

“As Spiders Do” – UR Alumni Podcast

Episode 5

Evangelizing Wellbeing with Dr. Brad Bongiovanni, R’92 & Jon Chandonnet, R’92

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[intro music]

Maggie Johnson:

Welcome to As Spiders Do, the University of Richmond podcast where we share stories about our amazing alumni. I’m your host Maggie Johnson from the class of 2018. Today I’m talking with Dr. Brad Bongiovanni and John Chandonnet, both from the class of 1992. Brad and John are both experts on well-being, so today we’re discussing everything to do with community, connection, and overall well-being. We’ll even have tips on how to kickstart or restart your personal wellness journey. So, let’s get into it.

[intro music fades out]

Maggie Johnson:

Welcome to both of you. I am so thrilled to have you both. Would love to just start by having you guys introduce yourselves, talk a little bit about what you did at UR.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Go ahead, Jon.

Jon Chandonnet:

Okay. So, I was super involved at UR. I was the president of RCSGA. I ran a bike race that raised money for Habitat for Humanity. I was in Greek life, played club lacrosse. UR was like a candy store for me. It had so many things that I loved to do. I was just so engaged. Yeah, it was awesome.

Brad Bongiovanni:

John and I are the same year. So, we entered Richmond in 1988, right John?

Jon Chandonnet:

Yeah, right. 1988.

Brad Bongiovanni:

You know, to be honest, I don’t think I was as involved in some of the campus life and governance as John was. Sort of just took different approaches to our college experience, but not all that different. We shared a lot of the same friends, and found out, as we’ll talk

about, a little bit more of our commonalities. But I was also a participant in Greek life. I did intramural sports. I was involved in some student-led diversity initiatives - this is 30 years ago too, before DE&I was what it is today - because I really wanted to see some change there. Those four years really gave us a lifetime of connection.

Maggie Johnson:

That’s fabulous. So, did you two know each other at UR?

Jon Chandonnet:

Yeah, we did. We lived in the same town, Trumbull, Connecticut. I moved there my senior year in high school. I didn’t go to the high school, I went to another high school, but Brad and I found out pretty quickly that we’re from the same town. So, we connected pretty early in our journey.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Jon actually grew up in the same street with a couple of people I knew really well from high school. Of course, we didn’t know this until we got to Richmond and realized we’re from the same town. And then as we entered Greek life, Jon went to one fraternity, I went to another. But John also had multiple friends from before he moved to Connecticut from his previous life in Philadelphia who also attended Richmond, who happened to become my fraternity brothers. So, you know, very quickly we started to sort of weave together like a spider, I might say. We’re the web of connection.

Maggie Johnson:

Oh, I love that. And did you guys remain close after college or kind of what’s that friendship journey been like after leaving UR?

Brad Bongiovanni:

Even though we shared a lot of mutual friends and were friends, but not really tight friends, I’d say during those four years. After that, you know, this is 30 years ago. This is the, you know, early to mid-nineties. So, there was no, remember like the internet was just forming. Now I sound like a dinosaur, but there were no cell phones, there was no social media. And so, connection after college, at least for me, was going to weddings pretty much with my friends. That’s how we stayed connected. And, or, you know, going through the real-world rate of divorce and then remarriage. So, for the next 10 to 15 years, that’s how we got to stay

connected. But it wasn’t until, well, some other happenings that really, I think, brought us back together.

Jon Chandonnet:

And because we have so many friends in common. Our circles were orbiting around each other. While we may not have been in direct contact, I definitely knew that you were up to. There was enough familiarity with you and with our common friends.

Maggie Johnson:

Brad, you mentioned that there were some specific things that brought you guys really close afterwards. Would you guys like to tell us a little bit about that?

Brad Bongiovanni:

I’ll start, John, because then I want you to sort of relay a little bit of your story, but probably...for the last 20 or so years. After all of our friends, and I’ll speak for myself, were married and having kids and so our reasons to get together kind of kept getting less and less and less. Again, this is before social media too. So back in the early 2000s, I kid but I don’t kid, fantasy football may have saved my life. I’m going to do, don’t steal this anyone who’s listening, but I’m going to do a [TED Talk](#) and I’ve done two. I want to do another one, how fantasy football saved my life and about the power of connection because that created a reason to connect with friends that I didn’t have any other medium to connect. So that led to getting together in person. A lot of John and I’s mutual friends were in this fantasy football league, big league, 14 team league, okay. And that’s how I stay connected to John, what’s going on with John through some of his great friends who happened to be some of my great friends. As John, then in, you know, probably what your mid-thirties, then some big, big occurrences happened for John. That’s also what began to coalesce us together maybe 15 years ago. And then there’s a strong reconnection over the past couple of years, but I’m going to turn it over to John to sort of comment on his journey.

Jon Chandonnet:

I’ve been on a well-being journey for the last 17 years, dealing with MS (multiple sclerosis), you know. I had a great job at a graduate school, out of UR. And then went to the west coast and did amazing work. But I had MS at the same time and it didn’t surface until I really was just pushing it way too hard. And I crashed and I had to find wellbeing. I wrote a book about my journey and I developed a wellbeing approach that I’ve been working with people for the last nine years. It’s all about how to enable people to just tune in with their natural

energy to live their best life. And, and so I’ve been on this wellbeing journey myself and along the way, Brad and I connected serendipitously. We had the same business coach and we popped in one day to one of the events that he was putting on and Brad was there. I’m like, oh my God, he wants to do the same work.

Brad Bongiovanni:

It was crazy.

Jon Chandonnet:

And we’re like, we’ve been revolving around each other. We’re really in the same orbit. And there’s a lot of synergy behind Brad and I when we get together, because he thinks about things in his own way. He’s got the hard science in it. I’ve got the experience and so forth, and story that really resonates and connects. And so, we got together. But the whole point is there’s some crazy synergy, Brad.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Yeah. And I should say, because I forget what people know and don’t know about us. Our well-being journeys collided in this very unique way because for the last 20 or so years, I’ve been practicing what I would call wellbeing medicine. My background is naturopathic medicine. It’s basically a four-year doctoral program after Richmond designed to educate us as primary care physicians with an expertise in more holistic and lifestyle-based medicine. So, all I did for the last 20 years was talk with patients about their health, their disease, how to reverse that and how to reestablish wellbeing again. So, when John was going through his journey with MS and then writing his book and then developing his wellbeing operating system, sort of we were on these parallel paths, but it was only at this really odd serendipitous juncture where we were pursuing some business coaching that we really came back together again.

Maggie Johnson:

I’m really struck by how Brad, your journey has been a little bit more continuous in the wellbeing space; and John, your kind of like a little circle, it came back around to that and you guys have met in this really cool space. Can you guys tell me a little bit more about the work that you are doing together?

Brad Bongiovanni:

Go ahead, John.

Jon Chandonnet:

So, I specifically coach people, but Brad and I together, we are, we’re evangelizing wellbeing. And that’s really where our combination together is most powerful. We’ve done events through, through UR. So, we put a spotlight on wellbeing together and look to evangelize and just promote how people can practice wellbeing more in their life. As a result of the pandemic, we all now know wellbeing matters and it matters a lot.

Maggie Johnson:

Absolutely.

Brad Bongiovanni:

And John, you didn’t plan this, but you gave me the perfect transition because I was gonna pick up with well-being doesn’t matter unless you experience it, right? So that’s what John and I, really is, our work is all about now. There’s a lot of information about wellbeing, but where we find passion and a gap for people is how do you take that information and apply it so that you can actually in the real world have the experience of wellbeing. And so, my work is somewhat in making sure that organizations and employers, whereas John is more focused on individuals, understand that it’s not about more programs and it’s not about buildings and it’s not about a fitness center. Those things are all elements, but what really brings it to life is when you can foster the experience of it and then it becomes very meaningful.

Jon Chandonnet:

I don’t mean to be boastful, but I think one of my superpowers is that I’m really good at helping people organize stuff. I was a software development project manager and I help teams organize themselves to deliver computer applications on time and on budget, which is pretty heavy stuff. So, I took that mentality to well-being because my life hit a well-being emergency and I just had to figure out what well-being is. And I did a deep dive in my own life to understand that it’s really these seven elements and these seven elements, if you really figure them out, you can really get your life optimized and you can stop the volatility, ambiguity and anxiety.

Maggie Johnson:

I love hearing you guys talk about wellbeing because there’s just so much passion there. You guys also mentioned the pandemic. I think there is such a keen awareness on it now. What excites you about where awareness about wellbeing is headed?

Jon Chandonnet:

For me, just first of all, the whole concept of mindfulness and being intentional about wellbeing, there’s a big movement in culture right now. The zeitgeist, the common culture is talking a lot just about mindfulness and how mindfulness around what wellbeing means. And we’ve got a very specific recipe, if you will, or just framework for how you can hang your wellbeing, to do it as in tune and effortless and as much in the flow of life as possible. Brad and I, we’re busy people and we work with really, really super busy people who don’t wanna fill their life with another mousetrap of things that they’ve gotta run. We wanna make this as easy and as accessible for people as possible so that just wellbeing can flow naturally. So, it just gets imbibed in how you’re being on a daily basis.

Brad Bongiovanni:

And I would say there’s a couple of things that excite me about where wellbeing is. Before the pandemic, I went on my own wellbeing retreat. It was a wellness vacation and it was in the Mediterranean. And that’s actually what I based my first TED Talk on. The immersive experience of wellbeing on this quote unquote, wellness sort of retreat in the middle of Tuscany. Took me a few days, but it didn’t, but not much long after that. Did I really understand it was the Mediterranean lifestyle, which has a lot of elements built in that are consistent with John’s developed operating system of wellbeing, and I had the experience of it there, which caused a lot of positive changes for me, then the pandemic came and, and I thought, wow, like now. It’s just fan to the fire. One, we’re moving from just sort of information about it to how do we go about experiencing it? And number two, what excites me about it is the fact that in my opinion, I would say, what’s great about John’s work, even one-on-one with people in his system, is at the end of the day, it’s self-defined. What wellbeing is for me, I decide. What wellbeing is for John or for you, Maggie, you decide. And so, John and I’s collective work is just asking you to check in. What does that even mean to you? Don’t worry about your neighbor, your friend, your college roommate, your mom, your sister. Just focus on what wellbeing truly, truly, truly means to you. Now, where are you in respect to your own definition and how big is that gap and how do we close it so that you really experience it? But only based on your own definition. So those are the things that really excite me about where the pandemic has brought us, just in general, but also then the pandemic sort of induced spotlight that it’s brought to, you know, mental health challenges and anxiety and stress and depression and PTSD and all sorts of other mental health challenges.



Jon Chandonnet:

Yeah, so, and if, you know, one of my superpowers is organization, I would say one of Brad’s superpowers is the depth of his listening, you know, I mean, that’s what he’s come to through his 25 years in medicine. He’s got to listen to people and understand what they want. And so, you know, we talk about the framework, the [seven elements of wellbeing](#). That framework is whatever you fill it with. However, you want to move your life physically or emotionally or professionally. These are the key waypoints to guide your journey. But the journey that you take is as Brad says, 100% self-directed. It’s what you want. That’s the only way to make it work.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Because building on what John said, the other thing that we’ve learned in the last couple of years too, is John and I are obviously the same age. And so, our worldview comes biased by our, where we are in life, also by our experiences. But what we’ve realized is that based on your life and your journey, your experiences, your age, and probably several other factors, that someone who’s 25, who’s a recent grad, has a different life perspective, has different priorities, has different needs. But nonetheless certainly has a view on what wellbeing is to them. And then when you’re 35 or 40 and you’re sort of getting established and you’re building your family, and there’s lots of stress and time constraints, then your definition of wellbeing might change and then it changes probably where we are at our stage of life. And then it’s gonna change again when we get into maybe what I will call the third act of our lives. And so, but it doesn’t matter in the sense because we still always get to define what that means for us. But it’s interesting for John and I to see, there’s still value in having these conversations with someone who’s just gotten out of college and looking at what do they want their life to be? And then having an interesting or different conversation with someone our age or someone who’s 70. The principles don’t change, but the application of the principles. I think are interesting and they shift. And that’s, I think John and I would agree that’s just sort of a normal evolution.

Jon Chandonnet:

I think it’s amazing what the university is doing around wellbeing. I was just so impressed with the wellbeing center. I know the new president, Kevin Hallock, in his inaugural address identified, you know I think five key planks for the University of Richmond and wellbeing was one of the five. So, or at a time that this is really relevant for people and people are really trying to contextualize what well-being means. And it just so happens, Brad and I are on our professional journey together and we slam together at the same time to like support each

other. Because doing this on my own, gosh, the fact that I’ve got a close friend who I trust, who also will give me the velvet hammer at times, just to let me know that, hey, buddy. Buddy, that sounds good, but man, come on. I’m gonna give you some real feedback here. And just having someone like that who’s got 35 years of history, it has weight. You trust it. And that’s just one of the advantages of keeping my UR network going is to have this type of connection in my life, which adds tremendous value. Absolutely, I love that.

Maggie Johnson:

Yeah, y’all mentioned that you reconnected at this event for a business coach. What made you guys decide to work together and how has that changed your relationship?

Brad Bongiovanni:

Well, I think it was John who shortly after I think our business bootcamp ended. I think John just reached out to me and I think this is what I remember John, correct me if I’m wrong, but he was just dude. We need to work together. You know, like that’s basically all he said. And I, you know, it didn’t take much for me to go, yeah, we should. I think we both felt the same way. I know I had shared with John that I had always been yearning to have a partner of some kind, because in my practice, I was the leader that I never really felt like I had someone to lean on when, when times were tough or just when I wanted to maybe roll out a new product, a new service, nuts and bolts stuff, but also emotional support too. And so, both of us felt that way. And so, John’s just like, dude, we’re on the same road. Like we might as well rideshare.

Jon Chandonnet:

Right? Because I’ve been working alone for like six years at that point and Brad was just new to it. And I was like, this should be really beneficial. Don’t go six years down the road and be like, oh my God, I should have realized this way back then. How can we help each other shorten our journeys a little bit? There’s some of that going on and just things that Brad add, that the blind spots that I have, you know, that I just don’t come to table with that he has, that is just really, really nice to have on top of just a trusting, solid foundational relationship.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Yeah, it really has totally reinvigorated our connection and our friendship because we talk regularly. We talk regularly for what, the last year and a half at least?

Jon Chandonnet:

Yeah, yeah.

Brad Bongiovanni:

I mean, basically every week, sometimes throughout the week. Sometimes we’re just supporting each other in our personal lives, but most of what we’re doing is just trying to support the work forward. And again, it’s really cool, I’ll say as a plug, again, the intentional or probably unintentional, but still beneficial ripple effects of our university experience at Richmond and creating solid and long-lasting connections. Because even though John and I have gotten together, we’ve sort of brought in, right? Other people from Richmond. John went to high school with Kelly Corrigan, so he was able to grease the wheels together to say, hey, sure, yeah, I’ll spend, you know, 30 minutes with you guys for an alumni virtual event. But also, some of our friends and our deep network, we’re still, they’re supporting us, they’re cheering for us, and we lean on them when, again, personally, professionally, both of us. So, having that connection, that’s so deep and so robust and so meaningful and having it for the last 30 plus years is, whoo, amazing is an understatement.

Jon Chandonnet:

Yeah, right, priceless. Oh my gosh. Right. My UR, education is a gift that keeps on paying dividends. It is, it keeps on giving. And through connection, it’s just greatly appreciated.

Brad Bongiovanni:

I wish the university could take credit for it. And in an indirect way they can, but I think Like John said, it’s a priceless experience that we treasure to have our Richmond network, our Richmond connections. I can say for myself, I get by with a little help from my friends and I’ve gotten by for the last 30 years with a little help from my friends. So, it’s really, really made a profound difference and had a profound impact on my life.

Maggie Johnson:

When you guys look back on your Richmond experiences, do you think your college selves would be surprised by where you are now and maybe even how you got there?

Brad Bongiovanni:

I don’t think my 20-ish year old self would be surprised to know that 30 years later, I’m still really connected to these friends. I think I would be surprised at professionally like all the

twists and turns that I’ve taken. Yeah, because it’s so hard, you can’t read into the future. So that’s surprising. But, on a deeper level, if you had said 30 years ago, hey, what are the chances you’re still gonna be pretty well connected to these guys in 30 years? I mean, I would have felt pretty confident in saying that the answer would have been, yeah, I don’t see why not.

Jon Chandonnet:

I had no idea. I figured I’d just be working hard, developing a professional career. I figured in 30 years, I’d have a family and that would be my focus. I didn’t understand the importance that all these connections would have later in my life. I just didn’t get it. For me, I couldn’t have anticipated where life has taken me at all when I was in school. Just because some of the things that have happened to me. But I have such a good foundation of friends and support that I’ve really leaned on going through some tough times that I’m not going to overplay it, but just I’ve really leaned on, on the network. I didn’t realize how important it was later in my life.

Brad Bongiovanni:

I think people in general underestimate the value of connection. I think intuitively we understand that’s important, but what really blew my mind was when I started looking into the science of connection and what happens biologically and hormonally and immunologically to us when we are either connected or disconnected. And the science, it’s there. It’s just a little bit buried. It’s not very sexy or the media hasn’t really turned it into a very sexy topic. But there’s a lot of published research that shows that connection is more biologically powerful to our health and wellbeing than what we eat, how much we exercise, how much we weigh, smoking, drinking, or abusing other addictive substances. You know, those are the things we hear a ton about and they’re important. But if you look at the power of these risk factors on our health, the one that stands out according to the research in terms of power is social connection and the degree and the complexity of your social networks. It’s something that can’t be just shoved under the rug. It’s there and I would just make sure people understand social connection is also something to be self-defined. What fills you up versus what depletes you, you get to make that decision. But then it does require effort. It doesn’t just happen. As much as a lot of us, including myself, would like it to. It requires, once you define what’s meaningful to you, I think then it’s important to decide what actions you need to take. And it won’t always be equal, I will say. My own experiences with some of my own friends, we just have different operating styles. You just have to work around those things, but ultimately land on what’s important to me to feel socially connected and what do

I need to do about it. And then go about. doing your best to foster and nurture and cultivate those connections.

Jon Chandonnet:

Hey, Doc, I just want to say, don’t sell yourself short. You make well-being sexy. You do. Even just the way you break it down, the way you make it relatable.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Well, thank you, John. Make sure you tell my better half that too. All right.

Maggie Johnson:

I love in talking to you, you two bolster each other so much. And you’re like, no, like, call it like it is, tell it like it is. You always have a more positive word for each other. And it’s just, this has been so fun. What’s your best advice for someone who’s just getting started on their wellness journey, or someone who maybe wants to take the next step for themselves?

Jon Chandonnet:

Start with one thing that feels easiest. If you try to take on too many things and really try to make too much, it’s gonna overwhelm, it’s gonna burn you out. Just incrementally, if you want to take on wellbeing, there’s a lot to it, but just take on the one thing that’s most important to you. If it’s starting to take a walk or starting to exercise, or if it’s drinking more water, or if it’s getting more sleep, just to focus on the physical thing, or if it’s something professionally where you really get in tune with what fulfills you and where your desire is professionally and use that to power your life. But, start with that one thing to get momentum. Because that’s the most important thing. The most important thing is momentum. Because then it becomes self-fulfilling.

Brad Bongiovanni:

I agree. Totally. It’s about getting momentum. So, the easiest ways to start getting momentum is to keep it simple and start with baby steps. Really the operating system that John built from his life experience. I like, because, you know, you can talk about what your wellbeing means to you and all these different pillars of wellbeing. And if it’s part of sort of John’s assessment that takes place over two or three weeks, right, John? With these long conversations with his private clients. Pretty quick. You know, you have a long list of stuff and then that can be overwhelming. So, but John does a really good job of saying, OK, well, OK, of all these things, like what’s most important and where, you know, where are you going

to feel the best if we get some quick momentum and then you start building the positive snowball effect? But my answer to that question, it’s very simple. It’s if you wanna get started or restarted on a path to wellbeing, the very first thing you need to do is ask yourself, what’s important to me to have the experience of wellbeing and then to be honest with yourself, okay? So, where am I? Is having physical wellbeing important to me right now? Okay, where am I specifically? What’s in the way of me experiencing that? Because until you’re clear on that, all the other downstream things can’t really happen. Or you’re talking to a friend and she’s telling you about the latest exercise craze or latest food craze or whatever, and it’s really working for that person. That’s great. You can cheerlead, you can support, but then you have to go home and quiet the noise and ask yourself, what would physical wellbeing or whatever it is mean to me? It takes some reflection, takes a little bit of focus, takes some discipline, but it’s a really easy first step to take.

Jon Chandonnet:

So many of us, we focus on the result. We want well-being, we want our body to be fit. We want our emotions to be stable. But what are you doing to make that happen? What are you putting into your body? How are you processing your emotions? And then taking a step further back even, which is how are you being? How are you being when you’re eating? Are you being mindful of how fast you eat? Are you being mindful of what you’re putting in your body and is it really what you, how you want to be feeling your body? So, it’s important to understand that we want the result, but understand it’s what you do and what your thinking is and it’s what your actions are on a routine basis that build to that result. So, if you’re more mindful earlier in the process about how you’re doing things and how you’re being, those results can flow more naturally to you.

Brad Bongiovanni:

Sometimes when we’re trying to distill it into like a 2022 bite size sound bite... As far as when people ask us who we are, what we do, John and I try to boil it down to just asking people like, how big is your gap? And you know, usually that might cause them to ask, well, what are you talking about? Or what gap? And you know, it’s real simple. What’s the gap between the life that you’re trying to live in terms of experiencing wellbeing and where you are now? What is that gap? And whatever the answer is, Is that okay with you? And if the answer is yes, great. And if the answer is no, that gap isn’t okay with me. But in the end, you get to decide is that gap okay with me or not? And if it’s not, then there’s things that between John and I and lots of other people who are in this industry can offer to help you close that gap.

Maggie Johnson:

Wonderful. My final question for you guys, what does it mean to be a Richmond Spider?

Jon Chandonnet:

Like grateful to be a Richmond Spider. Richmond, I think when Brad and I were there, it was like a hidden gem. Not many people knew about it. It didn’t have a national footprint back then. I mean, yeah, the basketball team made some waves and did some things which put us out there, but it was still growing out of being a regional university. And it’s really blown up in reputation, really has in a big way. So, Richmond, my hidden gem turned into something really big that I wouldn’t have anticipated 30 years ago. For it to like do what it’s done in continuing to transform itself, it’s a big deal for me. And I’m like, yeah, I went there. That’s pretty cool. I don’t know if I could get in there now, but yeah. I went there.

Brad Bongiovanni:

As I was down talking, and as I was reflecting on your question, Maggie, two words really came to my brain, what it means to be a Richmond spider. It means success to me, and it means connection to me. And I think you and I actually, Maggie, have a similar story in the sense that when I, as a freshman arriving to school in 1988, I met my college roommate and we bonded immediately. And we lived together as roommates all four years of college because we were best friends. And you know, I don’t know if I know anybody among my friends circle at Richmond that had that experience. Totally lucking out that their totally random college roommate was someone they were going to want to live with all four years and who’s part of that fantasy football team, of course, that I had mentioned. And, you know, obviously we’re still really, really good friends 30 years later. So, we shared sort of that. So that could be in your future too. It sounds like it is. It’s crazy as it might sound, but sometimes I do struggle because I think my story is still being written. And I think if we’re alive, all of our stories are, but sometimes it’s easy to get lost in comparison. I don’t always think of success when I think of myself for whatever reason, because I think there’s still more I want to achieve. But man, every other spider I know is a blaring billboard for success. So, I really think of it as that way being a Richmond spiders. You’re just on a path to success. And number two, you can be on a path to really deep and long-lasting connection.

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Episode 5

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Maggie Johnson:

Thanks for listening to “As Spiders Do” from the University of Richmond Office of Alumni Relations. We hope you enjoyed hearing from today’s alumni guests and learned a little bit more about what it means to be a Richmond Spider. Thank you to Olivia Huber, Class of 2025, for editing this episode. Our episode music is by [FAS Sounds](#) from [Pixabay](#). You can subscribe to “Ask Spiders Do” wherever you get your podcasts and leave us a review to let us know what you think. We’re always looking for new stories to share, so let us know who else we should feature by emailing us at alumni@richmond.edu. That’s all for this episode. Talk to you soon and remember there are spiders everywhere and that’s a really good thing.

[intro music fades out]



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