

Carmelite Spirituality in the Workplace
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For those of us who work, we spend almost 1/3 of our time each week, in the workplace (I'm assuming a full time job here). That's a pretty substantial portion of our lives, based on time alone. Factor in the amount of energy given to work, our reliance upon work for supporting our families, and any number of other reasons, and those of us who are doing our best to respond to God's presence in our lives know that we must somehow find a way to find God in our workplace. We can not and must not relegate God to only those times that we set aside for mental prayer, for liturgy, specifically for religious acts. Somehow we must find a way to view our work as a source of spiritual insight (Pierce, pg xiii).

Making this connection between our spiritual life and work can sometimes be hard. In his book, *Spirituality@Work*, Gregory Pierce quotes a lawyer, Joseph A. Davie who points out that the elements of contemplative spirituality: quiet, solitude, withdrawal, and meditation are in contrast to the elements we usually find in our workplace: hustle, bustle, noise, crowds, and complexity (Pierce, pg.5). And if we turn to our treasure trove of saints for guidance in finding God in our work, we encounter plenty of members of religious orders who's spirituality is based on their state of life as religious and no ready examples come to mind of saints who had a spirituality based on work in the world.

Yet, this is exactly what the Church calls upon those of us who are laity to do, find God in our workplace. *Lumen Gentium* (Ch. IV) specifically tells us that laity are to "seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs (re: work) and by ordering them according to the plan of God....they work for the sanctification of the world from WITHIN as a leaven."

So, if the workplace is a place of "noise, crowds, and complexity" in contrast to the contemplative spirituality of "silence, solitude, and simplicity", how do we find God in our work? And when we turn to our very contemplative Carmelite saints who lived a very different state of life from we Carmelite seculars, what can they possibly tell us about God in relation to our 21st Century working lives?

First, let me state that in talking about Carmelite spirituality in the workplace, I am not going to talk about a "pious" approach of doing such things as organizing lunch time Bible study or prayer groups, nor about proselytizing in the breakroom. Instead I want to challenge all of us, myself included, to seek out a spirituality of work in which we are able to find God IN the world, in the noise, in the crowds, in the complexity of the everyday working world in which so many of us live. As Carmelite seculars, we are called to a spirituality of work where we are able to find God, respond to God and help incarnate God's spirit in the world every day, including Monday through Friday, 8-5.

Of our Carmelite saints, there is one who can speak to us out of her own experience as someone who actually spent many years out in the real working world. After all, Teresa and John spent most of their lives within the Carmelite Order. Therese certainly never held a job. But Benedicta!! She did spend several years in the working world and so Benedicta provides us with a good starting point.

Let us begin with Benedicta's own description of a typical day:

“The duties and cares of the day ahead crowd about us when we awake in the morning (if they have not already dispelled our night's rest). Now arises the uneasy question: How can all this be accommodated in one day? When will I do this, when that? How shall I start on this and that? Thus agitated, we would like to run around and rush forth...

Now begins the day's work, perhaps the teaching profession – four or five hours, one after the other. That means giving our concentration there. We cannot achieve in each hour what we want, perhaps in none. We must contend with our own fatigue, unforeseen interruptions, shortcomings of the children, diverse vexations, indignities, anxieties. Or perhaps it is office work: give and take with disagreeable supervisors and colleagues, unfulfilled demands, unjust reproaches, human meanness, perhaps also distress of the most distinct kind.

It is the noon hour. We come home exhausted, shattered. New vexations possibly await us there. Now where is the soul's morning freshness? The soul would like to seethe and storm again: indignation, chagrin, regret. And there is still so much to do until evening. Should we not go immediately to it?

Thus the remainder of the day will continue, perhaps in great fatigue and laboriousness.... And when night comes, and retrospect shows that everything was patchwork and much which one had planned left undone, ... many things rouse shame and regret.” (EW, 143-145)

Does this sound like the kind of days you sometimes have? Same here. Now in quoting this lengthy passage from Benedicta, I confess, I left out a few parts. Let me now bring them back in. In the midst of describing the trials and tribulations of the day, Benedicta does talk about fitting God into it. When talking about arising in the morning and how right away the cares and worries of the day can begin to crowd in, Benedicta tells us that “we must take the reins in hand and say “Take it easy! Not any of this may touch me now. My first morning's hour belongs to the Lord. I will take the day's work which he charges me with, and he will give me the power to accomplish it...and after quiet dialogue, I will go to that which I see as my next duty.”” Benedicta then goes on for a couple more paragraphs speaking of how starting the day with God is good preparation as it opens the soul up to love which can then be taken into the world so that charity may prevail.

When she speaks of the noon break, Benedicta speaks of it as a chance to reclaim some of that morning calmness. She recommends time in front of the tabernacle but then points out that if that's not possible, then time alone in your room. And for those of us

who are nowhere near our homes for the lunch hour? She writes “And when no outer rest whatever is attainable, when there is no place in which to retreat, if pressing duties prohibit a quiet hour, then at least she must for a moment seal herself inwardly against all other things and take refuge in the Lord. He is indeed there and can give us in a single moment what we need.”

Does that remind you of another of our Carmelites? Br. Lawrence, perhaps? Indeed, in his Spiritual Maxims, we find him saying “During our work and other activities, even during our reading and writing, . . . we must stop for a moment, as often as possible, to adore God in the depths of our hearts, to savor him, even though in passing and stealthily.” (Maxims, 9)

Benedicta also encourages us to end our busy day by “taking all as it is, lay it in God’s hands and offer it up to him. In this way we will be able to rest in him, actually rest, and begin the new day like a new life.”

The advice of Benedicta and Lawrence is good and gives us some ideas for how to keep prayer as a touchstone of our day. But what about those real down to earth situations we face at work? What can our Carmelite saints tell us to help us with things like interactions with the boss, with our co-workers?

When I first began thinking through this topic of Carmelite spirituality in the workplace, I thought there was no way I’d be able to work Therese in. After all, she entered Carmel at the age of 15. She never worked a day in her life. But then I read this:

“There is in the Community a Sister who has the faculty of displeasing me in everything, in her ways, her words, her character, everything seems *very disagreeable* to me.”
(Manuscript C, 13v, 19-20)

I read that and immediately thought . . . oh . . . that is exactly how I feel about what’s-her-face down the hall!! Actually, I can think of a few people at work that I could say this about. But what does Therese remind us to do when confronting that co-worker that can push our buttons so very easily?

“I told myself that charity must not consist in feelings but in works, then I set myself to doing for this Sister what I would do for the person I loved the most. Each time I met her I prayed to God for her, offering Him all her virtues and merits.” (Manuscript C, 14r).

Maybe you are like me. Maybe that person down the hall is someone for whom you just can’t quite bring yourself to pray for, someone who has no noticeable virtues or merits that you can offer to God as Therese advises. I take some comfort that even Therese did not find doing this all that easy. She tells us “frequently, when I was at recreation and had occasion to work with this Sister, I used to run away like a deserter whenever my struggles became too violent.” (Manuscript C, 14r, 15) Or maybe, all you can do is come before God in true humility and admit the difficulty you have in praying for that person.

Even Teresa had problems with the individuals that she worked with in making her foundations. Due to health and also in obedience upon being ordered to stay put in one house, Teresa had to rely heavily upon others to handle various business related matters and could only write from a distance with advice and concern. Sometimes she didn't have much confidence in those being entrusted with Carmelite matters. An example in point was Don Teutonio who apparently wanted to help in the negotiations with the bishop of Salamanca who had made a request for the friars to come and run a home for repentant women. Teresa was against the friars being involved in such work and had no confidence in Don Teutonio as a help in the matter. She writes in a letter to Gracian:

I don't know if good Don Teutonio will do anything, for his chances are limited and he is not a good negotiator. If I were there to stir things up, I truly believe we'd succeed.
(Letters, 134)

Teresa does have more confidence in the friars themselves. In a letter that same day to Ambrosio Mariano, she writes:

I raise these objections so that all of you there may consider them and then do what seems good to you, for I submit to that. You will arrive at a better decision....Otherwise, I don't have confidence in Senor Don Teutonio as a great negotiator – in his good will, yes; in his abilities, no.
(Letters, 135).

While Teresa expressed confidence in Mariano in this letter, he caused her plenty of problems as well. Mariano tended to lack discretion and often ignored those in authority within the order. Teresa often pleads with him to mend his ways. In this same letter, she addresses the fact that Mariano has not paid attention to the concerns of Gracian in carefully setting up a house of friars in Madrid. He has rushed into things:

(Fr. Gracian) told me that it wouldn't be opportune since this could do harm to our cause, and I think he was right. And knowing his will in this matter, you shouldn't have decided to bring so many friars together and set up a church as though you had permission.... I never even bought a house until I had permission from the ordinary of the place. You know well what it cost me in Seville for not having gotten this permission.

I told you often that until you have a letter from the nuncio granting permission, nothing should be done. When Don Jeronimo told me that you asked the friars of the observance, I was dumbfounded. (Letters, 135)

Teresa is dumbfounded because already at this point, tensions were developing regarding the reform and she has little trust for the friars of the observance (the unreformed branch) to act in the best interest of the reform. Despite this lack of trust, Teresa recognizes that the friars and nuns of her reform are still in some way under the juridical authority of what we now call the OCarm and so she is not happy when she hears that Mariano has moved out of the house of OCarm friars in Madrid into the home of secular friends because of the harm it may bring to the reform efforts:

I would like to know how you can be in that city without living with the friars, I mean in the Carmelite monastery, since the nuncio has insisted so much on this. It's only right that we not displease him in anything; it would not be fitting for us to do so.

Up until now with the expectation of having a house there, any arrangement seemed acceptable. But believe me, padre, so prolonged a stay, and with four discalced friars, doesn't seem right to anyone, and it attracts attention, and not just the attention of the friars of the cloth, which we don't have to be concerned about. But I would not want us to provide the slightest occasion for criticism by doing anything that would give the appearance of non-compliance. (Letters, 189)

So, what do these interactions which Teresa has with Mariano have to say to we Seculars in the 21st century about spirituality and work? Well, in some ways, it shows that some things never change. How many of us have had co-workers who prefer to go their own way? Who aren't "team players" in today's terms? In many ways, that is exactly what Teresa had on her hands with Mariano, someone who wasn't a team player. Yet she did keep working with him, always pleading with him to do as she and the other superiors of the order were asking.

In the work world, we all live with the imperfections of our co-workers. In asking how to handle the imperfections of others, we need always to remember our own imperfections. How many times in her writings does Teresa talk about her own imperfections? But she recognizes that through God, she can move past them. At the beginning of the Way of Perfection, Teresa says in regards to making the foundation of St Joseph's: "I would have desired the possibility that nothing be lacking. In sum, my intention was the intention of the weak and wretched person that I am...I did this trusting in the great goodness of God, who never fails to help anyone who is determined to give up everything for Him." (WP, Chapter 1, 1-2). The reminders that Teresa and John of the Cross give us of the importance of humility in our lives point to the fact that when conscious of our own imperfections, we will have more patience and understanding in facing the imperfections of others, including our co-workers. For Teresa, the ability to forgive, to look past the imperfections of others is a sign of progress in the spiritual life:

"I cannot believe that a person who comes so close to Mercy itself, where he realizes what he is and the great deal God has pardoned him of, would fail to pardon his

offender immediately, in complete ease, and with a readiness to remain on very good terms with him. Such a person is mindful of the gift and favor granted by God, by which he saw signs of great love; and he rejoices that an opportunity is offered whereby he can show the Lord some love.” (WP, 36.12)

Mariano provides also an example of another imperfection we find both in others and ourselves at work – gossip. Teresa had some concerns about things that Mariano might say to the wrong people:

I also beg you to speak with great caution, whether you have any complaints about the nuncio or not. Because of your frankness – with which I am familiar – I fear that you are careless about this; please God nothing will reach his ears.

Be careful not to talk with the archbishop. Once he is informed, it isn't fitting for you to insist even if you have the opportunity to speak with him. ...After this, the best way to carry on the business is to be silent and speak with God. (Letter, 189)

For advice on not gossiping, we can go back to that most fundamental of Carmelite works – the Rule of St Albert. In # 17, we are advised to keep silence and when not observing what monastics would call the Great Silence, Albert writes “be careful not to indulge in a great deal of talk.” He goes on to cite several Scriptures about the dangers of too much talking because of the offense it might give. Teresa also reminds us in the First Mansions “that we must not talk about these things to one another. The devil could thereby gain greatly and manage to get the custom of gossiping started.(IC, I.18).

John of the Cross reminds us also of the harm that comes from gossiping in *The Ascent*. “Joy in hearing useless things gives direct rise to distraction of the imagination, gossiping, envy, uncertain judgments, and wandering thoughts, followed by many other pernicious kinds of harm.” (Book III, 25.3) It comes as no surprise that John advises that we “direct all the operations of the senses and faculties to divine contemplation.” In John's maxims, he's much more to the point, “speak little and do not meddle in matters about which you are not asked.” (Maxims, 62).

One of the members of my community specifically asked me to speak to competition in the workplace, another of those imperfections we encounter in ourselves and in others. Competition is one of those aspects of work that has its good side and its bad side. On the positive side, competition can result in producing a superior product, providing better services to customers, being creative and truthful, as well as being able to attract and retain the best employees (Pierce, pg. 99). However, we all know how very harmful competition can be when it results in unjust treatment of co-workers and customers, false claims, taking unfair advantage of others, and assorted other negative practices.

What immediately comes to mind is chapter 13 of the Ascent. That whole business of “if you want this, desire the opposite”. We might paraphrase John about competition in the workplace by saying something like “to get a promotion, desire a demotion”. But even I have to admit that feels like stretching our Carmelite spirituality a bit when we have mortgages to pay, children to feed, and this or that person at work who is highly competitive to contend with. I find his advice elsewhere to be much more applicable. In a letter to one of the nuns in Segovia, John writes “have a great love for those who would contradict and fail to love you, for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love.” (Letters, 33). And in his maxims, we again find helpful advice. “Take neither great nor little notice of who is with you or against you and try always to please God.” (Maxims, 76) and again, “Never take a man for your example in the tasks you have to perform, however holy he may be, for the devil will set his imperfection before you. But imitate Chris, who is supremely perfect and supremely holy, and you will never err.” (Maxims. 78).

Competition also means being concerned about what is the right thing to do. If you are honest with your customers, with your vendors, with your employees, you may sometimes lose out on something in the competitive sphere but you’ll be living out of Truth, something we know Benedicta emphasized. It may mean having to speak up about some injustice that is taking place at work. Sometimes all we can do is take baby steps toward creating a workplace where love, while unspoken and below the surface, undergirds all our actions – a workplace where we live out that golden rule of do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I still remember a saying from moral theologian, Dick Westley, in which he told the RCIA group in my parish of the time that we are called to forgive, even if the other person doesn’t want to forgive us and even if the other person does not want our forgiveness.

One of those very important persons in all our workplaces is the boss. How might you react if this happened? (I will substitute just a couple words here)

The (boss’s) latest prognosis for (the project): first of all, I am to stay with him until I marry; then I may only accept a man who will also become his assistant, and the same holds for the children. Highly unpropitious! Even apart from time, the requisite preconditions are absent. For it, in the long run, it is not entirely beyond the realm of the possible that someone could be found who would not shy away from an alliance with me (and vice versa), I deem it essentially impossible that a man could be his assistant. (Stein Letters, 5)

Yes, we’re back to our working saint, Benedicta and one of her letters from the time when she was an assistant for Edmund Husserl. He was definitely not an easy man to work for. Here’s another quote from one of her letters about his demands:

When the Master recently favored me with a whole set of directions regarding the handling of his manuscripts (in a most friendly manner, but I simply cannot bear that

kind of thing), I explained to him (also, of course, in a most friendly manner) that such a procedure (1) is impossible, in principle; (2) if at all valid, could be set up that way for his own use only by himself; and that (3) I am especially unsuited for it, and can only continue with this occupation if I do something original on the side. I am curious what he will have to say to that. I offered to remain on in Freiburg and to help him with the editing of the Jahrbuch, and similar things, only not as his assistant in works for which I am unable to find meaning.

(and then comes this bit that I love so much given her future as a Carmelite) she goes on to say...

Basically it was the thought of being at someone's disposition that I cannot bear. I can place myself at the service of something, and I can do all manner of things for the love of someone, but to be at the service of a person, in short – to obey, is something I cannot do. (Stein, Letters, 19)

And in the very next letter, Benedicta reports that Husserl has graciously accepted her resignation. Despite this somewhat tense departure, we do know that Benedicta did keep in touch with Husserl over the years and great mourned his death.

One hopes that most of us have better relationships with our boss. Much of what I said above about the imperfections of co-workers is equally applicable when it comes to dealings with the boss. One thing that I admire in Benedicta, when she realized that the working relationship with Husserl had become untenable, she had the courage to resign. Sometimes that is what is necessary for our own mental health. And it can be a very difficult discernment. After all, many of us very much need our job and the salary it brings in. But when it is having a negative impact upon our lives, when it endangers our mental and spiritual health, I think it is equally important that we look for something new, something healthier.

If you are in the position of being a boss, it is so important to recognize that you have within your power the opportunity to truly do as John of the Cross asks and bring love into a place where love may be lacking. Now, this doesn't mean we have to go around being all warm and fuzzy with our staff. Rather, it means creating a work environment that people look forward to coming to each day. As a boss, you have such a great opportunity to model the life of Christ. Sometimes it is the small, simple things that can make all the difference. Teresa knew this. In her letters, she is constantly asking after the well-being of various nuns and of Gracian. She keeps up with their health and what each Carmel needs. She encourages the prioress of one better off Carmel to send money to help another Carmel that is less well situated. We can do similar things in the workplace – inquire after the well-being of someone's family, take note when the work load may be uneven and redistribute it so no one person is overwhelmed while another has little to do. We can also see that people who work for us receive a just wage for the work they do.

One of the small things which has huge impact is the very simple act of saying thank you. I fully realized this when I began to work for my current boss. I've now worked for him for 10 years and every so often, he'll very sincerely thank me for doing something that is a normal, routine part of my job. I always look at him like he's totally out of his mind since it's such a routine part of my job that I tend to think thanks aren't needed. But you know what? That simple thank you for something I may do day in and day out without giving it much thought because...well...it's my job...leaves me walking on air for a bit. It's the kind of thing that makes me willing to go the extra mile for my boss when needed and even without him asking. And knowing the impact it has upon me, I've tried to incorporate doing the same in relation to those who I supervise. Teresa knew this too. Time and time again in her letters, Teresa thanks the person she is writing to for any number of things and sometimes she thanks them simply for having written to her. In the Foundations and in the Life, she frequently writes in gratitude for the help she and the nuns and friars received from various people. Teresa understood the importance of giving thanks.

Another aspect of looking for God in the workplace is deciding what is enough. Remember the beginning of my talk? The lengthy quote from Benedicta about how much can fill our day and her small suggestions for fitting in a few moments, at least, of time with God? For each of us, the question of what is enough comes up in terms of our time, our energy, our money, even our spirituality.

Benedicta in that earlier quote very much touched upon our time. And certainly, it doesn't take much for time to get away from us and next thing we know, we're ready to collapse into bed and we've barely had a chance to slow down all day and perhaps...perhaps have not even had the chance to pray. Hopefully that lack of prayer is more the exception than the rule. However, as Carmelite Seculars, we are all too familiar with having to make decisions regarding what gets our priority in matters of time. Here again, Benedicta has some advice in one of her letters to Sr. Callista:

I do not use extraordinary means to prolong my workday. I do as much as I can. The ability to accomplish increases noticeably in proportion to the number of things that must be done. When there's nothing urgent at hand, it ceases much sooner. Heaven is expert at economy. Therefore, whatever comes your way after nine o'clock is evidently no longer essential. That, in practice, things do not proceed smoothly according to reason is due to our not being pure spirits. There's no sense in rebellion against that. *(and then she adds this short prayer)*

Oh, Lord God, will to give me

All that leads me to you.

Oh, Lord God, take away from me

All that diverts me from you.

Oh, Lord God, take me, also, from myself

And give myself completely to yourself.

These are three graces: the last is the greatest and includes the others; but take note: one must pray for it. (Stein Letters, 69)

I even want to propose that in minding how we prioritize our time, we also have to consider whether we are spending too much time on Church activities. I know a few of you just gasped! It is easy to convince ourselves that spending so many hours doing things around our parish is a good thing because, after all, its all related to God that way, isn't it? And I'll confess, I've had weeks where I've spent almost every evening at my parish for one meeting or another. But then, God stepped in with an extended period of family crisis where I had to pull back from all those parish activities and when my time freed up again, I took a good hard look at where did I truly feel God was calling me to serve and how well did that fit with my commitments to Carmel, to family, and in relation to work. And I found that I became much less active in my parish so the only week when I might be there almost every night is Holy Week. We are not short-changing God when we recognize and adjust to the limits of our time and energy.

Energy is closely connected to how we spend our time. Even Jesus knew to look after his energy. In her book, *Jesus CEO*, Laurie Beth Jones talks about how Jesus did not “engage in meaningless debates with people who wanted not to learn but to argue...he was a recruiter of sorts, (but) he never wasted energy begging or manipulating others to follow him.” (pg 21-22)

Another “enough” that we need to look at is money. This is something we especially need to look at as people who have made a promise to live out the evangelical counsel of poverty within the context of our secular lives. When do we have enough money? In his article, *I Promise to be Truly Poor*, Gerald Alford OCDS poses the question that we all should spend time reflecting upon – what is my relationship to the goods of this world which I now have in my possession? Naturally, John of the Cross immediately comes to mind when we think about and ask ourselves, how much money, how many possessions are enough. In the *Ascent*, he reminds us “it is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them, for it is these that dwell within it (Chapter 3).

As Carmelite Seculars we must approach the issue of money in a balanced manner since many of us have families to support and they are most definitely one of our priorities. So we do want to receive good salaries for the work that we do. And sadly, sometimes we find ourselves stuck in jobs that are draining our time, our energy, and maybe even our soul because we need the job to support our family. I certainly hope and pray that if you find yourself in such a job, you are able to find something healthier for your own soul and your family (because such things impact there as well) and you can move on to a better situation. Our call to doing God's will very much implies that if we find ourselves in a situation which is having a negative impact upon our relationships, be they with family or with God, we should do what is possible to move out of that situation. Sometimes, taking a lower paying job may be the more holy thing in the long run.

The Church reminds us of this as well in the *Gaudium et Spes*:

For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, women and men are

performing their activities in such a way that appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their brothers and sisters, and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan (#34).

So, even the Church reminds us that our work is about much more than just money, it about participating in God's plan for the world. As Christians, this is what we are called to do and as Carmelite Seculars, we bring into our work those incredible gifts that we find in our Carmelite spirituality and saints. They have taught us so much about prayer and we know that we must take all that we are and do into that prayer life that we've been called to.

There is much more that can probably be said about Carmelite Spirituality in the Workplace. I encourage each one of you when reading and studying and praying with our saints, to make some of those connections, such as I have, between what they are telling us and our own experiences in the 21st century workplace. Teresa and John may have been writing to 16th century nuns and friars. Therese may never have worked a day in her life. But they do still have something to say to us about the workplace. To close, I want to turn once again to Benedicta. She is such a blessing to us as someone who did spend many years in the workplace in relatively modern times and it is a wonderful gift that she sometimes wrote about all this. So, I close with a rather lengthy quote from another of her letters to Sr. Callista:

Of course, religion is not something to be relegated to a quiet corner or for a few festive hours, but rather, as you yourself perceive, it must be the root and basis of all life: and that, not merely for a few chosen ones, but for every true Christian. That it is possible to worship God by doing scholarly research is something I learned, actually, only when I was busy with St Thomas. Only thereafter could I decide to resume serious scholarly research.

Immediately before, and for a good while after my conversion, I was of the opinion that to lead a religious life meant one had to give up all that was secular and to live totally immersed in thoughts of the Divine. But gradually I realized that something else is asked of us in this world, and that even in the contemplative life, one may not sever the connection with the world. I even believe that the deeper one is drawn into God, the more one must "go out of oneself"; that is, one must go to the world in order to carry the divine life into it.

The only essential is that one finds, first of all, a quiet corner in which one can communicate with God as though there were nothing else, and that must be done daily....Finally, one is to consider oneself totally as an

instrument, especially with regards to the abilities one uses to perform one's special tasks... We are to see them as something used, not by us, but by God in us. (Stein Letters, 45)

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