

Following the Puritan concept of a calling, Dewey's concept of community envisaged a society in which men performing diverse and specialized functions were meaningfully related to each other and had a vital sense of their own roles in the social and productive processes. Dewey's hope was no less visionary than that of the Puritains: he could not establish the meaningfulness of the individual role in modern society and, hence, could not state the sense of community which education should foster.

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JOHN DEWEY'S "CITY ON A HILL": The School as a Model of Community

Disciples of John Dewey are apt to see him as a no-nonsense philosopher of, and for, the scientific age - tough-minded, unmystical, unswayed by metaphysical cant: the perfect Yankee pragmatist. His educational theories, in particular, seem to embrace the demands of an industrial civilization without a blush. Dewey himself lent credence to this view by repeatedly arguing that progressive methods of learning must be developed "for the sake of securing industrial intelligence — a knowledge of the conditions and the processes of present manufacturing, transportation, and commerce."¹

Dewey's defenders do have a point, and a very large one, at that — there can be no disputing how hard and how persistently Dewey tried to adapt his model of education to the mechanical rhythms of modern America. Above all, Dewey's philosophy of education claimed to be "progressive" — unencumbered by the learning rituals left over as a residue from the pre-democratic and pre-industrial era.²

This decided emphasis on *the application* of the progressive model of education to modern society has concealed from some readers, however, how much *the model itself* owes to the vision of community of Dewey's Puritan ancestors — and how often Dewey's thought seems to parallel (if not incorporate) elements of that earlier vision.

Stated baldly (and too briefly), the Puritan idea of community was that of an organic society, predicated around an overriding faith in a common purpose — a community which transcends all barriers of class, blood, geography and economic self-interest by providing every member with a *calling* — a vocation which serves the essential needs of society and justifies the role of every man from every social estate who dutifully fulfills that calling.³ While each man had his own *particular* calling, as worker, father, husband, sub-

¹ John Dewey, "Learning to Earn," in Joseph Ratner (ed.), *Education Today* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), p. 132.

² John Dewey, "The People and the Schools," in *Education Today*, p. 48.

³ On this, see Jonah Goldstein, "Community and Vocation in America" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago), p. 23-30.

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ject — all men (and women) had too a *Christian* or *general* calling — a concept which referred not to roles other than particular vocations, but to the way in which those particular callings were carried out — in the service of the community, infused by the spirit of Christian brotherhood.

The Puritan belief in callings served to strengthen and support communal ties. Every man was the center of a web of personal, familial, occupational, civic and religious duties which bound him in myriad and complex ways both to his society as a whole and to its various institutions. Every man's role was, in one aspect, peculiar to him; and he alone could meet its responsibilities. At the same time even the most private duties were bound up with the general welfare, and subject to the judgment of God. All his deeds and acts were supposed to have a moral purpose — and for precisely this reason, he was expected to do his duties *willingly*. Similarly, the associations of which he was a member were designed to serve some moral goal. The calling was at once the most individual and the most universal of concepts: only through the individual commitment of *each* man could the *common* good of the community be served.

For Dewey as for the Puritans, the concept of “calling” involved far more than that of a job; it embraced the whole network of social roles and social relationships:

We must avoid not only the limitation of conception of vocation to the occupations where immediately tangible commodities are produced, but also the notion that vocations are distributed in an exclusive way, one and only one to a person . . . (i) No one is just an artist and nothing else . . . He must . . . at some period of his life, be a member of a family; he must have friends and companions; he must either support himself or be supported by others, and thus he has a business career. He is a member of some organized political unit, and so on . . . (ii) As a man's vocation as an artist is but the emphatically specialized phase of his diverse and variegated vocational activities, so his efficiency in it, in the humane sense of efficiency, is determined by its associations with other callings. A person must have experience, he must *live*, if his artistry is to be more than a technical accomplishment.⁴

“Calling” for the first Puritans, however, was a *sacred* concept — each man, by virtue of his callings, was a member of the *corpus mysticum*, the mystical community of Christ — joined to other members and God through the Holy Spirit itself. Dewey, on the other hand, wanted an idea of “vocation” purged of any metaphysical taint, a social philosophy that could be pragmatically justified. The test of the true vocation was not the Christian ethic but the yardstick of social utility: “A vocation,” declared Dewey, “means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates.”⁵

It is not enough, however, for a social role to be useful; its significance must be learned, experienced, and understood. Before the growth of the factory-system, children learned most roles (especially work-roles) naturally: “The household was practically the center in which were carried on, or about

⁴ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 316.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 311.

which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation.”⁶ In such a setting, every child was able to learn how and why a product was made, he could gain a sense of completion and a sense of purpose from his work through active participation in it:

Practically every member in the household had his own share of work. The children, as they gained in strength and capacity, were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes. It was a matter of immediate and personal concern, even to the point of actual participation There was always something which really needed to be done, and a real necessity that each member of the household should do his own part faithfully and in co-operation with others.⁷

Through an understanding of the implications of his work, and through his commitment to it, every man and woman could develop a sense of vocation; and because their work demanded co-operative effort, through it they could learn the spirit of mutuality. The household became, in a way, a small community.

But in a highly industrialized society — argued Dewey — the urban child no longer has the same opportunities to learn by doing. In contemporary civilization, adult roles have become so complex that rationalized institutions are required to train the child — and thus the school becomes *the* central arena in which the idea of commitment to community is forged. Through “vocational” education the child enters into a community of purpose:

An occupation is a continuous activity having a purpose. Education *through* occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method. It calls instincts and habits into play; it is a foe to passive receptivity. It has an end in view; results are to be accomplished. Hence it appeals to thought; it demands that an idea of an end be steadily maintained, so that activity cannot either be routine or capricious A calling is also of necessity an organizing principle for information and ideas; for knowledge and intellectual growth. It provides an axis which runs through an immense diversity of detail; it causes different experiences, facts, items of information to fall in order with one another.⁸

For Dewey, the school itself thus becomes a “miniature community, an embryonic society”: such a setting provides a realm in which children learn to act together; understand each other; develop a common mission; and in which each child learns “to use his own powers for social end.”⁹

The idea of the community as a model, as a microcosm — a community which is morally simpler, purer, more purposeful than the world around it — has antecedents in the American Puritan tradition. Three hundred years before, John Winthrop had addressed the men and women migrating with him to the New World and told them that they were engaged in an “extraordinary” mission to “bring into familiar and constant practice” the precepts of Christ.¹⁰ They must provide “a model of Christian charity” — and upon

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 311

⁷ John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 10-12.

⁸ Dewey, *Democracy*, p. 309.

⁹ Dewey, *School*, p. 18; and “My Pedagogic Creed,” in *Education Today*, p. 6.

¹⁰ John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in Edmund Sears Morgan (ed.), *Puritan Political Ideas: 1538 - 1794* (Indiannapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), p. 90.

their success or failure might depend not only their own fate but the fate of all true Christians everywhere; they would be, declared Winthrop, “as a city upon a Hill.”

John Winthrop saw no contradiction between social inequality and the spirit of community — in fact, he believed that class differences could actually re-enforce Christian unity — because in a heterogeneous society “every man might have need of other.”¹¹ It was the inequality of both abilities and social positions which made the community possible: for it is from this very diversity that each man derived his social role and his social identity. The Puritan divine, William Perkins, had made this point plain when he declared:

God . . . hath appointed that there should remain a distinction between man and man . . . and by reason of this distinction of man, partly in respect of gifts, partly in respect of order, come personal callings. For if all men had the same gifts, and all were in the same degree and order, then should all have the same calling.¹²

Dewey, on the other hand, was a liberal democrat, and did not perceive any positive good in social distinctions. Yet, for most of his life, he did not see such divisions as an insuperable problem, either — because men educated to appreciate the meaning of their callings could transcend class differences:

The world in which most of us live is a world in which everyone has a calling and occupation. Some are managers and others are subordinates. But the great thing for one as for the other is that each shall have the education which enables him to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance.¹³

The Puritan vision of community never was fully realized. As New England society grew it became richer, more secularized, and more diverse in purpose; and the original intentions of its founders were gradually transformed. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a new capitalist class began to emerge, and in its wake an increasing emphasis on liberty, equality, and materialism.

The concept of “calling” also lost something of its original moral force, coming more and more to mean particular secular occupations on the one hand, and particular acts of Christian piety on the other.¹⁴

But while the original vision could not hold, refracted images of the Puritan ideal of community would emerge and re-emerge in myriad forms within American society. In the nineteenth century, innumerable voluntary associations were founded by the descendants of the original Puritans — organizations ranging from abolitionist groups to temperance societies and to educational associations, all presuming to unite men of good will in the voluntary pursuit of some over-riding moral goal. Each one was, in a sense, a little “City on a Hill.”

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

¹² William Perkins, “William Perkins on Callings,” in *Puritan Political Ideas*, p. 50.

¹³ Dewey, *School*, p. 23.

¹⁴ On this and the following, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, Vol. II: *From Colony to Nation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1961), p. 367-84; and *Puritan Political Ideas*, pp. xxxv-xlviii.

The communitarian movements which flourished before the Civil War also often derived much of their thrust from a Protestant ethic in flux.¹⁵ Some, like the celebrated community of Brook Farm, Massachusetts (1841-7), were founded by New England intellectuals who felt they lacked a place and a sense of purpose in an increasingly secularized society; they hoped to forge a new model of community in which all men would perform both mental and manual labor, and each man would fulfill a vocation that served the common good. While the Brook Farmers usually rejected the formal creeds of the orthodox, they experienced a spiritual hunger for the sense of cohesion and purpose their forefathers had known — and they tried to articulate a model of community appropriate to the new age.

So too, some half a century later, did John Dewey. The parallels between Dewey and the members of Brook Farm are many and salient: both shared in — and yet rebelled against — a New England Protestant heritage; both believed in a community predicated around a common moral purpose which transcended class differences; both hoped to discover meaningful social roles which would demand both theoretical and practical skills, and thereby reintegrate intellectuals and non-intellectuals into one cohesive community; both believed that such a community would involve the active and voluntary participation of all its members; and both minimized the political and social conflict such a radical transformation of society might entail.

Dewey's debt to the Puritan ethic can be traced, in part, to his family history. Dewey's mother had been converted to Congregationalism (the religion of John Winthrop), and drove her son with a "missionary zeal"; during his adolescence, Dewey himself underwent a grave religious crisis which he never forgot:

The sense of divisions and separations that were, I suppose borne in upon me as a consequence of a heritage of New England culture, divisions by way of isolation of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God, brought a painful oppression — or rather, they were an inward laceration.¹⁶

Dewey eventually came to abandon all traditional dogmas: he resolved that "any sound religious experience could and should adopt itself to whatever beliefs one found oneself intellectually able to hold."¹⁷ Ironically, it was his deeply-rooted spiritual hunger for a world — and a world-view — which was intellectually and emotionally cohesive that drove him to renounce orthodoxy. It may seem strange that science, with its "probable" hypotheses and relativistic point of view, could seem to promise a method through which a new integration of values could be grounded; but it was precisely the adaptability of the scientific method which appealed to Dewey.

¹⁵ On this, see Goldstein, "Community," pp. 36-117.

¹⁶ John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in George P. Adams and William Peperell Montague (eds.), *Contemporary American Philosophy: Personal Statements II* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1930), p. 19. Sydney Hooks's inexplicable statement in *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: John Day Co., 1939), p. 11, that Dewey never underwent a religious crisis is directly contradicted by Dewey himself.

¹⁷ Dewey, "From Absolutism," p. 19.

In a culture which was undergoing rapid transformation, any attempt to achieve a coherent system of belief by predicating it around one supposedly "eternal" Truth, might quickly come to grief; but by insisting that all evidence is open to challenge, and that only a general *method* of inquiry be prescribed, Dewey hoped to forge a new unity of outlook from the chaos of experience, and achieve a new security of values through the regularization of doubt.

Dewey's ideal of the school as model community, therefore, for all its pragmatic rationale, still allowed him to salvage the essence of spiritual experience. In "My Pedagogic Creed," one of Dewey's most revealing essays, the themes of social utility and religious vision are strangely combined:

I Believe that . . .

- every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.
- in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.¹⁸

Dewey's explicit use of Christian imagery is admittedly not typical of him; but perhaps, for that very reason, it suggests more about the kinds of tensions he experienced than reams of blander prose. The problem he never ceased struggling with was how to find a secular equivalent to the community of Christ in a technological age.

It would be misleading, however, to imply that Dewey's vision of community was simply a direct intellectual legacy of the Puritans. It was probably the influence of their vision on American *culture*, diffuse yet pervasive, which affected Dewey most. More precisely, it was the increasing disintegration of the last remnants of traditional community values that Dewey was reacting to, and against.

Dewey's hunger for community reflected the experience of a large number of Americans during the first decade of the Twentieth Century.¹⁹ Such men were often professionals — products of a rapidly-expanding school-system geared to servicing the demands of the new rationalized society. The system had made them, and they believed in the system — believed in self-improvement through education and rational planning. At the same time, such men often experienced a nostalgia for the small towns and homesteads they had left behind in their upward scramble for success — for the spirit of community which their new situations could rarely provide. It was that spirit that Dewey's social philosophy promised to re-ignite.

Dewey believed that through vocational education, properly defined, the rift between "book-knowledge" and practical know-how would be ended:

Gardening, for example, need not be taught either for the sake of preparing future gar-

¹⁸ Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," p. 17.

¹⁹ On this and the following, see C. Wright Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America*, ed. by Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Paine-Whitman Publishers, 1964), p. 377-85, etc.; and Lawrence Vesey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 264-67.

deners, or as an agreeable way of passing time. It affords an avenue of approach to knowledge of the place farming and horticulture have had in the history of the race and which they occupy in present social organization. Carried on in an environment educationally controlled, they are means for making a study of the facts of growth, the chemistry of soil, the role of light, air, and moisture, injurious and helpful animal life, etc. There is nothing in the elementary study of botany which cannot be introduced in a vital way in connection with caring for the growth of seeds. Instead of the subject matter belonging to a peculiar study called botany, it will then belong to life...²⁰

The school itself provides a special environment in which all students participate in purposeful activities; each child, by performing his role within the group is infused with a sense of collective purpose. The school further serves as a model community in at least three ways: it provides a mode of association simpler than that found in the larger complex society, allowing students to understand more readily the purposes of social relationships; it purifies and idealizes social customs; and it exposes the child to a wider and better balanced environment. In such an environment, argued Dewey, students would learn to understand a broad spectrum of social roles and social groups — thus enabling them to transcend barriers of race, religion and class. Every child would be free to choose his own goals and discover social roles meaningful for him.²¹

Dewey failed. All of Dewey's emphasis on concrete, meaningful pursuits could never make up for the fact that Dewey was never very precisely able to define what *kinds* of goals education should foster — and how his generalities about individual growth and community democracy might actually lead to any over-riding sense of collective purpose. Dewey was, in fact, caught in a vicious circle of his own making: he refused to posit absolute values for the school or the community for fear that those values might become irrelevant — but by insisting that *any* goal was potentially significant and must be tested against experience, he came close to arguing for meaning for meaning's sake.

His failure reflected not only the tensions which divided his own psyche, but those which tore at the whole American social structure, too. The problem Dewey never solved was how to educate men to see that their vocations were meaningful when too often, they were not. As the new bureaucracies grew ever more complex and impersonal, they increasingly adopted a "value-free" ethic which separated means from ends, and practice from purpose. They demanded men who would implement established procedures instead of trying to initiate new goals.

At the same time, Dewey's theory of vocational education was taken into directions he never meant it to go: it came to mean vaguely-defined "life-adjustment" courses on the one hand, or narrowly-defined "practical" courses on the other. In his later years, Dewey himself came to believe ever more strongly that the school could not transform society without society also transforming itself:

²⁰ Dewey, *Democracy*, p. 235.

²¹ Dewey, *ibid.*, p. 22-27.

If our public-school system merely turns out efficient industrial fodder and citizenship fodder in a state controlled by pecuniary industry, as other schools in other nations have turned out efficient cannon fodder, it is not helping to solve the problem of building up a distinctive American culture; it is only aggravating the problem. That which prevents the schools from doing their education work freely is precisely the pressure — for the most part indirect, to be sure — of domination of the money-motif of our industrial regime.²²

Dewey's last writings are tinged with an increasing undercurrent of pessimism. He never discovered a way to span the abyss between pragmatism and purpose, between piecemeal reforms within the context of a competitive society and his vision of a cohesive community in which each man plays a meaningful role. It is a vision so dimmed by failure that it may seem to us — as it sometimes appeared to Dewey — only as an epiphany, eluding all rational definition:

When the liberation of capacity no longer seems a menace to organization and established institutions, something that cannot be avoided practically and yet something that is a threat to the conservation of the most precious values of the past, when the liberating of social capacity operates as a socially creative force, art will not be a luxury, a stranger to the daily occupations of making a living. Making a living economically speaking, will be at one with making a life which is worth living. And 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.²³

The idea of community had come to seem to Dewey, as it had once appeared to his forefathers, as a kind of mystic force — a “miracle.” Much had changed, however, since John Winthrop had first envisioned the City on a Hill: for a moment — for a moment only — Dewey had almost managed to forget that in modern, rationalized societies, we can no longer believe in miracles.

²² John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), p. 12.

²³ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (enlarged edition; Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 211.