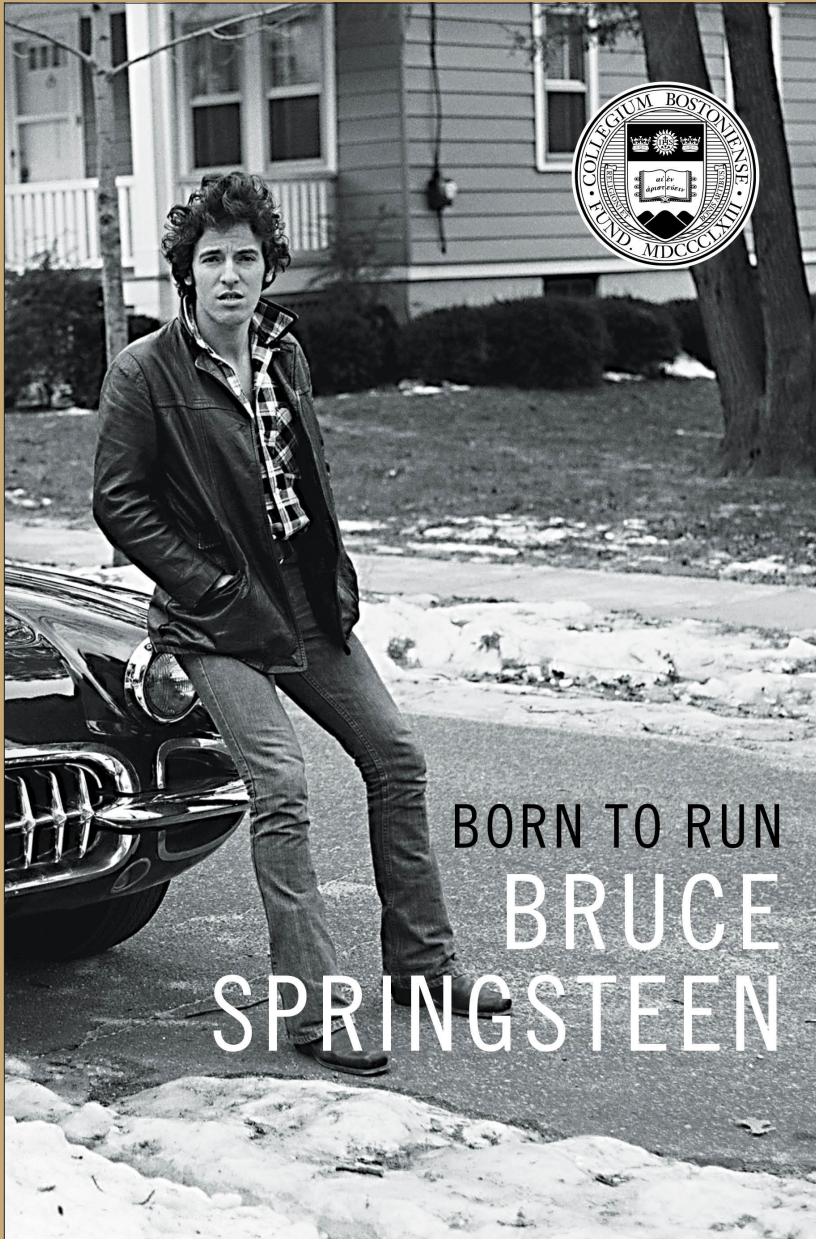


BOSTON COLLEGE



BORN TO RUN
BRUCE
SPRINGSTEEN

FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION
SEPTEMBER 2020



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WHY READ A BOOK?

We can learn what is in any book on Amazon, hear what others think on Facebook, listen to a podcast if we want to learn from cutting-edge thinkers. So why sit with a thick paper tome when it's far easier to get our information and entertainment in other forms?

One answer is precisely because it is easier, and noisier, to learn and be entertained via digital and truncated means. Technology keeps us connected, linked, always visible, always able to see and be seen. Sometimes this connection, this being linked, on, and seen is valuable, worthwhile and even politically efficacious. Sometimes.

But if all we ever do is check status updates, skim articles, and read summaries of other peoples' ideas while listening to music and texting our friends, something valuable gets lost. That something goes by many names: concentration, solitude, space for reflection, intimacy, and authenticity. Reading a book, we hope you'll learn at Boston College if you don't already know and believe already, brings with it unique form of pleasure and thinking.

Reading can take us out of the smallness of our own perception, our own little lives, the limited boundaries of what we have experienced. We can glimpse into the perspectives and even empathize with people whose lives are vastly different than our own. As Zits, the narrator of Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight* learns, "I can't jump into Dave's body but I can feel and see and understand a little bit about his pain, I guess.[1]"

Beyond teaching empathy, reading takes us briefly out of the noisy, overwhelming chaos that is our daily life and gives us something else, which William Dereseiwicz describes well:

¹ Alexie, S. (2007). *Flight: a novel*. New York: Black Cat.

“But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of his solitude, his attempt to think for himself.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they’re not from today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don’t reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought.” [2]

Cultivating habits of thought. That’s what coming to BC is offering you. Some habits can and should be digital, connected, and even multi-tasked. But sometimes we all need the habit of opening a good book, diving in, and leaving the din of our contemporary moment, temporarily, behind.



WHY READ *BORN TO RUN*?

As a member of the class of 2024, each of you will have the opportunity to read *Born to Run* and to welcome its author, Bruce Springsteen, to Boston College to discuss this work. Springsteen is an internationally-renowned singer, songwriter, and performer whose work has earned him 20 Grammy Awards, an Academy Award, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Springsteen is also a member of the Boston College family, as the father of a member of the Class of 2012.

Author Vinita Hampton Wright describes how St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, saw personal narrative as a way of encountering God.

² AFrom a lecture by William Dereseiwicz to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, October 2009

St. Ignatius understood that our lives are in motion, that we are living stories. A great deal of our spiritual health lies in our ability to see the story-ness of our existence. And not only do we learn to see our lives as meaningful sequences of events, and ourselves as the main characters who become transformed, but we learn to recognize another major character in our lifelong story. God has always been in our story, and as our eyes are opened and we see where God's love, peace, power, wisdom, and grace intersected our personal sequence of events, we begin to embrace our lives as sacred story—lovely, grace-filled story (<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/try-story/>).

In this book, Bruce Springsteen shares his story – the meaningful events and the transformation he has experienced on his journey – and how his reflection on these experiences has impacted his engagement with the world around him. As you read *Born to Run* it is the hope of the University that it inspires you to reflect on your own story – the meaningful events and the transformation you have experienced and will continue to experience during your time at Boston College – and understand how your own personal narrative enables you to encounter God's presence in the world. In reading Springsteen's reflections on truth, identity, and love, you will be invited to consider your own values and encouraged to think about how you respond to life's questions.

Since 2004, Conversations in the First Year has engaged members of the incoming class in an intellectual and reflective dialogue with a common text, embodying the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition at Boston College which calls us to examine our faith and experience in conversation with other thinkers in order to pursue the greater glory of God. This conversation among thoughtful leaders that will begin for you with this common text will carry over to conversations with all members of the Boston College community during your next four years.

This ongoing conversation is part of the University's commitment to finding God in all things. "Contemporary Jesuit schools maintain the original commitment to rigorous intellectual development, to

personal, moral, and religious formation, and to the discernment of God's action in all aspects of the student's experience. The pursuit of the greater glory of God remains rooted in a worldview that God can be encountered in all creation and through all human activity, especially in the search for truth in every discipline, in the desire to learn, and in the call to live justly together."

From *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Conversation at Boston College*



A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

Jesuit theologian and author Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. describes contemplation as a long, loving look at the real. In *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen shares how over his lifetime he has taken a long, loving look at the real things in his life – his family, his faith, his work, his relationships, his music – and how that reflection has influenced the way he has continued to engage in the world around him. Through his candor about the lessons learned on his journey, Springsteen encourages his readers to develop the same principles of contemplation and action.

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic University, we will ask each of you to engage in conversation, to live together, and to share your life with one another. As members of the Class of 2024, your conversation will include this book which invites you to consider the importance of reflection on your experiences and your story and how that reflection informs how you engage with the world around you.

The early Jesuits struggled to describe what they called "our way of proceeding." Their distinctive spirituality can be seen as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on its meaning, and ends in deciding how to act. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements: being attentive,

being reflective, and being loving. It results in the kind of good decision-making that St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, called discernment. Discernment enables each of us to seek the greater good before us. Having this deep interior knowledge of the heart is to communicate with God and trust that the hand of God is at work fortifying and directing us in our lives. One of the many goals of a Jesuit education is to produce men and women for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong process of exploring our experience, reflecting upon its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action that creates a harmonious community for us all. We can also think of this process as something that we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives, for example, during the four years of college or when we have to make important decisions. When we discern, we want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to do.

Through the practice of discerning, we grow in our ability to imagine how we are going to live our lives and discover our vocations. The novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner describes vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” When we arrive at this place of convergence, we understand the fit between who we are and what the world needs of us; St. Ignatius urges us to be unafraid to live with the consequences of this realization and to respond with generosity and magnanimity, because this is the way that we can love as God loves. (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education)

From the very beginning, the goal of Jesuit education has been to form men and women for others. To cultivate this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions translated their distinctive spirituality into an educational vision by describing it as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on the meaning of experience, and ends in deciding how to act moving forward. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements: Be attentive, be reflective, be loving.

Being attentive is largely about us and how God is working in us through our experience. Being reflective moves our gaze outward, measuring our experience against the accumulated wisdom of the world. Being loving requires that we look even more closely at the world around us. It asks the question: How are we going to act in this world? In part, this is a question about what we are going to do with the knowledge and self-understanding and freedom that we have appropriated by reflection. How shall we act in ways that are consistent with this new self and what it knows and values? (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

But we can't move very far in the direction of answering this question without discovering that it is not only a question about how our lives can be authentic. It is also a question about our relationship to the world around us and what the world needs us to do. We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships with others, grow up in cultural, social, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take responsibility for them, to contribute to nurturing and improving them, to give something back.

So, for Jesuit education, it is not enough to live authentically in the world. We have to participate in the transformation of the world (the Hebrew phrase tikkun olam conveys the same idea, of mending or repairing the world). For more than four hundred years, it has been said that Jesuit education educated "the whole person." Today, we live with an increasingly global sense of what it means to be human. A person can't be considered "whole" without an educated solidarity with other human beings in their hopes and fears and especially in their needs. We can't pay attention to our experience and reflect on it without realizing how our own lives are connected with the dreams of all those with whom we share the journey of human existence, and therefore with the economic, political, and social realities that support or frustrate their dreams. This is why Jesuit education is so often said to produce "men and women for others" (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

As part of this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions established guiding principles to cultivate a reflective practice among their students which is integrated with the way we live in the world. These same reflective principles of contemplation and action provide the framework for today's Boston College experience.

As you read *Born to Run*, consider how the author has cultivated the habit of contemplation and action, and how his story inspires you to take a long, loving look at the real in your own life: "Work, faith, family: this is the Italian credo handed down by my mother and her sisters. They live it. They believe it. They believe it even though these very tenets have crushingly let them down. They preach it, though never stridently, and are sure it is all we have between life, love and the void that devours husbands, children, family members and friends" (p. 24).

Early in the book, Springsteen names three of the things that he values most – faith, family, work. Throughout the book, he reflects on each of these as he shares his story, taking an expansive view of family to include his family of origin and his music family. As you begin your time at Boston College, what do you value most? Who do you see as part of your expansive family?

"It was a story, a part of my story that I had to tell. You lay claim to your stories; you honor, with your hard work and the best of your talent, their inspirations, and you fight to tell them well from a sense of indebtedness and thankfulness" (p. 399).

As you enter Boston College, who has helped shape your story this far? Who will continue to shape your story over the course of the next four years? What are you thankful for in your own story?

In reflecting back on his life's journey, Springsteen talks about his search for his identity – from his experience of family, faith, work, relationships – and how he discovered much of his identity through his music, “When the world is at its best, when we are at our best, when life feels fullest” (p. 236). He writes that his music became a focal point for finding his identity, “who am I, who are we, what and where is home, what constitutes manhood, adulthood, what are your freedoms and responsibilities” (p. 216).

How have you found your identity? How will you continue to search for it over the next four years?

As Springsteen explores his own identity, he also considers the issues in the world around him that shape identity – in particular, the issue of race. He is attentive to the racial tensions he witnesses in high school and begins to reflect on race through his personal relationship with Clarence Clemons and witnessing the racial injustice Clarence experienced: “For a long time he was alone, and no matter how close we were, I was white. We had as deep a relationship as I can imagine, but we lived in the real world, where we’d experienced that nothing, not all the love in God’s heaven, obliterates race. It was a part of the given of our relationship” (p. 244).

As he spends more time on the road, Springsteen develops a broader perspective on these issues, recognizing racism as both individual and collective, personal and systemic. Springsteen integrates both the intimate personal experiences and the broader social concerns of race into his music, as part of his story.

As our country struggles with issues of racial justice, how has race shaped your identity? What experiences have provided you with a broader social perspective? What are your intimate personal experiences of racial justice – or injustice?

Attentive to the systemic racism that exists in our country and our community, and reflecting on how the University can respond to the issue and its root causes, Boston College has committed to developing initiatives for listening, dialogue, healing, reconciliation, and understanding, including establishing The Boston College Forum on Racial Justice in America and a number of programs through University Mission and Ministry. In a letter to the Boston College community in early June, University President William P. Leahy, S.J., wrote, “The current anger, division, and alienation result from long-term, systemic causes, and they call for resolution of underlying issues through immediate and sustained action,” and described the loving response that Boston College will take against racism – both personal and systemic.

In a recent interview in *The Atlantic* with David Brooks (whose book *The Road to Character* was the focal point of Conversations in the First Year in 2015 and who addressed the Class of 2019 that Fall), Springsteen talks about how his experiences compelled him to take a deeper look at the issue of racism, to find a more loving response to the world around him: “...as I started on this record, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, I said, I want to turn the car around. I want to go back to my neighborhood, and I want to understand the structural issues, personal issues, social issues that are pressing down hard on the people I’m writing about and still living among. That’s where what I’m looking for resides. And so that’s kind of where my politics really began to develop, out of concern for my own moral, spiritual, emotional health, and that of my neighbors.” (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/bruce-springsteens-playlist/613378/>)

As men and women for others, how can you contribute to the resolution of these issues on a societal and on a personal level? Are there ways that you can foster dialogue and promote reconciliation in these divisive times? Are there ways that you can bring to light structural, personal, and social issues underlying racism by listening to others’ stories – and by sharing your story?

Throughout the book, Springsteen shares examples of difficult decisions he made and difficult relationships he had. Among these difficult moments are the tensions he experienced over the years with his father, times when he needed to tell bandmates, who were also friends, that his music was moving in a different direction, and the break-up of his first marriage. In reflecting back on these moments, Springsteen is able to recognize in these complicated experiences when he acted most lovingly and also when he was not at his best — once again, examining the real.

What are the complicated relationships in your life? What does it mean for you to act most lovingly in these relationships? When do you feel most challenged?

Springsteen focuses on the influence of the Catholic Church in his early life – geographical, cultural, familial, personal. While Springsteen acknowledges that his connection to the Church changed as he grew older, he also emphasizes the importance of his personal relationship with God. Again, with his critical reflection, Springsteen is able to articulate his faith and his belief, and how those inform his most loving response to the world: “This was the world where I found the beginnings of my song. In Catholicism, there existed the poetry, danger and darkness that reflected my imagination and my inner self. I found a land of great and harsh beauty, of fantastic stories, of unimaginable punishment and infinite reward...as a young adult I tried to make sense of it. I tried to meet its challenge for the very reasons that there are souls to lose and a kingdom of love to be gained. I laid what I’d absorbed across the hardscrabble lives of my family, friends and neighbors. I turned it into something I could grapple with, understand, something I could even find faith in. As funny as it sounds, I have a “personal “relationship with Jesus... I believe deeply in his love...” (p.17).

What does spirituality mean to you? How have you matured in your relationship with God on your journey? In what ways do you hope to do so over the next four years at Boston College? Who are the conversation partners you will seek out during your time at Boston College to help you consider your relationship with God, your relationship with others and the world around you, and your relationship with yourself?

Springsteen talks about the birth of both his younger sister when he was a teenager and his own children when he was an adult as moment of grace and turning points in his life: “Children bring with them grace, patience, transcendence, second chances, rebirth and a reawakening of the love that’s in your heart and present in your home. They are God giving you another shot.” (p. 30)

When have you experienced grace in your life? What are the relationships that have given you a second chance?

Springsteen shares his struggle to find his voice – not his musical voice, but his most authentic expression of himself. “In my twenties, as my song and my story began to take shape, I searched for the voice I would blend with mine to do the telling” (p.414).

Who are the people who have helped you find your voice on your journey? How have you learned to be authentic?



THE EXAMEN

The goal of Jesuit education is to produce men and women for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong project of exploring our experience, naming its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action. We can also think of this process as something we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives -- during the four years of college, for example, or when we have to make important decisions and want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to. At these times, we might be especially conscious of using spiritual exercises to help us negotiate the process. But we can also think of these three movements as the intertwined dynamics of daily life, the moment-by-moment activity of becoming fully human. (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education)

In *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen integrates action and contemplation – being attentive to the world around him, reflecting on what he observes, and discerning the most loving response and putting that into action. The Ignatian tradition encourages this same reflective practice as part of cultivating a daily habit of discernment in a mode of prayer called the Examen. The Examen is a prayer in five parts which helps individuals move through an examination of conscience, allowing the experiences of the day to guide one's reflection. Its basis is in Christianity, but it can also be considered in light of other faith traditions.

At first it might be helpful to move through all five of the points, spending two or three minutes on each, just to see what works for you. Or you may want to remain on the first point, giving thanks, after an especially great day. Or there may be times when you want to consider your career or a possible long-term relationship and then you might

spend time on orienting your future. There is no single way to make the examination. The only essential is to bring your day before God. At the core of the examination is self-awareness before God. Its power lies in the way you become conscious of your own relationship with God, with your own spirituality.

- **Giving Thanks.** *I thank God for the way God has met me today—in the work I have done, in the people I have encountered, in the letters from home, etc. I begin my prayer with the solid hope that God cares for me, knows me and loves me with an everlasting love.*
- **Seeking Light.** *I ask for light to understand the specific moments in which God has clarified who I am, what my gifts really are, and how I treat other people. I ask not to hide from the truth. I ask to be gentle with myself and honest, too. I ask to learn from God who I am.*
- **Reviewing Life.** *I go over the events of the day, noticing the ones where I felt closer to God and the ones where I felt distanced from God. Where today I met weakness or failure, I ask for forgiveness and self-acceptance. Where today I have lived faithfully and productively, I rejoice in God's service. God does not ask the impossible from me, only the good that I can do and be.*
- **Noting Patterns.** *I stand before my history as God does—lovingly wise about who I am, eager to make me part of the work of the Kingdom, allowing me to understand the patterns of my life that lead me to a more personal sense of how God calls me here at Boston College. Are there emerging insights about the life I should live? Are there difficulties that I keep trying to avoid and know I must face? Are there people, places and occasions that especially open me to God? And are there people, places, and occasions that bring out the worst in me? What does God want me to do with the person that I am becoming?*

- **Orienting My Future.** *Finally, I ask to live as Christ did. I look at the pattern of openness and the essentials of his teaching. I look at the trust he had in God's design for the world. I look at his availability to people. I accept the strategy of forgiveness, truthfulness and service that Christ portrayed. I want to believe that I am called to live just as Christ was, as a woman or man for others. Of course, I will fail. But failure can be the way to wisdom and compassion if I use failure to know myself better and to understand the human heart more deeply. More important, I look ahead out of the successes of the day. I ask to live with a growing sense of God's trust in my future. (The Red Book 2009, pp 115, 117)*

The reflective practice of the Examen is one that Rev. Anthony Penna, Boston College's Associate Vice President for Mission and Ministry and Director of Campus Ministry, prayed that a recent graduating class would take with them from Boston College into the world.

Just before Commencement he offered these words to them:

St. Ignatius said that the world's great sin is the lack of gratitude. So, I'm going to ask you to consider integrating this simple ritual into your daily life when you move on from Boston College. Every night before you go to bed, take a few minutes to think about your day. Examine the day reflectively, the ups and the downs (for no day is without a few bumps in the road, as is true for a four-year college career). Then, identify one thing that occurred, one thing that happened in the day for which you are grateful and give thanks for that one thing. Let that be the way you end every day before you fall to sleep. If you do this, you'll be a healthier, happier, more spiritual, and more balanced person. This practice will be good for you and everyone else who's a part of your life as well (Boston College Class of 2015 Senior Class Toast, May 14, 2015).

We renew his prayer for the Class of 2024 as you begin your time here at Boston College.



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Jesuit scholar and author John Padberg, S.J. notes that conversation has been an important part of the work of the Society of Jesus since the order's inception:

Simple, friendly and informal conversations were the earliest and chief means that Ignatius employed in helping people. Right from his conversion in 1521 he wanted, to use his own words, "to help souls." The way he started was to talk to people, men and women, young and old, about the things that really mattered to them and to him. Such simple talk, such conversation, was the beginning of the life and works of the Society of Jesus.

The term "conversation" in its most obvious sense means to talk with someone and, by so doing, to exchange sentiments, observations, opinions and ideas. Ignatius had that meaning in mind, but he also intended the older and more inclusive meaning of turning towards someone: to live with, keep company with and even to help oneself and the other person toward new experiences and new interpretations of them.

The Society in its members has carried on a great variety of such conversations. Among them, to cite but a few general areas, have been conversations with the secular world in all its variety, with other religious groups, both Christian and non-Christian, with the tradition and practices and personalities of its own Church, with itself among each generation of its own members and, finally, with the Lord. (With Christ Alive: Reflections on the Risen Christ, the Acts of the Apostles and Our Jesuit Vocation 1998, p. 48)

As you enter Boston College, you must consider how we live in the 21st century and how the world is growing rapidly and changing in unforeseen ways. In the midst of this globalized and technologically driven world, we ask you to critically evaluate all that has come before us. To enter into the University core curriculum is to enter into a foundation of knowledge and experiences that will better equip each of you to synthesize and adapt to the ever-changing world that you are part of each day. Being able to read, write, and think critically will be important building blocks within your academic journey here at Boston College.

To fully embrace your Jesuit, Catholic education, you also need to consider how you will grow in your own understanding of faith. There are many conversation partners, including the Jesuit community, faculty, staff, and administrators, who are here to be your companions in contemplative action and reflective conversation as you search for truths in your life and the world around you.



CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:
A PROGRAM OF THE OFFICE OF FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE



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