

SERENITY NOW! A JOURNEY IN RECOVERY

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*God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things that I can,
And Wisdom to know the difference.*

This prayer, one that is used by hundreds upon thousands of 12-step members across the globe, has been one that I have been familiar with since an early age. I remember as a child hearing my father say it in what, I realize now, were some difficult times for us. Once I learned to read, I noticed the many versions of it around our home—some engraved in metal and hanging on walls, one version of it framed on my father’s desk, and even one carefully stitched into a throw draped over the living room couch. Curled up in it watching cartoons on Saturday morning, I never knew why these words mattered so much to my father, but this spiritual mantra had saved my family from destruction.

Two years ago, this past November 1st, I called my school’s principal and told him that I was sick with alcoholism and had to leave for a while. I didn’t know if I would be invited back when I returned, but I did it anyway. I can’t say why or how, but it just happened, kind of like in the classroom when something clicks for a student for a reason that, despite our best efforts, we cannot explain. The best I do is to say that it was a spiritual awakening—an act of God, one might say. All I know for sure, though, is that something bigger than me restored my sanity and spiritual integrity in that moment of surrender, an inner space that I hadn’t felt since my youth. Interestingly enough, however, this spiritual experience did not magically elevate me to some enlightened state or blissful existence; instead, I left home to spend 45 days at a treatment center where I learned to be a person again.

Without creating too much suspense, once my 45 days at “camp” had ended, the principal who I called that fateful morning did give me back my job, allowing me to return to the classroom as a high school English teacher. At first, I thought that what I had learned about the nature of recovery at treatment, and continued to learn through regular attendance at 12-step meetings, would only have meaning in my personal life and would not at all apply to my professional existence. I thought that it would only help me to do the spiritual work and to live the spiritual principles of the 12-step model. While I knew that my professional life would improve as a result of this work, I did not imagine that it could be so integral to my career, as well. I had always been drawn towards the work of holistic educators who provided me with a theoretical understanding of how spiritual ideas could be integrated into pedagogy and curriculum, but I never really considered that one’s own spiritual path and history mattered much in his or her professional and academic development.

However, as I began the more formal part of my recovery, almost four years ago, I also began to find a new faith in life that found its way into the classroom. As I began the work demanded of the 12-steps, work that required an intense vulnerability and rigorous honesty, my personal life changed dramatically and so did my professional life. I began to see the entire world, and my role in it, differently. It was through this intense and rigorous work that I not only found myself back in the classroom (and also engaging in my dissertation research) as a re-born teacher, but also as a student in the

rawest of forms, almost that of a child in his or her most vulnerable, yet exciting, of developmental stages. I had to learn how to talk again, how to walk through life again, and how to think again. (Many argue that alcoholism is as much a disease made worse by thinking as it is drinking.) While I knew that my brain was not as malleable as it once was, I also knew that it could, quite essentially, be re-wired and that I could learn to be a different person than I once was—better and more reliable. I was told by others who had gone through this transformation before me that I would eventually experience a complete “psychic change” and that it had already started.

This meant not only finding change in my personal life, but also my professional one. Similar to the disease of alcoholism, the “dis-ease” that I had felt for years, as both a student and a teacher, demanded that I either surrender to it or burn out. Like my addiction, fighting the system no longer worked, and my idealistic self-will no longer mattered. Paradoxically, what I had to do was simply surrender, accept, and, *then*, take action. Yet, as it was with my alcoholism and its progression, I had to suffer quite significantly before reaching my rock-bottom, the place where change became inevitable.

Looking back on my years in the classroom, it is now clear to me that, while I worked hard to “fix” the school system, the more I tried, the more my ego manifested itself in the classroom, in faculty meetings, and even in my doctoral studies. I honestly believed that the more I suffered as an underpaid, underappreciated teacher, the more legitimacy I had in my claim that the system was corrupt, as well as my ego-driven desire to fix it. I also thought that, if I furthered my formal education to the highest of levels, I could guarantee that success. I thought, for sure as many of us do in the West, that with *more* knowledge I could *force* change in the school system, one that that I loved yet decried at every opportunity. I had even blamed it for my drinking. Anger and resentment for it fed me with what I thought was a sense of real purpose, and I assumed that, if I could master the classroom, everyone and everything else would fall in line accordingly. However, what became so clear to me on that morning I surrendered to my own addiction is that, despite my best efforts and my own self-will, I really can’t change anyone or anything. Even self-knowledge wasn’t enough. What I found instead was that, since that moment of surrender on November 1, 2013, I could use the tools of humility, acceptance, surrender, and serenity in my teaching.

Every day, both in the classroom and in 12-step meeting places where people like me share their stories of experience and hope, I try to find a way to model vulnerability, to practice acceptance, and to live the principles of the 12-step program: patience, tolerance, compassion, and humility. Through this program, I have learned about the value of fellowship and service, as well as the concept of recovery. As such, I have worked to amend the wrongs of my past, to accept what I can’t control in the present, and to seek to change only what I can. Serenity. I have learned to live, as the 12-step mantra suggests, “one day at a time” with the help of others, and this has become the great challenge of my life. Yet, as the literature of the 12-step program also suggests, I cannot and should not “shut the door on the past,” which has demanded that I not only look at my personal and familial past, but also at my life as a student and, ultimately, as a teacher. My sponsor’s sponsor has often shared with me that one can only connect the dots looking backward, so in the tradition of *currere*, here it goes.

THE REGRESSIVE

Before I had entered the third grade, my family and I had moved 26 times. My mother was a non-profit director who helped fledgling churches and other service groups to find financial stability; when she was done, she moved on, and so did we.

Consequently, I became the perpetual new kid at school. During my elementary years, I was painfully shy and had trouble making friends. Those friends I did make also had trouble making friends, so I suppose we made sense. By middle school, however, I began to experience anxiety and depression. Peer groups that I had begun to notice seemed much cooler than me. I suffered in my academics. My report cards began to sound awfully repetitive, always something along the lines of: "He has so much potential, but has a terrible work ethic," or "Tim is so smart, but does not apply himself." At least, I thought, I had begun to build an identity.

As I began to adopt this new role, I found that I could get by through mediocre attendance. Some days, it was just too tiring to be such an under-achiever, so I just skipped class altogether. When I did attend, I either slipped into the shadows of the back row or, if that didn't work, acted out so that I would be asked to leave. Paradoxically, however, my dysfunction seemed to pay off, as I did begin to make friends, albeit the kind who also liked skipping school. So, once my family finally settled down in Colorado at the start of my 9th grade year, I knew who I had to be. I quickly fell in with the party-crowd, a group that I had learned to be very welcoming to kids like me—kids who were always looking for a high, for a way-out, and, most of all, for a sense of belonging. I thought I had finally found my niche, one that wasn't quite as lonely or demanding. I finally felt included for the first time in my life, and while there were a few flashes of success in school, thanks to my secret love of writing, and while there were a few teachers who inspired me, I often chose to sabotage it with a fight and a suspension, or just plain apathy. For me, nothing was worth losing my peer group, not even my own hopes and dreams. I learned to stuff hope, to quit dreaming, and to not risk any sense of vulnerability for fear of losing that feeling of being part of something. Thankfully, by my sophomore year and before any total implosion of self, I discovered I was a talented athlete and, ultimately, a highly recruited one, giving some structure to an already chaotic life made worse through weekly and, eventually, daily use and abuse of alcohol and drugs. My sport, lacrosse, provided me a refuge of sorts and certainly a different kind of education; during those years where I found stardom on the field, I learned that, if I could perform on the field, stay in relative shape, and ultimately play well enough to get into a good college, I would be fine. In a sport like that one, vulnerability and surrender did not have value, and this appealed to me.

On the field, at least, I had control. I could predict events. I didn't have to struggle to survive, but I could thrive. So, it was with my sport that I thought I had finally found my calling. The lacrosse team provided me refuge from what, by that time, had become an abusive household and a true substance use disorder. My team became my family, and I was valued by them. I also found that they loved to get high and drunk, like me, yet because they were popular and athletes, I began to think that it was okay to get black-out drunk or come to school high—that it was okay to simply be me. School became easier for me with this newfound confidence. My grades improved, and I did get in to plenty of good, some even great, colleges. I had made it, or at least that's how it looked from the outside. On the inside, however, I was suffering, and the only cure I thought could fix that was not my sport or my newfound success at school, but the all-too-familiar and common denominator of alcohol and drugs. During these early years, what I learned was that, as a white, privileged, athletically-talented male, it was actually quite acceptable for me to get drunk every once in a while, or even every weekend, all weekend. Boys will be boys, right? Besides, as long as I performed on the field and in the classroom, no one would care. I could go along living this divided life as long as I had to, and it worked. That is until it didn't, of course.

And so it was, for 20 more years, ever since I took my first drink in high school and on and on until that fateful day on November 1, 2013. I thought I had found the answer to my existential crisis, for my life as a human being. I had found an elixir through which I could not only escape, but also explore the world. On one hand, it helped me to avoid feeling at all. It provided me with a peer group and a sense of belonging. My sport even seemed to get along quite well with my party-going lifestyle. I was a lacrosse player with a chip on his shoulder who could party as well as anyone, and then, I could step on to the field and score goals, all while holding together a modest 3.5 GPA.

In college, I continued to rely on my game to keep me afloat yet also began to drink and take drugs more heavily, noticing that I was not using them as a social-lubricant as some seemed to, but that I began to do it more and more often as a way to cope with growing feelings of inadequacy, often marked by manic depressive episodes. I joined a popular fraternity, and while I didn't agree with the entire institution of it on fundamental and moral level, I nevertheless engaged in this culture for purely selfish reasons. For four years, I drank until I blacked out three to five days a week, seduced women, made crude jokes with my "brothers," and lived a life that was not at all attuned to what I thought were my core values. In secret, however, I read and wrote poetry, switched my major from Business to English Literature, took classes in the women's college, and studied Marxism, thus, becoming a closet artist and Critical Theorist. While I thought this would somehow redeem me, it only made my internal crisis worse. So, I dealt with my existential, epistemological, and ontological woes and my raging discomfort in my own skin through the use of any substance I could find that could allow me to blot out my existence, my hypocrisy. Pills helped too; all of the injuries I sustained on the field gave me more reason than I needed to get high during the day, leaving nights for the booze and hard drugs. I graduated, somehow. I almost missed my own commencement because I was passed out on the floor when my parents came in to take me to the fieldhouse.

When I left college and was earning a few bucks as a substitute teacher (beer money really), I soon thought I should make teaching my thing and started my formal teacher training. This was finally my chance to prove that I was not the drunk, morally-inept frat-boy-jock that I had been for years. It was my way to save face and to finally live a life I could be proud of, one that was more attuned to what I believed was my true self. I started my career as a teacher, one that I have excelled in, achieving that goal, to some degree, of finding my sense of self and my calling. Yet, again, when I truly look at it, all I thought about each day was happy-hour with some of my new teacher-friends and especially what we called Friday-Afternoon Club—a chance to get drunk, talk badly about students, parents, and administrators, and, most of all, complain about how little appreciated we were by them all. While this time might have been quasi-therapeutic for my colleagues, for me it had greater meaning; it allowed me a chance to truly live out my double-life as both a scared, helpless drunk and a smart, charismatic teacher-man. This was certainly more appealing than a jock, so I found my calling. It turns out, I was also quite good at it. I could relate to the kids, and along with an excellent teacher-education program provided by my alma-mater, I had the tools to succeed in the classroom. I could drink all night and do quite well. I had even convinced myself that when hungover, maybe even a tad bit drunk, I was a better teacher. When that wore off and I thought I would get caught, I would reel myself back in, quit for a while, train for a triathlon, and even have a family. I had plenty of ways to convince everyone that I was still okay. Again, it worked—it really did—until it didn't.

And so, the happy-hour afternoons turned into long nights drinking by myself and then week-long binges and, finally, at the end, days at school trying to stave off tremors with Valium and Xanax, both of which I told myself I needed because of the stress and anxiety of being an over-worked teacher. Eventually, real consequences began to set in. I lost my marriage and also any semblance of a spiritual existence, but I still had my job. I was still a good teacher. I used my academic studies and the façade of a progressive classroom to hide behind, and that seemed to work, too, in convincing myself that I had finally figured it all out. At the very least, I had everyone else convinced that I knew what I was doing. However, after over a decade of this Sisyphean existence, none of it worked anymore. The pain that I felt, that I often blamed on my teacher-martyrdom, got too bad, and something had to change, yet as I found, it wasn't going to be the system, but it had to be me and, this time, from the inside out.

THE PROGRESSIVE

For years, I thought that, if I could just hang in there, something might change—maybe a better school, a more thoughtful class, or a paradigmatic shift in the system—and then, I would be happy with my role as a high-school English teacher. So, I waited and complained and sometimes cried. What I often did was decry the system that I thought had been exploiting and repressing me. However, what is so painfully, yet beautifully, clear to me today, is that, in all of these cases, there was one common denominator—no matter what kind of day I had at school or how I felt about it, I had a beer or glass of wine or cocktail in my hand by 5 p.m. every day. I needed it. The alcohol comforted me, and to be honest, it worked for a while. As I have come to see today, through a process called “recovery,” it has been this way for going on 25 years, since 10th grade in fact.

For a good number of years, alcohol, and sometimes other drugs, helped me to keep my spiritual “dis-ease” at bay and, seemingly, also helped me to feel included in what I thought was the human experience, one based on struggle, crisis, and conflict. For a while, even into my young adult years, I thought that drugs and alcohol helped to “expand my mind,” leading me to delve deeper into the truth about who I am, who you are, and who we could be (or, rather, should be). I wrote many of my college and graduate-level papers buzzed, if not drunk, and fantasized that I was channeling something beyond myself—or someone other than myself—in an effort to better what I thought was a hypocritical, broken system of education. If only I had better schools, better teachers, and better grades, I would have been okay. If only my parents hadn’t moved two dozen times, and if I had not been ruined by countless schools that didn’t understand me, then I, too, wouldn’t feel so broken. Naturally, by the time I became a teacher myself, my delusion and disillusion became even more toxic; I believed that, by saving education “one student at a time,” I might be able to save myself.

Needless to say, all this did was create further division within myself and more conflict in my professional life as a teacher. Critical theory became my bread-and-butter, allowing me more than enough intellectual energy and fodder to continue my painful descent into insanity. I figured that, as long as the system was broken, I had purpose, yet I couldn’t and wouldn’t accept that I was actually part of it. I made it a habit to derail faculty meetings with a single comment aimed at exposing the truth of power and privilege. I refused to put standards on the board despite my superior’s instructions, arguing that it was beneath me to do so. I talked behind students’, parents’, and my colleagues’ backs, assuming that they were out to get me. It was a

miserable life, yet I continued to justify it as a self-professed teacher-martyr. What's more is that this gave me a reason to check-out—to drink myself to death. There was no love, not for self or other, yet I was nevertheless valued as a teacher, complete with outstanding evaluations and a swelling resume of accomplishments.

I sustained this existence for 12 years as a classroom teacher, yet on that early November morning, I broke. I couldn't sustain this identity any longer. I was at what recovery circles explain as the "jumping-off-point," the place where I knew I couldn't live with the drugs and alcohol, nor could I live without it. I knew at that moment that I had to find a new way of living—of being—yet I didn't know where to go. So, I reached out for help, willing to give up family and career to do so. With time, and the help of others in recovery, I eventually found an inner strength that I never knew existed, yet one that I believe had drawn me towards education and teaching in the first place. While I am still quite unsure about what to call it, I can say that it was something of the spirit, something that we all have. It is there to be tapped into, yet it takes courage, if not also a little bit of healthy pain and suffering, to do so. Today, through both my personal recovery and my professional work as a teacher, student, and researcher, I have been humbly offered that opportunity, renewing my educational spirit and capacity for understanding my role therein.

Even my dissertation study, aptly titled *Perceptions of School Reform in a Post-NCLB World: A Cathartic Recovery of the Purpose and a ‘Shining-Through’ of the Spirit of Education*, took on new meaning following that fateful day. In this study, I used a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology to look at how different stakeholding groups, from teacher to parent to superintendent and legislator, have perceived school reform since NCLB. When I first proposed the project, my goal was to use Critical Theory and Social Semiotics to analyze how and why NCLB has left such a regressive legacy, one that I hypothesized educators would continue to suffer within; however, what I found, after 12 in-depth interviews of different stakeholders in education, was that, through their suffering, as well as through my own ability as researcher to empathize with their suffering now that I was sober, we could, together, constructively transcend the limits of regressive thinking to a more spiritually-centered and purposeful place founded on joy, connection, humility, acceptance, and, quite naturally, love. We honestly and rigorously talked about our resentments for our schools, students, colleagues, parents, and bureaucracies. We began to recover from the regressive nature of these perceptions and pasts. It was as if the pain and suffering that we had all endured over our careers, coupled with the opportunity to share the story of it, had given us permission to experience a healthy and safe “rock-bottom” of sorts, one out of which peace, if not also grace, was found. This surrender is the essence of recovery, at least as I have come to understand it.

What's more is that it is these moments of connection to my spiritual calling as a teacher and researcher that I find to be—that I have always known to be but didn't fully recognize—so rewarding and sustaining. Since surrendering to my brokenness, I can carry myself through my work with more integrity and vocational sense of calling than ever; I don't have to pretend anymore to have it all together, worrying about the codes of conduct, or even what's appropriate for students to hear and see in me as their teacher. Today, in my high school English classroom, as we study the ontological plight of Hamlet or the metaphysical fall of man in Milton's cosmic world of *Paradise Lost*, I don't just stick to the text; rather, I share my story of suffering, of inaction, and of my fall from grace...and back into it. Of course, I also make sure to share my happiness as a result of this recovered life and hope that I aptly model the spiritual life of service

that has become my vocation in the classroom and my fortitude outside of it in 12-step rooms, at home with my family, and in the wider community.

THE ANALYTICAL

Today, I can say with utter confidence that I do not suffer from the disconnection I learned as a child and that my drinking and drugging helped me to mask. Today, I know that I am both a teacher and a student on a very personal, vocational journey in recovery. In 12-step circles, and as I have come to know it on both a spiritual and pragmatic level, recovery means finding solutions through simple actions, such as sharing my story with others who need my help and, often, asking those same people for help of my own. Recovery also asks us to willingly walk through the wilderness of our past, openly accepting our role in the making of it. In order to recover, one must also be willing to feel it in all of its intensity. For me, now that I don't have anything to use or abuse to cover that up, I have no choice. Drinking is not an option anymore, so I have to use different tools—a new pedagogy of sorts—based on faith and action. I don't have to do it alone. I have a community of people to rely on, whose stories have shown me a new way. I have become a student again in every way, shape, and form, and when called upon, I get to teach others who are struggling the way that I had. This is my privilege and my service, one not at all too far removed from the sense of “agency” and “vocation[al]” calling (Hansen, 1994) that I had early in my teaching career, yet lost somewhere along the way.

Before I surrendered to my addiction, I tried everything to stop drinking and to keep my life in order; I read and applied just about every possible theory that could help with my problem of resentment, both in and outside of the classroom. I thought that self-knowledge would fix me, yet it just made me more a witness to my problem than a part of it. Even through years of graduate level study and with exhaustive knowledge of the who and what of curricular theory, this created only an epistemological front that I thought I needed to justify my existence. Theory, as its Greek root theōros suggests, implies that we are only just spectators of the spirit. With this comes a certain measure of humility and surrender, right-sizing my intellectual intentions; self-will can take me only so far. I cannot just keep filling myself up with theory and modern knowledge, because these forms of knowing, while important in my academic development, will not alone grant me the “wisdom” that I seek in living the undivided life, both personally and professionally—or the ability “to know the difference.” This has less to do with disconnection and more to do with an ontological awareness that I am part of something bigger than myself and not just a passive witness to it. While my intentions might be clear to me at any given moment, I must make room for the kind of cathartic growth that disappointment can offer.

THE SYNTHETICAL

Integrity—that is what I have learned through this process and what I am still learning today. It has changed me from being a hapless, thankless teacher to a happy, thankful alcoholic and teacher. Parker Palmer (2009), teacher, activist, and holistic educator, explains this “integrity” as “the state of being entire, complete, and unbroken,” the “human self in its unimpaired, unadulterated, or genuine state” (p. 8). For me, this does not only denote a synthesis of the self and other, but that of the inner and outer, not only an existential process of discovery, but also an ontological process of healing. He goes on to say that, when we refuse to live with integrity, we become deeply “divided” and, like so many schools, often then resort to

“compartmentalizing,” a trait that, while prized in many institutions of higher learning and society, is nevertheless a “six-syllable name for the divided life” (Palmer, 2009, p. 8). I felt this division every day and every night for years, and it wasn’t until I actually surrendered to my brokenness, as both a teacher and an alcoholic, that I was able to become unbroken. Quite paradoxically (paradox being another important part of living Palmer’s “undivided life”), the only way to become unbroken is to be broken, and the only way to be broken was to have been whole. While often painful in the moment of transformation, this learning process has been rewarding, and not just for me but, I believe, for my students as well.

Many who recover from addiction experience this connection between their inner and outer lives, so I am not unique or special, but rather have to remember that I am just another drunk (and teacher) who has been granted a second chance. Yet, it should be recognized that this hasn’t been without some real action and work, some of which I can’t help but think has implications for how and why I teach. As both a student of recovery and a trained scholar in curriculum and instruction, this seems to be a natural step for me to take—in this case, not from theory to practice, but from practice to theory.

As much as recovery means finding solutions through simple actions, such as being honest, asking for help, and trusting others, it also has asked me to willingly walk through the wilderness of my emotions and my past, an often uncomfortable experience. In order to keep this sense of calling, or my sobriety for that matter, I have to be honest, to face my fears, to make amends, and to look at my role in the disillusionment that dominated my teaching career and do so without shying away from it. This has found its way into my teaching on a daily basis. Today, I admit when I am wrong. I apologize to students when I get angry with them or take their adolescent apathy personally. I manage the classroom out of what I understand to be love and try not to assume anything about who my students are, what they are going through, and how I can fix it. These newfound pedagogies have become more natural for me today, given that I have to live them in order to survive my disease.

The work of holistic educational theorists help in defining what a life of “recovery” in teaching looks like on a curricular, operational, and pedagogical level; Palmer’s (2009) work, as well as that of Ron Miller (1992), John Miller (2007), Clifford Mayes (2003), Rachel Kessler (2000), Nel Noddings (2003, 2005), and others provide insight into what it means to have the “courage to teach” (Palmer, 2007) with integrity and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for arriving at the “undivided life” in education. As a graduate student, I had many opportunities to study these wonderful theorists and their ideas, many of which I have tried to put into practice over the years. However, now that I am recovering, from both the numbing affect of alcohol and the anger and resentment I once felt for the system of education, their ideas have become even more useful and enlightening.

The inner-teacher that holistic educational theory speaks of, one that I have begun to uncover through my own recovery, can be found within each of us. It is this inner space that our inspiration and sense of calling comes from, that I know not only led me to finding sobriety, but also will sustain me as a teacher in the complex and conflicted world with which we are now faced, particularly within the educational landscape. I am not only beginning to develop the tools to navigate this world with integrity and humility—thus, recovering the soul of my teaching—but I have also learned that I have an active part in the woes of our schools. This is, undoubtedly, a sobering thought, but so should it be, and I am thankful for that, for at least it provides a way for me to

connect to my past in a positive way.

Seeing both the complex “temporal and conceptual” (Pinar, 1975, p. 1) relationship between my past and my present offers me the opportunity to really examine what my intentions are as an educator and provides a way to reconceptualize these efforts. This profoundly simple, yet intimidatingly complex, process of reflection and renewal reminds me of Pinar’s 2005 lecture paper entitled, “The Problem with Curriculum and Pedagogy,” within which he called for a reconceptualization of what we value in education, as well as how we go about the process of educating. Here, Pinar draws upon Montaigne’s concept of autobiographical “study,” explaining its ontological value for educators as a more expansive way for one to understand his or her intentions and activities. Citing McClintock (1971), Pinar goes on to argue that it is through study that one can see beyond the limiting construct of instruction and look towards how nature, faith, and reason work together to help one understand one’s true situation. Paradoxically, he also argues that the will can go only so far in the effort to reinvent the self and that through dissimulation we can fully discover a real sense of relationality and attachment—the purpose of any educational endeavor in my experience. This process of letting go to connect directly speaks to my recovery from the disease of addiction, as well as the dis-ease I have long felt as a student and teacher. As I look forward towards my continued process in recovery, as both a sober person and educator, the Serenity Prayer, along with all of the lessons and tools of recovery that I have learned along the away, will continue to put my “mind in its place” allowing me, for once, to feel somewhat “placed together” for the first time in my life (Pinar, 1975, p. 13).

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