

Conversations About Aging

Vikki Choate, 63

November 18, 2019

Diane: Hello, I'm Diane Atwood and you're listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm traveling around my home state of Maine interviewing people 60 and above about what's it's like to be growing older. At 62, my guest for this episode is on the younger side of the aging spectrum. She lives in Bath, Maine has a more than fulltime job and is working toward a doctorate degree in nursing. She is currently a coach and international speaker at Studer Group, which, in a nutshell, is a healthcare consulting company. Because of her busy schedule, it took a few months before we could get together. It was worth the wait.

MUSIC

Diane: Welcome to Conversations About Aging and I am here talking with a youngster today. She's only 62, about to be 63 in December. Lately, I've been talking to people who are mostly in their 90s, so we're going to get a totally different perspective. I'm talking with Vicki and I'm going to ask her to pronounce her last name for us. Choate, Vikki Choate. Vikki Choate. We're sitting in her living room overlooking, what 27 acres? Yeah. Sheer beautifulness.

Vikki: Sheer beautifulness. God's a local call here, that's for sure. Hard to come by in Bath.

Diane: And there's a kitty meowing in the background. And I don't know if anybody can hear it, but we might hear it. I think I'm just gonna let them meow if they want to because they are also beautiful. You've got two rag dolls. I've never met a rag doll before. So you're a cat lover.

Vikki: I am a cat lover. I've had kitties in my life all my life. And I love feline energy. They ground me, kitties ground me, these guys are awesome. Is it possible that while we're talking, one of them will jump up on your lap at least? Potentially, potentially. This is usually their naptime. So I suspect that they're going to get bored with us very quickly and then take to the beds.

Diane: Okay, that's fine. Well, they were sniffing my stuff a little while ago, because I come with my own kitty energy. I've got two kitties at home, too. Well, so you're about to

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be 63. And I'm interviewing people who are 60 and older because I think that it's when you hit 60 or your 60s that you really start to think about what it means to age. Would you agree with that?

Vikki: Yeah, absolutely. And I would even back it up a decade. Something magical happened for me when I turned 50. And the most significant thing was my button of, I really don't care about a lot of what used to wind me up, that button popped out. And I found myself at 50 really starting to relax into my own life and enjoy my own life. And not be so troubled by those things that as a young woman, which is wind me around the axle. So that's what started it for me. And then when I hit 60 I'm like, I'm having the time of my life. And my life gets better every year. And that's intentional. And I look forward to aging. And when people offer me a senior discount, I don't wig out or get offended. I say thank you for that 5% off, you know, someday that will be important to me. And I appreciate it.

Diane: Do you refuse it now?

Vikki: No, no, if they offer me a discount, I'm taking it, man. I've earned it.

Diane: I think that's funny. I've asked people often, now that you're older, do people treat you any different. How would you like to be treated? I interviewed a woman who's in her early 80s and she said, oh, yes. She hates it when she goes to the grocery store and they'll say can we carry these out for you, ma'am? How many items do you want in the bag? Because she told me she might like to smack them? Because she feels that it's too easy to fall into that helplessness trap.

Vikki: Yeah. So I don't know that, I mean, I don't, I always welcome someone who wants to be polite. And I've been called ma'am, for, you know, spent a lot of time in the Brunswick community, where at one point we, our community was rich with military. And you can be 20 and still be called ma'am, so I don't take offense to that. But you know, it's, I travel almost 100% for work. And I do find that I'm called ma'am or madam. And I just smile. Right? The world is well intended. And I just smile.

Diane: You know, I'm more offended when somebody calls me miss.

Vikki: Oh, yeah, I don't have an opinion. I, again, 50, things that just used to trouble me just don't trouble me anymore. I really do believe that people are well intended. And some folks in the way that people communicate because I've been around the world a

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little bit. And words mean different things to people. And if there's a warm smile on someone's face and they call me ma'am, I know that it's not an insult, it's genuine. I just came from Louisiana. I worked in Louisiana earlier this week and down there people are sugar and honey. And I know that that might bristle a northerner, to be called by someone younger than yourself honey, sugar, sweetie pie, it's cultural. And I think we can react to it or we don't have to react to it. My choice is not to react to it.

Diane: Well, I like what you said. You're saying that you read body language? Yeah. Before you actually try to use your intellect to try to dissect what it is they mean? Or maybe you don't even do that.

Vikki: And even if people are looking grumpy, have their cranky pants on, they're having a bad day that has nothing to do with me. I'm just super clear about that. So I just little quick prayer, you know, may your day improve. Give 'em a smile, offer some warmth and move on.

Diane: The bells of the kitties.

Vikki: The bells of the kitties. Yeah. They're scampering towards naptime.

Diane: So tell me about when you were younger, let's talk a little bit about before you hit that magic age of 50. Sure. What were you like?

Vikki: So, I've had an interesting road and an interesting path. I was born and raised in Augusta. My dad was a practicing attorney there. My mom was a stay at home mom. And you know, we grew up with ponies and summer camps and sailboats. I went to Cony High School, played in the band, kind of on the, in the Latin club and playing in the band was kind of the nerd side of the equation back in high school. I graduated from the University of Maine in Orono, got married and moved on. And I think the difference, well, there are a number of differences. But the most significant one is just the spiritual center. You know, I was a little bit aimless in my 20s and 30s and had some, you know, young adult behavior that probably would have been consistent with that. And today, I'm pretty spiritually fit. I don't, you know, I don't mood alter in any way, and I just see the bigger picture that I didn't see back then. I get wound up about detail and in the big picture, a great mentor of mine, his name is Quint Studer who actually founded the company I work for just lives by the golden rule. And he said, once, write, there was a bunch of us in the room, write down right now what's got you upset. And then I'm going to give you an envelope, and I'm going to give you a stamp and you mail it, and you're

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going to mail and put your address on it. And in six months, I'm going to mail it to you. And then when you open that envelope, see if you can even recall what you are upset about today. So he did that for us and six months later comes this thing and I'm bulletted boom, boom, boom, boom and I'm like, I don't even remember what that stuff was. And the lesson there is, you know, to who do I give my peace of mind, my serenity away? I could do that all day long and end up at the end of the day feeling really depleted. Or I can just acknowledge that most of what everyone does has nothing to do with me and stay happy and kind of peaceful about that, and really focus on my being the best person I can for other people, because we never know how we're going to impact someone. I had an opportunity last week to talk to a hospital CEO who attended a conference that I spoke at years ago. And we're on the phone and she tears up and she said you were the speaker that day and my ears were ready to hear the message. And it was a tough message about when you're in a leadership role. Yet, if people have a skill issue, you got to help them develop the skills. If they have a will issue, that's a very different conversation. And you were pretty direct and you were pretty frank about what an executive's role is in managing the will issues. And I had been excusing them and I had been sidestepping them and I had been saying, well, that's she's really strong in this area we'll just minimize this and I've been excuse making for her. She said you completely changed how I lead. I was so taken aback by that, Diane that I started to cry. I'm like, oh, my gosh, we just never know the impact that will have. And if we wake up with the day full of intention to just tread softly on the earth and cast a light and a dark shadow and that's a really good day.

Diane: So, I'd like you to dive a little deeper into this topic of, you said skill versus will? Yeah. So what do you mean, exactly?

Vikki: So, I guess a little color and context to that, I coach, executive leaders all over the US and in Canada, and I coach them in particular on how to bring high reliability into their healthcare organizations, mostly hospitals. And the ultimate goal of that is zero patient harm. Hospitals and healthcare, generally speaking, continue to harm patients at an alarming rate. And we don't do that intentionally. Nobody wakes up and says, I'm going to go and do a wrong site surgery or cause an infection today, but it happens because healthcare processes need improvement. And so an executive's role in driving an organization towards high reliability really is to understand where is the variance in terms of clinical care delivery, in terms of attitude, in terms of living the organization's mission and vision? And at the leader level, where's the variance in the skill or willingness to hold folks accountable to follow evidence based practice? And there's actually a third ill that's a hill. So a leaders role is to assess is the non-adherence to a

protocol or policy, because the individual doesn't know? And that often is the case. So then the executive's job is to close the knowledge gap. And not only just close the knowledge gap, but make sure that knowledge translates into skill. I can train all day long but if I don't give you the moment of apply, with some coaching behind that, to practice what you've just learned and make some muscle memory of that, then the chances are that your chances of adopting that different behavior are slim to none.

Diane: So, you can't just say, here's what you should be doing. Good luck. Correct. You need to give the individual opportunities to actually practice what they've learned?

Vikki: Yeah, yeah.

Diane: It seems like you practice what you preach, what you have learned. When you mentioned about what Mr. Studer had you all do. That was in a training session back when you started working for them, or even before?

Vikki: No, no back when I started working for him about nine years ago, and he had all of the team and there's a large number of us and we coach all over the US, Canada, we have an office in Australia, I've had the privilege of coaching over there a couple times. And it's about the lifestyle that comes with our work and how we can get so wound up about a plane that's missed or a CEO that doesn't follow a recommendation in hospital, write it down and just move into the don't sweat the small stuff bucket. That was the message.

Diane: You can't be coaching CEOs if you don't really understand and practice the meat of what it is you're teaching them?

Vikki: Yeah. And you know, before I joined Studer Group, I worked in an organization where I served as the chief quality officer and I was coached by Studer Group. So I know what it's like to say well those evidence based leader behaviors are awesome, but we're different, you don't understand us. I know what it's like for a year in to not see results. And to have that closed door executive team meeting where we had to acknowledge that our lack of adoption and our lack of walking our own talk was the reason we weren't getting results, kind of our own little come to the Lord meeting and then just applying those very, very simple principles. And we were able to transform the culture of the organization and that's not easy work and it doesn't happen overnight. But you've got to have the interest, you've got to have the motivation, you've got to have the right education, you certainly have to have the right leadership.

Diane: So, before you started doing this leadership training, you said you were in quality control at this hospital but before that, where did you ever practice bedside nursing?

Vikki: Not much. No, I've been in leadership almost all my career. And I joined Studer Group, I was the chief quality officer for my health system and this was out west. I spent about a decade out west, in Colorado and Wyoming and I joined Studer Group because I wanted to step off the leadership train. It's hard work and I just wanted to be responsible for Vicki Choate because here's what I know about her. She shows up on time, she does great work and she needs very little supervision. I just wanted to be what we would call, quote, an individual contributor. It didn't last long and I quickly became a leader in Studer Group but I have led, in nursing and in case management, first half of my career, I spent mostly on the payer side, I worked at Martin's Point for almost a decade. In the case management department

Diane: I couldn't help but think as you're talking about what you try to impart to the leaders is that all of that could be applied to just individual human beings. When you think about people who are trying to make lifestyle changes, for instance, a simple thing like, oh, I know I'm supposed to be exercising or not having any sugar. Any of that, you know, those three ills.

Vikki: Skill, will, and hill. Do I have the skill? That means do I know how to keep my hand out of the cookie jar? Yes, I do. Do I have the will? Not always? And is there a hill? Yes, it's my will.

Diane: Okay, so it's circular. So ...

Vikki: So it can be, it very much can be, sure. Yeah.

Diane: Okay, so we know a little bit about your work life. And you said that at age 50, though, you started looking at things differently? Well, what I see before me is a driven woman who is always on the go. So what did you either give up or take in or what changed?

Vikki: Well, I think my attitude around what I was going to allow to ruffle my feathers changed. I'm pretty busy. You could say that I block my life in 15-minute intervals. I'm working on my doctorate right now. So between a really big job, I'm packing that in. I get

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up earlier in the morning, I do it after work and I give Saturdays to my doctorate. I'm a little bit shy of the mid point. But my plan once I, as I age and need to come off the road, I live a road warrior life. I want to teach and I want to be able to teach master's level nurses, so a nurse going for her master's degree and I want to teach leadership. I think that there are a lot of master's programs and I've been through one, the curriculum is very, very diverse. I think nurses, in particular, when they are put into leadership roles are fairly ill equipped to lead and there's a world of difference between managing and leading and as a young nurse leader, I got lots of quote, leadership training, but it was really managerial training. Here's how to fill out your staffing matrix, here's how to manage a hire, here's how to terminate someone, here's how to complete an annual evaluation. Those are all managerial tasks, that's not transformational leadership. That's what I want to teach. That's my retirement plan.

Diane: Okay, so in order to do that you need a doctorate. I know that because of the nursing shortage, there are a lot of nursing schools now, they're all university based

Vikki: That's how you and I first got connected. That's right, yeah, months ago,

Diane: I did a series on the shortage of nursing. And I learned from the interviews that I did, my alma mater, for instance, is St. Joseph's College, and they have a nursing program there. And one of the things that they've talked to me about is the need for doctorate level nurses to come and teach and how challenging that is.

Vikki: Yes, challenging for a couple reasons. You know, I would say that now a terminal degree, that's what a doctoral degree is called now, isn't something that people, when I got my bachelor's and then my masters, I took a pause, and I thought, well, I knew I'd want my doctorate at some point, but I think I'm done for now. Until it became well, if this is what you want to do, it's a requirement. But I think, you know, that the inability to push nurses through, and this is just based on my own personal research, to push nurses qualified candidates through nursing school is a shortage of nursing professors. And the challenge with nursing professorships is salary, for me personally, because I could go today and teach an associate level nurse with my master's degree, but my salary would be whacked at the knees and I'm in my prime earning years. So I think that's something that just the industry of nursing education needs to solve for because it is not competitive. Not competitive with what nurse executives can earn outside of academia.

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Diane: So, you've got a game plan, I do. You are going to be 63 in December. What age are you going to retire from what you're doing now?

Vikki: That changes. I say I'm on the three to five year plan. I'm probably in my fourth quarter. How long is fourth quarter? I don't know. I don't know. The work that I'm doing right now is so fulfilling to me personally, that as long as I can keep up with a physical rigor of 18-hour workdays, canceled flights and probably a 70ish average hour workweek, you know, I'll continue to do the work.

Diane: I guess the key is that it feeds your soul.

Vikki: It feeds my soul. You know, at 70, I think it's seventy we become eligible to collect Social Security. I don't imagine that I'll ever not be doing something. But at some point 67,72 in that window, I'm going to pivot and intentionally step off the road and step into teaching.

Diane: So, you said 70, I thought we could get it at 65.

Vikki: I think you can. But there's a financial incentive to delay.

Diane: Got it. So you're looking at that financial incentive. And I'd like to wait until I'm 70. Yeah, to start collecting. Yeah. So you make a decent salary now for all those hours and energy you put in?

Vikki: I do pretty well for a nurse who was educated in the state of Maine. Yep. I would say yes.

Diane: And where are you getting your doctorate?

Vikki: Through a university out in Denver. I lived out in Colorado for quite a bit in a decade long stint out west and found a wonderful university. It's American Sentinel University. Got my master's degree there.

Diane: And now you're getting your doctorate through them too? Is it an online program?

Vikki: Actually, it's a mix. There's some onsite residency work. And there's a lot of work that I'm doing at Studer Group, my research project will be conducted there through

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Studer Group, and that's a requirement of my program. IRB proposal, defense, dissertation. Final defense, the whole schlemiel is part of my education.

Diane: So, a lot. It's a lot of work, intellectual work.

Vikki: Yeah, it is one class at a time, one discussion question at a time one paper at a time. How long do you think it's going to take you, I can tell you exactly what my last class ends February 14, 2021. Valentine's Day, hard to forget, right? So I know exactly. I'm a little bit shy of the midpoint in terms of the classes. And then my research project will kick up probably January through May, June. ,

And I did I already ask you this. How long do you think the whole process is?

Well, it's 20 28 months from start to finish.

Diane: You know you are about as passionate a person that I've met ... about her work about what she does.

Vikki: I love what I get to do. It's a blessing and it's an honor. Now, if I'm at a gate and my flight's been canceled and I want to get home and it's Friday night at midnight, I might not be so gracious about it, but you wouldn't know that outwardly. I mean, I've been offered incredible opportunity in my company. I've created conferences that draw thousands of people, I get to go to work with some of the most incredible hospitals that I think an average nurse would never get to meet if you don't do this work, where you walk them, watch them really take their mission and values off the wall and make them walk the halls is beautiful. And you know, I think I have a pinch me job.

Diane: Nice. And you're not stopping. I mean, so many other people, when they think about moving into their 60s, all they can think about is retirement. And here you are going for another degree and thinking about all right, this is the kind of work I want to do when other people are retiring.

Vikki: I would say yes. And I mean, my eye is definitely on a prize. I won't lie. But I think that, you know, I am very close to the peak of my career. And that's important to me. I've worked hard to manage it. And I've had some incredible opportunities. And so, you know, it's like the last few chapters still need to be written. I'm not going to close the book.

Diane: Do you ever think about becoming 70 80, 90? What do you think?

Vikki: So, this year, my husband and I bought a darling little home in Mount Dora, Florida. And he also works virtually so when I'm not on the road. I'm here. That's my little home office right there. And so we can live anywhere.

Vikki: So this year for the first year, we're going to pivot south and wear flip-flops in February and come back in the spring. So we have no idea what that's like but we're unafraid to make an investment and unafraid to try but the ultimate desired life lifestyle in retirement is summer in Maine winter in Florida, so that the weather is not a hardship because, for me, as I age, I become less tolerant of it. My bones creak, that cold damp in the winter in Maine. I'm a Maine girl, born and raised in Maine but you know what it's like at the end of January, early February when it's light out for like six hours and it just hurts to be outside.

Diane: Yeah, so you won't work any less. You'll just be where I work from will change. Where you work from will change. And when you come home as long as the plane's on time. Yeah, you'll be able to just relax?

Vikki: Yeah, that's the plan.

Diane: How do you imagine yourself, say in your 80s or 90s?

Vikki: Longevity doesn't really run in my family tremendously. Although, I do have an uncle who's in his upper 80s and doing well. So I envision life being gentle and peaceful. Again, still very, very intentional. And I'll be involved in something and I don't know what that will be. I could be running a hospital gift shop, I could be sitting with premature babies in a NICU coming off of crack. I'll be doing something. And cuz I was just raised you give back what was given to you. And so, you know, but I see it as a slower pace. I see it as potentially enriching in other ways. Right now my enrichment is career my enrichment is the academic world. But being more enriched and available in community events in our church, things like that.

Diane: What do you enjoy doing when you're not working?

Vikki: So, typically, we take Sundays off as best we can. And we go to church and that's half the morning, half the day. We love to ride up route one, where I love to go antiquing, love to walk the beach we both love down East Maine and we get up there.

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Lubec, Eastport when we can. We just came back from a long weekend there over Labor Day. It was absolutely delicious that place is like nothing on earth. And so those kinds of things. We are season ticket holders, to the Maine State Music Theater. I love the Off Broadway shows and being connected with that. We both have spiritual interests. We have a beautiful fire pit out here. We bring friends out we have pop up barbecues, we love to hike in the woods behind us.

Diane: So, you have a good relationship, you and your husband?

Vikki: We're newlyweds. You're a newlywed. We got married a year ago September 1. We just had our first anniversary. It's beautiful.

Diane: Were you unmarried for many, many years?

Vikki: 17 years single.

Diane: You were single? Wait a minute, no, you were married before. You got married in your earlier life. Yeah. Ok and then you have one daughter, one daughter. Okay. Yeah. So married in your earlier life, had one daughter, been on your own for 17 years? Did you just say? So were you pretty set in your ways?

Vikki: I'm a little bit like a feral cat. But you know, we both approach and so is my husband, we both approach it like we're not kids anymore. And so we don't need to fuss about that. And we just fell into a nice step and have a nice cadence and we have a life that's together. And then we both have our own work and our own circle of friends. And we have friends that are mutual. It just is beautiful. I mean it's just beautiful.

Diane: Well, I'm happy for you. That's a nice story. It's an awesome story. So you would recommend, some people as they get older think, oh, well, for whatever reasons, I'll never get married again.

Vikki: Well that was my plan until I found the one, right? And so you know, and I think that period of being single allowed me to advance my education with my career and certainly discover a lot about who I am and what makes me tick. And that's always good, self-knowledge, when you enter into a relationship.

Diane: And as you get older, what I've found, you know, it depends on how you separate your life, in thirds or quarters or whatever. But as you move along in the

decades, as you said, when you turn 50, your perspective sort of changes. And what I've found is that you become more reflective of the mark that you're making every single moment of your life.

Vikki: Absolutely. I have a very dear friend who is living with pancreatic cancer that will take her life. And there are people all over the place who have a very similar experience. The gift of watching her walk through that is a daily reminder of, we never know. We never know. Do I have another 30 years? Do I have another 20 days? Do I just have today? So what am I going to do with today?

Diane: When you lay your head down on your pillow at night, do you reflect on how you were during the day?

Vikki: Absolutely. Yep, there's a little process that we go through. What do I feel good about? What would I do different if I had an opportunity to do it? Do I need to circle back with anybody I might have wound up?

Diane: Like a little personal inventory, you start out the day thinking all right. I hope I'm proud of myself at the end of the day. And at the end of the day, if you do that little checklist, you can be honest with yourself, can't you?

Vikki: Yes, absolutely. And then you carry that into the next day. Is there something that just keeps popping up in my life that makes me and others uncomfortable that I need to work on? Or is there something that I do really well that I'm just not doing enough because it has such positive impact on someone? How do I figure out how to do that more often?

Diane: I think we can all be more reflective, actually. You know, when you're younger and you're raising kids and things like that and you're very, very busy. It's hard to be ...

Vikki: Well, I think that's where the intentional piece of life comes. So what do I intend today to be and I rate the days I give every day a number. So you know, a 9 10 is like the top box, kind of like the patient experience surveys that get a nine or a 10, you're doing well. And if a day is an eight or seven or six, what's the problem with that? And it's almost always my thinking or my perception, right? Because that I do have control over. Okay, so it's all about you. Because it's so easy to want to blame people when things go wrong, but really, it might be but you also have you're in control of what your reaction is to it. Absolutely. So do you want to react? Or do you want to respond?

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Diane: All kinds of life lessons here. So what makes it a good day for you then?

Vikki: So, every day at work is a good day, some days are really, really busy and stressful, but they're all because I have a pinch me job. So and that's, that's a big part of it. What makes a good day? They're all good days, right? I'm healthy, I have relationships that are so meaningful to me, I have a rewarding career. I might stub my toe or break my favorite coffee mug. And I have the perspective of my friend who's living so gracefully with a terminal cancer condition. Being aware of that and I think just recognizing what a gift life is. And I either can be a victim of it or the owner of it. And I have to accept the responsibility that the quality of my life is nobody else's job, not even my husband's job. It's my job.

Diane: Right. So even if he does something that makes you mad, you've got a choice there.

Vikki: I can't remember the last time I was mad, because the truth of it is, is even when people have strong reaction that's about them, not me. And, you know, as I've aged, my ability to be patient with things like untangling a knot in a phone cable or, you know, trying to light a fire in a wind out there. And, you know, ripping through 50 matches before I get the fire or whatever it is patience and perseverance, enough life experience to know, just apply patience and perseverance. Yeah. Yeah, I think and I've walked some rough roads to collect those lessons.

Diane: And you're still learning?

Vikki: Yeah, I mean, even as I have aged, I stay very interested in the world around me. And I probably drive people nuts with my questions. What about that? Why does that happen, you know, little things. But if our ears are open, we could learn all day long.

Diane: Well thank you so much for spending time with me.

Vikki: Oh, my gosh. We've talked about a lot of different stuff. And I remember writing to you, four classes ago, two classes ago, whatever it was when I was in my public health policy class, so this is an honor and a treat. Thank you.

Diane: Well thank you and I loved being able to sit here. The kitties are asleep now. It's naptime. And have a fun journey to Florida.

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Vikki: Yeah, thank you so much. We're looking forward to it.

Diane: You've been listening to *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health Podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Vikki Choate who is 62 and lives in Bath, Maine.

If you enjoyed our conversation, please consider sharing it with a friend. You'll find more episodes on my blog Catching Health at CatchingHealth.com.

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