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When Reservoirs Run Dry:

Why some headteachers leave
headship early

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Introduction

Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.
(Japanese proverb, quoted by former primary head)

A previous study (Flintham, 2003) explored the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' in describing what has been termed the moral imperative of school leadership (Fullan, 2003) by interviewing a sample of 25 serving headteachers. The study tested the concept that not only can the successful headteacher be seen as acting as the 'external reservoir of hope' for the school by providing spiritual and moral leadership in action based on consistent values and vision, but the head also has to have an 'internal reservoir of hope' (the phrase is from West-Burnham, 2002 and is used by kind permission). This internal reservoir of hope is the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader, "the still point of the turning world" that sustains personal self-belief in the face of external pressures and critical incidents. This internal reservoir has to be replenished by a variety of personal sustainability strategies or there will be individual burn out or drop out, "when things fall apart and the centre cannot hold".

This complementary study considers what happens when for some the pressures for action become too great, when the vision cannot be sustained, when the replenishment strategies of headteachers fail and 'when reservoirs of hope run dry'.

Some 14 headteachers who had left their headship in advance of the normal retirement age were interviewed, together with one who proposed shortly to do so. A similar interview schedule to the one used in the original study allowed colleagues an open-ended, one-to-one opportunity to articulate the underlying spiritual and moral bases of their former headship role, to test the value of the concept of 'reservoirs of hope' in thinking about it, and to codify identified strategies for personal sustainability and replenishment within it. Of particular focus was reflection on the testing of those strategies by critical incidents and external pressures as possible precursors to the decision to leave headship early.

Summary of findings

1. The former heads interviewed gave a range of reasons for leaving headship. They could be categorised as:
 - 'strider' heads – who moved on after successful experience, in accordance with a clear career plan and with a proactive exit strategy, and found the new context re-energising
 - 'stroller' heads – who walked away from headship in a controlled manner as a result of concerns over work-life balance, change pressures or philosophical issues
 - 'stumbler' heads – who suffered burn out through the failure of their sustainability strategies to cope, resulting in stress-related or ill-health retirement
2. All were able to articulate similar value systems to their serving colleagues, and like them found the metaphor of reservoirs of hope a useful one in reflecting on their experience of headship and the critical incidents they had faced within it.
3. The essential difference was the way in which they had been able to cope with such critical incidents:
 - 'strider' heads had been more able to compartmentalise their feelings and be proactive in their response so that their sustaining reservoir did not run dry
 - 'stroller' heads recognised the continued draining of their emotional reservoir and its potential for eventual failure
 - 'stumbler' heads had non-existent or inadequate sustainability strategies to replenish their reservoir, particularly in the face of repeated waves of change
4. It was noted however that the difference between these categories could be very slight, and heavily dependent on the pressure of prevailing circumstances.
5. In common with the serving heads of the original study, there was an awareness of a sea-change around the 4–5 year mark with a transition from 'doing headship' to 'being the head'. However, there was a recognition of the emergence of a 'plateau effect' after 7–10 years in headship, which might have been overcome by the availability of re-energising professional development opportunities that could in some cases have prevented early departure.
6. Former heads, in common with serving heads, had key messages regarding the value of such professional development reinforced by strategic reflection opportunities and an infrastructure of peer support to underpin this, appropriately legitimised and funded, in order to sustain future generations of headteachers.

Main findings

The composition of the sample of early-leaving heads was broadly similar to that used in the initial survey of serving heads. The sample was drawn from all phases of compulsory education from infant school to large secondary school and a variety of social contexts from inner-city deprivation to rural commuter-belt. (Full details of the sample composition and the interview schedule are to be found in the appendix.)

The headteachers interviewed ranged in length of headship experience from 2 years to 18 years, with a mean around 10 years. Three colleagues had previously been deputy heads in the same school as their eventual headship, and one had previous headship experience in a similar school. Ages ranged from 48 to 58 with a mean at 52 on leaving, and all had left their headship in the last 5 years (except for the colleague still serving as head, who after 3 years of headship intended to move on within the next 12 months). Many saw the decision to leave headship as coinciding with a period of accelerating change within the education system with which they were no longer prepared or equipped to cope.

Reasons for leaving headship early

Reasons cited for leaving spanned the full spectrum. This ranged from successful heads with a planned and career-driven exit strategy, who had sought to capitalise on their experience in the wider educational arena, to those who felt burnt out and had suffered high levels of psychological stress which had made it impossible to continue in headship or even in gainful employment.

They could, however, be clustered into three distinct categories: 'striding', 'strolling' or 'stumbling' headteachers.

'Striders'

'Striders' were those whose exit was based on a clear career plan. They recognised that there was a finite time limit to successful headship, both for the school and for themselves:

I knew that I had reached the 're-ploughing the same furrow' point and that new blood was needed for the good of the school... I had done it successfully for a long time and could have happily continued, but I was ready for new stimulation and a new challenge to put my expertise and experience to use in a new context.
(male secondary school head, age 51, now in LEA project work)

Such heads wanted to have sufficient energy and enthusiasm left to maintain and develop an ongoing contribution to education:

The job overflowed the parameters of normal work. I wanted to come out with something still to offer. I didn't retire early, I moved on.
(male secondary school head, age 55, now in consultancy work)

They had clearly defined exit strategies for such moving on. These strategies had often been planned well ahead, sometimes as the result of having experienced the revitalisation of alternative professional development opportunities such as short-term advisory, training or consultancy work which had offered a taste of a wider sphere of influence beyond their schools.

These new prospects however brought with them a tension with existing responsibilities, between personal needs and organisational demands:

After 10 years of successful headship, I had a dilemma. Do I stay and be out of school a lot doing the things I want to do, and does the school then suffer? Or do I leave and build on these other opportunities?
(female primary head, age 52, now in self-employed educational training work)

...out of which a proactive career-driven exit strategy often emerged.

'Strollers'

'Strollers' were those who wanted to walk away from headship in a controlled manner, often at a high spot in the school's fortunes, knowing that it would be difficult to sustain this:

I made a conscious decision to leave on a high. I knew I couldn't keep going at that high.
(female primary head, age 58, now in part-time governor training work)

Others chose to exit from headship as a result of taking stock of the quality of their personal lives, catalysed by:

The tension between becoming a grandad and the demands of a 70 hour working week.

(male secondary head, age 54, now in part-time headship support work)

Some developed a lack of sympathy with the burgeoning national or local change agenda. Although some were energised by what was termed 'the roller coaster of headship' and the challenge of how to cope with or even subvert each fresh wave of change, others suffered from a crushing sense of déjà vu as problems they had experienced and resolved earlier in their headship came round again in a new guise.

In particular, there was a concern for the societal change into what was seen as an alien accountability culture, particular in its link to performance management, squeezing them into what Hargreaves (2003) has called "the tunnel vision of test scores, achievement targets and league tables...obsessed with improving and micro-managing curriculum uniformity...in place of ambitious missions of comparison and community", in contrast to a desired system of "intelligent accountability" (SHA, 2003):

Accountability restricted my professional freedom and league tables distorted its dynamics...I found myself out of sync with the culture of the new age.

(female primary head, age 54, now in part-time LEA support work)

...leading to a decision to leave "on principle".

For others it was the managerial consequences of such developments:

The intellectual tiredness and mental drain of coping with recruitment and retention issues.

(male secondary head, age 54, now in part-time support work)

...or the fall out from a developing Ofsted system where 'satisfactory' was no longer deemed to be good enough.

All, however, recognised the beginnings of failure in the capacity of their sustainability and support systems to continue to cope, and were anxious to depart before burn out became a damaging reality.

'Stumblers'

'Stumblers' were those to whom the realisation of that burn out came suddenly and unexpectedly. (The metaphor of the frog not appreciating the increasing temperature of the water until it was too late was cited more than once). Stress-related or psychosomatic physical symptoms resulted in early retirement often on health grounds. For those whose departure was thrust upon them, be it by illness or increasing inability to cope with events, there was no chance to plan a proactive exit strategy, and consequently no immediate positive outcome:

Anyone thinking of having to leave headship should have the escape route prepared. I didn't have. I hadn't developed extensive networks and the world outside education doesn't rate education experience... It's almost impossible for a headteacher to get a job outside education.

(male secondary head, age 48, now in freelance Ofsted work)

...although in time, hope could be restored:

Giving the job up (through ill-health) was like a bereavement. I had nine months grieving the loss, but now I can't imagine going back. The fact I *had* to finish, now looking back, was a good thing, although at the time it was like jumping into the abyss. I now have a lifetime of new opportunities, bolstered by time for myself that I never had as a head.

(female secondary head, age 56, now in part-time consultancy work)

In respondent validation of the 'strider', 'stroller' and 'stumbler' categorisation, several participants however drew attention to the fact that the difference between these categories could be very slight, and heavily dependent on the pressure of prevailing circumstances. As one 'stroller' head put it:

How great or small are the steps between striding, strolling and stumbling? Very few steps are needed I suspect, if the circumstances are such, to move you from one gait to another very quickly. I may have been a strider at one time, and I certainly recognise elements of the stumbler. Taking control (in respect of the decision to leave headship early), being proactive and 'doing' rather than being done to, have helped me to retain my professional dignity and to leave physically and mentally intact.

(male secondary 'stroller' head)

Similarities to serving heads

There was no difference in the range of value systems described by the former heads compared to those still in headship interviewed in the previous study, nor indeed between the categories of early-leaving heads. Some expressed foundational Christian beliefs, even though in some cases active faith had lapsed. Some cited the influence of upbringing, particularly when that had involved first generation educational experience, and many had strong egalitarian imperatives underpinned by a strong sense of moral purpose to provide for others less fortunate than what they themselves had enjoyed. Leaving headship early created therefore a particular sense of loss, especially amongst 'stumbler' heads:

I wanted to make a contribution to society, to work with and support those who can't look after themselves. I now feel frustrated (since leaving headship). I'm now doing a job rather than a vocation.

(male secondary head, age 48, now in freelance Ofsted work)

Equally, the metaphor of reservoirs of hope to describe the role of headship generated similar sympathetic resonance amongst all categories, as with serving heads. Looking back retrospectively, there was an enthusiastic desire to expand and refine the metaphor:

Reservoirs *store* water. I had to learn the hard way not to give it all out at once, to pace myself or I'd get emotionally drained.

(female secondary 'stumbler' head)

Reservoirs can get a bit sludgy; perhaps the image of streams or springs better conveys the image of change and renewal that headship is all about, and as long as there is a trickle of replenishment, I can cope, there's hope.

(male secondary 'strider' head)

Reservoirs have filters. I saw my role as a filter for other people's pessimism and stresses, but also as a buffer between my staff and the government's railroading of change: a proactive moderating of the system so you can subvert it according to *your* values. The trouble with filters however is that they can get blocked if you don't take time to clear them out.

(female secondary 'stroller' head)

It must be recognised that the metaphor relies for its resonance with those who have experienced headship, not only on the visual image of the reservoir but on its linkage with the concept of hope as the essential component of spiritual and moral leadership. A clear conceptual distinction needs to be made however between optimism and hope. Optimism as 'confident expectation' is easy in positive leadership situations; hope characteristically is required in the darkness of community tragedy, acute personnel problems and severe organisational crises that have made up the range of critical incidents of both former and serving heads' leadership stories. Hope is circumscribed by moral values in a way that optimism is not. Hope is constrained by assessment of what is really important in a situation, and carries with it a commitment to action, which can in itself be draining of emotion and energy levels (Watts, 2002).

Hence, to sustain hope for the organisation in the face of such critical incidents requires the sustaining of hope in the individual, through the maintenance of their internal reservoir of hope. Many former heads identified similar sustainability strategies to their serving headteacher colleagues in preserving and replenishing their personal reservoirs in the face of external pressures. Many were bolstered by a strong sense of self-belief, reinforced by positive feedback either from self or from others:

I would go on walkabout round the school, to convince myself that if I'd achieved this, I can't be that bad.

(female primary 'stroller' head)

Parental feedback gave me a buzz. Their respect gives you inner strength.

(male primary 'stumbler' head)

There was an almost universal awareness of the essential value of support networks of families and friends in sharing the emotional burden, although there was a keen appreciation of the personal cost:

One of the reasons I left headship was the encroachment on the quality of my relationships with my family.

(female primary 'stroller' head)

The value of networks away from the school was also recognised, not only professional networks where there was a secure environment to offload concerns and provide reflection time, but also the escapism of external pursuits with those beyond the world of education:

Where life is different, selfish, non-serious, even trivial.

(male secondary 'strider' head)

Differences from serving heads

Faced with critical incidents similar in severity to those experienced by serving heads in testing the capacity of the internal reservoir of hope to withstand, it is the absence or adequacy of those sustainability strategies that constitutes the essential difference between 'strider', 'stroller' or 'stumbler' heads.

'Strider' heads had robust and enhancing sustaining mechanisms:

I cannot say that I believe I felt the sustaining mechanism to fail at any time. They (a range of critical incidents) were just challenges that needed some form of response; each one provided a steep but very valuable and positive source of learning...the thrill of headship is from this learning.

(female primary 'strider' head, age 48, with 4 years headship experience)

Such 'strider' heads appeared more able to compartmentalise the problems of school from their own personal concerns and self-image. 'Stumbling' heads found this more difficult:

You never stop being the head. When something happens to your school, you can't help but take it personally...and sometimes that really hurts.

(male secondary 'stumbler' head)

One 'stumbler' head felt "too personally isolated and wounded to carry on", and recognised the absence of sustainability, 'switching off' and support strategies as a major factor in this. Significantly this head was the youngest in the sample both in terms of age and headship experience and faced a severe breakdown in head-staff relationships in a complete failure of what has been called "the covenantal relationship which rests on a shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals..." (Sergiovanni, 1992):

If I'd had sustainability strategies I'd have seen a way forward. The only one I had was more of the same: I enjoyed innovating which gave me satisfaction but ironically caused me to work even longer hours. I had no one professionally to turn to. I would have liked a professional listening partner (to share it all with) but (internal staff) problems meant that sort of relationship couldn't work at school and I suffered from the professional loneliness and isolation of the GM head. My self-belief was undermined. I felt a good head would have solved this, and I had no one to convince me otherwise.

(male secondary 'stumbler' head, age 48, with two years' headship experience)

For others, it was not one high-level critical incident that overwhelmed the defences, it was more the relentless, repeated pressure of the continual waves of change, and the accompanying sense of revisiting previous experience that wore down the reservoir's retaining walls:

I could have coped until 60 but I had this sense of déjà vu, of a pendulum effect...and I found the change after change after change physically wearing, especially as I had led from the front.

(female primary 'stroller' head)

There was however a communality of symptoms: a sense of powerlessness and a questioning of personal competence in feeling unable to affect the situation, and a consequent loss of hope; a physical impact such as the disruption of sleep patterns or frozen inactivity that are the classic symptoms of stress, and a perceived draining of the emotional reservoir:

The water was running out faster than it came in. School was overtaking me... I had no time to think about myself or look after myself.

(female secondary 'stumbler' head)

I felt completely drained.
(male primary 'strider' head)

The essential difference was in the way in which these symptoms were dealt with. 'Strider' heads with a proactive exit strategy in mind were proactive in their response, either in confronting it:

I admitted that I couldn't deal with it (an ongoing problem family) to the chair of governors, instead of trying to con my way through it as superman. As long as I could articulate my weakness to someone it was OK.
(male secondary 'strider' head)

...or in fighting it:

I had to fight (the inspectorate) and defend my beliefs.
(female 'strider' primary head)

...as opposed to the flight reaction of a 'stumbler' head faced with similar circumstances:

If you hit a dog often enough, it runs away. I ran away.
(male 'stumbler' primary head)

Others went into denial or hid behind a facade of continuing competence:

I appeared to be coping, but I was managing, not replenishing.
(female primary 'stroller' head)

...and eventually some paid a savage price for this:

I was very good at hiding it. Other heads and my staff didn't know the extent of my angst until I lost it through a panic attack at a heads' meeting. I went long-term sick and had to retire early on health grounds. I've cut myself off from education. I've never been back to my school and at first I couldn't even face the people I'd worked with if I met them elsewhere. I don't work at all now.
(male primary 'stumbler' head who retired on psychological grounds aged 52)

The 'plateau effect'

Amongst almost all of the heads, irrespective of category, there was recognition of an emerging plateau effect in their headship as it went on. In common with the serving heads of the original study, there was an awareness of a sea-change around the 4–5 year mark with a transition from 'doing headship' to 'being the head'. This involved the development of confidence, self-awareness and the capacity to take informed risks: "becoming a leader rather than a manager" as one head put it.

The stages of this growth in personal authenticity in headship from external dependence to internal intuitive understanding (West-Burnham, 2002) mirror those identified in teacher development from conscious dependency as adopter and adapter of existing materials to instinctive control as appropriator and creator of new approaches in new contexts (Rogers, 2003). However, continued growth in headship effectiveness is not upwardly linear throughout a headteacher's career.

Whilst there is some recent research evidence of an association between length of headteacher service and pupil assessment outcomes (Howson, 2003), this statistical relationship does not necessarily mean a causal linkage. The long-held view that heads who are three to seven years in post are associated with the most effective schools (Mortimore et al, 1988) and that longer-serving heads are more prone to the growth of a plateau effect or 'sell-by date' with a decline in effectiveness after seven years, was one which was subscribed to by many early leaving heads in the study. However, some estimated the beginning of the effect at nearer 10 years, significantly the time, on average, that a headteacher is likely to stay in post (Howson, 2003).

After 4–5 years, your vision is secure but there is still the challenge: can I take this further? Ten years in, there is the danger of the complacency of coasting.
(male 'strider' primary head)

There was in some cases amongst the 'stroller' heads recognition that a time to move on had been missed:

I had a window round about the seven year mark to bring about change. Thereafter I felt I was marking time. I should have cashed in my experience and moved on. I needed something different, even for a year, to re-energise me.
(male secondary 'stroller' head)

This appeal for professional refreshment and renewal opportunities after a long period of headship was echoed by a 'strider' head who had left a successful headship after 10 years for an education training role:

If I'd had a secondment, I might not have left. What I've learnt in the last 18 months (as a trainer) would have made me a better headteacher. It's given me an external perspective. I'd do things differently now in terms of systems and structures, but my vision and values would be the same. I would have been keen to go back (to headship) because I'd be re-fired.
(female primary 'strider' head)

Key messages for the future

Whilst the possibility of secondment opportunities even on a short-term basis is presently infeasible for the totality of the headteacher workforce, other similar re-energising opportunities need to be created or sought out. This was one of the key messages that colleagues who had left their headship early wanted to transmit to new generations of headteachers:

Develop an area of interest and expertise and take it outside your school to fertilise it. It benefits you, and it benefits the school.
(female primary 'strider' head)

There was recognition of the benefits to other senior managers too:

Seek professional time away from headship. You renew your reservoir away from school, and there's a development of the others who are left behind managing the school in your absence.
(female secondary 'stumbler' head)

There was, however, a sage recognition of the need to preserve a balance between personal fulfilment needs and the organisational needs of the school, and the danger of what was called 'the absentee landlord syndrome'.

A further key message was to be aware of the need to create the capacity for strategic reflection opportunities and the cultivation of a wide professional infrastructure of support to underpin this. Within this it is possible to re-examine and renew a personal value system through the challenge and support of a fellow head:

A detached sounding board with similar experience who is a good listener but who can plant the key questions to aid formative reflection.
(female secondary 'stroller' head)

...and to parallel in a wider sense the one-to-one mentoring support relationship available to newly appointed heads.

As with the serving heads previously surveyed, there was a strong plea for this to be legitimised both by the training of governing bodies to act as the critical friend of the head not only in terms of professional challenge but also as regards personal support, and the setting up of LEA-sponsored networks of support and pastoral care for headteachers, with the provision of funding to facilitate it. The need for the provision of ring-fenced finance for ongoing headteacher professional development, memorably termed 'tail-lamp' money to rival the former Headlamp funding for newly appointed heads was strongly urged.

Such funded and legitimised reflection opportunities should be part of the leadership entitlement package available to all heads. This would ensure that participation does not lead to perceived stigmatisation. Such embedded reflection opportunities are available to leaders in other stressful caring professions, for example health professionals, police and the clergy, and it was felt by departing headteachers that their ready availability would have been of benefit, in comparison with the situation of the headteacher leaving his headship early after 14 years who confided to the interviewer:

Fourteen years in headship and I haven't had the opportunity to talk like this before.
(male secondary 'stroller' head)

These key messages from heads who had left their headship early were tested on a representative of the emerging post-modernist generation of headteachers: a colleague who, three years into a headship in a socially and behaviourally challenging school, sees that

headship to be time-limited, and has a clear declared intention of only serving for four years in total before moving on into the wider educational arena of consultancy and advisory work, where he can build on his concentrated successful experience and generalise from into a wider context.

For such a colleague, whilst holding a similar value system to his early-departing colleagues, the concept of headship for life is an alien one, the acceptance of the time-limited nature of effective headship is embedded, and the need for a proactive exit strategy self evident to him and to others, so that in his words “the fruit does not rot on the vine”.

With an ageing workforce and heads in general being prepared to spend on average fewer years in headship (NCSL, 2003), the need for personal sustainability strategies and support mechanisms and the fostering of such opportunities becomes even more pressing, if the quality of effective headship for future generations is to be maintained.

Appendix

Methodology

The research sample

A cross-sectional sample of 15 headteachers who had left their headship in advance of the normal retirement age, or were committed to do so, was constructed, drawn from all phases of compulsory-age education, from infant school to large secondary school, with numbers of pupils on roll ranging from 60 to 2000, and from a variety of social contexts from inner city deprivation (free school meal (fsm) indicator 60%) to suburban social advantage (fsm 4%) within the East Midlands.

The detailed composition of the sample of 15 heads was as follows:

School Type	School Area	School Headteacher	Age on leaving
Primary:	Inner city (8)	Male (9)	45–49 (3)
Infants (1)	Suburban (5)	Female (6)	50–55 (10)
Junior (1)	Rural (1)		56–59 (2)
All-through (5)			Mean = 52
Total = 7	Free school meal indicator	Length of headship	
	0–9% (2)	1–4 years (3)	Reasons for leaving
Secondary:	10–19% (5)	5–8 years (1)	Career plan (5)
9–13 (1)	20–29% (4)	9–12 years (7)	Disengagement (5)
11–16 (2)	30–39% (2)	13–16 years (2)	Health/stress (4)
11–18 (4)	40–49% (1)	17–20 years (2)	School closure (1)
Total = 7	50–60% (1)	Mean = 10	
			Destinations
Special:	School faith perspective	Previous experience	Consultancy (5)
All-age EBD 1	Church (2)	2nd headship (5)	Inspection etc (5)
	Secular (12)	3rd headship (2)	LEA (part-time) (3)
Sample total = 15	High ethnic (1)	Same school (3)	Unemployment (2)

The interview schedule

Colleagues were asked to respond to the areas of questioning indicated below, which had been sent to them in advance. Interviews were conducted over a four month period and as interviewing progressed, supplementary questioning regarding the emerging themes took place. The main areas of focus were as follows, as specified on the provided interview schedule:

- Please give some background about yourself: length of headship, type and character of school, reasons for leaving headship, what you have done since or intend to do.
- Where would you say you derive your own spiritual/moral base from? (Remembering that the definition of spiritual leadership being used does not have exclusively religious connotations but seeks to embrace a broader concept of secular spirituality.)
- Do you find of value the concepts of an internal 'personal reservoir of hope' (the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flows and which enables effective interpersonal engagement no matter what the external pressures) and the external 'reservoir of hope' for the institution (where the head acts as the wellspring of self-belief and directional focus for the school) in thinking about your role in spiritual and moral leadership, or are there alternative metaphors that would have better described your own approach to spiritual and moral leadership?
- Could you give examples of sustainability strategies you used to preserve and replenish your personal reservoir of hope in the face of external pressures?
- What difficulties may arise should these sustaining mechanisms fail? Could you give examples of critical incidents in your 'leadership story' that would illustrate this?
- Was there a development of your capacity for spiritual and moral leadership as your headship went on, and if so, to what do you attribute this? Does this link to any perceived stages of headteacher development?
- From your experience, what messages would you want to transfer about spiritual and moral leadership to aspirant and newly-appointed headteachers?

The interview outcomes:

Interviews were tape-recorded with the agreement of participants to supplement contemporaneous notes. These were used to analyse emerging themes from the study and to provide the source of the quotations cited, as an authentic reflection of practitioner voice.

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