

ETHICS AND EDUCATION

George C. Stone, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
The University of the Ozarks
Clarksville, Arkansas

The American Republic continues to place education as one of its highest priorities, or at least we hear that from almost every politician running for almost any office state and local.

Education, on one hand, is a sacred cow. I haven't heard any politician say it is a bad thing and that we ought to close our schools, but none seem to be void of ideas to improve it. Clearly, though, as everyone in this room knows, the most important change is the willingness of politicians from both political parties to argue the virtues of K-12 education from a national rather than from a state's right point of view. To be sure, to argue the virtues of a national education system of any kind would have been political suicide from the time of the Early Republic into the 1980s. That is no longer the case.

Educators over the past thirty years or so have been dealing with several national programs, including "Nation at Risk," "No Child Left Behind," and "Rush to the Top," to mention only a few. The concern on the surface, at least, has been and continues to be a perceived belief that America's students have fallen behind their counterparts across the planet, particularly in science and math. That argument began with corporate America and found its way, as even the most naïve educator knows, into the hallowed halls of Congress. When corporate America speaks, legislators and presidents listen. I will not get into why that is the case. My focus today is not in that direction. My point is only that the prevailing perception of almost any politician today is that the Republic has a clearly inferior educational system, and that the best way to correct it is to elect them to office. I'm not so concerned about that problem

because I believe it will take care of itself. I believe our politicians need to be concerned about another and more serious problem occurring in our schools

I say the problem will take care of itself, but it will likely not be in the fashion politicians and their supporters, who have a great deal to gain from a continually imperfect educational system, keep telling us they can improve. I realize that by saying such a thing I have set myself up for accusations that I am defending a system that is perfect or one that cannot be improved. That is not the case at all. My argument is simply that all children will be excellent learners of science and math or for history and literature for that matter is misguided. There are simply too many complex factors at work preventing it from happening. Again, that doesn't mean we stop trying to move them in the direction of self-disciplined learners; rather, I just mean realistically they will not all make the highest level. Each will, however, demonstrate a given level of learning appropriate for him or her at the time of the evaluation. The key phrase here is "at the time of the evaluation." They can and do grow intellectually as their cranial capacities increase, or the stress of a very bad personal life is replaced with a more stable lifestyle, or the limitations the "factory school" K-12 model imposes on academic success. The practical world of public education is already working on those concerns and is having some successes. I am focused here today on a different concern that has been foundational to public education since the period of the Early Republic, the importance of ethics in public education. I do so because I believe it has received less and less attention over the past thirty years or so.

I start this discussion with a quotation from John Dewey toward the close of his life. Dewey wrote a paper entitled, "Has Philosophy a Future?" that first appeared in the *Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Philosophy*. Sidney Hook, probably Dewey's best

disciple, read the paper for Dewey at Amsterdam on 14 August 1948. He closed with these words.

“There is now a supreme challenge, a supreme opportunity. If Galileo and his successors could look upon this gathering here today they would say ‘It is for you to do for the very life of man what we did for the physical and physiological conditions of that life. Discovery of these conditions was for us the immediate task that determined the end of our search. You possess the results of this search. *It is for you to use them as means to carry forward the establishing of a more human order of freedom, equity, and nobility. We accomplished the simpler and more technical part of the work. It is for you, possessors of a torch lit by our toil and sacrifice to undertake, with patient and courageous intelligence, a work which will hand on to your successors a torch that will illuminate a truly human world.*’”¹ (Italics mine)

Dewey assumed a humanistic metaphysical argument, which, of course, is the foundation of his ethical theory, since he deliberately referenced “Galileo and his successors” as those who have laid out a naturalistic theory of reality. To be sure, he framed his challenge for a more human order of freedom, equity, and nobility from the metaphysical argument of scientific humanism. He is telling us that Galileo and his successors have put us on the proper road to understand reality, and we need to take what they have given us to build a more humane world. My focus will be entirely on Dewey’s challenge to us as we begin the 21st century.

Dewey’s challenge for the living to begin building a more humane social order struck me as crucial a good many years ago. Consequently, I began to examine his thoughts on building such a social order and the importance of teaching how to do it in public schools for a simple reason—that’s where the children are who we will continually be passing the torch. So, what is it we should be doing, how should we do it, and where do we start?

¹ John Dewey, “Has Philosophy a Future?” First published in *Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Philosophy*, ed. E. W. Beth, H.J. Pos, and J.H. A. Hollak (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1949), pp. 108 – 16, from paper read for Dewey by Sidney Hook at Amsterdam on 14 August 1948 in *Dewey, The Later Works*, 16:368.

I'd like to start the discussion with a bit of serious humor. Bloody Mary in Rogers and Hammerstein's classic musical, *South Pacific*, put into a rather light and fun, but serious song, the kind of thing we need to keep in mind when she sang.....

You got to have a dream,
If you don't have a dream,
How you gonna have a dream come true?

“If you don't have a dream, then you'll never have a dream come true.....” Bloody Mary was right. Dreams are what change is all about. Likewise, Dewey's challenge to build more humane societies will never happen unless we dream such dreams, think positively, and set about to make them come true. So, as we look at Dewey's dream we must begin with defining what he meant by more human societies.

Dewey's Great Community Defined. Dewey believed the way to a more human society is found in his concept of the Great Community. He explains that idea best in his book, *The Public and its Problems*.² He told us the American Second Industrial Revolution had made the American Republic an industrial giant with almost unimaginable potential even to those living a generation earlier. The great Second Industrial Revolution made America the Great Society and it was a good thing. But, he went on to say, Americans must not think that they had reached the pinnacle. There was much more to be done.

He proposed the next step should be to move the Great Society into the Great Community(ies), a society, or more accurately, *societies of peaceful, ethical, social democracies at all strata of the social order*. That is the torch we need to pass to the next generation. That should be our dream we are hoping will come true. Now, how do we make that dream come true?

² Dewey. *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) , *The Later Works* 2: 368

How the Great Community Works. Dewey's concept of the Great Community included almost any group of people coming together to work toward a collective end such as the local civic club, church groups, classrooms, as well as city councils, state legislatures, and Congress. Let me explain by example.

I am a member of a community of the local Kiwanis Club. I attend meetings once each week and participate, say, on planning a given community project that is designed to help, say, children learn to read better. After the meeting, I return to my work at the University where I teach a class, another community. That afternoon I attend a meeting of the University Senate which, in Dewey's thought, is another community. I participate in the Senate meeting, and then, once the meeting is over, I go to another meeting at my church. My church meeting is another community made of up different people from those I met with in my civic club and university meetings. Perhaps, later that evening I attend a meeting of my political party where I am asked to run for city mayor, and I accept to do so. An election will be held in the larger community of the city, and, say, I am elected. I will now be a part of a local political community (city council, building committee, courts.) and will be voting on issues that affect the larger community, the city.

The point is that I and others travel from one community to another in any given day helping make decisions at each meeting. The next point is crucial. I carry my ethics with me from place to place as I try to persuade others to join me to vote on some particular issue. When the vote is taken, I will find myself on the majority on one vote and perhaps in a minority on another vote. Majority rules in a democracy, but one must realize that the majority is rarely the same majority on each vote taken. When I find myself on the minority on a given vote my job then is not to take up arms against the majority, but to use rational thought buttressed with

evidence to support my case and ultimately to change the minds of the majority to vote as I have chosen. Democracies, then, amount to the people making decisions in one community or another day in, day out, and, as such, they require freedom of movement and freedom of thought and speech to work properly in their quest for the public good.

But, there is a problem here. Far, too many people are situational. That is to say, they do not carry their ethical values with them as they move from one situation to another. All too often, they change them to fit the situation so they might be accepted by another person or a group. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to carry our values from one situation to the next. The young woman, for example, who takes vows of chastity in her church and willingly has sexual intercourse later that evening because she wants to please her boyfriend. A young man who swears allegiance to the principles of MADD is cited with a DUI on his way home from a party. Neighbors are shocked to learn that one of their own who they thought was a model citizen has been arrested and convicted of robbery and murder. We can move to lesser extreme examples by thinking of ourselves or of those whom we know who inconsistently carry their ethical values from one situation to another. Some might well argue that such a flaw destroys Dewey's dream of the Great Community. I want to hurriedly say that I disagree with those who might make such an argument. My experience tells me some believe Dewey's Great Community translates as Dewey's perfect society, a belief that is simply dead wrong.

John Dewey fully understood that humans can never build a perfect society where no one ever commits a crime or there is never a social mistake. His argument instead is to encourage the living to constantly be aware that peaceful, ethical, civil communities constantly depend on each of us to build and live in it, and to make sure that it is passed along to the next generation in an endless process of building good society(ies). So, yes, humans are often guilty of not carrying

their ethical values from one situation to another, but it does not negate Dewey's argument for building Great Community(ies). It merely sets a problem for the living to figure out how to make people more aware of the necessity to do so. Let me digress here for just a moment and address democracy and the living.

Democracy is always a matter for the living. The dead are gone, although their ideas can still be with us. Dewey fully understood that if democracy is to work, it must work with a constantly changing living in a constantly changing present. Some people in the democracy are being born and others are dying at any given moment. The ethics of democracy must constantly be passed from one generation to the next on a daily basis, if the Republic is to continue into posterity. That is simply the challenge of the democratic-republic, and it is not easy. Parallels can be drawn to the Greek god, Sisyphus, a god who was sentenced to push a heavy rock uphill forever into eternity. In other words, Sisyphus, much like the living who must make democracy work ethically every day, faces a constant struggle forever into eternity. That brings me to my next point, namely, why the concept of the Great Community should be taught in public schools.

Why The Great Community Should Be Taught in Public Schools. Dewey argued that democracy is not limited to political democracy, but instead he said social democracies precede political democracies since the latter grows out of the former. Writing in *The Public and Its Problems*, he said: "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community."ⁱ He also said, "Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal; namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected."ⁱⁱ In other words, democracy belongs to the people; they own it. He suggested that they made their collective decisions together day after

day according to their individual and collective experiences of life, and that they are responsible for the consequences that follow.

This brings me to the first reason why the concept of the Great Community or the ethics of democracy should be taught in the public schools. I firmly believe that the concept of the Great Community is fundamental to the civil life of the Republic. I also agree with Dewey that democracy is the idea of community life itself, but I am not convinced that communities, as he so broadly defined community, were all that democratic at the time he was writing, nor are they all that democratic today. One can certainly make the case that his description of social democracy existed in his native New England, but I am not convinced that it still exists all that much in some other places. In fact, one of the fundamental problems in the every day life of public schools centers on some, if not many, children from the under classes, particularly in the inner city and in rural areas of America, have not lived in the family as a democratic community, and consequently, they bring anti-democratic behavior into the public school classroom where they confront teachers and administrators with it almost daily. For that reason, I strongly believe the learning of the ethics of democracy is a fundamental challenge for public education, a challenge that is often lost, particularly on the one third of public school students who drop out. I would further argue that the problem is exacerbated because it is not addressed by current prevailing programs such as No Child Left Behind which, in turn, means too many school administrators are not particularly concerned about the matter. They believe there are simply too many other immediate problems that must concern them. I conclude, nevertheless, that the public school should address the need for instruction in the ethics of democracy because it is a fundamental element in the well-being of the Republic.

My second argument that instruction in the ethics of democracy, as defined by Dewey's concept of the Great Community, is fundamental to the purpose of public education as it was defined as far back as the Early Republic. The History of American Education, one of the most important courses all teacher education students took until the 1980s, taught the New England states led the charge for instruction of all students in the ethics of democracy were followed by Thomas Jefferson's similar arguments for public education in the State of Virginia in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These leaders understood that the Republic would not endure unless the people were educated in and practiced the ethics of democracy. The idea took hold because the history of the 19th century in America reveals that the people did, in fact, expand political rights to all white males, then in theory at least to all black males, and finally, to all women.

Dewey noticed, though, that the Great Second Industrial Revolution had changed the social order of the American Republic. There were millions of foreign nationals, most from Eastern Europe, who immigrated to the United States from 1880 through 1927 when he wrote *The Public and Its Problems*. These people needed to learn the importance of personal responsibility of a citizen in a democratic social order. As a result of that need, the federal government passed immigration laws to require immigrants to study the ethics of democracy and to pass a federal citizenship exam before they could become citizens of the United States of America.

I believe it is equally important to note that the National Education Association as late as 1961 said the purpose of public education was to teach children to become responsible citizens in a democratic social order. The adult society, particularly the education profession, took seriously the importance of requiring citizens to understand the ethics of democracy until about the 1980s

when the emphasis on teacher education moved to methodology. That is no longer the case. Consequently, that decision has led to two unfortunate results.

One, most undergraduate teacher education programs in the United States require at best one course in educational foundations, a course that is often so watered down that it is for all practical purposes---worthless. Some doctoral level education professors have never had even one course in the educational foundations. That has occurred because most contemporary teacher educators argue courses in history, philosophy, anthropology, and often educational psychology are a waste of time. They believe teachers should spend their time thinking only about how to teach the subject matter of the child to the child. The result is simply far too many public school personnel do not understand the ethics of democracy, and consequently, are not prepared to look to that knowledge as a means of goal setting for themselves and for their collective communities, including classrooms and individual school sites themselves. That leads me to my second point.

Two, I submit that community life, particularly among the under classes in America's inner cities and rural areas, has broken down and that, as a result, children are not learning how to become responsible citizens in democratic social orders. As a result, instead of learning to practice civil discourse, all too often, they are learning "power makes right" when they join street gangs or even when they attend school. This leads me to ask, "Where will children learn the ethics of democracy if not in the public school? I suggest that, if the public schools were teaching the concept of the Great Community, the probabilities that it would reduce anti-democratic behavior might be enhanced.

In summary, my hope is somehow politicians will move back to the wisdom of their counterparts in the Early Republic and their counterparts in the 19th and the 20th centuries, and

require schools to focus on the ethics of democracy. To that end, I have tried to show here that John Dewey, America's most respected philosopher of democracy, not only challenged us with building more human communities as late as the 90th year of his life, but that he even provided us with a set of guidelines he called the Great Community(ies) as a place to begin the discussion. But, I am under no illusion that teaching it in public education will be easy. It will not. Still, we should not give up. On the contrary, we need to keep pressing ahead. The cause is good and the dream is worthwhile for the mission is basic to the well-being of communities and to civil life in the Republic as well. Let me urge you to listen quietly for a moment for the voice of Bloody Mary reminding us.....

If you don't talk happy,
And you never have a dream,
Then you'll never have dream come true
