

A Preliminary Report of a New Case of Responsive Xenoglossy: The Case of Gretchen

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INTRODUCTION

In an earlier report of a case of responsive xenoglossy (Stevenson, 1974) I discussed and emphasized the potentially important contribution of such cases to the evidence of survival after death. I also pointed out that authentic cases of this type are exceedingly rare. Since 1970 I have been investigating a second case of responsive xenoglossy about which I have prepared and will shortly submit for publication a lengthy, detailed report. It has seemed appropriate, however, to offer readers of the *Journal* a summary of the essential features of this case. I have called it the Gretchen case after the name of the manifesting personality or communicator who spoke a foreign language, in this instance German.

Since the experiments were still in progress when I began my investigation, and since I can speak German, I was able to speak it with the trance personality on four separate occasions. In addition, however, I enlisted the assistance of three native speakers of German who participated with me in sessions at which German was spoken.

In referring to the trance personality or communicator of this case by the name she gave herself, Gretchen, I do so without commitment to any interpretation of her ontological status. It is desirable to keep

¹ It is a pleasure to acknowledge with thanks the wholehearted cooperation of the Rev. Carroll Jay and Mrs. Dolores Jay (the subject) in my investigation of this case. They have asked to be identified by their real names. In this report I shall usually refer to them by their initials.

My thanks are due also to Dr. Doris Wilsdorf, Dr. Kurt Kehr, and Mrs. Elisabeth Hölischer Day, all natives of Germany, who participated with me in three sessions at which German was spoken with the Gretchen personality. Mrs. Day, in addition, helped in the transcription and translation of tape recordings.

Mr. Richard Arther of New York City conducted the polygraph examination of Mrs. Jay. I am grateful to him for this assistance.

separate the question of who, if anyone, Gretchen was from the questions whether the subject during the trances spoke German responsively and whether she had ever learned that language normally.

CASE REPORT

Summary of the Case and Its Investigation

Carroll Jay, the hypnotist for the experiments from which this case developed, started to practice hypnosis in about 1954. In the late 1960s he began a series of experiments in regression during hypnosis to "previous lives." He found that his wife, Dolores, made an excellent subject for hypnosis, but the present case did not develop directly from an attempt to regress D.J. to a "previous life." Instead, it began one day (May 10, 1970) when C.J. had hypnotized D.J. to give her some relief from a backache. Upon asking her a question, he was surprised to hear her reply with the German word "Nein." C.J. had and has no effective knowledge of German, but he knew that "Nein" is German for "No." A few days later (May 13, 1970) he hypnotized his wife again and tried to encourage the personality that had spoken this German word to emerge further. Gretchen then manifested and during experiments throughout the next year and later she gave considerable information about herself, although she left many gaps in what we would like to know about the life she described.

Gretchen spoke (with a few brief exceptions) entirely in German. C.J. spoke to her in English which Gretchen seemed able to understand. Because he understood no German, C.J. had some difficulty in comprehending what Gretchen was saying. However, several friends who knew some German listened to some of the tape recordings of Gretchen's German and their assistance, together with that of a German-English dictionary that he bought, gradually enabled C.J. to understand the general drift of what Gretchen was saying. Her expressions of emotion and gestures also aided this process.

By the spring of 1971, C.J. had had about 10 sessions in which he had spoken English to Gretchen and she had replied in German. He then invited a native of Germany to attend a session and converse with Gretchen in German. Some exchange in German occurred, but a misunderstanding as to the purpose of this experiment—that of establishing clearly Gretchen's ability to speak German responsively—made it less helpful than it would have been otherwise.

I learned about the case in the summer of 1971 and began my investigation of it in September of that year. On September 2, 1971, I

participated in an experimental session in Mt. Orab, Ohio, where the Jays were then living. Gretchen manifested and showed clearly that she understood questions I put to her in German, giving sensible replies to them in German. Subsequently, I brought three native speakers of German to sessions with Gretchen. These were: Dr. Doris Wilsdorf, who participated in a session in Mt. Orab, Ohio, on October 5, 1971; Dr. Kurt Kehr, who participated in one in Elkton, Virginia, to which the Jays had moved, on May 11, 1973; and Mrs. Elisabeth Hölscher Day, who participated in one at the Division of Parapsychology, University of Virginia, on March 25, 1974.

In addition to the foregoing experiments, a little German was spoken to Gretchen at two other sessions when I was not present. One of these occurred on September 10, 1971, and was recorded. The other occurred sometime in April, 1973, and was not recorded.

The experiments were discontinued in the summer of 1974 when D.J., for whom the long series of experiments had been something of a strain, declared that she did not wish to participate in any more.

By this time at least 22 sessions at which Gretchen had manifested had taken place. As mentioned above, one of these was not recorded and the tapes of two other sessions (and possibly others) have been mislaid or lost. There remain, however, a corpus of 19 tape recordings of sessions with Gretchen, some of them rather lengthy. All of these were transcribed and translated by Mrs. Elisabeth Day and myself. Since every word of German spoken to Gretchen up to April, 1973 (and most of what was spoken afterward) was included in these transcriptions, it became possible to make an accurate count of all the German words spoken and to say who had spoken them first. The tape recordings and transcripts also permitted an examination of Gretchen's German grammar and pronunciation.

Having become convinced that Gretchen could speak German responsively, I extended my investigation to the question whether D.J. might have learned German normally in childhood or later. She and her husband both firmly denied any knowledge of German prior to the development of the experiments at which Gretchen emerged and they both signed affidavits to that effect. D.J. stated that she had never studied German in school or otherwise and had never even heard it spoken apart from occasional phrases on radio and television programs. She took a polygraph test for lie detection with results affirming the honesty of her denials of previous knowledge of German.

I considered it important to make a searching inquiry into the circumstances of her childhood with regard to the possibility that she might have learned German then and afterwards forgotten that she had done so. In the course of this inquiry I visited Clarksburg, West Virginia, in the area of which she and her husband had grown up. I

spent the better part of two days there in May, 1973, and will give later some details of my inquiries.

Brief Relevant History of the Subject

D.J. was born on May 18, 1922, in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Her father was of mixed ancestry, but it did not include any Germans. Her mother had two great-great-grandparents who had immigrated to the United States from Germany, but they had died many years before D.J.'s birth. D.J.'s mother, whom I interviewed, told me that she had never heard any member of her family speaking German.

During D.J.'s infancy, when she was less than two years old, her family moved from the town of Clarksburg to the adjoining suburb of Eastview. D.J. grew up in Eastview and from there attended first the local primary school and then the high school in the neighboring suburb of Nutter Fort. There she met Carroll Jay, who had himself grown up in Nutter Fort. They became close friends and were married soon after D.J.'s graduation at the age of about 18.

After their marriage, C.J. trained for the ministry and was ordained in the United Methodist Church in 1959. He subsequently served as pastor in a number of churches in West Virginia, Virginia, Alabama, and Ohio. He also taught on a part-time basis in schools of the areas where he and his wife lived. They had four children. They were living in Mt. Orab, Ohio, when the Gretchen case developed in May, 1970.

As I mentioned earlier, C.J. had engaged in hypnosis as a dedicated amateur for many years before the case developed. He had some acquaintance with developments in modern parapsychology, but neither he nor his wife belonged to any formal organization associated with it. Nor were they members of any of the numerous cultist groups that purport to study paranormal phenomena or elicit them. Their knowledge of such matters, and interest in them, seem to have been no greater than that of intelligent laymen.

Gretchen's Personality and the Content of her Principal Communications

During the experiments it was possible to influence Gretchen to assume different ages between eight and 16. She did not like to be 16, however, and firmly refused to advance beyond that age. She said she had died at 16, but gave fragmentary and somewhat differing accounts of how she had died.

Gretchen said that her family name was Gottlieb and that her father, Hermann Gottlieb, was mayor of the town of Eberswalde in Germany where she lived. Her mother was dead and her principal companion was a Frau Schilder who was the housekeeper. Gretchen

played with the young children of Frau Schilder. She did not go to school and said that she could not read or write. She described her own appearance and also said what she and her family ate. She gave a little information about Eberswalde. She could not, however, name any political leaders or the head of the state.

Gretchen was much preoccupied with religious strife and reverted to the subject repeatedly. She said the head of her church was Pope Leo. This statement identified her as a Roman Catholic, a connection that she also stated explicitly on one occasion. Gretchen expressed much fear of the "Bundesrat" (best translated by the phrase "Federal Council") and she depicted its members as listening in to her conversations and posing a serious danger. She was constantly apprehensive about being overheard. She alluded to imprisonment and at one time gave the impression that she herself had been imprisoned.

Gretchen showed pervasively a rather depressed and fearful mood. Occasionally, however, she relaxed and even chuckled a little. She rarely spoke spontaneously, but nearly always only in response to questions. She had few themes of conversation and efforts to lead her onto topics other than those mentioned above were usually unsuccessful.

Efforts to Trace a Person Corresponding to Gretchen's Statements

It has not been possible to trace any person whose life corresponded to Gretchen's statements. Some of her statements are incompatible with known facts. For example, a real Gretchen could not have been the daughter of a mayor of Eberswalde by the name of Hermann Gottlieb because Eberswalde has had no mayor of that name (Schmidt, 1939, 1941).² On the other hand, a number of the words she used and names she mentioned plausibly suggest a life in Germany during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. The expression "Bundesrat," for example, was conceived in 1867 to designate the council of the states federated in the North German Confederation and its successor, the (second) German Empire. In the 1870s a severe struggle occurred between the secular authority of the Prussian (and German Imperial) government and the Roman Catholic Church. This quarrel, known as the Kulturkampf, entailed much hardship and even persecution for Roman Catholics in Germany. The Bundesrat, presided over by Bismarck as Chancellor of the German

² At present the only town in Germany (East or West) with the name Eberswalde and large enough to have a post office is the city 60 kilometers northeast of Berlin. Inquiries made in Eberswalde have failed to uncover any evidence of a person corresponding to Gretchen's statements. I am trying to learn whether other towns with that name may have existed earlier and since been absorbed in larger communities.

Empire, took a leading part in numerous repressive measures adopted by the government against the Roman Catholics. The strife did not end until after Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) adopted a more conciliatory tone toward the German government than had his predecessor, Pius IX (1846-1878), and Bismarck, for his part, had realized that he and Germany were losing more than they were gaining by harsh treatment of Roman Catholics.

The failure to trace a person corresponding to Gretchen's account of herself means that the chief interest of the case lies in the evidence for responsive xenoglossy, to which I shall now turn.

Characteristics of Gretchen's German

From my own knowledge of German I am certain that Gretchen could speak the language responsively, that is, that she could give sensible answers in German to questions put to her in that language. (She could also understand English, but would answer in German when addressed in English.) My opinion on Gretchen's ability to speak German responsively was shared by Dr. Kurt Kehr and Mrs. Elisabeth Hölscher Day, and they both signed statements to that effect. Dr. Doris Wilsdorf, to whom, for reasons that I do not understand, Gretchen had not responded well, thought that Gretchen had perhaps picked up the German she spoke during the session at which Dr. Wilsdorf participated from us (Dr. Wilsdorf and myself). Dr. Wilsdorf said that although Gretchen answered questions in German, she had doubts about whether Gretchen understood what she was saying. It was possible to resolve the questions raised by Dr. Wilsdorf through an examination of the tape recording and transcript of the session at which she participated. These showed that Gretchen herself introduced 96 words in that session before either Dr. Wilsdorf or I had spoken them. Furthermore, of these 96 words, 21 had never previously been spoken by Gretchen or anyone else who had earlier spoken German with her. With regard to the intelligibility of Gretchen's responses in German, I counted 16 instances in which what she said gave a sensible response to a question or comment Dr. Wilsdorf or I had made, and only two instances in which Gretchen's reply did not make sense.

In the 19 transcripts of sessions with Gretchen, I counted altogether 237 German words that Gretchen herself first introduced; that is, she used them before anyone had spoken them to her in these sessions. Of these words, she used 120 in the nine (recorded) sessions before *any* German was spoken to her. Many of the German words used by Gretchen were cognates with English words; perhaps half could be so considered. The remaining words of her vocabulary consisted of German words that were not cognates of English ones or

only remotely so. And even when speaking the cognates Gretchen tended to pronounce and use them as a German would. In addition, she used a number of rather obscure and somewhat archaic German words. In general, however, her German vocabulary was modern.

Gretchen's German grammar was much more defective than her vocabulary. She spoke mostly in short phrases each consisting of only a few words and her word order, a feature of much importance in the German language, was quite faulty. She rather often simply omitted words, especially auxiliary verbs. She showed no knowledge of the inverted word order used in German subsidiary clauses. And she seemed also to have almost no ability to use the past and future tenses of German verbs. Her grammar fluctuated in quality, at some times being appreciably better than at others. It did not, however, show any noticeable improvement over the three years during which she was exposed to correct German spoken to her by persons from whom she might have learned to improve her own language.

Some of Gretchen's grammatical errors were those typical of Americans who have learned German imperfectly, but they were not specifically so. That is, these errors could be made by persons of any nationality who had learned German defectively.

Gretchen's German pronunciation was excellent at some times, and satisfactory or good at most other times. Occasionally she grossly mispronounced a word. Neither I nor any of my three German colleagues who spoke with Gretchen detected in her accent (or other aspects of her language) features that were geographically localizing, that is, suggestive of the dialect of a particular region of Germany or Austria. There was certainly no trace of the accent characteristic of most Swiss speakers of German.

On one occasion (April 23, 1971) Gretchen wrote 38 words in German. These were strung together in short phrases somewhat like her oral utterances. The phrases are not easy to translate because of obvious omissions of words. They do, however, make some sense and show allusions to Gretchen's dominant theme of religious persecution. The particular interest of this xenography lies in the mixture of auditory and visual influences on the spelling of the German words in it. Some of the words are spelled correctly as they would be by a person who had read some German. (This appears to contradict Gretchen's statement that she could not read.) But others are spelled incorrectly as they might be by someone (an English speaker, for example) who had never learned to read or spell German and who was trying to represent as best he could German words that he heard by recording them with the closest approximating written symbols derived from English.

For further and more detailed information about Gretchen's German I must refer readers to the long report that I hope to publish of

this case which will include portions of transcripts of several sessions at which she spoke and the passage of writing just mentioned.

Inquiries Relevant to the Possibility that D.J. Had Learned German Normally

As mentioned earlier, D.J. firmly denied that she had ever studied or learned German. Her husband made the same denials and both signed an affidavit to that effect. D.J. took a polygraph test for lie detection on February 5, 1974, in New York City. The polygraph operator, Mr. Richard Arther, asked her questions concerning her awareness of ever having learned or spoken German prior to the development of the case in May, 1970. Mr. Arther interpreted the results of the test as indicating that D.J. believed she was telling the truth in her answers to the questions posed. (C.J. had been equally willing to undergo a polygraph test, but because he was in poor health and taking medication it was thought that his physiological responsiveness would be inadequate for a reliable test.)

In the area of Clarksburg, West Virginia, where both the Jays grew up, I interviewed 19 relatives and neighbors of D.J. The principal informants concerning her childhood were her parents and a younger sister. They all affirmed that they had had no German-speaking persons in their family or among their acquaintances in Eastview, the suburb of Clarksburg where they lived. They also denied having any German books in the house when D.J. was a child. They were equally certain that D.J. could not have gone off from the home by herself, perhaps visiting some German-speaking resident of the area, without their knowing of such wanderings. D.J.'s parents and younger sister signed an affidavit testifying to all the above points. Subsequently D.J.'s older sister signed a similar statement. I did not meet her, but corresponded with her about the pertinent questions.

After Spanish, German is the most commonly spoken foreign language in the United States and is therefore not infrequently heard in this country. However, for the interpretation of the present case we are concerned not with the number of German speakers all over the United States, but with the number of them who lived in the area where D.J. grew up and her chances of being exposed to the German language spoken by one of them.³ Fortunately, rather exact figures

³ Mere exposure to a foreign language spoken in one's presence may lead to recitative xenoglossy—rote memory of some passage of the language heard—but cannot alone produce responsive xenoglossy. The ability to speak a language, including one's mother tongue, requires practice (Stevenson, 1974). However, if I had found evidence of any German speaker with whom D.J. had had contact during her childhood, we might assume that she had spoken the language with him even though such an assumption would have included complete forgetfulness of this on the part of D.J.

exist for the number of German-speaking persons who were living during D.J.'s childhood in Harrison County, West Virginia, of which Clarksburg is by far the largest community. In 1920 there were 476 persons in the county identified as having been born in the German-speaking countries of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Davis, 1970). By 1930 the number of such persons had decreased to 217. I learned, however, that the German immigrants to Harrison County did not tend to agglomerate as much as some of the other ethnic groups of that region had done. I could learn of no German-speaking persons in Eastview itself. There was a small group of German-speaking persons about a mile to the west of Eastview, where D.J. grew up, and another about a mile to the north. So far as I could learn, there were no German-speaking persons within the ordinary range of a young child, even one less closely supervised than D.J. appears to have been.

The German language was not taught in the schools of Harrison County during the period when D.J. (and C.J.) attended them. This fact is relevant to the possibility that D.J., even if she had not studied German herself at school, might there have become acquainted with a teacher who was a native of Germany or otherwise a speaker of German.

Some Observations on the Relationship between D.J. and Gretchen

Some time before the first emergence of Gretchen as a trance personality in May, 1970, D.J. had a vivid dream about a girl who was riding a horse sidesaddle.⁴ The girl was accompanied by an older man who was on foot. They were approached by a crowd of angry persons armed with sticks and stones. The man escaped, but one of the mob seized the bridle of the girl's horse at which point D.J. awoke. In the first part of this dream D.J. seemed to be an observer of what was happening to the girl, but toward its end she experienced herself as actually being the girl. As the dream unfolded D.J. spoke (in English) about it to C.J. who was lying on a bed beside her as she slept. A day or two later C.J. hypnotized D.J. and instructed her to relive and describe the dream to him in more detail. She did this, but no new details came out. The Jays do not appear to have attached much importance to this dream at the time, but subsequently, after the emergence of Gretchen, D.J. identified the girl in the dream with Gretchen and therefore also with herself—at least up to a certain point.

⁴ D.J. and C.J. afterward differed in their estimates of just how long before May, 1970, this dream had occurred, but D.J. certainly dreamed it not more than a year earlier and probably much less.

During the session of April 23, 1971, D.J. again had the experience of "seeing" Gretchen and it was on this occasion that Gretchen seemed to "take over" sufficiently to write the German phrases mentioned above. In the late winter of 1971-72 D.J. had a series of nightmarish dreams in which she saw Gretchen beckoning to her and inviting her to join her, presumably on some other plane of existence. D.J. also at this time rather often had a sense of the presence of Gretchen. She thought that if she turned around she would actually see Gretchen standing in the room behind her. Once she did turn around when under this influence and had a brief vision of Gretchen, Gretchen said nothing and the apparition soon faded away.

D.J. found these experiences somewhat frightening and she considered without pleasure the possibility that Gretchen might somehow "possess" her. At the same time Gretchen herself did not frighten or annoy her. She thought of her as a benign person, but one in need of help. D.J. and C.J. have both come to regard Gretchen as a friend and "member of the family."

Observations Concerning the Attitude of the Jays toward the Case

Prior to the development of this case the Jays had little interest in reincarnation or knowledge about evidence of it. (C.J. had nevertheless been sufficiently interested in the subject to undertake the experiments with hypnosis regressing subjects to "previous lives" that I mentioned earlier.) They found the idea of reincarnation somewhat incompatible with the teachings of Christianity to which they subscribed. They were therefore open-minded with regard to the possibility of reincarnation, but far from convinced believers in it. On the other hand, the idea of possession had little more appeal for them and perhaps less, since it carried the connotation of traffic with the devil. And this in turn involved the Jays in controversy with some persons of their community who learned about the experiments at which Gretchen had manifested. C.J. endorsed a thorough scientific investigation of the case of which the present summary is the first report. At the same time he also wished to have the case made public in a manner that would answer his critics, if not silence them. Some newspaper reports about the case that appeared before 1975 furnished half-information or misinformation of a sort that exacerbated the conflict the Jays felt with certain members of their community. C.J. accordingly decided to release a fuller account of the case. An article about it then appeared in the *Washington Post* on January 20, 1975. This in turn generated worldwide publicity that greatly surprised the Jays and troubled them a little. Summing up the results, however, they have decided that this publicity was on the whole beneficial and led to a better understanding of the experiments on the part of persons whose opinion they respected; others they were

willing to ignore. C.J. now plans to write a book about the case, recording its development from his and his wife's point of view and showing the impact it has had on their lives.

DISCUSSION

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the principal significance of the case, at least up to this point in its investigation, derives from the occurrence of a responsive xenoglossy. That the Gretchen personality could speak German intelligibly seems to me established beyond all doubt. The facts that Gretchen's German grammar was defective and that her pronunciation was also poor at times are certainly of interest, but should not detract from the more important fact that Gretchen spoke German and did so most of the time quite intelligibly.

If my statements and those of the native German speakers who helped me are accepted with regard to Gretchen's ability to speak German, then the next question is whether D.J. learned German normally. She denies that she did so and I am convinced that she and her husband have told the truth when they say that they had no effective knowledge of the German language prior to the development of the case. If we set aside fraud as a hypothesis, there remains the possibility that D.J. somehow learned German in her early childhood and afterwards forgot that she had done so, this fact also remaining unknown to her family or having been forgotten by them. This explanation of the case seemed far-fetched to me when I went to Clarksburg to search for evidence of it; and it seemed even more so after I had been there. All my efforts, which I think not inconsiderable, to learn of any opportunity D.J. might have had for learning German when she was a young child turned up nothing whatever to support this conjecture. After some years of doubt, I now have no hesitation in saying that I am quite convinced that D.J. did not learn German normally.

How then did D.J. acquire the ability to speak German that she showed during the periods of Gretchen's manifestation? In reporting the Jensen case (Stevenson, 1974) I argued that the ability to speak a foreign language is a skill, that skills cannot be acquired without practice, cannot be transmitted either normally or paranormally, and that if it can be shown that a person has not normally learned a foreign language that he can speak responsively, then we have evidence of the existence and influence on him (or her) of another personality which at some time had learned that language. In short, authentic cases of responsive xenoglossy provide for me important evidence of the survival of human personality after death.

A surviving personality capable of continuing to speak a foreign

language and expressing it through an entranced person may do so through processes that we call reincarnation or possession.

With the concept of reincarnation, we can think of a deceased personality which had once learned to speak the language in question as surviving death as an enduring personality which later becomes associated with a new physical body. Under the special circumstances provided by hypnosis, and perhaps at other times, the previous personality could come to the surface—albeit perhaps only partially, but yet with sufficient control to speak its native language.

In considering the hypothesis of possession, we can imagine a deceased personality capable of speaking its native language persisting in a discarnate state until a suitably entranced living person gives it an opportunity to manifest temporarily through that person's body. In the present case this would imply that D.J. became a medium when hypnotized by C.J. and that at such times Gretchen became a communicator capable of controlling D.J. with sufficient power to speak her native language.

If we interpret the case as one of reincarnation, this does not bind us to believing that D.J. is a "one-to-one" reincarnation of a previously living Gretchen. It is conceivable that D.J. lived a previous life in Germany when she could speak German and that the Gretchen personality provided an appropriate dramatic vehicle for the partial expression of memories of that previous life. The Gretchen personality might then resemble an historical novel comprised partly of fact, partly of fiction. Nor does the interpretation of possession oblige us to believe that the manifest personality of Gretchen corresponds exactly, or even closely, with a real person who once lived a terrestrial life and is now discarnate. On this hypothesis also, the phenomenal Gretchen personality could be a mixture blended from parts of D.J.'s own personality and elements of a real discarnate Gretchen lying behind and influencing the manifest communicator (Hart, 1958).

I find myself at this time quite unable to decide firmly between the interpretations of reincarnation and possession for this case and also for that of Jensen (Stevenson, 1974). I am, however, somewhat inclined to favor that of possession, but with the qualification included in the preceding paragraph. I see no reason to be rushed toward final judgments in this matter. It seems to me enough for the present to conclude that responsive xenoglossy derives from *some* paranormal process. If my assumptions about skills be allowed, then responsive xenoglossy further indicates survival of a human personality after death and its later manifestation in the sessions with xenoglossy.

The further study of additional cases of this type cannot help being fruitful in many ways. The Jensen and Gretchen cases exhibit a

number of similarities which are all the more impressive since I am certain that the two cases developed quite independently of each other. If we can study three or four more such cases and if we find that the characteristics already noted for the Jensen and Gretchen cases are repeated in others, we shall be able to make interpretations about processes in such cases with much more confidence than we can at present justify.

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