

# What Is Insight?



Beyond spending more time in an Insight State of Mind, the second critical thing Robin and I learned is simply this: If you know what you're looking for, you're more apt to find it. That's as true for finding insights as for tracking down a lost pair of socks. So let's explore what insight is and how it differs from other kinds of thought. Here's what we've learned from our clients, friends, and colleagues. But remember, it's most important for you to sharpen and deepen your understanding of what an insight is *for you*.

## ***Insights are Thought***

Insights are a specific type of thought. We all think we know what thought is, but our confidence can erode pretty quickly when we look at it closely. For now, let's adopt a rather loose definition: thoughts are ideas, opinions, mental images, and cognitive activities — the internal activities of our mind, without physical substance.

Thoughts appear to naturally come about and flow away. If I ask you to think about an orange balloon, you will think about it, and, after some period of time, the thought will vanish, perhaps never to return. Other thoughts get stuck in our heads, and we can't help but think about them over and over again.

Sometimes, we seem to actively create our thoughts by looking for them. A common example of this is 'problem-solving,' where, when our first thoughts don't yield a solution, we make an effort to bring forth new thoughts. In other cases, thoughts appear to us unsolicited, and we simply notice their arrival.

We also think in a manner we are not consciously aware of. For example, when we're behind the wheel of a car, we may suddenly notice we were absorbed in thought and were not conscious of our driving. Of course, while our drivers' mind wanders, we continue to have many thoughts telling us to slow down, bear right, or speed up. Although never verbalized and essentially invisible, these thoughts exist and are, in fact, essential for driving. Suffice it to say, we are aware of some thoughts, while many, many others constantly happen outside our awareness.

*Insights are a  
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thought...*

## ***Memory Thought and Fresh Thought***

Thoughts occur all the time, even when we sleep. Many are thoughts we have had earlier in our lives — let's call them Memory Thoughts. Any particular Memory Thought can occur not just once or twice but many times. We also create new thoughts we haven't had before — we'll call them Fresh Thoughts. These thoughts are new *for you*, even if they are old news to someone else. The distinction between fresh thoughts and memory thoughts can be useful when exploring the origin of insights. Insights are always fresh thoughts, but not all fresh thoughts are insights. You might say to yourself, "Wow, look at that flower," or "This dinner is one of the best in my life." Fresh thoughts, perhaps, but we would not use the word 'insight' to describe them. Also, just because a thought is fresh doesn't necessarily make it good; fresh or not, any thought that is ultimately proved wrong would not be termed an insight. In fact, fresh thoughts are commonly way off base, even foolish. This is not a bad thing at all if you just use these sparks as part of your creative thinking process and don't act on them.

Fresh thoughts, whether good or bad, generally have a distinct, often unnoticed, feeling: a lightness, a spaciousness, a sense of surprise, joy, and (sometimes) freedom, all varying in degree. The presence of these feelings can alert you that something fresh



has arrived. Even ideas that turn out to be poor can appear with a certain kind of good feeling at the outset. Of course, fresh thought may also coincide with a particularly nasty and negative feeling — like wanting revenge and suddenly seeing a new way to get it. Despite its freshness, we are not likely to call such ideas an insight. Insights take us to a deeper level of understanding — understanding that is somehow *less* personal — while new thoughts that occur in the context of arguments or other bad feelings invariably cause us to ‘take it more personally.’ When a true insight occurs in the context of an argument, rarely is it directly about the subject of the argument. Instead, the insight broadens the point of discussion, takes it off on the new tangent, or moves it into a new dimension that somehow subsumes the launching point or departs from it altogether.

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Perhaps the most important insight of my life occurred in the context of a heated fight with my then-fiancée. To compress an indescribably emotional incident, I felt she had treated me with contempt, she was in tears, and I was beside myself with a rage I had never experienced in my life. In the next moment, I understood something about how my thinking was the architect of this experience, a realization that was universal, timeless, and changed my life. Somehow, the argument, the tears, the rage precipitated this moment of insight, but the insight itself transcended anything that occurred then. And there were profound consequences. We broke off the engagement, I left my job, I began serious study of the relationship between thought and consciousness, ultimately founded Innovation Associates, and much more. More surprising, much of this occurred somehow in a natural way, without management or even a sense of purpose on my part.

In no way do I mean to suggest you should create everything freshly and from scratch. Memory and knowledge are essential. You must have a grasp of the basic knowledge of what you are doing. Otherwise, how could any of us live effectively? However, I believe we operate at a higher level of effectiveness when memory thought is present in the background and fresh thought holds the foreground. For example, a strong understanding of case law is essential for a lawyer, but the best attorneys are not those who remember the most from law school. Rather, the outstanding lawyers are those who have the ability to come up with the most creative and appropriate approach to a case. The best doctors are fully knowledgeable about human physiology, pathology, and the like, but you also want a physician who is skilled in applying that knowledge insightfully to your particular medical condition.

The right relationship between fresh thought and memory thought is not just background and foreground; interplay between the two must be ongoing and active. As your memory bank grows and expands, you accumulate more raw material for insights. If you are trying to become well-versed in a subject, you must search for more information and more ideas outside of your own and add them to your memory bank. Linus Pauling believed memory of isolated facts lay at the core of creativity. Pauling’s CalTech students complained bitterly at having to memorize facts they could easily look up. Dr. Samuel E. George (Wall Street Journal August 13, 2008; Page A16) paraphrases Professor Pauling’s response:

I was always amazed at the lack of insight this showed. It’s what you have in your memory bank — what you can recall instantly — that’s important. If you have to look it up, it’s worthless for creative thinking. [Pauling] proceeded to give an example. In the mid-1930s, he was riding a train from London to Oxford. To pass the time, he came across an article in the journal *Nature*, arguing that proteins were amorphous globs whose 3D structure could never be deduced. He instantly saw the fallacy in the argument — because of one



isolated stray fact in his memory bank — the key chemical bond in the protein backbone did not freely rotate, as was argued [and he] knew from his college days that the peptide bond had to be rigid and coplanar. He began doodling, and, by the time he reached Oxford, he had discovered the alpha helix [for which he later won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry].

### ***Insights Deepen Understanding***

Insights are fresh thoughts that result in improved understanding. The better the understanding and the more different than the perception we held before, the more dramatic the insight. An insight is when something we previously didn't understand — the motivation for a person's action, a scientific theory, a line of argument, the true nature of a problem or an opportunity — finally, and often suddenly, becomes clear. We call the moment of seeing a problem differently an insight. In that moment, we see the solution. Of course, it is not unusual for solutions to problems to come from memory thought. We simply don't refer to these insights.

Take the case of the struggle we sometimes encounter with ideas presented by someone else. A concept that is simple and clear to a teacher can be entirely confusing to students. Confusion may continue for some time until, suddenly, understanding and clarity arrive. I remember sitting in my introductory quantum physics class in college where, for three lectures every week, the professor described phenomena like quantum states as though they were the simplest of concepts. Imagine a 700-person lecture hall — perhaps you have even seen it in a movie — with blackboards spanning the front wall. Each blackboard floats on a little elevator, and, once the professor fills it, it rises to reveal yet another blackboard underneath: a wallpaper of equations with a few scattered pictures and graphs. I muttered to myself: “What the heck is an ‘energy well’? Nothing up there looks like a well to me!” To some of my classmates, however, the concept was completely clear. Then, in the third or fourth week, the proverbial penny dropped, and I finally understood everything the instructor had been saying. “Oh, I see what he means by ‘well.’ It's like hills and valleys. The electron can roll down into the valley; maybe it can stop on a ledge along the way, but once it's on a ledge or in the valley, it won't roll back up again without someone pushing it.” This is *not* one of the great discoveries in twentieth-century physics, yet it wasn't until after this point of awareness/insight on my part that the class made sense to me.

*...that deepens your understanding...*

Until then, I could do an acceptable job parroting back facts and applying the equations in the assigned problem sets, but I had yet to see the big picture and truly understand what was being taught. When all the facts finally fell into place and I saw something *for myself*, everything came together. A distinct trait of insight is that a fresh thought is absorbed suddenly, instinctively, and immediately, in a personal, often visceral, way, and a particular feeling is associated with that moment. It's a combination of surprise, satisfaction, pleasure, relief, and freedom.

Incidentally, I think two things actually happened in that moment in my physics class: one was a realization; the other was an insight. We often use these terms interchangeably, yet there might be a difference worth noting. I think of a ‘realization’ as *coming to understand something for what it is, at face value*, such as when you finally comprehend something someone is trying to explain to you *in the way they intend you to understand*. In the course of my college physics class, I came to understand concepts the professor was presenting as he hoped, including the appropriateness of the word ‘well.’

The word ‘insight’ describes a realization that goes beyond face value or beyond the obvious; it is somehow deeper or more universal. For example, a fundamental idea of



quantum physics is that matter can exist only in defined states. Matter can move from state to state but only in defined amounts and only through the acquisition or the release of energy. The insight for me was not only the idea itself but also how universal is this property of the physical universe. Both insights and realizations are accompanied by the ‘a-ha’ experience. The notion of ‘why didn’t I see that before?’ is probably always present to some degree in the case of a realization. Such is not the case for many insights, which are often characterized by surprise or astonishment. The distinction between realization and insight has little practical benefit beyond noting that everyday realizations are not only good in and of themselves, they may also build capacity for insights.

While the difference between a realization and an insight may not be large, a real distinction exists between intellectual understanding alone and insight. Insight includes intellectual understanding *and*, somehow, *goes beyond*. This ‘going beyond’ can occasionally pose its own set of problems. Typically, we get excited about insights and realizations. As a consequence, we want to share them with others. How often, particularly in the case of a personal insight, have you tried to explain your new realization to a friend, only to have them look at you and say something like, “So what?” or “What’s new? You’ve known that for years!” Other friends feel your excitement but haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about and respond in some lame, uncomprehending way. Your insight is deeper than you are able to express with words.

My close friend Eliot attended one of our insight thinking workshops a year ago. He was in the midst of writing his fourth book, having had his previous works published by major houses. Early in his career, Eliot spent three years as president of Fred Rogers’ production company, where he wrote all the scripts for *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* and was acknowledged by critics and peers as a gifted writer. After *Mister Rogers*, Eliot wrote thousands of pages of reports that changed the directions of companies, published op-ed pieces and other journal articles. . .you get the idea. He’s written a lot, and it’s very, very good. Even his e-mails are small literary delights. Then. . .Eliot had an insight in our workshop.

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I quote from his fabulous book, *Formerly Called ‘Retirement’* ([www.eliotdaley.com](http://www.eliotdaley.com)), which he wrote — from start to finish in two weeks — in the wake of his insight. We pick up the story with Eliot and two partners in a staged conversation during the workshop, having received this instruction: you have only one minute to share the issue or question you want insight on. Then, you must listen *silently* to the conversation of your two partners.

When it was my turn, I posed my question. And they began considering my brief, blunt query. Of their seven minutes of dialogue together, I heard only one thing—ten seconds’ worth. The young financier drew his right index finger across the left side of his chest as he quietly observed, ‘It sounds as if Eliot hasn’t decided what he wants on his name tag.’

My God! Oh, my God! An insight flared in my head like a sunburst, fierce and hot, searing itself into my mind: I have to decide! This isn’t something that just happens to me. I have to decide!

I never thought of that before. I’ve been waiting, but nothing was happening. I was going nuts, and on the verge of getting depressed, but still nothing changed. It never, ever dawned on me that it was just as simple as deciding on my identity. This is not a matter of fate—this is a free choice: Who do I choose to



be?  
Well, who do I choose to be?

A writer.

The answer was instantaneous, unequivocal, certain. A writer. The answer leapt up from forever in my life. A writer. That is who I am, and that is who I choose to be. That is my identity, from this instant onward and ever.

Oh, my God! Everything in the universe became clear in that moment. If I am a writer—not an unemployed jack of all trades who also ‘does some writing’ or ‘is working on a book’, but a writer—then I just need to start acting like a writer, living like a writer, being a writer.

It was all so clear. The difference between what I do, and who I am. If I am a writer, then that will determine what I do, not the other way around. If I am a writer, then I organize my life, shape my priorities, spend my time, protect my space the way a writer would.

Now a robust agenda of transformational actions bloomed in my mind. Being that I am a writer, I need to create a proper space for writing. That means purging what had become my ‘office’ of everything that dilutes or contaminates its new role as my ‘studio’. No more a dumping ground for whatever matters might claim my attention. No more a cluttered tumble of distracting and distressing diversions from what matters in my life. No more anything but a serene environment dedicated to delivering whatever was within me. I’d find new space in the house to transform into a ‘home office’ and cart over there everything not related to my writing. From now on, I would never use my studio for anything but writing. *Fait accompli*. Sure, I hadn’t yet stirred from the conference room to actually take any of these actions, but they were as good as done. And I knew it.

Reading the complete narrative of Eliot’s insight is well worth your time; you’ll find it posted on our website [<http://www.insightmanagementpartners.com/docs/story-eliotdaley.html>]. I relate this story because Eliot bubbled with enthusiasm about his insight, telling all his friends he was a writer ... but we already knew that! Eliot was the best writer we knew. For us, Eliot’s insight was a big ‘duh,’ even though we could clearly tell something very important had happened for him.

*...even beyond your  
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in words.*

To some degree, every insight takes you into a way of knowing, which lies, in a sense, in the unknown or before conscious thought, a territory that cannot be expressed in words. This inability to express a personal insight in words may indicate its importance — the more important the realization, the harder it is to explain. This was certainly true for me regarding the insight I had in the wake of the argument with my fiancée. Over the next 30 years, I would, on infrequent occasions, try to relate this story to others in hopes of finding someone who could understand what I was trying to explain. I never did, until, after attending a talk by theosopher Syd Banks (whose insights formed the basis of George Pransky’s work), I approached him with my story. I thought perhaps Syd could understand why this experience had been so important to me.

Briefly, I related the incident. With great anticipation, I asked Syd if he could understand what I was talking about. He replied with something like, “Well, it was a real important experience for you.” I said I knew that, but what did it mean? Syd replied again, “Well, I can tell it was a real important experience for you.” That was it!



And was I ever disappointed! I thought Syd might understand, but, clearly, it looked to me as if he hadn't. I must have been bothered about this for a couple of months until, one day, another insight hit. Maybe that's all it was — an important experience *for me*. Nothing more profound than that. Despite how life-altering my insight was, it had no further meaning. What an enormous relief! A lifelong weight of great obligation dropped to the ground.

### ***Things are Simple. . .and, Maybe Even, Fine the Way They Are***

Before we understand something, we perceive the situation as complex. As soon as we understand, as soon as the insight arrives, we often mutter to ourselves, “This is so simple. How could I not have seen this before?” The new understanding connects existing elements in our thinking, rearranging what we know in a flash of insight. The pieces were already in place; understanding connects them and makes them more accurate and we experience the moment of happiness associated with ‘insight arrival’ I mentioned earlier. Sometimes the understanding we arrive at is more ‘universal,’ like the elegance and beauty scientists speak of when they arrive at a more fundamental appreciation of a subject, and when it does, it may or may not include rearranging what we already know.

*Sometimes the only thing that changes is how you think about a situation*

Sometimes, our insight is that our situation is not actually a problem: things are truly fine the way they are. The issue may be unchangeable, and the insight brings the realization that this is not a bad thing. In these tough cases, insights serve to dissolve the fear, frustration, and anxiety. Our insights help us see the issue in a new way, one that provides new perspectives and new opportunities.

Robin and I were once invited to share our ideas about insight with the management team of a business unit of a large organization. Over the previous few years, this business unit failed repeatedly to introduce new products into their marketplace, which was not only frustrating but a source of fear for the management team. As part of the sales process Robin and I employ, we taught them a little bit about our Insight Thinking Methods and proposed they spend an hour using these methods to explore their problem. Robin and I felt the management team would benefit from direct experience of the potential for insight into their situation and, therefore, choose to hire us. The team must have been about half an hour into their discussion when an insight hit: every other company in their industry was having *even more* difficulty than they were. Then another insight: the characteristics of the industry had so changed, simply rolling out new versions of existing products was no longer the path to success *for anyone*. The room filled with an enormous psychological sigh of relief. Immediately, the team discarded the track they had been on for the past few years and devoted the remainder of their discussion to applying their resources into distinctly different areas.

### ***Insights Result in Changed Perception***

After an insight, you see the world differently — sometimes, only a bit; other times, a lot. You may have had a common experience where insight proves useful: struggling with the behavior of a friend or relative who makes you feel awkward or defensive. One day, you learn something about the person's history, and you realize why she or he always behaves a certain way. Instantly, the defensiveness, animosity, or other negative feelings dissolve, replaced by a sense of connection, empathy, and even compassion.

*Other times insights “rewrite” history*

One colleague, whom I will call Joan, describes absolutely hating her sister for 15 years — to the point that not only did she not want to be around her sister, when the sister's name came up in conversation, even when referring to someone Joan hadn't met but who shared her sister's name, she would tighten up. (Joan is a bit dramatic.)



One day, while talking with a friend about her difficult upbringing, Joan realized her sister had simply created an entirely different version of how to insulate herself from the troubling family situation. Although Joan and her friend weren't even talking about Joan's sister, the sister's behavior now made sense. Joan knew she didn't want to live in the 'alternative universe' her sister had created for herself, but she knew now why it existed. And all her negative feelings evaporated.

From the moment we are struck by an insight, what once looked natural and right may suddenly appear foreign. After years of accumulating reasons to stop smoking, acquiring veritable libraries of medical justification, then over and over breaking the habit, only to eventually start up once more, upon an insight lifelong smokers toss out their last pack of cigarettes, never to smoke again — never to even miss it. In the wake of an insight, acting in new ways is easy and takes less energy than when we try to move our thinking purposefully in a different direction.

Joan's story about seeing her sister in a new light illustrates yet another characteristic of insights. In the moment of clarity that accompanies an insight, compassion transforms anger and fear into understanding, appreciation, and even love — a surefire way for you to know you've experienced an insight. From this moment on, you see the person differently, and you see the past differently, as well. The insight rewrites the history of your relationship. With their origins clear, previously hard-to-palate experiences diminish in magnitude or disappear so completely, they become hard even to remember and leave only a sense of compassionate connection.

### ***Insight is Not Necessarily the Same as Solving a Problem***

One of the biggest uses of insight lies in the area of problem-solving, and while solving a problem and having an insight are related, they are not the same. We'll explore the differences in detail later. For now, remember you can have insights even when you don't have a problem (known as learning), and you can also have problems you solve using memory thought, without insight. While our problems can certainly be solved by insight, more often, we solve them by applying memory thought, using logic and facts already stored in our mind.

The fact that memory thought plays such an essential role in our lives is more than fine, especially when the answer to a problem lies in memory. Why look for an insight when the solution is already known? But memory thought can't work when the answer is *not* known. Fresh thought is required. Memory thought, however, often rears its insidious and self-reinforcing nature. As we depend more and more on memory thought over time — in many cases far past its point of usefulness — most of us form a strong (if not debilitating) habit and reliance on it for problem-solving. Our education system (which stresses the accumulation of facts and the use of logical reasoning) gives us a lot of positive strokes when we ably employ memory thought. When faced with a problem, our training pushes us to look first (and maybe exclusively) to memory thought, not fresh thought. As a result, we enter easily and can stay stuck in memory thought for a long time, while the problem remains unsolved. Although we can value memory-based thinking, the habit of employing it unmindfully is not useful, because we unconsciously disconnect from our access to insight.

### ***Insight is Both Natural and Common***

Some insights are epiphanies that change lives forever; others are so small, they are often missed. We think of insights as being relatively rare, but smaller ones are actually quite common: finding a new simile to explain something to a child; figuring out why your teenager did the most incomprehensible thing; discovering that a path to work — one you always thought was longer than another route you chose — is

*You have insights  
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problem*



actually shorter; finding your keys when your spouse placed them in a never-before-used spot. By noticing these tiny, everyday realizations — in essence, catching yourself doing something right — you become evermore receptive to bigger insights.

*Our capacity for insight is innate*

The capacity for insight is innate, arriving with us at birth and never leaving. You certainly see it if you observe one- and two-year-old children, who seem to have realizations all the time. Many of our clients tell us that playing with kids helps them remember their own capacity for insight. They find themselves having insights just by hanging out while their children play with blocks or crayons.

If one big reason we don't have insights is because we don't look for them, the other is that we are simply not used to *listening* for them. With the volume setting for most insights positioned between 'quiet' and 'moderate,' an active mind full of memory thinking can often drown them out, just as ambient room noise can drown out a softly played radio. When we are not engaged in listening to the loud music of memory thinking, we give ourselves the opportunity to hear the insight, which may have been with us a long time. If an insight is not loud enough to be heard when it first appears, the potential for hearing it will persist as long as the problem stays with you. You only need to grab the opportunity. Although I hold no proof, I believe we are never given a problem without a solution. An insight is available to every problem, if we could but hear it.

You may have had the experience of driving past a shop several times when, on the fourth pass or so, you realize the place sells the spare part you needed months back. For some reason, the first three times you drove past, the thought didn't come to mind even though the shop was there, as was your need for the spare part. You simply missed the message. In the movie *August Rush*, the title character, a child prodigy, talks about the music he hears in his mind and asks, "So only some of us hear it?" His mentor replies, "Only some of us are listening."

Some insights aren't even verbal; they manifest as a feeling. One of my most interesting recent insights was of this kind. I was discussing Insight Thinking with another Charley, chairperson of a university psychology department and an authority on pain management. He commented, as do many, on the connection between the occurrence of insight and a state of relaxation, so essential to pain management. Charley noted one of the most reliable and easily learned methods of achieving a relaxed state is to simply teach people to slow their respiration rate to between three and five breaths per minute or less. (The average person breathes 12-15 times a minute or more.) Charley went on to ask a suspiciously simple question: "How many parts are there to a breath?" As you might imagine, I answered, "Two." Charley pointed out the truth. A breath consists of three parts: inhale, exhale, and relax. "And," he remarked, "everybody misses the third." Beyond being conceptually sound, I could feel this insight somehow soaking deeply into my body. Since then, I find myself lying in bed most mornings, breathing in, breathing out, and resting until I feel a natural urge to take the next breath in. With my respiration rate well under two breaths a minute, waking up is one of my most fertile times for insights, as I have heard it is for many others. As important as this process has been for my overall well-being, the ramifications have gone far beyond. I now see that deliberate relaxation is a previously missed fundamental element for being effective. After my encounter with Charley, I have become conscious of advising my clients (executives, who, like me, are used to pressing ahead one-hundred-percent of the time) to make a move, relax the pressure, rest, and watch what happens before pressing forward again. I find I now take my own advice and use this approach more often myself, as well. I think my new understanding somehow works its way into how I see and feel the world in general.

*Insights can be non-verbal*





\* \* \*

If you want to have more insights, it's good to know an insight is what you are looking for. This gives clear direction for your unconscious mind to go to work and find an answer for you. By including insight as well as memory in the mix, insights will show up more regularly over time. Be clear about the subject of the insight you seek; it makes you more sensitive to relevant information. Have you ever noticed when you begin thinking of buying a new car, you start seeing more cars on the road like the one you are considering?

Do you think you must reach an impasse before you can achieve an insight? Not true. Insights unrelated to specific problems happen all the time. You commonly have insights on topics you are simply curious about: a fresh thought hits, and you gain a new understanding. Sometimes, you feel an insight has occurred — you notice a new thought arrived and it feels naturally right — but conscious understanding is missing, perhaps entirely. Something has changed, but you can't quite place what is different. Or you can have a new thought that carries the good feeling of an insight even if the thought doesn't connect with anything specific at the moment. Only later do you link the thought with your other issues, as when an insight into a subject comes to you while reading a professional journal and you put the new understanding to work a month later.

Remember: you are looking for fresh thought, not just memories. Insights can be tiny or enormous. The smaller they are, the less often they are recognized. Being mindful of your fresh thoughts, inviting them in, and being more sensitive to their occurrence, is key to increasing their frequency and quality. Insights, large or small, deepen our understanding and change our perception. Finally, despite the value of both insight and problem-solving, gaining an insight is not always the same as solving a problem. If you only ask yourself for an answer to a problem, habit and training may unconsciously limit your search to your memory. On the other hand, if you think about having an insight, your unconscious mind looks for creative solutions into both memory and what might be termed 'the not-yet-known.'

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