The Care Leavers' Annual Lecture 2016

Jimmy Paul

Abstract

A care experienced person is invited to host the Who Cares? Scotland Care Leavers Annual Lecture, and this is the transcript of the lecture from 2016. Jimmy Paul, an alumni member of Who Cares? Scotland, shares his story and makes several compelling points in doing so. With the announcement of the root and branch review of care and the pledge to listen to 1000 care experienced voices, Jimmy explains that we have a unique opportunity to transform care experiences across Scotland, and even globally. He argues that we need to challenge the stigma that children face by triangulating; presenting more stories and qualitative richness to help people understand the damning statistics and outcomes of care leavers. Children need to feel claimed and loved by people around them, and it is vital that the care system doesn't repeat the trauma of their earlier lives. Ongoing, nuanced debates about what does (and doesn't) work across the care system is vital to an improved care system.

Keywords

Love, care, triangulation, identity.

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Introduction

2017 has the potential to start the most empowering, transformational time for care experienced people in Scotland ever. Our calls for a revolution of the care system have been heard. On the 15th of October 2016, the First Minister [Nicola Sturgeon] announced a root and branch review of the care system, and a pledge to listen to 1,000 care experienced voices. A decision she came to after listening to the life stories, the challenges and the hopes of care experienced young people across Scotland. The review will be driven by care experienced people, a first in the history of the care system here. These commitments demonstrate an acceptance that the care system isn't doing what it should be for all of those in it – already, some of our society's most vulnerable. Thankfully, this is something unanimously accepted by government and across party lines.

The statistics for care experienced people in Scotland are unacceptable. When a child enters care, they have often experienced the worst things that life can throw at them – but the system sometimes repeats the trauma of their earlier life, exacerbating instead of healing these wounds. People with care experience are overrepresented in prison, criminal and homelessness statistics and underrepresented in employment and education. Very few are known to police or the judicial system when they enter the care system, but more than half are known to these services when they leave.

I believe that right now is the perfect time for care experienced people in Scotland to get behind this incredible movement that is taking place in the sector. Today, I will share some of my experiences of growing up in the care system. I'll share how liberating it has been for me to 'own' my care identity and will encourage others to do the same.

The need for triangulation

A recent Who Cares? Scotland poll has shown that over a third of adults believe that children are in care because of their behaviour. In reality, we know that is almost never the case.

Too often, it feels like statistics are used in isolation, and thisunfairly tarnishes the reputation of children in care. The fascination and mistrust of people who are different just seems too strong. In East Lothian a few years ago, when discussions were taking place over opening a new residential care unit for children in care in the area, this very thing happened.

Using social media, I followed the discussions that took place with some of the locals there, and I was appalled by the reasons for opposition. Many were more concerned about the preconceived impact of this decision on their house prices, instead of the wellbeing of some of their potential new neighbours.

'What if they commit crime?'

'What if they fail to integrate?'

'Why wouldn't they have an earlier curfew?'

'How can we trust them?'

Here, the statistics that I have presented were interpreted in a way that was completely detached from reality. Existing stereotypes of children in care were reinforced to suit the agenda of those who opposed change.

I believe they acted this way because it was easier for them to see a young person in care as trouble, rather than to accept that society isn't doing enough to love and support them. It is very difficult to see these young people for what they are: victims of extremely challenging, often unimaginable upbringings. They have often been failed multiple times throughout their short lives.

I am therefore making the case that the sector needs to 'triangulate'. Triangulation is the idea that we use multiple methods to get as close to the truth as possible. We need to give qualitative richness to the quantitative statistics, so that people can understand *why* the statistics and outcomes for care experienced young people are so poor.

That's why today I'm going to share my story, to challenge stigma, tackle stereotypes and to humanise the care story. I hope it will inspire others to do the same.

Jimmy's story: the early years

Growing up, I lived with my dad, mum, two older sisters and two younger brothers. My mum, who was loving and had a great sense of humour, taught me how to read at a really young age – something I loved. At nursery, I was the only person who could spell the word 'aeroplane'. I cherished how much it impressed my classmates and teachers, and enjoyed being able to help others in class. Having that time with my mum gave me an important head start and learning very quickly became what I describe as my 'thing'. Education is a really important theme which transcends my whole story, right up until today.

Whilst these precious memories stay with me, most others from this time are hard to recall. My siblings and I always had a sense that something wasn't quite right in our family. Sadly, we never knew any different. My dad was extremely controlling, manipulative, neglectful, and violent. Domestic violence was a daily occurrence of my childhood. My dad's erratic moods were incredibly stressful to deal with. One moment he could be happy, playing computer games and laughing, the next he could be threatening to kill me or throwing me across the room.

Despite the injuries, our skinny frames, lack of clothes and cleanliness, services didn't pick up on these telling signs. Often people ask me: 'why didn't you just tell someone?' I believe it was because of a chilling fear of the unknown. What would life be like without my family? What if I was sent to live with carers I didn't like? What if I was separated from my brothers and sisters? It never seemed like a risk worth taking.

Around primary school age, things got worse at home. The rare occasions of seeing my dad appearing happy were gone, and life had become hell. In order to cope, my mum turned to alcohol, which sadly changed her. Those happy times of sitting and learning with her were over, as she became unable to deal with living in poverty, while looking after several children and being with an abusive, violent partner.

Many people rely on their care files to understand their history and early years. I have to rely on my memory, and that of my siblings. I do recall one evening in 1997, as my dad had a particularly violent outburst. I was frozen with fear as he tore through the house and hurt all of my family in front of my eyes. Somehow, my mum managed to take us away to our grandparents. I remember the sound of the washing machine rumbling, the taxi driver trying to make too much conversation, I remember feeling sick with tension. I was in a state of fight or flight, and was left traumatised.

Life in my family got worse from then. My parents had split up and I moved between their homes. My school attendance was woeful and I remember dressing awfully, feeling hungry and dirty. When I was picked up from school, I never really knew where I would be staying that evening such was the constant uncertainty in my life at that time. My dad was in and out of prison for short amounts of time for his various criminal actions. I had many social work visits in this time but unfortunately, none of these are recorded in my care files so I will never know what these visits were for.

Parents' separation

One day, my dad violently attacked a man with a baseball bat right in front of me. I ran upstairs and stayed there when hours later, the police came around and arrested him. I was moved back to my mum's, where I expected to stay for the rest of my childhood. I had hoped that without my dad being around, things could perhaps get better.

A few months later, I heard whispers between my mum and older sister that my dad was due out of prison that day - this was an earlier release date than originally expected due to good behaviour behind bars. He became excellent at manipulating the system. There was concern among us all about what he might do to us once he was released. That day passed, and everything seemed fine.

This was a real surprise as we went to bed. Knowing my dad, we all feared the worst.

I woke up the next day to the news that through the night, my dad had broken into our home. He had climbed over the church building two houses away and broken through my sister's window. He had a bag on him full of 'tools', or weapons, whichever way you decide to look at it. He had an axe, a drill, a saw, and a hammer, among other things. Thankfully, my mum was given a panic button which she pressed when she heard noises on the roof. My dad, who was hiding in my sister's wardrobe, was caught by police and taken straight back to prison. Waking up to hear all of this stirred such a mixture of feelings: anxiety, stress and concern that it had happened, followed by a deep sense of relief and joy that he was behind bars again. I think that affected all of my family psychologically. There was always a sense that he would get out of prison and that he would come back to find us again.

Head of the house

Naturally, my mum felt increasingly unsafe in our Stratford [London] home. Even though our dad was in prison (for what would be a minimum of two years), she became increasingly unable to cope with the constant reminders of life with our father. She gradually spent more time away from home, opting to stay with her new partner in a pub. My two older sisters also had boyfriends and started spending nights away. As a result, from the ages of eight to 10 years old, I was head of our household.

I did as well as I possibly could in this role, using money mum used to send to us in a taxi so we could buy food. I used to take my brothers to school, did all of the cooking and most of the cleaning. Of course, this was hard to maintain and the conditions were awful and got progressively worse over the next two years. I was never washed, I didn't eat well and the house was always damp. There was a leak in the bathroom which ended up flooding the whole back end of the house. As a consequence, our home became host to rats. Mushrooms began to grow through the carpets and the conservatory or 'back room' was so damp that frogs lived there.

In the autumn of 2000, I remember becoming increasingly concerned for the wellbeing of my brothers and me. How would we survive in a deteriorating house with freezing temperatures? Would we be safe walking to and from school in the dark again? I was afraid someone would recognise the truth about our home situation, which we were so ashamed of and worked so hard to hide.

One day in September we arrived home from school to see that the landlord had been back for the first time in years. Not only this, but our dad, who was recently out of prison, was standing at the door. Fear struck me. Our dad seemed happy, and explained that we had been evicted. We needed to get as

much as we could, load it into his van and then we would live with him in his flat in a place called Gascoigne Estate in Barking. One of my older sisters was keen to stay with us at our dad's; looking back I imagine that she wanted to be with us to try and protect us. We all knew that we couldn't trust him, or his good mood. Amazingly, I have no idea how this situation came about. By all accounts it doesn't seem like this should have been allowed to happen. Like I said before, my dad was very manipulative and I do believe that he engineered it all to suit his plans. He had a track record of stalking us all and using us to get back at our mum. Unfortunately, our hands were tied. We had nowhere else to go.

Moving back in with my dad

We packed up his van with the few belongings that we had and drove to Gascoigne Estate. Unsurprisingly, it didn't take long for my dad's charm to fade and for him to resume being the nasty, violent and aggressive man we knew him to be. This was the start of the toughest five months of my life.

Daily life was unbearable. The violence got worse and the emotional abuse grew to intolerable levels. We tried to get in touch with our mum, but she wasn't answering her phone. I felt helpless to change anything and often felt like a better solution than living would be to jump out of the window on the 11th floor of the block of flats. My sister stayed with my brothers and me during this time and took us to school which was two hours away on the bus. School remained my haven. Another world compared to my home life, and a place where I had some good friends and amazing teachers. I continued to get real enjoyment out of learning. Despite the hardship I was living through, I always felt that I needed to remain focused at school.

On my 11th birthday, things got too much. My sister told us that we were going to her friend's house in Hackney [London] and that we wouldn't be returning. As soon as our dad left the house for work that morning, we left without him knowing. We got on two buses that we needed to get to Hackney and stayed there all day. As soon as our dad finished work, he called my sister threatening to kill us. My sister turned her phone off and realisation set in. I was now free from my dad.

Entering foster care

Within a few days, we were taken into foster care. Thankfully, my brothers and I stayed together because we were all younger and close in age, and my older sister moved into supported accommodation. To best explain my transition into care, I flip a famous analogy: it was like being moved out of the fire and into the frying pan. I went from an unbearable and life threatening living situation, to one where I didn't get the love and support I needed, but I was somewhat safer than before.

My brothers and I had two short-term placements before we were moved to a long-term one. In this time (and throughout our time in care) we had a high turnover of social workers and a continued sense of uncertainty. Unfortunately, despite it being mentioned at every review meeting, I was never taken to a meeting to discuss permanence, where I was hoping to have a permanent decision made about how I was looked after by the state. Even at this early stage, the care system was repeating the trauma that I experienced in earlier life.

My foster carers looked excellent on paper. The foster dad was an engineer and the foster mother was a former teacher. In a cruel twist of fate, I quickly learnt that being good on paper doesn't mean being good in practice. There were several instances of physical violence across my seven years there, but emotional neglect was a part of my everyday existence. I was frequently told that I was 'just a job' to them, that 'home was their castle' and they would 'retire from the money' they made from me.

Contact with my wider family was out of my hands. My foster carers and social workers had a responsibility to oversee contact, but this was not consistently pursued. My family members later reported that trying to see me was made deliberately awkward and impossible. This is another example of the care system repeating the trauma of my earlier life. The adults who were meant to care for me pursued their own interests, not mine, and I was made to feel aware of that. I was a victim of my early life, and now of the care system as well. I was never given much on Christmas or at birthdays and most my clothes were handme-downs from the older foster siblings in the family. One of them was a girl and I remember wearing her tracksuit bottoms to school on non-uniform days and being bullied for it.

Despite these challenges, school remained the place I felt truly at home. My dream was to study at a top university. I hoped that life would be different if I could get a degree. I knew I needed to create my own stability.

I often get asked why I didn't report what was happening at the time. There are several reasons for this. The first is that this life in foster care was better than my life before; my life wasn't in danger, and the 'frying pan' was bearable compared to the 'fire', which was the only alternative I knew. Being taken into care was better than my life before, but it wasn't good. Also, social workers visited me extremely rarely. There was a period of two years when I was never visited in the home by my social worker and countless occasions where visits were cancelled because I 'was doing well at school and his foster mother says he is happy'. Also, with such a high turnover of workers, I rarely had a chance to build an authentic and sustained relationship with someone from the local authority. It never felt relevant to tell a teacher at school and I was also scared of what the repercussions would be if I did report these things.

On one occasion, with no reason at all, my foster mother hit me again. After suffering for so long, something finally snapped inside. I was angry, I felt violated, and I finally found the courage to speak out. I made the huge step of reporting this to the head of the private fostering agency, who later visited. I expected to be treated like a victim and supported through a tough time. I was hoping to be commended for opening up, and supported to fix the situation in the best way possible.

Abuse in the foster home

Frustratingly, none of the above happened. I was moved to 'emergency respite' and treated like a perpetrator, with no explanation as to why, what would happen in the future, and who I would be staying with. Again, the system was repeating the trauma of my earlier life. I felt that the head of the fostering agency was preserving her reputation and the reputations of her staff over doing the right thing and prioritising my wellbeing. When returning me to the foster home, she gave me two choices in her car which was parked outside: either stay in the placement with my brothers and keep quiet, or report what had happened to the local authority. Attached to the second option was the 'strong likelihood' that I would be split up from my brothers. Unsurprisingly, after being given these skewed and deeply unfair options, I decided to stay in the same foster placement.

A few years later, I turned 18 and had conditional offers to study at university. I was hoping to study in Edinburgh where my favourite subject, human geography, was world leading. Tied in to this move was the knowledge that I could escape my past. I could leave the difficulty, adversity and trauma that I had experienced with this physical move to Scotland, and start a new life. I knew that I had to stay extremely focused to pass my final exams. However, I had some news which invaded my mind and sent me straight back into my past.

I found out that my dad was in prison in Canada, serving a life sentence. He had attempted to murder a woman in front of her children. He was labelled 'psychopathic' and given the most serious offender rating possible in the Canadian judicial system: a 'Dangerous Offender'. In this moment I felt a range of things. A huge wave of relief came first. He was now locked up and society was safe; I was always concerned that he would return into my life with the same violence I experienced as a child. But later, I became really concerned. I was worried that I might be genetically predisposed to turn out like him one day – after all, he is my dad – and that I was also destined for a life of violence and crime. It took many conversations with friends and teacher to help me realise that this was never going to happen. I am a completely different person from him.

After my foster carers learned of my ambitions to attend university, they knew the money they got for looking after me would soon end. They told me this on several occasions with huge resentment. As a result, they started to mistreat me. They stopped cooking and cleaning for me and completely ignored me when I would try to talk to them. They stopped me using the internet for homework and when they did decide to talk to me, shouted that I had fulfilled my purpose for them and that I would amount to nothing. Again, the care system was repeating the trauma of my earlier life in facilitating situations of emotional and physical neglect. I was made to feel like an outsider and a perpetrator, and love wasn't a part of the equation.

Moving to a residential care unit

With exams around the corner, and my foster carers continuing their tirade of emotional abuse, the constant stress threatened my dream to study in Edinburgh. I knew I needed to take action quickly. I kept my social worker informed with what was happening and explained to her that there was a history of abuse; but she repeatedly broke her own promises to organise a 'crisis meeting'.

My options were running dangerously low. I consulted my brothers, who the foster carers were treating fine, and they gave me the go ahead. So the next morning, I packed as much as I could into a small bag and left for work. I called my social worker and told her that I wouldn't be returning to that abusive and neglectful foster placement. I will remember her response to this for as long as I live, she said: 'You shouldn't have left. If there was a history of physical abuse I would understand, but I was sorting this out'.

I couldn't believe that after I had clearly explained to her that I was abused physically, she disregarded my mistreatment as acceptable and my distress as unwarranted. Was a month's worth of emotional neglect not sufficient to warrant a move? I put aside my frustration to get on with work, while I waited for her to call back.

After the end of a long day at work, I hadn't heard anything about where I was staying that night. I was kept in the dark and office hours had closed. I called the out-of-hours team and a man told me that I would be moving to a residential care unit in North Woolwich, a two-bus journey away from school and my friends. Again I was left anxious and uncertain of what lay ahead. I didn't know what this home was like, all I knew was that I would be hours away from school, work and my brothers.

With a lot of help from some good friends, I made it to this new residential unit. I was alarmed to find out that it looked just like a prison. It was called 'The Roundhouse', and staying there meant tackling an entirely new living situation, which filled me with apprehension. However, there was also a sense of relief

because I had finally left my previous placement where things were horrendously tense.

The staff in The Roundhouse treated the residents with a lot of trepidation. It often felt like this place was a stepping stone for prison. There were frequent raids for guns and knives, and there were often broken windows in the unit. The place had an oven which didn't work and no tin opener. All I had to make food was a microwave and a kettle in my room.

The other young people who lived there were often involved in trouble. Almost all of them had dropped out of school or education and weren't working, and most were involved in gangs. The sad thing is that, even though I felt different to them, I was very much the same. We had all experienced difficult, traumatic lives until that point and we had all been exposed to the challenges of not being supported by society. I was fortunate, though: education was the thing that gave me excitement, happiness and a buzz. For most of the other residents there, illegal activities were where they found their release.

Education continued to be a constant outlet and space for me to focus. It offered me a route out of the life I had experienced until then, and I continued to focus on it as much as I could, especially through the tough times. My teachers were amazing – at school I was head boy and this helped foster those positive relationships. One teacher, Ms Winnicka, did my washing and ironing for me and anything else that she could help with. Other teachers, Mr Rider and Mr Rainford, had picked up on the fact that I was looking more thin and unwell. They had me round to their houses for hot cooked dinners, allowing me more time to revise in evenings. Other teachers, Ms Southwell-Sander and all of my subject teachers, checked up on me as often as they could and even offered me extra, free tuition outside in their own time to ensure I was as prepared as possible for my final exams. It is important to acknowledge that some of my corporate parents went so far and above for me at a critical time. This reminded me that humanity can be kind, and the generosity of these teachers is something I will remember for the rest of my life.

Despite an extremely difficult time in the residential care unit, I managed to get the grades that I needed. I got straight 'A's and I was ready to study my favourite subject in the amazing city that I had always dreamed of: Edinburgh. I'm happy to say this was the start of a much happier chapter in my life.

University

I remember feeling sick with nerves the day that I moved into my university halls. Finally, though, luck was on my side. I had some great flatmates and met some amazing people living in the same block. Here, I made friends for life. I played football for Aston Vica FC, the most successful intramural team in the

history of Edinburgh University. I had some amazing nights out. I continued to study hard, and I had the chance to finally have fun and be free.

The local authority paid my rent whilst I was at university, but I only saw my social workers twice across four years and had sporadic email contact with them. Whilst the majority of time I was really enjoying my life in Scotland, the arrangement with my social workers didn't feel like one with a corporate parent. It felt more like a business arrangement, and there were times of fear and worry which a good relationship with a helpful social worker could have really alleviated. Throughcare and aftercare support has developed into a passion of mine as a result.

Summers were particularly anxiety-inducing. My friends would all go home back to their parents and I would be left alone, to fend for myself to find summer accommodation. Navigating systems that I had never navigated before with no support to do so was challenging. Financially, it was tough. In my care files, there are instances of social workers saying that they didn't need to visit or contact me because they understood that I was achieving well at university and would be proactive in contacting them. It always reads to me more like an excuse not to make contact rather than a supportive reason to leave me to it.

At university, I never really owned my care identity. I hid the fact that I grew up in care, largely because I was ashamed. I was ashamed of the things that people might assume about me, and ashamed that people would find out more about my life and expect me to eventually follow the path of my dad. On the odd occasion that I would open up to someone about it however, they were often very supportive and interested. Sometimes, though, people reacted extremely awkwardly.

After four of the best years of my life, I graduated from Edinburgh with a 2:1 degree. Frighteningly though, this was where my support from the care system ended. I had the carpet swept from underneath me in terms of local authority support. 'You have graduated - all the best for the rest of your life' was essentially the message that I got from my social worker. Again, the care system was repeating the trauma of my earlier life: leaving me alone to support myself, without the love and care of a family or parents in the same way that my peers had. I felt lonely, isolated and without a fall-back option. I knew that if things went badly, or I made a mistake, things could spiral out of control without anyone looking out for me. I struggled to get jobs for a while and felt stigmatised when I was applying for Jobseeker's Allowance. Paying rent and bills (most of which you are exempt from as a student) was a real shock, and I had to learn extremely quickly, on my own, through a lot of hardship.

Later that year, after a string of thankless jobs, I got onto the extremely competitive NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme in Scotland. I was over the moon; I would be invested in, supported, and paid a decent wage. I would

get to study for a master's degree and project management qualifications. The Management Scheme gave me a platform to succeed and support where I needed it, which the local authority had failed to do.

Owning my care identity

With the same drive I had to complete school and university, I finished the Management Scheme and enjoyed all of it immensely. After completing it at the age of 26, with space between me and some of my darker days, I finally started to own my care identity. I realised that I wasn't responsible for my life before, I was a victim in my earlier life. I started to give myself credit for the life that I had created for myself. From this, I developed anger towards stories like mine, of the care system repeating the trauma of earlier life and of the lack of support. I'm still upset that it happens to some of the most vulnerable people in society today, when we should be doing much better.

As a result, I got involved in the work of Who Cares? Scotland and started writing articles for *The Guardian* newspaper and *Aspire To More* website. I realised that it was important for me to own my care identity because there are many other stories like mine, where support should have been better, in England, Scotland and across the world. I knew that by sharing this story, I could let others know that they're not alone, inspire them to share their stories and realise that they deserve to be treated with respect, compassion and love. I could also help those not in the care system to learn about what care experienced people go through, and help challenge the stigma they face.

With the growing Who Cares? Scotland Alumni, the 1000 Voices Pledge, and the root and branch review of the care system in Scotland, we now have a platform to shape lasting change in care. It's an amazing opportunity to be a world first in this approach to changing care. With care experienced young people at the heart of the review, we have an opportunity to dramatically improve the lives of so many people in Scotland, the UK and more widely – and that is really exciting.

So what can we do to support this one of a kind care revolution? First, people with care experience should try their best to accept that they were a victim of their circumstances, and aren't responsible for their past. Too often, care experienced young people are made to feel guilty and at fault for their lives, while the reality is that the care system has a long way to go to get this right for young people.

Another brilliant opportunity is to get involved in the amazing work that Who Cares? Scotland does and contribute in any way you feel comfortable. You can speak at events, write blogs, attend alumni meetings, volunteer, or otherwise. It's an amazing organisation: a family of care experienced people where everyone is welcome. It's a great place to explore your own care identity and meet others who have been through the same things as you.

Finally, make sure that you are driving the review of the care system. Speak about what you are most passionate about with regards to care and what you think can be improved. Your stories are needed to help triangulate the statistics, and there is huge value in your narrative at this time. You have the opportunity to shape lasting change; if you feel like you can contribute, don't hesitate to share your views. They are more valuable than you could imagine.

We all have stories to tell. Some of these stories are more tragic and harrowing than others. It's not a competition! But I want to end this lecture with a metaphor. Care experienced people are diamonds. They suffer under so much more pressure than other people could imagine, but bigger and brighter diamonds form when exposed to heat and pressure for longer. Those of us who have lived through those tough times can use that to be strong and resilient. It makes us tougher and brighter than we know. Those diamonds shine the brightest and are so valued in our society.

We need to make sure that we are finding and supporting care experienced people and helping them to shine.

About the author

Jimmy Paul is a Permanence Consultant at CELCIS involved in the rollout of the award winning Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme across Scotland. Originally from east London, he is a graduate of the University of Edinburgh and completed the prestigious National Health Service Graduate Management Training Scheme with NHS Lothian.

Jimmy has been open about his own background as a child in care and is an active member the Who Cares? Scotland Care Alumni. He has written articles for *The Guardian* and the *Aspire To More* website and has spoken about his experiences at several events. Jimmy is deeply passionate about improving care experiences and believes that authentic, loving and genuine relationships must be at the heart of everything that the care system does in order to ensure lasting change for young people. He believes that there is huge potential in 'care experienced' adults sharing their stories to set an example for children in care now, affirming the message that they *can* be successful and happy in life, despite the challenges they face.

References:

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Aspire to More. https://aspiretomore.wordpress.com

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