

SPIRITUAL EDUCATION AS POETIC CREATION IN DEWEY'S RELIGIOUS HUMANISM

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Many throughout the world feel that the second millennium after the beginning of the Christian era marks an immense crisis in human spirituality; I agree. Spiritual values have succumbed to the commercial values of a global economy almost everywhere. Technical rationality has so defeated spirituality that governments as well as individuals calculate their values in terms of utilities rather than responsibilities. The assumption is that having more implies being more. People have become ciphers rather than selves. Fragmented and frustrated, the multitudes desire spiritual unity.

In the United States reaction to spiritual poverty has ranged from the reappearance of the "Religious Right" to the advocates of "New Age" thinking. In education, religious unrest has led to calls for restoring school prayer, to more support for private schools as a way to support private religious education, to demands for curriculum reform. The din of business-minded reform and the requirements for national tests that will improve "competition" among schools usually, however, smother these voices.

My contribution to the ongoing debate over the role of religion and spirituality in education is small. I want to suggest that if we conceive of spirituality as an active poetic quest for meaning, understood as more intimate and meaningful relationships with existence wherein what we do matters, then the arts are the best way to restore spirituality to our schools. By the "arts," however, I mean something much finer than just the fine arts. What I advocate is a return to the ancient Greek notion of *poiesis* that is, creation, making, or calling into existence. In this sense vocational or multicultural education is potentially as poetic as English or music education and, therefore,

potentially as spiritual.

Currently, the manufacture of human resources to amplify the production function is the aim of public education in the industrialized world. So-called “public schools” often serve the predominantly private purposes of business and industry. Given the same curriculum and the same schools we now have, it would be almost as easy to make spiritual awakening the aim of education. Surely, every individual as a true poet, a spiritual seeker, a creator is a worthier goal than every individual as a utility of economic production. This may all be done without violating the wisdom that separates church and state.

A secondary thesis of this paper, stated boldly, is that spirituality is more important than rationality. We should esteem rationality only insofar as it contributes to spirituality. Spirituality, I suggest, is the struggle for poetic unity. It is part of what Thomas Alexander (1993) calls “the Human Eros,” by which he means the human desire to live lives of ever expanding meaning and value. Further, spirituality involves the human desire to find intimacy, functional unity, and harmony with the rest of existence. Finally, spirituality involves the desire to make human action, especially creative action, count in the course of events. Such spirituality is continually creative and constantly open to alterity and possibility.

We survive and exalt our existence by creatively unifying ideal and actual. Spiritual expression is a general and holy, human function according to Dewey (1934a/1980):

But the *function* of such a working union of the ideal and actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all the religions that have a spiritual content (p. 35).

Spirituality as the creative quest for harmonious yet dynamic unity among diverse and dispersed existences is a major theme in Dewey’s philosophy. This should not be surprising provided Dewey’s (1934a/1986) insistence that there is no “definite kind of experience

which is religious....marked off from experience as aesthetic, scientific, moral political....But 'religious' as a quality of experience signifies something that may belong to all these experiences" (p. 9). Here is what Dewey (1934a/1986) meant by religious quality: "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality" (p. 19). Religious quality is present whenever we are actively striving to unite ideal and actual. It is a measure of faith and a testimony to the movement of spirit through the world and us. Not every movement toward unity is spiritual, though, "I would use God to denote those forces which at a given time and place are actually working for the better" (personal correspondence, cited in Rockefeller, 1991, p. 513). For Dewey, only those instances of unity that contribute to relatively stable harmony and the good, while honoring diversity in an infinitely pluralistic universe are spiritual.

Even the most ordinary acts of creatively striving to unify the ideal and actual are, for Dewey, spiritual acts. Spirituality may pervade the work of the caring teachers as surely as that of the careful choreographer; often the two functions are often the same. Dewey's naturalism does not eliminate spirituality; rather, it relocates spirituality from an otherworldly transcendental realm to the active striving of living creatures to unify the actual with the ideal in their daily lives. Spirituality for Dewey (1934a/1986), though, remains numinous in that it is active, creative, and retains a sense of divinity:

The process of creation is experimental and continuous....These considerations may be applied to the idea of God...to the idea of the divine. This idea is...one of ideal possibilities unified through imaginative realization....It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name "God" (1934a/1986, p. 34).

Creative action that strives to unify diverse aspects of existence

in enduring, though not eternal, dynamic equilibrium remained the essence of spirituality for Dewey throughout his lifetime.

Qualitative Thought and Creative Inquiry as Religious Activities

In his essay *Qualitative Thought* Dewey (1930/1984) begins boldly by explicitly defying prevalent assumptions about the character of thought, “The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive....This world forms the field of characteristic modes of thinking, characteristic in that thought is definitely regulated by qualitative considerations” (p. 242). Intimate involvement within a qualitative situation initiates inquiry for Dewey. The immediately experienced qualitative whole is vague, inexact, and indeterminate, yet it influences the later discriminations of thought. Qualities envelop us; we are enwrapped—rapt—within them, as within a wonderful dance, and they are within us. One first acquires a world through mood and feeling. Dewey (1934b/1987) writes:

Not only does the ‘mood’ come first, but it persists as the substratum after distinctions emerge; in fact they emerge as *its* distinctions. Even at the outset, the total and massive quality has its [affective] uniqueness; even when vague and undefined, it is just that which it is and not anything else. If the perception continues, discrimination inevitably sets in (p. 196).

Mood determines how one discriminates and interprets a situation. Mood has an important role in Dewey’s epistemology and pedagogy.

For Dewey, the context for all inquiries is *taken* from the antecedent qualitative whole, the given. All subsequent meanings depend on the inquirer’s original selections. For Dewey selectivity (and rejection), care, and concern is implicated in every act of thought; there is affection for some things over others. As thinkers we are differentially sensitive to qualities. Dewey (1930/1984) insists “intuition pre-

cedes conception and goes deeper” (p. 249). It goes deep enough, Dewey (1934a/1986) thinks, to have religious significance:

All purpose is selective, and all intelligent action includes deliberate choice. In the degree in which we cease to depend upon belief in the supernatural, selection is enlightened [and emancipated] and choice can be made in behalf of ideals whose inherent relations to conditions and consequences are understood (p. 38).

Recall Dewey’s definitions of faith and of God as an active relation between real and ideal. The presence of a qualitative dimension in thought implies that emotional education is a part of all education; if so then spiritual education, as Dewey understood it, is a part of education.

As the background of qualitative thought gives way to the foreground of cognitive, even methodological, thought, it does not become less creative. For Dewey (1934b/1987), “Science itself is but a central art auxiliary to the generation and utilization of other arts” (p. 33). Let us look deeper into what it means to call science an art.

Poiesis for the ancient Greeks meant the activities of productive science and art, or, most generally, making. Words written or recited with meter are only a small part of poetry. In Plato’s *Symposium* we find “the young Socrates” receiving a lecture from a prophet, the “Mantinean woman called Diotima” (201d). This dialogue is one of the few in Plato where Socrates is clearly ignorant of the topic—love. At one point Diotima pauses to explain to Socrates the true nature of poetry, “There is more than one kind of poetry in the true sense of the word—that is to say, calling something into existence that was not there before, so that every kind of artistic creation [*poiesis*] is poetry, and every artist is a poet” (205b). Creation, “calling something into existence,” or simply making meaning, *is* the truly comprehensive theory of poetry. Calling ideal things into existence, creation, or poetry, *is*, by Dewey’s testimony, the supreme act of numinous spirit.

A genuinely comprehensive theory of poetry does not distinguish the fine from the practical arts, and for good justification. In using the term *Techne*, the ancient Greeks meant craft, skill, or art. It is the form of knowledge associated with *poiesis*. Larry Hickman (1990) provides a bit of useful etymology in the course of describing Dewey's philosophy of technology: "Technē was for the Greeks a pro-duction, a leading toward, and a con-struction, a drawing together, of various parts and pieces in order to make something novel" (p. 18). *Techne* involves skill in the activity of poetic creation, of calling something into existence. Spiritual *Techne* helps unify the real and the ideal. Technology education should not only lead to good jobs, it should also lead to the release of spiritual goodness as well as a sense of vocation or calling. Small wonder Dewey (1916/1980) wrote, "Education *through* occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method." (p. 319). Worldly success, spirituality, and existential commitment may all express aspects of the same poetic unity.

When Dewey (1925/1981) proclaims, "thinking is preeminently an art," I believe he has *poiesis* and *techne* as well as *logos* in mind (p. 283). Methodological thinking is particularly skillful thinking. Methods of inquiry, including scientific inquiry, are a part of a comprehensive theory of poetry. All methods artistically transform an indeterminate situation into a unified, harmonious, aesthetic whole. Methods are creative for Dewey (1938/1986) who insists, "*Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole*" (p. 108). Inquiry is complete when chaos is artistically transformed into a cosmos of aesthetic unity. Methodological inquiry is a systematic way of poetically transforming the real into a unified ideal of desire. The movement of inquiry progresses from what is to what ought to exist; it is an active, creative, relation between ideal and actual. According to Dewey's definition we may, therefore, assign the name "God" to the active, poetic, and creative methods of inquiry. Education in the use of rational methods, poeti-

cally understood should provide spiritual enlightenment.

Dewey's Religion of Spiritual Poetry, Prophecy, and Pedagogy

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey (1934a/1986) cites George Santayana:

Religion and poetry...are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry (p. 13).

Poetry as *poiesis* may serve moral purposes by intervening in the world; it may disclose ideal possibilities and awaken desires. In poetry we may catch our first glimpse of what ought to be, the good beyond what actually exists. Dewey emancipates religion and spirituality so that they may intervene in life and conduct existence toward the ever-evolving ideal, thereby becoming something more than poetry.

Let us begin with his reconstruction of the act of creation. Dewey (1934a/1986) conceives creation as continuously and endlessly creating new forms, "Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than any faith in a completed revelation....Revelation is not completed" (p. 18). Dewey (1934b/1987) borrows the phrase "ethereal things" from Keats to "designate the meanings and values that many philosophers . . . suppose are inaccessible to sense, because of their spiritual, ethereal and universal characters—thus exemplifying the common dualism of nature and spirit" (p. 38). According to Keats the artist may look "upon the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, and the Earth and its contents as material to form greater things, that is ethereal things—greater things than the Creator himself made" (p. 38). Dewey thinks humankind a participant in an unfinished and unfinishable universe and not a spectator of a completed cosmos laid out conclusively by the divine creator at the beginning (or the end). The artistic creation

of ethereal things is profoundly spiritual, so arts education is not an educational “frill.”

Dewey (1916/1980) thinks creative “imagination is the medium of appreciation in every field” concerned “with a warm and intimate taking in of the full scope of a situation” (p. 244). For instance, “Deliberation is dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action. It starts from the blocking of efficient overt action, due to that conflict and newly released impulse to which reference has been made” (p. 132). Imagination is that part of deliberation that grasps alternative possibilities in some actual situation. Dewey (1934b/1987) defines imagination as follows:

It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange becomes the most natural inevitable things in the world (pp. 271-272).

Unless one can see the possible in or beyond the actual they cannot frame a moral ideal of what ought to be; slaves to the actual are never free. Imagination acquires moral import in the effort to unite the real and the ideal. Dewey asserts that “imagination is the chief instrument of the good . . . the ideal factors in every moral outlook and human loyalty are imaginative” (p. 350). In the active relation between ideal and actual imaginative art may become more religious than religions. Dewey concludes that “art is more moral than the moralities” (p. 350). Spirituality involves expanded moral and cognitive, not just aesthetic, perception; so, education in all subjects involves educating creative imagination.

For Dewey, “Imagination is as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement” (p. 245). Embodied muscular movement itself is poetical for Dewey. Chapter 2 of *Art as Experience* has the significant title, “The Live Creature and ‘Ethereal Things’.” There Dewey quotes Keats yet again:

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May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive, attitude my mind may fall into as I am entertained with the alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer? Though a quarrel in the Streets is to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man has a grace in his quarrel. Seen by a supernatural Being our reasoning may take the same tone — though erroneous they many be fine. *This is the very thing in which consists Poetry* (1934b/1987, p. 39).

In this passage we come face-to-face with the numinous and poetic hidden within Dewey's nonreductive, emergent naturalism. According to Dewey (1934b/1987), "Possibilities are embodied in works of art that are not elsewhere actualized; this *embodiment* is the best evidence that can be found of the true nature of imagination" (p. 272). Ideal's, as ideas, are born in embodied poetic imagination; it is there that they are most often first called into existence. The spirit of poetry may permeate the ball game as well as lines written on paper. The habits of the body think, feel and act. Physical education is not an educational "frill" either.

Russell B. Goodman as well as Kathleen M. Wheeler discuss the influence of the Romantic poets on Dewey. He, like the Romantics, obscures the difference between philosophy and poetry. Nowhere is this more apparent than near the end of *Art as Experience* (Goodman, 1990, pp. 96-99; see also Wheeler, 1993 Chapter 9 titled, "Dewey's Romantic Aesthetic"). Dewey (1934b/1987) is impressed with Matthew Arnold's dictum that "poetry is criticism of life," but remarks that he does not identify how it is criticism (p. 349). Dewey (1934b/1987) answers:

Not directly, but by disclosure, through imaginative vision addressed to imaginative experience A sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are when they are put in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating "criticism" of the latter that can be

made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress (p. 349).

The most powerful form of criticism does not follow pre-established rules of critical logic. Instead, the most powerful criticism names new ideals for which one may strive through practical reason to obtain. Dewey (1934b/1987) writes, "Art has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence of meanings that transcend indurated habit" (p. 350). If our intention is to educate students to think critically, then the arts must become a prominent part of the curriculum for both teachers and students.

Dewey makes the connection between pedagogy explicit when he says that "poetry teaches as friends and life teach, by being, and not by express intent" (p. 349). The problem is that such patterns of intimate, passionate teaching are lost to us in a world of pencil and paper, machine graded, multiple choice tests. Dewey concludes:

It is by way of communication that art becomes the incomparable organ of instruction, but the way is so remote from that usually associated with the idea of education, it is a way that lifts art so far above what we are accustomed to think of as instruction, that we are repelled by any suggestions of teaching and learning in connection with art. But our revolt is in fact a reflection upon education that proceeds by methods so literal as to exclude the imagination and one not touching the desires and emotions of men (pp. 349-350).

Pedagogical communication is a miracle besides which transubstantiation pales. It is an important part of the spiritual quest for poetic union. If schools are truly in need of reform, then I recommend spiritual release and poetic unity as the new aims of education. Within the confines circumscribed by church and state, schools should be sites of spiritual renewal for everyone. Wisdom counsels leaving the rest to parents, or to the students themselves.

Poetic pedagogy intervening in the lives of young people, instead of merely supervening, a curriculum that emphasizes the poetic creation of ethereal things, and schools that facilitate communication, would release the forces of spiritual energy held so long in chains. It would free the eros of every student who seeks to live a life of expanding meaning and value. Spirituality and spiritual education could readily be restored to our schools if the will of the people rivaled that of business, industry, or political demagoguery. The active spiritual urge to form a more intimate and creative union of the self with society and the ecosystem is more powerful at its source than the passive escapist fantasies of mass media amusement.

Regrettably, the forces of power, privilege, and domination hold the disunity of the actual in place. These forces devote themselves to creating systems of education that oppress us at the very font of freedom—the imagination. They imprison the spirit. These forces reduce religiosity to dogmatic religion and morality to rules and principles. The arts, the ethics of care, and genuine religiosity are absent from the political rhetoric about schooling. Instead, false political prophets devoted exclusively to financial profit offer citizens a technocratic diet of more testing and standards in service to increased economic productivity. We live in spiritually impoverished times; only poetry and serious play can save us now.

I need a school attribution. thanks, su

End Notes

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