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Philomene Kocher received her M.Ed. from Queen's University in 2008. She began writing haiku in 1991 and tanka in 2001, and her poetry has appeared internationally in journals and anthologies. She is the Secretary of Haiku Canada. She may be contacted at [kocherp@queensu.ca](mailto:kocherp@queensu.ca).

**Abstract**

My M.Ed. research focused on using haiku poetry as a way of connection with persons with dementia within an established spiritual care setting. As foundation for this research, I explored the connection-building capacity of the gap created by the juxtaposition in haiku. Seventeen experienced haiku poets (including myself as both researcher and poet) responded to survey questions about the intuitive process of writing and reading haiku. The responses illuminate how the simplicity of haiku can paradoxically hold profound meaning through the connections with self, other, and environment. Haiku may have potential in curriculum beyond language arts into environmental studies.

*Inviting Connection Through the Gap in Haiku*

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Walking down the street where I had lived for nine years, something caught my attention: on my neighbour's rosebush were rose hips, roses, and buds. It was late August, and I was amazed at seeing buds still. As a haiku poet, it is often when I am surprised that I am moved to write. It is also often true that this happens when I am walking, perhaps because I am closer to nature despite the sidewalks and traffic, and because I have slowed down. And so I wrote this poem:

rose hips and roses and buds  
on the same bush  
August evening

I recorded my awareness of a particular moment. Reflecting on it later, I realized how much this image spoke also to my life circumstances. I was only months away from my fortieth birthday, and I pondered the parts of my life that were mature, that were blooming, and that were still in bud. After almost two decades exploring haiku, I am still astonished at how much story can be distilled into such small poems.

The potential of haiku to capture so much experience with so few words has always fascinated me. This power of poetry was brought home to me in a new way when I participated as a guest poet in a spiritual care program for persons with dementia. The Soul Sessions program was designed by Marjorie Woodbridge (Woodbridge, 2008), a chaplain in a long-term care facility. Her primary intention is to invite individuals with severe dementia to share their stories and memories to their capacities within a welcoming, no-fail environment. Their contributions might appear fragmented as they express words or sentences, rather than long stories. Yet, through their experience of being deeply seen and heard, they may also experience the joy of

connection with their memories and with others. From her experience, Marjorie found that using poetry as a prompt provided a doorway to connection for the persons with dementia. She told me the story about several women reciting the long familiar poem *The Highwayman* (by Alfred Noyes) along with her when she had read it in the group. She had been surprised. So had the daughter of one of those women who had joined the group that day—to see her mother with the capacity to recite a poem, a capacity that she had maintained despite dementia.

After Marjorie noticed that the persons with dementia responded to contemporary as well as classic poetry, she invited me to bring haiku to share with them. In the familiarity of the established setting, we read the haiku out loud and asked prompting questions to invite stories from the participants. We were moved by the humour and poignancy of what they shared, and recorded their words and phrases on a flipchart. Together as a group we then created collaborative haiku from these gleanings. Their poems were published in a small chapbook (*Soul Session Poets*, 2007), and have touched the hearts of many. My experiences with the persons with dementia inspired me, and I began graduate studies to explore further how haiku invited connection.

### **The Study**

Although I had been writing haiku for many years, I still wondered about the alchemy of turning experience into a poem. I knew that this distillation was a key to discovering the connection-building capacity of haiku that I had witnessed in Soul Sessions. I conducted a survey of established haiku poets to gain an understanding of how they experienced haiku. Ethics clearance was obtained through the university research ethics board. I mailed a survey to 26 established haiku poets (13 women and 13 men) who were also members of the Haiku Canada organization. This was a convenience sample. I chose the criterion of membership in Haiku

Canada because I am also a member, and from my review of the newsletters could select individuals who were experienced poets, i.e., had been writing for over five years and were widely published. I felt this level of experience was an important foundation for their challenge of describing what happens in the creative process around haiku. Sixteen poets responded (nine women and seven men). I was both researcher and study participant, so the total number of responses was 17. I wanted to experience trying to describe my process as a writer and reader of haiku, a process which had become second nature to me. I answered the questions before reading what others had written in order to understand what it was like to write about the ephemeral moments of inspiration and creation. The following research questions were designed to explore these moments.

The juxtaposition of images in haiku is its most signature characteristic. There is a tension or “gap” created by the association or contrast of two things, and this “gap” invites participation by the reader or listener.

As a haiku poet, what is your understanding of the way that this “gap” is created and experienced? What do you experience when you write haiku? What do you experience when you read haiku?

Poets were invited to share a one- or two-paragraph response, and their replies ranged from a few sentences to several pages. The quotes selected for this article reflect at least one contribution from each poet, and are meant to highlight the themes that emerged from the material.

A few poets challenged my use of the word *gap*: one believed the gap was really between self-serving human beings and nature, and another perceived only the continuous flow of a

haiku. Other poets invited me to reconsider the role of juxtaposition in haiku, and my perspective has changed: I would now describe juxtaposition as one of the significant characteristics of haiku, rather than its signature characteristic.

Although juxtaposition has been explored in haiku journals (Spiess, 2001; Sterba, 2007), and an individual poet may talk about her or his own experience of the intuitive moment, the following discussion is distinctive in presenting together the opinions of 17 contemporary haiku poets. I begin with a description of haiku characteristics. I then weave elements from the poets' responses into an exploration of what happens in writing and reading haiku. I conclude by describing the educational potential of haiku.

### **The Characteristics of Haiku**

The form of contemporary English-language haiku is based on the Japanese tradition of haiku, and retains many of its characteristics: a short poem usually written in 3 lines with a seasonal reference. Bare-bones sensory images are used to capture the essence of what is called an *aha moment* or a *haiku moment*. The syllable count of 5-7-5 is less of a criterion in contemporary haiku than is capturing a moment of awareness. There is usually a juxtaposition or association in a haiku which provides the ambiguity in the poem. The following haiku holds two clear images that create the juxtaposition:

full moon

the sidewalk curves

around tree roots

One-image haiku are more challenging to create because there must be enough internal contrast presented within the image to make it a haiku, rather than a poetic fragment. In this haiku, the third line holds the surprise and tension of the poem:

a sparrow alights  
on the concrete wall  
of the prison

This ambiguity creates what I am calling the *gap* between the words of a haiku and its larger story: the story of the connection between the images in a two-image poem; between the image(s) and the whole of the experience; or between the poet's inner experience and outer experience. In this way, the gap provides both an absence (it does not appear in words) and presence (it is suggested) of connection. The revelation or epiphany experienced by someone when they *jump the gap* is well described by Natalie Goldberg (1993).

The real essence of a haiku is the poet's awakening, and the haiku gives you a small taste of that, like a ripe red berry on the tip of your tongue. Your mind actually experiences a marvelous leap when you hear a haiku, and in the space of that leap you feel awe. Ahh, you say. You get it. The poet transmits her awakening. (p. 35)

Other characteristics of haiku that help to create poetic tension are brevity, word choice, line breaks, and word and line arrangement. Literary devices such as simile and metaphor are not used in haiku; it is the contrast or association of images that provides the resonance. However, there is a sense in which the words in a haiku do represent something else in a metaphorical way.

Haiku poet Bruce Ross (2007) describes this as an *absolute metaphor* where an existential quality can be evident in the concrete, sensory images of a haiku.

Something mysterious is happening...that can't really be expressed in words but can be felt through words.... If that mysterious thing is the appearance of the universal, that appearance can manifest itself only in the particular. (I. Absolute Metaphor, ¶ 7 and II. The Particular, ¶ 1)

It is paradoxical that a haiku can appear to contain so much meaning at the same time that it is pared down to only spare images. This is largely due to the poet employing words in a clear and direct manner, thereby allowing the images to resonate both literally and metaphorically. As Diane Ackerman notes in *Deep Play*, “It’s ironic that poets use words to convey what lies beyond words” (1999, p. 127).

This metaphorical understanding is also connection-building. Poet John Fox (1995) describes the metaphorical voice as containing “the threads that join mind and soul, self and other, self and the natural world, self and God. What once seemed separate is revealed to be made of one fabric” (p. 119). Indeed, other researchers propose that metaphorical language functions as a *process* that shapes how reality is perceived by an individual or a society—i.e., in that “the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 3). This interconnectedness of the perceiver and the perceived within the context of environment and culture has particular relevance for haiku poets who look to nature, including human nature, for their inspiration.

### **In Their Own Words: Haiku Poets on Haiku**

In reviewing the survey responses, I realized that the main themes could be divided into the three parts of the prompt: How is the gap created and experienced? What do you experience when you write haiku? When you read haiku? In writing my own responses to the survey questions, I felt both reluctance and hesitation in trying to decipher an experience that is both ephemeral and sacred. Would words do justice to the miracle of the experience? Like writing a haiku, I realized that the most I could do would be to approximate in words what it is that I think, feel, and sense. Still, I do believe there is value in these approximations for what they can tell us about the power of poetry: in making meaning of experiences and in making connections—both of which are deep yearnings of the human heart.

### ***How Is the Gap Created and Experienced?***

I am reminded of the picture used in psychological testing that can be viewed as either a vase or two faces, depending on which part of the picture is focused upon. This appears true for juxtaposition in haiku as well. If I look at the juxtaposition as creating a space, then I am focusing on the gap. If I look at the juxtaposition as creating connections (e.g., between the writer's response to the moment, or between the haiku and the reader's response), then I am focusing on what fills the gap. Both are true *at the same time*, and this simultaneity resembles that of consciousness itself, where the threads of mind, body, and environment are inextricably woven together. One poet described it this way.

Intuitively we know that as large and varied as forms and the universe are that in some essential way everything is connected seamlessly. As poets we experience differences, similarities and give values and feelings for what we witness. The gap to me is the space or distance between seemingly unrelated objects and experiences. When we close that space by recognizing a relationship between things we are both creating the gap and in

essence experiencing it too. Our being, our haiku, is the connection of events, phenomena and the closing of the gap. (Tom Clausen)

Another poet made specific reference to the influence of cultural context, and how this influences the ambiguity and resonance of a haiku.

The “gap” is created by the contextual distance between the two juxtaposed images. Context may be defined as the defining elements or attributes of an image, including common cultural associations.... Ambiguity can involve questions of the famous “who, what, where, when, and how?” (but not why). “Suggestiveness” in my opinion is the artful creation of ambiguity within a verse. (Jeanne Emrich)

Similar to the idea of “suggestiveness,” other poets spoke of association between the images and how this association can expand meaning well beyond their particularity.

Now, there is a juxtaposition of images in haiku...and what this encourages is a lateral associative way of mental processing, rather than a “vertical” one which tends to be discriminatory and spontaneously judgmental. (Marshall Hryciuk)

For me what is most important is that the disjunction in a haiku brings *association* into play. The lyric and logic of the poem is interrupted, thus creating two juxtaposed parts.... The reader experiences associations having to do with shape, color, texture, sound, smell, taste, symmetry and the deviations therefrom, and various kinds of “meaning”—both conscious and “unconscious.” (Barry George)

That haiku can provoke literal as well as symbolic meaning shows the power of haiku to stimulate fresh ways of seeing the world. The development of a way to see beyond preconceptions can be encouraged through the practice of haiku.

Art is about perception. The brain is constantly sorting and grouping the billions of images that flood it every day. Of course this process is essential for an individual to function. If we had to constantly re-evaluate each image as it's taken in by our eyes, we'd never make it out of bed every morning. The function of art is to temporarily sabotage this process. The artist's primary role is to cause us to look at the familiar in an entirely different way from the one to which we have grown accustomed....[T]he poet is forced to constantly try to see the images around us in ways free from the normal preconceptions that most people would have. (Marco Fraticelli)

It is not just a matter of connecting images like train cars but of images clashing with each other, thus reverberating one against the other. Often, a reader is not expecting this juxtaposition of images and, I would argue, this is partly the cause of its power. (Rick Black)

Several poets spoke of haiku as *epiphany*, another way of describing a shift in their way of seeing things. The epiphany can be at once intellectual and emotional.

In fact, for me the two parts of a haiku are seen at once, as in a photograph, a snagging of a moment by any of the senses, a combination of sensual perceptions.... It's an "epiphany" in the sense of St. Paul's famous one, in various degrees, but the opposite of blinding. It's a shift in "seeing." (Claudia Radmore)

The association of things encourages both writer and reader to make observations and perhaps draw some conclusions about the world around them. The resulting epiphany is intellectually stimulating and emotionally satisfying. (Joanne Morcom)

The practice of haiku is not only a process of creation, but at the same time can influence the poet. Several poets commented on this reflective capacity and described it as harmony and stillness—both of which have long been associated with haiku.

Interestingly, even though there may be a tension at one level of haiku, deep down there exists a sense of harmony, and I think this can evoke a strong feeling of peace in both poet and reader. (Angela Leuck)

It also seems to me that something in the juxtaposition—the balancing—of the poem’s parts helps create the stillness characteristic of a haiku. (Barry George)

The “balancing” of the parts of a haiku can occur at the same time as the “balancing” between the literal and possible symbolic meanings of a haiku. This poet described the balancing point as the place for “revelatory truth.”

I regard paradox in accomplished haiku as a precise fulcrum point on which the precarious balance between connected yet contrary entities exists as a teetering, revelatory truth. Such a pivotal moment of poignant contact...scrapes and sparks into flame the comfortable sensibilities one feels about personal, particular experience / existence and life as a whole. The initial impact may be felt emotionally, intellectually,

spiritually, or intuitively; and the realm of the experience / content may be physical or metaphysical. (Michael Dudley)

From my own experiences with haiku, I agree with the views expressed by these poets that it is primarily juxtaposition that creates the gap, and that a haiku paradoxically holds a sense of unity in that space as well. Haiku can move me differently on different days, and there are rare haiku that continue to reveal new levels of truth with repeated readings.

### ***What Do You Experience When You Write Haiku?***

Whether haiku are written from memory or from an immediate experience, they are written in the present tense. The prompt to record is often a sensory awareness that draws the poet's attention.

I was a farm child so the scent when someone on horseback goes by brings remembrances of: animals, the earth. Gardening also can trigger memories. I've written those haiku as if happening in the present. (Winona Baker)

I write haiku as a way of moving more intimately into the natural condition that gave rise to the writing. (Marshall Hryciuk)

These poets connect their outer experience to their inner, and allude to the outer event happening first. Other poets observe that the sensory awareness and the emotional response are interchangeable as a first step, and that sometimes the emotional state is what allows the poet to welcome an observation.

As a writer, I find that haiku come to me at the juncture of strong emotion and keen observation. Something I see triggers an emotion or a memory or occasionally a fantasy; or, in reverse, my emotional state causes me to observe more deeply. (Pamela Miller Ness)

When I write haiku I approach it from one of two angles. I either start with an emotion (which seldom results in a good poem), or with a concrete image, which I tell myself must be evocative of something, an emotion perhaps, or else it would not have grabbed my attention. (Dina Cox)

Perhaps my emphasis on chronology is a disservice to the experience of haiku. Studies in consciousness reveal that it is the wholeness of *embodied cognition* that integrates mind-body-environment interactions. Neuropsychologist Merlin Donald (2001) asserts that “our bodies set the stage not only for conscious experience, but for memory” (p. 67), and describes the theory of neurologist Antonio Damasio that the bodily feeling tone of an experience is crucial for anchoring that experience in the moment and in memory. Damasio (1999) states that “[e]ven in the most typical course of events, the emotional responses target *both* body proper and brain” (p. 288). Similarly, philosopher Evan Thompson (2001) proposes that “the affective mind isn’t in the head, but in the whole body” (p. 4), and reiterates that this embodied awareness occurs in relationship to others and to the environment. Haiku are poems of the senses that allude to feelings and memories, and that can hint at deeper, symbolic truth. It is important to remember that human nature has an integrity, and that the sensory, emotional, and spiritual ways of

connecting to an experience are not separate, but occur together. One respondent expressed this experience of unity in the following way.

As the poet contemplates and experiences, becomes submerged in the object, there comes (as Coleridge said) “a coalescence of subject and object into one.” Consciousness is completely unified and the poet’s nature and environment are one. (Terry Ann Carter)

When I answered the question “what do I experience when I write haiku,” I realized I was drawn to incongruity, like seeing the delicate tendrils of a morning glory clinging to the sturdy bark of a tree. Or, more correctly, what I perceive as an incongruity since nature has its own inherent wholeness. It is often the sensory awareness that prompts me to write, and only later does the emotional connection occur to me. The dissonance disappears into consonance. The paradox is that they are both present in the moment of experience.

### ***What Do You Experience When You Read Haiku?***

When I was initially considering the questions to be included as prompts for the survey, I had an inkling that there might be a difference between the experience of writing a haiku and of reading one written by someone else. One poet described the difference of reading a haiku as being more relaxed.

The critic hat’s on in a different way than when I’m writing my own haiku. I can relax and be present with an experience. (Winona Baker)

From my experience, I agree with her. There appears to be less at stake when I am reading a haiku. An insight may still occur, but I do not feel the urgency that I do when trying to record my

experience into a poem. However, both sensory awareness and emotional connection are still important to me in reading a haiku, as they are in writing one.

Having enough familiarity with the images when I read a haiku is an important first step in its appreciation. Otherwise the gap between the images remains unresolved. One participant commented on making this connection as well.

In reading haiku by various other poets, I am struck by the notion that, “YES! that ‘works’ for me;” in other words, bridging that “gap” is something within my realm of possibility. (Terry Ann Carter)

Other poets focused on the novelty in a haiku. Again there is a balancing: this time between familiarity and novelty. The novelty can act as “magic” to shake up one’s assumptions and invite new insight to emerge.

Pretty much like a magic trick, the artist shows you an image, lets your brain sort it out, and then transforms the image so that your brain has to reconsider its assumption of what it has seen.... The haiku poet does this primarily in two ways: 1) The first is to present a single familiar image, but to frame it in a certain way so that we are forced to re-evaluate that image. 2) The poet takes two familiar safe images but by placing them together creates tension by forcing the reader’s brain to try to make some sense of why these images are side by side. (Marco Fraticelli)

Or novelty can act in a similar manner to the punch line of a joke. Again, expectations are challenged, and the reader is invited to see things in a new way.

As to haiku in general, they depend on the same thing as most good jokes, shifting the readers or hearers away from their expectations...or even trampling on, or cheating them out of those said expectations.... The pairing should be done in an original, unexpected manner to create the joke effect. Further, a haiku, like a good joke, is ruined by being explained. (Grant Savage)

Both haiku and jokes are characterized by incongruity that invites interaction. The structure of humour as described by psychologist Lucille Nahemow (1986) could as easily describe the structure of haiku: “The discrepancy between the expected and that which transpires accounts for the humorous experience. However, incongruity alone appears insufficient. There must also be resolution for the joke to make sense” (p. 6). Nahemow also notes that “[t]he recognition that something is funny contains both emotional and cognitive elements” (p. 8), and this kind of wholehearted response is true for haiku as well.

Along with experiencing the unexpected as a kind of insight, several poets described a physical response to encountering the juxtaposition in a haiku. This relates once again to the mind-body-environment integrity of embodied cognition.

There is something pleasing about the interruption in and of itself—perhaps like the lightness we feel in our stomachs when driving over an abrupt hill or cycling downward on a ferris wheel. (Barry George)

What do I experience when I read haiku? I experience haiku as almost a physical jolt.

With a good poem, I feel something is triggered in my mind, sort of like an extra release of electrical energy. I silently think “hmmm” or “yes, isn’t that true,” either because I’ve

experienced that situation myself, and am re-experiencing it, or because I believe in its truth and feel that I am actually experiencing the moment along with the poet. With a truly excellent poem, I feel it with my entire body. (Angela Leuck)

Several poets also described this capacity of haiku to evoke memory.

If successful, haiku can resonate deeply and evoke long forgotten or buried experiences in a reader, thus providing a spark to reaffirm life. (Rick Black)

This leads me to believe that haiku are stimulators of memory and the gap that is created is to give the subconscious mind time to shift into sensory mode to join the two images. (Alice Frampton)

A well-crafted haiku holds enough familiarity that the reader can relate to the images, and enough novelty that the reader is encouraged to jump the gap and make some kind of connection. One poet described this experience as “co-creation” in which each reader renews the haiku with their own interpretation.

Of course, if a haiku is going to work, it must resonate for the reader as well as the writer. The reader needs to be able to enter the moment and make a connection that works for her. This may not be the exact connection that the writer had in mind, but that doesn't matter because a good haiku is open to multiple interpretations. In fact, one of the essential characteristics of good haiku is that they are open-ended, and the reader becomes a co-creator of experience. (Pamela Miller Ness)

### ***Summary***

It can be a challenge to describe something as intuitive as writing or reading a haiku, and I appreciate the poets' generosity in doing so. For many poets, haiku is a way to describe their experiences through an elegant and meaningful form. For others, haiku is an attitude and a way of life—the lens through which they view the world. Like metaphor, haiku can be both *product* and *process*. It is also gift.

The primary purpose of reading and writing haiku is sharing moments of our lives that have moved us, pieces of experience and perception that we offer or receive as gifts. At the deepest level, this is the one great purpose of all art, and especially of literature.

(William J. Higginson, as quoted in MacRury, 2009)

### **Educational Possibilities**

My experiences in Soul Sessions prompted my exploration of the connection-building capacity of haiku. They also provided the backdrop for my wonderings about the place of poetry in the curriculum. Most of the participants in Soul Sessions would have memorized poems in school, as I had in my early grades before public speaking took its place. The participants' recitation of the poem *The Highwayman* along with Marjorie when she had first read it to them was her catalyst for exploring poetry further, and for eventually inviting me to the group. Might their early encounters with poetry (anchored through memorization) be important for building a foundation for and an appreciation of poetry that can extend beyond the school years? I believe so. And this importance is not that poems can be recited in later years, but that poetry allows the development of a metaphorical understanding. Arts educator Elliot Eisner (2002) describes work in the arts as a way to develop "a disposition to tolerate ambiguity, to explore what is

uncertain...[and] such a disposition is at the root of the development of individual autonomy” (p. 10). Metaphorical understanding that allows room for ambiguity and uncertainty may help to build essential skills not only for future learning, but for navigating the complexities of life that follow graduation.

Haiku focus on the particular as it happens in the present moment, and can allude to a wider and deeper symbolic meaning. As an accessible form of poetry, haiku could be used widely in teaching to develop such metaphorical understanding. Its advantages are many.

Haiku are brief, and such brevity means that its form can be taught and practiced within a short time frame in a classroom setting. As well, haiku can be taught at many different grade levels, and could be combined with the associated forms of *haibun* (story and haiku) and *haiga* (picture and haiku).

Haiku could potentially be used in subjects other than the usual one of language arts. During my graduate school experience, I facilitated a haiku workshop for a group of teacher-candidates in a writing class. When they returned from their time in the classroom, they shared their experiences of applying haiku in novel ways. One teacher-candidate used haiku in her Grade 11 physics class: she invited her students to use the first line for the concept and to use the next two lines to give an example of the concept. Another teacher-candidate shared haiku as an exercise with his Grade 8 history class. Several other teacher-candidates read and talked about haiku with their students in the primary grades.

Writing haiku invites students to stand in the authority of their own experience, and to express their understanding through the potent language of poetry. At the same time that haiku invites students to explore their inner selves, it also invites them to explore their connection with the environment in which they live. Educator and poet Victoria Gaylie (2008) invited her urban,

middle-school students to write poetry outdoors as a way of teaching ecoliteracy, and one of the forms of poetry she used was haiku. Her study showed “how nurturing a quiet, alert, poetic awareness toward the earth in our students provides a predisposition that permits ecoliterate knowledge to emerge” (p. 13).

In a world that is becoming increasingly complex through technological advances and ecological challenges, haiku offers an opportunity for connecting to the simplicity and wholeness of nature, including our human nature. This is a valuable lesson at any age.

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**rose hips and roses and buds:** *Waiting for You to Speak, Haiku Canada Members Anthology, Haiku Canada Sheet, Frogpond, RAW NerVZ HAIKU, The Second Time, Rose Haiku for Flower Lovers and Gardeners, and Carpe diem: Anthologie canadienne du haïku / Canadian anthology of haiku.*

**full moon:** *The Heron’s Nest, Haiku Canada Newsletter, and the Daily Haiku web site* (November 2005 and September 2007). <http://haiku.mannlib.cornell.edu/date/2007/09/page/23/>

**a sparrow alights:** *Daily Haiku web site* (November 2005), and as part of the Theatre Kingston production of *the garbage and the flowers: beauty in the most unlikely of places* (November 2008).

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