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Flow, Centering, and the Classroom: Wisdom from an Ancient Friend

Cover Page Footnote

Lorie Heggie is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and French and Coordinator of Foundations of Inquiry, the first semester critical thinking and argumentation course required of all freshmen at Illinois State University. Her primary research area focuses on issues in formal syntactic theory.

Flow, Centering, and the Classroom: Wisdom from an Ancient Friend*

Lorie Heggie

*Your horse is your mirror. Learn what your
horse has to teach you and then apply it to
something else in your life.*

—An Old Arab Proverb

One-two-three, one-two-three. I am cantering. No, *we* are cantering. We are moving rhythmically forward in this three-beat gait with a suspended fourth beat, and I am so relaxed that it feels as if my own legs are doing the cantering, not my horse's. I feel centered with my horse as she carries me willingly; I am sitting tall, square, supple, yet strong enough to balance with 1,000 pounds of momentum underneath me. I live for such spiritual moments; we are *in flow*.

To be centered in the physical sense is to be balanced, relaxed, strong, aware. A rider must keep her center on a horse both physically and spiritually if she hopes to achieve quality in dressage requirements such as shoulder-in or half-pass, movements where the horse moves laterally and forward with much force. Dressage is the ultimate form of classical riding where the rider and horse “dance” together as one with very little obvious communication. It only takes seeing the Lippizaner stallions perform or watching the dressage events in the Olympics to understand the seamless, precise, gentle, but extravagant energy that characterizes the dressage pair.

If a horse is naturally balanced, achieving this ideal is somewhat easier, which is why certain breeds are preferred. My horse, however, was very unbalanced, stiff in some ways, supple in others. Until I learned to find my own balance, my own center, I could not help her find hers. And so began my quest. Through the years, I have learned first the physical balance required to find my center and then the spiritual balance that allows me to keep my center while using different parts of my body independently. This process required learning first cognitively, and eventually somatically, the physical and mental strategies that would allow me to be centered, relaxed, and confident. My experience as a teacher

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* This paper is dedicated with love to my horse, *Sanderia Fawnnya*, who has guided me to new levels of consciousness, and I am forever in her debt. I would also like to thank Maureen White and DeeDee Rea, the trainers who have taught me well.

formed a foundation for how to train both my horse and myself. Unexpectedly, this process influenced my teaching.

What would it take to have a centered classroom? Kristie S. Fleckenstein argues that classrooms have become de-centered as a result of our need to quantify; we tend to honor the material over the spiritual, the rational over the intuitive, the social over the self, and critical thinking is valued without questioning why ("Creating" 25). As she observes, centering a class does not mean a "teacher-centered" or "student-centered" classroom, but rather, a classroom where affect is recognized and integrated with cognition. Meaning is then created through a dialectic process where a renewed emphasis on the self leads to more relevant learning. Teacher and student work together, neither fragmented nor unified, but centered within the participatory consciousness of the mind-body connection (26). The construction of this type of classroom reveals itself only slowly to our minds as it is very different from current prototypes for classroom interaction. How do we create a "center that holds" (25)?

For me, these concepts find a home in the somatic experience of riding and training a horse. The horse context adds an important dimension to the meaning of connecting the mind and the body. With the horse, a rider must not only build a consciousness through cognitive understanding and felt sense of her own body, but must also influence, understand, and merge with another consciousness, that of the horse. This connection creates a reciprocity of communication. Good riding is not based on a master-servant relationship with the horse; good riding is not based on domination and submission. Instead, good riding is the result of a partnership of two beings working together, respecting each other. With this understanding, the rider-horse relationship mirrors the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. I have experienced the same feeling of sublime centeredness on my horse and in the classroom. In both contexts I have felt the energy connection where a soft, vibrating oneness creates an incredible inner stillness, much more akin to silence than to noise (Suhor). I cannot help but think that something from my riding is transferring to how I manage the classroom energy. This paper is an attempt to explore those principles of riding that help me to work with students in a way that fleshes out my personal metaphor for participatory consciousness in a way that may help teachers and students.

To provide a framework, I will use the concept of flow as a way to understand the process of centering and transcendence. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (4). They are completely absorbed in the activity and "typically feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities" (4). In fact, flow may be achieved in many different types of activities, from rock climbing to experiencing a raindrop glistening on a leaf. What riding a horse and teaching a class have in common is that these activities both involve interacting with energies that are larger than the self. In each case, an individual is attempting to guide and motivate the energy of another to reach certain goals. The insights provided by horse riding derive from the fact that, because of the immediacy and very explicit reactions of horses, riders are left with far less ambiguity in their minds as to the effectiveness of their actions than teachers experience in the classroom. Because horses cannot separate their mind

and body the way humans can, their reactions, both good and bad, always contain an important message for the rider if the rider is able to listen. Good riding teaches good listening. Good listening is essential to good teaching because students are far more complex than horses, providing far more complexity in their responses. Moreover, students come in groups and therefore create situations of multiple energy.

Nevertheless, dressage can support the development of a spiritual center by revealing to us some of the hidden ordering principles that drive the conversation between an individual and others (Berger, *etd.* in Fleckenstein "Creating" 26). In order to make sense of these principles, I will first explore the concept of flow as developed by Csikszentmihalyi. Understanding how flow is achieved in general terms will allow us to see how the five guidelines extracted from dressage training help the teacher and students to attain flow.

The Definition of Flow

Research on the psychology of "optimal experience," or flow, attempts to analyze and categorize the types of experiences that create happiness. Researchers have studied the experiences of factory workers, Japanese motorcycle gangs, students, sailors, and elderly Koreans, among others, through various methods of self-report, interviewing, and a methodology explicitly devised for this context called the Experience Sampling Method (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi). This is a process where participants are paged a number of times each day over a certain period of time and asked to report on their current setting, emotional state, and activities. Through these studies, the researchers found that a state of flow requires just the right balance of challenge. A person must be neither too anxious nor too bored. Moreover, a person must be interested in the activity, or apathy results (261).

For most people, finding themselves in a state of flow is a pleasant reward for pursuing an interesting challenge. We know that when we immerse ourselves in certain activities, we may tend to lose our self-consciousness, and time just disappears: we enjoy ourselves. However, as Csikszentmihalyi suggests, it may be possible to make conscious choices that will enhance the opportunities for flow. He refers to this trait as the "autotelic self" and gives guidelines for strengthening this dynamic within the individual. Csikszentmihalyi defines "autotelic" as "self-goals" to capture the idea that the individual who is able to achieve flow is also able to transform potentially deadening experiences into flow through the application of self-contained goals (209).

Accordingly, the first of four rules for developing an autotelic self is to set goals. One must have clear goals in order to know which choices to make. Moreover, because of these clear goals, feedback as to whether one is achieving one's goals is clear as well. This immediate feedback allows the autotelic self to build in the chosen direction, allowing a person to be both more consistent and more flexible. In having chosen the goal that she is pursuing, the autotelic person has not only a sense of ownership of her decisions, but also the capacity for changing these decisions if the rationale no longer exists for continuing them (Csikszentmihalyi 210). Thus, the first step towards flow is to know one's goals and not lose sight of them.

My own experience with horses would suggest that this “eye on the goal” is not a hard, focused stare, but rather a softer awareness that encompasses the larger context as well. That is, we are mindful of the goal without letting it dominate our field of vision. Sally Swift calls this attitude “soft eyes,” a concept that is discussed in the context of jumping horses. The goal is to jump over a fence, an action that many horses enjoy and will do on their own. However, successful jumping is more difficult than it looks. Many problems at fences are attributable to rider error; the rider is thinking too much about the fence and transmits this harder inner stare to the horse, who then thinks the fence might be something scary.

So what allows a person to maintain a soft connection to her goals? A rider must be confident and believe in herself, that she is strong enough to stay with the horse. This observation would suggest that setting goals requires a prerequisite belief by the individual that she has the means to attain these goals. This belief in oneself must be separate from whether an activity is actually feasible or not. It is not uncommon to see riders do less and less for a while after some traumatic event such as a fall; fear will hold a rider back, despite the physical ability to do many different things.

The second rule for achieving flow is to become immersed in the activity, to invest in the activity at hand. However, if one is to lose oneself in an activity, two factors must be present. The first is that the activity chosen needs to be neither too easy nor too difficult; it must be at an appropriate level for the skills of the individual. If the activity is too hard, the person will feel overwhelmed and anxious. If the activity is too easy, the person will feel bored. In either case, flow will not be reached. This understanding merges with the notion of confidence developed earlier, making clear that “difficulty” can be defined not only in terms of the physical activity itself, but also in terms of emotional challenge, or affect. In order to reach flow, a person needs to be comfortable and confident in both mind and body.

Becoming immersed in an activity requires concentration (Csikszentmihalyi 211). If an individual is easily distracted by outside influences for whatever reason, her ability to achieve flow will be compromised. Most certainly, horses can be all consuming. People invest in activities for which they feel a passion; it is the love for our passion that conquers fear and boredom and anxiety.

The third rule for flow is to pay attention to or to focus on what is happening. Without focus, athletes cannot maintain their effort (Csikszentmihalyi 212). The key to focus is the absence of self-consciousness. Individuals must be so involved in the activity that worries about how they look from the outside disappear. It thus takes the desire and ability to merge with the “here and now” to achieve flow. This aspect of flow touches on the Zen concept of living in the fullness of the moment (Suhor). As Csikszentmihalyi points out, this merging with an activity leads to a paradoxical result because the individual, in becoming one with the activity and no longer feeling like an individual, actually becomes stronger: “The autotelic individual grows beyond the limits of individuality by investing psychic energy in a system in which she is included. Because of the union of the person and the system, the self emerges at a higher level of complexity” (212).

Accordingly, the person who is willing to be committed to and involved in something larger than himself will grow beyond the individual whose only motivation is that of self-interest. This is a profound notion, difficult to grasp in its entirety. An Aikido master demonstrated this concept for me many years ago when he asked me to straighten my arm out in front of me and hold it so that he could not make it bend at the elbow. Being a much larger person than I was, he easily bent my arm. The master then asked me to extend my arm again, but this time I should imagine my arm connected to a wall six feet away. I put my arm out and threw my consciousness into the wall. I dove into a kind of silence that blurred the edges of my vision. Suddenly, this six-foot man could not bend my arm even slightly. This experience, and others like it, suggests to me that perhaps this “focus” that Csikszentmihalyi refers to goes beyond what we usually mean by “paying attention.” Perhaps we must “throw our consciousness” into our activity to the point that the edges of our vision are blurred and not be self-conscious, even if we tried (see Millman).

The fourth rule is to learn to enjoy immediate experience or the “here and now.” This behavior is a natural outcome of the three preceding rules if one is determined and disciplined. Enjoying the present moment as an autotelic self demands that there be goals, immersion, and focus, not just a simple letting go of responsibilities. One must be able to “develop skills that stretch capacities [. . .]. Flow drives individuals to creativity and outstanding achievement” (Csikszentmihalyi 213). According to Csikszentmihalyi, the ultimate goal is to create a life of optimal experience in which one may create flow experiences at will, linking these experiences to a larger, more meaningful philosophy of life.

This last guideline requires the individual to enjoy being in flow while at the same time using determination and discipline to find flow. The fact that one must use significant effort to achieve flow seems to contradict the whole idea of being “in flow.” The word “flow” implies “effortlessness,” and yet Csikszentmihalyi seems to indicate that achieving flow requires effort. From this seemingly contradictory statement, we can understand that flow occurs under the right conditions and that we can manipulate those conditions actively to create flow. Where people may normally only achieve a sense of flow infrequently, they may, if they desire, reach this state more often with a disciplined effort. Just as I threw my consciousness into and merged with the wall, so can anyone blend with an absorbing activity if they commit energy to doing so. Writers surely do this as they are writing (Elbow; Fleckenstein “Mental Imagery”; Gallehr; Perl). This understanding brings us hope that, with the correctly applied understanding and concepts, a teacher can actively encourage flow in her students and create a centered classroom.

Some Principles of the Dialectic

The guidelines for controlling and creating flow explored above give us some important clues as to how to promote flow and a feeling of transcendence within the classroom dialectic between teacher and students. Creating a center in the classroom rests on many conditions that we may not even know exist. However, following Fleckenstein, I accept the premise that finding a spiritual center means

finding the ordering principles of a culture and individual that create significance and allow for the integration of the mind and body. In addition, as Morris Berman argues, in order to gain access to these principles, we must develop a “participating consciousness,” a state of being which involves re-conceptualizing the self as neither fragmented nor historically determined (qtd. in Fleckenstein “Creating” 32). Instead, we identify with the other with no projected purpose in mind but to understand and empathize; the act of participation creates centering in us as we discover the “selfother,” that part of us that exists in relation to others and allows us to experience a heightened awareness of ourselves (32).

This concept of participating consciousness finds an echo in Csikszentmihalyi’s third rule of focusing. As he observed, with focus, the individual becomes stronger and grows beyond his current level of complexity. However, we also know through Csikszentmihalyi that this is only one part of the flow experience; there must also be goals, investment, and enjoyment for it all to come together. Centering in and of itself does not lead to achievement; there must also be a goal and investment.

How should we think of the goal and investment in the classroom? Parker Palmer gives us a profound answer: we search to know the subject *in the community of truth*. For Palmer, “truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline” (104). Teacher and students interrelate in their search for knowledge in a “dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones” (104). The investment that we make in our learning is guided by a passion, a *love* for the subject. It is the love for our subject and our students that keeps us involved in “things that matter” (104).

Dominique Barbier captures this notion for riders by describing the attitude that a rider must have to ride well: “an open, analytical, unconditionally accepting attitude is necessary, with no room for anger or a sense of superiority” (13). She goes on to say,

90% of riding is mental, allowing the horse to move and perform for and of himself [. . .]. Riding itself is not difficult. Using the mind, however, can be difficult if you are not accustomed to applying it as an aid in riding. Nor can you train without love. This will sound airy, perhaps, but only deep love and understanding coordinated with refined tact will give you positive results with horses. (xiii-xiv)

Superb riding is thus not a matter of controlling an animal and forcing it to do something. Instead, it is a matter of the horse-rider pair understanding each other and working together for the pleasure of doing so. Of course, one must have the complicity of the horse; unwillingness to join the *pas de deux* always indicates an underlying problem that must be addressed.

So what might be this dialectic that enables teachers and students to communicate in a centered classroom? Based on my experiential knowledge from training a horse in dressage, I have isolated five principles that help us to create an understanding of this “conversation.” These guidelines were chosen because, of all the various overlap that exists between teaching humans and teaching horses,

these principles seem to be explicit only in the horse world and thus may bring into clearer perspective the insights that I have transported from the horse world into the classroom to create flow.

Principle One: Center Yourself First

A rider must be relaxed, calm, and aware of her center. Otherwise, the horse, being naturally a little crooked and unbalanced physically, especially with a rider on its back, will throw the rider off-balance, making it difficult to ride well. How does one maintain a feel for the center? A number of physical sensations are attached to being centered, such as the feel of the seat bones on the saddle or the way the elbows seem to drop into the hips. The “elbow” feeling is what I have felt while in front of a classroom, but I suspect that different people have different ways of feeling their center.

By keeping a balanced position in the saddle with a gentle feel on the reins, the rider is able to truly influence how the horse moves, and, if the horse spooks or jumps, the rider will stay with the horse because their center is one. The horse is “in your hands.” This sensation can only happen when the rider is relaxed yet strong and aware of where her center is located. If the rider is tense in any way, this will stop the flow of communication, and she will not be able to feel what the horse is communicating to her.

Lad Tobin reminds us that the teacher is still the center of a “de-centered” (i.e., not teacher-centered) classroom (20); the teacher is the one to organize and develop directions for learning, even if particular topics come from the students. Thus, when teachers use a student-centered, collaborative approach to teaching, they must be centered within themselves just like the rider. Otherwise, students may pull the course off track. When all the students are engaged and working in the moment, the classroom comes alive with their energy. This is when they “come into your hands,” the moment when the goals of students and teacher coincide and they are all focused and invested in what they are doing.

What does it take for students to feel invested, focused, and centered in the class? Teachers ask this question every day, straining their resources to find ways to motivate and excite students about learning. And, no matter how centered a teacher is, if the student does not invest in his learning, flow will be difficult, if not impossible, to establish. This question of investment troubled me a great deal this semester as I faced an experimental section of Foundations of Inquiry, the required freshman-year critical thinking course at Illinois State University. All of the students in my class had failed Foundations of Inquiry the previous semester.

As a way to understand these students, I asked them to write mission statements: what they valued, how they saw themselves, what they wanted to do with their lives. Even though the sample was small, the results are interesting. One might think that an eighteen-year-old student trying to establish a university career would be most interested in learning, improving skills, and getting good grades, or just basically getting an education. Although these goals were mentioned by various individuals, by far the most important goals cited related to connecting to other people. As shown below, over half of the students said that what was most important to them was helping others and valuing their friends and family.

*Table 1: Main Themes of Mission Statements
for 16 Freshmen at Illinois State University*

To value friends and family	11
To help people	9
To be a leader or teacher (to be looked up to)	5
To reach my potential; to live life to the fullest	4
To find happiness	3
To be honest	3
To learn	3
Concrete goals (get a great job, have a family)	3
To be responsible	2
To listen	2
To succeed this semester	2
To understand the meaning of my life	1
To express feelings	1
To be strong and independent	1

In discussing these observations with the students, I noted that they seemed to value connection a great deal and asked if they felt connected to those around them. We then talked about the stress of trying to be successful, and I showed them how strength comes not from brittle, overly focused trying, but from relaxation and connection. I demonstrated for them the “arm into the wall” exercise described earlier. This concrete, physical demonstration captured their attention quite effectively. In this way, I encouraged students to gather strength through connection and collaboration with those around them, both faculty and students (Chickering and Gamson). Students are seeking connection and are willing to invest in this connection if they understand its relevance to their lives. This knowledge provides a key for teachers in their search to create flow with their students.

Principle Two: Walk Past the Fear

Many situations create opportunity for fear and anxiety, and this must certainly be one of the primary deterrents of flow. In a situation where my horse is nervous or afraid, I have learned to ask where I want the energy to go. With horses, the direction of flow is almost always “forward.” Even a correct reverse maintains a sense of “forward.” With this answer, the rider must look to where she is going and ease the horse’s mind by remaining calm and centered and by encouraging movement in a forward direction without heading directly for the object creating the fear. If the rider is looking constantly at the horse’s ears, the horse senses that the rider does not know where the two of them are going and

becomes tense. The horse's tension is then thrown back to the rider, who becomes tense as well. However, if the rider looks out to where the pair is going, the horse gains confidence, and worry fades. Flow may be regained by retaining forward motion.

The direction of flow in the classroom is obviously not so simple. Learning to write is often accompanied by anxiety, for example, and teachers have many ways of supporting students as they hesitate to move forward. The key is that students continue to write. An example of how this concept might be applied to teachers in the classroom is suggested by what happens when a teacher develops a new course for a new student population that she does not know well. If the teacher does not have a clear idea of what is to be learned and how to teach it, she will probably ignore the students or study them too closely. Predictably, when the teacher concentrates too single-mindedly on students and loses sight of her goals, the pacing slows, and students become disruptive. The teacher must keep her objectives in view at all times. This is one reason a new class preparation is so difficult; the teacher may not have clearly developed ideas about where the class is going and how the course will complete the objectives. Thus, the direction of flow is hard to see.

This particular dynamic has been especially apparent in implementing a new General Education Program at my institution. Foundations of Inquiry, the cornerstone course of this program, is an argumentation course for freshmen that also introduces students to the university and academic values and culture. When I first taught this course in its piloting phase, students would say that they had no idea what the course was about, and I had to accept that I was not sending clear messages because the course was ambiguous in my own mind. Six years later, my sense of the course has clarified so that the students may say they don't like the course, but they do know what it is about. In the past year I have twice taught groups of students who were repeating the course. Often their first instructor was teaching Foundations of Inquiry for the first time. One of the more interesting reactions that I see in them as we begin our class is the sense of relief they express as I show them the direction of the course. Their fear is calmed when a determined, centered teacher takes the reins, at least for that day.

Principle Three: Signal Before Asking

This principle expands on the notion of respect. We must have the attention of our students before we can ask them to do something. How we gain attention is the key. In the horse world, the rider uses a half-halt, a very subtle aid applied through the seat of the rider and various muscles in the legs, back, and stomach. The half-halt says, "Wait! I'm going to ask something of you." The effect of the half-halt is to re-balance the energy. The parallel to the half-halt in the classroom comes in many guises. Just as there is a strong half-halt ("whoa, Nelly!") such as using a student's name, there are more subtle ones as well, such as eye gaze, raised eyebrow, or hand gestures. The important contribution of this principle is the understanding that we must have the attention of the student before we can have an influence and that students have their own momentum. We must always respect the energy of the other and ask it gently to join ours. This principle is closely tied to the next one.

Principle Four: Create the Space to Move Forward

This principle is the most difficult to learn; it has taken me years. Essentially, we can often unwittingly block the flow of energy, both physically and emotionally. If the rider holds the reins too tightly, the horse has nowhere for her splendid energy to go; she will remain short-strided and tight-shouldered. If the horse is disobedient or afraid, tightening up on the reins will only make her feel even more claustrophobic. A rider must use appropriate aids to quiet the horse, but *always* release any pressure *before* the horse realizes that the problem is gone. In this way, the horse has the space to move forward on her own and thus feels it was her decision to calm down. Flow can then be quietly re-established.

This is an extremely important insight that is very difficult to master because tension often gets in the way. The prerequisite to its enactment is a gentle, relaxed contact that, without bias, may get stronger and then release immediately *even when it does not feel safe to do so*. If required, the contact will become a series of strengthenings plus release. Anger cannot be part of the equation. The lesson is that, by releasing the pressure just before the horse gives in, the decision to stop the argument is given to the horse and thus gives her confidence, endows a feeling of space and choice, and keeps communication open. The horse does not feel trapped and ridden heavy-handedly and has no reason to get resentful. The rider just asks quietly, “Won’t you join me?”

A classroom example of this dynamic might be a situation I had in Foundations of Inquiry when young university freshmen tended to pack their belongings and even stand up to put on their coats before the class was over. I found myself especially vulnerable when I was working with one of many small groups. Rather than yelling to be heard above the noise, I insisted that everyone be seated to receive directions and announcements. My eyes focused on students still seated, not on the ones being discourteous. Students who were paying attention pressured the rude, inattentive students to sit down. Thus, the class corrected itself, and I did not spend any excess energy on classroom management. The students in ensuing, similar situations corrected themselves faster and faster, and it quickly became a non-issue. Trust was being built on both sides.

Principle Five: Move Toward Self Carriage

In any class, an area of major concern for new teachers is how to grade and correct mistakes. We often forget that, in fact, learning requires making mistakes; mistakes are part of the flow process. If a horse is held so tightly that it cannot move other than how it is told, not only will there be tension, but also the horse will never learn to move better *without* support. The goal in dressage is for the horse to carry itself, or “self-carriage,” a state where the horse has learned to move with strength, confidence, and grace on its own. It is only with self-carriage that a horse may truly dance with the rider.

This concept captures the idea that students should take responsibility for their actions, building the cognitive skills to exhibit true learning. Only by making mistakes can students know that they have made wrong hypotheses. Moreover, the teacher cannot correct all mistakes, but can only point out to students when mistakes have been made. If students are actively learning, they will refor-

mulate their hypothesis and eventually figure it out. Of course, if students are distracted and not paying attention, the teacher must go back to the start and regain the students' attention, something that teachers, and riders, spend quite a bit of time doing. The teacher cannot create the energy for students to achieve learning. The teacher can only create an environment where the students' energy will naturally flow to the next level of learning. We create the space through which energy is invited to surge. This act involves timing, a generous and non-judgmental spirit, and an incredibly supple, connected awareness of student insecurities and curiosity.

Towards an Exploratory Pedagogy

Exploratory pedagogy is what Fleckenstein describes as a pedagogy that draws on non-traditional types of input such as imagery, visualization, somatic experience, meditation, koans, felt sense. To this list of activities and approaches, we must add the means to get there. This paper has been an attempt to flesh out the dialectic component of exploratory pedagogy; how we develop our attitude and the conversation with students in the classroom is just as important as the type of activities that we might use to enable discovery. Only then can we find a "center that holds." ☺

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