold Canadian passports
Participants will have spent at least five years between the ages of 0-18 in a country other than Canada
Participants will have a minimum of two years of Canadian work experience for the 18-29 age category; seven years for the 30-45; 12 years for the 46-60; and 17 years for the 61+;
Some leadership experience is preferred, but not required

Of the 25 participants, 13 were from FBOs and 12 were from non-FBOs. Table 2 details the participants' age categories, biological gender, and pseudonyms.

Table 2 Participants

	ATCKs from Faith-Based Organizations		ATCKs from Non-Faith-Based Organizations	
18-29	Jason	Male	Steve	Male
	Derek	Male	Heather	Female
	Ben	Male	Aaron	Male
30-45	Nicole	Female	William	Male
	Pam	Female	Theo	Male
	Lucas	Male	James	Male
	John	Male	Kelly	Female
46-60	Mary	Female	Jake	Male
	Rose	Female	Philip	Male
	Judy	Female		
61+	Ken	Male	Karen	Female
	Olivia	Female	Albert	Male
	Michael	Male	Victoria	Female

2.2 Data Analysis

Two stages of narrative analysis were conducted: discovering participant story plots and uncovering emerging threads (Polkinghorne, 1995). The first stage required multiple readings of each interview transcription and my observation notes until the plot of each participant's narrative emerged. I then

constructed a narrative of this plot, highlighting the overarching storyline of the ATCK's life and experiences, as well as the broad themes of their stories. The second stage also required multiple readings, as well as coding and categorizing stories using NVivo, to identify emerging threads. I chose to use the term 'emerging threads' instead of themes for my findings. This decision was based on Clandinin's (2023) belief that narrative inquiry produces "knowledge that leads less to generalizations and certainties and more toward wondering about and imagining alternative possibilities" (p. 32).

In order to confirm the reliability of the emerging threads, I compared the results from each stage of analysis. I also employed peer debriefing with two people who had knowledge of the subject matter of my research but were not directly involved.

3 RESULTS

The fourth objective of this study was to propose recommendations for how ATCKs can cultivate spiritual self-leadership for themselves and leverage their value within their workplaces. The Spiritual Self-Leadership model was created in response to this objective, using the participants' narratives and their advice for other ATCKs.

Six spiritual self-leadership principles comprise the Spiritual Self-Leadership model (Figure 2). These principles can be exercised in whole or in part, in any order, and at any time. Two headings, representing one's inner and outer life, comprise this model: *Focus on Self* and *Taking Self into Community*. Both are important for fostering identity creation and sense of belonging. Under *Focus on Self* are the principles of know yourself, develop your spirituality, seek professional help, and commit to a lifelong, continual journey. Under *Taking Self into Community* are the principles of build community and live your purpose.

The first principle, know yourself, has three elements: practise self-reflection, recognize and leverage your strengths and gifts, and embrace who you are. Practising self-reflection is the starting point for many of these principles under *Focus on Self* as it supports cultivating one's inner life. It was also the practice most widely and consistently used by the ATCKs in this study. The second element, recognizing your strengths and gifts, comes from a greater knowledge of yourself gleaned from practising self-reflection. However, this knowledge is only part of the equation, as one must also leverage their strengths and gifts when choosing and navigating one's career, which, in turn, can bring purpose to one's work. The third element, embracing who you are, can be an outflow of recognizing your strengths and gifts, and instils confidence to project one's authentic self to the world.

The second principle, develop your spirituality, has two elements: cultivate spiritual practices and be intentional. Spiritual development is a journey that involves questioning and sifting through one's core spiritual beliefs in order to determine one's identity and how one wants to live one's life. However, this journey may or may not be related to religion but, instead, focus on cultivating one's inner life. Additionally, one's spiritual practices may be religious, like prayer or engaging in faith communities, or non-spiritual, like journalling or spending time in nature. Regardless of which path one chooses, intentionality is key. Commitment and regularity are essential as this journey does not happen by chance.

The third principle is to seek professional help, if necessary. Seeking professional help can be invaluable as family and friends are not always able to help when doing the deep inner work required to move forward in life.

The fourth principle under *Focus on Self* is to commit to a lifelong, continual journey. Although changes to one's spirituality or practices may occur throughout the seasons of life, interests, and outside influences, committing to a consistent journey is an important decision towards spiritual well-being.
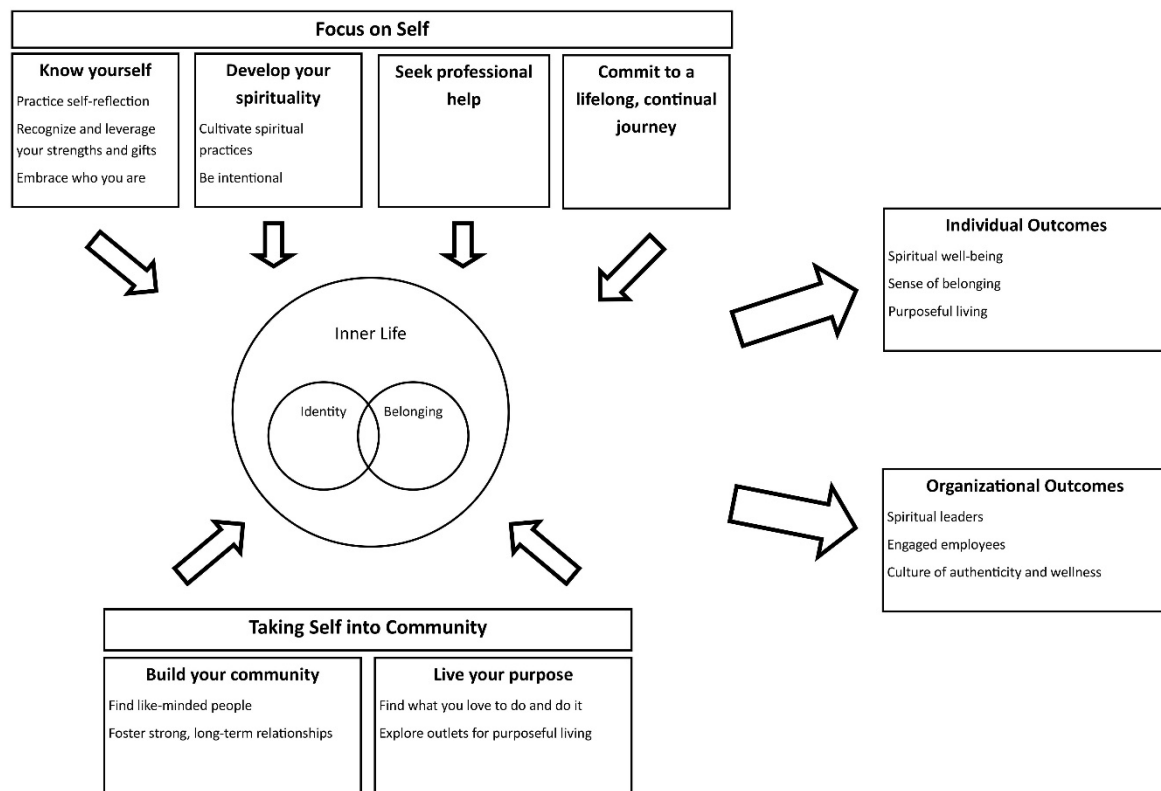
Focus on Self

Know yourself	**Develop your spirituality**	**Seek professional help**	**Commit to a lifelong, continual journey**
Practice self-reflection Recognize and leverage your strengths and gifts Embrace who you are	Cultivate spiritual practices Be intentional		

Inner Life

Identity / Belonging

Individual Outcomes
Spiritual well-being
Sense of belonging
Purposeful living

Organizational Outcomes
Spiritual leaders
Engaged employees
Culture of authenticity and wellness

Taking Self into Community

Build your community	**Live your purpose**
Find like-minded people Foster strong, long-term relationships	Find what you love to do and do it Explore outlets for purposeful living

Figure 2 – Spiritual Self-Leadership Model

Taking Self into Community has two principles. These two principles align with the two elements of the spiritual well-being component of the Spiritual Leadership model (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). The first principle, build community, consist of two elements: find likeminded people and foster strong, long-term relationships. Building community with people who have had similar experiences and backgrounds can be a starting point in fostering strong, long-term relationships. Once a foundational community of likeminded people is established, relationships can be extended to include others in order to build an inclusive, not exclusive, community.

The second principle is to live your purpose. Two elements comprise this principle: find what you love to do and do it, and explore outlets for purposeful living. Exercising your passion within your career can bolster your spiritual well-being. When your passion infuses your professional life, your job is transformed into a calling and often brings likeminded people together, which can then contribute to building community. As well, purposeful living can be achieved through pursuing a

career that brings fulfilment or using one's knowledge and skills to affect change in the world and help others.

4 DISCUSSION

Although the Spiritual Self-Leadership model was created by ATCKs, its usability transcends this one group. Other similar demographics include immigrants and refugees, 1.5 and second-generation immigrants, ATCKs who stayed in their country but moved between culturally different communities, expatriates, and, potentially, indigenous communities. Beyond these groups, organizational leaders may find this model useful in cultivating their own inner life and spiritual self-leadership. Because inner life is the wellspring of spiritual leadership, leaders who cultivate their inner life could be equipped to lead spiritually and encourage a similar journey of spiritual self-leaders for their followers (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020).

Each of the principles within the Spiritual Self-Leadership modelm can be exercised at any point of one's life journey. The principles, as well as the elements within each principle, are not ranked in any particular order and each can be practised in isolation or in conjunction with another. This model can be used at the beginning of one's spiritual journey or at any point along the way. It can also provide guidance to organizational leaders for providing space for workplace spirituality and fostering connection amongst organizational actors.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for future research involve testing the Spiritual Self-Leadership model with various audiences to ensure its usability and generalizability. First, testing the model with a wide sample of ATCKs within Canada could further confirm the findings of this study. This sample should include those from FBOs and non-FBOs including multiple organizations and professions, as well as various ages and cultures. Second, the model should be tested with others of similar backgrounds to ATCKs, particularly those who have experienced cross-cultural mobility as children or adults. The third demographic is the general Canadian public, particularly those in the organizational context. Determining if organizational leaders find this model helpful in cultivating their inner life as a basis for leading spiritually could have far reaching implications for leadership theory and practice. Fourth, conducting an international study could determine the model's applicability in other countries and cultures.

The practical recommendations arising from the application of the Spiritual Self-Leadership model involve the development of materials and curriculum for individuals and groups. These materials will be tailored for various audiences and situations.

First, for ATCKs and others with similar backgrounds of cross-cultural mobility, a workbook designed for personal reflection and application will be developed. This workbook will include an overview of the model and its principles, followed by an in-depth description of each principle and its elements, providing space for journaling to facilitate personal reflection and application into their lives. Second, a similar workbook will be developed for organizational leaders and others who wish to cultivate their inner life and spiritual self-leadership.

Supplemental materials will also be developed for use by ATCK practitioners. A facilitator's guide and teaching materials will be developed to equip facilitators for leading spiritual self-leadership sessions in workshops and transition retreats for ATCKs, both in person and online, or for mentoring one-on-one.

Other supplemental materials developed for organizational leaders and HR practitioners will include documents outlining the best practices of how to create space for cultivating spiritual self-leadership for their followers…[and] detailing options for introducing and promoting spiritual self-leadership within the organization, such as forming ERGs, facilitating workshops, allocating a physical space for individual reflection and spiritual practices, and spiritual leadership training (Lyons, 2025, p. 260).

Finally, materials for academic institutions will be developed that provide all of the aforementioned materials, as well as a syllabus, course proposal, and class resources. I will also include articles pertaining to this research study and a literature review of all relevant topics.

Two further recommendations for the dissemination and promotion of the Spiritual Self-Leadership mode are to publish a book and develop a website. Both would springboard awareness to a greater audience and support a greater number of people towards cultivating their inner life and spiritual self-leadership, and holistic well-being.

6 CONCLUSION

The Spiritual Self-Leadership model, arising from the lived experiences of the ATCKs in this study, has the potential to not only facilitate ATCKs in their journey towards spiritual well-being and wholeness, but also foster their identity creation and belonging. This model is also poised to impact a larger demographic with its practical, yet transforming, principles. The key to its success will be in providing access through developing materials for multiple demographics and formats, and through a variety of platforms.

As our Canadian organizations continue to change and evolve due to our increasingly diverse workforce, as well as national and worldwide challenges that impact our country economically and socially, it is essential for organizational leaders to foster holistic well-being and create space for cultivating spiritual self-leadership for all organizational actors. The Spiritual Self-Leadership model can play a critical role in equipping leaders to lead their organizations into this new reality.

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