



I WANT TO WRITE

*NOTES FROM THE HEART AND SOUL
OF A WRITER'S LIFE*

MARITA GOLDEN

This book is dedicated with much thanks, to all those who have mentored, encouraged and supported me as I have created my writer's life. I want to especially thank my husband Joe Murray for his limitless belief in me and all the writers I have worked with in my classes, who have in their generosity, continuously taught me not just how to teach and how to write, but how to keep the faith.

The ten chapters in this book are based on presentations made in my writing workshops- **I Want to Write!**, a writing “bootcamp” designed to jumpstart your writing life, **Imagi-Nation**, a fiction (novel/short story) intensive and **Tell Your Story True**, a workshop devoted to memoir/autobiography. For more information on my writing workshops contact me at info@maritagolden.com or visit my website www.maritagolden.com.

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FEAR IS WHAT YOU FEEL...

Fear is often the first thing you feel once you realize or decide that you want to write. I make a distinction between a realization and a decision because they are two very different actions. A realization is an intellectual understanding that something is possible –i.e. “I want to write” ; a decision is a mind-set that moves you to take action i.e.- “I WILL write.”

I begin this meditation on the writing life with a discussion of the “F” word because it’s so hard to acknowledge, and produces such a squishy squirmy mix of emotions. You want to write, are often desperate to tell a story. The narrative is throbbing in your heart, keeping you awake at night, has become the sum total of your daydreams. But you can’t tell the story because you’re scared.

I’ve been writing with serious intent and the desire to have a public voice since I was a college freshman. Once I decided that I wanted to live and to write “out loud”, I wasn’t merely frightened of the personal power that would be unleashed if I realized my dream, I was terrified. I was also frightened by the specter of just how much energy and commitment this life I said I wanted to live would require of me.

Thirteen books, and countless articles later I now know the most important thing *you* need to know about fear-it’s an essential part of any creative process. It isn’t an emotion you work to “overcome” as much as a type of energy that’s a sign that you’re about to embark on an adventure, and submit yourself to the hearty winds of personal transformation. *You can write often, and with beauty and grace even as you tremble with fear.* You may want to read that last sentence again. *You can write often, and with beauty and grace even as you tremble with fear.*

So what is it you're afraid of? Well.... There's the fear that you won't write as well as the authors you admire. Fear of ridicule. Fear of the reaction of family and friends. Fear that you can't handle success. Fear that you can't handle failure. Fear that you'll be blinded by the luminosity, the breadth and depth of your talent. Fear of standing up for something because you've seen people who stand up get knocked down. You, like so many of us, have forgotten that "we fall down but we get up."

Winston Churchill said that success is going through failure after failure without losing your enthusiasm. It's the enthusiasm, often difficult to feel and hold onto that ultimately results in the success. Similarly, good writing is essentially draft after draft of fait to middling writing that you *work* until it speaks to the reader in an undeniable way with an unforgettable voice.

Fear can be redefined as an adrenalin rush, a propellant, an ingredient that sets your creativity on fire rather than dousing it. Fear doesn't have to paralyze you unless you're comfortable with it as a cocoon you hide in so you can keep your story to yourself. Your fear cheats the world of another piece of the puzzle that creates the picture of our shared human experience.

I've always known that my desire to be a writer was a gift. Now I know that writing for me, is my assignment from God. *And who I am to talk back to God?* Whether you're a spiritual/religious believer, skeptic, or atheist, it's clear that the urge to create is generated by a source we can't fully know, absolutely define, but only submit to. Therefore the mystery. Therefore the wonder. Therefore the reasons we can't let go of the urge to write.

So, how DID I conquer fear? *One word at a time.* For me, writing isn't a battle to be won. It's more like a body of water that's alternately murky and crystal clear. It frightens me with rip tides and blustering waves, lulls me on its surface when it is calm, makes music with its rhythmic waltz onto the shore. It cleanses and hypnotizes me. I listen to and dive into it. Some days I swim, others I just float. But I always show up at the beach, and I love the feel of sand between my toes.

YOU HAVE TIME TO WRITE

You have time to write. Despite what you think. Despite what you've told yourself. You have time to write. You have the desire and that's the first step in creating the *will* that launches you into a committed writing life. For writers stymied in their quest to establish a schedule, the issue of time-not enough of it, often becomes a convenient excuse. "If only I had more time," goes the refrain, "I could write more." But you do have more time-24 hours every day from which you can choose some period of time to write.

Pulitzer-Prize winning author Robert Olen Butler wrote several complete novels commuting to work on the train before his first book was published. Poet Sonia Sanchez wrote at two a.m. when her twin sons were children. I completed the first draft of my memoir *Migrations of the Heart* writing an hour a day at 4 a.m. five days a week for nine months.

You don't have to quit your job to write eight hours a day. You don't have to be the recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts or a generous MacArthur Genius Award. You just have to WRITE. Half an hour in your journal before

you get out of bed in the morning. For fifteen minutes before you go to sleep. The regularity produces results. When I have a large writing project to complete, I break it into small sections and may write as little as half an hour a couple of days a week. I'm still writing however, in the shower, as I wash dishes, when I'm driving, as the narrative gestates in my imagination and continues the process of taking shape. Write **when** you can, **what** you can, **as often** as you can. In a nutshell, that's the secret to writing success.

INSPIRATION IS A GOOD PLACE TO START

Inspiration is just the beginning. It's a good place to start, but because of its ephemeral nature, inspiration lacks the ingredients necessary to carry you through to the completion of a writing project or idea. Novice writers often speak rapturously of the power of inspiration, the ability of a mood or feeling to serve as the foundation of their writing life. Yet too often the writing that results from an over reliance on inspiration is infrequently produced and of inconsistent quality. Perhaps the first line or the initial pages blaze like a heady starburst, but the body of the work shows evidence of neglect and even worse, clichés and indifferent writing. Inspiration is designed to provoke in the writer a long-term commitment, not an on again off again infatuation.

Still, the paradoxical nature of this warning is evident. There is a sense in which we have to fall in love with our poems, plays, novels, stories, essays all over again each time we are involved in their creation. Yet the type of love that serves our writing, that ensures its maturation, is love that asks more of us as creators than we think we are capable of. Love that is willing to listen to the story, hear its voice and shove our ego out of the way. Love that imagines our writing on a par with and even surpassing the writing

that's moved and inspired us. To reach your goal, always set the bar higher than you think you can reach. You need to be driven and practical, a day dreamer and a doer, in possession of a rich fantasy life and the willingness to work and write and think and imagine page after page even, and especially when you can't see an end in sight.

Inspiration keeps you returning to your writing. It sets you before your computer for an hour before you head to your day-job. Has you writing in your notebook before you drift off to sleep. Allow inspiration to perform it's primary task-to place you on the path of consistency. Show up, inspired or not, and the writing will happen and you *will* be inspired by the process you've unleashed.

AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

"If I don't tell the truth I lose all interest in writing."

Joyce Carol Oates

Who am I writing for? Who are you? That's a question that's both friend and potential enemy on the path of the writing journey. It's a question that in my earlier days as a writer, I wrestled with often. Was I writing for the imaginary thousands of eager readers who I wanted to buy my books? Was I writing for critics and reviewers, whose opinions are fickle, often biased and that change with the seasons? Maybe I was writing as a way of talking back to all those voices in my head that tried to convince me "Marita face it, you have nothing important to say."

In a sense I write for all those audiences. But I learned rather quickly, that most of the time, I was writing for an audience of one, and that audience was me. Powerful writing springs from a solid core of convictions. What do you believe? What are you

willing to stand up for even if you have to stand up alone? What is your vision of life? Community? Your fellow citizens on the planet? Right? Wrong?

Big questions, yes, but they're the questions whose answers ground you in the essence of the story you render in your writing, exploring its dimensions repeatedly in a variety of ways. Writing is not only lonely, but if you write anything challenging, it's an endeavor that's guaranteed to spark controversy, get you in "trouble" "offend" someone or leave people puzzled and upset. When I wrote *Don't Play in the Sun One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex*, about the scourge of intra-racial color discrimination, I was praised and pilloried. Because writing that book allowed me to center myself in an understanding of what I believed about this problem, I could take the hits and the pats on the back almost with equal ease. "But I just want to tell a story, I don't want to change the world", you say. Well, any story you write changes the world. And there are no simple stories. Write about your childhood and your sister will tell you "I don't remember that." Write poetry that rhymes in a free-verse world and people will call you old fashioned and out of touch. Write about what could be and people will assure you it's impossible. Suit up, polish your armor. You said you wanted to write. This is what you signed up for.

I write for me, an audience of one. Yet in my singular existence I'm connected to everyone else. Many of the fictional and nonfiction narratives I've written were conceived to fill what I saw as a void that needed to be filled, an absence that had to be addressed. I felt that way deeply and passionately. Those readers who have bought my books confirm that what I felt was merely an echo of a need others saw as well. Writing reminds me again and again how enmeshed we all are in the fabric of each other's dreams

and desires. There are only a few major themes that the majority of stories dramatize or address-family, love, the desire to be safe, identity, guilt, redemption. If I'm creating characters or offering new ideas about any of those themes, I'm inevitably connected to and a reflection of everyone else on earth. That's why great literature is so effective at smashing through the walls and barriers we constantly erect to divide us one from another.

The writers who've provided the model for my writing life have marched to the beat of their own drum and turned it into an instrument that created a song whose lyrics offered new ways of looking at the familiar. The writers I admire write from the inside out, from the center of who they are, not who others tell them they should be. These are writers willing to risk telling a story the world is not yet ready to hear. They know the world will only become ready for the story if they tell it.

Writing is serious business and serious writing forces the writer, of necessity, to become their own best friend. To water the garden of private fantasies that is the soil from which the amazing and the beautiful constantly springs. Get to know your audience of one. Make sure she has a front row seat.

EIGHT THINGS WRITERS DO...

1. **Writers Write.** No excuses. On a schedule. With regularity
2. **Writers Read.** The writers working in their genre. The writers in other genres, so they can learn something new and maintain a fresh perspective on the many different ways stories are told.

3. **Writers Write.** And they seek out constructive assessment of their work from smart readers whose opinions and instincts they trust.
4. **Writers Attend Public Readings** by other writers, poetry slams, book signings, lectures, to support other writers and to form a community they can learn from. Writers take workshops and classes to hone their craft.
5. **Writers Write.** And they revise, revise, revise; edit, change, alter, re-imagine, all in the service of telling the best story the best way they can.
6. **Writers cheer the success of other writers.** So that they don't block their own blessings. Writers realize success is a state of mind they control and define, not something given to them by anyone else.
7. **Writers Practice Patience.** A story has it's own deadline, it's own schedule. The time-line you designed is just a joke that makes God laugh! Expect frustration, surprises, disappointment, unexpected detours as your story struggles to be born.
8. **Writers Write.** Yes they do. Yes you can.

EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING

The decision to write is about much more than just writing regularly, even though that's where you'll start. You're creating a new life and life style. In this endeavor, everything counts, or as we used to say (I'm showing my age here) "*everything is everything.*"

The decision to write can have a quake-like effect in your life. An earthquake shifts the earths' crust, shaking and cracking it, releasing a powerful blast of energy that

while a natural and normal act of nature, leaves destruction in its wake. Think of the energy released in your life by the decision to write, as an earthquake in reverse, one that builds rather than destroys.

Once you begin writing with serious intent, that action will inevitably shift your priorities, and result in displacements and replacements in the major areas of your life. When the dust settles, you'll gaze upon a life-scape very different from the one you once knew. Expect these shifts in the major areas of your life and define them as opportunities for growth.

- **Family** If you're married with children or living with a partner, once you've decided to give more time to developing your writing, talk with these most important people in your life. Tell them why you've made this decision and what it means to you. Honestly discuss the trade-offs that will be required, i.e. rather than snuggling on the sofa to watch t.v every evening with your partner, you may need to spend that time writing. This can be an opportunity to encourage greater self reliance in children and partners. Enlist the people you live with as your cheering squad. Let them know that more money could result from your writing which would help everyone; you'll be more content, devoting regular time to an activity you enjoy and that will affect them as well. Let them know that they remain important and it's because they are that you need their support.
- **Friends/Family** Giving yourself permission to write can sometimes inspire an unsettling, unexpected emotional backlash from friends and even family, who may wonder or even ask "*Who told you you could write?*" Long-festering, buried resentments, jealousies, even anger can erupt in the face of your decision to act on

behalf of your creative power. While you can't replace disgruntled, fearful family members, you can find new friends who can support your creative life. If you suspect that divulging the "great news" (from your perspective) that you're writing will encourage these negative reactions, hold onto your dream in silence.

- **Physical/Mental Health** Writing is taskmaster, buddy, interloper and friend. The writing life is also demanding and sometimes grueling. You write with your mind and imagination, and with your body. Stretch frequently when writing on the computer, take periodic ten minute breaks that give your eyes a rest from the screen. Practice yoga or pilates, work out in the gym. The healthier and more fit you are, the more productive your writing life will be. Don't let writing take over your life. Make time for friends, fun and family. Laugh often and develop a sense of humor, believe me you'll need it!
- **Work** The more time you commit to writing, the more you may be tempted to see your 9-5 job as irrelevant and intrusive. When I worked a 9-5 I woke up early to get a start on my day and to perform what were for me the most important rituals of my day. I'd pray, then meditate and do half an hour of yoga, followed by an hour of writing. Having written for an hour before the onslaught of the demands of the day, I could go to work and feel much less resentment toward work that paid the rent but that didn't have my heart. Be grateful for your job. A check you can depend on provides you with the cushion you rely on to write. While I don't advocate remaining on a job that's killing your spirit, a job doesn't have to be an obstacle to the writing life, unless you define it as such.

- **Faith** If you never prayed before you began writing, you will once you become deeply entrenched in this endeavor. The rigors of the commitment you've made will sometimes test your faith in yourself, impatience with the process will have you in dark moods muttering, "*what have I gotten myself into?*". You'll be afraid that if you don't hurry and complete your project there won't be any success left in the world for you. Be assured, the universe isn't stingy and there really is an inexhaustible supply of potential and possibilities. Buddhist meditation, silent retreats, my belief in an indwelling divinity, the love and support of my husband, family and friends reinforces my faith. Each time I sit down to write, that act alone affirms my faith in myself. The words come as an eager response to my own belief. Find the spiritual tools that work for you, that keep you spiritually grounded so you can soar!

THE TRUTH ABOUT MONEY

Money. It's another topic, like fear, that haunts (quite literally) the lives of writers. Some writers are unabashed in their willingness to acknowledge their desire to become rich and famous (mostly rich). Even the most idealistic writer, one more focused on the perfect sentence than the bottom line, hopes to make a profit from their work. The great American poet Walt Whitman and the iconic writer Ernest Hemingway were both brazen, often brilliant self-promoters, who cared deeply about craft, getting paid the value of their work *and* a lasting literary legacy. So an interest in money is not inconsistent with a commitment to good writing. Money isn't dirty, or evil and it won't corrupt you

unless you're ready to BE corrupted. Besides, writers are like everybody else. We want to get paid.

How much money do writers make? Beginning poets are, unfortunately, often paid next to nothing, sometimes receiving only a set number of copies of their book on publication, until the book actually begins selling. Children's book authors are higher on the scale, but they don't generally get sizeable advances. It takes years to become a Judy Blume or Eloise Greenfield. Self-published authors bear the entire financial burden of publication and promotion, and very few self-published authors are prepared for the challenges of the enterprise or fully recover their financial investment. A first time author of a literary fiction or nonfiction book could get \$50,000 as an advance from a major publisher. Expect half that amount from a smaller publishing house. If the writer is incredibly lucky and publishers literally FALL IN LOVE WITH AND LOSE ALL SELF CONTROL over the author and the book, the size of the advance can go into six figures or more. Writing about a controversial person or topic can also increase the amount of the advance. If you're a free-lance writer, a reputable national magazine pays a dollar per word for your published story.

How do writers get their money? After your agent has negotiated a contract on your behalf, they receive 15 to 25% of the advance. The advance is the amount of money a publisher gives you to write the book, and is often broken down into three payments. One on signing the contract. One on completion of the manuscript. And the final payment upon publication of the book. In tabulating this income, writers often forget that they're required to pay taxes on the advance. That \$50,000 is shrinking fast, isn't it?

Royalties are profits earned by a writer after the publisher has recouped the advance plus other costs related to the production and promotion of the book. I've written 14 books, and my advances have ranged from \$10,000 (my first advance in 1980), to \$130,000 for my book *Saving Our Sons Raising Black Children in a Turbulent World*. Yet the largest royalty check I've ever received is \$2,000.00. My agent, who has represented me for almost thirty years, told me in our first conversation, that she wanted to work with me over the long haul, the highs and lows of my career and that money was not the most important reason to choose a publisher. Finding a good editor who could encourage and demand my best writing and a publishing house that valued and respected my unique voice were what she would look for in protecting my interests as her client.

So how does a writer live comfortably off their writing? By selling hundreds of thousands or millions of copies of a book. By living off the royalties from those sales, which become a passive form of income the writer can rely on.

This doesn't mean that you can't become a writer who lives the writer's fantasy life. Enterprising writers *can* get paid. The books I've written have provided me with advances, royalties and a reputation that has garnered me lucrative speaking engagements and writing assignments all over the world. My training as a journalist allows me to write for magazines, even as I'm allowing a novel to percolate. I teach writing workshops, deliver lectures and readings; I offer editing and literary coaching services. Because I write both nonfiction and fiction I have more options as a writer than if I had mastered only one genre. Early in my career, the desire to provide my young son with a materially "good" life of options and opportunities was a huge source of the drive that energized my career and made it so productive. The success I've attained isn't exactly the success I

dreamed of, in many ways it's even better. The final truth about money is that there's plenty out there, but even the most financially successful writer is motivated to write largely because they love telling stories, it's that simple. Yes. Do what you love and the money *will* come.

HONOR YOUR TRIBE

When I realized that writing was both my calling and my career, it became very important for me to live in an environment where I could find a community of Black writers. I was living in Boston when I committed to the writer's life, and increasingly disheartened by the racial fragmentation and tension in the city, and the absence at that time of a meaningful Black writing community, I headed back to my hometown, Washington, D.C. When I returned I found a vibrant and active group of Black writers-poets, journalists, novelists who met regularly and had numerous informal support groups. Without this cadre of writer/friends I'd been lonely, felt adrift and unsure. What I found offered me much needed fellowship. It also inspired me to become a literary activist, founding first the African-American Writers' Guild and several years later the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation.

For over twenty years working through both those organizations, I labored on behalf of my fellow writers to create more and better opportunities for growth, recognition, and community for Black writers. During those years when I worked diligently for other writers, my own career blossomed. Everything I worked to provide for my fellow writers came in abundance to me. I think somehow the two are connected.

My fellow writers have as no others in my life, understood the journey of the writing life. They've provided me with valuable and constructive criticism of my work

and welcome and much appreciated praise. Together we've bemoaned the travails of the publishing world, and celebrated each others' successes. A really good book by a writer I know and call a friend, or even a writer that I don't know but admire, is an inspiration to me to write as well or better-that's healthy competition. Only another writer knows how it feels to be "blocked" or can appreciate the strange mix of gratitude and frustration you feel signing a new book and being asked by the person who just bought it "So when is your next one coming out?" Only another writer knows that you had to give almost everything to get *this one* done. Only another writer understands how good it can feel to have a fictional character come to life on the page after years of struggling to hear her voice and capture it on the page.

One of the best ways I've gained a full sense of the complexities and challenges and rewards of the writers' life is to read the autobiographies, biographies and journals of writers. Reading John Steinbeck's *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath* I learned how all writers have to create in the midst of the onslaught of the messy and unpredictable requirements of daily life.

Zora Neale Hurston's memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road* gave me an appreciation for her zest for living, her courage and love of adventure and to see how that informed her stories. When I read the journals of abolitionist and poet Henry David Thoreau, I found a spiritual soul mate and experienced with a stunning precision the beauty of nature, breathing on the page. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is a meditation on how his childhood of poverty was a metaphor for children of poverty everywhere.

When I think of my writing community, my tribe, I claim the living and the dead, and writers of all races and ethnicities. Wherever we are, we are the keepers of the

powerful flame of the story. We are lauded and praised, jailed and tortured for the stories and the truths we tell. Science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin has said, “The story... is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind for the purpose of understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” We are the stories we tell.

Honor the members of your tribe by buying their books, joining organizations that support the professional and political endeavors we engage in, and by adding your writers’ vision and voice to the circle of stories, a circle that must not be broken.

“A diary necessarily has no form beyond the accidental one of improvisation and hence though it cannot be a work or art... perhaps it can be a masterpiece.”

Jean Paul Sartre

PUBLISH OR PERISH?

What if you don’t want to publish? What if you just want to write in a journal or keep a diary? Is that writing valuable too? Journal writing by its very nature and intent is therapeutic. Writing in a journal can resurrect the spirit and become a source of continual emotional rebirth. A journal keeps your secrets and it doesn’t talk back.

The act of writing launches you on a restructuring and a remembering process about the past and allows you to envision the future in delicious solitude. When I journal I think of the writing on those pages as a first draft of my future plans. On the pages of my journal I admit, confess, worry, celebrate, and congratulate myself with more honesty than anywhere else.

For some writers the journal becomes the place where story ideas evolve and mature over time, where they build up the courage to write for others as well as themselves. The dialogue between you and the pages of a journal possesses a sacred quality, because the revelations, the longing expressed, the fears exposed, come unadulterated, shot straight from the heart. All writing for the public is a kind of performance. You write with an eye on both the story and it's intended audience.

A journal is a resting place where your thoughts and feelings are perfect just as they are. There are pitifully few other places where you'll be met with so much generosity and absence of judgment as on the pages of a journal. A journal greets you with an open invitation everyday and it says, come as you are. Be what you are. There's nothing you can say or reveal that will make me turn away.

WHY YOUR STORY MATTERS

One of the joys of teaching writing is that I get to stay connected. Connected to people, their passions, their energy and their possibilities. I've been teaching writing for many years, and no matter who or where I teach, writing workshops and classes are where people come to be enlarged. When you enroll in a writers' workshop you may think that it's just because you want to learn how to write. I think you're taking my class because you want to reinvigorate a hibernating imagination, give voice to a long-closeted and insistent narrative, leave the safety of the shore and test yourself in the deep water. Life is at it's essence about evolution and change. That's what writing is about too.

I'm renewed by the stories my students share, and each class of writers teaches me how to teach them, how to listen, and how to honor what they are sharing. When you

take a writing class you're signing on to stand butt naked before strangers. To willingly submit your work and your ideas to the assessment of people you've never met, don't know and after the class may never see again. And you do this with a heart full of trust that somehow you will not only survive this process but thrive as a result.

You're enrolled in a writing class also because you know instinctively that your story matters. Scientists have concluded that because of quantum physics we are, all us, literally connected to one another through energy. We keep trying to divide and conquer our individual souls. But that's a battle that can't be won. We are connected. That's why a war fought thousands of miles away from where we live causes us such anguish, it's why a story set in a foreign land speaks to us as though it was unfolding in our mother tongue.

Your story matters because, it's *my* story. Your story matters because I'm not complete without it. Often in my classes and workshops students enroll clearly because they have a need to write from the perspective of one who's been traditionally marginalized by society. When I discover as I have, that a student is HIV positive, is gay or lesbian, or has felt diminished because of racial or color discrimination, sexual or physical abuse, I urge them to write about and from the core of this sense of marginalization. They have a duty, I tell them, to take me as a reader to that place, the place where our souls can be joined.

Often the writing we produce that's inspired by anger, or a sense of wanting to right a wrong has an awe-inspiring quality. It's the honesty of the writing that makes it shimmer with eloquence. But we need to write out of a sense of joy too. Writing is often associated with suffering, some even see writing itself as a form of punishment. We need

to write to celebrate ourselves, our struggles, what we have achieved and what we have *tried* to achieve. Yes, writing well is a challenge, but every sentence I write and then re-write is a celebration of myself, my imagination and my tenacity.

All stories are true (for someone) and all stories matter. Giving the world your story, even if and especially, if it hurts, or is a story everyone said no one would believe, is an act of altruism woven into the fabric of our everyday miracle life. You don't have to *make* your story matter. It already does.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Marita Golden". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline.

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