

STEP



STEPPING OUT

FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ALTERNATE SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS AND GENDER IDENTITIES

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INTRODUCTION

For a child – a teenager – at least, telling a friend they are gay or lesbian is, in itself, a difficult challenge. So one must understand how difficult it would be for them to tell their parents about it.

There are many reasons why a child would be afraid to tell their parents about their sexuality. Most important amongst these is the simple fact of their fear: fear of disappointing their parents, fear of being alienated from them, fear of being punished. In addition, most LGBT teenagers harbour a solid belief their parents will not understand what they are going through, and what it means to be gay. Unfortunately, this belief about their parents' lack of knowledge is, more often than not, correct.

Sri Lanka is a country where matters relating to homosexuality are widely misunderstood and misrepresented: where being gay is considered to be unnatural, weird and violently intolerable. With traditional belief systems and cultural practices dictating the way most people perceive sexuality, it is inevitable that parents too, follow the general ideas of what about sexuality is “normal” and, in effect, what about it should be “abnormal”. Children who are LGBT, who know their parents do not accept homosexuality, would have very good reasons to keep the truth about their sexual identities hidden from their parents.

But a truth that is universal is that children need their parents. This truth, being universal, applies to LGBT children as well. In fact, the gay child's need for parental guidance is unique, and significant in ensuring that he or she does not fall victim to any of the dangers associable with alternate sexuality that can easily be overcome – in the presence of their parents.

In that light, this booklet will inform you on how to handle the situation if (or when) your son or daughter reveals to you their homosexuality. Hopefully, it will provide you with useful insights that will guide your decisions and actions: in terms of supporting your child and also in terms of supporting yourself.

SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW

Through out this booklet, you will see the abbreviation LGBT. This stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender”.

- **LESBIAN** – a word used to describe a homosexual woman. That is, a woman who is sexually, emotionally and/or spiritually attracted to someone of her own sex.
- **GAY** – a word used to describe a homosexual man. That is, a man who is sexually, emotionally and/or spiritually attracted to someone of his own sex. “Gay” is also sometimes used to refer to homosexual people in general, irrespective of gender.
- **BISEXUAL** – a word used to describe an individual who can be sexually, emotionally or spiritually attracted to both men and women.
- **TRANSGENDER** – A broad term used to describe individuals who experience and/or express their gender differently from what most people expect. It is an umbrella term that includes people who are transsexual, cross-dressing or otherwise gender non-conforming.
- **HETEROSEXUAL/ STRAIGHT** – words used to describe individuals who are sexually, emotionally or spiritually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

In some instances of this book, the word “gay” is sometimes used to refer to all sexual identities/orientations in general. This is merely for the sake of the writer’s convenience. This does not insinuate that in instances where the other identities/orientations are not mentioned, the content is not relevant to those identities. Most of what is found within applies across the board to all alternate sexual identities/orientations.

FINDING OUT ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S SEXUALITY

There are possibly two ways you will find out that your child is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The simplest and the most convenient way is your son or daughter telling you themselves. This is generally known as “coming out”. The second much less preferable way is you finding out about your child’s sexuality without his/her consent or knowledge: perhaps, by someone else telling you about it, or by you coming across the information by, for example, reading your child’s diary. This is known as “being outed”.

COMING OUT

If your son or daughter has approached you, or eventually approaches you to tell you that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, there are a few things you must initially realise.

- After an individual comes out to a friend, it is very difficult for them to change or retract the impression of themselves that coming out creates on the friend. If a teenager is ready to talk about their sexuality with their parents, and come out to them, it means they are willing to take the risk of it becoming a permanent identity with their parents. This can only be if that child has done a lot of thinking on their own.

- Realising they may be gay is a very difficult experience for children; it entails a terrible amount of comparing themselves with their peers, and a constant questioning of their self-worth. That they are ready to accept their different sexuality before their parents, after that painful process, indicates their survival through a huge ordeal. An ordeal they possibly survived alone.

- More often than not, gay, lesbian or transgendered children suffer at the hands of their peers: be it bullying, name-calling or marginalisation. Young victims of such abuse therefore carry around many unanswered questions of their validity as individuals. That they have come to you to confirm their sexual identity is indicative of the realisation of their self-worth. How you respond will carry a long way in reaffirming that realisation.

As you can see, for a child, realising their sexual identity, coming to terms with it, and being able to come out about it, is no simple task. A lot is uncertain, and they place a tremendous amount of hope and trust in their parents to not reject them, to accept them as who they are. In short, if your child comes out about his or her sexuality to you, the first thing you must feel is an incredible amount of pride for your child: for being so brave, for being so honest, for being so mature about something that far exceeds their age.

BEING OUTED

It may be obvious by now that giving your child the opportunity to come out on their own terms is extremely important. There are some things that children need to understand on their own before being able to talk about it freely with others, even with their parents. However, it is not uncommon for parents to discover their child's sexuality without the child's consent or knowledge. In such instances, the most important thing is to ensure the safety of the child.

Being pulled out of the closet is dangerous for a child. In their adolescent years, children can have a great amount of uncertainty regarding their sexuality. They are still trying their wings, and they need their space to do so. If you find out that your child may in fact be gay, the most important thing to do is ease your child into a conversation with you, instead of accosting him or her with an impulsive confrontation. Educate yourself. Try to find out things about homosexuality beforehand. Be the parent: only take informed initiatives.

That you do not go into an impulsive confrontation is crucially important. It has already been mentioned that a child needs to process his or her sexual identity, and that doing so takes a lot of soul-searching. Children with questioning sexual orientations are full of question and doubts and fears: What is happening to me? Why am I different? Will I ever be normal? Will I be alone forever? Will people hate me if they find out? What will my parents say? Is it a sin? Is it an illness? Is there a cure?

By stepping in and confronting the child, when he/she is in such a volatile position is dangerous. You could scare your child into irrational behaviour. They might try to run away, or shut themselves in, or even harm their own lives. Great care must be exercised when dealing with a child who is not yet ready to come out.

REACTING TO YOUR CHILD'S SEXUALITY

The revelation of their child's alternate sexual orientation or identity can be a very difficult experience to parents. The feelings and questions that generally go through such a parent's mind can be roughly listed as seen below.

ANGRY

unnatural – abnormal – shameful

I will not allow him to live a perverted lifestyle!

Not even animals do this kind of thing!

A man can't sleep with another man. It is abnormal.

sin

God will not tolerate this!

She was not raised to disrespect our religion!

Anger sometimes takes away rationality. Getting angry with your child will not bring you any closer to understanding your child or the situation. Sometimes it is best to take a moment to settle down and think things through. The sections in this booklet will show you why your anger against homosexuality may not necessarily be justified.

SCARED

fear of the unknown:

What does he mean, he likes boys?
How can she want to marry a woman someday?
What has happened to my child?

fear of a destroyed future:

How can he live a meaningful life without getting married and having children?
Will my child grow old and die alone?
Would people ever employ her if they found out?

fear of being rejected in society

Will people always be laughing at her behind her back?
Will anyone ever take him seriously if they find out?

fear of legal repercussions

Will my daughter be thrown in jail for this?

fear for their health

Will my son someday contract HIV or AIDS?
Wouldn't my child be vulnerable to all kinds of venereal diseases?

These are some of the questions that will come to your mind as you struggle with your fear of what is happening. You weren't taught about homosexuality when you went to school. You won't see much about it discussed on TV, either. Most of what you have actually heard is negative. So it is very natural for you to be frightened about what is going on with your child. This booklet will provide you with the required understanding that would answer many of your questions.

HURT

disappointment

I had so many dreams for her...

He was so successful in everything he did, this will ruin it all...

I never thought any child of mine would do this to me...

embarrassment

Will people laugh at our family?

What will our neighbours say if they find out?

responsibility

Should we have spent more time with her?

Is my son like this because of something we did wrong?

Does this mean we have failed as parents?

Most parents are inevitably hurt when they find out that their child is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. But sometimes this hurt is caused by many misconceptions and misunderstandings on the nature and origin of a person's sexual orientation/identity. This booklet will provide you with the necessary knowledge to cope with this experience.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S SEXUALITY

The questions on alternate sexuality are complex. But let us brief you through the most important ones of these questions. What is homosexuality, bisexuality and transgender? How do they take place in a person? Is it normal? Is it an illness? Does it need to be cured? These are the questions that we will attempt to answer in this section.

Homosexuality is when a person is attracted to a member of his or her own gender. Bisexuality is when a person is attracted to people of both genders. Transgender is when a person feels that his or her innate gender-personality is different to that of their physical gender (as determined by their genitalia). The reasons for why some people are LGBT are vague, and are still at best theoretical.

WHY IS MY CHILD GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL OR TRANSGENDER?

The most predictable question that would occur to a parent of an LGBT child is “why”. Why is my child gay, what caused it, did we do anything wrong in the way we brought him up, is it an illness, did they choose to be this way?

“Why some people are gay?” is a question that has consistently baffled scientists for a very long time. Although millions have been, and continue to be, invested in research to find an answer to this question, a conclusive consensus is yet to be arrived at.

However, there are very strong suggestions that there is a biological component that determines an individual's sexual orientation or identity. In that, some scientists are of the opinion that sexuality is genetic: a person's sexual orientation is decided in his or her genes the same way that person's other physical characteristics (such as hair colour, height, left- or right-handedness) would be decided. Although this idea is yet to be conclusively proven, it is gradually gaining credibility. The fact that in some families siblings (in some cases, twins) are of uniform sexual orientations supports this theory.

There is also a popular belief that the environment a child grows up in has a bearing on his or her sexual identity. This is to say that the environment people grow up in, the relationships they have during childhood, their role models, and their various experiences all contribute to the development of their sexuality.

Still for all, the scientific reasons why someone is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender should be immaterial to such a child's parents. The fact is that no one chooses to be LGBT: especially in a world where making such a choice would be asking for all sorts of problems. Some parents also think that their children ended up being LGBT because of their inadequacy as parents. But parents must be assured that they are not responsible for their child's sexual orientation: alternate sexual orientations are very normal in humans, as it is in almost all other mammals. It is not an illness (see below), it is not a result of a child being "taught" homosexuality, it did not happen because your child did not receive the right kind of nutrients or watched the wrong kind of TV shows. It is simply how he or she was born, or developed. The same way a child turns out to be left-handed or be able to sing beautifully.

IS MY CHILD MENTALLY ILL?

Most people in Sri Lanka maintain that homosexuality is a mental illness, and that accepting it as normal is just the corruption of the Western world. However,

- While, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed Homosexuality from its official list of known mental disorders,
- In 2001, the Chinese Society of Psychiatry, too, removed homosexuality from its "Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders" after five years of their own research.

At two opposite ends of the world, homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness. This clearly shows that the acceptance of homosexuality is not limited to the Western world. In fact, the World Health Organisation, which carries with it an impression of global consensus, deleted homosexuality from the 10th revision of its ICD¹.

Research and clinical writing conducted by the institutions mentioned above showed that "same-sex romantic attractions, feelings, and behaviours are normal and positive differences of human sexuality". They further noted that "the long-established faulty perception of homosexuality as an illness was actually the untested assumptions based on once-prevalent social norms" and therefore was unscientific.

In fact, while homosexuality in itself according to the World Health Organisation's ICD-10, is not considered a mental disorder, the desire to change one's sexual orientation (i.e., go from homosexuality to heterosexuality) is considered a mental disorder².

The bottom line is that homosexuality or bisexuality is NOT a mental illness, and the idea that it is, has been rejected by recognised, global psychiatric experts.

1 International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems

2 Ego-dystonic sexual orientation

ALTERNATE SEXUALITIES: AN ABNORMALITY?

Most people in society believe alternate sexual identities and orientations to be abnormal. This is because of the wrong, but popular belief that there is (or should be) only one natural sexual orientation: heterosexuality.

There is documented evidence of homosexual, bisexual and transgender behaviour in non-human animals. Such behaviours include sex, courtship, affection, pair bonding, and parenting. A 1999 review by researcher Bruce Bagemihl shows that homosexual behaviour has been observed in close to 1500 species, ranging from primates to gut worms, and is well documented for 500 of them.

Some say that homosexuality among other animals does not justify homosexuality among humans. Examples of homosexuality among animals is merely used as evidence to show that homosexuality is a natural instinct.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN OUR CULTURE

Some say that homosexuality is against our culture and traditions. That allowing homosexuality in society will lead to the deterioration of our values.

In response to that, firstly, we say that most Asian cultures welcomed sexual diversity and freedoms before the Western world influenced our value systems. In fact, India still considers the presence of Hijras (castrated, cross-dressing men) as good omens for newborn babies. The Kuttanvadar Festival is a special ceremony in India that venerates eunuchs as a specially favoured community of Vishnu. From the temple art of Khajuraho to the writing of the Vedas, Puranas and Itihasas, Asian science has an ancient tradition of recognising a variety of sexual orientations as natural: the binary gender concept, where male and female are the only two gender identities, is a Western construct. In fact, the Penal Code that criminalises homosexuality in Sri Lanka was instated by the British more than a century ago. Still, they themselves now agree it is wrong and have repealed those laws in their own country. These facts beg the question, in protection of whose traditions should Sri Lanka hold on to out-dated laws that were imposed by outsiders?

Secondly, culture was a banner behind which society has hidden behind to justify some of the grossest injustices against human beings throughout history. The oppression of women, the discrimination of so called “low caste” citizens, minority ethnic groups and members of foreign faiths were all once justified with the “culture excuse”. Historical figures ranging from Lord Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi denounced cultural practices that oppressed people and violated their rights. Denying homosexuals their right to equality behind a cultural banner is merely veiled bigotry.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN SOCIETY

In Sri Lanka, society expects a “normal” person to grow up, receive a good education, start off on a successful career path, get married, have children and settle down. Because this is what society expects of people, it is what parents expect of their children too. In that light, parents with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered children will have some of the following questions.

What if my child will never get married? What will their future be like? Without a spouse, or children of their own, who will take care of them after we are gone and they are old? What will people say about us, with a grown son or daughter who doesn’t want to get married?

The problem is that society’s notion for what “normal” or what “acceptable” ought to be is very narrow and vague. A successful life is not necessarily a married life and each individual has a right to decide how they will make their lives fulfilling for themselves, irrespective of their sexual orientation. This notwithstanding, parents have a very natural anxiety to follow the social trend – to be “normal”, to be accepted, to be respected, to not be regarded as failed parents. So when faced with a homosexual, bisexual or transsexual child, such parents are presented with the following two options.

- Either have their child deny their real sexual orientation and force them to live life as heterosexuals by getting married, having children, and living a so called “normal” life,
- Or accept that all people have problems, therefore help your child to solve the problems that come with being gay in society, though still supporting them in living an honest life.

The first option is a dangerous one to take, because it will make many innocent lives unhappy (see following page). The second option is not an easy one, but not only is it the practical thing to do, it is also the braver decision of the two.

LIVING THE LIE: THE DANGERS OF LIVING IN DENIAL

Most parents expect their children to “put aside” their homosexuality, finish their education, get married and live a normal life. This is because they think that even for an LGBT person, living a “normal”, married life is possible, if they “focus” on it enough. They think that a person’s homosexuality is only limited to his or her sexual needs.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A person’s sexuality is a large component of who that person is. Things they like, their hobbies, the way they express themselves, the way they see the world are all affected by their identity as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person. To live life as if they were not gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender would require them to suppress most of their honest, natural feelings and desires. A mundane conversation in an office or over a dinner table would require a lot of carefulness: to not give away anything “suspicious”, to maintain the consistency of the lie they are living. This type of life can become extremely stressful for a person.

In a loving relationship between two people, the partners want things like love, caring, security, adoration, honesty etc. from each other. The way a homosexual man or woman desires these things and receives them from their partner are different to the way a heterosexual person would desire and receive them. So when a homosexual person is forced to marry a heterosexual person, the relationship will not be in balance. Both those people will be left emotionally and sexually unfulfilled. This will certainly lead to an unhappy married life, an unhappy family life and cause pain to not only each other, but also to the children of that marriage. The worst case scenario would lead to domestic violence, infidelity, alcohol abuse etc.

What we must understand is that anyone who would deny their real sexual identity, and pretend to live a different life, do so because of the pressure on them from society. But society has its pressure on all of us to “go with the flow”. If conforming to social demands results in the unhappiness of so many people, it is better to reject those social demands. It is far better to be different, to not be “normal”, if doing so is the honest thing to do, if doing so will not hurt other innocent people. Being honest about one’s sexuality is not an easy thing to do. But neither is living a lie, with its constant fear. But at least being honest about it will not cause unnecessary pain to others.

HEALTH RISKS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Most people wrongly believe that homosexuality has an extraordinary threat of spreading venereal (sexually transmitted) diseases. But actually most venereal diseases are contractible across the board by people of all sexual orientations, and homosexuals are not differently threatened. In Africa for example, where AIDS is most prevalent, a majority of sexually transmitted AIDS cases reported were transmitted through heterosexual sex.

Therefore, parents should only protect a homosexual child from these diseases only in the same way they would protect a heterosexual child from them. Most parents teach their children sexual abstinence, monogamy and sex only within marriage: these teachings do not necessarily have to change for a homosexual child. True, teenagers also need to be monitored to ensure that they do not make any mistakes, or disobey – but this is clearly not limited to homosexual teenagers, but all teenagers, irrespective of their orientation.

Whether a child contracts a venereal disease or not is not determined by their sexual orientation but by the ability of the parents as the protectors of children.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S SEXUALITY

So far the sections in this booklet have attempted to provide you with the necessary insights into understanding what alternate sexuality is and the various implications of being LGBT in Sri Lanka.

We told you that your child's sexual orientation must be accepted by him or her, despite society's negative attitudes towards it.

We showed you how encouraging (or forcing) them to grow up pretending to be "straight" can only take away the real happiness of your child as well the innocent people around him/her.

But that is not to say that living as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person in Sri Lanka does not come with its own set of problems. In fact, there are many problems that your child will have to face as a member of the LGBT community. This section will discuss those problems and how the parents' role becomes pivotal in helping the LGBT child navigate through his/her adult life as well as adolescent life.

Many tragedies take place throughout the world as teenagers struggle with their sexuality. It is a very difficult time for them, and if they don't receive the right kind of support at the right time, their well-being could be in jeopardy. Obviously, the parent's role in providing this support and guidance is of paramount importance. The most crucial areas of support are discussed below.

Your child may or may not have approached you with the matter of their sexuality. If they have, then the following advice will be much easier to put into action. If they haven't, give them sometime before you broach the subject yourself. Try to take away the taboo on homosexuality by mentioning it in ordinary conversations – to imply to your child that they need not be afraid to come to you about it.

If they come out to you, or if you feel they want to come out to you, or if you feel they are going through the struggle alone, take this advice.

GIVE YOUR CHILD ACCEPTANCE AND STRENGTH

The possibility of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is a very difficult trial for a teenager. They are full of questions and uncertainty: Why is this happening to me? What will people say? Will all my friends hate me? What if they find out? Will I always be like this, or is it just a phase? The questions will be endless.

The important thing on your part is to show them that you are there, that you understand the turmoil within your child, that you are behind them at all times. That they can count on you no matter what happens. Give them acceptance and strength.

GIVE THEM TIME AND SPACE

There is absolutely no need for someone to come to a quick decision about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender – especially when they are at such a young age. They may want a lot of time to figure it out. As long as you as the parent sends your child a clear message that you will love them and accept them for who they are, whether they decide their orientation now or later doesn't matter.

Always making their sexuality a topic of conversation will overwhelm your child. But if they have come out to you, make sure you talk about it once in a while with them: going on with routine life in silence, and avoiding mentioning it again will only tell your child that you're not comfortable talking about it, and they may feel awkward about mentioning it again, too, establishing a firm taboo on the matter.

GIVE THEM SELF-ESTEEM

Adolescence is a time of great peer pressure. Teenagers are constantly worried about fitting in and not being left out. Being gay can only add to that pressure. Fellow students are rarely kind to homosexuality. And in the school environment, where hormones are raging, children are very conscious of their sexuality. The possibility of being LGBT can make your child feel inadequate, vulnerable and inferior. They can start to gradually feel ashamed of themselves, and hate themselves.

This is why it is vital that you show your child that you are proud of them. Show them that being gay or lesbian is not easy, and praise them for how well they are coping with it. Remind your child of their other achievements and talents. Show them that those things are not taken away because they are gay, that being gay does not invalidate them as your children, or as people in general.

GIVE THEM RESILIENCE

In our society where LGBT people are viciously maligned, your child stands to suffer many harsh words, name-calling, hatred and discrimination. They could be subjected to the most senseless of injustices because of the rampant homophobia in Sri Lanka.

As the parent you must teach your child resilience. Show them that there are all kinds of victims in society, all sorts of communities that are marginalised. We must learn to hold our heads high against these adversities: else, we will always bow down to bigotry and hatred. Give your child your acceptance, and help them in creating a support network of family and friends, so that when society tries to bring them down, you will be there to help them back up and hold them high.

In the meantime, take initiatives to change the negative social attitudes towards gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people. Don't let people make rude jokes about them in your presence. Don't let unacceptable remarks or lies about homosexuality go unchallenged in your presence. Stand for the common humanity, equality and dignity of peoples of all sexual orientations. Doing so will help in making a better world for your child.

GIVE THEM EQUALITY

One argument that most people harp on when making the case against homosexuality is that homosexuality is illegal.

According to Article 365A of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka, sexual acts between persons of the same sex constitute a crime punishable by law. This law was introduced to the Sri Lankan penal system by the British in the year 1883. Britain currently has same-sex unions legal in that country and many international organisations, including the UN, believe that our law is in direct violation of the human rights of the LGBT community in Sri Lanka. In fact the law is in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sri Lanka is a signatory nation. While breaking this law is expressly advised against, your contribution to the effort of having it overturned will go a long way in making Sri Lanka a safer place for your child to live in.

CONTINUE TO BE THEIR PARENT

All teenagers are, irrespective of their sexual orientations, teenagers. For that reason alone, you have a responsibility to keep a close eye on what your child is doing. Do not be overwhelmingly inquisitive, since that would give your child the impression that you don't trust them because they're gay. Still for all, do not go easy on your child. Keep track of their friends, especially new ones, where they spend free time and what they do during their leisure. Keep an eye on what they do on the internet, with their phones. All children are prone to make mistakes and make wrong decisions. LGBT children are no different.

THANK YOU

A child who is confused with their sexual orientation or identity is in an extremely vulnerable position. It is a critical place in their lives where they very badly need the love, support and guidance of their parents. Hundreds of thousands of children across the world harm themselves, fall victim to predators because they do not receive the right kind of guidance and support at the right time. Even more children get thrown out of their homes, and abandoned by their own parents. That you took the time to read through this booklet, and educate yourself, creates a possibility of your child coming through his or her crisis in a way that would not have been possible had they gone through it alone. By reading this, you may have just saved your child's life. By reading this, you may have just made the difference between a loving parent and a negligent one.

Congratulations.

FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND MORE INFORMATION

EQUAL GROUND, **Sri Lanka**

EQUAL GROUND seeks equitable human and political rights for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) community of Sri Lanka through unity and advocacy against all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. EQUAL GROUND currently operates a 'safe space' in Colombo for LGBTIQ persons. It also operates a Counseling Hotline for LGBTIQ persons which is available from Monday through Friday from 930am-530pm, on Tuesdays and Thursdays extended till 9pm and on Saturdays from 1pm-9pm

Telephone: **(011)-5679766 or (011)-2512977**

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EQU◀L GROUND

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