

A Life in the Woods: Protest Site Paganism

By Adrian Harris

"I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else
whom I knew as well".

Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods*.

Over ten years ago I gave a presentation that was to change my life. I spoke about a "somatic knowing" that "is the knowledge of faith, of emotion, of the gut feeling" (Harris, 1996). I concluded that spiritual experiences in nature give us an embodied knowing that can inspire environmental action. My words spoke of an unexplored landscape and I embarked on a remarkable journey of discovery.

That 1996 paper revealed a broad horizon and it took a PhD to even begin to map out the territory. What I discovered was as profound as I'd hoped and more surprising than I ever imagined.

Academic research can be bone dry, so to create a fleshier appreciation of my work, I'd like to invite you to join me on a pivotal part of my journey. My fieldwork touched the individual threads of many lives, and this story weaves them into a tapestry. This is an autoethnography, a more intimate expression of fieldwork than most, which embraces the researcher's personal experience and reveals a "personal voyage of discovery" (Bruner, 1986).

Autoethnography is an *aesthetic* activity as much as an academic one in that it tells stories that invite the reader "to put themselves in our place" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This is an imaginative retelling in as much as I distil many months at various protest sites into a single narrative. But every word speaks true: all substantive quotes are as spoken and always in a context that preserves their intent¹.

A new arrival

Field notes:

A few long days ago I was in London phoning the camp from my flat. Now the flat is empty, my unaffordable lease is done and, with my material life in store, I'm on a train going west. It started snowing just as the train left London and the fields all around are now dusted. Not ideal conditions to arrive in! Still, it may delay work on the road. I hope so. When I spoke to Jill on the phone she emphasised how "bloody beautiful" the woods are.

¹ Aliases are used throughout and two characters - Oak and Ben - combine more than one individual.

It's snowing pretty steadily as the train arrives at my destination and the bus driver jokes that I'll need skis in the woods. I smile through my mixed feelings: I have the usual slight anxiety at heading into an unknown situation, tempered with a certainty that this is where I need to be right now and all will be well. Why am I so certain? My first thought is that this is in accord with the pattern of my life: it's living the life I've created.

Dusk is falling as I get off the bus but within 10 minutes I find myself walking down the rough path towards the camp. A voice hollers out a "Hello!" from the bank above me. "Hi! It's Adrian – I phoned the camp a couple of days ago." At the moment I'm no more than a shadow in the dark, so I want to reassure them that I'm a friend. "Oh, hi! Come on up. There's a gap in the fence over here". A guy who calls himself 'Oak'² meets me with a smile and leads me to the fire pit where people sit huddled round the warmth.

"Hi, I'm Adrian. I'm an old mate of Jill's and she was telling how amazing it is here."

"Hi. Good to meet you. Always good to see new people. You staying long?"

"I dunno. Maybe. See how it goes."

"Cool. Have you got a tent or something? You can always sleep in the communal bender if you like."

"I'm OK. I've brought a tent and stuff. Guess I'd better pitch it before it gets too dark." I head off and find a spot to pitch my tent near a tree. It's not exactly sheltered, but it'll provide some protection from the wind - I hope!

Back at the fire, I get chatting to Jan, a young woman of about 20. When I tell her a bit about my understanding of Eco-Paganism she smiles with recognition and says "Oh, I guess I'm an Eco-Pagan then!" I smile with a different kind of recognition as this experience is quite common in Paganism. You don't get converted but just realise there's a name for what you already believe. My problem is that the name 'Pagan' doesn't fit me so well these days. I keep quiet about my doubts as we chat round the warmth of the fire for fear I might break the spell.

² About a third of the people I met on protest sites used an alias which they referred to as their 'site name'. Typically this was only used while on the site or involved in a protest action.

After a few rounds of red wine it's time for bed, so we all crunch through the snow to tents dotted round the camp. The snow is inches deep now and even wearing all the clothes I have I'm cold as I struggle to get some sleep. We must all be crazy.

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Next morning is bright and cold, but the fire pit is warm and Oak has made porridge. Joy!

There are a few new faces at breakfast, so I introduce myself.

"You're the guy that's doin' the research on Paganism aren't you?" Says Ben.

"Yeah, that's right. Well, that and helping with the protest. I used to be involved years ago and it felt like time to get my boots dirty again."

Rob thought for a moment and then nodded as he said, "I have a sort of pagan connection to the earth".

"Yeah," said Jan, "that's what Paganism is all about – connection with everything".

Ben shrugged: "It's blatantly all connected. If you can't see that it's just because you're closed down - conditioned".

Ray agreed: "In this day and age it's just taken away from you. Your mind's just filled with so much other stuff - well, crap basically. No-one's really in touch with what they actually are or anything - or *life*".

"Which is why living in a wood is quite good", responded Ben. "Because you get less distractions and you get more of the spirits of the trees - whether or not you believe in fairy nonsense - which, you know, I do!" He laughed.

Ray nodded, and added with a chuckle, "And if you start talking about, you know, the wind and the earth and the fire and the stars people just start laughing at ya".

***Field notes:***

*Alex wrote about the "sense of connectedness" that's common amongst activists (Plows, 1998). Can we learn that sense of connection? I think so, and it's highlighted by life on a protest site: without the mod-cons of urban life everything has a vital rawness. I'll see what I can learn from people here - and the place!*

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As we sit and eat supper, Jan asks me for my thoughts on how the body can 'know' something³.

"Well, basically, we have different ways we can know something. I know in a *conscious* way that Paris is the capital of France. But I also have an emotional, sensual knowing of Paris – the smells of Paris, the taste of Paris, that odd little back street that I couldn't *tell* you how to find but that I could easily walk to. One kind of knowing – the conscious sort – is right here in my head." I tap my head. "The other – that fuzzy, wordless, poetic knowing – is here in my gut", I say with a gentle touch to my stomach.

"OK. I get that. But does it relate to intuition and the kind of connection I sometimes get with this place?"

"Yeah, totally!" I say, excitedly. "Let me think how to explain it." I ponder for a moment before picking up a couple of forks from a nearby pile and hold them up in front of me. "If you take two tuning forks of the same pitch, and strike just one of them", I say hitting one fork on a log, "the other fork will begin to vibrate in harmony. The two tuning forks are separate but connected. Something similar is happening to us all the time – the deep awareness in our bodies is resonating with the world around us".

"And we can listen to that deep awareness?" Jan asks.

"Sure," I reply. "When we sink our awareness into it we can come into communion with the world. It's probably not practical – or even desirable – to consciously tune in to that awareness all the time. But I reckon that regularly dipping into connection is vital".

Jan smiles as she says, "I think I know the answer already, but how do we dip in?"

"There's lots of ways - ritual, mediation, sex ..." I glance round in mock caution and add "magic mushrooms..."

Rob looks up from his bowl of vegan curry with a grin.

"But that's a much longer conversation!" I say, picking up the plates and heading to the washing up bucket.

³ Although Jan and I could have had this conversation, this section is a fictional device to outline my ideas.

Field notes:

Jill came over last night and we sat by the fire to catch up over a cuppa. It's been years since the last big round of road building, and she has a sense that this marks the next turn on the spiral that started at Twyford Down. Jill moved house recently so can't spend much time here now, but she thinks we can win this one. Let's hope so: there are bats, owls, badgers, dormice and toads in these woods.

THE TURNING**Enchantment**

I wake up feeling good: that's one of my last nights in my cold, cramped tent, 'cos I'm building myself a place to live! Most people on site live in a tree house or a bender tent. A tree house would be wonderful, but they are hard to do properly. I read a great quote from an Eco-Pagan explaining that "when you live in a tree it becomes part of you" (Greenwood, 2005). I'd love that, but I reckon I can build a bender in a few hours: you just make a structure with bent branches and cover it with canvas.

Ray and I are both going to build benders, so Oak is taking the two of us to some nearby woods to cut branches. With that happy thought, I wander down to the communal for breakfast to find Jan is also in a bright mood, despite piles of washing up.

"You look happy this morning!"

"Yeah, I'm going to plant seeds today. I love doing that." I look vague, wondering why. She gives me a big smile as she explains. "It makes me feel like I'm talking to the Goddess."

I'm still pondering the profundity of Jan's joy as we arrive at the woods where we'll cut the branches we'll use for bender poles. Ray and I both need poles, so Oak shows us what to look for: the poles need to be straight, not too thick and nice and long. It looks easy enough, but it's not. I just can't see the wood for the trees! After a while looking far too hard for the right poles, I begin to get the knack: it needs a particular sensory acuity that feels like I'm relaxing into it and opening myself up to the space. Now I'm looking less and seeing more.

That evening as we sit round the fire I ask if anyone meditates and it turns out that most people do some form of sitting. Rob learnt Vipassana meditation but also uses a less formal approach: "Just spending time out in nature, just listening. Just looking. Not really thinking too much".

"Yeah," says Jo, with a nod. "You just sit there and if you give it a moment, peace - It will just come in. It's like a wash that floods through you".

Adam sits quietly, looking thoughtful, so I ask where he learnt his spiritual understanding. "It's partly about spending time with other beings and partly about being with the land and the trees", he says. He pauses for a moment and adds, "If meditation means doing without thinking, then I do what you might call meditation all the time when I'm with the land".

Sitting outside my new bender watching the waxing moon, I think, "This is my Paganism!" To worship something you have to be separate from it, but I don't feel a need to worship nature. Actually, it's stronger than that: I don't feel it would make sense, because I *am* nature. My Paganism is an expression of a deep love for nature that doesn't try to objectify it. I hear crows squawking in the trees while in the distance the road drones by. The contrast seems poignant: life in place, as part of a sustainable ecology sits next to an oddly pointless series of individual journeys.

Field notes:

Reading 'Walden', Thoreau's book about his time living in the woods. His perception became finely tuned and he writes that he smells the arrival of muskrats in the Spring. Living here does seem to sharpen the senses. I remember back to when we were cutting bender poles and the way I somehow had to learn to see them. I'm definitely much more in tune with my environment now. I've been a Pagan for years but before I came here I usually couldn't make more than an educated guess at which phase the Moon was. Now I knew the Moon phase better than I know what day of the week it is!

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I wake up and smile as I look at the curve of hornbeam branches that is my new home. The space is motley, more open and fluid than a brick house or even a tent. It has an organic quality inspired by the materials; a dome, shaped purely by the relationship between bent hornbeam and space. It's beautiful, but not much warmer than a tent, so I leap out of my sleeping bag, dress and head out to greet another chill, bright day.

As usual, Lauren is up early. She's a retired school teacher, though you'd never guess from her dreadlocks and rainbow clothes.

"Morning Lauren. How's it going?"

"Fine now I've got my cuppa tea!"

"Are you coming to the Land Blessing on Sunday?"

"Oh, I don't think so" she says with a bit of a frown. "I somehow don't get the whole spirituality thing".

"Ah well. Each to their own". I say with a smile, as Rob wanders over to make himself a tea.

"What about you Rob? Will you joining the Land Blessing?"

"Yeah. I've been at a Beltane festival and Paganism fits in a lot with how I feel about the world."

After supper I get chatting to Rob about his experience of life on site. He's been living on protest sites for a few years, so spends most of his time in the woods. "I find it quite difficult to connect with my spirituality when I'm in an urban environment", he says. "It's only when I get out into nature ... and feel the energy flowing through me and I have that connection."

I know just what he means: "Yeah, I've felt that too - especially since I've lived on site."

"It's not that it's there all the time - I get distracted in the mundane shit of my life, like living in a city - but all I need to do is go outside into nature and I can kind of connect and open up those channels again."

We sit and chat while the fire burns low and the inviting darkness crowds around us.

***Field notes:***

*Tonight we talked about our embodied understanding of the site but found that conventional language can't really grasp it. According to old paradigm thinking, the body can't 'know' anything but it's pretty clear now that the mind is more like an ecosystem than a computer: the mind and body are one system, reason needs emotion to function and embodied intuition is a powerful way of knowing<sup>4</sup>.*

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The sunlight wakes me. Maybe it's late - or is the sun just stronger now? Time passes strangely on site: days feel short yet looking back over a week it seems like a fortnight. It reminds me of the old stories about

⁴ I explain my model of embodied knowing in more detail in Harris, 2011.

time in Faerieland: humans visit Faerieland for a day only to discover that years have passed in the mortal world.

After breakfast, I look round the site for Rob. He told me earlier how he finds it much easier to connect to his spirituality when he's in the woods, and I want to try to find more. I find him sitting in a little grove of beech trees at the end of the site.

"Hi Rob. You got time for a chat?"

"Sure. I'm just sitting."

"I wanted to ask you a bit more about your experience of living in the city".

He frowns. "I find being in the city very very difficult - it drives me a bit mad having to have the filters on, constantly having to block out noise because if not you'll go absolutely insane because there's just so much going on."

He told me how clear this was he left the city to drive down to Climate Camp. When they stopped off in the middle of the countryside the silence was overwhelming:

"It was so goddam quiet it almost hurt. And it was only when you actually started to listen that you realised it wasn't quiet at all but the river was flowing, the wind was in the trees, the birds flying. All of these things were going on which we weren't hearing because we had these filters on. People live their entire lives in an urban environment and they just don't get that connection with nature".

Rob went on to describe one evening in the woods when a deep sense of connection overwhelmed him.

"The sun was coming through the branches of the trees making a kind of a column of light and these mosquitoes were flying into it. It was November, and because the air was lit by the sunlight it was warmer than the surrounding air, so a sort of convection was going on, and the insects were dancing around in it. This dance was beautiful and there was so much order and beauty to it. It wasn't just a random thing at all. It was utterly poetic".

I nod for him to go on.

"I was just sat watching the sunset, hearing the sounds of the cars in the background and thinking about all the shit that is going in our world, and feeling so sad, so utterly sad. And then I felt like the sun was setting

on all life and this one day was the last day and I just started crying, you know... I felt like Gaia was really screaming out through me, saying please help me. I felt so connected, so at one with the Earth that this violence was being done towards me. Not me personally, but me as in life, as in this whole unity which I'm connected with. That strengthened my conviction - I actually said to myself on that day that I would do whatever I could for the rest of my life, whatever the hell I could to stop this from happening. There's an empowerment and purpose - the ability to get up in the morning and not have to think about what you're doing but just have that energy flowing in your body. I think it's important not to underestimate how powerful that energy is".

Field notes:

To really be in nature - to be nature - we must honour and value our sensory experience: the tastes and smells in the air, the touch of the wind as it caresses the skin, the feel of the ground under our feet as we walk upon it. Instead of a strict boundary between self & the rest of the world, we can embrace a shifting awareness across a kaleidoscope of being. And this new awareness encourages a right relationship with nature. Many of us say that the Earth is Sacred, but we may mean that our relationship with the Earth - and our physicality - is Sacred.

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The Land Blessing was beautiful. I nearly wept after Jan's short and simple invocation of the Goddess though it wasn't much more than one line: "Welcome to the Goddess of the Well". Oak suggested that this was because she expressed such a strong belief. That resonates.

Ray wept openly at the end so I did a grounding meditation with him. It seemed to help.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

We sit quietly for a while, then he smiles and says: "That was probably the first time I connected properly - realised this bit of land is here and we're actually protecting it and saving it and loving it".

I give him a hug and we walk in silence back to the communal bender. Jan is the only one there so I sit down and asked about the ritual.

"I think that went pretty well. What do you reckon?"

"I've been feeling quite magical being here," Jan replies. "I don't differentiate between what we did in the circle and what I do on a quite regular basis ... Just talking to whatever's out there".

Jan had given a beautiful invocation of a local deity, so I ask about her work with the Goddess. She gives me an odd look, like she didn't quite get the question.

"Well, I wouldn't call it work, "she says smiling. "I just like to say hello. Whether it's Her, or something else, or just the land breathing maybe, I don't know, but it's the same kind of feeling. But, I can call Her the Goddess to other people because they understand".

I've never heard it described quite like that. "What do you mean, 'the land breathing'?"

Jan explains: "Well it's all the layers. It's the mushrooms and all the roots, and the trees intertwining underneath. I mean, in a wood all the trees have joined together and then you've got all these layers of different ecosystems - I think the whole thing makes a complete breathing creature, almost. Which is why, you know, land clearance is so dreadful. That's the whole breathing entity of which we should be a part, a symbiotic part, and we're not. That's where it all goes wrong, horribly wrong, isn't it? That's the Goddess, that's who I try and communicate with, talk to, sense. Yeah, but I felt wonderful when I was calling Her in and I think people understood what I was trying to say".

"Hello?" Calls a voice outside. "Anyone home?" It's a visitor, probably someone from the nearby town who's got up the courage to come and find out what we're all about.

"Thanks Jan," I say with a smile, as I get up to greet our guest.

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I wake up with the remains of a dream. All I can remember is a man saying to me that answers don't come in a single moment. He didn't say any more, but the implication was that solutions emerge over time. It reminds me a dream I had years ago: I met the Green Man in the woods and I asked him if I could record our conversations to take to people outside. The dream ended with me walking out of the wood clutching a cassette tape. Weirdly, that's kinda what I'm doing here.

Mulling over my dream, I wander down to the communal for breakfast, where I find Jan reflecting on life on site. She's lived on a site before and was clearly happy to be back. "I feel free here. I'm back to being myself".

Free. Yes, I've felt that myself. A feeling of lightness, a sense of openness. It's great to hear other people express that too - It's not just me then! There's certainly something special about this place - A sense that anything is possible.

Lauren and I get chatting after lunch and it turns out that she was involved with the Twyford Down campaign of the 1990's. Odd that she hadn't mentioned it before.

Twyford Down was a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with loads of wildlife, but that didn't stop them building a dual carriageway through it. Lauren used to visit and felt the power of the place.

"Twyford was such a *wonderful* piece of land", she said. "As you stepped onto it you just thought, 'What's happening to me?'"

It was pretty amazing and the protests there kicked off a new direct action movement in the UK. As we sat and reminisced, Lauren unpacked just how important it had been for her. As she spoke, I came to understand lots of things about Lauren that I hadn't grasped before. She'd mentioned that she'd had a breakdown some years go, but not why. Now I found out that Twyford was the catalyst.

"The reason I think I had the breakdown was because it presented the real me to me and I just didn't recognise it or was able to cope with it. And yeah, I couldn't cope with the fact that I knew in my heart of hearts that we'd lose and it would be a motorway one day and ... the madness of it all just really hit me".

We sit in wordless silence, lost in memories as birds sing brightly outside the canvas walls.

Field notes:

There's a unusually strong sense of connection here. Autobiographical accounts of road protest life describe it too: activist Jim Hindle describes how living on the Newbury site "was like being connected to a great river, the source of all life ... and years of separation between us and the Land were falling away like an old skin" (Hindle, 2006).

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I wake up with a realisation: when I lived in London I used do brief morning rituals to greet the Elements. Why aren't I doing my Elements ritual anymore? I get the answer in a second; 'cos it's all here! Every day I go and collect water, every day I light a fire; I walk on the bare earth

and spend most of the day under the open sky. In London I needed to make an effort to stay connected – here it just happens.

As I crawl out of my bender I see Ray emerge from his.

"Morning mate! How's life in a bender?"

"Lovin' it man!" Says Ray with a big grin.

We chat as we wander down to the communal for breakfast.

"I don't want to live in a house ever again", he says with a laugh in his voice.

I can relate to that: it feels like I'm in an intimate connection with everything around me because the inside and outside are less defined.

Ray is on one now:

"In a house you're just sealed off from anything that could possibly connect with outside of it you know? Other than probably another box -which is the television. Like you don't realise it until - well I didn't realise until I had the opportunity to live outside in a bender".

The reality of our connection with the world is inescapable here: even in my bender it's very obvious what the weather is like.

I turn and asked Ben if it feels different when he's in the woods.

He gives me a mischievous grin: "Does it feel different? No, it feels different when I'm not - when I'm in a box or on a street. That's when it feels different".

While cleaning my teeth tonight I hear a car drive past. I stand on grass, beside a tree in a space lit by the light of the half moon. They sit in a metal box, closed off and closed in. Although we are only separated physically by a short distance, psychologically we occupy different worlds. That evocative phrase from Rob Greenway that 'civilization is only four days deep' comes back to me, and I suspect it is even more fragile than that: removing just some of the trapping of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century can profoundly shift our awareness. That powerful phenomenon may be what lies at the heart of the protest movement.

***Field notes:***

*Several factors contribute to the sense of connection people feel here, including meditation, ritual and what ecopsychology calls the*

*wilderness effect. Rob Greenway claims that "both the psychedelic and meditation experiences ... closely parallel" the wilderness effect, and that such awareness seems to have the "capacity to open consciousness to Mind - that is, to the more natural flows of information from nature". There are various aspects to the wilderness effect, but fundamentally it involves feelings of reconnection which Rob unhesitatingly describes as "spiritual" (Greenway, 1995). The wilderness effect is found on long treks in North America, but I think it's happening here too.*

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It's late in a long day. We've had several visitors from town and got quite a bit of work done on the defences. Everyone's gone to bed now, and high time I headed off to my bender.

Suddenly Lauren rushes into the communal bender in a real state. "Thank god you're still up!" She says, breathlessly, and hugs me. "Can you please come with me? I've just seen the Green Man by the compost toilet ..."

What on Earth? Lauren is clearly very freaked out but I can't quite make sense of what she's saying.

"Yeah, OK", I say, trying to sound reassuring. "Let's just go down there together". Lauren is a little calmer now, and together we walk down to the compost toilet.

"There", she said, she pointing out the shape in the trees where she'd seen the Green Man. Whatever spirit Lauren had seen had done its work, and there was now not much more than a vaguely human shape in the trees. We sat and talked about her experience and she explained that the Green Man seemed to have been calling to her. Now that her initial panic had subsided she realised the figure she'd seen wasn't frightening but protective.

"Nothing like that has never really happened before except that night when I sat at Twyford Down. I kind of had it - I call that one of my deep spiritual experiences, sitting there that night when I knew I'd never be back there. I think the Earth is drawing people to protect Herself - a bit like the Rainbow Warriors".

"So you're still not spiritual, huh?" I asked with a grin and she replied with a smile and a hug:

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**Field notes:**

*When I started my research I thought that ritual was fundamental in developing our connection to the world. But there's been hardly any ritual here and I've found something even more powerful: the spirit of place.*

**Changes**

My mobile sings. I have a text from an old mate in a Housing Co-op. With a shock I read that they have a vacancy in the house – Can I come for interview? Well, yes ... And before I know I'm booked for Wednesday night.

“Looks like I might be offered a place in a housing co-op. Some old mates have a vacancy.”

“Oh. Great ...” Says Jan in a tone which translates that into “Oh. Shit ...”

Wednesday comes round fast and I find myself on the train to London. As I sit down in this warm, enclosed space I feel odd – slightly shocked somehow. It feels strangely alien: straight lines; hard surfaces; ordered space. I feel shut away. I stare out at the trees and think of my bender.

The train pulls into the station, and here I am, back in London. On the tube I get that shut in feeling again: I feel enclosed, restricted and less emotionally open. We talk a lot about urban congestion but it's not just roads that are congested – it's psyches.

The interview goes well. Part of me is delighted as it means I'll have a stable base and I can focus on trying to make sense of what's going on. But I don't feel ready to return to a more conventional life and my emotional ties to the camp mean I'll be leading a double life for a while, spending time living in my new home and my old one.

I got back to camp late and hoped not to see anyone tonight, but Lauren has caught me by the fire as it sit in a pensive mood. She has that air of wanting to say something important.

"So you're leaving us!" She teases.

"Not really", I say, trying to fudge it. "I'll be here for at least half the time."

"That's good. There's something I wanted to say before you go back to London- something for you to remember when you're there: what was at Twyford Down is living on - it's turned up here. This feeling, this love of

the land, is growing so much in people now. And that is what will win through in the end".

I gave her a big hug, and we sat quietly staring at the flames flickering their eternal dance.

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