



## **Strong at the Broken Places: Voices of Illness, A Chorus of Hope**

*Richard M. Cohen*

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*Strong at the Broken Places* is the remarkable story of five ordinary people trapped in the complex world of serious chronic illness. In this intimate portrait, acclaimed journalist Richard M. Cohen probes lives of sickness as these individuals struggle to cope.

In 2003 Cohen published *Blindsided*, a bestselling memoir of illness. The outpouring of support revealed to him that not only does the public want to hear from people who overcome the challenges of illness, but that in the isolated world of illness, there are people who want their voices to be heard. *Strong at the Broken Places* was born of the desire of many to share their stories in the hope that the sick and those who love them will see that they are not alone.

Cohen spent three years chronicling the lives of five diverse "citizens of sickness": Denise, who suffers from ALS; Buzz, whose Christian faith helps him deal with his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; Sarah, a determined young woman with Crohn's disease; Ben, a college student with muscular dystrophy; Larry, whose bipolar disorder is hidden within. The five are different in age and gender, race and economic status, but they are determined to live life on their own terms. Intimately involved with these patients' lives, Cohen formed intense relationships with each, talked to their families and friends, and shared joy, even in heart-breaking setbacks.

Though each individual's illness wreaks havoc in a different way, Cohen shows how their experiences are strikingly similar and offer lessons for us all—on self-determination, on courage in the face of adversity and public ignorance, on keeping hope alive, and on finding strength and peace under the most difficult of circumstances.

We are strong at the broken places, stronger than we think. In sharing these inspirational and revealing stories, Richard M. Cohen and his fellow warriors against illness offer a chorus of hope.

## Strong at the Broken Places: Voices of Illness, A Chorus of Hope Details

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**Richard M. Cohen**

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## **From Reader Review Strong at the Broken Places: Voices of Illness, A Chorus of Hope for online ebook**

### **Sylvester says**

This should be on the list of 1000 Essential Books to Read. Its a humanizing book - I don't know how else to describe it. We like to read about explorers, athletes, people who climb Mt. Everest, people who escape from disaster/war/oppression - we like to see what keeps these people going when they are strained to the limit - but we see someone in a wheelchair and we look away. We are uncomfortable. These are the warriors among us, and we don't give them the time of day. I loved this book, especially the last chapter. How do people live with debilitating illness? How do they keep going when they are losing more every day? We are a culture that worships independence and health. What happens to the people who have neither luxury? What these people have to say about their struggle matters more to our society than can be measured. I highly recommend.

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### **Dustin Hartley says**

A little disappointing; definitely not the most technical of books.

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### **Ashley Peterson says**

Strong at the Broken Places: Voices of Illness, a Chorus of Hope is an intimate look at living with chronic illness. Author Richard M. Cohen, who himself has multiple sclerosis, works with five participants who have various chronic illnesses to capture their stories and help others understand the overwhelming toll that chronic illness can take. The participants are Denise, who has has ALS (often known as Lou Gherig's disease), Buzz, who has has non-Hodgkins lymphoma, Ben, who has muscular dystrophy, Sarah, who has has Crohn's disease, and Larry, who has bipolar disorder. The author engages with those featured in the book over a span of not just months but years, getting to know them on a far deeper level than simply the words they chose to use.

This is not a sanitized, at-face-value look at chronic illness. Rather, it probes the depths of it, encompassing the myriad ways in which chronic illness affects the lives of those it touches both directly and indirectly. The author skillfully ties the stories to one another, illustrating the many commonalities among the experiences of disparate chronic illnesses. The book gives voice to those who society tends to silence: "Too often the sick are seen and not heard. Listen. Their songs are soft but steady. Hear the sound of steel, the quiet toughness at the core."

There were a few things that surprised me and at times somewhat disturbed me about Cohen's approach. He openly brings in his own opinions and expectations of how the participants should behave, including questioning Buzz's decision to accept his oncologist's recommendations rather than seeking additional information or other opinions. Initially this struck me as inappropriate, but as the book progresses, as a reader I become more comfortable with it, as the purpose seemed to be a deeper exploration of the

participant's ideas and behaviours.

The author's interviews with people who knew the ill participant initially felt awkward to me as a reader, seeming almost a betrayal. In particular, his attempt to interview Buzz's 9-year-old son accomplished little besides making the child uncomfortable. However, in checking my own reaction I recognize that at least to some degree I'm projecting because of my own illness.

A mildly irritating quirk was that the dialogue didn't contain the contractions that would typically be used in casual speech. This made the dialogue feel a bit stilted at times, which is unfortunate, as it seems unlikely that this accurately reflected the quality of speech.

Cohen describes the "daily brushes with public ignorance and indifference and the stigma of being sick in a society that worships health, brand and define us." The weight and pain of the burden this imposed were difficult for the participants to carry. Larry likened chronic illness to a battle with two fronts: the disease itself and public ignorance. Denise's slurred speech led people to ignorantly jump to conclusions, such as assuming she'd had a stroke or was drunk. Sarah was quickly identified as abnormal because of the side effects of long term steroids, which significantly reshaped her face and body, and this took a heavy toll on her self-image.

I had to smile when Cohen identified "How are you?" as the most insincere question that people ask. I share the experience that "people really do not want to know and inquire under the assumption that no one will be rude enough to actually answer the question honestly." Another point that strongly resonated with me was Larry's experience that others tended to place him into a diagnostic box, attributing much of his behaviour to his illness. "When does the diagnosis stop and the human being regain a sense of control of a life?" he asks.

Social support varied amongst the participants, and maintaining relationships could be challenging. Denise was divorced and had limited family support. She pointed out that she was alone before she was diagnosed, and there was no reason for that to change after her diagnosis. She observed that a benefit of this was not having to experience guilt over being a burden on a spouse. The author repeatedly challenged Denise on her choice to be alone, which initially struck me as imposing his own preconceptions. His attempts to intercede in Denise's family situations seemed like inappropriate interference, even meddling, or a misguided attempt to apply his own agenda. Yet again, I must check myself, since like Denise I have chosen to isolate myself because of my illness.

Roles and identities are a recurring theme across the participants' stories. Buzz, unable to work, fell deeply into debt and feared ending up homeless, which compromised important role identities he held as a husband and father. Ben's parents, especially his father, struggled with the idea that their son would die before they did. Sarah's illness "constantly makes me second-guess myself and question who I am".

Buzz drew heavily on his faith in God to maintain a positive outlook. The stoicism that resulted was challenging for those around him to face. Larry identified himself as a very spiritual person, and found it frustrating when doctors dismissed his spiritual experiences as psychotic, attempting to "force patients into non-psychotic behaviour with such zealotry that they dismiss too many possibly positive and healthy dimensions of the patient's mind, body, and soul."

Hope was a theme that arose often. Larry struggled with doctors who would try to take away hope, saying he would never get his life back. He felt they had no right to do this, and he saw hope as being as necessary for the soul as oxygen for the body. The book concludes on a very hopeful note, with all of the participants presenting their stories to Harvard Medical School faculty and students. Meeting one another and speaking

together was a way to come together as a community and connect in finding hope, voice, and inspiration. Through the advocacy work they engaged in, they were able to take ownership, find a sense of purpose, and establish identity. As Larry observed, "We are connected, and were strong at the broken places."

This book is a fascinating journey into the depths of chronic illness, and while there are some elements I wish were done differently, the message of being strong together at the broken places is certainly a powerful one.

First published on the blog Mental Health @ Home  
<https://mentalhealthathome.wordpress....>

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### **Haya Dodokh says**

Strong at the Broken Places follows five individuals' stories, interviewing them and their family members with sincere interest in both learning from them and in sharing with readers what was learned. An honest look into chronic illness and relationships.

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### **Lori Erickson says**

Interesting read about illness, coping and strength.

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### **Margie says**

The book chronicles the lives of Five citizens living with various disabilities and although each wreaks havoc on them in different ways, they share similarities in courage, self determination and public ignorance. Each story tells of the person finding hope and strength under the most difficult of circumstances and how we, as able bodied people, should strive to be more like them. Each story is inspirational and revealing; and show how each one is determined to live a good life, on their own terms. Richard Cohen is the wife of Meredith Viera, (television news journalist) and was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in his late 20's; prior to his marriage to MV.

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### **Reese says**

I began reading STRONG AT THE BROKEN PLACES on March 31, 2012, when reading anything longer than a prayer was not on my to-do list. With four killer diseases, my mom was still hanging on to life. Her date of death, April 17, was -- on the Hebrew calendar -- the day after the second anniversary of my brother's death. Although (eight years ago) I found Richard M. Cohen's BLINDSIDED quite interesting and inspiring, I've noticed that I keep walking by my copy of STRONG AT THE BROKEN PLACES -- and NOT picking it up. I do plan to read it -- someday, but not today or tomorrow or next month. So I created a new GR shelf for it, and I'm almost certain that it will have company before it leaves its place on the someday-but-not-today shelf.

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### **Jessica says**

I enjoyed this, but for some reason, throughout each one of the five separate profiles in this book, the author doesn't use any contractions when writing the dialogue. This was fairly jarring, since no one truly talks like that in their everyday lives. I'm not sure why he made that choice but I think if he would've transcribed the dialogue as it was actually spoken, it would have allowed readers to better connect with the people telling their stories.

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### **Walter says**

This is a powerful book about ordinary yet extraordinary people living with chronic illnesses. What they share is an incredible determination to live the best life that they can, not to be defined by their diseases, a commitment to hope and sharing this with others via advocacy and the alienation of the sick in a society that often (if not almost always) marginalizes them.

Now, it's not perfect - some of the sections are overly long without and the author's tendency to inject his own views into his subjects' stories to offer comparisons and contrasts can be unhelpful at times. This being said, the stories of these six people are so compelling that these shortcomings are minor distractions.

To Richard Cohen's credit, the vignettes are so well written that you actually come away feeling that you know the subjects personally. You come to care about them and their struggles because the latter are so compellingly conveyed and the protagonists are so inspirational, and indeed heroic, in their pursuit of a full life despite incredible adversity. Simply put, it certainly helps those of us who are "chronically healthy" to put our problems and challenges into perspective (which was my primary reason for reading the book initially).

In closing, I recommend this book highly, as it will give perspective, hope and determination to those who allow its subjects to touch and inspire them. I appreciate both the incredible humanity therein displayed as well as the gift of heightened awareness about how we as a society (and even, perhaps, how I as a healthy person) are not sufficiently aware of or empathetic to those with chronic illness. Among other gifts from this book, this has been revealed to me and I am the better for it.

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### **Bev says**

This book is the story of 5 people with various medical conditions, and how they deal with their illnesses. The problems are a woman with Lou Gehrig's disease, a man with terminal cancer, man with muscular dystrophy, a woman with Crohn's Disease, and a man with Bi-Polar disorder. This was a tough book for me to get through. The people whose stories are told were brave and tough, but I found the telling to be on the depressing side. There were nuggets here and there that I would like to remember, but mostly I dreaded going back to it. There is a very interesting bit in Buzz Bar's story, my favorite, on pages 120-122...very cool.

The author has MS and has been through colon cancer twice. His experiences are told in his first book, *Blindsided*, which I don't think I will read.

The woman who recommended this book to me absolutely loved it, so don't discard it because of my review. I was probably just in the mood for a cheerful book!

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### **Astrid Edwards says**

Stop for a moment, and consider the likely fact that you know someone living with chronic disease. It is increasingly prevalent. And they may or may not have told you, because such diseases are often stigmatised. Richard M. Cohen collates five searing accounts of chronic disease. As a person with Multiple Sclerosis, he explores the lives of others living with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), muscular dystrophy, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, Crohn's disease and bipolar disorder.

This is a disturbing and depressing must read that I recommend for all adults. Too often we choose not to see the daily pain and extraordinary lives of those around us, many of whom are living with chronic disease. Strong at the Broken Places: Voices of Illness, a Chorus of Hope is an attempt to break through the stigma, and a good one.

As Cohen writes, 'do not turn away'.

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### **AyuShafiyah says**

Strong at The Broken Places – Adalah sebuah buku yang mengisahkan tentang 5 orang penderita penyakit kronis yang tidak dapat disembuhkan. Penulisnya sendiri, Richard M. Cohen adalah seorang jurnalis penderita Multiple Sclerosis yaitu penyakit yang menyerang system saraf pusat yang membuat terganggunya penyampaian ‘pesan’ antara otak dan bagian-bagian tubuh lainnya.

Buku ini diawali dengan berkumpulnya 5 orang penderita sakit di Harvard University untuk berbagi kisah mereka dengan mahasiswa kedokteran di sana.

Denise Glass, seorang wanita yang menderita penyakit ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), penurunan progresif pada saraf dan struktur lain yang berhubungan dengan gerakan otot. Pada akhir tahun 1999, Denise merasakan cara bicaranya yang mulai melambat dan semakin sulit menelan. Setelah melakukan berbagai pemeriksaan medis, diketahui bahwa dia menderita ALS yang juga dikenal dengan penyakit Lou Gehrig's. Dengan adanya penyakit ini, bagi Denise mulai memperjelas bagaimana dia ingin menjalani kehidupan ini.

“Saya orang yang tidak bahagia sebelum terkena ALS, dan itu telah berubah. Ketika saya terdiagnosis penyakit itu, selama sekitar delapan bulan saya benar-benar tidak melakukan apa-apa, kehilangan pekerjaan, dan seorang teman saya melibatkan saya dalam satu sesi ALS Association Greater L.A. Saya mulai menjadi sukarelawan dan bergaul dan menulis surat-surat dalam satu koran triwulan, berbicara pada berbagai seminar dan di sekolah-sekolah. Aktif dalam kegiatan pendampingan memberi saya identitas. Saya jauh lebih merasa nyaman dengan penyakit saya, karena saya tahu apa yang akan terjadi. Saya seorang pendamping. Saya melihat masa depan saya, dan menjalani kehidupan setiap hari sampai suatu hari saya tidak bergerak.”

Denise, meskipun memiliki penyakit yang sangat parah, namun dia tidak mau tergantung dengan orang lain. Baginya, ketergantungan lebih buruk daripada sekarat.

Buzz Bay, seorang religious penderita Limfoma non-Hodgkin atau kanker getah bening. Divonis menderita penyakit tersebut pada Agustus 2001. Proses Buzz dalam mengetahui penyakit yang bersarang di tubuhnya

merupakan pengalaman yang tidak enak untuk didengarkan. Para dokter yang tidak terbuka padanya, di pindahkan dari ruang pemeriksaan satu ke ruang pemeriksaan yang lain, menjalani berbagai macam tes yang sangat serius, tanpa ada penjelasan apapun dari pihak rumah sakit tempat Buzz berobat. Hingga akhirnya, sang Istri, Susan, menaruh curiga bahwa ada sesuatu yang tak beres dengan Buzz, hingga akhirnya terkuaklah tabir kebenaran itu bahwa Buzz menderita penyakit yang cukup parah.

Apa yang Buzz lakukan saat mengetahui dirinya sakit? “Saya meminta Tuhan agar saya, dengan waktu yang saya miliki, menjadi saksi yang yakin atas dirinya. Izinkan saya memberi harapan kepada orang lain ketika harapan tampaknya sudah tidak ada lagi. Bantu saya agar menjadi kuat untuk Susan dan Ryan dan berusaha menjadi suami dan ayah terbaik yang bisa saya lakukan. Bantu kami sebagai keluarga berjuang dengan semua yang kami miliki menghadapi masalah ini, dan memahami bahwa kami melakukan yang terbaik. Dan izinkan keluarga saya membantu keluarga lain memahami bahwa Tuhan ada di sana apa pun yang terjadi.

Sungguh, tidak ada sedikit pun pernyataan yang menyiratkan penyesalan ataupun pertanyaan “mengapa harus saya?”

Ben Cumbo, seorang mahasiswa di St. Mary’s College yang menderita penyakit Muscular Dystrophy, yaitu menurunnya kekuatan otot yang menyebabkan kelumpuhan. Di usianya yang masih muda, memaksa Ben untuk tumbuh dan menghadapi arti kehidupan yang dipersingkat. Namun, dia tampaknya tidak mendengarkan detak jam yang terus menghitung hari-harinya. Seperti tidak ada waktu bagi Ben untuk merasa kasihan terhadap diri sendiri atau pun merasa takut. Baginya, begitu banyak pekerjaan yang harus diselesaikan dan tidak ada waktu yang bisa dibuang-buang. Dia berani bermimpi. Ben mengajari kita bahwa menambah kualitas pada kehidupan itulah yang paling penting, bukan panjang umur kita.

“Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.”  
(Maya Angelou)

Sarah Levin, menderita sakit Crohn (semacam radang di saluran pencernaan) sejak usia 4 tahun. Cerita Sarah mengajarkan bahwa orang sakit harus berdamai dengan tubuhnya sendiri, meski terasa sangat tidak nyaman. Bayangkan saja, dalam sehari dia harus minum obat minimal 18 macam..!! Sarah benci dengan tubuhnya yang tidak banyak menawarkan kenyamanan. Dan Sarah benar-benar mengekspresikan kebenciannya. Sarah mengatakan, “Ini memang brengsek. Kesengsaraan memang sudah nasib saya. Kebaikan apa yang ada dalam kehidupan saya? Saya adalah orang cacat. Siapa yang berminat dengan saya? Siapa yang mau menikah dengan saya? Saya menjadi beban bagi keluarga, bagi teman-teman saya.”

Dengan support dari keluarganya, terutama ibunya, Sarah muda bisa mengendalikan rasa marahnya dengan lebih tenang daripada yang bisa dilakukan orang lain. Emosi tidak memberikan pengaruh terbaik pada dirinya, tapi perasaannya sangat kuat. Bagaimana dia mengatasi kekecewaannya ketika terus melaju dengan kehidupannya memberikan muatan makna tentang menjalani kehidupan dengan elegan dan kecantikan terpancar dari dalam jiwanya.

Larry Fricks, penderita gangguan bipolar, yaitu kelainan mental yang merasakan gembira dan sedih secara berlebihan. Menghabiskan sepanjang tahun 80'an di rumah sakit jiwa dan menjadi penulis sesudahnya, yang mengantarkan dia menguak kehidupan dan penyakitnya pada tahun 1999. Sejak itu, Larry sering diundang di pertemuan-pertemuan yang membahas program perawatan bagi orang-orang penderita penyakit mental. Dia memperjuangkan hak orang-orang penderita penyakit mental yang seringkali mendapatkan diskriminasi dari lingkungan sekitar.

Dengan penyakit mental yang menghinggapi tubuhnya, Larry masih menyimpan harapan. Menurutnya,

harapan bagi jiwa laksana oksigen bagi tubuh. Harapan bagi Larry adalah kunci dari pemulihan. Larry tidak sekalipun mempersoalkan penyakitnya, bahkan berpikir untuk menghilangkan penyakitnya pun tidak.

“Menghilangkan penyakit saya, berarti menghilangkan arti dan tujuan yang saya miliki sekarang. Kehidupan saya adalah kehidupan yang punya tujuan sangat penting.”

Penyakit telah mengambil identitas Larry.

Beigutulah, kisah-kisah inspiratif dari 5 orang yang berbeda usia, kelamin, ras dan statusnya. Dengan kekurangannya, tidak membuat mereka berhenti menjalani hidup, tidak membuat mereka merasa tak berguna dalam hidup. Kisah-kisah mereka memberikan pelajaran kepada kita tentang ketabahan, keberanian menghadapi kesukaran, keterasingan dari masyarakat yang tidak peduli, mempertahankan harapan dan impian, mencari kekuatan untuk berdamai dengan diri sendiri dalam kondisi tersulit sekalipun.

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### **Beth Shapiro says**

Wonderful exploration of what it means to live with different types of chronic illness. One chapter is about a social worker in the Shaker area.

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### **Jeri says**

I can't write the review as well as Goodreads did so am leaving most of it "as is":

Cohen spent three years chronicling the lives of five diverse "citizens of sickness": Denise, who suffers from ALS; Buzz, whose Christian faith helps him deal with his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; Sarah, a determined young woman with Crohn's disease; Ben, a college student with muscular dystrophy; Larry, whose bipolar disorder is hidden within. The five are different in age and gender, race and economic status, but they are determined to live life on their own terms. Intimately involved with these patients' lives, Cohen formed intense relationships with each, talked to their families and friends, and shared joy, even in heart-breaking setbacks.

Though each individual's illness wreaks havoc in a different way, Cohen shows how their experiences are strikingly similar and offer lessons for us all--on self-determination, on courage in the face of adversity and public ignorance, on keeping hope alive, and on finding strength and peace under the most difficult of circumstances.

We are strong at the broken places, stronger than we think. In sharing these inspirational and revealing stories, Richard M. Cohen and his fellow warriors against illness offer a chorus of hope.

As one of those who is suffering from chronic illness which has no cure but also is not life threatening, these stories gave me true inspiration and to say that "there but the grace of...." If they can do it, so can I!

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## Brandt says

After the acknowledgment section, and just prior to the preface, Cohen (2008) quotes Ernest Hemingway's (1929) powerfully subjective stance on life, *viz.*, “[t]he world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places”. However, this quote is not entirely correct. What Hemingway wrote was,

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry” (Hemingway, 1929, p. 267).

I am not quite sure why Cohen chose the abbreviated version of the quote. It appears that the actual quote more closely resembles the context and spirit the book was written in. Nevertheless, I agree with Cohen's assessment that,

Hemingway had it right. If the world is not the enemy, neither is it our friend. In the end, no matter who surrounds us, we travel alone. Our friends and loved ones are there, providing an infrastructure of love and support. **But courage must be drawn from within** [emphasis added]. Let the world see us as we see ourselves and have the faith to permit us [to] do it our way” (Cohen, 2008, p. xx).

This text provides an intriguing portrait of the lived experience of five (six, when including the author) people with chronic illness. From Denise Glass' life-defining amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), through Larry Fricks' battle with Bipolar disorder, each story paints an intimate portrait of the subjective battle waged by people with chronic illnesses.

Without a doubt, the people profiled in these pages display a deep existential authenticity that Cohen has masterfully translated into words. In Denise's case, “the prospect of dying was beginning to clarify how she wanted to live;” whereas, Larry opines, “[w]hen does the diagnosis stop and the human being regain a sense of control of a life” (Cohen, 2008, p. 30; and p. 352).

Ultimately, this book is about the subjective experience of those with chronic disabilities and their authentic reaction to finding the courage (and hope?) in difficult circumstances. It shows the importance of the human dimension as opposed to the merely medical. The strength and courage of these individuals may serve as a lesson to those looking to find value in empathy, compassion, and acceptance. Above all, it serves as a reminder that despite a variety of unintended hardships, the human spirit can prevail and become “strong at the broken places”.

Happy reading!

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