

Hospitable Learning Spaces: Making Room for Many Voices in Applied Doctoral Education

By Ellen L. Marmon, PhD

Abstract: When a doctoral degree is “applied” or “professional,” the variable of student-practitioner experience adds multi-layered, context-specific resources to the curriculum. However, adult students often believe their experience pales in the presence of an educational professional. These unique dynamics at play in DMin programs generate important questions:

- In what ways are DMin teachers aware and respectful of the decades of praxis gathered in their classes?
- To what extent are students willing to ascribe value to their peers’ contributions in the learning process?
- Could a conversation between a metaphor, adult learning theory, and subsequent practices assist teachers and students in engaging the transformative dynamics of applied doctoral education?

Introduction

We all needed a caffeine break; five-day intensive classes can wear out the heartiest of doctoral students and faculty. Waiting for the tea water to boil, I rejoiced in the warmth coming through the window. “Isn’t it great to see the sun, Daniel?” My new friend from Zimbabwe answered with a resounding, “No! It’s a trick.” His response caught me off guard.

A trick? But Daniel, stand right here in the sunbeam, and look out at that beautiful blue sky!” (These were survival techniques I learned growing up – weeks of gray, gloomy, cold days were the hallmark of Midwest winters.) Daniel shook his head and repeated: “It’s a trick. In Zimbabwe when you see the sun, it is hot outside. When the sun is out here [central Kentucky], it means nothing.”

Daniel had a point, a point of view to be specific; he taught me a different and equally valid way of thinking about sunny, winter days in the Northern Hemisphere. More complex conversations than weather await both students and faculty in Doctor of Ministry programs, ones that bring multiple, seasoned perspectives to the classroom.

Over the last five years, the DMin Program at Asbury Theological Seminary has seen an exciting increase in overall student diversity, both US-based and international. For the second year in a row, the incoming cohort consists of slightly less than 50% North American men and women, and slightly more than 50% from every other continent except Antarctica. Typically, in each DMin cohort, twelve to fifteen states are represented (US), and twelve to seventeen countries. These global leaders arrive with unparalleled ministry experience and a deep desire to expand both their understanding and their leadership capacities.

Interestingly, DMin students are quick to discount their own in-ministry expertise, as well as that of their peers; they enrolled to learn from the person with Ph.D. credentials. Professors, however, find themselves surrounded by seasoned practitioners, each representing unique and complex cultural contexts about which teachers know little to nothing. What potential exists for both students and teachers to navigate these unsettling yet exciting DMin learning curves together?

First, DMin students and teachers share a common identity: they are all learners. Committed to a life of continual growth and discovery, professors and practitioners alike gravitate toward lessening the gap between what they do and do not understand (cognitive, emotional and spiritual dimensions included). This role of lifelong learner requires uncommon sense in academia: a sense of humility; a sense of humor; and a sense of expectancy. These dispositions orient both professors and students toward giving *and* receiving, to talking *and* listening, and teaching *and* learning.

Second, engaging a common metaphor for education has the potential to create clarity and generosity within the learning process.¹ For example, what happens when the practice of hospitality becomes the lens through which teachers and students view a DMin program? How could the inter-changeable roles of host and guest enliven applied doctoral education?²

Finally, introducing relevant adult learning theory and practices into the conversation grounds these explorations in social science research that is focused specifically on adult learners.³ Insights about motivation, multi-cultural realities, and relationships in an adult classroom enhance both the teachers' and the students' participation.⁴

This article invites DMin faculty and students to listen in on a conversation between the ancient metaphor of hospitality, current adult learning theory, and practice. These perspectives offer a unique combination of voices through which to explore the dynamic of experienced, multi-cultural leaders in the DMin classroom.

The Metaphor of Hospitality

Historically and especially in the Christian tradition, hospitality has concerned itself with creating space for strangers, for people pushed to the margins of society. Christine Pohl

¹ David I. Smith and Susan F. Felch, 2016. *Teaching and Christian Imagination* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company).

² Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1986).

³ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1991); Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning, A Guide to Theory and Practice*, Third. (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2016).

⁴ Robin Robinson, "The Whole Person in Front of Me: Toward a Pedagogy of Empathy and Compassion," in *Transforming Classroom Culture: Inclusive Pedagogical Practices*. ed. Sharan Dalalgar, Esther Kingston-Mann & Tim Sieber (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 143–164.

observes, “Hospitality is a practice that integrates respect and care. Finding ways to respond to the needs of persons while simultaneously respecting their dignity is an ancient concern.”⁵ Scholars and practitioners alike are carrying principles of this “physical manifestation of welcome”⁶ into the higher education classroom.

In *Teaching and Christian Imagination*, David Smith and Susan Felch invite teachers to envision their jobs imaginatively, through metaphors that “offer lenses, not recipes, opening possibilities rather than laying out instructions.”⁷ The authors lament higher education’s current reality; with the growing number of educational delivery systems and administrative duties, professors are taxed by multiple responsibilities beyond the classroom. Teaching is often reduced to covering material and grading assignments as efficiently as possible. Alarmed by such reductions, Smith and Felch turn to three major metaphors as “orienting images.”⁸ They explore gardens, pilgrimages, and buildings as life-giving imagery for education. Comparing learning spaces to homes, they assert that education needs to include elements of welcome, safety, and story.⁹

Three decades earlier, Henri Nouwen envisioned teaching as a form of hospitality and encouraged learning institutions to cultivate hospitable learning spaces. “To look at teaching as a form of hospitality might free it from some of its unreal heaviness and bring some of its exhilarating moments back in perspective.”¹⁰ Nouwen assigns the roles of host to the teacher and guest to the student, all the while maintaining that these roles are interchangeable. Focusing on the teacher’s responsibility to students, he argues, “A good host is the one who believes that his guest is carrying a promise he wants to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest.”¹¹ How might this metaphor of hospitality orient both DMin professors and adult learners toward a mutually respectful, rich educational experience?

Biblical and Theological Perspectives.

The theological concept of *imago Dei* bestows on all humans the dignity of being made in the image of their Creator. “So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them,” recites the Genesis narrator (1:27 NIV).¹² God gives this honor only to human beings, a distinction that compels Christians’ respect for all people. Jesus models this regard and expectancy, for example, when he calls the despised tax collector Zacchaeus by name, and then invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’ home (Luke 19:1-10). First

⁵ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 69.

⁶Carolyn Call, “The Rough Trail to Authentic Pedagogy: Incorporating Hospitality, Fellowship, and Testimony into the Classroom,” in *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith & Learning*. ed. David I. Smith & James K.A. Smith (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 64.

⁷ Smith and Felch, *Teaching and Christian Imagination*, 2.

⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁹ Ibid. 95.

¹⁰ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 89.

¹¹ Ibid. 87.

¹² *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984). All scripture references come from this translation.

as a guest and then as host, Jesus brings dignity to an entire family, creating a space ripe for holistic transformation.

John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace further awakens believers' expectations for each person's potential. "Drawing on John 1:9 [*The true light that gives light to every person was coming into the world*], Wesley's principal text of prevenient grace, he claims that 'Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world.'"¹³ This ongoing work of God in people does not depend on human effort; nor is it just for Jesus followers. Believing that all human beings are created in God's image and that God's grace is purposefully stirring in every person can serve as a powerful motivator (and a humbling reminder) both for teachers creating learning experiences and for the students participating in them.

Professors and students in a DMin classroom are not only sitting next to people made in God's image, but they are also interacting with sisters and brothers. The writer of John's first letter celebrates this mystery: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (I John 3:29). Adopted into "Abba Father's" family, teachers and students alike are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17a). The Holy Spirit testifies within and among the learning community about this God-given identity. Hosting such a group now moves beyond a privilege to a holy responsibility.

Qualities and Responsibilities of Good Hosts.

Nouwen's understanding of the teacher as host hinges on the disposition of humility. Good hosts believe that "students are not just the poor, needy, ignorant beggars who come to the man or woman of knowledge, but that they are indeed like guests who honor the house with their visit and will not leave it without making their own contribution."¹⁴ One of those contributions in any DMin program is the unique vantage point of each student-guest. Their engagement in diverse contexts for ministry adds depth, texture, and story to each class's curriculum. Good teachers-hosts learn to value and highlight those contributions in concert with their own gifts and resources. Humility does not function well in competitive, zero-sum environments; it flourishes, however, in messy spaces that make room for many voices.¹⁵

Vulnerability is another quality that Nouwen values in hosts: "Teachers who can detach themselves from their need to impress and control, and who can allow themselves to be receptive to the news that their students carry with them, will find that it is in receptivity that gifts become visible."¹⁶ Allowing students' strengths to surface in an educational setting requires teachers to reduce what Pohl describes as the "power differential" in hospitality.¹⁷ Rather than practice what

¹³ Kenneth Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 39.

¹⁴ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 89.

¹⁵ Call, "The Rough Trail to Authentic Pedagogy: Incorporating Hospitality, Fellowship, and Testimony into the Classroom," 61-79.

¹⁶ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 87.

¹⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 120.

Nouwen calls “violent learning” (unilateral, competitive, and alienating), vulnerable teachers create spaces of respectful encounter and collaboration.¹⁸

Humility, vulnerability and academic expertise combine to make memorable class resources. As a result, teachers/hosts will find themselves trying out new roles. Givers of knowledge also become receivers of guests’ experiences and insights. Adding the roles of listener to talker and dialoguer to speech-maker stretches many professors. Like a new exercise at the gym, these roles are likely to feel uncomfortable at first. Pohl notes that hospitality “reflects and anticipates God’s welcome. Simultaneously costly and wonderfully rewarding, hospitality often involves small deaths and little resurrections.”¹⁹ She understands that for Christians, God’s sacrificial welcome compels hosts to move into unfamiliar, uncomfortable spaces for the good of the guest.

Qualities and Responsibilities of Good Guests.

The practice of hospitality in education also calls guests to let go of familiar classroom roles and patterns. In every DMin program there are a few students who show up fully convinced of their own superior gifts. More often, however, DMin guests arrive with deeply ingrained, often unevaluated assumptions about their position in the classroom. Based on past experience, they function as “the amateur,”²⁰ a passive receptacle for collecting information from the professional educator. Considering themselves co-creators of and valuable contributors to an academic learning community is an uncommon notion for students.²¹

Adult women and men in the classroom must reorient their unquestioned expectations of teachers, themselves, and fellow students. “Learning is a formational process that occurs through interaction of the two [teacher and student], not in the presentation of the one.”²² Finding themselves in generous learning environments, students courageously grow to value their own voices in the teaching-learning process. No longer tuned into just the teacher’s voice, students start seeing other guests as hosts; they can become humbly, expectantly attentive to their peers’ contributions as well.

Adult Learning Theory

Over the past four decades, adult learning scholars and practitioners have pushed beyond a primarily cognitive, individual-oriented focus to explore holistic change for teachers and students.²³ It is not the aim of this article to explore many or even one adult learning theory’s history, proponents, critics, nuances, and applications in total. For this particular conversation,

¹⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 5.

¹⁹ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 187.

²⁰ Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education, A Call to Renewal* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 102.

²¹ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 87.

²² Roy Barsness and Richard Kim, “A Pedagogy of Engagement for the Changing Character of the 21st Century Classroom,” *Theological Education* 49, no. 2, The Changing Character of Faculty Work (2015): 105.

²³ Sharan Merriam and Laura Bierema, *Adult Learning: Linking Theory to Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

aspects of Transformative Learning Theory enlighten the “why?” and the “what?” of hospitable DMin classrooms. (“How?” is addressed in the next section as Practice.)

Transformative Learning Theory begins with a “dilemma”²⁴ of sorts. Sudden or cumulative changes in people’s lives trigger a sense that their current ways of understanding and engaging the world are either incomplete, inadequate, or just wrong. At this point of awareness, an individual or group of adults can ignore the issue or lean into it and learn more. Mezirow describes the former as a “process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of references (meaning schemes, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.”²⁵

This process may describe what happens inside of teachers and students encountering the roles of host and guest in an applied doctoral classroom. “Becoming aware of assumptions or the habits of mind that consist of a web of related assumptions is difficult. These things are a part of the fabric of who we are or who we perceive we are.”²⁶ Even with such a challenge, potential for transformation surfaces anytime adults find themselves unlearning something to embrace new ideas, values, and perspectives. Taylor²⁷ identifies essential elements in transformative learning:

- Prior experience (individual) or shared experience (e.g., classroom),
- Critical reflection,
- Dialogue,
- Holistic orientation,
- Awareness of context, and
- Authentic relationships.

Teachers or hosts have no control over the experience their guests bring with them into the classroom; they can, however, design shared learning experiences that challenge unquestioned or partially-formed beliefs and behavior. Faculty who enter the classroom “with a sense of awe, not so much of what they have to give but of what they might learn,”²⁸ are more likely to create experiences that students will engage openly.

Openness or receptivity on the students’ part, can activate honest critical reflection of cherished beliefs, values, and practices. Rather than only gain new information, these guests have the potential to change their priorities, relationships and patterns so that they align with their new

²⁴ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*.

²⁵ Jack Mezirow & Associates, *Learning As Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 8.

²⁶ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning, A Guide to Theory and Practice*, 50.

²⁷ Edward Taylor, “Fostering Transformative Learning,” in *Transforming Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, ed. Edward Taylor, Jack Mezirow & Associates (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 4.

²⁸ Barsness and Kim, “A Pedagogy of Engagement for the Changing Character of the 21st Century Classroom,” 102.

discoveries (holistic orientation). “There must be space for students to reflect, discuss, and engage in activities that draw upon their life experiences. Such a space is safe, open, supportive and in Vella’s words ‘sacred.’”²⁹ Pointing to dialogue’s meaning as “the word between us,” Jane Vella champions the teacher’s primary role of dialoguer. “As a dialogue educator you will wear a number of hats: designer, teacher, listener, learner. You will work hard to teach less and make more room for learning.”³⁰ She argues for learning-centered classrooms above content- or faculty-centered spaces. The humility required of a good host is, well, humbling.

Additionally, adult learning literature addresses the importance of faculty’s and students’ cultural awareness in the classroom. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and Reflection in Higher Education*, Sharlene Voogd Cochrane et. al., share insights from the Cultural Literacy Curriculum Institute at Lesley University. One of the first concepts they found helpful in understanding culturally responsive teaching was “cultural humility,” a capacity they describe as an ongoing “willingness to learn, self-reflect, and acknowledge power dynamics.”³¹ When students encounter a teacher who is living and learning along with them and also *because* of them, students are more likely to make authentic contributions themselves. These guests are also poised to value the context-rich wisdom of their peers.

Practice, Praxis, Practice

This conversation gains traction when praxis (practice + reflection) is added to an engaging metaphor and relevant adult learning scholarship. Academic practitioners from multiple higher education disciplines are addressing the “How?” of hospitable classroom experiences. The following list highlights practices related to equipping hosts and guests to become better at “creating a classroom environment that generates a kind of learning that transforms both parties.”³²

1. Hosts

- a. Jones³³ regularly asks herself, “How can language be framed to honor cultural practices while encouraging consideration of best practices in professional practices?” She also challenges higher education hosts to reflect on how their “expectations of student knowledge and achievement are impacted by the larger designations of countries into ‘first-world’ and ‘third-world’ categories, race, ethnicity, and geographic locations of schools.”

²⁹ Merriam and Bierema, *Adult Learning: Linking Theory to Practice*, 96.

³⁰ Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, Revised. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), xvi.

³¹ Sharlene Voogd Cochrane et al., “Cultural Literacy, Cultural Humility, and Reflection,” in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and Reflection in Higher Education*, 5.

³² Arlene Dallalgar, Esther Kingston-Mann, and Tim Sieber, eds., *Transforming Classroom Culture: Inclusive Pedagogical Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 4.

³³ Marjorie Jones, “Culturally Responsive Professional Practices in the College Classroom and Professional Sites,” in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and Reflection in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge), 75–86.

- b. In both her choice of reading and interaction with students in the classroom, Jones asks herself about the voices and experiences “I have more than likely missed.”³⁴
- c. Palmer recommends collaborating with students to create a “covenant” at the beginning of class. It describes what kind of learning community to which the students want to belong and contribute.³⁵
- d. Sieber³⁶ narrates the benefits of multi-disciplined faculty participating in long-term teaching enhancement seminars. “It is a sad commentary on how thorough my own academic socialization had been that it was so hard for me to accept that what happened in the classroom was not principally about me but instead was about my students and what promoted their learning. What promoted their own learning would also promote my own, it became clear.”
- e. Organizations like the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion send consultants out and offer grants for faculty who want to become better teachers/hosts. <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/>
- f. Call³⁷ included a mid-point break with food in her longer classes; she also designed the second half of class to be discussion led by the students. Introducing time for occasional “testimonies” from students enabled them “to better connect course material and everyday life.”
- g. Arguing that answers to the following questions lead teachers toward specific “pedagogies,” Gin and Hearn³⁸ recommend evaluative reflection for faculty:
 - i. What are the results you intend for the course, the students?
 - ii. What do you believe counts as knowledge?
 - iii. How do you believe students best learn?
 - iv. How should you teach?

2. Guests

- a. Cydis, et. al.,³⁹ activate “Essential Learning Outcomes” with a pre and post “Student Perception Survey,” giving students opportunities “to learn more about the competence they have acquired” over the duration of each course.

³⁴ Ibid. 85

³⁵ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, 20th Anniversary. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2017).

³⁶ Tim Sieber, “A History Lived and Lessons Learned: Collaboration, Change, and Teaching Transformation,” in *Transforming Classroom Culture: Inclusive Classroom Practices*, ed. Arlene Dallalfar, Esther Kingston-Mann, and Tim Sieber (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 37.

³⁷ Call, “The Rough Trail to Authentic Pedagogy: Incorporating Hospitality, Fellowship, and Testimony into the Classroom,” 61-79.

³⁸ Deborah H.C. Gin and Mark Chung Hearn, “Why You Do What You Do: The Power in Knowing and Naming Pedagogies,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22 (2019): 30–51.

³⁹ Susan Cydis, et.al., “Integrating and Assessing Essential Learning Outcomes: Fostering Faculty Development and Student Engagement,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 15, no. 3 (June 2015): 47.

- b. Addressing students' lackluster response to small group discussion ("nothing happened in class today"), Panofsky and Bogad⁴⁰ simply added a required, informal writing exercise after in-class discussions. Students reflect and then list what they "got out of" the conversation.
- c. Panofsky and Bogad⁴¹ also explored why students are silent in class by initiating a journal entry. They ask students to identify what makes them "lose their voice" in class, and what contributes to their feeling comfortable to speak.
- d. With such diverse guests in DMin programs, it makes sense to make room for students to describe the unwritten rules and overt patterns of their formal educational experiences (e.g. Korean students who have never questioned their teachers; Nigerian students who never considered learning from their colleagues; or women who often deferred to the male voices in the room). Understanding what qualifies as the educational norm for students informs teachers' efforts at engaging their guests in safe ways.
- e. Half-way through their two-week DMin residency at Asbury, students are prompted to email their families/friends to share "What I Learned from My Ministry Colleagues," including the men and women's names, ministry roles, and locations.
- f. Our DMin homiletics professors take turns preaching during morning worship; then they walk into the classroom and ask their guests to assess their sermons. They use the exact same criteria by which DMin students will be evaluated later in the week. By submitting themselves to the same process as their guests, these hosts practice humility and set an example of lifelong learning as preachers.
- g. Asbury's cohort model prioritizes relationships between DMin students. Even before they first arrive on campus, they are sorted into diverse "Legacy Groups" (8-9 people) which remain constant throughout the three-year program. During residencies these groups meet outside of class for spiritual and leadership formation. They also encourage each other throughout the year about assignments and dissertation challenges, growing in their identities as doctoral students and friends.

The Conversation Continues

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver's character Leah Price witnesses the ugly consequences of an unteachable spirit in her own missionary father: "I've seen how you can't learn anything when you're trying to look like the smartest person in the room."⁴² Hosts carry the responsibilities both of sharing expertise and modeling humility. Taylor argues that being a

⁴⁰ Carolyn Panofsky and Lesley Bogad, "Hearing Students' Silence: Issues of Identity, Performance, and Recognition in College Classrooms," in *Transforming Classroom Culture: Inclusive Pedagogical Practices*, ed. Arlene Dallalfar, Esther Kingston-Mann, and Tim Sieber (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 189.

⁴¹ Ibid. 182.

⁴² Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2013).

transformative teacher “demands a great deal of work, skill, and courage.”⁴³ A participant in Lesley University’s Cultural Literacy Curriculum Institute reflected,

When we teach we feel obligated to ‘impart knowledge’ and thus must maintain this elevated status. What I experienced is that, especially with adult learners, giving myself permission to be a participant in the learning process in the classroom and being emotionally available helped me reach my students far more.⁴⁴

Students are also challenged by examining their own resistance to – or promotion of learning that leads to change. Perhaps reflecting on the equally rich roles of host and guest in the larger metaphor of hospitality will open generous, expectant learning spaces for this conversation to continue both inside and outside the applied doctoral classroom.

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⁴³ Edward Taylor, “The Challenge of Teaching for Change,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 109, Teaching for Change: Fostering Transformative Learning in the Classroom (Spring 2006): 91–96.

⁴⁴ Deborah Wright, “Adult Learners: Where I’m From and Why It Matters,” in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and Reflection in Higher Education* ed. Sharan Cochrane, et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 87–94.

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