# Miracles and Monstrosities

## John Dewey and the Fate of Progressive Education

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### Introduction

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Dear Reader:

Our parents grow old, and eventually die. At least that's how it typically unfolds, the child outliving the parent, the child ultimately orphaned. My father is in his seventies now, and he talks of twilight and J. Alfred Prufrock, and sometimes he walks—hobbles, he would say—with a cane. I feel compelled to ask him questions. And I'm reminded of what Erik Erikson says about the end of life:

> Potency, performance, and adaptability decline; but if vigor of mind combines with the gift of responsible renunciation, some old people can envisage human problems in their entirety (which is what "integrity" means). . . . Only such integrity can balance the despair of the knowledge that a limited life is coming to a conscious conclusion, only such wholeness can transcend the petty disgust of feeling finished and passed by, and the despair of facing the period of relative helplessness which marks the end as it marked the beginning. (Erikson 1964, 135)

This letter exchange began when I asked my father, an educator, why he so often speaks of progressive education as a failure. This project is an exploration of that question. It's also a son's effort to open integrity's door, to

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invite an older mind's vigor and wisdom, at a time when the body taunts the old man with "petty disgust" and "feeling finished." There's integrity in this for the younger man, too, and humility: a reminder of all that's left to learn, the work that's still undone.

We discuss John Dewey in these letters, and my dad reminds me that Dewey's work, like his own, like mine, will never be finished. The projects of progressive education—working in democratic association with others, solving common problems for the common good, mobilizing powerful identity stories—are never complete. Knowing that the work will never be done can make it difficult to commit, but to see something as unfinished is really the only way to begin.

These letters have been collaboratively revised over time. Any names of students are pseudonyms. My father and I are grateful for this journal and its continual call for reflections on the subjective experience of school life.

T. Elijah Hawkes

## Individuality: "Something to Be Wrought Out" (Letter 1)

October 15, 2011

Dear Elijah:

On the day I started typing this letter I was at my second home in Kigali, Rwanda, pondering your questions, when I was suddenly distracted by the sharp sound of metal scratching outside in the yard. I looked out to see your little stepbrother—child of my old age—with Agnes, our cook, the two of them holding and sharpening a long (and I mean long) knife on a big stone. My immediate thought was of the ground-down stone I had seen two weeks earlier outside the church in Nyarubuye ("the place of stones") in Rwanda's eastern province, where men and boys had sharpened their machetes in April 1994 en route to killing some thirty thousand of their neighbors.

But the knife sharpening that interrupted my work was for the throat of a chicken. Over the previous week, your little brother had been talking about how much he wanted to kill that bird; he had been chasing the poor thing with a stick around our compound nonstop. (I was reminded of that first illustration in *Where the Wild Things Are*: Max, fork in hand, evil in eyes, running after his dog.)

Some months have passed now, but I can still picture Agnes standing there with one foot on each wing, pulling the chicken's neck up and back so that she and the boy could saw off the head, which they did successfully, blood splattering in huge drops on a bed of bright green banana leaves.

That blood on those leaves struck me as quite beautiful. It bothered me then, and even now, to have this sensation at this scene of carnage. Also as I watched, I remembered how some 60 years ago my cousin, Little Charlie, and I argued about the best way to kill a chicken. My dad always chopped off the head, while Charlie's father strung the bird up and slit its throat. I liked the head chopping because the chicken would inevitably run around the yard for some seconds after the decapitation.

They were dipping the dead bird in big pot of boiling water as I turned back to my computer to address your questions. You had asked me to begin our dialogue by spelling out some of my current views on progressive education. You had asked specifically that I address an assertion I had made that the progressive education movement has been a failure, at least compared to other social movements of the twentieth century, the Civil Rights movement, for example.

Sitting there in Central East Africa, I considered what passed for education in the schools throughout that region—be it preschool or graduate level—and all that I saw was the top-down, rote memorization of facts, facts, facts. Nothing that John Dewey would have called real learning: he once described this rote process as little more than the creation of human calculating machines.

I felt perplexed. You know this from your days working in West Africa and your visit to Rwanda: compared with most of Africa and much of the rest of the world, I think we agree that the schools in the West at least appear to be pretty darn progressive. Yet appearances are often indeed misleading, and here in the twilight of my life and career, I continue to stand by my assertion that the progressive education movement has been a failure. There are exceptions, about which you know more than I. But on the whole, even among reform-minded teachers and educators, there is scant evidence that what passes for progressive reform is *really* progressive in the most fundamental and, I'd say, most powerful ways. My measuring stick is derived from Dewey's own philosophical and social vision.

As a professor at the University of Massachusetts Graduate School of Education in the mid-seventies, I began delving into Dewey, reading and rereading two of his works in particular, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *Democracy and Education*. I was very critical of much that was happening in the reform movement of that day, especially all the business about meeting individual needs, much of it under the banner of "humanistic education." (For several years I had been using Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* to help teach some of Freud's basic concepts: Cat as Ego, Fish as Super Ego, and those Things representing the Id. So I didn't hesitate to use *The Lorax* as

part of my critique of education reform. It seemed to me that far too many reform-minded educators were caught up in the consumerist business of making and selling "thneeds" to meet the individual's supposed needs.) At some point, I decided to check out my dictionary's definition for "progressive education," and what I found surprised me. Webster, in the *New World Dictionary*, stated that progressivism was "an educational system stressing individuality, self-expression, etc." (1970). Wow! Maybe I was wrong. But, no, in none of Dewey's work—at least, in none of the books I was reading—had I ever seen that the individual was the be-all and end-all of education.

And what about today? When you and I agreed to exchange some e-mails on this subject, I wondered if current, mainstream definitions of progressive education were still emphasizing this kind of self-centeredness. Sure enough, using the Encarta dictionary of my word processing program, I found "progressive education" defined as a "20th-century theory of education that stresses children's self-expression, an informal classroom atmosphere, and individual attention."

We know, of course, that Dewey sought to underscore the needs and potentials of individuals, but at the same time, often in the same sentence or paragraph, Dewey touted the power of creative association, of what he termed "the miracle of shared life and shared experience" (Dewey [1920] 1959, 211), the real learning that takes place between and among individuals—groups of individuals, associations, nations, and so forth—wherever problems exist, be they in politics or on the playground; or in the back yard where a boy and a woman are working together to kill a chicken; or, come to think of it, working together over the Internet, a father and his son exploring an issue with an eye toward making some social and historical progress.

The idea of problem-solving, scientific in nature, through association with others was more important to Dewey than any notion of individual advancement. In fact, he considered individualism "in a social and moral sense as something to be wrought out" (Dewey [1920] 1959, 194). Consider Dewey's words alongside those found in the dictionary definition quoted above: "Apart from associations with one another," Dewey stated, "individuals are isolated from one another and fade and wither; or are opposed to one another and their conflicts injure individual development" (Dewey [1920] 1959, 188). The extent to which twentieth-century educational reforms have centered on meeting individual needs is the extent to which these same reforms have fallen short of progressive philosophy as articulated by Dewey himself. It deserves repeating: "Individuality in a social and moral sense is something to be wrought out." In Dewey's phi-

losophy, the individual has little or no meaning apart from the active process of working with others to advance the common good.

Speak to us, John Dewey, speak: "Society is the process of associating in such ways that experiences, ideas, emotions, values are transmitted and made common. To this active process, both the individual and the institutionally organized may truly be said to be subordinate. The individual is subordinate because except in and through communication of experience from and to others, he remains dumb, merely sentient, and a brute animal" (Dewey [1920] 1959, 207).

In short, Elijah, I view the progressive education movement to be a failure because twentieth-century American education, while often parading as progressive, has been hijacked by that "mighty ruler" Nietzsche talked about—that ruler called the Self! I think of Ishmael's words in *Moby Dick*, depicting the crew of the Pequod as "isolatoes all" (Melville [1851] 1956, 100), individuals bound together by the tyranny of their mad, powerful, egocentric captain.

Dewey worked from a huge philosophical and historical canvas, with emphasis on the power of creative association in a problem-solving process, which had emerged in an evolutionary time frame, which has unique implications for each historical era and its challenges, challenges that can never be met by individuals standing alone. Nor, for that matter, can those challenges be met by individuals living in conformity with others, their self-identities shaped by social forces designed to make them feel secure while keeping them in place, often in the name of liberty, freedom, and democracy. Dewey shared Tocqueville's fear of "the tyranny of the majority."

In *Individualism Old and New* (1930), published on the eve of the Great Depression, Dewey argued that agents of progressive change must embrace and find agency within the very social, economic, and historical forces that were shaping their society into larger and larger "corporate" entities and associations. Passages in this book foreshadow Paulo Freire's use of the concept "praxis," whereby the very act of learning constitutes individual and associative empowerment and prophecy, an entering into history as agents of creativity and progressive change, a far cry from self-centered individualism and the much acclaimed goal of "self-actualization." As stated above, the process of creative association must transcend "both the individual and the institutionally organized," and I think Dewey would perhaps also include here political parties and institutions, left or right. For Dewey, "individuals who are not bound together in associations, whether domestic, economic, religious, political, artistic or educational, are monstrosities" (Dewey 1930, 81–82).

In short, Elijah, I hereby assert that a majority of reform-minded people actively committed to educational reform don't have a basic understanding of the core ideas in Dewey's work, especially his emphasis on the miracle of communication, shared experience, and the creative power of association. Dewey labored to bring about fundamental social and historical change, not to advance self-actualization through the satisfaction of merely individual needs.

So the dictionaries have it wrong. I submit their entries as evidence that progressive education has failed. Show me some examples of where what Dewey called "real learning" is being practiced, and I'll show you ten thousand cases of the bastardization referred to above. Dewey called for the development of mature human beings. He called for the most difficult thing that any human can hope to accomplish in a lifetime—to grow up.

I've got more to say about this challenge of growing up, and more to say about that chicken's blood splattering on the banana leaves, but I'd best get this off to you for a response.

Love,
Dad

**In the Master's House (Letter 2)**

November 22, 2011
Hi Dad,

I've been thinking about your letter for some time. It's been a month now since you returned from Rwanda. It's November in Vermont, and here I sit looking out my window at an old apple tree, nearly leafless, a few apples hanging on, the very nervous ones, anxious about the fall, or the rotting on the ground, or the deer that may come for them. It's been pruned. It looks like an amputee, many gnarled limbs.

Gnarled things: I've been thinking about the monstrosities that you and Dewey name in your last letter: the individuals who are only individuals, people without association, without connection, the isolatoes, to use Ishmael's phrase.

I'm thinking of the recent middle school Halloween dance, where there were many monsters moving, mashing, dashing, milling about, sometimes dancing. There were witches and fairies, a robot, cartoon persons, super heroes, some simple masks hung on noses, and other elaborate plastic faces loosely hung over little heads.

One of the ghouls moved about with dark eyes, white lifeless skin, wretched teeth; he walked in and out of groups, constantly moving, seeking

something like a friendly gesture and yet finding only his usual enemies, his half-enemies, his sometimes friends, those other boys into whom he bumps at recess or who glare at him at lunchtime. It felt a bit like recess, actually, when outside after lunch this one moves about searching for association, for a pal, not knowing how to find one—rather, not knowing how to be one—and it invariably ends in strife. He is a great antagonist, and others reciprocate. He is also a misanthrope, petite of stature, and so he's a prime target for plenty of derision and outcasting. They can be very mean, but in meetings afterward, the boys are small-voiced, often sorry, sometimes giggling disarmed children. At recess they still look like little children—but there at the dance, they were monsters and supermen, killers and kooks, wolves and vampires.

This monster-masked boy moved about with hunched shoulders, unable to connect, cultivating his own ire and the enmity of others, angry, alone. I could see—with regret and a sense of my own future failure as an educator—the real human monster he might later become. He gets good therapy now, among the best services the Northeast has to offer. But he's among the most disturbed boys that educators and mental health professionals around here have ever seen. He's prepubescent now, on the cusp of leaving a child's body, on the cusp of never forgetting a childhood that was tragic in its abuse. What will he become when one day soon he marshals a man's body, drive, strength, and energy?

I've been thinking of the knife, and the adult guiding the knife, and the chicken's blood, and the age-old traditions you describe in your letter. But this boy has only known contortions of all that. In his home, cruel pleasures, violence, the blade of the knife, and adult body parts that no child should know too soon, or never in that way.

So, now, he is a disconnected one, an individual, unable to join hands, being robbed of the "the miracle of shared life and shared experience." This is an extreme example. But what would you and Dewey say about him? And the place of progressive education in his life? The place of a progressive educator in his life? My role?

I suppose you would say that my role is to connect him, to connect to him, to connect him with others, to meaningful tasks, skills, knowledge, goals; that this is our role with all kids. I would agree. I suppose, too, that we should discuss less extreme examples. There will always be outliers like him.

So what about the majority in the middle? Your argument is that to the extent that progressive education has embraced the misguided focus on the individual, it has failed, and that our charge is instead to cultivate the "creative

power of association"—not only for the welfare of the children in our classrooms, but "to bring about fundamental social and historical change."

Dad, I've actually seen a great number of schools that, in essence, function as small communal societies, where individuals are oriented to common tasks, where the dispossessed come into possession of themselves through creative association with others. I've been lucky to be a part of the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Expeditionary Learning network, and the Outward Bound Schools in New York City. And I see it in many classrooms where I now work in Randolph, Vermont. There are a lot of school communities that worship the self very little, in contrast to a world outside our schools that worships the self very much. I have seen amazing educators create very healthy small school societies, even while the society outside their doors is largely individualistic and ailing.

This is no small achievement. But what I don't think is being achieved in these schools—and not due to any shortcoming of their own—is "fundamental social and historical change." I wonder, is this too big a charge for progressive education?

Many educators have a vision of a society shaped differently than ours is now, but we work within an institution that, it seems, can do very little other than replicate the dominant structures of the society outside its walls. This is because that society builds those walls, pays for them, specifies their dimensions—through public policy, building codes, regulations—and that same society determines the curriculum standards, the outcomes that the student work hung on the walls must embody. We work in the master's house, with his tools.

Yes, (some) schools can (sometimes) help (some) kids move beyond poverty and despair, but most cannot, and I have seen many of the schools that can do this come and go—quickly. I've seen teachers break their backs, or leave before their backs break, because the work of "correcting generations of bad faith and cruelty"—to borrow a phrase from James Baldwin—is too much for a school to take on. Endemic poverty, chasms in access to health care, adequate housing, and livable wages—these are too much for schools to take on. Schools can help an individual feel a sense of belonging and purpose, through collaborative work with other individuals. But, in our country, a corporation is an individual, too—by law, I mean. And these individuals can just as well as people—perhaps more easily—become monstrosities, powerful agents, transnational in scale and therefore disconnected from political entity or community values that might hold them accountable for their actions in human terms. And the income gap widens.

And so the social classes—rich and poor—become disconnected, too, living apart and unaccountable to each other. And in Congress, the rights of the very wealthy, and the rights of corporate personhood, too often trump the rights of the child, and schools can't really fix any of this, nor the problems that result. I don't think this is a failing of schools. I think people should look to schools as one part of a larger puzzle of collective public health and economic well-being. Educators have a colossal role to play in the learning and maturation of children, in the shaping of future citizens, but we have only a small role to play in achieving the widespread structural social change our country needs.

So, I wonder, Dad, are we barking up the wrong tree when we—you, I, Dewey, others—enlist schools in social change? Are there other levers that we need to push? Should we join the progressive labor movement instead? There are many who believe that the demise of organized labor charts the demise of the middle class and the widening inequalities and widespread hardship that many now know in our country.

And at the same time I write this, I don't believe what I'm saying. It sounds more pessimistic than I feel. I go to work everyday, including this day, knowing that my colleagues and I can give children the gift of what it feels like to live another way: in harmony, in common, in love. I guess I'll conclude with this confusion. See you at Thanksgiving, and I look forward to your response.

Elijah

**Fostering Immaturity (Letter 3)**

January 27, 2012

Dear Elijah:

I have been digging even more into one of Dewey's lesser-known books, *Individualism Old and New* (1930), and your questions about the purpose of school and progressivism in the present age take me to a chapter called "The Crisis in Culture." Writing in the late 1920s, Dewey is deeply concerned with conditions that appear almost identical to those we're looking at here in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Dewey talks about the conformities of identity and behavior that accompany modern industrialism and the extent to which politics and education have come to reflect the economic system. He recounts the advent of the machine; the mechanization of labor; the revolution in steam, electricity, and transportation; the power of capital and the banks. Today we would speak of different technologies, and underscore social media

and virtual networks, but of course these same influences continue to work their way throughout the culture, including into the schools.

I think that Dewey would agree with you, Elijah, in that there is not much that the schools can do, and not much that the schools should do, to change the fact that public education mirrors the political/social/economic conditions of the culture at large. Thus, the schools are bound, and should be bound, to reflect the wider society.

Dewey discusses these economic forces in a manner that reminds me (as it perhaps did remind others at the time) of Karl Marx and the *Communist Manifesto.* Dewey wrote: "Economic determinism is now a fact, not a theory" (Dewey 1930, 119). And he continued on, Marx-like, to decry the dualism that splits individuals apart:

> The subordination of the enterprises to pecuniary profit reacts to make the workers "hands" only. Their hearts and brains are not engaged. They execute plans which they do not form, and of whose meaning and intent they are ignorant—beyond the fact that these plans make a profit for others and secure a wage for themselves . . . a complete separation of mind and body is realized in thousands of industrial workers, and the result is depressed body and an empty and distorted mind. (Dewey 1930, 131–32)

Sounds like Marxism, doesn't it? But it's not. Dewey's thinking entails a big twist in the Marxist tale. The twist springs from a psychology and a philosophy much more subtle than the ironclad notions of historical dialectics that had come to dominate the thinking of Marxism and Communism. Dewey's vision is not one of people being shaped by immutable historical forces, but of people shaping history themselves. His vision requires us to shape, elevate, and utilize our human identity as problem solvers, as scientific agents, as the creators of "a system of cooperative control of industry" where the inclusion of the many in decision making and social change will replace their current conditions of exclusion, where "cooperative control" will be substituted for the "present system of exclusion" (Dewey 1930, 132).

In the 1920s and 1930s, as we are seeing today, economic forces were dividing people, oppressing them, dividing their minds and their spirits, driving a wedge into a culture of haves and have-nots. Dewey's vision requires an imaginative embrace between human beings, an embrace that those economic and historical forces seem to be working against.

The subtlety of this position—and perhaps a weakness that we need to address—is in the fact that what may be deemed wrong, and in need of

change, should not—in Dewey's view—be deemed morally bad, or socially evil. In Dewey's view, even the biggest problems, especially the biggest problems, were deemed opportunities. Progressivism, as Dewey defined it, encourages people to engage in a love affair with the problems at hand, to form associations with others and engage in redetermining that which has been predetermined, that which has been given, that which will not disappear, but which can be transformed through the human imagination and collaboration.

With all this in mind—and keep in mind that Dewey is presenting his views on the eve of the Great Depression—the outcome that Dewey envisages for America (and perhaps the world beyond) is along these lines:

> We are in for some kind of socialism, call it whatever name we please, and no matter what it will be called when it is realized. Economic determinism is now fact, not a theory. But there is a difference and a choice between a blind, chaotic and unplanned determinism, issuing from business conducted for pecuniary profit, and the determination of a socially planned and ordered development. It is the difference and the choice between a socialism that is public and one that is capitalistic. (Dewey 1930, 119–20)

In other words, Dewey saw that "the corporate" organization of society would not disappear, nor should it; but it would *have to be* regulated, if not by the old players (the corporations and those who owned them), then by all players, in the public interest.

What about the schools? The same kind of thinking applies. Yes, the schools *are* (and should be) reflective of the dominant economic, political, and social interests that invest in the schools and expect a solid return. But I also think that Dewey was bent on undermining, subverting if you will, what he called the "money motif of our economic regime" (Dewey 1930, 127). Thus, after asserting that economic determinism is a reality, and that the schools can and should in fact reflect this reality, Dewey asks: "But what is our system for? What ends does it serve?" (Dewey 1930, 127).

Here's where the essence of Dewey's philosophy can be seen as wed to what I would refer to as his fixed and rock-solid values. Dewey has a vision—an end for educators to ponder—about what it means to be a mature human being. Education on the whole, as Dewey saw it in his day, and I'd say the same goes for today, was fostering immaturity in our citizens: "This immaturity is mainly due to their enforced mental seclusion;

there is, in their schooling, little free and disinterested concern with the underlying social problems of our civilization" (Dewey 1930, 127–28). He goes on to say: "The immaturity nurtured in schools is carried over into life. If we Americans manifest . . . a kind of infantilism, it is because our own schooling so largely evades serious consideration of the deeper issues of social life; for it is only through induction into realities that the mind can be matured" (Dewey 1930, 128–29).

This is a different valuation of immaturity than the one Dewey articulated 15 years earlier in *Democracy and Education*, wherein he describes immaturity as "a positive force or ability—the *power* to grow" (Dewey [1916] 2004, 41). In contrast, here we're talking about immaturity as an inadequate consideration of important social realities, an absence of positive intellectual and emotional development, an infantilism in schools and in adult society.

But the potential for growth is always there: always. This is Dewey's unwavering faith. He believes that not only is there a process of progressive improvement taking place in human evolution and history—a greater good for a greater number of human beings—but there is also a maturing process taking place, or that will take place in our species, if the right educational practices, that is, progressive educational practices, are instituted.

Of Dewey's efforts to define the purpose of progressive education, among the most concise and clear statements is this: "It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them" (Dewey [1916] 2004, 115). Amen! Progressive education without this end in mind risks being gravely misunderstood as a formal process without moral and ethical direction. It is a lack of this understanding—and in part it is Dewey's fault that he didn't better communicate it—that leads to the definition of progressivism we see in our dictionaries today: a focus on the individual's welfare alone—or one in which individuals cooperate, but toward ends that have nothing to do with the greater good of humankind.

There is a lack of compelling storytelling in our philosophy—stories about good overcoming evil—and so it can be misunderstood, and critics of progressive education will assert that there is relativism in our approach to teaching, that it is a morally directionless process, a means without a clear end in something good.

In a course called Identity and Democracy that I taught to high school seniors in the late sixties, one required reading was "What's Happened to Patriotism?" by Max Rafferty, a superintendent of schools in California at the time. His words from a graduation address were republished in *Readers*'

*Digest* for millions to read. Consider here what he said about American soldiers who became Communist sympathizers during the Korean war:

> These spineless, luxury-loving, spiritless "Americans" came right out of our classrooms. . . . They were "adjusted to their peer groups." . . . They were persuaded that the world was shortly to become one big happy family, with everyone loving everyone else. . . . It is our fault. We have been so busy educating for "life adjustment" that we have forgotten to educate for survival.
>
> It is not the fault of teachers—as individuals—that our profession has been brainwashed for a quarter of a century with slogans like "There are no eternal verities"; "Everything is relative"; "Teach the child, not the subject"; and—worst of all—"Nothing is worth learning for its own sake."
>
> The results are plain for all to see: the worst of our youngsters growing up to become booted, sideburned, ducktailed, unwashed, leather jacketed slobs; the best of our youth coming into maturity for all the world like young people fresh from a dizzying roller-coaster ride, with everything blurred, with no positive standards, with everything in doubt . . .
>
> . . . Our national nose has been rubbed in the dirt. The flag for which our ancestors bled and died has been torn down by a dozen comic opera countries. (Rafferty 1961)

Rafferty then calls upon Americans to rise up and put an end to America's role as an "international doormat," with the warning that "we educators had better not be caught withholding from the nation's children the wonderful, sharp-edged, glittering sword of patriotism" (Rafferty 1961).

I was always struck, even impressed—though never convinced—by Rafferty's rhetoric. What I am convinced of is that, as wrong as he was on the facts about progressive education, he told a powerful story steeped in emotional meaning that both reflected and promoted the views of millions of Americans. Rafferty critiques progressives for having no faith in eternal verities, in moral virtues, absolute goods, clear wrongs and rights. But Dewey did believe there was an absolute good. His life and work were, at the very core of his being, an act of faith in this goodness, in the same way that his contemporary and friend, Charles Beard, wrote about *Written History as an Act of Faith*. Dewey's was a kind of pragmatic and scientific faith, which explicitly embraced the idea of human social, historical, and evolutionary progress. The problem, for Dewey's contemporary followers, fu-

ture followers, including myself, and the problem for his legacy is that Dewey's definition of the good, and his faith in progress and moral goodness, like his ideas about individualism, are often difficult to discern and thus are easily misconstrued. Indeed, at the heart of the experimental, pragmatic process that Dewey championed, he regularly emphasized that there were three conditions that would accompany the same: "perplexity, confusion, doubt" (Dewey [1916] 2004, 144).

Perplexity, confusion and doubt—who would want to dive into a stream where the water was bubbling with perplexity, confusion, and doubt? Few would, and thus we hear Rafferty's critique of doubt as relativism, and his call to sharpen the certain sword of patriotism and cut down any who question America's goodness. Well, obviously this is problematic for any educator to profess: uncertainty and questioning are what learning is about. In various places in his work, Dewey noted that human beings are designed by nature to embrace the kind of problem solving that he was advancing; that human beings are programmed, if you will, to raise and then answer questions that help advance the social good. Even in certain reflections about war, Dewey sees the positive potential it has for human advancement: "Conflict of peoples at least enforces intercourse between them and thus accidentally enables them to learn from one another, and thereby to expand their horizons" (Dewey [1916] 2004, 82).

Dewey's glass is always half full! His belief was that, come what may, hell or high water, by evolutionary design, tomorrow could and would be better than today. So, I disagree with the critics who assert the relativism of progressive education. John Dewey believed in truths and absolutes embedded in social and historical reality. He possessed a faith, a god if you will, and he situated his faith in a narrative as grand as that of the Holy Bible. Agency, human agency, prophesy was part of this progressive religion. If Dewey had a conception of the Creation it would be that human beings are godlike creators themselves—creators for the good and the ill, but ultimately for the good.

Alas, this construction of evolutionary and historical reality, supported scientifically in Dewey's mind, is not always easily grasped in Dewey's works. Indeed, it's often obscured. Dewey and the progressives in his wake have largely failed to convey this bigger, broader faith.

In a series of essays called *A Common Faith* (1934), Dewey tackles the concept of faith directly, and the concept of God and the religious. He defines religious feeling as something separate from supernatural forces or deities. The religious, the spiritual element in our human striving is, well, the striving itself: having values, setting goals, and striving to make them real.

God—and he does use the term—can be found in "every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization" (Dewey 1934, 57). He goes on to say: "All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame" (Dewey 1934, 57). Unfortunately, passages like this can embolden those who accuse Dewey of relativism, for one could interpret him to mean that any experience counts: any emotional stirring born of the union of any ideal and any action.

But Dewey's god is not just any god. Dewey is a prophet of the common good. His spiritual feeling is one that comes from positing and striving to realize the progressive goals: the healing of unfairness, the correction of imbalance in how the world apportions deprivation to many and privilege to a few. The challenge for us, for you, is to remain focused on this end—the true aim of progressive education—to find our emotional stirring in the possibility of expanding fairness and freedom in our world. And we must be better prophets of this faith, so to dispel the uncertainty and doubt—not the uncertainty inherent in the learning process, but the confusion about what we intend to achieve for ourselves, our students, our society, our species, planet, and universe. Perhaps the issue for us, for you, now mid-career in public education, is not that schools are stuck replicating the dominant structures of the wider society, but that neither schools nor our society are being clearly guided toward a vision of what is good.

I leave you with this from Dewey; again, he is writing about the economic inequities of in the 1920s and the exaggerated, one-sided "emphasis upon business and the results of business" in American society: "The one-sidedness is accentuated because of the tragic irrelevancy of prior schooling to the controlling realities of social life. There is little preparation to induce either hardy resistance, discriminating criticism, or the vision and desire to direct economic forces into new channels" (Dewey 1930, 129).

Love,
Dad

## Optimism Is Important (Letter 4)

February 27, 2012
Dear Dad,

So your critique of Dewey is that he hasn't told his story, or prophesied his faith, in the right terms, and this is why there is such a misunderstanding of progressive education, with most people widely believing that it's all about individual wellness and not a larger story of collaboration and

human progress. The lack of compelling narrative has made the progressive agenda easily overwhelmed by other more powerful narratives, ones that serve the ends of individualist and corporate greed, rather than a public socialism and collective wellness.

I've added it to my bookshelf, *Individualism Old and New*. It's interesting to draw reflections from the work, written, as it was, at a time with so many parallels to the current day: economic depression and the extreme polarization of rich and poor.

One thing I don't hear you discuss yet is that it would seem, given how things unfolded in the decades after Dewey wrote those essays, that he was right: our country did move toward socialism. Those decades of the mid-twentieth century were terrific for their violence in the world, but there was also the reformation of American society under the New Deal and the establishment of a broad middle class and programs that reflect a priority of social welfare. We can't avoid the painful paradox that war, bloodletting, was a major engine in the economic recovery, but this doesn't diminish the fact that the fruits of the economic recovery were spread upon a table where, in our country, many more could eat. This can't be taken for granted, for we see today how the mobilization of a country in war doesn't necessarily lead in that direction: even our weapons and warriors can be privatized and used to enrich but a few.

I guess what I want to ask you is this: What about the great prosperity of the post–World War II decades and the strengthening of those fibers in the American fabric that weave us together rather than alienate us apart? Didn't Dewey get it right? Wasn't his story indeed told, and well told, for some time? And do we not now see a regression, a return to an immature society, where motives are self-centered in rather adolescent ways? Maybe this is your point, that the story was told and it took, for a time, but now we see that it needs to be told better. We need to grow up—again.

I know, from all we've exchanged in the past, that you have your own terms, your own narrative that—over the course of your long career, in schools and out—you have been using to tell this story of how human beings and societies progress, mature, grow up. From what you've told me, I know it's a hopeful story: that people do grow up, that we can grow up, and that societies also can become more mature.

The optimism—yours, like Dewey's—is important, I think, for so often we focus on what's not working, what's wrong, indeed what's evil in our world. Some of this probably stems from a proclivity for the apocalyptic, the doomsday visions that human beings seem to never be without. And some of it is the ever-present sense of Eden being lost, the longing for

return to wholeness that we once knew, animating a belief that things were better in the past. Neither of these sentiments is particularly productive in addressing social ills, but another reason we focus on negative dimensions of our world is, of course, our productive problem-solving nature: We highlight what's not working as part of our efforts to fix it. So it's not bad to focus on the bad, necessarily, if it helps us to make progress.

I tend to believe that we contemporary societies need to keep the past very much in mind and that progress—in many ways—is return: that we must retain allegiance to the small human groups in which our species evolved—body and mind—for otherwise we will be unwell in spite of our material progress. I believe that schools have a major part to play in this by creating small human communities that can nurture the child the way the child was nurtured during the latest formative period of our evolution, the past couple million years or so. This is what I'm working to create for the boy in the monster mask. I recently met with the adults in his life, two separate households, two different sets of expectations, three adults who love him but don't often share the same assumptions, values, consequences for misbehavior, incentives for good behavior, supports. I asked if the two households would be willing to come together, to establish shared assumptions, to see if we can agree to consequences and incentives, in school and out. We discussed routines on weekends, and who takes him to church, and whom he does chores with, and when on Sunday morning he gets a donut and juice. We decided what would happen next time he said he claimed to be sick but was really just trying to avoid the social trauma of school and go home early. We were trying to get on the same page. It's important that a young person feel that the adults of his village have shared expectations of him, and high expectations of him: that he is good, he is worth it, he is worth loving, he is loved, he can do better. It's important that young people know the village that it takes to raise a child. We have dissolved the village in so many ways in the modern day. Much of my vision for where we need to go involves a return to what we once knew: small human societies, with shared values, rituals, and lots of time together for hands-on nurturing and group work for the common good. "Progressive traditionalism," I've come to call it.

I understand your vision of progressive education to be less about school structure—in the way that I focus on the village or community structure—and more about the process, how we communicate, and the direction of our problem-solving work toward the collective good. This process involves surfacing personal stories, which allows for connections and associations

among people, who then together creatively and scientifically work to solve the problems, big and small, that are most important to us and our society.

You recently shared with me a paper you wrote called "The Social Utility of Historical Narrative," in which you describe the social studies curriculum that you mention in your last letter, Identity and Democracy. A guiding assumption was that "we are and become in relation to how we see ourselves being and becoming." This class was a sort of history of Western thought, or rather, a history of how the individual sees himself in history, bringing the students back to an animist worldview and then up to Judeo-Christian identity stories, through the Enlightenment, up to present day liberal-democratic identities, as well as contemporary dislocated identities, and extremist identities, and the light shed on all of this by Freud, Erikson, existentialists, and others. You rely on Erikson a lot, in fact, on his developmental stages. The point of the course is to help students understand how they understand themselves, and thus become more active agents, more competent prophets in making their own futures—something which democracy invites, indeed a responsibility that human consciousness and capacity obliges us to accept.

The problem this course confronts is a lack of historical narrative in the contemporary adolescent's self-concept, and a lack of personal agency in the definition of the child's fate—thus rendering the child susceptible to having his or her future controlled by others. There is still a strong focus on the individual here, and on how the self understands itself in history. And since you generally define progressive education as a process that marshals the miracle of shared experience, I imagine that some of what would make the class "progressive" is the extent to which this problem is approached collaboratively—in the classroom community and in the wider communities in which the classroom is situated in that particular place and time.

I believe, for you, in 1968 when you wrote your paper, the location was a private school in Texas. At one point in the course you have the students draw pictures of American flags, and you talk about what the flag means. Then you or your colleague sets one of the drawings on fire. It is a provocative event intended to stimulate students' awareness of how our sense of self exists in symbols and the stories those symbols carry. Is progressive education necessarily provocative? I think it must be so. It needn't be sensationalist, but provocative of deep thinking, yes.

The year 1968 was long before I knew you. Later, some years after I entered your life, you engaged in what I would say is another substantial effort in progressive education—outside the classroom. I don't know if you

would call it such, but it fits the definition of progressive education emerging in my mind as we write these letters: in content, the curriculum dealt with a personally significant essential (and existential) question; it focused on a contemporary shared problem, and in the process it was inherently collaborative, with solutions and meaning constructed with others.

The essential question of this social curriculum was "What about the children?" and it was asked in the 1980s, in the context of the proliferation of nuclear warheads and the missiles to deliver them, in mere moments, to anywhere. You wrote a booklet of that title, and you begin the booklet with "I am a proud father," and you tell a story of rocking an infant—me or my brother—upon your shoulder, and then you tell how you and other parents started asking "What if . . .?"

You gathered parents and teachers in schools, and you asked "What if a nuclear fallout intended for Montreal or Boston instead falls here, in our quiet Vermont town? Would we want the school nurse to stock morphine to kill the pain our children feel?" You were asking the community a powerful question: How would you want your child to die? And you and other parents and citizens formed an organization that joined the work of informing others about how the world was arming itself—and inherently preparing for war on children.

W. E. B. Du Bois asserts that "the cause of war is preparation for war" (1969, 46). As an admirer of Du Bois, you probably know the phrase. It seems both to connect to the "What about the children?" community mobilization and to be consistent with the basic premise of the Identity and Democracy course that "man is and becomes in relation to what he sees himself being and becoming," that to prepare is to imagine, and to imagine is to tell the story—and to tell the story enables it to be.

It seems to me the work of the progressive educator, as I reflect upon you in the role, and draw from these instances of your own work, is to surface the deep identity stories, to locate these personal stories in the context of contemporary social problems and gather with other people to solve them. Freire's pedagogical framework is similar to this, and I notice that you mention him in your first letter in this exchange. You rarely cite Freire, actually—but then he was more of a contemporary of yours, a peer. It is Dewey you go to as the father figure for the roots of your educational philosophy, to whom you go for grounding, and whom you—son-like, in your own admission—feel compelled to critique. Say more.

Your son,
Elijah

**How to Story the Story? (Letter 5)**

May 18, 2012

Dear Elijah:

Surfacing deep identity stories—and, I would add, telling them—is indeed the work of a progressive educator. I saw this as the heart of my efforts in the two educational projects that you mention, the Identity and Democracy curriculum, a centerpiece of my doctoral work and my teaching in the sixties, and the social action initiative of the eighties, part of the international grassroots movement to slow, halt, and reverse the nuclear arms race.

One way to understand what I was trying to do with the Identity and Democracy curriculum is to think about what John Dewey was saying about immaturity in the culture of the twenties and how technological, industrial forces and changes were contributing to what he called "the lost individual." Dewey's way forward was not to reject or demonize the industrial technologies, but rather to embrace the machine as "a revolutionary transforming instrument," "an undreamed of reservoir of power," something to "harness" for the "liberation and enrichment of human life" (Dewey 1930, 96).

If we replace "machine" with "identity" or "the self," we've captured where I was heading with my curriculum for high school seniors. I believed in the sixties, as I do today, that one of the ways toward achieving greater levels of maturity in American society is to embrace identity stories as revolutionary transforming instruments, undreamed of reservoirs of power, that we can harness to the liberation and enrichment of human life.

In your letter you wondered if the Identity and Democracy course was progressive in nature, saying that you thought it might depend on the pedagogy. I agree with your concern that a progressive curriculum must engage students on a level of exploration and problem solving whereby they are active agents in their own process of learning. But I also think that curriculum content—where the meat and sizzle of the story is found—is equally vital in advancing a progressive agenda. And of all the meat available at the market, especially for youth in their late adolescence, there is none with greater potential appeal than the heart muscle of their own story. This story includes not only their own self-concept, but the many ways that they have been "storied" by others, from their parents and the wider culture to the even broader forces of evolution and history.

Identity and Democracy centered on the most basic questions that we can have about ourselves: Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am

I going? Such questions cannot be answered—save for most psychologically disturbed among us—without also asking and trying to answer another set of questions: Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going? And this gets us to that concern about maturity and immaturity that Dewey underscores: What does it mean for a human being, and for me in particular, to grow up? Every one of these questions lays bare story lines that can be woven into the most powerful of identity narratives.

Thus, the curriculum was an appeal to my professors, to my teaching colleagues, and especially to my students to embrace, analyze, understand, and harness self-identity for the good of each and all; in Dewey's words, for "the liberation and enrichment of human life." It was an appeal guided by reason and science; and in almost every way it was compatible with the "Humanistic Manifesto" so dear to father Dewey's heart.

However, there were fundamental differences between my perspective and Dewey's, especially in the incorporation of insights from depth psychology as means for exploring the underworld of our behavior, individual and collective. Dewey was curious about the subconscious underworld, but he did not enter. In the late twenties, when writing about "the greatest obstacle" in the path toward a new individualism, he said that something was in the way, blocking "the role of science and technology in actual society," and he was talking about the world of the unconscious: "I sometimes wonder if those who are conscious of present ills but who direct their blows of criticism at everything except this obstacle are not stirred by motives which they unconsciously prefer to keep below consciousness" (Dewey 1930, 100). He ends on this note; whereas in my curriculum, this is a place to begin.

Harnessing the power of the underworld, of blood consciousness—as D. H. Lawrence would say—was part of what I and others were trying to do with that question "What about the children?" In your last letter you spoke about Parents and Teachers for Social Responsibility, the organization that I founded in the early eighties, when you and your brother, Jesse, were small boys. You're correct to say that this work was progressive education—millions of citizens, and countless groups, were associating freely and constructively in this problem-solving initiative.

You were just seven years old in 1982, when you and I and 800,000 others marched from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, around the tip of the island, and up the West Side to Central Park. And since you were so young, you can be forgiven for a couple of factual errors in what you've written about our work at that time.

The booklet that awakened many Vermonters to the threat of nuclear war was not *What about the Children?* It was *Nuclear War in Vermont*. I think it was 1981 when I came across a small publication being used by the city council of Cambridge, Massachusetts, called *Nuclear War in Cambridge*. This booklet was a wake-up call to the citizenry, informing them that the federal Civil Defense plans for how to handle a nuclear war—which included moving the population of Boston to northern New England—were really quite insane. With the Cambridge booklet in hand, some of us Vermonters set to work telling the story of what would likely happen in our state if the missiles were to fly.

Another correction I should make is that, to Vermonters at the time, the greatest immediate threat was not Soviet missiles gone astray. Rather it was the location of the US Strategic Air Command Base on the other side of Lake Champlain, in Plattsburgh, New York. This base would have taken multiple hits by Soviet missiles, after which the prevailing winds would have blanketed Vermont and the rest of northern New England with terrible levels of radioactivity.

You were on the money about the concerns we had for our children. It was a pediatrician friend and coactivist who first made me aware that parents—and even teachers, given the rural locations of Vermont's schools—might have to assist children facing terminal injuries and pain if the bombs ever did fly. This pediatrician kept a supply of morphine hidden away in his home for the worst-case scenario. He did not advocate this for other parents; however, his example caused me to ask the question of myself and of others.

There was plenty of perplexity, confusion, and doubt—not to mention anxiety and fear—in the air. But there was also a tremendous feeling of strength and empowerment as parents joined with teachers, school administrators, physicians, physicists, lawyers, governmental officials, and many others in researching and developing the stories we used as tools in manufacturing this social movement.

The *What about the Children?* booklet was my attempt, supported by countless colleagues, to tap into the blood layer and tell a story that might be an alternative to the powerful story of the Red enemy hoard at the gates (or at the missile sites!). We didn't claim that people were wrong to ask "What about the Russians?" but using the 16 pages of this short booklet, which took me as long to draft as my doctoral dissertation (almost a year), we became quite successful in getting people, parents in particular, to weigh in on other questions. During the mid-eighties, over a half-million copies

of the English text were distributed, and the booklet was translated and printed in at least seven other languages, including Russian.

I deem it important to note that we were not proclaiming the need for world peace. In fact, we avoided the phrase. I never considered myself to be a member of the peace movement, and when asked if I was a peace activist, I would answer no. I would say I was doing what I needed to do to protect you and your little brother. If that meant going to war, I said I was prepared to go to war; but if that meant pursuing other strategies, so be it.

As my first-born child, Elijah, you were the first person in my universe for whom I would have sacrificed my life in an instant. It is thus that "What about the Children?"—what about MY children?—is a question from the blood layer. What could be more steeped in the blood of life than the need for a parent animal to protect its young? I was never in the armed services, and thus I cannot say if I would have covered a grenade with my body to save a buddy. But for my children I would not have hesitated to give my life; nor would I have had second thoughts about killing any predator bent on harming you.

During those times many of us parents walked a tightrope when it came to the nurturing and education of our own children. We did not want to hide from them the truth, but we also did not want them to be looking into an abyss. Celebration was a big part of this picture. I think of the children's musical theater production "Heart of the Mountain" that you and Jesse performed in and the "Heart Troupe" singing ensemble that Jesse traveled with to West Germany and the Soviet Union in 1988, just prior to the fall of the wall. In the face of troubling questions, many children—and adults, too—felt safer and empowered through celebratory and creative efforts like these.

Tapping into the blood layer to tell powerful stories can mean that we ask troubling questions, but this does not condemn us to live life devoid of happiness, sensitivity, humor, emotional warmth, and tenderness. I remember when Benjamin Spock and I stood before a gathering of activists in city hall, Montpelier, Vermont; each of us held high a "small flag," the tiny T-shirt of a baby, the visual symbol employed in our campaign. I used one of your T-shirts from when you were just a week old. I would tell people that it was yours as I took it from the back pocket of my pants where I carried it at all times. Adults often forget just how very tiny and vulnerable the newborn baby is, and holding up that small flag often bought tears to many eyes.

Language change, story change, and social change work hand in glove. Short and simple can be powerful and deep. Many of the most moving and motivating stories in the world today are just a few words, sometimes one word in length. (We call them advertisements.) Educated and intellectually proud, progressive professionals generally shy from the simplistic expressions of truth that could be hooks for compelling narratives.

How to story the progressive story? Well, to me it's obvious: the progressive education movement needs more leaders who are storytellers. Given almost one hundred years of history during which progressives have been accused of being unpatriotic, soft on communism, wimpy, and the like, isn't it time to explore the possibility that what we need are grand prophecies into which strong identity stories can be woven? Howard Gardner, on leadership, puts it this way:

> A leader is an individual who creates a story that significantly affects the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of a significant number of persons who then become followers. Since followers invariably know many stories, a leader can only be effective if his or her story is powerful and if it can compete successfully for influence with already prevalent stories. The most powerful stories turn out to be about identity; stories that help individuals discover who they are, where they are coming from, where they are headed. (Gardner 1995, 15)

So, Lij, if I haven't beaten this horse to death yet, let me just strike it a couple more times. My critique of dear father Dewey is that he didn't tell his story in a way that pulsed with the spirit in things, the blood that beats below and within. I'll be a bit more concrete. Let's consider Dewey alongside his contemporary and friend, whom you mention in an earlier letter, W. E. B. Du Bois. Both men were brilliant, working within and outside of the academy on the cutting edge of social and scientific research. Both were deeply invested in education as central to social and historical change. Both were committed to the most core values of the American political tradition. Both men were treated badly, with their persons and their ideas constantly under attack by the forces of knee-jerk nationalism and, in the black man's case, racism. Both were accused of being un-American, subject to the Red Scare and McCarthyism. And both understood—surely Du Bois as much or more than Dewey—that no answers would come easily: perplexity, doubt, and the unfinished nature of it all.

In terms of being true to science, experimentation, justice, and progress, these men were surely brothers in thought and action. But there was a fundamental difference in the methodology that each employed, their methods of articulating stories that can kindle and sustain the fires of popular reform. Dewey was no less of a person than Du Bois when it came to using his story-telling hands to do the real work of educational and social change. But, for whatever reasons, Dewey insisted on keeping his hands clean, sterile, like the scientist's laboratory tools. It's ironic that this educator-activist, who insisted on getting out of the ivory tower, who engaged life beyond professional and national boundaries, was such an unskilled narrator of the work. He wrote and spoke about war and depression and other things epochal, but almost never with words that would grab or stick, like blood itself.

Consider how each man writes about that cataclysmic event that transpired in the middle of their lives, World War I. Here is Du Bois as he describes the situation in Europe, and especially the German nation as it, along with others, made preparations for that war:

> To South America, to China, to Africa, to Asia Minor, [Germany] turned like a hound quivering on the leash, impatient, suspicious, irritable, with blood-shot eyes and dripping fangs, ready for the awful word. England and France crouched watchfully over their bones, growling and wary, but gnawing industriously, while the blood of the dark world whetted their greedy appetites. (Du Bois 1969, 46)

Dewey also speaks about the causes of the Great War, cutting through propaganda and exposing the motives of the nationalistic and capitalistic players; he tells us that they used idealistic words to give the impression that the war was being fought for "humanity, justice and equal liberty for strong and weak alike," but as proof of what their real motives were, Dewey draws our attention to the peace settlement, which gave "the most realistic attention to details of economic advantage distributed in proportion to physical power" (Dewey [1920] 1959,128). Like Du Bois, Dewey understood that the war was waged for economic exploitation. But rather than utilizing language that stirs emotion—the language of dogs with "bloodshot eyes and dripping fangs" hungering for the meat of the dark world—Dewey gives his insightful analysis in lifeless prose.

I don't think I've created a straw man here. Reality for Dewey, subject to his scientific method and deep analytic thinking, was to be stripped of poetic and religious idealization; he was reluctant to "idealize experience,

to give it, in consciousness, qualities which it does not have in actuality" (Dewey [1920] 1959, 104).

The shortcoming here is that human reality always has been and always will be an idealized reality. There always will be an animistic layer of human experience where the material reality is colored with "consciousness qualities" that, according to one level of reasoning, are not literally there. The sun rises. The sun sets. Always has. Even in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary—that the earth itself is the spinning orb—I continue to think of the sun as moving up, rising over me, and falling every day.

Dewey seemed to want bloodless descriptions of reality. He wrote: "Nothing would conduce more . . . to the elimination of war than the substitution of specific analysis of its causes for the wholesale love of 'liberty, humanity, justice and civilization'" (Dewey 1930, 165). His argument is that such "loves" are dangerous, for they posit the objects of love—God, country, and so forth—as some kind of eternal and fixed truths, objects of devotion that cause the lover to be blind.

Of course, Dewey understood how much our lives are rooted in foundations that exist prior to consciousness, but he was wrong to think that these unconscious layers of our being can be carved away by the scalpel of scientific thinking. War will not end because people understand its causes. He was wrong when he asserted:

> Wholesale creeds and all-inclusive ideals are impotent in the face of actual situations; for doing always means the doing of something in particular. They are worse than impotent. They conduce to blind and vague emotional states in which credulity is at home, and where action, following the lead of overpowering emotion, is easily manipulated by the self-seekers who have kept their heads and wits. (Dewey 1930, 165)

Cynical I may be, Elijah, but as I have had some decades to observe the business of social reform and, at times, war-making, in America and beyond, including the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda, it seems to me that a more realistic statement would stand John Dewey on his head. Thus, the facts of actual situations, the particular circumstances and doings, are impotent in the face of wholesale creeds and all-inclusive ideals; such facts may be worse than impotent; they may be manipulated by the self-seekers to compel others toward even greater states of blind and vague emotion.

The fact that there were no weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq did little to shorten the war. Americans who insisted on using facts, and facts alone, to stop the second Iraq war, were swept aside by those embracing powerful "wholesale creeds." Facts are important. And no real progress can be made without them. But standing apart from some degree of idealized reality, they are of little value.

There are glimpses of idealized reality and poetry in Dewey's writing, which reveal that his own principles arise from sources that can only be understood with imagery borrowed from religious feeling as much as scientific method. Dewey saw the light. It sustained him. He was reluctant to admit it, but admit it he did, in the concluding words of what I consider to be his greatest book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: "When the emotional force, the mystic force one might say, of communication, of the miracle of shared life and shared experience is spontaneously felt, the hardness and crudeness of contemporary life will be bathed in the light that never was on land or sea" (Dewey [1920] 1959, 211).

Elijah, let's you and I now join with progressive colleagues and tap into this emotional force—this "light that never was on land or sea"—for the purpose of creating the narratives, the identity stories, to help secure and advance Dewey's legacy.

Love,

Dad

## "The Full Meaning of the Present Life" (Letter 6)

June 2, 2012

Dear Dad,

In your call for philosopher storytellers, you think of W. E. B. Du Bois; I think of James Baldwin. I'm recalling *Notes of a Native Son*, which begins with Baldwin's father's burial and riots in Harlem and then takes us on a journey through America's identity and into my own. I think of Camus: a philosopher may write a treatise or two that are read widely within the academy, but it's putting your thoughts into a story of suicide, or resuscitating an ancient myth, like Sisyphus, or putting your ideas into the story of plague or murder—killing an Arab man on the beach—that gets your thinking into the minds of millions. And I think of more modern progressive storytellers, working for social reform. The filmmaker Michael Moore has told some compelling stories. His reach may not extend far beyond the choir—but his agitation is important, and his courage can be inspiring. Environmental activists like Bill McKibben and the British scientist James Lovelock

and others have been struggling valiantly for decades to find the compelling symbols and terms to tell the story of our climate emergency. They should be glad Naomi Klein is joining them. I've perhaps not read a more compelling, blood-layer-conscious, progressive narrative than her work, *The Shock Doctrine*, which begins with an archeology of modern torture that is then integrated into a story about disaster capitalism and the neoliberal global privatization crusade.

There are many progressives who are telling, or trying to tell—and struggling to tell—the powerful identity narratives that can drive the changing of minds and policy. And sometimes these stories are deeds, not words, and sometimes they're photographs, videos, tweets, blogs, or Facebook posts. Social media seems to be weaving collective identity stories and spurring action in ways that traditional storytellers may never fully grasp.

As these letters between us attest, America's progressive educators struggle as much as any to find the message, medium, and means to tell the stories that bring our values to life. I recently watched a video of the Coalition of Essential School's 2012 Fall Forum, the opening panel discussion. Their topic, on the day after the presidential election, was "What's next?" The panel included Pedro Noguera, among others, and the conversation was largely about how to tell the story better: how to combat the powerful narrative that our schools are failing, that the teachers' unions are the villains, and that better tests and charter schools will save us. After about an hour, Noguera passes his microphone to Debbie Meier, who reads from the notes she's been taking during the talk. She's looking for a phrase that can embody, succinctly, the purpose of progressive public schools in our country. She offers: "to prepare a generation to defend democracy." The sentiment resonates. Democracy does need defending. And naturally I think of Dewey, the passage you've quoted, "the miracle of shared life and shared experience," which one might call, in a word, democracy.

I'm not sure how best to tell the story. I can say that the light from Dewey's thinking and our correspondence that shines brightest for me right now is the conviction that our schools are fostering an immaturity in our citizenry and that this "is mainly due to their enforced mental seclusion; there is, in their schooling, little free and disinterested concern with the underlying social problems of our civilization" (Dewey 1930, 127–28).

If there is a fire of school reform to be lit, which burns in places, but which rather needs to rage, for me the flame kindles in this passage. Curricula in schools must engage young people and their communities in addressing the underlying social problems of our time.

Those of us who have kids in school, or who work in schools, will often ask children about how school's going, what they're studying. And then sometimes we ask "So, why are you studying this?" or "What's the importance of what you're learning?" Far too frequently we hear in reply that they are studying something now because they'll need to know it later, or that it's important in order to pass the test or get a certain grade. This postponement of relevance is stunting their maturation and sedating the idealism of youth, which aches to decry injustice and wrestle with questions of right and wrong. It also stunts their maturation by denying them the ability to acquire the skills necessary to do work with real world relevance—now, not later.

Of course, there is a place for tests as summative assessments, for grades as extrinsic motivators, and for you'll-need-this-later skill building over time. But the arena for developing these skills and awarding grades must be built with the bricks of contemporary life, the child's local and broader community, and the challenges those communities face.

You asked me to have a look at Dewey's obituary in the *New York Times*. I found this:

> In 1893 Dewey wrote: "If I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education I should say: 'Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life.'" (*New York Times* 1952)

Yes. When the school day has ended, and the students and I wait outside for the buses, and I ask Buddy or Natalie why they are learning what they are learning, their eyes should shine with empowerment, and their answers should teach me about my world and theirs. Without this sense of empowerment—the agency to shape their present world through their present work and study—their understanding of themselves as learners, as problem solvers, is tragically narrow. The individual must derive his or her identity as person and citizen from the work of collaborative problem solving in the realm of contemporary personal and social challenges.

The *New York Times* obituary also provides one scholar's summary of Dewey's views on democracy, philosophy, and relevance:

> Dewey concluded: "Philosophy counts for next to nothing in the present world-wide crisis of human affairs and should count for less. It needs a thorough house-cleaning and the final, definitive abandonment of most of its traditional values. Those values are class

values. They were established in a time when the masses of mankind lived in slavery, or near-slavery, and when a little body of the elect could occupy themselves with speculations on the divine and the absolute. *The present world belongs to a democracy. And the democracy cannot waste time on recondite speculations that have nothing to do with life*." (*New York Times* 1952; emphasis added)

Public schools are among the foundation stones of our democracy. We educators likewise cannot waste time on speculations that have nothing to do with the lives of our students and fellow citizens. If we disconnect ourselves and our young people from the democratic association with others, and if we isolate the relevance of our work to ivory towers and self-referential systems of reward and relevance, we are on our way to creating those abominations of individualism that we spoke of earlier.

I recall the boy in the monster mask. His abuse as a child produced in him the ultimate individual: disassociated, unable to connect or problem solve with others, disabled in friendship and love. He has left our school now, for a time anyway. We couldn't help him enough. If he returns in future semesters, we'll try again—with all of our good faith and conviction. Meanwhile, with a sigh of conflicting regret and relief, I know that he's somewhere else, and so with many hours of my time now free to refocus, I can concentrate on the more moderate cases of individualism and disconnection, and consider—with you, and with my colleagues—the remedy, which is, simply, curriculum that embodies the identity stories of the children and the work of collectively addressing contemporary social problems.

This kind of curriculum and learning arms young people against the threat that hyper-individualism poses, and it arms public schools with the shields we need to resist the attack that comes from the forces of privatization and the less aggressive but equally destructive disengagement of the tax-paying citizenry that funds our schools. I'm talking about a matter of public school survival, a danger that emanates from the basic demographic shifts that are happening in America: we are getting older, having kids later, and having fewer of them. What this means, according to recent census figures, is that 70–80 percent of American households do not contain school-aged children. The large majority of households who are paying for public schools does not have any immediate and pressing interest—a child—in those schools, and so these citizens rarely, if ever, set foot inside a classroom.

It's fascinating to me that the two public expenditures that most consume the annual budgets of local, state, and national governments—our

public schools and our military—involve so few of us day-to-day, directly, and in person. I think this is part of the reason why our last war has been the longest in the history of our nation. Who goes to war and bleeds? For most of us, it's other people's children. Likewise, this is a reason that public schools are so vulnerable to attack in recent decades. Who goes to school and studies? For most of us, it's other people's children.

In terms of the voluntary military, I have very few notions of what reforms might be necessary and right. I hesitate to call for a draft. I'm tempted to call for universal public service duties—beyond sitting on a jury—with military service as one option, such as many other industrialized democracies once had or do have. But I haven't thought or learned enough about it to take an informed stance. About schools, I know better where the answer lies, and, again, it's about engaging the local community in curriculum that is grounded in our common concerns and engaging students in the study of themselves, their families, their communities, and the challenges they face. In Randolph, Vermont, where I've been now for one school year, there are wonderful examples of these imperatives at work.

Last fall, I visited an information technology class that contained a very heterogeneous group of learners, with several students on IEPs (individualized education plans) and some with physical disabilities. The curriculum helped students to learn the skills necessary to create podcasts and short films. And what the students made their podcasts and films about was a group of elderly blind men and women in a nearby town. By filming the blind, and recording the hearing impaired, the audiovisual and multimedia technology took on a whole new dimension of social meaning. The relevance of the curriculum to the diverse group of learners increased. The elderly citizens who met our students and became the subjects of their work ultimately became the audience for their productions. At the luncheon when the elderly visitors came to experience the student work—stories about them—the spirit of creative association and problem solving in the room was palpable. What problems were being solved? Many, including how to live in a world when you are blind; how to transcend generation gaps and the segregation of the elderly; how to make a podcast; how to make a movie; how to find and make meaning. In a quavering voice a woman of ample white, curly hair, with great dark glasses over the top third of her face, stood up to tell the room that this was among the most meaningful moments of her very long life. She had just heard her own story of struggle and triumph, and those same stories of her peers, told in the voices and technologies of her society's youth. In the last decade of

her life, from out of darkness, her story was brought, by a child, to light. I couldn't tell if tears came from her eyes behind the dark glasses. I don't know if her tear ducts worked. But there was the moisture of profound feeling in her voice.

These elderly citizens now know where their tax dollars go. These 10 citizens, with no children of their own in schools, sustained by advances in health care many decades beyond a child-rearing age, will not vote the local school budget down. They will not denigrate the teachers' union. They wait for no Superman to save this local school. Instead, through the curriculum, they, themselves—with the children—experience the saving.

Another instance of sustained community engagement and curriculum relevance in the school where I now work is the senior project, which every senior must complete to graduate. This is a requirement beyond any state expectation, and it has been in place at Randolph for decades. Every year students must design an original project that necessitates collaboration with a citizen in the local community. There are requirements beyond this, in terms of a research paper and portfolio defense, but the collaboration between student and mentor is among the key components. This year I was part of an evaluation panel in the fine arts. Two students chose to learn how to become photographers, one of them collaborating with a local photojournalist, the other with a local studio and magazine photographer. One other student built a stained-glass lamp, working with an expert one town over; she was completing a piece that her grandmother had begun but not finished before dying. Another student became a potter, working in the studio of a local craftswoman. In a graduating class of 70 students, there were 70 different collaborations such as these. The mentors of these students will hardly be likely to feel that public schooling isn't worth the investment, even for other people's children. Once again, these citizens will be unlikely to vote down a school budget. They will be less likely to fixate on standardized test scores as the sole measure of school and student performance. They will be informed taxpayers, knowledgeable about where their valuable dollars go.

In my work with teachers to help develop or refine curriculum at Randolph, I am piloting an acronym, PRIDE, to capture elements of curriculum that I feel are crucial. Here is how I've been describing it to current colleagues:

> P: Projects. A project is a form of summative assessment through which students demonstrate proficiency in key standards. It is not a test or exam, though tests and quizzes have their place in the process

of building the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the project. The project embodies much of the learning. It is created over time, first by sharing models with students and helping them develop the skills and knowledge capacity—and motivation—to create it. Then there is the creative process, the work, and this should include multiple drafts or iterations.

R: Rigor. Rigor is not sacrificed in project-based work. Indeed, the work of creating something over time, through multiple drafts, and with frequent feedback from teachers/peers, allows for differentiated supports, so that each student can be rigorously challenged to push himself/herself to new heights.

I: Interdisciplinary Content. The segregation of subject matter is a convenient division of labor in learning, and it helps us develop deep expertise in particular domains. But specific knowledge in any area lacks utility and purpose if it is not joined with others. What is math without science? Biology without psychology? Literature without history? Me without you?

D: Developmental Urgency. The work we do in our classrooms must be of urgent importance to the healthy maturation of our children. Early and late adolescence is characterized by many different needs, and every classroom represents a new constellation of specific needs and talents, but at a general level we can plan curricula with two of the most common needs of adolescence in mind:

(1) They need to become good at using the essential tools and skills of adulthood, for this helps counter the inferiority they feel vis-à-vis the adult world that they are just entering. Drivers ed is a course that does this well; all curriculum should strive for as much practical and immediate importance, in terms of teaching skills important to young adult life. We must avoid saying to children—and ourselves—learn this now because it will be important to you later.

(2) Adolescents are in identity flux. Their bodies are taking new shape, as are their ideas, likewise their destinies. The second major developmental need of adolescence is to be able to balance the question of "Who am I?" with a sense of "who I am"—and one key way they can do this with a sense of "what I believe in." Adolescents have idealism. They need to be presented with problems that activate it: questions about equity, justice, fairness, good/bad, right/wrong. Curricula that meet the needs of adolescents will be anchored in essential questions that are alive with the electricity of ethical and moral dilemmas, which trigger adolescent passion and belief.

Obviously there are other major developmental needs of adolescence, including the need to feel approval in the eyes of peers and adults. Pedagogy plays an essential role in these and other areas.

E: Engagement in the Community. The curriculum should involve learning and work that is of importance to the local community, which doesn't preclude importance on a broader state/national/global scale. The students should be solving community problems, addressing shared concerns, interacting with experts, engaging in fieldwork, and ultimately sharing the products of their labors with audiences who care. Engaging the community increases the relevance of what we are doing, but also the rigor. Authentic audiences, experts in the classroom, all help raise the expectations of what we do.

If schools can commit to curricula that embody the principles above, progressive educators will be doing our part in meeting the imperatives that you and Dewey name: nurturing agency and sense of self in our young people and providing society with cohorts of young citizens who are experienced in thinking about and solving the important problems of their time and place.

So, Dad, that's where I'm at these days, the story I'm telling about progressive education and where we need to go. You can tell me if I'm telling this story in terms that resonate. Depending on my audience—a local town meeting, a newspaper editorial, testimony before legislators, the press, or letters to you—I might choose my terms differently.

As Debbie Meier said at the CES Fall Forum, the need to defend democracy is real. Dewey would have agreed, and he would have agreed that schools are an essential ingredient:

> Dr. Dewey believed that if democracy were to survive in this country it would require a tremendous reorganization of instruction and administration in the schools. Democracy, he maintained, "cannot go forward unless the intelligence of the mass of people is educated to understand the social realities of their own time." (*New York Times* 1952)

In my own story telling, a fear for democracy's demise is something I might accentuate more here in Vermont. This state's town meetings are often idealized as pure democratic form; yet the most common town meeting these days is one where little to no discussion occurs. Australian Ballot is how votes are cast. There are few places besides America's schools

where meaningful discussions can be had between people of different classes, religions, races, and political perspectives. I think freedom and peace in a pluralist, democratic society depend largely on the health of our school system, and this health depends on our ability to make the curricula relevant to the yearning hearts and minds of our children and on our ability to connect our classrooms to the citizens and challenges of the world outside the schoolhouse walls.

I remark that I'm feeling less discouraged now than I was when I wrote my first letter to you about all that schools can't do. In June, after a long school year, that's good. I'm looking forward, with energy, to the slower pace of work in the summer, the planning and preparations for the return of students in the fall.

The boy in the monster mask will not be back, but I think of him often. He once told me, casually, honestly, that he believed he would end up homeless and on the street in his adult life. My heart was cracked by the clarity and hopelessness of his vision. And I have a piece of artwork in his file, left over from his first term with us. It was a future-oriented piece, something for us to catalog and for him to collect and view in later years. This drawing is of an adult, a child, and a gun. I look at the drawing from time to time, to remind me that sometimes our work in schools is to undo prophecy. It will cost our country less, in the long run, if we can undo this prophecy now, rather than confirm it later.

I can't remember now, here at my dining room table, with my own wife and child peacefully asleep upstairs, who is killing whom in his drawing. It doesn't really matter; he's a victim of the violence either way. And a society that does violence to its children does violence to itself. A society that works to save its children works to save itself. I feel a part of that work. I'm feeling more hopeful about this boy's fate, and the place of my work in it, than I was when I wrote my first response to you, Dad. Thanks.

Love,
Elijah

## Will I Heal? (Letter 7)

December 2012
Lij,

Coming down the home stretch in our exchange of letters, I want to say thanks to you, and also to the journal editors, for patience and suggestions. Also, I like your introductory note, with the Erikson text, but let me also register a mild reprimand at your reference to the cane and my hobbling

gait. Have you forgotten that I'm now walking about like a 60-year-old, with my new metal hip?

I appreciate the mention of my old friend J. Alfred Prufrock in the introduction. Actually, I identify less with Prufrock today at age 73 than I did at age 23, when I committed the entire poem to memory. But still today there is plenty of emotional relevance in the poem, that "developmental urgency" you define in your last letter. I embrace Prufrock because I know I am him in much of my being and becoming. But even more, perhaps, because of what I have not become. For what I have not achieved.

> I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
> And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker.
> (Eliot [1917] 1991, 6)

You might say I'm Prufrock in the very fiber of my own identity story. But no person is one thing; in fact, one of Dewey's observations that I wish we might have explored more in our letters is the extent to which we humans have "plasticity."

At times I am not Prufrock—I am Dedalus—still a "young man" looking to the future, standing in the shallows of a vast ocean of possibilities, a creator, soaring over the past:

> Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable. (Joyce [1916] 1993, 184)

Deadalus and Prufrock: Me! The portrait of an artist as an old man.

It's closing time now, and whether it's the Deadalus in me, or the Prufrock, I'm drawn to what the older man described as "an overwhelming question" (Eliot [1917] 1991, 3). During much of my life and teaching—as we have discussed in these letters—this question was "What does it mean to grow up?" But in the past decade or two, another question comes more to mind: "Will I heal?"

I mean "heal" in two ways: Will I be healed, myself? Will I heal others? I think that in asking and struggling to answer these questions, we are addressing the question about growing up, about maturity. These healing questions were given to me as a gift from my now late-friend Rosette Lamonte, at the end of a conversation we had at my kitchen table when I still lived in Vermont.

As you know, I had been working with Rosette at some summer institutes for youth on the subject of the Holocaust. She was an expert on the French resistance during the Second World War, and I had invited her to Vermont to speak with us about Charlotte Delbo, a courageous woman who gave her life during that resistance. At one point our conversation turned to the subject of dreams, like the one that Carl Jung reported having just prior to the outbreak of World War II, a dream about seeing an ocean of blood flooding down across Europe from north to south.

She got up from the table and said that she had brought something for me. She returned with a book she had edited, a collection of plays by women playwrights called *Women on the Verge*, and she read to me this passage from "Us," by Karen Malpede. A man and woman have been sleeping; the man wakes to tell the woman about his dream:

> Hannah, wake. I dreamt last night I was led by a monk in a black robe along the ridge of the mountain range that runs across the top of the world. . . . I could see the whole world from where we stood. He led me to the place where the water wells up from the earth and flows down the mountain from two sides, filling the oceans of the world. . . . He waved his hand. "Look." I looked around. I saw everything. The whole world spread itself under my feet. And the water ran down. It bubbled and sang. The monk asked for my hand. I laid it down in his own. He drew a knife from his cloak. In one stroke, he punctured my palm. He squeezed the wound. Clots of my blood dropped into all the waters of the world. I saw the water turn red. "Will I be a healer?" "Will I heal or pollute?" I cried out to him. He didn't answer when I spoke. He was gone. I stood there alone. I watched my blood flow. Watched the water turn red as it spilled two ways down the mountain side, spilled into oceans, rivers and lakes. Red blood from my hand, turning the waters red. (Malpede 1993, 150)

It seemed to me then, Elijah, as it seems to me now, that the question the man asks is the question we should all ask, one that every free person might want to ask in reference to what it means to grow up. It's a question that teachers might ask of themselves and their students, especially those who are in transition from childhood to adulthood. These questions about healing are universal, because the need for healing, for redemption of one kind or another, is a universal need derived from the reality of feeling that

we are fallen animals or angels, separated from something, possibly even guilty of something—even for something we may not have done.

This need for healing is a need for wholeness. No matter one's religious or secular orientation, there is an ultimate separation awaiting each and all—death. We began that way, too: through a painful separation. And so all our lives we live with the memory and the anticipation of separation, this ache that is our divorce from others, from mother, childhood, parents—from home, from life itself.

In the context of what John Dewey has taught us about an individual's potential for integration, we know that one cannot heal oneself without healing others—through the miracle of shared communication and the power of creative, democratic association. Any other kind of healing or search for wholeness is the formula for producing monstrosities.

Love,
Dad

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