Friends for the Movement: Emotion and Learning in the Balance of Intrinsic and Strategic Relations

Tanner Vea, Pennsylvania State University, tvea@psu.edu

Abstract: This paper contributes to recent theorization of relationships in the learning sciences using the case of an animal rights activist group. Drawing on ethnographic data from participant observation and interviews, I argue that the emotionality of being part of the activist community provided intrinsic value but also became part of instrumental understandings that linked feeling "empowered" by the community to practices like speaking up for one's values and participating in direct action. I introduce *casual emotion work* to describe how seemingly non-pedagogical practices during community events can support the uptake of ways of feeling that are understood as strategically valuable for social transformation. The study has implications for understanding emotion as a dimension of relationality with consequences for both learning and politics.

In this paper, I build on the concept of emotional configurations in learning (Vea, 2018, under review) to analyze the learning that occurs through the social relations of animal rights activists. Learning sciences research has turned increasing attention to learning in social organizing and social movements (Curnow, 2014; Curnow, Davis, & Asher, 2018; Esmonde, Curnow, & Riviere, 2014; Jurow, Teeters, Shea, & Van Steenis, 2016). Scholarly interest in social movements follows a recognition that all learning is inherently political (The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). In the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of Direct Action Everywhere (DxE), an international animal rights activist network, movement activity frequently combined socializing and fighting for the cause. Examining the emotional texture of friendships in an animal rights movement organization reveals how emotion shapes possibilities for the identities and practices learners can take up—and how those dimensions of learning may support broader social transformation.

I interviewed Gunnar, a vegan who volunteered on the Tech Team of DxE. One of things he worked on was search engine optimization and keyword targeting for the recruitment of new activists. He explained:

> When I'm looking at analytics, I could see exactly what keywords people are searching on and not only what gets them to the site but what also gets them to either become an organizer or become an activist, or at least get on the email list. What we'll find is that most people that end up going further in the program are already vegans so they're just looking for a community of vegans. Our most popular terms would be "lonely vegan," "how to find a vegan community," more broad things like "veganism." Generally, it's like you're already a vegan and you're just looking for a community, and DxE is that.

Clicking on a search ad from DxE using these terms would take a "lonely vegan" to a landing page with limited navigation, where they would be asked to input their email address and locality, if they were nearby a local DxE chapter. Once they did that, they would be added to the Activist Database. Volunteers at events took attendance in the database, attempting to link offline behaviors to digital records. According to another Tech Team volunteer, organizers in the chapter looked at the database to make decisions about who should be given additional responsibility and cultivated to grow as an activist. The Activist Database represented a kind of learning analytics that used "community" as its medium: a "lonely vegan" in the newfound community of DxE would be tracked and supported to develop in the identity and practices of being a DxE activist. At the same time, the focus on being in community with others was also deeply felt and personally meaningful for the activists with whom I spoke. Gunnar had also been a lonely vegan himself when he moved to the Bay Area from Texas. Though he first saw DxE as "really militant," he was eventually convinced to attend a DxE meetup and protest, and his perspective changed. He said, "what I really liked was that they had the protest and then they all had an afterparty at one of the DxE houses afterwards. It felt really cool to both go and do that but then also feel like *truly part of the community*" (my emphasis). What did it mean for relations between activists to at once be intrinsic ("truly" feeling good in themselves) and strategic (instrumentalized for movement goals), and with what implications for learning?

Learning researchers have examined how the qualities of social relationships shape learning possibilities. Partner responsiveness is key to collaborative learning (Barron, 2003), and friends have higher-quality dialogue during learning than non-friends (Azmitia & Montgomery, 1993; Miell & MacDonald, 2000). More recently, Takeuchi (2016) showed that students designated as English language learners accessed a broader repertoire of work practices and were positioned more frequently as experts when working with friends. Emotionality may be

an important ingredient of these dynamics, as learners may feel more secure when collaborating with their friends (Fonzi, Schneider, Tani, & Tomada, 1997). The importance of social relationships extends beyond classrooms as well. For instance, Dagaz (2012) showed how skilled performance in high school marching band required strong social ties that also led to the development of feelings of trust, acceptance, and self-confidence.

Research on the politics of learning has accounted for how power relations in particular shape relational meanings in learning. More specifically, educators and learners can come to understand the quality of social relations as integral to transforming injustice. McKinney de Royston et al. (2017) developed the notion of "politicized caring" to describe how Black educators enacted care interactionally with Black students toward transforming inequality "beyond the time and space constraints of classrooms and schools" (p. 4). In a similar vein, Vakil and colleagues (Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019; Vakil, McKinney de Royston, Nasir, & Kirshner, 2016) have articulated the concept of "politicized trust." Examining student collaborations in a multiracial classroom setting, Vakil and McKinney de Royston (2019) argued that the realization of equity goals requires a form of relational solidarity that includes race-conscious political understanding and respect. Of interest here, they also warned against treating "relationships as a means, not an end unto themselves" (p. 548). Rather, just and supportive relationships are of value as a matter of ethics regardless of what learning outcomes may emerge from them. In the context of collective social action, Teeters and Jurow (2018) demonstrated how *promotoras* (community health workers) developed relationships *de confianza* (mutual trust and commitment) in ways that mediated the broader possibilities for developing a thriving neighborhood community.

Attention to emotional configurations can extend the purchase of concepts such as politicized caring (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017), politicized trust (Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019; Vakil et al., 2016), and relationships *de confianza* (Teeters & Jurow, 2018) by deepening an understanding of how emotion shapes the political possibilities of interpersonal relations in learning activities. Emotionality is a mostly latent dimension of the relationships described in these works, though when it becomes explicit, it is clear that it is consequential. For example, Vakil and McKinney de Royston (Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019) wrote that "feeling offended, attacked and blamed are hallmarks of a relationship that lacks solidarity" (p. 563). In DxE, how being with friends made activists feel had implications for their perceptions of self- and collective efficacy and for the security of their ideological stances. The emotional configurations of friendship were central to achieving and maintaining the identities and practices of animal rights activists. In the sections that follow, I first present a framework for understanding how emotion in social relations shapes the possibilities for learning. Then I describe the research setting of DxE and my data creation and analysis methods. Finally, I share three patterns in the social meaning of relationships for DxE activists that have implications for how learning takes place in DxE.

Framework: Learning, relationality, and emotional configurations

I focus on the emotionality of social relationships in learning. Recent learning research has shown a significant concern for how affect and emotion can support learning (e.g., DeBellis & Goldin, 2006; Ehret & Hollett, 2016; Gupta, Danielak, & Elby, 2010; Jaber & Hammer, 2015; Nemirovsky, 2011). To understand the import of emotion to social relationships and learning in animal rights activism, I take an emotional configurations perspective (Vea, 2018, under review), which deemphasizes identifying "internal" states and instead seeks an understanding of how participants in social activity configure relationships between feeling, sense-making, and practice. In this view, emotion is comprised of social practices (such as emoting and managing emotions) and is implicated in other social practices. For instance, ways of feeling can serve as "felicity conditions" that make other practices more effective (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 85; see also Austin, 1975). For a politics of learning, emotional configurations foreground emotion's role in shaping how people understand political possibilities and the means for achieving them (Gould, 2009), how ideological convergence is achieved in interaction (Philip, Gupta, Elby, & Turpen, 2017), and how people come to identify with collectives engaged in political struggle (Ahmed, 2004).

In my work on emotional configurations, I demonstrated how learning researchers can understand ways of making sense of feelings in practice as learning outcomes in their own right. Building on the work of Rogoff (1995, 2003), I proposed the construct of guided emotion participation to name the "provision of opportunities, along with normative pressure, for others to participate in particular ways of feeling" (Vea, 2018, under review). Though the initial examples I presented were facilitator-led in ways that marked them as explicitly educative, Rogoff's original concept specified that the guidance in guided participation was meant "to include but go beyond interactions that are indended as instructional" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 284). Participants in learning activities establish shared meaning and shared social practice in a broad range of ways, some of which appear more casual. Given that emotional configurations—the linkages that cohere between particular ways of feeling, sense-making, and practice in learning—enable and constrain political possibilities, I propose that guided emotion participation may become especially consequential when learners develop explicit understandings about what emotion is "good for." Such understandings can become occasions for instrumentalizing emotion.

Methodology and methods

This paper is part of a larger study on learning in the course of animal rights activism (Vea, 2018, 2019, under review). The methodological approach is based in sociocultural understandings of learning, which have since Vygotsky included attention to the relationship between thinking and affect (Bakhurst, 2007; Herrenkohl & Mertl, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987). Sociocultural theory and approaches are also well tuned to the operation of power because they consider relations between people, rather than focusing on the individual as unit of analysis (Esmonde, 2017). By treating emotion as implicated in social practice, my approach extends conceptualizations of learning as changing participation in practice (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and suggests the fruitfulness of examining practice and interaction in situ. Of particular interest here was the way emotion was expressed, understood, and worked on in the context of developing and maintaining social relationships between activists.

This research was conducted with DxE's SF Bay Area chapter, the original chapter of the network, which was founded in 2012. By 2017, the chapter had approximately 150 active members according to organizers. The participants in the chapter were mostly White, with smaller proportions of Asian, Latinx, and Black activists. Organizers in DxE espoused an "abolitionist" approach to animal rights and described direct action as a lever for shifting societal norms around the use of nonhuman animals. For example, DxE organized protests at grocery stores and restaurants. They also conducted "open rescue" operations in which they publicly disclosed their identities while video-recording conditions in agricultural facilities and removing ill or injured animals. Significant movement activity was dedicated toward the internal development of DxE's activist ranks, politicizing vegans and preparing them to take direct action. This work involved the potential for social sanction from the activists' nonvegan friends, family members, and professional colleagues. In this context, the maintenance of strong networks of social support within DxE was seen as critical to the achievement of external political goals.

The study used participant observation and ethnographic interviews to understand how people learned to become animal rights activists and participate in the valued practices of the group. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation, have been used in the learning sciences to understand communities of practice, cross-setting participation in learning activities, and long-term developmental changes (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002; Jackson, 2011; Roth, 2001). I engaged in participant observation with DxE SF Bay Area between December 2014 and May 2015 and again between October 2016 and July 2017. Settings included disruptive protests, social gatherings, trainings, outreach events, working meetings, and other events. During the research, I positioned myself as a non-member vegan whose purpose for participating was to understand how learning happens in DxE. The balance between observation and participation shifted contextually. For instance, I participated fully in social gatherings, trainings, and workdays, but with one exception early in the fieldwork did not participate in protests or other direct action. Following the conventions of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), I wrote fieldnotes on these engagements, which became a primary data source. I conducted formal interviews with 20 current and former DxE activists, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview participants, who were recruited through an email announcement sent by DxE organizers followed up by in-person announcements and direct invitations during fieldwork, included 10 women and 10 men. They ranged from early adulthood to middle age and were majority White, with two identified as Latinx, one as Asian, and one as biracial. I asked them about their personal stories of changing involvement with respect to vegetarianism, veganism, animal rights, and activism activities.

Following an inductive round of open coding, for the purposes of this paper, analysis proceeded by coding all references to community and friendship between activists across the data corpus. This process allowed me to look across the data on relationality in DxE and identify patterns in the ways people made meaning about their relationships and the emotion that cohered in them. Rather than make claims about internal states, I focused on sociocultural constructions of emotion exhibited in language use (Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990) and in practice (Reckwitz, 2012). Such constructions reveal how individuals and groups learn to make meaning of emotionality and its relationship to the practices of social movement participation, as well as to the "political horizon" (Gould, 2009) of "total animal liberation" toward which this participation is oriented. In the following section, I highlight three such patterns: community enjoyment, "empowerment" through community, and the cultivation of community feeling. The first is about valuing relationships in themselves. The second is about how community feeling shapes what people can do and become as a matter of learning. The third is about how to make community feeling happen in order to support those strategic ends.

Emotion in "the community" and possibilities for learning

During my fieldwork, both current and former DxE activists spoke frequently about the importance of "the community" to life in DxE. It was both a source of intrinsic enjoyment and a key feature of the explicit theory of change that DxE espoused. How activists learned to take up emotional configurations related to community needs to be understood within the context of social movement participation. Scholars of social movements have argued that the costs and risks of participation are an important causal factor in understanding patterns of participation

(for an overview, see Snow & Soule, 2010, pp. 112-116). Activists in DxE sacrificed time and monetary resources, faced social sanction from friends and family, and risked legal repercussions. Enjoying the community, and drawing strength from the good feelings it provided, was essential to how learning unfolded.

Community enjoyment

The first emergent theme is community enjoyment, the intrinsic value placed on being part of the DxE community that derived from the positive feelings that spending time together engendered. The very first DxE event I attended was a protest in San Francisco in December 2014. Before the actual protest, activists gathered in a public square to find out the plan and rehearse the elaborate staging, which involved the recitation of a poem and the use of a metal wire enclosure as a prop. A reflection in my fieldnotes registered my surprise, as someone new to sustained activist organizing, at the community feeling I noticed:

> One thing that was really striking was how as people showed up at the Beale St. Plaza, there were tons of hugs. It was like a family reunion. Everyone (or almost everyone) seemed to know everyone else, and it was clear that many of these relationships have been built over a long time. (*Researcher fieldnote, December 7, 2014*)

This pattern repeated frequently over the next two and a half years of my fieldwork, and I came to understand the depths of people's relationships with one another in DxE. As Bruce, a White tech worker and activist, said to me once about the norms of interaction in the group, "We're in DxE, so we hug."

Several activists referenced the centrality of "the community" to their joining DxE or solidifying their participation. For example, Ethan, a White, gay activist, described in an interview what it was like to visit the SF Bay Area chapter before deciding to relocate to Oakland from New England. "I just thought everyone was like so fun," he said. "Abhi was so funny, Lucy too, Roger just really wise and well versed in like union stuff and social movement stuff, and Roxy is so bubbly and hilarious. So it's so many people, and I loved every one of them so much." The enjoyment of the community during his visit, and the impression that they made on him that they were well organized and effective, convinced Ethan to move there permanently. DxE SF Bay Area held regular community events that were focused on socializing and enjoying one another's company. Krystal, a White traveling nurse who volunteered extensively in DxE during her time living in the Bay Area, grinned as she explained during an interview why potlucks were her favorite community event:

> It's just fun to try everybody else's food, and have people come into your house, and really be warm and welcoming, and do fun things like singing or dancing, those kinds of things, at the potluck. I just really like having people over at my house and eating food and cooking and that sort of thing.

For Krystal, being part of the DxE community meant that she could count on regularly occurring parties with people she cared about. These activities were intrinsically enjoyable to her.

Many activists, like Krystal, also lived in "activist housing." Boarding together with other activists was a way to manage costs in the high-priced Bay Area housing market, but it also provided opportunities for bonding and hanging out. Roxy, mentioned earlier by Ethan, was a recently graduated university student when I interviewed her in the spring of 2017. I asked her to describe a typical day, and she laughed:

> You cannot get work done in my house. There's so many roommates, and I love them so much. So there's a lot of screaming and laughing and wrestling in my day too. Usually in the evening, when I'm done with everything. I goof off. I can't not goof off. […] They're so fun. The other day we all went out and played hide and seek. After I finished all my finals, I was like, can we play hide and seek?

Living in a house with almost 20 other animal rights activists—a house that had gained notoriety in DxE for its rambunctiousness—provided plenty of opportunities for hanging out and enjoying the company of others. In these ways, DxE activists not only maintained strong working relationships. They were true friends, and in this sense, spending time together involved an enjoyment that was an end in itself.

In these ways, being in relation with other DxE activists meant feeling good and having fun. An emotional configuration developed that linked these feelings with practices of cohabitation, hugging, and playing games together. Taking up these relationships of meaning between feeling and practice was central to the identity

of DxE activist, as Bruce's statement, "We're in DxE, so we hug," indicates. Community feeling was intrinsically valued as part of DxE participation.

In situ understandings of "empowerment"

At the same time, "community" was also a pillar of the DxE strategy and theory of change, and activists developed an instrumental understanding of how participating in the community could support emotionality with implications for learning as the development of activist identity and growing participation in activist practice. An emotional configuration (a knot of meaningful relations between feeling, sense-making, and practice) of interest to learning in DxE involved what activists called "empowerment." Talk about empowerment by DxE activists drew together specific ways of feeling with moral sense-making about the use of animals and particular practices related to the use of voice and participation in direct action.

Because DxE aimed to make social change by disrupting social norms, organizers believed that they needed to achieve great enough numbers in their ranks in order to begin to overcome the existing, mainstream norms that authorize the instrumental use of nonhuman animals. In order to mobilize these activists, one organizer told me, DxE had to provide "a way for vegans to identify as activists and become the most empowered activists they can be." Examining language in use reveals that "empowerment" involved feelings of personal and collective efficacy, confidence, motivation, and inspiration. Part of taking up an activist identity in DxE thus entailed sharing in and practicing these feelings of empowerment.

Personal and collective efficacy involve the feeling or belief that as individuals and as groups of individuals working together people can make a difference and create change in the world (Snow & Soule, 2010, pp. 123-124). It was in the context of outreach and recruitment that Orin, an organizer and member of the Outreach Working Group, told me that it is "really useful to empower people." Orin believed that in bringing new people into the movement, it was important to demonstrate to them that DxE was accomplishing its goals and having effects in the world. In this way, DxE recruitment involved a promise that participation could confer on new members a feeling of "empowerment." Previous research on social movement participation also supports the relevance of this dimension of "empowerment" as a sense of efficacy, showing that people are more likely to participate when they can perceive that doing so makes a difference (Corrigall-Brown, Snow, Smith, & Quist, 2009; Forward & Williams, 1970; Paulsen, 2018).

Current and former DxE participants also spoke about "power" and "empowerment" in terms of a feeling of confidence they had to communicate about their convictions with others. Jo, a middle-aged White woman who had previously participated in DxE activities but was no longer active, put it this way:

> One of the things I feel like DxE really helped me with, and I'm glad I just remembered this, is that I feel like it helped me to be sort of more in my power with my voice. Like basically say, "Yeah I'm vegan. I'm not comfortable around—That's a dead animal. That's a tortured animal." "Why are you vegan?" "Because I don't want to eat a tortured animal."

"Empowerment," as confidence, was a desirable way of feeling within DxE because it supported practices of speaking up for one's beliefs about animal rights and addressing the potential conflicts that may arise as a result. In the face of questioning from others, the feeling of empowerment generated from being part of the DxE community solidified for Jo her identity and her ability to speak up for the moral sense-making that identity involved ("Yeah I'm vegan."). An emotional configuration connected feeling empowered with practices of using one's voice to speak up for this sense-making and of affirming one's vegan and activist identity.

Activists also discussed "empowerment" as being related to "motivation" and "inspiration." This dimension of "empowerment" was associated with the social milieu of DxE and the relationships people built together. Roxy explained:

> I'm motivated to go to protests, not just because I believe in it, but more than any other group that I protest with, I'm motivated to go 'cause those are my friends. And I don't want to let them down. I want to see them. And I want to like—We empower each other so much, too. That's key. Community empowers us. Community keeps us going. And it helps, like, inspire us. I just can't imagine how I would be if I was alone without my community, you know?

For Roxy, a feeling of "empowerment" was a force that propelled her into action. It was derived from her friendships within DxE and was related to a sense of responsibility she had for the other activists. The social "empowerment" she felt supported her "to go to protests" and persevere when she might otherwise give up. This

dimension of "empowerment" was desirable in DxE because it supported people's trajectories of maintaining and growing their involvement in practices of protesting and organizing others.

When I asked Roxy about any challenges she faced as part of being a DxE activist, her response revealed her understanding of the strategic consequences of not being empowered by one's community:

> I think the only thing that comes up for me sometimes is when I'm not with my community, or like somewhere, or like traveling. I'm going to Mexico a lot. And I hang out with... I love people, right? So I always end up hanging out with really different groups of people. But it really hurts when I'm alone, as in like, the only vegan. And I have to explain myself. And I believe so strongly in what I'm saying, but people make fun of me. Which is fine if I'm not alone! And they're eating animals. And that really crushes me. That makes me so sad. And then I'm like, maybe I am crazy. You know?

If ideology is an interactional achievement in learning (Philip et al., 2017), Roxy's response shows how community feeling, or lack of it, can shape that sense-making. If being with the DxE community made Roxy feel empowered, confident about her moral sense-making, and inspired to take action that would advance the world-changing goals based on those claims, being away from the community made her feel "alone," even when surrounded by people. The pain this involved for Roxy ("it really hurts") threatened her sense of confidence that community empowerment usually offered. Because for DxE the political project necessitated transforming social norms by calling them out as immoral and having the numbers to make such claims stick, Roxy's questioning ("maybe I am crazy") had important implications for whether such broad social transformation could be achieved.

Cultivating community feeling in support of the Liberation Pledge

Because emotional configurations in DxE made feelings like "empowerment" strategically valuable, they became targets for learning. Sometimes people worked on each other's emotion while they said they were doing something else. Sometimes emotion work was only a partial explanation of the purpose of an ongoing activity. I refer to these more diffuse, partial, or covert forms of guided emotion participation as *casual emotion work*. Here, I draw on an ethnographic example from the weekly DxE meetup events to suggest how learning to take up a form of practice that developed in DxE, the Liberation Pledge, was supported through casual emotion work.

The Liberation Pledge was a pledge that many, though not all, DxE activists took not to eat at the same table with others who were eating animals. My interviews showed that the pledge was interpreted flexibly by the activists who took it, with some enforcing vegan eating, some enforcing vegetarian eating, and others allowing other kinds of exceptions depending on the circumstances. Some activists wore a rubber bracelet or one made from a bent fork on their wrists, a kind of artifact that reminded them both of their commitment and of the community feelings of empowerment that could reinforce that commitment in action.

By mid-2017, the format of the weekly DxE meetup had been updated to include a designated time for a member of the community to be invited to speak about their experience with taking the Liberation Pledge. Though I witnessed several of these occasions, I report one illustrative case involving Mohan, a relatively new South Asian activist who shared his Pledge story with a crowd of activists in the Berkeley Animal Rights Center:

> [Mohan] said he'd found it awkward and difficult to tell his coworker friends he'd become vegan. They said, "Why?!" They would frequently go out together to get fast food. He said a common remark from them about food was, "Looks good but needs meat on it." He told of one blowout fight he had at one point where he told them that they were eating a "dead carcass" and it was "rotting inside" them. Once he took the Pledge and explained to them that he wasn't going to eat with them anymore if they were eating meat, it was awkward, but they eventually decided together to have certain "vegan days" when they would all eat together. He's starting a new job though and is nervous about what his new coworkers will think.
>
> (*Researcher fieldnote, April 29, 2017*)

Mohan's story was followed up by raucous applause in the crowd, an empowering show of support for his bravery in speaking up and his commitment to the Pledge despite how awkward it was to inform his coworkers and how nervous he felt about having to restart the process with new colleagues. As a form of casual emotion work, the ritualized telling of Liberation Pledge stories in the weekly meetup was an activity that could make the practice of challenging social norms stick for individuals who might feel challenged to stand up for their beliefs when they were not able to be present with their activist friends. The success of their collective goals would depend on it.

Significance

In this study, I demonstrated how emotion in relationships was central to learning to be part of the DxE activist community and taking up an activist identity. While being a member of the DxE community brought enjoyment and thus was understood by activists as a kind of end in itself, activists also expressed community feeling as "empowerment." This understanding involved an emotional configuration that tied community feeling to ideological security and practices of speaking up and participating regularly in direct action. Because the theory of change in DxE involved politicizing vegans *en masse* to challenge social norms, the feeling of empowerment that the community provided gained an instrumental dimension for organizers and rank-and-file activists alike. Further, other practices such as ritualized Liberation Pledge talks were organized as forms of casual emotion work, opportunities for activists to feel empowered and supported by the community that did not resemble overt pedagogy but which nonetheless had learning effects for individuals and the nonvegan social others they would encounter. This study is significant for the learning sciences because it builds on scholarship foregrounding the importance of relationality to learning, particularly in politicized contexts. It suggests ways in which the emotional dimensions of concepts like "politicized caring" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017), "politicized trust" (Vakil et al., 2016; Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019), and "relationships *de confianza*" (Teeters & Jurow, 2018) might be brought into the foreground as a way of explaining how the development of relationships can transform power and be used toward political ends, even if they are also ends in themselves.

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