Deweyan Hopefulness in a Time of Despair

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[Happiness lies] . . . in the endeavor to wrest from each . . . experience its own full and unique meaning. Faith in the varied possibilities of diversified experience is attended with the joy of constant discovery and of constant growing. Such a joy is possible even in the midst of trouble and defeat. . . .

—John Dewey

The epigraph of this essay was written in 1930 during the global economic depression that followed in the wake of the First World War. The strong note of optimism in this quote—Dewey’s belief that discovery and growth are possible “even in the midst of trouble and defeat”—is important because I believe it can provide support for us in our own time: our post-September 11 atmosphere of uncertainty and despair. Thus, in this essay, I compare Dewey’s hopefulness in the years following World War I to our own reactions to September 11 in an effort to help teachers at all levels who, like me—a philosophy instructor at the post-secondary level—need to rebuild their confidence that teaching can truly serve to strengthen and extend American democracy. More particularly, I investigate the parallels between the shortcomings of American society that, in the World War I era, became apparent to Dewey and the shortcomings that September 11 have made apparent to contemporary commentators. I then examine the philosophic roots of Dewey’s conviction that he could help ameliorate these shortcomings, his sources of hopefulness in his own period of national crisis. I conclude by outlining three touchstones of optimism for contemporary teachers, touchstones that I draw from Dewey’s hopefulness and his unwavering efforts to realize his vision of a more democratic society.

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September 11 and Four Weaknesses of U.S. Democracy

Educators have begun to explore the events of September 11 and their implication for teachers.¹ In these explorations authors focus on a cluster of four weaknesses in U.S. democracy—failures to honor our country’s constitutional commitment to liberty, equality, and justice for all—that they argue are evident in America’s responses to the September attacks. These are (1) patriotism that is used to muffle academic freedom, a weakness that unnecessarily restricts teachers’ civil rights; (2) propaganda that masquerades as news, a weakness that retards the development of an informed citizenry; (3) limited open public debate or its absence, a weakness that interferes with minorities’ rights to be heard; and (4) the opportunity to acquire personal wealth in a laissez-faire marketplace that is mistaken for the essence of democratic freedom, a weakness that inhibits equality of opportunity for all citizens.

Regarding the first of these weaknesses in U.S. democracy—patriotism that is used to suppress academic freedom—Henry Giroux documents the ways in which fear and insecurity, post-September 11, have led to efforts to limit the civil liberties of educators. He reports the attack by Lynne Cheney, former NEH director and wife of the Vice President, on the deputy chancellor of New York City schools for calling for American students to know more about Muslim cultures. He also details the dismissal of several U.S. professors for speaking critically about post-September 11 restrictions on Americans’ civil liberties (“Democracy”).

Susan Searls Giroux provides further examples of attempts to limit academic freedom under the guise of promoting patriotism. She discusses a report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a conservative group founded by Lynne Cheney and Senator Joseph Lieberman, that names 117 professors, students, and a university president who are accused of unpatriotic behavior. The report urges university trustees to withdraw their support for programs that feature multicultural curricula instead of what the ACTA calls America’s “history,” “principles,” and “founding documents” (69; see also H. Giroux, “Democracy”).

Regarding the second weakness in U.S. democracy that has been revealed by post-September 11 developments—propaganda masquerading as news—Kathleen Knight Abowitz claims that what we don’t see on the nightly news about September 11, more than what we do see, shapes our view of these events. For example, she argues that our inability to show compassion for the innocent victims of U.S. bombings in Afghanistan is the result of media conglomerates’ miseducation of the American
people: the media’s exclusive focus on New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania as sites of violence, destruction, and American heroism.\textsuperscript{2}

The third weakness of U.S. democracy revealed by the events of September 11—the absence of open public debate—is the focus of a study by Michael Apple. He describes the Madison, Wisconsin, School Board Meeting in October, 2001, where, he claims, the effects of conservative media upon public opinion made it impossible for minority positions to be heard. School Board members who attempted to voice opposition to the conservative line were drowned out by boos and hisses, whereas those who pushed the “war-fever” position were met with loud cheers. Apple reports that it was like “an Olympic event in which the chant of ‘USA, USA’ could be heard” (see also Rorty). Given that Apple views this meeting as illustrative of the growing obstacles to fair, public discussion in America, he encourages teachers to create space in their classrooms for critical dialogue about post-September 11 policies (see also H. Giroux, “Democracy”). Apple also wants teachers to help students explore the consequences of other U.S. initiatives—such as its embargo of Iraq and its support of various dictatorial regimes—without teachers appearing to condone the attacks of September 11 or driving students to adopt right-wing political views. However, Apple recognizes that, in the present climate, trying to conduct such open discussion is a delicate task, and he cautions that “any critical analysis [by teachers] of the events [of September 11] and of their roots in the hopelessness, denial of dignity, and despair of oppressed peoples . . . [has] to be done extremely cautiously.”

Susan Giroux’s approach to the classroom resembles Apple’s. She also advises teachers to use caution when they assign texts that are critical of U.S. foreign and domestic policies. More specifically, she urges teachers to be respectful of the pro-American positions that many of their students hold. Otherwise, she worries, we will be unable to foster the trust required for candid dialogue.

Finally, regarding the fourth limitation of American democracy laid bare by the events of September 11—the opportunity to acquire wealth in a laissez-faire marketplace that is mistaken for democratic freedom—Henry Giroux argues that America has been in the grip of a neoliberal revival for at least the past two decades. One result is that freedom has come to be defined as the right “to pursue one’s own individual interests largely free of governmental interference. . . .” Giroux sees Milton Friedman’s stance—profit-making is the essence of democracy—as emblematic of the neoliberal ethos with its indifference to the core
democratic values of equity, compassion, and support for the cultural, intellectual, and economic growth of all citizens. Giroux's concerns about the self-centered materialism of neoliberalism are echoed by Patricia Somers and Susan Somers-Willett. These authors want teachers to work against the private-gain, capitalist ethic that, they believe, more and more controls America's institutions, including its schools. They ask teachers to take collective action through their unions and faculty organizations against the business model (the student as consumer and the teacher as deliverer of packaged knowledge) that threatens to dominate American education. The danger of this model, as they view it, is not only that it limits student curiosity and teacher creativity but that, too easily, it allows school administrators to restrict teachers' First Amendment rights (see also H. Giroux, "Vocationalizing").

I admire these educators' analyses. However, after reading their critiques of U.S. democracy, I am left needing stronger antidotes to our post-September 11 situation than the renewed teacher activism and reconstructed pedagogies they recommend. Specifically, I need to know how I can counter my own despair about my ability—no matter what social action I take or teaching techniques I adopt—to reduce the impediments to democratic practice that these authors articulate. That is, on what basis can I be hopeful about preserving and expanding democracy in the U.S., given the four long-standing and entrenched problems that these contemporary commentators describe? In characterizing these problems as "long-standing" and "entrenched," I have in mind John Dewey's concerns in the World War I era. More than seventy-five years ago, he noted that war puts into relief the weaknesses of a society. Indeed, many of the weaknesses of U.S. democracy that have been spotlighted in the wake of September 11 are ones that Dewey discussed. During the "Great War" and its aftermath, Dewey, like the authors I have just cited, worried about the suppression of academic freedom, the absence of genuine news reporting, the eclipse of public debate, and the self-centered individualism and materialism that mark America's dominant ethos. In fact, I borrow the word despair in this article's title from Dewey who uses it to characterize the emotional and intellectual tone of the era following World War I ("What I Believe" 276).

However, I do not look to Dewey and America's past in order to engage in hand-wringing. Nor do I expect he will offer specific pedagogical recipes for me to follow (see Fishman and McCarthy, John Dewey; Whose Goals?). On the contrary, I turn to Dewey for philosophical sources of hopefulness. I turn to Dewey to understand why he remained
steadfastly optimistic about the role that classroom teachers (and others) could play in social reform despite witnessing considerable labor violence, domestic race riots, two world wars, an economic depression, and repeated personal failures to significantly reshape American politics, culture, and schools. However, before studying the sources of Dewey’s hopefulness and their importance for contemporary teachers, I look briefly at Dewey’s own reactions to the weaknesses of U.S. democracy during and after World War I, shortcomings that the events of September 11 have brought, once again, into prominence.

Dewey and Four Weakness of U.S. Democracy

Weakness #1: Patriotism Is Invoked to Muffle Academic Freedom

Dewey was certainly no stranger to the ways in which wartime conditions reveal a country’s weaknesses. In particular, he experienced the power of patriotic fervor to limit academic freedom and freedom of speech. At Columbia University, where Dewey was hired in 1904, he heard Nicholas Murray Butler, Columbia University’s President and a former member of its philosophy department, make the following declaration in June, 1917:

[There is] no place at Columbia University ... for any person who [is] ... not with whole heart and mind and strength committed to fight with us to make the world safe for democracy .... The separation of any such person from Columbia ... will be as speedy as the discovery of his offense (qtd. in Summerscale 88; see also Metzger, Academic 225 and “Affirmation” 600).

Four months later, in October, 1917, Dewey watched as Butler’s promise was fulfilled when the Columbia trustees voted to dismiss James McKeen Cattell, a professor and former chair of psychology, editor of the respected journals Science and Popular Science Monthly, and longtime Dewey friend who recruited Dewey to Columbia (see Cattell). To be fair to Columbia’s president and its trustees, Cattell’s dismissal is set in a complicated history, including his longstanding conflicts with Butler. For a decade, Cattell had battled with Butler over the latter’s autocratic administrative style and the University’s low faculty salaries. These confrontations led Butler to try, unsuccessfully, to push Cattell into early retirement in 1913. However, the immediate cause of Cattell’s dismissal in 1917 was not conflict with Butler but what the trustees called his “opposition to the enforcement of the laws of the United States” (Summerscales 91). What the trustees were referring to was...
that Cattell had petitioned several U.S. Congressmen in August, 1917, to oppose sending American draftees to fight in Europe against their will.

At the time, Dewey was a member of a newly formed “Committee of Nine,” a group of three deans and six distinguished professors whose function was to provide hearings for faculty charged with disloyalty and to advise the Board of Trustees. Regarding Cattell, the Committee of Nine’s recommendation was that he be retained, a recommendation the trustees considered but rejected. The same day that the trustees dismissed Cattell, they also demanded that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, a lecturer in English, resign for participating in anti-war demonstrations. In the case of Dana, however, the trustees did not even bother to consult the advisory committee (see Dykhuizen).

Dewey did not protest the trustees’ violation of faculty free speech and due process by resigning from Columbia as did the famous historian, Charles Beard. However, Dewey did quit the Committee of Nine and, shortly thereafter, spoke scathingly of the rapid increase in U.S. bigotry and intolerance during wartime. In The New Republic, he wrote that when treason is cited to justify the “abrupt dismissal of college teachers” without allowing appeal, the notion of disloyalty invoked is suspect. Treason in America in 1917, continued Dewey, had come to mean nothing more than “every opinion and belief which irritates the majority.”

In the end, Dewey tried to connect the two issues that were intertwined in the dismissals of Cattell and Dana: freedom of speech and university governance. In arguing that the problems at Columbia were basically about who controls the university, he foreshadowed the analyses of contemporary advocates of faculty rights who tie threats to academic freedom to the increasing “commodification” of the university (see Somers and Somers-Willett). In both eras, faculty who espouse dissident opinions risk offending the wealthy donors and business interests (or “partners”) that universities often serve. Dewey, writing just after Columbia’s actions against Cattell and Dana, spoke out against the consequences of these business influences for faculty freedom and the overall university atmosphere. Quoting Beard’s letter of resignation approvingly, Dewey claimed that when university trustees have full power to direct the course of study and the hiring and firing of faculty, as they did at Columbia, these faculty have a status lower than industrial workers who at least have a voice in their terms of employment through their unions (“In Explanation”). Working to secure a greater share in
college control for faculty was not a new cause for Dewey. It had been his primary motive in helping organize the American Association of University Professors and accepting its first presidency in 1915. He believed increased faculty responsibility for university programs was vital to the "intellectual life of the nation," and in 1917 he appealed for public support to achieve this end ("Case" 166).

Although Dewey was unable to prevent the dismissal of Cattell (his friend since their graduate school days at Hopkins in the early 1880s) or the resignation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, he did not give up the fight. In his continuing effort to give faculty greater voice in university administration, Dewey, along with Beard and others, helped establish The New School for Social Research in 1919, an institution avowedly dedicated to freedom of inquiry and academic self-government. In a related initiative the following year, Dewey was instrumental in founding the American Civil Liberties Union (see Ryan). Another, and earlier, attempt by Dewey to address the problem of a group's voicelessness in U.S. democracy was the role he played in 1910 as a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Rockefeller 288).

In short, Dewey witnessed this particular weakness in U.S. democracy—the invoking of patriotism in wartime to silence dissent—and, like current commentators, he was appalled. When his resistance to the Columbia dismissals failed, however, instead of yielding to despair or cynicism, he took further action. It is, as I have said, this resiliency—Dewey's apparently inexhaustible wellspring of hopefulness across a very long career—that is of interest to me in this essay.

Weakness #2: Propaganda Masquerades as News
Not only was Dewey caught during World War I in what he called "moral mob rule and psychological lynch law" ("In Explanation" 292), he also found himself victimized by managed news coverage, or what he called "intellectual paternalism" ("The New Paternalism"). He had been pleased by the fact that World War I proved the practicability of centralized, public control of industry, a phenomenon he termed "industrial paternalism." That is, the war had shown that diverse interests, when working together in pursuit of a shared goal rather than competing with one another for private gain, could raise worker satisfaction and production beyond all expectations. However, another development during the War—centrally controlled news or "intellectual paternalism"—deeply troubled Dewey ("The New Paternalism" 117–18). His prescient proph-
ecy was that “industrial paternalism” (or state socialism) would not last, whereas “intellectual paternalism” was likely to be long-lived. “There are,” he wrote, “too many interests concerned with maintaining a private paternalistic regulation of other men’s affairs . . . to permit [state socialism] to go unchallenged” (117–18). By contrast, he lamented, these same interests want to maintain “intellectual paternalism.” That is, those who urge private ownership and initiatives in manufacture, banking, and transportation are “most vigorous” in discouraging “private initiatives in belief” (121).

In Dewey’s eyes, efforts to control public opinion by either government or business interests became more dangerous than ever in the World War I era because technologies and concentrations of capital had emerged that greatly enhanced the possibility of achieving such control. According to Dewey, when private interests could write and distribute news on a large scale, there was no room for “the small operator,” and the chances for minority voices or oppositional perspectives to be heard were greatly reduced. In 1918 he wondered whether all that we once called “news” was not destined in the future to be more accurately labeled “propaganda” (“The New Paternalism” 118). And a decade later he lamented, “We seem to be approaching a state of government by hired promoters of opinion called publicity agents” (Public 169).

Dewey’s concern about the distribution of knowledge and its importance for democracy also had a long history. From the time when, at age twenty-nine, he was appointed chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Michigan—a position he held from 1889 until 1894—he wanted to bring philosophy out of the ivory tower and use it to promote a more informed public. These desires led to his association with Franklin Ford, former editor of Broadstreet’s, a New York-based business paper. Together, Dewey and Ford planned Thought News, a newspaper that was to offer more in-depth coverage of the news than was provided by the normal dailies. Although flyers announcing Thought News appeared in Ann Arbor and elsewhere in southern Michigan in the spring of 1892, Ford eventually upset Dewey with unrealistic promotions of their venture. As a consequence, Dewey withdrew his support and no issues were ever published (see Westbrook).

Despite Dewey’s aborted plan with Ford to offer in-depth analysis of current events, and despite the prescience of his worries during World War I and the subsequent decade about the direction the U.S. news industry was taking, Dewey, once again, did not retreat into despair. Drawing upon his willingness to keep addressing what he saw as the
limitations of America’s democracy, he found public spaces to resist the language and orthodoxy of the dominant group and was, for more than fifty years, one of America’s most widely read intellectuals. This is, in part, because he was a prolific writer, publishing more than thirty books, many of which had a wide circulation. His biggest audience, however, was comprised of those who read the numerous articles he produced for popular magazines such as *The New Republic, The New Leader, The Christian Century,* and *Commentary.*

*Weakness #3: Open Public Debate Is Limited or Absent*

The third theme at the center of recent analyses of the events of September 11—the dearth of opportunities for open public debate in the U.S.—is sounded by Dewey as well and is, for him, closely tied to the previous weakness: control of the national media by special interests. That is, one consequence of “paternalistic” news is the absence of public debate and organized public voices. This issue is the main subject of Dewey’s book, *The Public and Its Problems,* which appeared in 1927. In this volume, Dewey argues that the primary condition of a democratically organized public is “freedom of social inquiry and of distribution of its conclusions” (*Public* 166). The absence of “freedom of social inquiry” in the U.S., according to Dewey, means that the forces affecting most citizens are so far removed from their purview that they have little chance of making intelligent decisions about their futures.

We hear much talk of this today regarding the ordinary people’s ignorance of corporations’ finances, an ignorance that limits people’s ability to plan wisely for retirement given their uncertainty about the actual worth of publicly traded stocks. For Dewey, an example of the lack of “freedom of social inquiry” in his time was the economics of agriculture and the naivete of small farmers who, during World War I, expanded to meet the war’s demands by borrowing on expensive credit. Sadly, since they had little understanding of the factors that would influence the cost of loaned money relative to the price of their marketable commodities after the war, many farmers ended up unable to fulfill their loan obligations and banks foreclosed on their properties (*Public* 129–30). The key problem, as Dewey viewed it, was the lack of distribution of information and the resulting absence of informed, public debate. That is, poor distribution of information prevented farmers from identifying their common problems, communicating with others in similar straits, and developing a democratically organized public voice.
Weakness #4: The Opportunity to Acquire Personal Wealth Is Mistaken for Democratic Freedom

As I read Dewey, I believe he would say that beneath the three limitations of democracy that I have just discussed—suppression of free speech, manipulation of news coverage, and absence of informed public debate—lies a fourth one: the mistaken identification of the opportunity to compete for personal wealth in a laissez-faire marketplace with democratic freedom. This is, as I have indicated, also a concern of commentators on the events of September 11 (see H. Giroux, "Democracy"). In sharp contrast to the private, material-gain notion of freedom—a notion traceable to Locke’s formulation of natural rights and his justifications of private property—Dewey’s idea of democratic liberty emphasizes personal growth, a type of individual development that can only occur, according to Dewey, as we contribute our special skills to a common cause. Alternatively put, freedom in a democratic society, for Dewey, is not consonant with the Lockean view—and contemporary political theorist Isaiah Berlin calls “negative liberty”—that stresses individual rights and believes that the “government that governs least governs best.” To the contrary, freedom, for Dewey, is more akin to what Berlin calls “positive liberty”—that is, the development of dispositions and habits of living that allow each individual to contribute to and take from a shared culture. This latter notion of freedom balances attention to individual rights with attention to our duty to promote the welfare of others.

Dewey’s conception of liberty follows from his vision of democracy as a “mode of associated living” (Democracy 87; emphasis added). I stress the word associated in Dewey’s vision to make clear that, for him, democracy is less about each person’s doing his or her own thing and more about individuals joining with others to contribute to and enjoy, each in his or her own way, the “fruits” of shared activity (Public 150, see also “Philosophy” 50-53). In short, Dewey views democracy as a way of living that is rooted in cooperative, open inquiry leading to shared activity. Thus, the real failure of American democracy—as both Dewey and many of the September 11 articles suggest—lies in our country’s prevailing ethos of individual competition for material gain (see Art 343-44; “Liberalism”).

In Dewey’s criticism of America’s materialistic ethic, I find a strong spiritual dimension, despite the fact that he surrenders his belief in a transcendental God by the time he is in his mid-thirties. It is not just the material poverty of laborers—their poor wages, housing, and health care—that worries Dewey. He is also concerned about the spiritual
poverty that results from the way people’s work is controlled by others for those others’ private profit. Under these conditions, he claims, workers have few opportunities for intellectual and emotional growth. The “esthetic quality” of laborers’ lives is “suppress[ed] and limited[ed]” since, typically, he argues, workers cannot find occupations in which they can take pride, exercise responsibility, and express their creativity (Art 344; see also Democracy 317). And it is not just laborers’ spiritual and intellectual well-being that concerns Dewey. He also points to the limitations that the owners’ lifestyles impose on their own opportunities for broadened perspectives, the ways their displays of luxury and power over others “restrict” and “distort” their own experiences (“What I Believe” 274).

Ultimately, for Dewey, democracy is about the chance to live a satisfying life, one filled with “abundant and significant experience.” Laissez-faire capitalism, as he saw it, interfered with the realization of this ideal (274). The fundamental justification for democracy, he writes, is that it promotes “a better quality of human experience, one which is more accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life” (Experience and Education 34). Thus, the “supreme test”—the “moral meaning”—of the institutions and practices of our culture, for Dewey, is the contribution these institutions and practices make to “the all-around growth of every member of society” (Reconstruction 186). That is, the qualities that Dewey sees as hallmarks of democracy—freedom of speech, an education based on open circulation of information, and genuine spaces to communicate, inquire, and work cooperatively with others—are both means to and constituents of an integrated and meaningful life. His critique of America’s focus on private profit in the World War I era centers on the ways in which these spiritually important (albeit secular) qualities of democracy were under siege.

Despite Dewey’s criticisms of capitalism’s interference with the realization of what he envisions as America’s democratic ideal, and despite his admiration for the success of centralized, governmental control of the economy during World War I, Dewey never embraces the idea of state socialism. As the failures of the Russian and other social experiments became evident in the 1930s, he becomes increasingly wary of all forms of state control of industry (“A Great”; Freedom 62). Instead, Dewey wants reforms of industry to be aimed not primarily at economic efficiency but at their ability to increase “free choice . . . on the part of individuals” (“I Believe” 94). He also wants these reforms to be the result of grass roots efforts by professional and worker cohorts, coalitions he
refers to as "freely functioning occupational groups" (96). In sum, as Dewey attempts to address the ways in which capitalism restricts democracy, he walks a tightrope between emphasizing individual fulfillment, including aesthetic and spiritual development, and a communitarian focus on social service that begins at the Jeffersonian, "face-to-face," local level (Public 213-14).

Of course, Dewey does not limit his discussion of mistaken notions of democratic freedom to their negative impact on American news coverage, civil liberties, university governance, and its citizens’ quality of life. He also devotes considerable energy to analyzing their negative consequences for primary and secondary schools in the U.S. In this light, one of Dewey’s insights as an educational theorist was to recognize that the prevailing curricula and pedagogical practices in early twentieth-century classrooms did nothing to help students practice the sort of collaborative inquiry that he believes a flourishing democracy requires. Alternatively put, Dewey, foreshadowing the view of Paulo Freire, believes education is never neutral. All education is moral education since it is always governed by educators’, parents’, and politicians’ ideas about the type of citizens they want to encourage and the type of society they want to maintain or promote ("The Moral"). Given Dewey’s desire that schools further his vision of a democratic society, a society, as I have already indicated, that seeks to establish the best conditions under which citizens can work together cooperatively, Dewey’s criticisms of America’s classrooms are understandable. He believed the schools of his day did too little to cultivate students’ personal growth through their contributions to cooperative group undertakings. This led him to put the encouragement of habits of cooperation and a spirit of social service at the top of his agenda for public schools. Writing in 1934, just as the first harbingers of World War II were sounding, Dewey made this forceful appeal:

In a world that has so largely engaged in a mad and often brutally harsh race for material gain by means of ruthless competition it behooves the school to make ceaseless and intelligently organized effort to develop above all else the will for co-operation and the spirit which sees in every other individual one who has an equal right to share in the cultural and material fruits of collective human invention, industry, skill and knowledge ("Need" 13; see also "The Moral" 274).

Although Dewey realized that the cult of personal advantage would not change until industrial and political conditions changed (Democracy
he believed schools had to shoulder a good portion of the blame for our materialistic, self-centered morality. He noted that when pupils, day after day, compete for grades by reciting the same lessons as their classmates, there is neither an opportunity for students to contribute something of their own to "the common stock" nor to participate "in the productions of others" ("Ethical" 118). Classroom situations that pit students against one another in answering known-information questions have the deleterious effect, according to Dewey, of producing pupils who are academic "sharps" and "egoistic specialists": intellectually dishonest seekers of high grades and marketable resumes (Democracy 9; School 15–16). In sum, Dewey's test for schools was the same as his test for U.S. politics and industry—namely, how well are they nurturing the habits and dispositions vital to democracy? That is, how well are they promoting students' personal growth as they engage in shared inquiry and collaborative activity with their classmates (Reconstruction 186; see also Frankel)?

Despite Dewey's continuing hopefulness about the possibility of pedagogical change in schools that would prepare students to build a more democratic society, he, at times, acknowledged his failure to bring about such change. Late in his career, in an address at the University of Vermont in the 1930s, he admitted that it was rare for him to find his own educational theories reflected in actual classroom practices anywhere in the United States (Burbank). However, if at this point Dewey was tempted by despair, the temptation was short-lived. As with his approach to other experiences of failure, he continued undaunted. In 1938, when he was seventy-nine years old, he wrote Experience and Education, a robust defense of his approach to education that remains in print more than half a century later.

As I have already noted, despite Dewey's uphill struggles—in printed word and in action—with the weaknesses of democracy that parallel those exposed by the events of September 11, he remained optimistic about America and the potential positive effects of his social activism. In an effort to assist teachers who, like myself, battle a sense of despair over the possibility that we can be successful agents of reform in or outside our classrooms, I now turn to the views that I believe sustained Dewey's hopefulness.

Three Philosophic Approaches to Hope
I sort philosophic approaches to hopefulness into three categories, offering the first two (to which Dewey does not subscribe) as a context for the third (to which he does).
Divine Presence as a Foundation for Hope
In the first group, I place theorists who claim that a belief in a transcendent, divine intelligence is a necessary condition for warranted hope. Their argument is that hopefulness makes no sense unless one believes that God will ultimately bring into the world a realm of eternal peace in which all humans participate. Proponents of such a view do not deny that men and women have secular hopes and worldly objectives—such as wealth, health, and friendship—but they argue that the inevitable transitoriness of the realization of such objectives makes them hollow, the peace of mind they bring unsatisfying. What people truly long for, claim philosophers who take this view, is communion with God and the family of all people. The goal is “life at God’s table,” as the contemporary Christian theologian Josef Pieper puts it, and it is a hope “which is identical with our very being.” This image of the great banquet, according to Pieper, implies that “not one iota will ever be futile or lost of whatever is good in earthly history” (108–09).

In this first grouping of philosophers—those who base their hopefulness upon God—I include classical theorists, such as Augustine, who have a clear vision of the ultimate communion, one in which Christ sits at the right hand of God and judges all men, both “the quick and the dead” (8). I also include contemporary theorists, such as Gabriel Marcel, who have a more mystical view of the final communion. For example, true hopefulness, for Marcel, involves a faith that there is a mysterious but intelligent force in the world, a “veiled, mysterious light” (Homo Viator 32). Marcel believes that what we truly want is what the “mysterious light” wants (Philosophy 28). Marcel also believes, and in this regard he is one with Augustine, that to align ourselves with this “centre of intelligence, of love and creation” requires a renunciation of the secular world (Homo Viator 61). It means putting aside our egos, our desire to own things and protecting our biological lives. It means living in a world of spirit, of service, of unconditional love. Marcel writes that it is “no doubt true that, strictly speaking, only those beings who are entirely free from the shackles of ownership in all its forms are able to know the divine light-heartedness of life in hope” (61). But, unlike Augustine, Marcel leaves the nature of this ultimate communion mysterious. For him, it defies human imagination.

Human Evolution Toward Perfection As a Foundation of Hope
In the second category of philosophers of hope, I place theorists who believe that hopefulness is based not on God’s miraculous deliverance
but on the inevitability of the perfection of the human species. I find this view in Enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet, Kant, and Jefferson. Theorists in this second category share the belief that evolution is on the side of greater human perfection—more particularly, increased freedom, equality, health, and knowledge. Although God, the creator of the universe, does not intervene in human history, His creation is harmonious and benevolently conceived, and this insures that human evolution is toward increased perfection. Buoyed by the French Revolution, Condorcet claimed that with the end of domination by the first and second estates (the aristocracy and the Catholic Church) society would become increasingly democratic and progressive. While in hiding from the Jacobins, and just before his death in 1794 in a French prison, he wrote,

Organic perfectibility... amongst the various strains in the vegetable and animal kingdom can be regarded as one of the general laws of nature. This law also applies to the human race. No-one can doubt that, as preventive medicine improves and food and housing become healthier, ... the average length of human life will be increased and a better health and a stronger physical constitution will be ensured. ... Would it be absurd then to suppose that this perfection of the human species might be capable of indefinite progress ...? Finally may we not extend such hopes to the intellectual and moral faculties? (199-201)

Although Condorcet rejected the Christian view of individual immortality, he trusted that the “unlimited perfectibility of mankind” is “a universal law of nature.” This meant, for Condorcet, that despite the fleeting quality of our individual existences, our efforts to perfect mankind “unite” us to “all ages” and make us part of an everlasting cosmic work (qtd. in Schapiro, 260–61).

Jefferson, while not quite as optimistic as Condorcet, maintained that with the proper education and in an environment free of class distinctions, people could live harmoniously and avoid the harmful selfishness bred by the extremes of wealth and poverty that characterized eighteenth-century European, industrial cities. God, wrote Jefferson, created humans to be social, and, to achieve this end, He “implanted in our breasts” a sense of justice, “a moral instinct,” whose flowering simply required the appropriate environment and nurturing (150).

Human Capacity to Ameliorate Social Ills As a Foundation of Hope
Alongside these first two categories of philosophic hopefulness—one based on divine deliverance and the other on the inevitable perfection of
human evolution—I add a third. In this last category, I place those who believe, more modestly, that greater social harmony is, while not assured, at least possible, and this possibility itself justifies human hopefulness. In this third grouping, I include Dewey. (Others I place in this third category are the contemporary philosophers Kurt Baier, Paul Edwards, and Richard Taylor.)

Contrary to Enlightenment thinking, Dewey does not hold that human perfection is an evolutionary inevitability. He does believe, however, that our environment allows us to ameliorate our problems when they are approached with an intelligent frame of mind and a democratic spirit. That is, Dewey shares with many eighteenth-century philosophers a positive view of human nature and the potential for science—or what Dewey calls the method of intelligence—to help us achieve more aesthetically and spiritually satisfying lives and a more equitable distribution of humankind’s cultural and material wealth.

Whereas Dewey agrees, in part, with Enlightenment figures such as Jefferson and Condorcet, he expressly distances himself from those who place the intervention of a transcendent God at the core of their hopefulness. In fact, Dewey argues that belief in a heavenly world to come can lead to a this-worldly resignation, an acceptance or passivity about secular problems (Common 47). He decries the life of the spirit when it leads to withdrawal, to a life of contemplation divorced from action (Democracy 122). Dewey grants that ideals and hopes are important if we are to improve the human situation, but he distinguishes hopes which remain “idle castle-building” from those which lead to closer empirical observation and intelligent experimentation (Reconstruction 119). What distinguishes Dewey from other-worldly philosophers such as Augustine and Marcel is his attitude toward the consequences of our behavior. That is, unlike Augustine and Marcel, who connect events on earth to their meaning in heaven, Dewey finds certain earthly events—like the experiences of growth, communication, a fulfilling vocation, and collaborative projects—to be “consummatory” or good in and of themselves. Alternatively, put, these experiences have value, for Dewey, despite their transitoriness.

This is not to say that, for Dewey, consummatory experiences that are the culmination of long and continuous effort do not afford greater satisfaction than brief, more narrowly based consummations. However, Dewey is not troubled—as are Augustine and Marcel—by his own mortality or by the fact that he will not live to see his visions of a better society fulfilled. Neither does the long-range perspective that focuses on
the inevitability of our civilization's and our species' destruction lead Dewey to stop celebrating the possibilities that cooperative, intelligent human endeavor promise for the amelioration of earthly suffering. To the contrary, Dewey suggests that life without death is a poor foundation for hopefulness since such a foundation is a contradiction in terms. For Dewey, life and death are two sides of the same coin. If there were no death and everything were permanent, there could be no growth, no life (Experience and Nature 47). And the presence of growth and change means, in turn, that nothing is permanent. This apparent twinning of life and mortality has led some philosophers (Camus, for example) to claim that life is absurd and to urge an attitude of cynicism in response to the human situation. Dewey, by contrast, chooses to celebrate the fact that, although nature does not cooperate with all of our efforts to reduce human hardship and injustice, we can, with intelligent and sustained effort, make things better.

**Specific Sources of Dewey's Hopefulness**

Dewey's hopefulness about the possibility of moral and social progress may be the result of nothing more than a sunny, confident personality. Or it may simply be a consequence of personal factors such as a stable childhood, meaningful work, and satisfying relations with family and associates. In addition, as Dewey's student and close friend, Max Eastman, reports, Dewey had a "mystic" experience as a young high school teacher in his early twenties in Oil City, Pennsylvania. Dewey told Eastman that he had no vision or definable emotion, just a blissful feeling that his worries were over. When he tried to convert his experience into words, Dewey described it as asking himself, "What the hell are you worrying about, anyway? Everything that's here is here, and you can just lie back on it." Long after the event, Dewey explained to Eastman that since that experience, he had ceased to worry. "I never had doubts since then, nor any beliefs. To me faith means not worrying" (256–57).

My concern, however, is not with the personal, psychological bases of Dewey's hopefulness but with the philosophical ones—more specifically, Dewey's assumptions about human nature, knowledge, and experience. I find four philosophic sources for Dewey's positive outlook, his confidence that we can work together to ameliorate our problems. These are our capacity for extending the use of scientific method, our capacity for developing collaborative know-how or "social intelligence," our favorable disposition toward social service, and our ability to use experience as a catalyst for growth.
Extending the Use of Scientific Method or Intelligent Practice

Given Dewey's longstanding advocacy of scientific method, this source of hopefulness is not surprising. In "What I Believe," the article Dewey wrote, as I noted earlier, in 1930 in the midst of a global economic depression, he says that the fact that we have lost confidence in reason and comprehensive beliefs is only temporarily negative (277). This is because, in the long run, it makes room for a "thoroughgoing philosophy of experience." Moral progress, Dewey explains,

can begin only when there is the sifting and communication of the results of all relevant experiences of human association, such as now exists as a matter of course in the experiences of science with the natural world. (276; see also "Reconstruction" ix–xxix)

I understand Dewey to mean that, for him, the only way out of the pessimism and uncertainty that mark the modern age is to bring a scientific frame of mind to our moral and social conflicts: to our disputes over competing values as well as to our outdated economic, legal, and other institutions, ones that persist but no longer meet the demands of contemporary life. The specific form such a scientific approach to human dilemmas might ultimately take, and just what sorts of results such an approach might yield, cannot, according to Dewey, be predetermined. He suggests that it will take a type of Kuhnian revolution in thinking about morals, one which, at the least, will require an emphasis on discovery and invention, rather than immutable principles. In sum, although Dewey views the work of moral reconstruction as taking place over "an indefinitely long period," he is hopeful that we can extend our use of scientific method—what he describes as "the method of observation, theory as hypothesis, and experimental test"—from its sole focus on physical nature to the study of social issues as well ("Reconstruction" xxxv, ix).

At this point, Dewey might seem to be maintaining a positivistic, Enlightenment faith in science, a position for which he is sometimes (and unfairly) criticized. However, Dewey uses the phrase "scientific method" in a very broad sense to mean the art of intelligent practice rather than an activity of laboratory specialists doing work that is fundamentally different from everyday problem solving. This broad view of science as intelligent practice comes out clearly in the last paragraph of "What I Believe." He tells us that the breakdown of traditional faith is an opportunity to produce "the kind of experiences in which science and the
arts are brought mutually to bear upon industry, politics, religion, domestic life, and human relations in general . . ." (278). In other words, Dewey places his hope for a better future on the potential effectiveness of applying to our social problems not only science but also the arts—a synthesis of what Dewey labels the "industrial and scientific arts" and the "literary and poetic arts" (Experience and Nature 289). What exactly does Dewey mean by such a blending of science and art?

_Dev eloping The Arts of Communication and "Social intelligence": Their Importance for Collaborative Community_

By linking science and the arts, Dewey is reminding us that intelligent practice depends not only on individuals engaging in analysis, planning, and experimentation but also on collaborative community. Achieving collaborative community, in turn, depends on individuals understanding what it takes to work cooperatively with others. It depends upon our mastering the art of effective communication, what Dewey often refers to as "social intelligence." That is, if we are to democratically reduce social conflict, we need more than the industrial and scientific arts that promote experimental thinking. We also need the literary and poetic arts that promote mutual understanding, the sort of communication and social know-how that is crucial if we are to collectively identify and address our shared problems. Dewey and James Hayden Tufts, in the 1908 edition of their coauthored work, _Ethics_, write,

> Science [is] . . . a fine illustration of the balance and interaction between individual and social intelligence, individual effort and social cooperation . . . [and is] making possible in many ways a state of society in which men have at once greater freedom and greater power through association, greater individual development and greater socialization of interests, less private property but greater private use and enjoyment of what is common. (497–98)

In other words, for Dewey, science provides a model of communication that blends individual and social intelligence, scientific and poetic arts, to foster collaborative community. In such a community, members are creative about discerning shared goals (_Democracy_ 358). They are also respectful of one another’s dispositions and the importance of asking each other to undertake only those projects to which each can give their free assent. The "concerted consensus of action" that results is, for
Dewey, the most "fulfilling" type of action because its participants have a sense of "sharing and merging in a whole" (*Experience and Nature* 145).

Building collaborative community depends, as I have already indicated, on the art of effective communication. More specifically, according to Dewey, this means using imagination to get sufficient distance from ourselves and adequate connection with others so that we can convey our own experiences and understand others' perspectives. This sort of communication is so important to Dewey that he describes its yield of sharing and participating as "a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales" (*Experience and Nature* 132).

Communication not only helps us establish joint inquiry and action, it also helps us cross class, race, and ethnic lines so that we can reduce traditional barriers to shared experiences and undertakings. In short, Dewey rests his hope for a better future on bringing "science and the arts" to bear upon human relations. That is, he has faith that by perfecting the art of communication, we can enhance our "social intelligence," our ability to trust one another, to forge common goals, and to work collaboratively to achieve these goals.

*Nurturing Human Nature's Disposition Toward Social Service*

Granting Dewey his view that men and women can extend the use of scientific method and can develop the know-how required to work cooperatively—the first two sources of his hopefulness that I describe—does he believe that humans have the motivation or inclination to use science and our cooperative know-how for the common good? Are humans by their nature egotistical and competitive, as Hobbes (98–102) claims, or are we naturally social and sympathetic as Aristotle and Rousseau (133–40) maintain? Without being naive about people's capacity for doing harm, Dewey sides with Aristotle and Rousseau on the issue of human nature (*Human* 1–13; *Freedom*; "Creative" 226–27). Thus, I find a third source of hopefulness in Dewey: his idea that humans have a strong disposition for social service. Alternatively put, a spirit of social service, according to Dewey, does not have to be imposed with an iron fist on a recalcitrant human nature. To the contrary, in his study of learning outside formal settings, Dewey finds that children imitate adult behavior not simply because they are natural mimics (as some researchers claim) but because they want to participate in and contribute to adult projects (*Democracy* 34). He writes, the child rolls the ball back not only to imitate the adult but to "keep [the activity] going" and to "take an effective part in the game" (35). Speaking more generally about this social charac-
teristic of child behavior, Dewey remarks, "The child is born with a natural desire to give out, to do, and that means to serve" ("Ethical" 119). In fact, Dewey goes so far as to suggest that children would neither survive nor learn anything if they did not have a natural inclination to collaborate with others and rudimentary social skills (Democracy).

Despite his claims about young people's disposition to collaborate with others, and despite his deeply held belief that only in group activities can individuals develop their unique talents, Dewey is realistic about the limited staying power of humans' inborn capacity to serve. Our social service disposition needs to be cultivated at an early age, he says, and, in this regard, his approach coincides with that of Aristotle (34-35). Both believe that concern for others is a virtue that can only be developed through practice. In fact, according to Dewey, when young children cannot find ways to contribute something uniquely their own to common projects but are encouraged, instead, to compete to see who can best perform a specific task, their disposition to serve "gradually atrophies for lack of use" ("Ethical" 118).

**Using Experience As a Catalyst of Growth**

In "What I Believe," Dewey not only expresses his belief that scientific method is a source of hopefulness, he also, as I have noted, expresses his faith in our ability to learn from experience even in relatively dark times. This is, in my view, the fourth source of Dewey's hopefulness. In the full passage from which I took the epigraph for this article, Dewey writes,

> Faith in the varied possibilities of diversified experience is attended with the joy of constant discovery and of constant growing. Such a joy is possible even in the midst of trouble and defeat, whenever life-experiences are treated as potential disclosures of meanings and values that are to be used as means to a fuller and more significant future experience.

(272)

I understand Dewey to mean that, no matter the circumstances or nature of a particular experience, it always offers us opportunities to make discoveries and grow. That is, "even in the midst of trouble and defeat," we can learn from present experience in ways that promise a better, "a fuller and more significant" future.

This is not to suggest that Dewey takes a Panglossian approach to life or denies that there are moral evils and natural disasters. On the contrary,
attending to our difficulties, finding where the "shoe pinches" is the first step, for Dewey, in responding intelligently to human experience. Rather than denying that life often presents us with miseducative and debilitating situations, Dewey seems to be urging us to be flexible, to avoid holding onto habits that no longer function well or become outdated when things do not go as we anticipated. Reminding us that the immaturity and flexibility of children make them good learners, he argues that one of life's tasks is to work against our natural tendency to become more closed and rigid as we grow older (Democracy 43).

When I look behind this aspect of Dewey's philosophy of experience, I see one of his most vibrant visions, his view that the purpose of education is to help us learn to get the most out of each of our experiences (Experience and Education 49; Democracy 56). This requires both cognitive skills as well as emotional dispositions such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and courage (Democracy 173–79; How 3–33). That is, in addition to adopting a scientific frame of mind, we must also adopt an optimistic attitude toward the future, one that has faith in our ability to use untoward experiences to bring forward personal powers and new abilities to cooperate with others.

Dewey's view contrasts sharply with Scott Peck's reflections in his best selling book, The Road Less Traveled. Peck tells us that life is a matter of constantly giving things up: our youth, our children, our jobs, our lives. Dewey, in contrast, suggests that each period, each moment, each relationship presents different goods, ones that offer the open minded person new opportunities to learn and discover. Put another way, for Dewey, the Golden Age is in the future rather than in the past. A better world is not behind but ahead of us if we can learn how to get the most out of our experiences.

Deweyan Hopefulness and Its Implications for Today's Classrooms

My inquiry into the sources of Dewey's continued optimism during his own periods of national crisis has led me to explore his answers to questions about politics, human nature, and theories of learning. Since responses to these questions are the key to understanding any teacher's pedagogy, Dewey's stances on these issues go a long way toward explaining his particular approach to education. Given the current political climate, it will not be easy to achieve Dewey's goal: a democracy in which the collaborative classroom is an essential element in the reconciliation of individual fulfillment and collective action. However, Dewey's views of human nature and learning provide rays of optimism about our
chances of making progress, however piecemeal and halting, toward his vision. In particular, my study of Dewey’s sources of hopefulness leaves me with three touchstones for hopeful teaching in our post-September 11 era.

The first touchstone is Dewey’s insight that when teachers encourage students to partake in collaborative inquiry, one consequence is that they help pupils practice the habits of “associated” living that mark a democratic way of life. Put another way, when students engage in cooperative and honest exploration with others, they practice what Dewey saw at the heart of democratic freedom: the chance to develop one’s unique, individual skills in the service of shared, collectively generated goals. This Deweyan insight adds to my hopefulness as a teacher because it enables me to see a way—the introduction of more cooperative assignments in my courses—to help my students and me develop the types of habits that will allow us to expand, albeit modestly, the presence of democracy both inside and outside the schoolroom.

The second Deweyan insight from which I draw hope is his insistence that as we try to introduce more group work into our courses in an effort to foster democratic living, there is also a second consequence. We are, in addition, helping our students engage in a highly effective and satisfying type of learning. That is, according to Dewey, it is in free, cooperative give and take with others that we truly realize our individual potentials. Such cooperative give and take, for Dewey, is the crucible that brings forward and sharpens our powers of creativity, discovery, and intelligence. Although most students have probably been conditioned to believe that successful pupils learn best by working alone at their individual desks, Dewey gives teachers good reason to challenge such a belief. He reminds us that just as scientific inquirers do not make their best headway working in isolation, so students cannot develop their full cognitive and imaginative powers in personal competition that requires them to hide their discoveries from classmates as if knowledge were a form of industrial secret. That is, intelligence is not a personal but a social power, or, alternatively put, the development of students’ social skills and virtues is crucial for the development of their intellectual ones.

The third Deweyan touchstone for hopeful teaching is his observation that students come to school with a natural desire to participate in and contribute something of their own to a common cause. Despite the fact that we live in a world, as Dewey puts it, that has gone “mad” with competition and the pursuit of personal gain, we are by nature, he
maintains, social creatures. Although students’ faces, as they look at us on the first days of class, may show wariness about the upcoming competitions in which they expect to engage, it buoys my spirits to know that beneath those looks are capacities, albeit not always well-developed ones, for collaborative work. It gives me hope to believe that as I attempt to fashion a pedagogy that features more collaborative undertakings, I am not working against my students’ native grain.

By contrast, I will be working against a major focus of contemporary education: the testing of individual students. However, our schools and universities are not monolithic or fully efficient in pursuit of this objective. Without intending to minimize what is a pervasive institutional constraint, I believe teachers can create classrooms in which they are able to encourage students’ critical thinking while also nourishing their desire to work together and their capacities for democratic living. Obviously, I cannot prove that if teachers attempt to realize these goals democracy will be preserved and extended. However, adopting these aims in the context of Dewey’s analysis of America’s ills is, at the least, a start toward reducing the despair that many of us may feel about our teacherly missions in a post-September 11 world.

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**Notes**

1. Abowitz; Apple; Chomsky; Dolby and Burbules; Fish; H. Giroux, “Democracy”; S. S. Giroux; Rorty; Somers and Somers-Willett; Zembylas and Boler.

2. For accounts of the media’s failure to report U.S. public dissent from and resistance to the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” see H. Giroux, “Democracy”; Chomsky 29–33, 113–15; Zembylas and Boler.

3. “In Explanation” 292; see also Howlett 33–34. For post-September 11 accounts of patriotism that also identify “dissent” with “treason,” see H. Giroux, “Democracy”; Didion 54–56; Fish.

4. For discussion of more recent celebrations of individual initiative in commerce existing alongside denigration of individual initiative in belief, see Sandel.

5. For post-September 11 descriptions of large-scale news coverage controlled by private interests, see Chomsky; Dolby and Burbules.

6. Considerable scholarship has focused on developing such collaborative assignments as well as service learning courses and classrooms that are communities of inquiry. See for example, see Adler-Kassner; Aronson and Patnoe; Brown and Campione; Bruffee; Johnson and Johnson; Jolliffe; Mintrop; Shulman.
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