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## The Year of Living Decanally, or Non-Regular Research

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# The Year of Living Decanally, or Non-Regular Research

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## Abstract

Traditional assumptions about the relationship between research and teaching are challenged by the trend of PhD-holding candidates with research agendas being hired into full-time non-tenure-track positions, jobs that generally lack a research component.

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At the end of the 2021–22 school year, I was poised to step down after eight years as chair of the English department. Eight years was an unusually long tenure, but I and a number of my fellow chairs whose terms were due to conclude in 2020 all felt that the beginning of the pandemic was not really an optimal time to rotate out of the job, so we ended up staying on for an additional stretch. But by spring 2022 I was ready to move back into “civilian” life and to address the benign neglect that had stalled a number of research projects. I had even made some initial forays into my faculty office to assess what I’d have to do to turn it back into a working space, as opposed to the “Storage Wars” set it had begun to resemble over the years.

Then, in June my dean announced that he had taken a position at another university, and by the first of July I found myself with an appointment as Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for 2022–23. About that process “ther nis namoore to seye.” The full story of that year, by turns rewarding and frustrating, is a subject for another essay, but one of my favorite parts—job candidate interviews—is immediately relevant to the topic of this essay cluster, the relationship between research and teaching. These interviews repeatedly brought home to me the gap between the kinds of jobs we were offering and the kinds of jobs candidates were trained to do, a gap with significant institutional and disciplinary consequences.

In the College a stop in the dean’s office is a standard part of a job finalist’s campus visit, and since that was now my office, I took part in about fifty half-hour conversations across the course of the year, involving about a dozen different positions (including the dean’s job, on a permanent basis, which I’ll admit was a little odd). These chats were always a pleasant break from, say, reviewing spreadsheets about budgets and enrollment projections, and I tried to read the candidates’ materials closely so that I could ask in specific ways about people’s research, teaching, and professional goals before giving them my own spiel about the College, the campus, and the region. The result was a lot of really engaging conversations: with criminologists, about performative versus instrumental aspects of women’s public crime-prevention behaviors, coercive work environments experienced by formerly incarcerated laborers, and the role of social networks in transmitting the effects of justice-system involvement for youths and adolescents; with biologists, about plant genomics, new RNA sequencing techniques, and fish evolution in extreme environments (natural toxic springs awash in hydrogen sulfide, about which I now have nightmares); with physicists, about cometary volatiles, Bose-Einstein condensates, and how to book time on the Mauna Kea telescopes. I did perhaps less well with computer scientists, where there was a lot about deep-learning AI techniques being applied to gigantic astronomical or photographic datasets that mostly left me struggling for similes (“so it’s like you’re developing an algorithm that will find a particular subset of, say, strangely curved needles in a haystack the size of the solar system, but in the dark?” They were all very kind about my efforts).

But here’s the thing. Half of those interviews were with candidates applying for tenure-track positions, in which successful and ongoing research activity would make up a significant portion of the job, and half were for non-tenure-track slots, full-time teaching positions in which research would not feature, and indeed, from which it is specifically excluded in the job description. In practice, this meant that the latter portion of each candidate interview would go in one of two possible directions, either to an account of tenure and promotion expectations, or to a description of a contract position

with no possibility of tenure. We made ten hires overall that year (not counting the new dean). All the tenure-track finalists were PhDs or PhD candidates or post-docs. And twelve of the fourteen finalists I interviewed for the non-tenure-track jobs also held the PhD; of the remaining two, one had two MA degrees and the other an MFA (the same terminal degree held by many faculty in our English and Art & Design departments). Every one of the eventual non-tenure-track hires, in Chemistry, English, Physics, and Psychology, held the PhD.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we undertook to hire people with research backgrounds and agendas, including three then working as post-docs, into slots with no defined capacity to do or receive credit for research.

Though they are by no means easy jobs (the typical teaching load is four courses a semester), non-tenure-track positions in my university are still pretty good ones overall in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century American economy: they offer full-time employment with good benefits; ongoing professional development, including—as of this year—opportunities for teaching leaves; increasingly competitive salaries in most disciplines (especially in my region, where the cost of living is about 13% below the national average); and straightforward contract renewals and multi-year contracts as individuals pass through the promotion stages every five or six years, from Assistant to Associate to Full Teaching Professor—titles obviously cloned from the tenure-track ranks. In those disciplines where industry salaries are inevitably higher (for example, computer science or chemistry), these positions offer those who feel called to teach the chance to work in a stimulating university environment. And the service component of the job, typically 20% of overall effort, offers the potential to be directly and significantly involved in many important aspects of department and campus governance; indeed, when I was dean five of sixteen departments in the College were led by senior NTT chairs.

That said, there is of course no disguising the hierarchy here; the very name of the position defines it by what it lacks, access to tenure, something that shorthand conversational use of the “NTT” acronym never really masks—though that is still probably better than the alternative offered in the Collected Rules and Regulations (hereafter CRR), “full-time non-regular faculty” (University of Missouri 2003–24).<sup>2</sup> From a medievalist’s perspective, these folks are governed by just as many *regulae* as tenure-track faculty, if not more. And one of those rules makes it abundantly, redundantly clear that there is no official research component to these positions:

Unlike tenured and tenure track faculty, whose performance is evaluated based on their contribution to research, teaching, and service, the performance of NTT faculty

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<sup>1</sup> In the previous year, 2021–22, the College made eight NTT hires: six individuals already had doctoral degrees and one was a PhD candidate at the offer stage.

<sup>2</sup> Other local institutions use alternatives that address the distinction more slyly, e.g. “teaching-track faculty.” I should acknowledge that the categorical distinction I draw here between tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions is a feature of the academic profession largely specific to the United States, where I have spent my career. For the one, the basic model involves a six-year probationary period followed by a multi-level review of teaching, research and service—in my university, by departmental, college, and campus committees—which if successful and approved by the campus’s chief administrator (president, chancellor, archon, etc.) leads to essentially permanent employment. For the other, the term of employment is defined by a contract that is potentially renewable. Despite the overall decline in tenure-track positions in recent decades and thus the lengthening odds of landing one, they still occupy an outsized place in our academic imaginary.

should be evaluated on the primary responsibility of the NTT appointment as well as service and professional activities related to that primary responsibility.

There is no prohibition for NTT faculty to be involved in multiple duties related to research, teaching, or service. However, decisions regarding hiring, continuation of employment, and evaluation of NTT faculty performance should relate to the primary purpose of their appointment as defined by category and not be based on all three criteria. Only tenured and tenure track faculty should be hired, evaluated, and promoted based on all three criteria (University of Missouri 2003–24, 310.035.C).<sup>3</sup>

There's no prohibition, so go ahead and knock yourselves out. Just don't expect the attention, credit, or reward that will accrue to your tenure-track colleagues (whose research efforts you will be subsidizing through your heavier teaching load).

These paragraphs tend to expose an alarming administrative bottom line about any “bedrock assumption [. . .] that there is a necessary relationship between research and teaching” (I quote the original prompt for this essay cluster), which is that there doesn't really have to be one. From the System's perspective, it's perfectly possible to be a successful instructor, to pass through promotion stages and get raises and win teaching and service awards and march in the faculty commencement procession and enjoy a lengthy career on campus, with no recognized research interests. Implicit here, I think, is the notion that if there is any “necessary relationship,” it more or less evaporates at the point of hire, because it is taken as evidence of a successful training process, an artifact of disciplinary reproduction, not a necessary or ongoing element of one's professional life. The numbers above certainly suggest that in 2022, search committees (comprising TT and NTT faculty, and graduate students in some departments) making “decisions regarding hiring” were influenced by the research profiles of the candidates, which unquestionably contributed to their advancement to the finalist stage—that is, by the widespread belief that “being trained to research a field has the inherent benefit of training one to teach it” (the prompt, again).

That assumption is deeply rooted in the 150-year history of the research university as an institution. Certainly, nowadays there is also widespread acknowledgment that there's probably more to effective teaching than just mastery of one's discipline, as recent decades have seen both more targeted pedagogical training for graduate students—not especially widespread in the 1980s, I can assure you—and more pedagogical resources made available for faculty, for example through campus teaching centers. (Assessing the effectiveness of such efforts, which typically have to be field-neutral in order to be widely marketable, is of course its own debate.) But my admittedly small sample suggests that the older assumption still frames hiring practices, even when a research program is not a requirement, since both TT and NTT jobs are being filled from the same overall pool of candidates, currently overflowing with PhDs. I won't review the recent history of academic labor here, and I am not in a position to offer policy prescriptions for the wide variety of institutions involved in it (more

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<sup>3</sup> There are in fact Clinical and Research NTT positions in the university system, where the “primary responsibility” falls into one of those areas, but in my college, there are only a half-dozen or so such positions. Presumably a fair amount of lawyering contributed to these paragraphs, which are designed to immunize the university from potential lawsuits claiming a right to tenure based on, say, a history of publication materially similar to the work done by tenure-track faculty.

on that below). But it seems clear that at four-year institutions, market forces have led to the displacement of the MA degree as a sufficient credential for NTT roles, in favor of the now readily available research-based PhD as the preferred qualification for teaching positions.<sup>4</sup>

I can cite the history of my own home department to illustrate the changes over time, and the local accommodations that have evolved to address our current circumstances. Currently, in English, there are 8 NTT faculty (out of 17 F/T lines, so half the total). Three hold doctoral degrees, two the MFA (again, the same terminal degree as our tenured creative writers), and two have double master's degrees (MA + MDiv; MA + MFA). In 1991, when I joined the faculty (then numbering 33), there were 13 "lecturers," as they were called in the before-times, and only one held a PhD.<sup>5</sup> In the English Department at a private university across town, the numbers are even more telling: 11/15 NTT faculty hold the PhD, three the MFA. In the face of these numbers, congenial chairs and deans (or chairs-become-deans) find ways to frame some research or research-adjacent activity—a conference presentation, say—as meaningfully pedagogical, and thus eligible for acknowledgment and reward for faculty with positions whose "primary responsibility" is teaching. In that sense, the bedrock assumption lives on underground, as it were, though it generates a set of perverse incentives for both faculty and administrators. Here's a (semi-hypothetical) example drawn from my time as chair: a PhD- or MFA-holding NTT faculty member in English might publish a book of poetry (or a second book of poetry, the first one having contributed to our decision to hire this individual in the first place). The department could send out fliers and newsletter announcements, feature the achievement on our webpage, host a book launch and other public readings, and provide travel support for readings at other venues. But come annual evaluation time, the accomplishment could only be assessed as an adornment ("Professor Wroth also published a book of poems in the review period") or as evidence of pedagogical development ("The fact that Professor Wroth is a working poet—she published a book of poems this year—contributes to her effectiveness in her poetry workshops, since in addition to guidance about writing she can acquaint her students with the publication process as well").

The rule concerning NTT faculty, from which I have quoted just one of thirteen paragraphs, was first added to the CRR in 2006. It grew out of what was ostensibly an effort to rationalize the diverse set of titles held by "non-regular" faculty across the four-campus University of Missouri System, aimed at making things administratively easier to manage. In one sense, it was no more than an acknowledgment of the status quo, of the ineluctable fact that a cohort of NTT instructors had long been and would continue to be a permanent part of the university, and that, their numbers having grown, they required their own separate rung on the faculty ladder. Thus, a charitable analysis would see these changes, which are ongoing, as the work of well-intentioned (if lawsuit-averse) individuals—

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<sup>4</sup> The 2011 MLA/ADE report *Rethinking the Master's Degree in English for a New Century* claimed that "about 50% of the non-tenure track faculty members in four-year colleges...hold an MA as their highest degree," but that figure is drawn from 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (surveying fall 2003 data) published by the National Center for Education Statistics, so those numbers are now 20 years old (ADE 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Yes, my department is half the size it was 30 years ago. *For godes loue be wer by me!* (de Lisle Psalter 1999, fol. 127). Non-tenure track faculty currently make up just under 40% of my College's full-time instructional staff, a ratio that has been fairly consistent over the past fifteen years—though while the *ratio* has remained stable, in raw numbers total F/T faculty numbers have declined by 20-25% over that time. The gender breakdown is interesting. Currently 43% of TT and 59% of NTT faculty are female. But if you adjust for time on campus by omitting from the calculation full professors in both categories, the disparity vanishes: women make up 55% of assistant/associate faculty in both ranks.

like the congenial chairs and deans of the previous paragraph—trying to improve a legacy structure that isn't going anywhere and isn't open to any radical reworking in a public university system in a state that barely makes it into the second quartile in higher-education funding (NSF n.d.). One might also argue, still more positively, that the new titles and the expectations and privileges associated with them implicitly recognize that to hold one of these positions is to have not simply an academic job, but an academic career. It's just not the career candidates might have initially imagined, that is, a (tenured) position with an ongoing research component in addition to teaching and service responsibilities.

My university (which is hardly unique) has made it clear that it is work in those latter two categories that cannot be sacrificed, that in order to reproduce itself from day to day, what the institution requires is the contributions of faculty in the classroom and in the various administrative activities to which they can be called, while research—exceedingly hard to measure by the currency of the moment, student credit hours—need not always figure. Certainly, the shape of these NTT careers going forward remains a work in progress,<sup>6</sup> and it's not impossible to imagine that in time the sheer number of terminal-degree holders occupying these positions will force institutions to make changes that won't simply amount to freeing faculty to work still harder. But it's just as likely that, once the conceptual link between research and teaching has been severed (and then canonized in the CRR), it won't spontaneously grow back.

This account of an implicit institutional disavowal of the idea of a “necessary relationship between research and teaching” may seem dour, but it is hardly contradicted by the evidence available to those of us who find ourselves in the research-producing ranks. I refer to what we in that cohort have all inevitably noticed in the course of our professional lives: that we have always had some colleagues who are great teachers, dynamic and inventive instructors who engage and energize their students and whose classes routinely fill (or, these days, consistently make), but who don't really publish all that much, and others who are absolute superstars when it comes to publications and papers and fellowships, but whose reputation in the classroom is not exactly stellar and who struggle to attract students to their classes (and to keep them enrolled, once they've been induced to sign up). These extremes won't necessarily represent the bulk of your tenured colleagues; maybe the majority split it

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<sup>6</sup> CRR 310.035 has been revised nine times so far, most recently to bring librarians and archivists into the fold, and the promotion guidelines on my own campus were just updated again last year (University of Missouri 2003–24). But progress hasn't exactly been smooth. When the System first established the new promotion platform—the one offering title changes and significant salary bumps at six-year intervals—NTT faculty were still being offered only a succession of one-year contracts. The university was simultaneously saying both “you are valuable members of our community, and we expect to keep you, nurture you, and rely on you far into the future,” and “you'll be the first to go when there is financial exigency.” It took another decade of unrelenting pressure by the Intercampus Faculty Council to extract the concession of offering 2- and 3-year agreements to senior NTT faculty—a practice that was of course suspended during the pandemic year, during which everyone temporarily went back onto one-year contracts. For a comparable history at a private university, featuring the same collision between careful and thoughtful rule-making and financial exigency, see Hartfield-Méndez and Stolley 2013.

I'm willing to risk an axiom here, despite my one governing principle of never, ever making categorical statements. It's a pretty obvious one: tenured faculty can never fully understand the feelings of contingency and precarity that can haunt holders of these contract positions. No matter how much one thinks of these folks as permanent colleagues—I certainly did, as chair, and there's one who's been in my department for the same three decades I have been—their experience of their positions is different.



all beautifully right down the middle. Probably you've got one who churns out the essays and is also a riveting lecturer, and another who unhappily lags in both realms. Moreover, I'm happy to concede that everyone reading this essay is terrific at both teaching and research and at managing their complex interactions. But the existence of these first familiar types represents, it seems to me, a real challenge to any axiomatic assertions about some mutually sustaining relationship between research and teaching, and even between especially successful research and teaching.

Sometimes, of course, the energy flows in a particular direction: I happily acknowledge that my teaching has had a very important and productive influence on my research. I like to say—and it may be true, although I may simply be romanticizing an earlier period of my professorial life—that I was at my most effective in generating ideas to write about when I was an assistant professor, and that the cross-fertilization effect of teaching five courses a year (sometimes five different courses a year) was intellectually and professionally stimulating. There are essays on medieval topics that I could not have written, or even conceived, without the experience of teaching classes outside my chosen field.

Like most medievalists, I did quickly develop some side gigs in my teaching, as a hedge against the day when the bottom falls out of the Chaucer market. In my case, in addition to the inevitable Brit Lit survey (where I love love love teaching the greatest poem in the English language, *Paradise Lost*), that has meant intro-to-theory courses and a series of film classes, with an emphasis on studio-era Hollywood. Certainly, one factor encouraging the development of an expanded repertoire is the “medievalist gap”; insofar as our research, primarily directed toward other medievalists, deals with languages and historical and cultural knowledge unfamiliar to many of our students, it isn't necessarily something that we can bring into class without doing a lot of groundwork first. My ongoing work on book bequests in Latin wills in early fifteenth-century Yorkshire will inevitably seem pretty abstruse to students—in my experience in this century, even graduate students—who come to my classes with no previous academic exposure to the Middle Ages.

But emphasizing the “abstruseness” argument itself tends to obscure something important about the institutional circumstances in which teaching and research about the Middle Ages takes place, which is that the “Chaucer market” really isn't that extensive in the first place, and that the number of medieval courses that can appear on the schedule is constrained by many factors extrinsic to any individual scholar's interests and ambitions. The number of such courses that the market will bear (that is, courses that might directly relate to the research interests of someone trained in medieval studies) varies considerably between the needs of large PhD-granting departments with multiple faculty working in the various sub-disciplines and the capacities of a small or medium-sized department where “Medieval Studies” is not so much an area as a person.<sup>7</sup> And let's be blunt: in the United States, there are a whole lot more of the latter than the former.

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<sup>7</sup> Even when there are other medievalists across campus, there may not be very many of them (which means, again, that the job of introducing students to the Middle Ages, much less facilitating advanced work, falls on very few shoulders). On my campus there is (other than me) one in Philosophy (Islamic philosophy and science) and one in Art and Design (high medieval—formerly part of the Art History program in that department, which is now no more). Over the last decade both (like me) were department chairs teaching a reduced load with, therefore, a diminished ratio of discipline-specific courses to general education ones. The History department has not had a medievalist since a 2016 retirement, and the prospects for a full-time replacement there—given other urgent needs, for example in the American history courses mandated by state graduation requirements—are negligible.

How many more? In the US, only about 28% of the four-year colleges and universities ranked according to the current Carnegie classification system are doctoral institutions, falling into three categories: R1 (Very High Research Activity), R2 (High Research Activity), and “doctoral/professional.” But those numbers can be refined even further: a quick (actually rather laborious) survey of fifteen midwestern and mountain states shows that while 82% of R1 universities—comprising both private institutions and flagship campuses of state universities—have English PhD programs, only 36% of R2s do, and no universities in the “doctoral/ professional” category offer that degree. Overall, about a third of these schools offer an English PhD. But that’s really a third of a quarter: a third of doctorate-granting institutions, which themselves make up only 26% of the total number of four-year colleges and universities in those states, offer the PhD degree and the professional training that we historically associate with “research.” This comes out to about 8% of the institutions where a card-carrying midwestern medievalist might potentially find herself employed.<sup>8</sup>

What about the New Chaucer Society—how do its demographics map onto this general distribution? Well, another laborious survey of members affiliated with American institutions reveals that Carnegie R1 universities make up a plurality of that group (43%) (New Chaucer Society n. d.). But there are almost as many combined in the categories of Master’s Colleges and Universities, Baccalaureate Colleges, and Associates Colleges/High Schools, and among the additional 20% or so that fall into the R2 and Doctoral/Professional Universities category, as I have just shown, only a fraction have a PhD program in English (New Chaucer Society n. d.). I teach at an R2 (doctoral, high research activity) campus where fewer than half the departments in the College of Arts and Sciences have doctoral programs, and English is not among them.<sup>9</sup>

To be clear, I’m not suggesting that people should apologize for having a position at an R1 institution. It’s just that any exploration of the relationship between research and teaching really needs to be undertaken in the context of our diverse professional and institutional circumstances as a whole, and not solely through the lens of our experiences earning a research-based degree. It is certainly understandable that we—we who have PhDs—might tend to default to a set of assumptions adopted during that important (and sometimes lengthy) formative stage, because to one degree or another we all carry those ideas forward in our heads. All of us ducklings emerge from the same handful of hatcheries, but we end up settling into a very wide variety of ponds. We move into our nine-person liberal-arts-college English departments full of notions about the nature of English Studies and the demands of field coverage that we learned in departments four or five times that size, and are invited

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<sup>8</sup> CO, IA, IL, IN, KS, KT, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE OH, SD, WI, and WY, home to about a quarter of the nation’s population. All of the data in this paragraph comes from American Council of Education 2024. I have not searched the relevant PhD programs in History, Languages, or Medieval Studies that might also produce medievalists, because I suspect that the overlap is considerable. And note—remembering the first half of this essay—that a true assessment of the odds here needs to account for the fact that not every job available in this 8% slice is going to be a tenure-track, research-intensive position.

<sup>9</sup> Currently Biology, Chemistry, Criminology, Computer Science, Political Science, and Psychology; programs in Math and Physics are suspended at present. There are of course a variety of doctoral programs in the Colleges of Education, Business, Nursing, and Optometry.

into discussions about curriculum reform and replacement hiring while we try on the fly to map our graduate school expectations onto our current situation. Or we have the opportunity to teach in our chosen field in various MA courses—surely a close cognate to our own graduate seminar days?—but soon discover that only about one in ten of the students in our program intends to use the degree as a stepping-stone to further study in the field. (Note: not just the field of medieval studies; historically in my department, no more than 10-15% of MA students plan to pursue the PhD at all.) The result is perhaps a certain cognitive dissonance about our place, and the place of our research, in what we think of as the profession, along with an increasingly malleable notion of what “coverage” can mean. Place matters, conceptually and institutionally. Certainly, the place where I have spent my own career has helped to shape the ways in which I (am able to) think about that career.

Wherever we find ourselves, it would at least be reassuring to think that maintaining an active research agenda would still have a credentialing effect for our classroom audiences, similar to the hiring phase: “Well, this guy does have a list of publications with ‘Chaucer’ in the title, so there’s a good chance he probably knows what he’s talking about.” But I don’t believe that the percentage of students thinking that thought is very high; I suspect that in introductory classes especially the mere fact that I’m standing at the front of the classroom unmolested by campus security is enough that they will give me a chance. An easy index here is the way honorifics get used on campus: if the local practice is for students to use “Professor” or “Doctor,” in my experience pretty much every instructor is then referred to as “Professor” or “Doctor,” which suggests that distinctions between faculty who do research and those who don’t, or faculty who are on the tenure track and those who aren’t, are not foremost in students’ minds from day to day.<sup>10</sup> It’s not that they can’t learn about or appreciate the distinction—it’s that in most circumstances, it seems not to matter; there is nothing to be gained by saying (to anyone) “This semester, I’m taking a class with Senior Lecturer Kittredge.”

What’s the shape of Senior Lecturer Kittredge’s career going to be, when stories of making the jump from an NTT to a TT slot are vanishingly rare, and often involve leveraging a willingness to take on administrative work rather than making a good show of one’s research; when the inexorable infiltration of the “workforce development” mantra into the vocabulary of college presidents means that degree programs can only be compared according to the starting salaries of their graduates; when decades of declining investment in public higher education have unsurprisingly created a feedback loop in which students shy away from programs that campuses have clearly signaled their own disengagement from? That research is happening in real time.

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<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, the claim that non-tenure-track faculty give higher grades across the board because their retention depends on student satisfaction is statistically false, in my experience.

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