

# GLOBAL LEADERSHIP DIALOGUES

Insights and Inspirations from Change Leaders



Photo: Michael Marsland/Yale University

## Environmentalist Extraordinaire

### JAMES GUSTAVE (GUS) SPETH

*Gus Speth has had a long and distinguished career as a public servant at the national and global levels, as an academic and as an environmental activist. Right after completing his studies at Yale Law School, he co-founded the Natural Resources Defense Council and later the World Resources Institute, two of the most important environmental NGOs in the United States. He was chair of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality in President Jimmy Carter's administration and an advisor on environmental affairs to President Bill Clinton. He served as administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, the second-highest office at the UN, chair of the UN Development Group, and for a decade (1999–2009) he was the Dean of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. He currently teaches at Vermont Law School and is a senior fellow at the Democracy Collaborative, where he is co-chair of the Next System Project.*

*Speth's many books have received critical acclaim, including reviews that liken his contributions to those of Rachel Carson. Called "the ultimate insider" by Time magazine, Gus Speth is a legendary figure in the environmental movement and one of the world's leading public intellectuals. Published in 2012, his book *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* extends his work well beyond the environment, taking a holistic view of the ways we need to reinvent our society. In 2014, Chelsea Green published Speth's memoir, *Angels by the River*, where he shares his reflections on race, environmental policy and politics, and change leadership.*

*In May 2013, Speth visited the University of Massachusetts Boston as the commencement speaker and an honorary degree recipient. Ira Jackson, Dean of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, interviewed Speth for Commonwealth Journal at WUMB Radio. This brief, an adapted version of the interview, includes the full text of Speth's commencement address at UMass Boston.*

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**CENTER FOR GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY**

JOHN W. McCORMACK GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLICY AND GLOBAL STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

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**You were arrested for civil disobedience protesting the Keystone Pipeline. What led you to go from college professor to taking on civil disobedience? Have things gotten so bad that we have to go beyond traditional governance mechanisms to accelerate the pace of progress?**

Yes and yes. I think that the political system we have is letting us down terribly on the climate issue. When I was President Carter's environmental advisor in the late 70's, we issued three reports calling for action on climate change. This means that for almost 35 years this issue has been in the public domain and there have been people calling for action that entire period. So little has been done, though, that we are on the cusp of ruining the planet. At this point, I think it is incumbent on people to do things that they wouldn't normally do, and civil disobedience is one of those things. I can pretty much guarantee that if the State Department recommends to the President that he approve that pipeline, we are going to see widespread civil disobedience across this land, and I'll be with them.

**And that is an imminent decision by the President upon the recommendation of the Secretary of State, isn't it?**

Well, we don't know how imminent, but it could come. They have issued a very flawed environmental impact statement for the Keystone project that was drafted in large part by consultants that previously worked for the pipeline company. So this is a faulty process. I hope that Obama rises above it and sees the long-term issue here, which is that we should not be getting ourselves deeper into the fossil fuel hole; we should be climbing out of it.

**With Al Gore as Bill Clinton's vice president, and Gore then going on to write a book and produce and narrate the Academy Award-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, why wasn't Clinton more aggressive?**

Remember that there was a process that led to the Kyoto Protocol, which was an effort to do something internationally about the climate issue. The United States never ratified the Kyoto Protocol. It never even got to the Senate. That sort of story is indicative of what happened back then. More recently, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama campaigned with climate plans in the 2008 election. They were both very aggressive about it. That was on the heels of major efforts to bring the issue to the public – *An Inconvenient Truth* and other things. Early in the Obama administration a real plan looked inevitable, and indeed, the House of Representatives did pass a major plan that we would be delighted to have today.



*Speth (second from left) at the 2014 People's Climate March in New York City.*

Congressman Markey was the leader in this effort. Then we got socked with a disinformation campaign that really scared people. This has been documented by one of the major historians of science in our country: Naomi Oreskes wrote a book called *Merchants of Doubt* about how uncertainty was sowed in the public mind about the seriousness of the issue and even the reality of the issue. The Koch brothers and others also spent a lot of money to elect members of Congress who were doubters of the issue, so we have a Congress today that really does not believe in the seriousness of the challenge. There is a lot of misunderstanding about this complicated topic. The public needs help understanding it and knowing that we need to hustle. This is a great tragedy, because we knew enough to act on it 34 or 35 years ago.

**We hear you suggesting that environmentalists have to go well beyond the environmental issues and get into the thick of the political arena.**

I think so. I think there are two issues. One is we need to act rapidly and with renewed strength on climate change. We cannot wait on the major changes that will be necessary for the country to deal with its environmental and other problems down the road. As an issue, climate change has gotten to the point where we simply have to act within the political system that we have now. In the somewhat longer term, we ought to be desperately trying to change our politics to adopt a long series of pro-democracy political reforms that can reverse this ascendancy of corporate power and money power over people power. We need to reconfirm and reestablish real democracy in our country. But that will all take longer, and honestly we do not have time to waste. We have squandered time and the climate



Photo: Jeff Malet, www.maletphoto.com.

*Gus Speth was among 65 environmentalists arrested on August 20, 2011, outside the White House in Washington, DC.*

is changing now. My prediction – and I don’t know whether this is good news or bad news – is that over the next couple of years the climate impacts are going to become so severe that even Washington is going to have to respond.

**So even more severe than Sandy?**

We could certainly see another Sandy.

**You said in a recent talk that eight of the 20 largest cities in America are coastal cities that represent something like 30% of our total economic output and they’re all vulnerable to major catastrophic climate-related incidents.**

Well, there is normal sea-level rise, and then there are stronger storms that lead to storm surges, which is the most serious problem. This is a tremendous vulnerability in the United States, but one reason that the climate issue is hard to describe and deal with is the unpredictable nature of its impacts. It just shifts the odds towards certain things. It doesn’t absolutely determine one particular tornado or one storm, but it shifts the odds towards stronger storms, towards more and stronger tornadoes, towards coastal inundation. Already we are seeing this in the Southeast, where I spend a certain amount of time: previously freshwater marshes and freshwater wetlands becoming inundated with salt because of the sea-level rise. So this is a very serious problem. And there will be heat waves. And there will be droughts and floods. It is

coming. It is coming at us like a tsunami right offshore. We can already see some of the signs. I do not think we have seen the worst. Our cities were just not designed for this.

**During the Rio+20 Conference in 2012, governments agreed to create a new set of global Sustainable Development Goals. What is your vision for this process and its relationship to the Millennium Development Goals?**

The Millennium Development Goals had to do with reducing poverty, providing sanitation services, fresh water, and other basic things that the world needs desperately. There has been a certain amount of progress toward those goals since they were adopted at the turn of the century. Now we need to revisit that and to effectively upgrade them. We could push further on the goals that we have already established. There is still a lot of work to be done on poverty, sanitation, water supply, and the other issues. There are a couple of things that could be added, though. There might be a Sustainable Development Goal that calls for a certain percentage increase in each country’s movement toward better environmental performance. That would be quite an important thing. Yale University puts out an Environmental Performance Index that is pretty sophisticated and includes data for all countries. There is some environmental language in the Millennium Development Goals, but it is pretty vague. One of the great things about these goals is that they get quite quantitative, which gives people

a target. Something like the Yale Index might be used to press for improved environmental performance across the board.

Another thing that should be added to the SDGs is a commitment to greater equity within each country. We already have a measure of economic equity in each country called the Gini coefficient. We could have goals set around improvement in each country's Gini coefficient. That is to say, the inequality of movement toward greater equality accords greater social equity in countries. So these are things that could be thought about as new initiatives as part of the revised goals.

**Your book *America the Possible* refers to the changes that the US political economy system faces to make the sustainability of our people and our planet a priority. What motivated you to propose this theory of change given that you've spent the last 35 years being a drum major for environmental performance and climate change recognition? What made you suddenly take on a much wider lens and go into the heart of reinventing American democracy?**

If you are asking, "Are we succeeding with the big global environmental problems?" the answer is no. We are still losing forests at a rapid rate. We are still losing fisheries. We know about the climate issue. Biodiversity loss is proceeding... as you continue down the list of the major global challenges, we are not seeing the type of progress that we had hoped for when we drafted these grand treaties. That led me to wonder why – why is this system preventing success on the environmental challenges?



Source: Environmental Performance Index

For the book, I looked at the top 20 democracies in the world. The United States was not just a poor performer, we were frequently at the bottom. On the environmental performance index that I mentioned we are at the bottom of these 20 countries. And when you look closer, you see that we have the worst poverty and the most inequality.



Books by Gus Speth: *Angels by the River* (Chelsea Green, 2014), *America the Possible* (Yale University Press, 2012), *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* (Yale University Press, 2008), *Global Environmental Governance* (Island Press, 2006), *Red Sky at Morning* (Yale University Press, 2004), *Worlds Apart* (Island Press, 2003).



*Ira Jackson (left), Dean of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, interviews Gus Speth for Commonwealth Journal at WUMB Radio.*

We are the worst on the Gini coefficient that I mentioned. We have the lowest score on the UN's index of gender equality. We have the worst score on UNICEF's index of material well-being for children. We are in the basement on literally 30 major indicators of international standing. So it is not just environment that we are losing on. We are losing across a whole front of environmental, social, and economic issues. Something is badly wrong, because we have a system that is geared to deliver the wrong things. We have an economy geared and hardwired to deliver certain things but is not delivering well-being for people and the planet. We have to change the system if we are going to deal with these issues. We need a much deeper critique of why we are not succeeding, and we need a much more profound commitment to deeper transformative change that can make it possible to solve these problems. Right now we are swimming upstream and we are not being totally washed away by the current, but the current is ever so consistently pushing us down... we are not making it using the approaches that we have been trying for the past several decades.<sup>1</sup>

**We have had some successes, though. We have taken on ozone depletion, and a number of other issues, in which you were among those in the vanguard. Successful actions have frequently had bipartisan leadership, too. People like Ed Muskie and Richard Nixon, legislation like the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, we seem to have come a long way as a nation and we are doing much better.**

Yes, we have come a long way, thanks largely to Senator Muskie, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. You are right that it was bipartisan, and those were very tough laws. We have not seen anything like them since. There has been definite progress in certain areas, but on the global-scale issues we are losing ground. You mentioned success on halting depletion of the ozone layer. That is the only of the top 10 global-scale issues where we have some sense of major progress.

**So is there something to be learned from that one? Because the whole world said, "If we don't do something about these CFCs, the world is at risk."**

<sup>1</sup> Sources available in *America the Possible*.

There is a very big lesson to learn. CFCs became an easy problem to solve because DuPont, which made the chlorofluorocarbons, developed a substitute for them. DuPont was willing to ban CFCs, in effect creating a huge international market for its substitute. Because of that, there wasn't a big economic lobby against saving the ozone layer. That was also really the only issue where the United States has taken major leadership. We have been dragging our heels on all the other major global-scale issues ever since.

**We, as a nation, are innovative and we harness technology. Why haven't we applied that savvy and entrepreneurship in wind, solar, and other forms of alternative energy?**

It is true that we are way behind in renewable energy compared with some countries in Europe. I think it all started around the late 1970s and 1980s. We began to lose our ability to act as a country with common objectives and a sense of commitment to all the people. You can trace the decline of the U.S. in those decades while Europe and other countries in the top 20 industrial democracies kept improving. There have been a lot of improvements in the U.S. in the environmental area and in things like life expectancy. At the same time, if you consider the 20 countries that I looked at in the book, we are really not doing well. We have the highest infant mortality. We have the highest rate of prevalence of mental illness. We have the shortest life expectancy. *America the Possible* documents all of this. Thirty different variables – indicators of national well-being and international citizenship – and we are at the bottom. Not just near the bottom, we are at the bottom. These are national statistics, and international comparisons, so they require national action. There is no reason that we cannot do this, but it's going to require deeper change to overcome these problems. It is basically going to require building a new political economy, a new operating system.

**One review of *America the Possible* states that it actually has a hopeful message in how you talk about re-localization, new business models, plentitude, restoring equality, regaining time and new goods and services, a resonance with nature and cultural resilience. It seems that it all is a paradigm of a political economy that is**

**presumably viable, that provides opportunities, but how do we get there?**

I think there is still a chance that we could do it, but we will not do it by sitting on our hands like we are now. We are going to need a powerful political movement for deeper change to address these issues. The book details at length that there are solutions for all of the areas where we are in the basement. We could still build a bright future for my grandchildren – I have six now – and of the young people today. By 2050 we could build *America the Possible*.

**So what skills do young people today need when they enter the workforce to be able to more effectively tackle the challenges we face at the local and the global levels? What can universities do to better prepare the next generation of professionals to be more effective than your generation has been?**

We certainly need to instill a deep appreciation of science and scientific knowledge. We need critical thinking, and I don't mean just objective thinking. The system demands a searching analysis, and an ability to think critically and independently, and to separate oneself from one's tribe. I think many of my environmental friends take issue with where I am now on these issues, which is that we are not going to solve the environmental issues within the traditional framework of environmental activity and policy.

So those are two areas, but I think it is also important to have the ability to think down the road. We are very much in the moment, in the now, and we do not think nearly enough about what kind of future we really want for ourselves, for our children, and our country.

I would also say that I hope that the young people will not lose faith, and will get involved in our political system. If I could go back and start over as a young person today, I think I would try to create something like "Environmentalists for Political Reform" or "Environmentalists for Democracy." If we do not save the system of democracy in our country, we will not be able to do any of these things.

**COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS**  
**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON**

James Gustave Speth

May 31, 2013

What a great honor to be your commencement speaker today, at this unique and important university. The administrators and faculty that I know here are truly inspiring. And I hear the students are pretty special too! Congratulations to you all. And thanks to the parents.

I suspect many of you have heard Woody Allen's commencement quip. "Two paths lie ahead of you," he said to the eager graduates, "one leads to utter despair and the other to extinction. May you have the wisdom to choose wisely."

When I told my son I'd be here today, I quoted Woody to him, and he said, "Don't go too negative on them, Dad." I'm afraid I have a minor reputation for doing that. But I'm not going there!

Somehow, I've become an old man. Surely, old man, you've got something useful to impart to the younger generation. In fact, I have thought hard about what I have learned that might be truly helpful to you, something positive.

So let me say up front what is the most important thing I've learned over the years. What we've got, mainly, to get us through life, with a maximum of happiness and a minimum of suffering, is each other. In the end, I think it is just that simple. The main thing that gives meaning to our lives is caring for others. We impart meaning to our lives and, indeed, to the world by caring so much for others that we act to create for them as much joy and as little suffering as possible. As the philosopher George Santayana said, "There is no cure for birth and death, save to enjoy the interval." And that enjoyment of life, above all, requires companionship, affection, support—things that we can only receive from each other.

I say it's just that simple, but, of course, we all too often seek to impart meaning to our lives in other ways. Almost universal is the tendency to try to find meaning at the Mall. Here I refer to our consumerism, our affluenza. How wrong-headed to think that we can satisfy our nonmaterial needs with more materialism—more stuff! You are probably fa-



*Gus Speth delivers the commencement address at UMass Boston on May 31, 2013.*

miliar with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. At the bottom of the pyramid are the material things we really do need to buy—or, even better, make ourselves—food, water, shelter, health care, education—the basics. But as we move up the pyramid, we encounter the non-material needs—friendship, belonging, intimacy, self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment. Advertisers seduce us to try to meet these higher needs by buying stuff—cars, clothing, jewelry, beer, and so much more. Madison Avenue and its clients love it precisely because it doesn't work. There is no meaning to be found at the Mall. But somehow that doesn't stop us. We keep buying, shop till we drop.

But, at some level, more and more people sense that this consumerism involves a great misdirection of life's energy. We know we're slighting the precious things that no market can provide—that truly make life worthwhile. So, here's a revolutionary new product that is trying to make it at the Mall. Recently, a group of young women set up a stand in the Mall to sell Nothing. They promised it was "Guaranteed not to put you in debt . . . 100 percent non-toxic . . . sweatshop-free . . . doesn't contribute to global warming . . . family-friendly . . . fun and creative!" When they refused to leave, they were arrested! Good for them. Humor is a powerful way to challenge the system—intelligent, irreverent debunking.

So what makes us truly happy? That's the question addressed by the new field of positive psychology. When a founder of this new field was asked to identify the roots of human happiness, his answer was simple: "Other people." We flourish in a setting of warm, nurturing, and rewarding interpersonal relationships, and within that context we flourish best when we are giving, not getting.

Graduates and friends, I have spoken of caring mainly at the personal level—our families, friends, neighbors. But caring for others is an opportunity that opens up in many-spheres. Let me mention three.

- First, care for your place, your community, wherever you live. In America, we've had enough of throwaway cities and runaway businesses. So build the future locally. Create intentional communities. Transition towns. Launch new enterprises that are rooted, sustainable—that have a higher social purpose than profit. There is no Washington-style gridlock stopping us where we live. Follow the food.
- Second, care for your country, wherever it is. Listen to this: Here is what Thomas Jefferson wrote at the end of his presidency, "The care of human life and happiness . . . is the first and only legitimate object of good govern-

ment." Goodness! What if everyone in Washington took that seriously.

We Americans had another wonderful, caring president in Franklin Roosevelt. In his last State of the Union Address, in 1944, he called on America to accept, and I quote, "a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all—regardless of station, race, or creed."

And Roosevelt then listed these rights:

- The right to a good job;
- The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;
- The right of every family to a decent home;
- The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;
- The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment;
- The right to a good education.

Imagine these as rights! That's what the International Declaration of Human Rights in fact does.

Whatever the sad craziness of U.S. politics in the current moment, the proposition that we should have these rights is not radical. They are the rights—not the hopes, not the promises, but the rights—sought for all people by a great American president. Just yesterday, when I was two!

To secure these rights, and others, we all need to escape the clutches of the reigning neoliberal orthodoxy. In America and elsewhere, we need to build an economy and a politics that give priority to people, place, and planet rather than profit, product, and power. Some have called it the caring economy. Others have called it the solidarity economy. Still others, the sharing economy. At the New Economy Coalition based here in Boston, we are just calling it the new economy. Join with us and help us build it. Rebecca Solnit has written that "the grounds for hope are . . . in the people who are inventing the world while no one looks." Join us.

George Bernard Shaw famously remarked that all progress depends on being unreasonable. My friends, it's time for a large amount of civic unreasonableness. It is time for a deeper critique of why our economies aren't working for people, place, or planet. Remember: to protest because you care for your country is an act of high patriotism. As Frederick Douglass observed in the fight against slavery, "Power concedes nothing without a demand."



*Gus Speth receives an honorary degree from UMass Boston. With Chancellor J. Keith Motley (right) and Provost Winston Langley (left).*

• And lastly, care for our planet, and care for our children and grandchildren and all future generations who will inhabit it. The poet Drew Dellinger said it well about future generations:

“it’s 3:23 in the morning  
and I’m awake  
because my great great grandchildren  
won’t let me sleep  
my great great grandchildren  
ask me in dreams  
what did you do while the planet was plundered?  
What did you do when the earth was unraveling?”

The brilliant senator from Illinois Adlai Stevenson spoke to our planetary future in his last speech, in 1965: “We travel together, passengers in a little spaceship, . . . preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft.” Today we know that caring for our fragile craft requires much deeper change than

we imagined a few decades ago. Today’s environmentalism will not save the environment. Environmental action has got to dig deeper and challenge the root causes of our problems—consumerism, misguided values, the ascendancy of money power over people power, worship of GDP, neglect of social justice, and more.

When we think about caring for this earth, let’s always remember that that caring must extend to all the life that evolved here with us. It does not matter, for example, whether we think a particular species is important or unimportant. We did not create it and we do not own it. It has intrinsic value. Nature has rights. The cultural historian and visionary Thomas Berry observed that humans had created the concept of rights—and then given them all to themselves. Aldo Leopold saw plainly and wrote beautifully that the ethics by which we live must extend to caring for the land and all the life on it. As Terry Tempest Williams has noted, “We can no longer say, ‘Let nature take care of itself.’”

As you leave here and go forward, will your caring succeed? I believe that your generation can and will succeed in many, many ways.

Remember that there's tremendous power in having a dream. Dream of a new place—a place where the pursuit of happiness is sought not in more getting and spending but in the growth of human solidarity, real democracy, and devotion to the public good; where the average person is empowered to achieve his or her human potential; where the benefits of economic activity are widely and equitably shared; where the environment is sustained for current and future generations; and where the virtues of simple living, community self-reliance, good fellowship, and respect for nature predominate. We can build this future if we join together and fight for it.

Of course, there are bound to be setbacks, and times when our efforts at caring do not seem to be working. But giving up is not an option. You know that.

Consider the principal thing I've done in the public arena—that is, to work in every way over 35 years to hold back the onslaught of climate change. I certainly haven't succeeded well, have I? But I have, at least, succeeded at trying, and, if that is not enough, it is still a lot. Moreover, this fight is not over, and with your help we will win it. We simply must.

Bill McKibben and 350.org are surely correct that there are real villains in the climate story—the fossil fuel executives who are determined to maximize profits and to defeat regulation, most of them knowing full well that they

are ruining the planet but not caring. That's why it's vital for all colleges and universities to divest, not because it will bring Big Oil and Big Coal to their knees, but because it is right.

The climate struggle has been like rolling the rock up the hill only to see it roll to the bottom again. So let me close with a remarkable interpretation of Sisyphus and his rock, that given to us by Albert Camus in his "The Myth of Sisyphus."

Camus says that Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to the dreadful punishment of futile and hopeless labor, forever rolling a rock to the top of the mountain only to have the stone always fall back of its own weight. Camus says that Sisyphus' crime was "his hatred of death, and his passion for life." But Camus finds Sisyphus "superior to his fate, . . . stronger than his rock." "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain," Camus writes. "[But] the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a person's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." The struggle itself, Camus concludes, is full of meaning.

So, here is my advice: find your rock. Find your rock. You never know. It might just stay up there one day.

Good luck to each of you.

Take care of each other.

Take care of your community.

Take care of your country.

Take care of the planet.

Thank you.



### About the University

With a growing reputation for innovative research addressing complex urban issues, the University of Massachusetts Boston, metropolitan Boston's only public university, offers its diverse student population both an intimate learning environment and the rich experience of a great American city. UMass Boston's 11 colleges and graduate schools serve more than 16,000 students while engaging local, national, and international constituents through academic programs, research centers, and public service activities.

Part of the five-campus University of Massachusetts system, UMass Boston is located on a peninsula in Boston Harbor, near the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum and the Massachusetts State Archives and Museum. To learn more about UMass Boston, visit [www.umb.edu](http://www.umb.edu).

### About the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies

Named in honor of U.S. House of Representatives Speaker John W. McCormack, the McCormack Graduate School was founded in 2003 as an academic and research center in policy studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. We are the go-to school for a world-class interdisciplinary education and values-driven research that seeks to explain and offer remedies for some of the most important social, political, economic, and environmental issues of our time. A dynamic institution with a teaching soul, we train the next generation of local and global leaders in conflict resolution, gerontology, global governance and human security, international relations, public affairs, and public policy.



UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

*50 Years*

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## About This Series

Based on in-person interchanges, the stories told in the Global Leadership Dialogues series offer insights into the professional work and personal experiences of notable professionals in the global governance field. The series provides in-depth perspectives on what these leaders think about key issues in global governance, what inspires them, and how they imagine the future.

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