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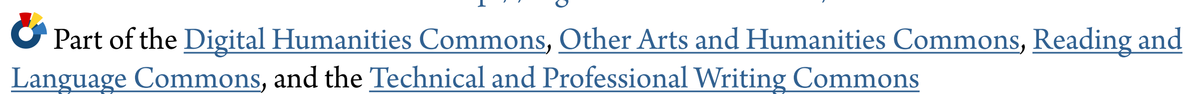
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What John Dewey Taught Me

HARRIET FURST SIMON

John Dewey, because of his longevity and productivity, has spawned a cottage industry. Seldom has one man kept so many women respectably employed for so long (we are not prejudiced; we have had a male co-worker now and again). Of course, his editors are not the only ones who have been busy; an increasing number of scholars are churning out books and articles on topics ranging from Dewey and the May Fourth Movement in China to the important women in Dewey's life.

As I thought about the subject of appreciation, it seemed to me that Dewey has educated us in at least three major ways: He has provided an editorial education, an education through the subject matter of his writings, and, perhaps most significantly, an education through the way he conducted his life. This education has demanded our active participation and reflective thinking—attributes he discussed more than once.

Dewey has tested the full range of editorial skills. First, there is the problem of ferreting out everything he wrote—a considerable amount, since he published for seventy years. By his nineties, he sometimes admits to slowing down a bit; however, in his next breath, he is planning what he will tackle as soon as his strength returns. When I joined the Dewey Center, we were preparing the sixteenth volume in the *Collected Works*, in which Dewey celebrates his sixtieth birthday; we had not even reached midpoint yet; there would be another twenty-one volumes to add to the shelf, for a total of thirty-seven! All along, as we researched correspondence for textual commentaries, we were hard put to understand how he was able to produce so many letters along with books and articles. Now, as we begin a selected edition of Dewey's letters, we continue to unearth items; the letters lead to previously unknown newspaper reports of addresses, to typescripts, and, of course, to ever more letters and documents.

To emend or not to emend—our persistent dilemma. With his sometimes seemingly random punctuation, his complex (dare we say confusing?) sentence structure, his quirk of italicizing for emphasis not *quite* the right word, Dewey did not make it easy to abide by our policy of light emendation. Dewey's sometimes puzzling word choice sends us scurrying to dictionaries. He uses archaic words, uses common words in a most uncommon way, occasionally creates words, and fearlessly uses new words. (H. L. Mencken commented on an early appearance of the word "dope" in Dewey's 1919 essay "Our Share in Drugging China."[1]) Dewey clearly loved language; we get the impression he eagerly awaited the 1933 publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for he cited it frequently from then on. Dewey frequently makes it difficult to discover the source of his quotations, using introductory phrases like "A well-known novelist," "A recent newspaper article," or, merely, "It has been said that." Recording Dewey's alterations in typescripts can be a tedious process because of his

John Dewey (1920) by Anne Sharpe, from a Japanese painting at Tamagawa Academy, Tokyo (courtesy of Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale).

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handwriting, because of the sheer number of changes, or because a caret, arrow, or mark to indicate placement was missing. The choice was ours. Challenges continue, perhaps escalate, as we begin the letters. Some things change: Although we no longer need to collate various versions of documents, we are now faced with the thorny issues of selection, presentation, and annotation.

Because Dewey treats a multitude of topics, it is possible, through reading and researching his writings, to gain the rudiments of a fairly decent education. In addition to ethics, logic, and value theory, we hear about Polish history, Sino-Japanese conflict, faith vs. religious dogmatism, education in Turkey and Mexico, and the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy. We hear from Joshua Reynolds on art, Thomas Jefferson on democracy, William James on the psychologist's fallacy.

As we proofread, we were often struck by the relevance of Dewey's comments; it was uncanny how he seemed to be observing the current scene—dissatisfaction with schools, a need for child health and protection, chronic unemployment, or the danger from authoritarianism, whatever its source. Is there a finer goal for education than that in Dewey's *School and Society*?—"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."[2]

Others apparently thought Dewey relevant during his career. "Unbelievable as the idea may seem today," Dewey "began to have such an impact that students [at the University of Chicago] would get up early in order to be in line at the bookstore when one of his new volumes was coming out."[3]

Lastly—John Dewey as a man. Dewey's modesty is well documented. There are references to his "utter indifference to clothes," stories about people being shocked to learn that the quiet gentleman in the corner they had met the previous evening was none other than *the* John Dewey. A younger Columbia University colleague described Dewey this way: "He was so simple and plain that anybody might have mistaken him for a janitor. I . . . used to stare at the man on a blustery winter day as he shuffled homeward on foot, a cigarette drooping from his lax mouth, bucking a stiff wind off the Hudson, wearing no overcoat, and everybody else was bundled up warmly. He was thinking."[4]

"America's most distinguished philosopher" usually answered his mail, including inquiries from total strangers. He was notoriously generous to young, unknown students, inviting them to his home and corresponding extensively with several. The many gracious tributes and book reviews he wrote reflect this same generosity.

The absence of mean-spiritedness in Dewey is, I think, remarkable. Rarely do personal tragedy and political disappointment transmogrify into bitterness. He normally remains unruffled by poor reviews or angry rejoinders; theoretical disagreement descends to personal animosity in only a few instances. Friendly contemporaries tried to explain what Dewey *really* meant, a process of interpretation and reinterpretation that continues today.

His prose undeniably caused problems. A Unitarian minister suggested that, instead of laying down authoritative answers, Dewey "actually shares his thought processes with his reader in order to show how he arrived at a specific conclusion. While this is an admirable expression of that humility of spirit characteristic of Dewey, it does place considerable strain on the person trying to assimilate his thought."[5]

In his letters, we discover Dewey as a son, brother, lover, husband, father, friend, mentor. The letters exhibit humor, unintended pathos, and, incidentally, a style that is sometimes anecdotal, that is frequently crisp, concise, and to the point—worthy of a military commander. In addition to abundant love letters to Alice, there are passages like the following, from a letter written early in their courtship. Dewey, a young instructor, having just taught a logic course, has said good-bye to Alice to return home for the summer: "My grief at parting was somewhat assuaged by the timely appearance of a youth who insisted on helping me carry my things to the station—As I knew it would be 'embarrassing' both to him and myself, I didn't mention the fact that he had a Condition in Logic till he had got the things pretty well down to the station. I knew that under such circumstances his grief at the condition and his joy at seeing me depart would just about offset each other—"[6] (A "condition" is an unsatisfactory grade that may be raised by doing additional work.)

Several years later, during the summer between Michigan and Chicago, while Alice traveled in Europe with the two older children, Fred and Evelyn, Dewey cared for their eighteen-month-old son, Morris. Reassuring Alice that Morris was no trouble to him, Dewey wrote, "He is the one bright spot here that keeps me from feeling wholly a wanderer on the face of the earth. As long as he is with me, I feel that I still have a home & a place & a belonging."[7] Dewey describes "Morrissey" (as he came to be called) climbing up and down stairs, playing with the kitty, chasing birds, getting his molars; Morrissey's genius for language; Morrissey's demonstration of displeasure by backing into the nearest corner, drawing himself up, and remaining there in dignified silence. "He is an extraordinary child,"[8] Dewey wrote. The following summer, while the family traveled in Italy, Morris died from diphtheria.

At William Rainey Harper's University of Chicago, Dewey found himself embroiled in a situation fraught with bureaucratic, financial, and personality problems. Frank A. Manny, Dewey's assistant during this period, described him years later as a man "concerned about people and individuals with no desire to impress his own point of view upon them or allow them in any way to become his disciples."[9] One exceptionally revealing letter to Manny, written to an unhappy subordinate who feels that he has perhaps let his boss down, reads:

> I want to say you have not been a disappointment to me—so far as there has been any "misfit," I am to blame, not you. I have had years of working practically alone, you know the conditions at Ann Arbor—Moreover, the kind of studies I have pursued, and my natural bent of mind have tended to give me a habit of isolation in work. The thing I have chiefly learned in the last two years is the extent to which this habit of isolated work had fixed itself upon me and the great serious difficulty I have in getting into cooperative relations with people—my theories to the contrary notwithstanding. Others have suffered from it & you have. Moreover, my experience of the past year is the first I have ever had with any administrative responsibility. I have learned somethings—much from you, more than you realize—but have much more to learn.[10]

Dewey's roots were firmly planted. The Columbia University colleague previously referred to, who was also a farmer and got to know Dewey as a farmer, wrote that Dewey "would think just as hard about soils and manures and the best time to cut asparagus and how to make pullets lay as ever he thought about Instrumentalism. I wonder how many people who used to see him riding his creaky old wagon (and later, I think, a secondhand truck) peddling asparagus around Huntington [Long Island] ever knew what they were seeing. . . . The plain Vermonter in him never came out fully except when away from learned folks and with dirt farmers and plain laborers."[11] Perhaps this solid underpinning accounts in large measure for Dewey's endurance and perseverance.

Always Dewey sought to unify theory and practice, word and deed; perhaps he achieved this union most dramatically when, in 1937, he accepted the position of chairman of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials. Trotsky, banished from the Soviet Union years before, had been convicted in absentia. A commission chairman with impeccable credentials was sought—someone with stature who could command worldwide respect, someone whose integrity and objectivity were beyond question. Dewey was their man, but required persuasion; he felt intellectually unprepared and, also, was finishing a major work. At age seventy-seven, he withstood opposition from friends, family, and a split liberal community in order to provide an impartial forum for Trotsky to present his testimony. Endangering his welfare and, some charged, his reputation, Dewey traveled to Mexico to chair Trotsky's inquiry. His opening statement closes with the words:

> Speaking finally not for the Commission but for myself, I had hoped that a chairman might be found for these preliminary investigations whose experience better fitted him for the difficult and delicate task to be performed. But I have given my life to the work of education, which I have conceived to be that of public enlightenment in the interests of society. If I finally accepted the responsible post I now occupy, it was because I realized that to act otherwise would be to be false to my life work.[12]

NOTES

1. H. L. Mencken, *The American Language*, 4th ed., abridged and rev., ed. Raven I. McDavid, Jr., and David W. Maurer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 101. Dewey, "Our Share in Drugging China," *New Republic* 21 (24 December 1919): 114–17 [*Middle Works* 11:235–40].
2. *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 3 [*Middle Works* 1:5].
3. Jack C. Lamb: "John Dewey: A Look Back," lecture to Philosophical Society, State University of New York, Buffalo, [October 1959], 6, John Dewey Papers, Box 73, folder 9, Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
4. Walter B. Pitkin to Joseph Ratner, 2 March 1947, Joseph Ratner/John Dewey Papers, Box 1, folder 15, Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
5. Rev. Wayne Shuttee, "Philosophic Insights into the Meaning of Life: IX. John Dewey," a sermon to the West Shore Unitarian Church, Lakewood, Ohio, [November 1949], 3, Dewey Papers, Box 89, folder 15.
6. Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, 25 June 1885, ibid., Box 1, folder 8.
7. Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, [10 May 1894?], ibid., Box 2, folder 4.
8. Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, [15 May 1894?], ibid.
9. Manny to Joseph Ratner, 4 June 1947, Ratner/Dewey Papers, Box 1, folder 17.
10. Dewey to Manny, [1897?], Frank A. Manny Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
11. Walter B. Pitkin to Joseph Ratner, 2 March 1947, Ratner/Dewey Papers, Box 1, folder 15.
12. "Introductory Statement of the Commission of Inquiry," 10 April 1937, *The Case of Leon Trotsky* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), 5 [*Later Works* 11:309].