

The Social Sacrifices of Being Modern

by

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(ABSTRACT)

Finding conceptual tools that lend themselves to the creation of consensus is no easier in an age of mass communication, mass transportation or mass education, than it was in earlier less “modern,” technology adventurous, times. In fact, as I argue in this dissertation, modernity can be analyzed and experienced as being anathema to those characteristics upon which consensus can be built. This dissertation examines why this is the case and what may be done to ameliorate the worst excesses of modernity while building on its greatest strengths.

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Preface

Throughout this dissertation you will notice that where it is relevant to an example I will always include an individual's name. I did this for more than citation purposes. It is also an intentional reference to the fact that specific individuals are responsible for enacting the ethos of an age. Like the bumper sticker says, if there was a war and nobody showed up the war would have to be canceled. The same holds true for attending schools, living in cities and buying groceries at a supermarket. Of course, the brevity of bumper stickers often belies the complexity of their claims, as would any curt answer to why we school our children, inhabit urban landscapes or buy our food at supermarkets. This dissertation offers a lengthier explanation of why we do what we do.

In that respect, I offer a sort of translation manual for putting individual action into a broader context, a context that I have adopted the convention of calling "modern."

One of the reasons I think that this manual is necessary is exemplified in an exchange that recently took place between two of my College of Education colleagues. In this exchange, the speakers debate the case of high school students interested in protesting the U.S. war against Iraq. The speaker opposed to student participation uses a fairly typical approach to undermine his opponent by claiming a lack of "in the trenches" experience. As he states it, "if you were a classroom teacher, you would know that these demonstrations are simply a chance for the kids to get out of the class." The respondent calls this claim "macho credentialism" and explains that it is a poor justification for limiting the rights of budding citizens. What follows is a response that exemplifies an astute translation, one that moves us from the inside of the classroom to the social domain where it is possible to ask a more probing and foundational question: "So? They want to get out of class. Let them out of class. Why is it so threatening to show young people deference to their initiatives?" Joel Spring addresses this tendency to be stuck at the level of the classroom when he explains that school is "often the safest and least controversial way of planning for social improvement."¹ I write this dissertation with the presumption that the individual provides the human corollary to the classroom and that as long as social problems are treated as the coincidental merging of individual maladies they will remain indecipherable and we will have no incentive to broaden the scope of our inquiry.

The evidence of this lack of incentive is illustrated by the many examples that are included in the following pages. Originally, I had intended these examples to support the thesis that our social problems require social solutions. Upon completion of this project, I find my thesis has shifted to the far less optimistic claim that we have social problems because we tend to refuse social solutions. I will argue that this refusal causes us needless suffering as we reject the personal and political solace that can only be found by acting collectively. I will argue that the underlying modern ethos that educates our responses takes us from each other and wastes the possibility contained in John Dewey's claim that "our individual habits are links in the forming the endless chain of humanity."² If this claim were taken seriously our idiosyncratic efforts at coping with the demands of modern living might be treated as personal ballots to be tallied collectively in the future. Instead, they are treated as fundamentally personal choices and therefore mostly free of the moral dimension implicit in more socially minded decisions. This illusory conception of freedom is common enough to prompt some social commentators like Barbara Ehrenreich to proclaim: Poverty is not a psychological condition. There are many things about modern living that are not reducible to the psychological profile of individual actors and the work of John Dewey has been indispensable in providing me with the theoretical framework

for understanding what elements *do* contribute to the psychological profile of modern individuals.

Since I have compared this dissertation to a sort of translation manual, I would like to extend the analogy in describing Dewey's contribution to these translations. If, as the author, I am the collector of terms to be translated Dewey provides the linguistic and conceptual tools that make these translations possible. Dewey's dismantling of long standing dualisms such as self versus society, private versus public, and nature versus culture is the impetus that informs each of the following chapters as they seek to undo the exaggerated distances between our selves and our surroundings. This rather radical facet of Dewey's work is often neglected in favor of simplistic accounts of his hands-on learning and child-centered teaching practices, elements that are certainly a part of Dewey's legacy but often favored at the expense of his more profound and politically charged contributions. After all, it is Dewey who writes, "the idea of perfecting an 'inner' personality is a sure sign of social divisions."³ I believe that this claim speaks clearly to the conditions of modern life and adds to the urgency of honing the kinds of translation skills that make self-improvement synonymous with social improvement. This synonymy is central to Dewey's work and it is central to the content of this dissertation.

One logical place for achieving the ability to appreciate and form personal habits that link us with the "endless chain of humanity" is the schools. As Dewey notes, the schools offer a special environment because they are "framed with express reference to influencing the moral disposition of the young."⁴ Unfortunately, the public schools fail to meet other of Dewey's criteria regarding the "special mode of intercourse" that falls within the schools charge by *not* eliminating "as far as possible, the unworthy features of the existent environment upon existent habitudes."⁵ For this reason, I treat schooling practices as indistinct from other modern practices.

Since schools reflect and are shaped by the ethos of the society they serve, I draw most of my examples from that society. By doing this I hope to suggest that what goes on in our schools is as symptomatic and exemplary of our modern ethos as any of the other institutional or individual practices used to illustrate the methods of being modern. The schools simply perpetuate the weak and uninspired definition of individuality that leaves our children vulnerable to making themselves in the image of whatever corporate sponsor sells the school its wares. This is doubly damning since the schools would also seem to offer the sort of fact finding guidance that I will describe as one of our main modern preoccupations. It is not that the schools do not engage facts but that they treat these facts like most moderns do, as morally ambiguous free floating objects that make their way into textbooks and tests with the kind of neutrality that keeps a plane air bound or a boat afloat.

What I will suggest in the following pages is that facts must land somewhere and in some form and that we must be prepared to face these facts as socially related beings... Whether through the loose linkages of simply sharing a language, a landscape or a labor issue we must come to realize that that without recognition of our socially sealed fate, we will continue to arrange our selves, our schools and our streets in ways that lessen the chance of learning this most important modern lesson—social problems require social solutions.

¹ Joel Spring, *American Education*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002) p. 12.

² John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Volume 14*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1983) p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Introduction

Some Opening Thoughts on the Trouble with Being Modern

As a parent, I have become accustomed to sitting through the unpolished performance. I have witnessed the sudden collapse of props, the disappearance of crucial bits of dialogue, and many misplaced dance steps. Like most parents, I accept a sort of code of honorable viewing where the poorly preformed is interpreted with an uncritical eye so that mistakes are never as wrong as they are charming. As I sat listening to “The Rainforest Song,” it occurred to me that this performance did not fit into that category. This performance was uniquely unpleasant. By the third refrain, I was ready to renounce the tacit parental code in favor of the explicit act of covering my ears with the palms of my hands. The children sang in perfect unison but the song seemed unresponsive to their voices, the incessant repetition of lyrics led not to a boisterous climax but to more of the same bland chanting. I learned later that this song was really an exercise in memorization, a mnemonic intended to help the children remember concepts related to the rainforest. To this end, “The Rainforest Song” was probably a success. As the focal point of a *performance* intended to share the talents of a group of school aged children, it was a failure with a multitude of implications.

To sing this “song” in public is like leaving the scaffolding up around a newly constructed building or tacking a recipe onto a completed dinner dish. If the intended audience is a group of carpenters or chefs, these elements may be welcomed but for a group of diners or potential homebuyers, they are necessary but irrelevant details that act to mask the main attractions. Furthermore, we expect the carpenters and chefs to know better. It is perfectly reasonable for teachers to rely on a strategy like the mnemonic. It provides a quick foundation for more sophisticated learning, and is no more offensive than teaching children to learn the alphabet through song. The problem in this instance, like the recipe and scaffolding, is context. In a production explicitly devoted to illustrating the talents and abilities of our children we are presented with tricks of the trade that encourage efficiency over effervescence and reward the fruits of infallible training at the price of significant education. Surely, the rainforest can inspire a more worthy tribute than an evenly spaced row of students shouting the traits of a particular ecosystem. Presumably, the school is a space that is outfitted with curious children and talented teachers; teachers committed to the love of subject matter and a desire to share this love with children. Given these components, it seems implausible that any subjects, including the rainforest and the curiosity of children, could be so carelessly reduced as to make them tedious and uninviting. It would appear though that my presumptions are incorrect. I fear we are an audience too easily impressed. With an applause that supersedes the demands of parental obligation, these listeners respond enthusiastically to “The Rainforest Song”, suggesting it may be more than good manners that keeps this audience clapping. It may be the consent of a crowd moved not by the sublimity of creative expression but by the predictability of the message delivered. While its conveyances are many, this message has dependability and sameness as its desired outcome. We see its successful transmission upon homogenized landscapes that trade in local color and street life for attempts at efficiency and repeatability of appearance. It lurks within notions of accountability and globalization. It is manifest in medical treatments that claim to remedy the problem of inattentive minds by stilling bodies. There are reasons why we like our entertainment predictable and welcome it when our children echo this predictability back to us. It is this lesson that gives “The Rainforest Song” its entertainment value.

On a recent road trip that included miles of interstate driving, I pulled over for dinner.

Although I had never been in this restaurant before, I knew it to be a stop that had hundreds of duplicates all over the eastern side of the country. I knew before opening the door exactly what the décor and the menu would include. I could also predict what the servers would be wearing and approximately how long of a stop this would be. The only surprise came when I asked the waitress if she could tell me the name of the town we were in. She gave the question some thought and then, embarrassed, replied that she could not. It would be easy to simply blame the waitress for her own ignorance of the local geography but simplicity would limit the usefulness of this experience. As I looked out the window to try to locate a signpost of some kind, I realized that there was nothing significant enough about this setting to warrant giving it a name. It was a landscape that could be inserted into a thousand different settings all over the country. The cluster of corporately owned fast food restaurants, gas stations and motels are so familiar that most of us can conjure up the image of this no-name location without having to know any more than what was just described. Whatever history this location possessed was now invisible and as inaccessible for our uses as the name had become for this particular waitress.

I do not tell this story to inspire sentimentality over lost place names or to encourage more commentary on the inability of our schools to teach this or that discipline. These conclusions have their own tales. I recount this incident because it captures an ambiguity that marks us as “modern” and informs the contents of our daily lives.¹ This ambiguity acts as a link between the namelessness of a workplace and the recitation of mnemonics in our schools. This link is atmospheric in its presence silently habituating those who take it in unreflectively; its influence is masked in a secular liturgy of accountability and standardization not for the sake of enhancing and enriching our daily lives but as a brutish, and short response to an uncertain future. We use our standards like life jackets instead of prisms, hoping that enforced rigidity will act as a brace and give us leverage against a current that seems to be always in motion. Meanwhile, the complexity of this predicament is routinely exploited as political aspirations become linked with “rescues” that promise to legislate security in the guise of whatever proposition makes for an expedient lifeboat. Of course, these maneuvers make for an illusory security. They are piecemeal and shallow making them carriers of the chaos their presence was intended to eliminate. They take their form in objects like metal detectors and stun guns and miscellaneous policies that consistently demand tougher standards for whatever group assumes this week’s position as scapegoat. These diversions not only make for troubling politics they also act to amplify the contradictions and ambiguities that they so desperately attempt to suppress.

Starless Nights and Disconnected Story Lines

The defining traits of an age may be posted on church doors or displayed on billboards. We perform these traits in the daily activities of our lives. They are as subtle as the privileging of sight over smell and as blatant as the implementation of one set of disciplinary measures over another. A medieval scholar once proclaimed, “I do not know in order to believe, I believe in order to know.” This statement compresses an entire epoch to the width of a dime, expressing a sense of temporal navigability that seems foreign to our modern ears. Ours is an age that seems to defy this sort of straightforward linguistic traversal. Yet, we too are the adept navigators of an age. In fact, our competence is so complete we may suffer the fatalities of a collective infatuation with the present, allowing the trinkets and gadgetry of an innovative world to distract us from thoughtful reflection on the consequences of our own practices. We are not alone in our ability to navigate an environment. Migratory birds routinely make their way around the globe and a rat will easily overcome the obstacles set in a maze. What can distinguish a skill that is instinctive from one adopted unreflectively? I am not suggesting that our most basic skills are not vital. Vast

ecosystems rely on the successful migratory patterns of birds and we humans won't make it past the first few weeks of life without the necessary confluence of our physiological predisposition with the physical conditions of our surroundings. Between what we are at birth and what we will become in adulthood is a process of continual refinement both of our behavior and our environs. The quality of this refinement will depend on a vast ensemble of variables, variables that can engender our greatest potentialities or constrain us at the lowest of limitations. If we do not reflect on this process of refinement our surroundings become a mere backdrop that we passively inherit and then replicate in our offspring, bequeathing the next generation a landscape that seems to have dropped from the heavens. While we may remain oblivious to the origins of our own actions, the heavens themselves are not immune from the shadows we humans cast skyward. We remain implicated even if it is only by default.

Throughout history the night sky has appeared like a huge canvas lit with sparkling outlines left for humans to decipher and enliven. These starry outlines provided the starting points for the telling of legends that have helped to deliver new generations into a world made safe by the continuity of both the stars and the stories. In recent times elders from the Arctic and other parts of the world say that these stories are becoming more difficult to pass on. Encroaching "development" depletes the darkness that has always acted to highlight the various cast members in these great tales. Each star extinguished eliminates a portion of some plot so that to have a history written in the stars is a vanishing privilege. Loss of this privilege takes with it the collective identity of those who see the stars as ready referents in the validation of their existence. How can we see ourselves when our "mirrors" vanish? What new stories will evolve within this void? Loss of this privilege takes with it the collective identity of those who see the stars as ready referents in the validation of their existence. How can we see ourselves when our "mirrors" vanish? What new stories will emerge?

Some so-called postmodern thinkers claim the age of the grand narrative has passed and our hopes for a collective response to any story are a nostalgia as naive as the prospect of re-lighting the stars.² Of course, this too is a narrative. This narrative becomes easier and easier to believe as we learn to take its tenets for granted. We segregate ourselves through a multitude of measures and then blame our distances on inherited incommensurabilities. I am not suggesting that we need to reclaim all past narratives; we still suffer their imperatives as we search for the one and only road to Love or Progress or God. We speak fluently from scripts that give life to these narratives, enslaving us, its cast of characters, to conjoin its antiquated demands with a world of activities that no longer speak in so cohesive a tongue. Learning to navigate this discrepancy is a part of the challenge of being modern and, like all worthwhile challenges, this challenge requires acknowledgement of the conditions in which it is being practiced. Without this acknowledgement we sit passively while stories of extinguished stars become unintelligible as they collide with a never-ending barrage of equally distant tales.

I did not learn of the plight of the elders by conferring with the stars. I learned of their plight in a newspaper article entitled "Bright lights obscure the dark's significance." There is symbolic promise in the fact that the stars of these ancient tales have not been extinguished. They are merely hidden from view, burning in a smog itself indicative of our collective disregard for one set of stories in favor of another. The "dark's significance" is now an answer to this disregard, confronting us with a new conception of the "purpose" of starlight. This fact is added to the stockpile of stories that we string together like beads with our own lives being the twine that holds an otherwise discontinuous muddle into a whole. The links between stars and stockpiles are not contained within myths of creation. They are the disparate elements that

collide in our contemporary world where we act as the connective twine for a disjointed agglomeration of tales. This is no easy task for we are heirs to traditions that favor single, unifying tales.³ Perhaps this is the appeal of mnemonics and indistinguishable landscapes. If we erase the stars from the sky, have we not exhibited the greatest kind of control? Many of our practices offer a template for making the discord of competing tales at least appear manageable. We use them for assurance. Unfortunately, they only befuddle our efforts so that our acts seem to dissipate into the air as intentions and consequences float passed each other like the stars being slowly dimmed by a brightening sky.

When my daughter was in third grade her class studied the oceans and their inhabitants. The culminating activity of the unit was a luncheon trip to a seafood restaurant where the children would feast on the creatures they had studied during the term. The many worksheets, stories and fact sheets devoted to celebrating the life of water creatures now looked like lessons on how to read the Red Lobster menu. When I suggested to the teacher that this treatment of sea life seemed strangely inconsistent with the appreciative tone of the previous lessons, she said that the kids “probably wouldn’t see any connection” between what they had studied and what would now become their field trip feast. It takes a particular kind of schooling to achieve this kind of an outcome, where specificity so defiantly negates the obvious. The effect is akin to teaching someone how to navigate a tunnel. Consequently, “tunnel vision” is esteemed and encouraged. How else could a war on drugs coexist with an ever widening list of newly defined medical conditions that require treatment with drugs? How could we possibly drive our massive “utility” vehicles along perfectly paved streets and simultaneously lament the dreaded onset of global warming? We water our lawns and mourn the passing of an aquifer.

These strange configurations, where personal behaviors remain detached from their social implications, are not the random results of an unpredictable universe. Nor are they the premeditated results of a group of conspirators conniving to outsmart policy makers and publics, although we are certainly made gullible to these perils by the same predisposition that allow for these detachments in the first place. John Dewey describes a western intellectual tradition that made its way along a course rutted with polarities, leaving our language and our lives as fractured as the rifts that inform the differences between us and them or good and bad. These dualisms give us the sense that the world is ready to be colored either black or white. They elevate finitude on its own account and demonize the arbitrary as unfathomable; they send you to heaven or to hell. Being one place or the other makes sense to us. It is why wealthy countries can pay poor countries to accept shipments of garbage; we are here and they are there. The matter would be settled except for currents and leakage and winds that carry unwanted contaminants. These contaminants are as varied as the boundaries erected to still their influence. They are the particulate that makes their way out of the distant landfill and back into the river, they are the questions that emerge when a link is made between a lifestyle and a lobster tail. Dewey describes the importance of making connections:

The world seems mad in pre-occupation with what is specific, particular, disconnected in medicine, politics, science, industry, education. In terms of conscious control of inclusive wholes, search for those links which occupy key positions and which effect critical connections is indispensable. But recovery of sanity depends upon seeing and using these specifiable things as links functionally significant in a process... and when thus seen they will be seen to be *in*, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never finished process. Until we have a procedure in actual practice which demonstrates this continuity, we shall continue to engage in appealing to some other

specific thing, some other broken off affair, to restore connectedness and unity....⁴
The links between lifestyles and lobster tails are less important than developing the habits of thought necessary to look for and explore these possible connections. Our modern surroundings offer a very provocative setting.

Enduring Values in a Volatile Context

In 1996, the United States reached a notable milestone when over 1 million of its citizens became convicted felons. In general, U.S. incarceration rates have more than tripled since 1980 with over 6 million Americans living in prisons.⁵ How do we account for these statistics? Are there more criminally minded people in the United States than there were twenty years ago? When did we become corrupt? Surely, our downfall is an event of record since so many of our current practices are being dedicated to the pursuit of “tougher standards” and higher levels of accountability. We have become so convinced of our degraded state that we routinely medicate our offspring to try and curtail what has only recently become classified as disruptive behavior. In February 1999, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that use of Ritalin among preschoolers had increased 150 percent between 1991 and 1995. Clearly, our demons arise internally and individually. If not, why would millions of people be ingesting psychotropic drugs for an ill-defined condition like depression? The use of punitive measures and “medicalized” terminology are linked in a number of interesting ways. Both operate as mechanisms of control, offering boundaries to human behavior and defining concepts like normalcy, criminality, and sanity along the way.⁶ These remedies, dedicated to an array of human inadequacies, are linked by the notion that our collective problems are individually inspired and individually remedied. They help to convince us that a prison of one is a legitimate possibility and that the “depression” of a single person would make itself known in a world of “un-depressed” people. Most importantly for my purposes, these concepts are linked by their shared position as popular answers to modern problems. These “answers” exist all around us, settling some previously asked question some difficulty in need of resolution. Of course, this correspondence is not necessarily direct; a gothic church created to animate the prospect of heaven may become significant “only” as a piece of architecture while the God of its inspiration may devolve into nothing more than a profanity. These changes make for complicated analysis and suggest that their instruction may reside in consequences rather than intentions.

When I ask my daughter’s teachers how she is doing in school I am immediately bombarded with test scores. The parent-teacher conference has the feel of a high powered executive meeting devoted to numerical analysis. There are always a few moments of awkward pauses as I attempt to diffuse the formal chart reading session into a more relaxed conversation about how the typical school day unfolds. I ask the teacher to put away the test scores and tell me about how my daughter is getting along with others. Does she have any playmates? Does she seem engaged and interested in learning? In this climate, my concerns are heard as liberal, coddling and overindulgent. I must retreat and assume the role of co-executive or assistant manager to make my voice heard. This exchange contains many “answers,” some that reveal the hold of the past and others that express the tightening grip of the future. It is typically modern to exist in more than one world at a time. Recently, my daughter saw an episode of “The Beverly Hillbillies” for the first time. She was describing a scene in which one of the characters was shown “slicing a bagel.” She had no idea that the “hillbillies” could not possibly eat bagels. Being the modern beneficiary of grocery aisles well stocked with a variety of ethnic foodstuffs, she assumed that these choices had always been available and that this availability extended into the fictional characters of a television sitcom. In all of their mundane innocence, our daily

practices convey our allegiance to the historic period of which we are a part. We witness it in our entertainment, we eat it in our food, and we support it in our institutions. It may sound ominous to think of our historical circumstances in such unambiguous terms, but to do so grants us the essential role of narrator in the telling of our modern stories. It allows us to conduct ourselves as more than channels for the roles that our modern existences bequeath us. Here is how Marshall Berman describes our plight:

To be modern . . . is to experience personal and social life as a, maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows⁷

This passage should remind us of how rarely the complexity of modern living is acknowledged. I recently listened to a public official reminisce about his years in office. He spoke of reliance on "our enduring values," attempts to create a "more modern" government and the importance of "always focusing on the future."⁸ He spoke of past, present, and future with the confidence of a time traveler but never gave any meaningful explanation for the source of the continuity that made his proclamations seem so effortless. He never alluded to the presupposition that informed his every word and made most of us accomplices to his myopia. His logic was our own and it reassured us that our values remain undisturbed even as the conditions of their inspiration change. We witness the repercussions of this stagnancy in the smallest details of our lives.

I watched as one of the neighborhood parents signaled his child to roll down the car window. He used a sweeping orbital hand gesture to indicate the mechanical movement of turning the window crank. The child looked back at him blankly. When this ineffective exchange was complete the father explained what his signal meant and the son explained that their car didn't have cranks it had automatic switches. This communication impasse is a familiar modern squabble. When we transfer this "failed" interaction to the "switches" of life support systems and genetic engineering, we hear the depths of its implications. There is far more than a hand gesture involved in the choice of one technology over another and the use of "our enduring values" as a ready-made response only acts to underscore the difficulty of attempting this intricate transfer. It is a difficulty that makes being modern akin to being mid-journey and discovering that our guidebook has remained the same but the destination has changed. We accommodate these interruptions as routinely as we accommodate the weather but our historic dependency on ready-made and enduring values has made us uncomfortable with this sort of spontaneity. We resist the indeterminate in favor of the black and white and yet we live our lives in a whirlwind that favors the ambiguity we work so hard to avoid. We forget that creating an electrically activated window may open to more than the solitary view we had intended. This is a particularly perilous oversight in the midst of the modern world where shortsighted solutions can often reemerge as new problems. Our modern agility can manifest itself in frightening ways.

Some school children have begun to put their prescription drugs to other uses. A young girl, interviewed recently on a television news show, described how Ritalin has become a valuable object of exchange among her classmates. She said that a seller could earn as much as \$20 for a single pill. In part, this value is derived from the children's belief that snorting the substance will give their intellect a boost. With this in mind, Ritalin has been nicknamed the "homework drug."⁹ This novel use of "attention getting" drugs juxtaposes tellingly with an exchange that took place between another parent and myself. I was complaining to this parent

about the amount of trivial homework assignments routinely given to our then third grade children. She explained that the real lesson of the exercises was to prepare them for the even heavier homework load of the fifth grade. By her logic, the quality of the assignments was irrelevant, the important lesson was learning to accept the inevitable fate of being a modern student. The perceived hazards of modern living implore us to adopt the habits of the endangered. If we catch hold of our wayward children early enough, they will mimic our subservience to the dangers of being modern. Once we have rendered dimensionality an illness, we will no longer have the threat of a conflicted and lively world to conquer. If this is the case, it appears we are well on our way to creating the kinds of schools, cities and people that surrender easily to the persuasive demands of a diminished existence.

During an editorial segment on a local television station, a man in his mid-forties describes the pleasure he takes in shoveling snow. His words are poetic and heartfelt as he carefully details the transforming effect that a heavy snowfall can have on sound. He delights in describing how the harsh clamor of an urban landscape can be quieted by the buffering properties of amassed snowflakes. His editorial is a response to the use of tools that threaten these increasingly rare moments of serenity. He speaks directly to the use of mechanical snow blowers and says that even the thick padding of a heavy snowfall isn't enough to subdue these machines. He laments that we are trading in the rhythmic sound of shovel scraping cement for the droning din of the mechanized version. He is frustrated in his attempts to capture these meditative moments, moments that are often interrupted by a neighbor armed with this more "efficient" method of moving snow. I shared in his lamentations until he became the source of my frustration. What began as an eloquent and compelling description of the drawbacks to this technology ended with his apologies for being "too old fashioned" to appreciate the benefits of blowing snow instead of shoveling it. What had started as an imaginative social critique ended with a psychoanalytic whimper. Still, to blame this particular speaker would be as unimaginative as his "solution" to the problem of an errant technology. Would anyone listen if he simply suggested that these machines make the world an uglier place by being too noisy and disruptive? To sustain a position on aesthetic grounds is to risk being labeled idealistic; it is to welcome the wrath of the "real world" advocates. The real world advocates are those who use the phrase "this would never happen in the real world" or some variation of these words as a catchphrase to denote any thinking that challenges their understanding of how the world has been in the past or will be in the future. Our poetic commentator spoke in reaction to this overly represented group. His position typifies what Marshall Berman refers to as the "flattening out of social thought"¹⁰ and the "shrinking of imaginative range" that marks the writings of many twentieth century social commentators:

Our nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions; their self ironies and inner tensions were a primary source of their creative power. Their twentieth-century successors have lurched far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations. Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt; in either case, it is conceived as a closed monolith, incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men. Open visions of modern life have been supplanted by closed ones, Both/And by Either/or.¹¹

Berman suggests that "we have mostly lost the art of putting ourselves in the picture, of recognizing ourselves as participants and protagonists in the art and thought of our time."¹² If his evaluation is accurate then our complaints about noisy blowers, traffic jams or any other modern

nuisance become beside the point. Our anachronistic needs are made irrelevant by their detached status. We become like frightened children demanding a security blanket, unable to find solace in the substitutes provided by a more knowing, more future oriented caregiver. We have to call ourselves “old-fashioned” to justify the acknowledgement of the very standards we are always sacrificing in the name of progress.

Identifying the Source of Our Sorrows

The following essays are an attempt to put us back in the picture by linking our practices to the currents that underscore so many of our acts. We react to these currents when we confuse standards with standardization, when we demand recognition for the sanctity of existence and then justify the indecency of poverty with stories of impossible self-determination and other heartless tales. It has been suggested that using modernity as a container for the gathering of these essays is analogous to what the physicists does when she uses magnetic fields to capture microscopic particles. In both cases the containers allow us to see what might otherwise remain invisible. This also relinquishes the implication that these themes are exclusively modern, in other words, the use of a different container would likely elicit different results. The results that I am looking for are the ones that will help us to interconnect the discordant events that come at us like a barrage of disassembled parts; modernity gives us a way of putting them back together without succumbing like embittered reactionaries to the perceived demands of dissension.

There are millions of different ways to be modern. We know this by knowing each other but we have arranged our lives like a battlefield for the enactment of a psychic war. If this claim sounds exaggerated, we need only consider our feelings toward the driver who forces us to sit through another red light or the contempt we feel toward the shopper who dares to exceed the allotted number of items when using the express lane. These pesky nuisances get in our way, they slow us down and keep us from complying with a frantic pace that no one of us created but each of us perpetuates as we blame and battle each other to insure compliance to its demands. Shopping lines and traffic lights may seem like trivial expressions of the combative modern milieu but these are the sites of our modern encounters. The paltriness of these encounters is evidence enough of the degraded state of our public contacts. When coupled with our infinite intrigue in private properties and all other manner of self-guided journeys, we are assured a degraded public experience. This is an especially destructive pattern in a world where the benefits of amicable relations can help us to make the most of being modern. Berman describes the need to share our modern experiences through communication and dialogue, activities he believes have,

taken on a new and specific weight and urgency in modern times, because subjectivity and inwardness have become at once richer and more intensely developed, and more lonely and entrapped, than they ever were before. In such a context, communication and dialogue become both a desperate need and a primary source of delight. In a world where meanings melt into air, these experiences are among the few solid sources of meaning we can count on. One of the things that can make modern life worth living is the enhanced opportunities it offers us—and sometimes even forces on us—to talk together, to reach and understand each other. We need to make these possibilities; they should shape the way we organize our cities and our lives.¹³

Tomorrow, infants too young to sit up alone will be delivered to daycare centers. They will be tended to by many caring and well-intentioned laborers who will fade into the murky past of their clients, still too young to appreciate their devoted toil. Meanwhile, 7 million other children under the age of 14 will spend their after-school hours alone while caregivers are away from the

home.¹⁴ At what point did we agree to this arrangement and where are these sacrifices acknowledged? If our most precious and intimate relations are vulnerable to these sorts of “silent” arrangements, it seems unlikely that our possibilities for dialogue and communication are being explored for their greatest effect. Clearly, the circumstances surrounding the “abandonment” of our children to the solitude of an empty house or the temporary relations of a daycare center are perceived as necessary within the context of our modern lives. This is the context that I seek to explore while simultaneously defining its contours. It is my hope that this exploration will highlight certain recognizable patterns in our responses and, correspondingly, identify the nuts and bolts of daily living as active responses to the collective challenges of being modern. Otherwise, our sacrifices become obligatory responses to unexpressed modern tendencies, not only depriving us of the possibility for celebrating their achievement but also making them unavailable for our use in determining where we are and where we would like to go.

The conditions of this journey are made complex by legitimate fears of being “summed up” as a silenced voice in some vaguely defined aggregate. We hear these “totalizing” tendencies in tags like “most Americans,” a label that is routinely affixed to a variety of modern stories. This deceptively simple short cut reinvents us with each airing but the frequency of its usage is disarming, making this overused generality *feel* like it is capable of capturing something about each of us in a single word or phrase. Perhaps we should be offended at the common use of such a loose abstraction. It seems inappropriate, like referring to a stranger by a familial first name. This is no surprise, issues of familiarity and difference are practically concurrent with modernity. How could it be otherwise? We are thrown together in a million different ways with as many tools between us. It is no wonder that we are perplexed by our own tales of a common humanity. These tales would have us believe that our work is to find the one trait that binds us rather than coming to understand that what makes us most interesting are our differences. This is where we can find the inspiration and impetus for reflections on how and why we live the way we do. I am choosing to address us as moderns because it is a label that can bind us without confinement. Being modern is as fruitful a designation for a single individual as it is when used to sketch the muted abstraction of a crowd gathered in a stadium. The limits of its usage are the limits of our own modern imaginations.

I want to contribute to the widening of our store of modern imaginings. I will not attempt to resolve the puzzles of modernity but I will explore them as concrete issues related directly to the way we live. Appropriately, the format for this exploration will be the essay which has been described as “a literary prose composition, embodying only a selection of its author’s knowledge and views on a given subject. It rarely pretends to be exhaustive or final; it is a series of comments rather than a finished argument—a cultural glance...”¹⁵ The etymological history of the term “essay” is derived from the Latin *exagiare*, to “weigh out.” I find this notion of “weighing out” a good fit for my efforts to work within the Pragmatic tradition with its emphasis on experience and experimentation, two concepts that are also similarly rooted in the active language of trial and testing. As Dewey noted, “The conjunction of problematic and determinate characters in nature renders every existence as well as every idea and human act, an experiment in fact, even though not in design. To be intelligently experimental is but to be conscious of this intersection of natural conditions so as to profit by it instead of being at its mercy.”¹⁶ The following essays are my contribution to making modernity a more merciful prospect.

For some, the prospect of a merciful modernity is an impossible oxymoron. We are only recently hearing the lost voices of those whose modern lives have been subsumed under the

victory of some more powerful modern entity. It is a resistant wound that I believe defies healing until we can speak to these powers collectively. I think that being modern is the place to look for this possibility. My optimism is strongly inspired by the promises of a pragmatic approach that can illustrate how to span the divides between the collective and the individual, the modern and the post-modern, the particular and the general. In the first of these five essays, I explore the complementary blending of Berman's notion of modernism as "any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization"¹⁷ with the pragmatist's interests in the "consequences of belief and action."¹⁸ Pragmatism offers us a lens through which to consider the contents of our modern lives not as detached spectators but as active participants. I will attempt to convey the extent to which we *are* participants by relying on examples that illustrate the ways we *are* modern in the hopes of collecting a context through which to consider what being modern makes elusive and what I treat as the thesis of this project: Social problems require social solutions.

In Chapter 1, *Finding Camaraderie in the Context of Being Modern*, I attempt to articulate the qualities of being modern. John Dewey writes, "when something can be said of qualities they are purveyors of instruction."¹⁹ This chapter is an effort to identify what is instructive about our modern milieu so that we have some appreciation of what we share by way of this milieu. We cannot appreciate our social status without some understanding of a shared social situation. In Chapter 2, *Making of Modern Boundaries*, I suggest that in fact we do share a profoundly important outlook. Ironically, it is one that acts as an impediment to gaining a deeper appreciation for what we share. Our modern conception of selves as autonomous free acting agents predisposes us to certain predictable responses when we are confronted with the many challenges put in place by our modern isolationist thinking. This chapter examines how these responses compel us to reject social solutions in favor of private ones, once again depriving us of the net effect of seeing ourselves as related and responsible for rectifying the conditions that plague us. This deprivation is reinforced and highlighted by the relationship that exists between ourselves and our environs and provides the impetus for Chapter 3, predictably entitled "*Illusory Separation of Selves and Their Surroundings*." Given the popularity of souls, egos, genetic information and all that reinforces our modern infatuation with the free acting agents outlined in chapter two, our environs are often neglected. This is an unsurprising outgrowth of a self-centered rendition of the individual. Our overriding concern with the domination of personal psychology makes our interactions much like that of a boomerang. We are hurled out into the world where we take what we need to know for making our way home again. Our learning takes place as we ricochet back and forth with as much or as little friction as our personal predisposition will allow. In Chapter 3, I will consider a more active conception of the environment, as one that is shaped while it is shaping. It is a conception that presumes the existence of porous spaces between our tools, our settings, and ourselves. This permeability invites a broad and critical view of what constitutes an environment while implicitly questioning what constitutes *us*, as both individuals and as each other's environs. Dewey understood our environs to be the collective gifts that each generation leaves for the next. We hear the weight of this responsibility in Dewey's charge that "the best we can accomplish for posterity is to transmit unimpaired and with some increment of meaning the environment that makes it possible to maintain the habits of decent and refined life."²⁰ In Chapter 4, I will consider the implications of a more active conception of the environment one where collateral lessons are given explicit airing and where meaningful choice is distinguished from the dictates of habit. I will suggest that we have neglected to consider the vital role of acting within a social medium and that the "gifts

that we leave for posterity” will suffer for this lack of social vision and empathy. I will also suggest that building this empathy is highly dependent on how we build our places since places and people make each other. The final chapter is about the inherent possibilities that are a part of this plasticity, this condition that allows people and places to evolve together. Any efforts at controlling the direction of this evolution necessitates some sense of where we want to go and what kind of conceptual underpinnings are guiding our journey. In the following passage, Jim Garrison suggests what this awareness requires of each of us:

We all live prescribed lives. Culture wrote the scripts for us in advance. They constrain our possibilities and control our thoughts, feelings, and actions. If we are to know ourselves, if we are to ever be free, we must become reflectively aware of the cultural scripts that prescribe the roles we play. If we are ever to know, much less re-create ourselves, then we must intelligently critique those scripts. What we need is the most penetrating criticism, poetry, and prophecy. Knowing how culture composes our scripts is the start of intelligent critique²¹

In the following pages, I suggest that our modern scripts are informed by an impoverished notion of individuality that confuses idiosyncratic individual preference with authentic self-creation. In order to enliven the role of individual we must also enliven the social realm from which this actor takes his cues.

¹ See Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment." In Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) p. 39. When Michel Foucault analyzes Immanuel Kant's famous essay "What Is Enlightenment," he notes that modernity is often treated as an epoch, "situated on a calendar... preceded by a more or less naive or archaic premodernity, and followed by an enigmatic and troubling 'postmodernity.' Ultimately, Foucault decides that it is best to treat the essay and the epoch that it represents as an attitude rather than a period of history. I have chosen the same course of action in these essays.

² See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (1979) for elaboration on his claim that "most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative."

³ The powerful expression of this tradition can be found in works like Auguste Comte's (1798-1857) *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1988) or Marquis De Condorcet's (1743-1794) *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979). It is also apparent and explicit in more contemporary writing like E.O. Wilson's (1998) *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*.

⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1926) p. 295.

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, (1975) *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and (1973) *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* for an elaboration on these themes.

⁷ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, (New York: Penguin 1982) p. 345.

⁸ Bill Clinton "Farewell Speech" ABC television, January 18, 2001.

⁹ Dateline, NBC January 16, 2000.

¹⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ *The Intelligencer Journal*, Lancaster, PA November 6, 2000 "7 million children under age 14 take care of themselves after school."

¹⁵ *The Home Encyclopedia*, ed. C. Ralph Taylor Vol. 5. (New York: Periodical Publishers' Service Bureau, Inc. 1952, p.1723).

¹⁶ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 70.

¹⁷ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Cleo Cherryholmes, *Reading Pragmatism*, (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1999) p. 123.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 126.

²⁰ John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Volume 14*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1988), p. 19.

²¹ Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire In the Art of Teaching*, (NY: Teacher's College, 1997) p. 141.

Chapter 1

Finding Camaraderie in the Context of Being Modern

Instances of the flux in which individuals are loosened from the ties that once gave order and support to their lives are glaring. They are indeed so glaring that they blind our eyes to the causes which produce them.

John Dewey¹

If people around the world were asked to empty their private purses, baskets and pockets, I suspect we would see an amazing mixture of objects. The combination might include regional goods that have emerged through long stored knowledge of local weather conditions, political uprisings and customs. Along with these local goods, we might find mass merchandised items made “local” by transnational corporations. To understand the odd juxtaposition of these objects we would need to tell many stories at the same time. To understand their concurrence we would need to know something of the individual carriers and something of the social collective that would produce such interesting arrangements. I like to think of this as the primary ambition of the following essay. It is an attempt to place the seemingly random contents of contemporary life into a coherent story line while simultaneously recognizing that coherency must give way to local adaptation and context.

Like the contents of our pockets, modern stories can share certain characteristics and still not come together with the precision of a completed puzzle; they can be distinct and related at the same time. The value of the distinction depends on the goal of the storyteller and the questions invoked by the choice of one theme rather than another. Every story needs a context to enliven the actions of its characters and make their worlds make sense to us. We moderns are entitled to the same privilege. Our analysis can begin with the objects of our wardrobes or the objectives of our schools. Both can be of assistance when considering what it means to be modern. In any other age, the contents of my closet would have been obvious symbols of wealth. Only the affluent could afford blouses from India, skirts from Sri Lanka and jackets from Thailand. Today, it is not necessary to be wealthy or a world traveler to wear the “made in China” or “made in Korea” label. On the contrary, these labels are the mark of mass production, they hint at the origin of our wares without divulging the conditions under which they are produced. I have only one article of clothing with no label. It is a childhood souvenir of my father’s, a handcrafted jacket created by members of the Seminole tribe in Florida. In the past, the novelty of the jacket centered on the delicacy of its design and the vitality of its bright colors. Today, it stands out as the only article of clothing in my wardrobe with an identifiable history, one that precedes my owning it. The rest of the garments are a hidden jumble of lost stories. If I knew these stories they might tell of low wages, pricked fingers and poor working conditions but I can wear these clothes and never know anything of these conditions. The level of anonymity between most moderns and their wares is similarly defined.

When we dial 1-800-FLOWERS the person taking our order probably won’t mention that two-thirds of Columbia’s 75,000 flower workers suffer from a variety of ailments related to pesticide exposure. Like many of us, they are probably unaware that these workers suffer asthma, miscarriages and congenital malformations from working with materials that are restricted from use in the United States. How could we know that a benign holiday like Valentine’s Day is “particularly hazardous” to these workers? As we nonchalantly ponder the

look of joy on our loved one's face we hear nothing of the depressed conditions of the Colombian flower worker. The worker who spends "up to eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, in poorly ventilated greenhouses producing the more than 100 million pesticide-laden roses that Americans buy every February."² These messages don't come readily from the mainstream American media but when they do many of us will listen. We will listen with our political preferences firmly in place but we will still hear with a modern sensibility. We will understand the burdens of the workplace and, while they may be different burdens, less dramatic perhaps, they will echo our own frustrations at being tethered to a dynamic we can not direct. We will toil under the contradiction of being free and being used as the source of another's profit. We will share in a future orientation that makes us believe today's sacrifices will be tomorrow's rewards. These modern motifs make many of us co-conspirators in an inability to extend the consequences of these values into the future. Still, there is camaraderie to be taken from this store of modern stories, a camaraderie that could help us to be "co-conspirators" toward different ends. According to Marshall Berman, our historical repertoire contains a "mode of vital experience" that immerses us all in a shared state of modernity:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all [hu]mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.³

This appeal is itself quintessentially modern as it attempts to link each of us to the one great tale that can explain us each to the other. Berman speaks of "joy," "power" and "growth" as if their meanings are crystallized in their mere mentioning. These sorts of exhortations have become frightening red flags for thoughtful commentators who hear totalitarian echoes in their idealistic sub texts. Who do we lose when "our" and "us" are invoked as collective narrators to tales that can not possibly name us all? Berman claims that we are living "in the midst of a modern age that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity."⁴ He wants to resurrect modernism as a rallying point, while concurrently suggesting that it "is not the only way to interpret modern culture" and that "no mode of modernism can ever be definitive."⁵ It is this lack of definitiveness that has led other writers to abandon modernity, proclaiming that we have done far more than lose touch with our modernity; we have crossed over into another age.

A great deal of energy has been spent attempting to chart this conversion from one age to the next. The "schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism" have been graphically depicted in a number of different publications.⁶ These textual representations usually comprise separate lists with one containing the attributes of modernity and the other, the attributes of postmodernity. For example, metaphysics and determinacy are placed on the modern side and schizophrenia and indeterminacy are located on the postmodern side. These charts are a handy tool for a sort of "at-a-glance" analysis of modifications in the way we go about doing things, they are the academic version of "before" and "after" as applied to history and current events. They seem removed from daily affairs until we recall that what aligns modernity with "purpose" and postmodernity with "play" is the stuff of our lives. Between the poles that are thought to mark these epochs lie the shared activities that define them as distinct poles to begin with, making our lives a continuum by which these changes are measured. After

all we are the carriers of these changes, the doers that reinvent ourselves in the processes that are said to moves us from the “centered” modern to the “absent” postmodern. My interests lie here, with the making of these motions and the consequences of their being made. The careful delineation’s of our charted trajectories collapse into and emerge out of individual practices that collect into public policy and other institutionalized formats. With so many variables in place, it may be that our best efforts in locating the rift between a modern and postmodern sensibility will always be destined to the reductionism of a chart. In spite of our propensity to follow the new, our ability to cast off the past is not as readily achievable as the whims of our craze conscious surroundings might imply. Berman describes the difficulty of abandoning one age for another:

The primacy of dialogue in the ongoing life of modernism means that modernists can never be done with the past: they must go on forever haunted by it, digging up its ghosts, recreating it even as they remake their world and themselves . . . if modernism ever managed to throw off its scraps and tatters and the uneasy joints that bind it to the past, it would lose all its weight and depth, and the maelstrom of modern life would carry it helplessly away . . . when contemporary modernists lose touch with and deny their own modernity, they only echo the ruling class self-delusion that it has conquered the troubles and perils of the past, and meanwhile they cut themselves off, and cut us off, from a primary source of their own strength.⁷

There are countless ways in which we are made vulnerable by modern metaphors that embellish this notion of entering a “new age” or a “technological revolution.” I hope that these vulnerabilities will be made clear in the upcoming essays, not for the purpose of becoming more firmly planted on one side or the other of the modern/postmodern debate but as an impetus for addressing the consequences inherent in these labels. The repercussions of this labeling have only hastened my aversion to this debate. It is an aversion that is highlighted in a passage taken from David Harvey’s *Spaces of Hope*, where he laments the disuse of Karl Marx because his writing is thought to “lie in a category that we are supposed to be ‘post’”:

. . . the prevalence of ‘the post’ (and the associated inability to say what it is that we might be ‘pre’) is a dominant characteristic of contemporary debate. It has also become a serious game in academia to hunt the covert modernists (if you are a dedicated postmodernist) or to hunt the decadent postmodernists (if you happen to be in favor of some sort of modernist revival.)⁸

Working in this vein makes citations a tool toward confirmation of intellectual allegiances rather than a means to “confront the changes occurring around us.”⁹ It also confines us to a chronology that makes certain earlier contributions seem superfluous and irrelevant. Some writers believe that this kind of thinking is itself constituent of a modern outlook. As Berman explains, it is a “tendency of modernity to make all things new; [so that] next year’s modern life will look and feel different from this year’s; [even though], both will be part of the same modern age. . . the fact that you can’t step into the same modernity twice will make modern life especially elusive and hard to grasp.”¹⁰ It isn’t clear that stepping on one side or the other of the modern/postmodern debate will make modern life any less elusive.

A local newspaper contains an ode to “All those born before 1945,” in which the author declares, “in our day, cigarette smoking was fashionable, grass was mowed, coke was a drink and pot was something to cook in. Rock music was a Grandma’s lullaby and aids were helpers in the principal’s office.”¹¹ The format may be hackneyed but the sentiment typifies the strange juxtapositions that modern life makes possible. This is the layperson’s version of the “schematic differences between modern and post-modern” chart. Although different in style, they are both

enterprising attempts by contemporary people to particularize their own circumstances. Berman defines modernism as “any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the world and makes themselves at home in it.”¹² This definition brings modernism down from the heights of abstraction; it takes the “meta” out of the modern narrative by focusing on the daily pursuits of men and women. These pursuits happen in a particular context, so that understanding how we “get a grip” must include consideration of how each of us acquires and practices our modern habits.¹³ The intellectual uses “schematic differences” and the senior citizen uses prose published in a local newspaper. Both speculate on why the past feels so unlike the present. Unfortunately, this is the point at which much of the conjecture ends, as musings with no impetus to action. Perhaps, this speculation can be put to good use by shifting Berman’s definition of modernism into a twofold question: What kind of world are we making ourselves at home in and, what do the consequences of this arrangement summon in us? If we interpret modern stories as anecdotes to these questions we can hear disparate tales come together as shared expressions of coping with, cowering to and co-creating the modern landscape. Of course, locating these stories is far easier than resolving the riddles they generate.

Social Amnesia and the Problem with Profiles

One legal spokesperson commenting on the latest school shooting said that the young assassin’s explanation indicated “no real answer” to the question of why he did what he did.¹⁴ Meanwhile, televised reports of the shooting highlighted images of police officers searching the school parking lot. They wore fatigues with black caps and guns strapped to their legs as they suspiciously eyed truck beds and the spaces between the cars. I thought of the many children who would be watching these scenes and later reenacting the same maneuvers in their own backyards and alleys having converted them into their own imaginary crime scenes. Would young viewers recognize these officials as the “good guys”? If these pieces were hung together, a picture might emerge but that would require more inquiry, more diligence and more imagination than many moderns have the desire or time to pursue. There will be weeks of speculation and then an uneasy resignation will settle in as we quietly concur with the comments of the legal experts. Finally, we too must conclude that there is no real answer apart from the inner workings of this particular child.

This is how many of our modern stories end, squarely on the shoulders of an individual but uncontrollably dispersed in a million different directions. What is lost in this dispersal is regained in the diligence with which the perpetrator’s acts will be interpreted and then punished. While I have chosen school shootings as illustrative of a certain predictable type of analysis, the same sequence of inquiry holds true for other cases of “inexplicable” behavior. These investigations typically begin inside the individual’s psyche, where personality and predisposition are thought to reside. From there, questions move outward to include the immediate family members. At the outer edge of inquiry, the conversation may include experts who will comment on connections between rock music and violent behavior or television viewing and violence. The possibilities will tend toward a local orbit that revolves tightly around the accused. We hear this rigidly bound discourse as an attempt to understand what precipitates such calamities but the goal is easily undermined by limitations built into the format. A typical example is a call-in talk show that polls its viewers with the following question regarding school violence: “Whose to blame, the kids, the parents or, the bully?”¹⁵ The multiple-choice format may sit well with an audience schooled through its usage but it reduces the complexity of these events to deceptively simplistic choices. In fact, research into the profile of these children has led

to the disconcerting realization that “there is no profile.”¹⁶ The revelation of a definitive personality type could seal these children safely into a separate niche one that sits apart from our normal kids. The research has been no help in this area but it has given us some leads in other directions. For instance, studies have revealed that perpetrators of school shootings don’t spontaneously “snap” and act in a sudden surge of vengeance. In fact, these acts are anything but spontaneous, “...these children take a long, planned, public path toward violence.”¹⁷ It is a “public path” that is far more predictable than the behavior of the person who walks it because it will likely lead to a prison cell. While we scramble for identifiable personality profiles, we can rest assured that these children will find constancy in their punitive encounters with the world after their transgressions.

I watch as a young girl is led to a police car handcuffed and chained as though her small, unarmed adolescent body could possibly pose a threat to the surrounding onlookers. The retribution begins immediately as exaggerated maneuvers act to symbolize our collective revulsion for her attack on a schoolmate. Meanwhile, the call-in talk show lends us scripts through which to channel our individual anger and frustration. The constricted format of the polling questions reveal that 40 percent of the respondents blame the kids who did the shooting, another 40 percent found the parents at fault while the remaining 20 percent blamed the bullies. Interestingly, our wayward children provide no consistent personality profiles and yet they react to their environments in similarly violent ways. This consistency defies the limited options of the multiple-choice format because it forces the question away from the failings of the individual. It makes us ask questions that are much more complicated: When does a “copycat” crime take on its own identity? What is it about our modern environments that prompt such extraordinary violent actions and what vision of the future makes the consequences of these actions feel like a better choice? Questions like these will not prompt perfect symmetry in our polling statistics but they can inspire a conversation that extends beyond the “inner circle,” of the errant individual. This circle is too readily constructed around events in need of more not fewer suspects. We moderns stay strangely unsuspecting of this pattern, supposing that our preference for reductive responses is a commonsensical approach to disagreeable circumstances. The popular three-strikes-you’re-out strategy is the height of systematic problem solving. It seeks to tally the behavior of a lone perpetrator without translating these totals into cumulative social phenomena. Given the modern propensity for rapid-fire reaction times this translation process seems uncharacteristically slow. In the meantime, we will demand more Ritalin prescriptions rather than taking on the more burdensome task of reevaluating what we mean by “misbehavior.” We will chastise the inhabitant of the inner city for high crime rates while retaining a cityscape that is most certainly contributive to a criminal existence. It has become easier to swallow an anti-depressant than to think about the circumstances that make so many of us disheartened and discouraged. Although the call for accountability is profuse in modern discourse, it rarely extends beyond the simplest of calculations. But, modern math is fatally flawed if our calculations remain indebted to formulas that can never account for more than a single instance at a time. The modern aggregate comes together like the crowd at a surprise party, with some vague sense of a shared undertaking but little sense of how each participant came to be invited to the party and very little to work with if the main attraction doesn’t show. How could it be otherwise when our imaginative range is fixed by the primacy of the individual disposition? It often feels as though we moderns share nothing but the mere coincidence of our coexistence.

This sort of social amnesia can conceal the consequences of our acts but forgetfulness has its drawbacks. We know its cost when we watch gurneys delivering school children into awaiting

ambulances or read of a high school food fight escalating into a “racially motivated brawl.” Our privacy does not free us from these events, it only furthers the helplessness we feel in understanding why this is happening, why this outcome? These questions are repeated like ritualistic chants at the aftermath of every violent episode. If the outcomes were not so tragic, this ritual might take on the quality of a comedy routine, a Three Stooges act where characters bump and fumble into each other, setting off a string of reactions that remain oblivious until some falling prop knocks them into recognition. Modern life mimics this routine in a very sobering way often making it feel as though these falling props are more constant than the stillness that separates them.

Adjusting to Adjustable Facts

Attempting to regulate this ongoing cascade is one of the chief pastimes of modern living. We are accustomed to the constant banter of dialogue that seeks to resolve issues of culpability and intention, intrusion and infringement. We have accumulated a vast repository of legal cases, television shows and personal anecdotes that all emerge out of concern with where and how our modern lives should merge and retreat. These disputes involve everything from the placement of fence lines to the status of a budding embryo locked within the confines of a single body but still intermittently prone to public encroachment. In spite of our constant struggle to make the individual the pinnacle of an elaborate psycho-social schema, we seem to be constantly ensnared in a social web that will not be subdued; we are like briars to each other’s clothing. The more zealously we champion the primacy of the individual the more immersed we become in contentious name-calling and implicated, by our own logic, in matters that should not concern us. With the individual at the apex of the social summit, the subject of who merits what designation becomes vitally important. The modern media is teeming with stories of identity and identification. For instance, recent research revealed that “black students were three times as likely as whites to be labeled ‘mentally retarded’ and in need of special education services.”¹⁸ Another recent report stated that the United States census bureau estimates that 3.4 million Americans will remain unnamed in the latest census.¹⁹ The fact that most of the unnamed are minority members adds further ramifications to the very real consequences of drawing and redrawing voting district boundaries. The desire for accurate head counts and appropriate descriptions can be driven by the noblest of aims or the most exploitative of ambitions. As moderns, we have been witnesses to both.

Still, one of the great achievements of modern thinking is the notion that abstractions like justice and freedom can take very real form in the way we organize our lives. Having the ability to grasp this eventuality is what stimulates compassion and gives depth to our modern visions. This ability has also stimulated a great deal of debate about who can speak most accurately and authentically for any particular cause. Although we moderns are often mired in trivial proprietary disputes, we are also convinced that their settlement is at least partly a matter of principle. Our skirmish with the neighbor about where he keeps his car supersedes the immediate parking problem and becomes a much more noble issue of right versus wrong, civility versus chaos. When political leaders charge that “no child should be left behind,” they too are attempting to make the individual instance merge with a transcending principle. In fact, our faith in contemporary politics has been weakened due to the ambiguity of these “transitions” from the few to the many, from the singular case to the plural. This is what makes the leap between the general and the specific a site of controversy but, if recognized and used well, it can also be the site of much hope. As John Dewey noted in *A Common Faith*, “the limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension.”²⁰ The

fruitfulness of exercising this imaginative range will be the topic of a later essay. For now, I raise this issue as it pertains to achieving a measured strategy by which we can traverse the gaps between our many modern stories.

We moderns speak with an air of authority about people we have never met, places we have never visited and events we have not experienced. We have “insider” details on the lives of celebrities just as we have them with regard to bombings, natural catastrophes or whatever other events get reported through our media. We need only reflect on how much of what we know is second-hand to realize that very little of what we consider “real” or “true” is based on our own personal experience. When scientists report that the Hubble Space Telescope is “peering back in time to when the universe was in its adolescence,” we tend to take their word for it and chalk it up as another not-so-obvious fact about our universe.²¹ In spite of our modern passivity, we are still deeply influenced by these accounts. Although most of us will never witness the “undersides” of our technological marvels, we will still assume the fact of their existence. Facts have become the cornerstone of any modern conversation that is striving for legitimacy. It is almost impossible for us to imagine a world without the same kind of allegiance to factual accounts of reality. Still this “pre-factual” world not only preceded ours it also acted as the impetus against which our modern ideas were initiated. James Burke explains the state of knowledge in medieval existence:

Much of life was led in a kind of perpetual present: their knowledge of the past was limited to memories of personal experience, and they had little interest in the future. Time as we know it had no meaning...[it] was a world without facts. Indeed, the modern concept of a fact would have been an incomprehensible one. Medieval people relied for day to day information solely on what they themselves, or someone they knew, had observed or experienced in the world immediately around them...there was almost no part of this life-without-fact that could be other than local...what medieval man called ‘fact’ we would call opinion and there were few people who traveled enough to know the difference²²

It is comforting to think that we moderns have managed to leap frog our way beyond the medieval muddle regarding fact verses opinion, that we have all been carried by a single sweeping wave and deposited at the doorstep of a new age. Much of our “New Millennium” discourse had this quality to it. It seemed as though everyone on earth had been invited to the same party.

Some commentators will say that far fewer attended the gala than our modern myths of inclusion would have us believe. They point to popular documents with deceptively simple phrasing like “we the people” and then tell of those who have been omitted from this collective. They point to the travel logs of early world explorers and the undisclosed political affiliations of great heroines to reveal the truth about history and the facts of our modern predicaments.²³ Facts are a kind of currency with truth as their purchasing power. We moderns use these facts to sell each other ideas about the way we think the world works and then we argue with each other about who has the truer facts. Using facts in this way has made modern problem solving a complicated prospect and our battlegrounds are strewn over a vast terrain.

From courtrooms to classrooms to living rooms, the standard is truth and the measure is some ambitious calculation involving principled decisions and ethical analysis. We strive to have our facts do the talking, to make the truth so obvious that our opponent recognizes the irrationality of his or her position. We assume that truth will volunteer itself like the white flag of a surrendering opponent. When it does not, we moderns devise clever methods of making truth

speak. For those who seek to hide the facts, we have coercive instruments like lie detectors, breathalyzers and urine tests. For those from whom the facts are hidden, we have hypnosis, psychoanalysis and standardized testing. We will find new truths as we find new strategies for eliciting their appearance. Many of these methods will point to other layers of meaning making some “conclusions” more ideologically laden than others. There is a world of meaning contained within the tools and strategies that we use to make facts apparent. After all, a polygraph test can only suggest a physiological response; its graphic output is a representation of this response not a picture of the truth. We cannot conclusively distinguish the anxiety of a liar from the benign and unintended anxiety of a truth teller but by the time that machinery meets flesh we have opened and closed a million possibilities; we have already tainted the guarantee of absolute validity. Such struggles for interpretation plague many modern projects where facts must be born of disinterested inquiry. Our goal is to assemble a fact-finding apparatus, put it in place and then let it reveal what is true and what is not. These devices are not the stuff of science fiction nor are they limited to the laboratory. Our contact with the promise of undistorted reality is as close as the nearest public school.

Among the contents of my fifth grader’s backpack is a conspicuously colored “parental advisory” announcing that our “KIDS ARE ABOUT TO TAKE A VERY IMPORTANT TEST.”²⁴ We are to post this message in a place “where the whole family can see it!” The creators of this advisory are proud of their announcement. Why wouldn’t they be? They are announcing an incredible feat, a feat that even I, as my child’s well-acquainted spokesperson would be hesitant to declare. They have created a written exam that not only measures “the success of the school and the District as a whole” but also, incredibly “measures what students know and are able to do.”²⁵ Imagine the assemblage of facts they will distill from this single exam. It is no wonder then that the advisory goes on to address the anxiety that children experience in anticipation of these assessments. John Dewey once wrote that “the more sincerely we appeal to facts, the greater is the importance of the distinction between facts which condition human activity and facts which are conditioned by human activity.”²⁶ In reckless abandon of these cautionary words, the parental advisory goes on to define anxiety as “natural” and “good for motivation.” The natural anxiety is unrelated to the months of “drill and kill” training sessions the children have endured or the corresponding bribes that have been offered for successful completion of the exams.

The creators of the advisory forget the barrage of assessment strategies, the tips for outsmarting the test makers and the many gimmicks that have gone on incessantly in anticipation of this “natural” anxiety that students are advised to accept on the grounds that it is an inevitable part of schooling. It is a modern mother lode filled with implications for how we define a successful education and, by implication a successful life. In spite of the reassurance that anxiety is natural, it is not clear why our children should suffer this symptom while demonstrating “how they can get the most out of their education.” Perhaps our children are more astute than these simplistic rankings would indicate. Perhaps they, better than the adults who judge them, understand that facts are vital tools in meaning making and that the facts distilled from these examinations may go on to define them in ways they find unappealing or threatening. An unwieldy fact can be a reckless contender in an age when the breeding of free-roaming facts is as ambient as the weather.

A recent factual miscalculation had the mayor of a town in New Jersey suggesting that weather forecasters should be held accountable for errant meteorological predictions: “Everyone needs to be held responsible for what they do in their lives and their professional functions.”²⁷

With so many facts floating around accountability has become a modern past time. It is the conceptual filter of an age unable to control the many channels through which facts are disseminated. Facts are white noise to the modern world and movements towards accountability are attempts to channel the noise into audible signals. It is difficult to avoid cross-purposes when facts appear to arise from the world like rabbits from a magician's hat and yet, we moderns are unremitting in pursuing the modern dictum of looking "only at the facts." Still, if we assume that facts are snapshots of reality then we can begin to see some "un-factual" patterns emerging even in our most literal fact finding missions. The 2000 census was the first to allow census takers to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race; not surprisingly, the number of race categories increased from five to sixty-three.²⁸ With the shading of a circle a fact of identity is changed from one racial category to another. The seemingly unbending facts of a particular genealogy are ceded to the changing categories created by modern men and women. These sorts of changes typify modern living; at every turn a fact is made into fiction but does this make fiction of our facts? If facts make meaning, what becomes of meaning when facts are so readily replaced? If we moderns take for granted that there is a correspondence between our facts and the world, then how do we resolve the daily disruption that modern living brings to this equation. There is some evidence that we simply proceed deeper into the mire taking our children along as the next generation of jaded fact finders.

The "Home and School Connection" is a short flyer given out to children in our local public school. It is a self-proclaimed collection of helpful hints "to promote school success, parent involvement, and more effective parenting."²⁹ This week's advice includes a section entitled "Understanding standardized tests" in which the writer explains the purpose of both the standardized achievement test and the standardized aptitude test. One is intended to gauge what students already know and the other predicts what a child can be expected to know in the future. The article goes on to say that a "child's test scores can vary from day to day" but this statement is not meant to qualify the predictive function of standardized tests.³⁰ Nor is it intended to caution readers about the perils of increased dependency on tests to evaluate not only the students but the teachers and the schools as well. The fact that variables can upset the precision of these recently appointed evaluative tools is not a fact that is addressed in this "resource for educators." This is the challenging side of our modern facts. As the philosopher of science Ian Hacking has noted, "facts do not just pile up blindly. They are used to determine the form of future inquiries."³¹ Our modern facts bare the residuals of this determination. Simply put, we do some things instead of others. Hacking uses the example of the development of intelligence quotient testing to demonstrate how this process works. In the early years of I.Q. testing women scored better than the men did. The response on the part of the examiners was to delete those questions and replace them with questions on which men scored higher. "Since women 'couldn't' be more intelligent than men, this meant that the questions were wrong."³² Similarly, early research on human reproduction revealed that male sperm acted aggressively during conception while female eggs lay in waiting, coincidentally, much like, their ideal human counterpart. Today our reproductive facts take into account the contributive action of both egg and sperm. Examples like these are plentiful and useful in begging the question of our own trajectory. The Microsoft Windows advertisement that asks, "where do you want to go today?" is beautifully representative of the modern mythology of factual clarity. The more accurate question would require such a shuffling of the context that it would lose its original simplicity. It might read something like this: Given the current condition of our socio-economic situation and all the historically laden characteristics implied within it, where is it possible for us to go today?

If my starting point involves a keyboard and a monitor then I have already chosen a very specific journey. If achievement and aptitude can be measured through bubble sheets and number 2 pencils then I have already constrained my definition of success.

Being modern means that these sorts of considerations have a slightly compromising feel to them. We prefer to keep a sharp line between our background and our foreground. When we tamper with facts by encasing them in a context they seem to leak over into categories that we moderns consider anathema to our fact-based reality. Still, for all of our supposed mastery over fact, we seem to be sinking into fact filled quicksand. Does anyone know the status of eggs in our modern diet? Are they the perfect protein or a contributor to cardiovascular disease? Should women use estrogen replacement therapy or does it cause cancer? Do children benefit from the social atmosphere of a day care facility or do they suffer feelings of abandonment and identity confusion? The answers to these questions will undoubtedly give us more facts but then what? For all of our modern familiarity with fact we seem strangely unskilled in deciphering fact from fiction. Imagine a school curriculum that included a class entitled “Evolution and Creationism: Two different ways of looking at the world.” The participants would consider the arguments, gather the facts and elaborate on the consequences of taking either view. When we conceptualize facts as tools to be used toward certain consequences they lose their position as revealed truths but gain in purposefulness and meaning. They become a useful and vital part of experience. This approach requires a different sort of revelation. It requires that we concede our biases, our interest in locating certain facts and losing others while recognizing that what is lost by way of objectivity is gained in the ability to direct the course of our own inquiry. We do not have to be at the mercy of our facts when we are explicitly responsible for their emergence but we do have to think hard about the questions we are asking.

Between the years of 1972 and 1998 some of these questions concerned “current attitudes toward children.” These are the years researchers surveyed American parents to find out what they considered valuable traits in their children and how these traits had changed during the intervening years. Not surprisingly, the one constant in the survey, “the top-rated trait in children, now and then, is thinking for themselves.”³³ Other traits were not as stable. Most notably parents had shifted their desire for obedient children to self-disciplined ones. The article does not address why self-disciplining precludes obedience. When asked if having children “interfered” in their lives, nine out of ten respondents answered “no.” Tom W. Smith, the director of the center conducting the survey explained that “...you can have a career and raise children; you can have caregivers during the day or the evening.”³⁴ The article does not raise the question of the advantages or disadvantages of this approach to child rearing. It does quote Smith at length as he describes the latest patterns of supervision needed by “busy parents...who do not want children having open-ended fun...because they do not have the time for the minute-by-minute supervision such behavior requires.”³⁵ Again, there is no remarking on whether this strategy has good or bad implications. A sociologist commenting on the results explains the changes in terms of a growing middle class. She explains: “Middle class jobs demand judgement over the ability to follow rules without objection, and middle-class parents assume that their children will hold those jobs, too.”³⁶ The article answers the five standard questions of journalism; who, what, when, where, and why but it does not tell us what is to be gained from this information. Is there some advantage to knowing how children’s parents rank their children? We moderns are constantly being reminded of both the rapidity and the pervasiveness of change but we are rarely counseled on what we should be doing about it. Our acquiescence is conceived as a sensible response to the inevitability of being awash in the by-products of progress.

Consequently, whatever clarity we distill from the miscellany of our modern fact filled world must emerge with the majestic lucidity of a spiritual awakening. How else do we distinguish trivial, run-of-the-mill facts from revolutionary, earth shattering facts? The challenging nature of this distinction coupled with the alterable nature of modern facts requires that we moderns most often participate in a faithful following of the facts through someone else's expertise and experience. Although, it may be the experts who pronounce their findings as facts it is our lives and our environs that provide the fodder that keep these facts up to date and modern. This is no less true of our deaths than it is of our lives.

The "International Classification of Diseases" (ICD) is described as "a complex information-processing tool" intended to "coordinate information and resources about mortality and morbidity globally."³⁷ Researchers use classification schemes such as the ICD the same way that an anthropologist might use a pottery shard to identify the habits and customs of an ancient people. In order to understand the features of a more modern society, researchers examine paper trails rather than unearthed debris. For instance, our modern death certificates reveal that "people no longer die the way that they used to at the turn of the century...they tend to be carried off not by a single disease but by a complex of diseases."³⁸ In order for the complexity of dying to become an official matter certain elements had to be put in place: "In the United States coding of more than the single underlying cause of death was a failure before 1968 despite repeated attempts. Such coding became standard when an automated computerized system was implemented for the selection of the underlying cause of death."³⁹ With these developments, the possibility of any single elderly person dying from simply being "worn out" had passed away. This foray into the world of medical terminology is an indicator of how malleable the facts of our lives can become. The relevance of *this* fact is due to our collective indebtedness to other facts that provide a sort of co-created infrastructure through which we each practice our particular identity. The difficulty is that when we couple these facts with our modern belief in the sanctity of individual self-determination we are confronted with a glaring contradiction. How can we be who we are and have the fundamental facts of our lives so readily adjustable and replaced? Berman describes the conflicted nature of our modern destinies as reflective of a longing for both,

a stable and coherent personal and social past," [and] an "insatiable desire for growth... for growth in experience, in pleasure, in knowledge, in sensibility—growth that destroys both the physical and social landscapes of our past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds"⁴⁰

I read these words and envision a plant dislodging its roots from the ground and quickly wilting to its own death. Dewey contributes a provocative question to any discussion that recognizes growth as a characteristic of human life: Does this form of growth create conditions for future growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing new direction?⁴¹ The key to meaningful growth is in learning to control ones environment for the enhancement of further future growth. Berman's alignment of our modern desire to seek "to embrace the limitless possibilities of modern life" while we simultaneously "obliterate all values"⁴² is "growth" through demolition rather than regeneration. It is limiting in its expansiveness rather than expansive in its refinement. In spite of modern advertisements that claim otherwise, wider is not always better, any growth is not the same as good growth. This distinction rests in the future where consequences reside but it takes a particularly tenacious modern to follow the course of an act. Without an almost vigilant watchfulness, consequences are easily lost, leaving us unable to

behave as judges to our own deeds. This may help to explain the mediocrity of some of our modern choices.

One journalist describes the Suburban Utility Vehicle as “hard to maneuver, harder to park, [with] less cargo space than most minivans or, full sized sedans, and... harder for the family to climb into and out of.”⁴³ In addition to this list of questionable attributes, recent gas prices have meant costs of \$100 for a full tank, a tank that “can suck dry its forty-four-gallon tank in five hours.”⁴⁴ If our desire for all terrain vehicles could be satisfied by their capability to be useful in “all terrains” then perhaps these bothersome trade-offs would diffuse these contradictions. But, 89 percent of SUV owners never tread on anything except smoothed asphalt laid out in voluminous quantities for the well being of our modern automobiles. The fact that these “four-ton leviathans” are often advertised in magazines like *National Geographic* and in between news stories reporting on issues of global warming only adds to a bewildering array of contradictory modern choices. Berman is right; contradictions are a mainstay of contemporary life. Still, we seem ill informed of their existence, making the modern environment an ideal breeding ground for the hidden fact. These facts are not necessarily conspiratorial but they may seem that way for the uniformed modern. When a shampoo container has the words “cruelty free” written on the label, does this mean that no animals were mistreated because of an ethical decision or because the shampoo’s ingredients are in no need of further testing? Does it matter that an SAT score is more readily predicted by income than by intelligence? Is it important to know that besides being blind-mute and deaf, Helen Keller was an ardent socialist who once wrote these words: “Our democracy is but a name. We vote? What does that mean? It means that we choose between two bodies of real, though not avowed, autocrats, We choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”⁴⁵ The answers to these questions will depend on how we intend to use them toward crafting our modern stories.

Private Virtue and Public Scorn

A top ranking U.S official recently contributed to the crafting of a modern story that has coarse utility and infinite consumption as its central theme. In typical modern fashion, he made the contradictory claim that “conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy.”⁴⁶ It is unfortunate that modern reasoning makes it easy to dislodge the privately virtuous from the creation of virtuous public policy. It is disconcerting to ponder the challenge of maintaining virtuous policies when “un-virtuous” policies may serve the aim of “efficiency” more readily than policies that are initiated through ethical themes. This effect is heightened when words like “virtue,” “freedom,” and “equality” cease to describe specific experiences and become static and vague slogans to further some modern means. We invite these sorts of perversions when we greet the use of these expressions with low expectations that arise from a debased sense of what qualifies as a worthwhile experience. We stand on our knees and demand higher standards. I suspect that this is the case when the fate of a modern nation is said to rest on the test taking skills of its youth. Surely, we can achieve a higher degree of collective well being by envisioning goals with more fruitful consequences. This too is a goal in need of a context, one that invites an expanded definition of experience. Dewey provides this sort of definition:

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return...the connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness or value of the experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience...experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously

connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued *into* the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something.⁴⁷

Our modern experiences can be difficult to evaluate on these grounds since they often have the confounding quality of allowing us to appear passive while we are actually expending great amounts of energy. It is also possible to appear active even when we learn very little. This is one of the many contradictory conditions that we confront as moderns; our ability to do nothing and still do so much. How many among us realize that the production of miniscule microchips hidden within our computers generates 89 pounds of garbage and requires 2800 gallons of water to manufacture?⁴⁸ These sorts of facts allow us to stand at the pinnacle of our modern powers and hardly recognize the enormity of our influence. This predicament is typified by the modern experience of being driven by a car.

While our modern metaphor of “being in the driver’s seat” portrays an active role for the person behind the wheel this activity is quickly given over to red lights, speed bumps and radar guns. The lone driver sits poised for control encased within a massive metal container that expends 95 percent of its energy transporting *itself* along great stretches of concrete that are devoted the its own massive proportions and not to those of its handler.⁴⁹ Much of our driving time is spent acting as each other’s irritating impediment stranded together in a pool of multicolored metal. Still, once freed of these unintended entanglements our cars can move us at speeds unreachable only a few generations ago. Many thousands of people will meet their ends through this combination of speed and steel in the seemingly simple act of moving bodies from one location to another. In the process they will contribute to the production of chemicals that may alter the climate of the earth. An indication that our own desensitization to power is not necessarily reflected in our environs. This is why power can be a convoluted construct in the driver’s seat.

In 1999 there were 37,140 fatal automobile accidents in the United States. Those commentators who are critical of the unimaginative approach to transportation in this country point to statistics like these and make the compelling claim that if these fatalities involved airplane accidents we would have a modern crisis on our hands. Of course, our apathy is not completely unjustified. The single car accident is only cataclysmic for surviving friends and family members of the fatality. For the rest of us, these individual accidents amass slowly like water droplets in a rain gauge. We moderns are drawn toward tales of the “Big Bang” variety anyway. We await *the* cure for cancer, *the* cause of obesity, *the* measure of student achievement. We ask single questions, and we find single answers. The trouble with such focused expectations is that they can limit our next round of questions. For example, when we rely on the Gross National Product as *the* measure of our collective success we have agreed to a definition that makes any legal economic transaction a positive contribution to its calculations. Whether these calculations are derived from the creation of bombs or baby clothes the GNP will rise. In 1997, an alternative to this “blind” scale was created. It is a scale that begins with the premise that

What we measure is literally a sign of what we value as a society. If critical social and ecological assets are not counted and valued in our measures of progress, they receive insufficient attention in the policy arena. The current reliance on economic growth statistics alone as the basic measure of prosperity and progress implicitly devalues the importance of our natural and social capital, including natural resource wealth and environmental quality, unpaid voluntary and household work, leisure time, health and

knowledge. This practice also fails to distinguish economic activities that contribute to well-being from those, like crime and pollution, that cause harm.⁵⁰

Conditions are easily manipulated when all eyes are on the big picture. This is especially true when the big picture is perceived as existing in a realm apart from the sketches made daily by the conduct and misconduct of the individual. We moderns seem to find ourselves using scales that either send us to distant galaxies in search of absolute Truth or confining us to the parochial scales of our own backyards. But, even here the territory is beginning to look unfriendly.

After 18 years as a referee for various suburban sports teams in Chicago, Jovan Lazarevic has decided to give up his position. Lazarevic says he knew it was time to resign “when people started saying personal things” about him. He laments that “these days all anyone thinks about is themselves instead of the game.”⁵¹ In other sports news, a Miami Florida circuit judge ordered a game rematch when parents claimed that two of their children’s teams’ best players “had been kept off the official roster because of a computer error.”⁵² The private problem quickly spills into the public realm in spite of our best efforts to reduce the complexity of our modern social relations to the psychological scale of a single person. We find that the self-interested individual who reigns supreme in the scaled up abstraction of the marketplace may not be the best next door neighbor or local sports fan. The transition from one role to the next is one made daily by the demands of modern living. It is a challenging transition, often exaggerated by the demands of our modern circumstances. Berman describes these circumstances in terms of an expanding modern public that “shatters into a multiple of fragments” and speaks “incommensurable languages,” no longer bound together by the idea of being modern and reaping the benefits it affords us to “organize and give meaning to people’s lives.”⁵³ The days of speaking nostalgically for a future *we* have yet to experience seems as old-fashioned as the surfing music of the sixties. If we can not get through a soccer game together how can we possibly run a democracy?

It is difficult to get our facts straight when our modern manners require a dexterity that seems to collide with so much of our modern heritage. We moderns have inherited an intellectual tradition that tells us to measure the worth or worthlessness of our endeavors along fixed points on a single scale but our modern experiences defy this type of measurement. Unfortunately, instead of rethinking our evaluative tools we either widen our definition of deviance or watch passively as our valued relations and their sustaining institutions get razed to the ground. Meanwhile, another living arrangement becomes bi-coastal, a fourteen-year old is sentenced to life without parole and another family agonizes over putting their elderly member into the unfamiliar confines of a nursing home. We make our adjustments to these modern demands but only with a diminished sense of what qualifies as a meaningful existence.

For Dewey experience is about “marshalling materials in a way that they do not merely accumulate, but culminate in some determinate, meaningful, form.”⁵⁴ Although we might confine this process to the circumstances of a single life, it is equally relevant on a broader scale. This process does not fall within the confines of *either* the private realm or the personal realm because acts that have consequences beyond the individuals participating in them will contribute to the environs in which others experience their own lives. This is how Dewey distinguishes between a private act and a public one: “When the consequences of an action are confined, mainly to the persons directly engaged in it, the transaction is a private one.”⁵⁵ Dewey is quick to add that a private act can have social consequences and, that the ability to observe these “consequences *as* consequences” is a worthwhile means of “introducing” intelligence. When we recognize the consequences of an act in a way that allows us “to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others” we are acting intelligently.⁵⁶ When we apply this thinking

to our permeable modern lifestyles we are also acting responsibly. More typically, we moderns act in unison and then credit ourselves with pursuing private ends and behaving self-reliantly. But, even our demands for *individual* accountability are prescribed through collective measures. We choose to evaluate our school children through standardized testing rather than individual portfolios or other more autobiographical sources. Given our delusions of self-grandeur we are brazen gamblers when it comes to the future, assuming that a conscientious citizenry will emerge readymade from the chance encounters of self-interested individuals. A citizenry enabled by the imaginative blend of personal aspirations with public consequences would be a novel circumstance for modern populations who see this union as a collision of two irreconcilable antagonisms. To make the convergence of our public and private acts a deliberate and meaningful project would harness what is often given over to the whims of political fashion and successful public relations. Rather than viewing public acts as events marked by the use of a bullhorn or as acronyms for a degraded relation to the hallowed private sphere, we could rewrite our modern expectations. We could make the ability to recognize and connect what we do as individuals with what we would like to see the wider world become as the true measure of a skilled modern. There are those among us who are ready to demonstrate what these skills might look like.

In San Francisco, a bicyclist alerts his fellow citizens to the growing number of bicycle fatalities by drawing bright yellow outlines where the felled bodies of slain riders lay. His goal is to create a meaningful and unavoidable symbol of the connection between a personal act and a public consequence. It is fashionably modern to run from this connection, to educate our children as competing individuals with social relations being an unintended by-product of being human. Occasionally we are alerted to facts that suggest a more profound interdependence. This was the case when the U.S. Surgeon General recently unveiled a national campaign to deal with the “preventable problem” of suicide. In doing so, he noted that community-based programs building life skills “and connections to family and community support” are “known to reduce the risk of suicide.”⁵⁷ The modern media makes it hard to believe that in the U.S. every two murders is matched by three suicides. These modern lessons of loneliness and alienation seem to be far too subtle for a visual medium, indicating that important modern channels are ill-prepared for depicting the public-private continuum. After all, isn’t suicide the ultimate public expression of private anguish? In the U.S. 30,000 people a year make this dramatic public statement, a statement that screams of the futility of their personal experiences while another 650,000 attempt to make the same statement. For our modern teenagers suicide is the second most likely cause of death. What of the private voice that has no public recognition? Where do the lines of our privacy become pathological? Among the unfortunate drawbacks to our modern preoccupation with visual accompaniments is our modern inability to readily see the continuum between our public and private lives. The intangibility is illusory. If we learn to look we will find that this continuum is contained within the very real and tangible consequences of sharing our modern world. These consequences offer themselves as guideposts to help us determine the status of our acts.

Dewey describes the public as consisting of “all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.”⁵⁸ The public need not be an ephemeral mass of faceless bodies to be summoned by the same adjectives age after age. Different historical contexts will elicit different publics. Within our modern context, an outline suggestive of the dead body of a felled cyclist is a public act and so is a campaign to stop individual suicides. These projects not

only demonstrate how public and private distinctions mingle and collapse into one another, they also transcend the personalities of those who created them as they simultaneously pay tribute to them. The bridge between public and private can be as fluid as the individuals who conscientiously cross it. The irony is that those who cross it unknowingly are not only a danger to themselves but the broader public as well.

In years to come our modern progeny may enter the Smithsonian Institutions American History archives to find a Hall of Fame of American achievers that includes the founder of Federal Express, Frederick Smith, basket ball player Michael Jordan and home décor guru, Martha Stewart. Whether these “achievers” meet some sort of public scrutiny is not completely irrelevant but it is made less relevant by the source of its funding. Since the Hall of fame is the result of a private contribution made by philanthropist Catherine B. Reynolds she will be given “a substantial say in determining who will be honored in the exhibition.”⁵⁹ One of the museum’s curators ponders the public reaction to this arrangement: “The question is at what point will the public say ‘This is just a corporate museum.’ If they get the impression we’re just renting out space, we might as well throw out the name Smithsonian. It won’t mean anything anymore.”⁶⁰ All indications are that this curator is in the minority. For many moderns the transformation of publicly defined spaces into private ones is not only inevitable but also desirable. From our zealous criticisms of public schools, to the under funding of public broadcasting, the modern milieu is a deceptive tribute to the hallowed role of the individual. Early on we learn to cope with the flaws of our modern age as if they seed themselves within the confines of a single person. These flaws reflect whatever personality attribute meets current standards of deviance and they settle in like demons possessing the soul of the individual victim. We use our institutions as tools of exorcism and then blame their failures on the fact that they exist to serve these demons in the first place. The more we sanction these interpretations the truer they become. Meanwhile, we watch as our collective shortcomings are driven from the expansive realm of *social* problem to the confines of the single modern. This self-centeredness is not limited to the egotistical whims of modern megalomaniacs. It is also inspired by much more altruistic moderns.

Our modern predecessors used collective pronouns very loosely. They were prone to errors of generality, using catchy phrases like “we the people” to demarcate a population that appeared to be far larger than the practical policy that followed their grand declarations. Some times we moderns *do* learn from our mistakes and today even the most altruistic moderns warn of being charmed by the deceptive promises of collective political goals. These well-intentioned moderns advise us to run from abstraction and guard ourselves with the heightened sound of our own individual voices. This is good advice until we are made deaf by the cacophony of individual voices. David Harvey suggests a pragmatic approach, one that focuses on “the specific institutions of power that translate between particularity and universality.”⁶¹ This is not a straightforward translation. When we consider the universal call for equal educational opportunity and then follow this call to its enactment in our schools, we will certainly meet with conflicting interpretations. This is where our modern work lies, in recognizing what Harvey identifies as the “creative tension” between our aspirations and their applications. We moderns need to learn the artfulness of diplomacy in order to participate in the “dynamic negotiations,” that emerge while working through the “translations from the concrete to the abstract.” This is a skill we forfeit at the risk of our own incompetence, but it is a forfeiture inherent in our conception of the individual as inherently opposed to the collective.

Dewey explains how our modern negotiations are doomed to failure by hopes for reunions that never materialize:

Because *an* individual can be disassociated from this, that and the other grouping, since he need not be married, or be a church-member or a voter, or belong to a club...there grows up in the mind an image of a residual individual who is not a member of any association at all. From this premise, and from this only, there develops the unreal question of how individuals come to be united in societies and groups: *the* individual and *the* social are now opposed to each other, and there is the problem of “reconciling” them. Meanwhile, the genuine problem is that of adjusting groups and individuals to one another.⁶²

The subtlety that an individual loses when patched on to the collective is already underway in the form of this “residual individual” who is burdened with the struggles of some mythological beast who, born with no resemblance to any other, can only form alliances by hiding behind a mask of sociability. We moderns could take a lesson from our contemporary corporate marketers who glide unimpeded between the realm of the private and the public. Unburdened with the demands of politically correct critics, these modern mavericks crassly compile data that moves them easily from individual consumer practices to general buying trends among whatever group represents the most profitable demographic profile.

My daughter’s preferred shampoo offers this bit of subtle advice for its users: “For once in your life it’s OKAY to be a little wet behind the ears.” While we debate the merits of the public school curriculum, the ethical dilemma of distributing or not distributing condoms our corporate profiteers comfortably take the role of familiar confidant. As we moderns squabble over if and how to address ourselves as a collective, marketers luxuriate in the distraction, creating a plethora of various labels to attract new and untapped market shares. With children spending billions of dollars in discretionary income, and advertisers matching them every step of the way, I am sure its tone not taken lightly. While we discuss “whiteness” they discuss “kid-ness” not as a method of inspiring greater awareness of the plight of our littlest citizens but as a linguistic guide to capture the fact that there is a “kids culture everywhere that transcends sociogeographic culture.”⁶³ What makes “kid-ness” important for marketing purposes is its recognition that “until children are taught the cultural values and customs of their society, they are kids first and susceptible to products marketed to their kid-ness.”⁶⁴

It is not my intention to degrade our important conversations about ethnicity, gender and identity but rather to supplement these conversations with other equally important issues that emerge in a modern capitalistic setting. As Harvey notes, “capitalism did not invent ‘the Other’ but it [has] certainly made use of and promoted it in highly structured ways.”⁶⁵ Our conceptions of the public and private realm cohere in this structure as well. Dewey describes generalization as a “social device” that allows us to broaden our view as it becomes locally adapted and applied. Without the ability to use this device we risk being sold our own idiosyncratic identities at the price of being unable to engage with others as active citizens. We have focused so diligently on the single voice we are in danger of losing the power that is only attainable through our collaborative, collective voices. We have traded in the notion of a shared civic identity for the ability to dress uniquely; we have given away the public square for the symbolic success of suburbia. Our modern alliances are being reduced to the contents of our shopping carts.

The contents of these carts support our modern conviction that the attainment of private gain will accrue amidst the debris of public ruin. Dewey called the rupture between collectivism and individualism “sheer superstition” and recognized the root of this disjoint as a tribute to the modes of association we are trying to encourage or escape. Dewey interprets this distinction as a lifestyle choice dressed up in the rhetoric of more lofty sentiment:

They may think they are clamoring for a purely personal liberty, but what they are doing is to bring into being a greater liberty to share in other associations, so that more of their individual potentialities will be released and their personal experience enriched. Life has been impoverished not by a predominance of “society” in general over individuality, but by a domination of one form of association, the family, clan, church, economic institutions, over the actual and possible forms.⁶⁶

We moderns have been heavily burdened with this notion of inevitable antagonisms between our public and private lives. We are regularly reminded of our inability to reach consensus and yet certain public policies are enacted with the authority of an iron-clad majority vote. The private world of the individual smoker has been imposed upon through recent changes in public smoking laws. We stand in lines for vaccines, airport metal detectors and drivers’ license testing. As Hacking notes, if we attempt to speak out in favor of illiteracy for the working poor or in favor of child abuse, we will quickly learn that “our society is not nearly as relativistic as is made out.”⁶⁷ Concurrent with general “decisions” like instituting standardized testing in public schools or subsidizing the burger industry or the gas industry we make individual choices that form a nebulous public shadow. We do this by eating the burgers, taking the tests and driving our single cars. We have rendered ourselves in favor of a modern story that presents the public private divide with such conviction that we believe it exists not as a product of our own imaginings but as a natural ordering of things.

Our modern political leaders reinforce this myth by spinning new tales of private heroics. In the U.S. our political leaders typically invoke us to behave as single saviors rather than cooperative citizens. We are advised that “our society” must “enlist, equip and empower idealistic Americans in the works of compassion that only they can provide.”⁶⁸ These moderns take on the aura of saviors doing the charitable work for the rest of us who are busy pursuing our own selfish modern ends. Of course, it is only plausible to hold the common good hostage to the deeds of a few charitable moderns when the notion of civic responsibility is at low ebb. How could it be otherwise? At the end of the day, the generous volunteer drives her car back to the safe part of town while her beneficiaries endure the lifestyle of compassionate capitalism. Unfortunately, the rewards of volunteerism will be short lived when the poor neighborhood begins to encroach on the wealthy ones. The imposition of social responsibility as a piecemeal project holds many detrimental drawbacks. The impulse that makes a generous citizen of a private consumer is not one that should be treated as the special domain of a select few. If we define citizenship as the “the notion of shared responsibility for one’s environment” we can stop looking for saviors and begin to share the burdens of being modern.⁶⁹ This may seem like a sacrifice until we realize that responsibility provides a means of control that is sorely lacking in our modern lives.

Several years ago I was speaking with a friend of mine on the phone when, during the conversation, she realized that the wooded patch behind her house was being razed. I asked if she had been notified about this and she said no “it’s private property.” What she had gained in the security of a private suburban tract she had lost in her ability to act as a member of a concerned public. Ironically, the “private property” incantation quieted her personal complaints as it simultaneously eliminated the seclusion offered by the privately owned strand of trees. This mantra is *the* modern conversation stopper. With the utterance of this simple phrase our most tenacious debates disappear like the bursting of a bubble over an open flame. It is said that early contacts between Native Americans and Europeans were marked by miscommunication due to the fact that the natives could not comprehend how the earth’s land could be bought and sold.

We moderns know how that conversation ended and now we seem to lack the imagination to see it any other way. Unfortunately, this arrangement left the landscape long ago. It is now freely enacted in our teaching practices, our housing, and our transportation. We moderns have allowed the divide between the public and the private to become a hotbed of ideological manipulations and maneuverings. If we look closely at our practices we can see these lessons coming to fruition.

Recognizing Ourselves as Protagonists

We are deceived by the belief that an inability to communicate is humankind's inevitable fate. But, for every story of competition there is an equally compelling story of cooperation. Our freedom from the constraints of an all-encompassing world-view allows us to explore what these alternative stories might mean. Clearly, being modern illustrates that we can generate as many controversies as there are contexts. These can be both the weight of our modern burdens and the source of our modern hopes. In both cases, we know that whatever standards we wish to enact must be those that we cooperate to create. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes

To formulate the significance of an experience a man must take into conscious account the experience of others. He must try to find a standpoint which includes the experience of others as well as his own. Otherwise his communication cannot be understood. He talks a language which no one else knows.

We moderns speak many different languages and we expend great amounts of energy on working through our translations. Our modern peril is not concentrated in these familial squabbles. Within the friction of these communications comes the fecundity of dispute and deliberation. The danger we suffer is of a different sort. It is the idolization of the private individual at the expense of the public individual. Without this participation the individual has little recourse but to acquiesce to the lonely limits of a private life where imagination is stunted at the level of a single modern memoir and civility is cashed in as a consumer preference. Of course, the good news is that we need not commit to this trajectory anymore than we remain committed to any of our other spent ideas. We moderns have created slavery, witch-hunts and indiscriminate whale hunting but we have also made them obsolete. The allure of being modern is the array of possible expressions it affords us to pursue and perform as the progenitors of modernity's ever-changing demands.

The demands of time travel have been used repeatedly for the sake of modern entertainment. These stories usually focus on the protagonist's inability to recognize the subtle social demands of whatever particular era he or she happens to be visiting. The audience, on the other hand, is able to assume a perspective that is unavailable to the characters being portrayed; we see a historical context where characters only see the limited scale of their interactions. We see the problems brought on by the incongruity of their set of beliefs with the beliefs that underlie the world that they are visiting. We see the problems and we know how to fix them. While we moderns may offer astute advice to the stranded time traveler, we meet our own situations much less authoritatively. Our use of facts as currency, our detachment from the source and influence of our wares and the corresponding sanctity of the privately motivated individual come together with the ominous presence of an impending typhoon. My intention in this essay has been to identify these elements in specific instances, to bring the abstraction of a cloaked philosophical disposition into the routine activities that fill our modern days. Within the tales of school shootings, suicides, telescopes and test scores there is a contemporary timeframe that acts as a working context within which to explore these subtle and profoundly influential philosophical dispositions. I believe this context is useful in identifying our inherited

vulnerabilities as they simultaneously create and inform our current adaptations to the demands of modern life. These responses need to be named and given a context so that they can be ordered as tools for our disposal rather than imperatives brought on by hastily arrived at reactions. Modern life with all of its accoutrements, ailments, and alliances does not move forward without our participation as co-creators of both its most promising prospects and its most fatal flaws. Berman describes our predicament in this way:

The innate dynamism of the modern economy, and of the culture that grows from this economy, annihilates everything that it creates—physical environments, social institutions, metaphysical ideas, artistic visions, moral values—in order to create more, to go on endlessly creating the world anew. This drive draws all modern men and women into its orbit, and forces us all to grapple with the question of what is essential, what is meaningful, what is real in the maelstrom in which we move and live.

Our personal biographies are made of and coincide with this process; yet many of us never learn of the congruity between who we are as individuals and how *who* we are is inevitably framed by social histories and conditions that both surpass and complement our presumably private roles. Without an understanding of what is entailed in being modern we act as carriers for notions of progress that reduce existence to the basest of standards. In the following essays I will examine how these standards are written broadly on our modern environments and narrowly on the concerns of single citizens so that we can begin to make deliberate plans, plans worthy of our modern memories.

¹ John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Prometheus Books 1999 p. 35) The full text of the epigraph to this chapter reads: Individuals are groping their ways through situations which they do not direct and which do not give them direction. The beliefs and ideals that uppermost in their consciousness are not relevant to the society in which they outwardly act and which constantly reacts upon them. Their conscious ideas and standards are inherited from an age that has passed away; their minds, as far as consciously entertained principles and methods of interpretation are concerned, are at odds with actual conditions. This profound split is the cause of distraction and bewilderment. Individuals will refind themselves only as their ideas and ideals are brought into harmony with the realities of the age in which they act.

² *Harper's Magazine*, "Fleurs Du Mal: Thorny truths about the global flower trade," By: Niala Maharaj and Donovan Hohn, February, 2001, p. 66.

³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) p. 17.

⁴ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For specific examples of these charts see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc. 1989) and Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc. 1991)

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p.12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p. 143.

¹¹ *Lancaster County Woman*, "For all those born before 1945: we are survivors," Lancaster, PA March/April 2001, p. 10.

¹² Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p. 5.

¹³ See *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. (p.17) Marshall Berman's efforts to help his readers "get a grip" on modernity includes the division of modernity into three phases. Although these phases correspond with specific dates they are primarily characterized in terms of the experience of living through them.

¹⁴ *Intelligencer Journal*, "Two killed in school shooting," Lancaster, PA March 6, 2001.

¹⁵ CN8, Call-In Talk, March 8, 2001 host: Lynn Doyle.

¹⁶ *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Examining the psyche of an adolescent killer," October 15, 2000 .

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The New Era*, "More blacks in special ed.," Lancaster, PA March 2, 2001.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 1934) p. 18.

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- ²¹ Associated Press, "Hubble spots most distant super-nova," April 2, 2001 Joseph B. Verrengia.
- ²² James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995) p. 92.
- ²³ For example, see Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, for excerpts from the travel logs of Christopher Columbus.
- ²⁴ School District of Lancaster, "Parental Advisory," 2000.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, (Ohio: Swallow Press, 1997, p.7, original 1927).
- ²⁷ Mayor Richard Bowe, March 8, 2001 Weather.com.
- ²⁸ *Intelligencer Journal*, "New chance for alliances," Lancaster, PA April 8, 2001.
- ²⁹ *Home & School Connection*, 2001 Resources for Educators Inc., March 2001.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 176.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ³³ The *Washington Post*, "Parents Top Goal: Raising Thinkers: Obedience is Less Valued" By: D'Vera Cohn November 24, 1999.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: The MIT press, 1999) p. 123.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.123.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.126.
- ⁴⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p.35.
- ⁴¹ John Dewey, *Experience & Education*, (New York: Touchstone, 1997 original 1938) p. 36
- ⁴² Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p.35.
- ⁴³ *Harper's Magazine*, "Bad Sports, or: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the SUV," By: Paul Roberts, April 2001 p. 69.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Helen Keller cited in, *A People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980, p. 337).

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- ⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, “Cheney promotes Increasing Supply as Energy Policy,” By: Joseph Kahn, May 1, 2001.
- ⁴⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1966) p. 140.
- ⁴⁸ John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning, *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* (Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch, 1997) p. 46.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ⁵⁰ Genuine Progress Index for Atlantic Canada, (<http://www.gpiatlantic.org/index.shtml>) May, 2001.
- ⁵¹ *New York Times*, “New Rules for Soccer Parents: 1)No yelling. 2) No Hitting Ref.” By: Edward Wong, May 6, 2001.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p.17.
- ⁵⁴ Raymond Boisvert, *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) p.125.
- ⁵⁵ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p.12.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p.15.
- ⁵⁹ *The New York Times*, “Smithsonian Is promised \$38 million, with strings,” By: Elaine Sciolino, May 10, 2001.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p.242.
- ⁶² Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p. 191.
- ⁶³ James U. McNeal, *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, (New York: Macmillan Inc., 1992) p. 187.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989) p.104.
- ⁶⁶ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p.194.
- ⁶⁷ Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, p. 141.
- ⁶⁸ *The New York Times*, “Bush pushes role of private sector in aiding the poor,” By: Frank Bruni, May 21, 2001.
- ⁶⁹ Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Planet*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997) p.11.

Chapter 2 The Making of Modern Boundaries

One no sooner establishes his private and subjective self than he demands it be recognized and acknowledged by others, even if he has to invent an imaginary audience or an Absolute Self to satisfy the demand.

John Dewey¹

I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul,
William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*

We moderns share a discomfoting familiarity with the expression that Timothy McVeigh chose to mark the occasion of his execution. Invoking the work of William Henley, a 19th century poet, McVeigh's last words to the world were quintessentially modern, echoing a sentiment that is as elemental to our notions of identity as birthdays and first names. We may find McVeigh's name an unwelcome reminder of a villainous deed but his choice of these words reminds us that we share an uneasy alliance, one based on our mutual allegiance to the supremacy of individual free will. Still, not all of McVeigh's expressions take such an unbending view of human nature and, here too, McVeigh reveals our common heritage, complete with the modern propensity for contradiction. For instance, when criticized for his reference to the younger victims of the bombing as "collateral damage," McVeigh responded, "as an American news junkie, a military man and a gulf war veteran, where do they think I learned that?"² Unfortunately, this provocative question remains mostly unexplored because, like McVeigh, we are both lured and reassured by notions of psychic mastery making questions of social psychology irrelevant to our self-proclaimed status as captains of our own modern destinies. Consequently, when reporters describe McVeigh's zealous anti-government behavior it is as though a fully formed monster has emerged from some remote part of the planet where the language of public opinion, the media and policy do not exist. What are deemed "vintage McVeigh," utterances are not the outgrowth of a specific social context but the unimpeded growth of a bad seed. Descriptions like these may make it easier to cope with the horror of seemingly unaccountable events but they do little more than turn certain moderns into monsters and leave the rest of us wondering who might be next.

We moderns have a tendency to make mysteries of the mundane while we make mundane of the marvelous. This is why gang behavior and school shootings seem puzzling and unstoppable while an invisible and enigmatic process like photosynthesis or conception is reduced to the tedious contents of an uninspired science lesson. Our conception of individual growth remains committed to this same sort of detached modern logic. There is little mystery involved in predicting the course a life will take when various factors of economics and education are taken into account. Still, battles rage over issues of funding and public policy as if the correlation between income and life expectancy had yet to be discovered or the economic status of prison populations had yet to be configured. In spite of our avid attention to all manner of record keeping we moderns seem unable or unwilling to put our accounting to use for the sake of social advances. Our willingness to accept certain circumstances as inevitable and others as contingent is a labyrinth of complicated ideological underpinnings. This essay explores why moderns are predisposed to give our consent to these conditions.

It takes a particular view of human nature for capabilities, concerns and criticisms to emerge with certain predictable outlines and shadings. I want to identify what emerges in a modern context, a context that is an outgrowth of a particular understanding of the role and nature of the individual. We educate, medicate and govern through standard practices that pay tribute to this understanding but we are rarely summoned to analyze how this understanding simultaneously creates and denies us certain modern possibilities. As moderns, we should be well situated to weigh options; after all our devotion to the credo of choice is one of our defining modern traits. This trait brings the individual center stage and seems to make the clutter and calamity of modern living a matter of personal preference. This chapter addresses the social consequences of our modern bias toward the individual. It is a bias so deeply embedded in our modern perspective that many of us hardly recognize it as a bias, assuming instead that our modern status as privately packaged seekers of personal fulfillment reflects some preexistent law of nature. I will suggest that to accept this notion is akin to believing that a national boundary can exist before a nation has been declared and inhabited. It may be that certain topographical features predate and invite settlement but land use is an on going interpretation of these features based on the dictates of both the features *and* the habits and needs of a population. The boundaries that we ascribe to our modern selves reflect a similar sort of on going interpretation where we too bear the marks of particular declarations and habitations. Consider the decisive influence of the following assumptions:³

- (i) What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others.
- (ii) Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
- (iii) The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.

These so-called “social assumptions” are identified as characterizing the work of seventeenth-century political philosophers who chose to explain human nature through the notion of possessive individualism. While these authors and their theories may be unfamiliar to many moderns, the consequences of their theoretical presuppositions are as tangible and real as the cautionary words on a No Trespassing sign or the admonishing words of a teacher challenged by the appropriation of one student’s assignment by another. In spite of our deep commitment to stark personal boundaries we seem endlessly preoccupied with issues of territoriality.

A religious group identified as “Humane Borders” struggles against the very real consequences of maintaining stringent boundaries. Using maps that indicate the sites where migrants have died from thirst and heat exhaustion, this organization provides and maintains water tanks in the hopes that they can help to prevent more deaths. Interestingly, the source of these maps is the United States border patrol, the organization responsible for enforcing the laws that illegal immigrants are dying to evade as they attempt to cross the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Although the patrol has agreed not to stake out these tanks, their spokesperson, Rob Daniel’s adds, “we’re not going to be camped out at a water tank, but, if we get a call about a large group of people in the general vicinity, we can’t be expected to turn our backs.”⁴ Whatever the impetus for this imprecise concession, Daniel’s calls “Humane Borders” a commendable and “humanitarian effort,” so that a strange and unintended working relationship has emerged between those who are employed to guard boundaries and those who feel that their allegiances must supersede the confines of these political boundaries.⁵ One “Humane Borders” volunteer describes the complexity of territorial arrangements this way: “I know we have to have borders

but I wish we could have a border that was more fluid and open.”⁶ Her desire is echoed in sophisticated scholarly treatises that call for “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction.”⁷ Still, whether through the reflections of a concerned citizen or those of a scholarly scribe, the call for fluid and permeable boundaries remains a modern anomaly. In a context where a sense of social detachment is considered a prerequisite for individual achievement, orations on the abandonment of protective barriers are a threatening prospect that must be guarded against even when modern experiences may dictate otherwise.

When my daughter’s fifth grade public school teacher suggests strategies for coping with the roving eyes of would-be cheaters, the last thing on his mind is the political philosophy of the seventeenth century or the complexities of illegal immigration and its consequent boundary disputes. Still, as a traditional modern teacher he is a ready contributor to the production and maintenance of these conditions. If this were not the case, he and others in similarly influential positions, might be asking why it is immoral for students to cheat when cheating only means sharing the answers to questions specifically designed to elicit identical responses? He might ask, why we moderns work so hard to standardize practices intended to demonstrate individual achievement? Perhaps, like other moderns, he believes that we condone misconduct when we question the conditions of its definition. Consequently, his advice to students sensing that an unscrupulous classmate may be stealing *their* answers is to “play dumb and keep writing.” He is mute on the classroom’s ability to transform general data into individually owned responses.

It was John Locke who described this same sort of alchemy when he concluded that objects become possessions as they are mixed with individual labor.⁸ Although it has been many years since Locke did his theorizing, similar notions turn our modern classrooms into suspicious scenes of high drama as teachers become guards securing the fruits of individual toil. In my daughter’s 5th grade classroom, this toil not only helps to rank individuals against one another, it also alerts the teacher to any wrongful appropriation of one student’s toil by another. Conscientious students are advised to include an incorrect answer among their responses so that this “error” can function as a decoy. Once the culprit has unknowingly duplicated a flawed response, the response becomes a silent signal between the wayward student and her watchful teacher, a teacher prepared to dispense retribution accordingly. Based on the enthusiasm of my daughter’s description, I assume that she found this thickly plotted scheme far more engrossing than the rote content it was intended to protect. In spite of the elevation of course content into private property, the most memorable lesson taken from this classroom is that we must approach each other suspiciously in order to learn the subtleties of our own intellectual self-defense. It may not be the most charitable lesson but it is a lesson that is contemporaneous with being a well-adjusted modern.

Common Concerns Combat Excessive Dependency

Being a well-adjusted modern is like being a skilled bumper car driver only a bumper car driver acknowledges the physical and social constraints placed on her behavior by the design of the ride. These constraints are recognized as a prerequisite for our participation. Once behind the wheel, the pace of our movement, the direction of our motion and even the mood of our personal maneuverings are influenced by what everyone else is doing. In this context the crashing and bumping makes for a good time because we bring along an understanding of the value of having others as challenging encumbrances. Although similar constraints greet us as we exit the carnival motorway, we are far less inclined to acknowledge, much less appreciate these constraints. Instead, we opt to refer our decisions back to an individual whose choices are thought to emerge unimpeded by the positioning and posturing of other people. Paradoxically, it is our common

faith in these ownership rights, in private access to privately possessed selves that unites us as moderns and makes for a tightly bound congregation in spite of what is often perceived as evidence of our cross purposes. Since these purposes are assumed to be self initiated and sustained we have customized our surroundings to encourage certain values while forsaking others. This is why modern heroism is rarely a collective act. To be a fully functioning modern is to revel in the belief in one's own utter independence.

The threat of excessive dependency looms all around us as our modern media channels various voices into the constancy provided by cherished notions of individual independence. Our televised glimpses into the intricately plotted rescue of some near extinct animal is peppered with dire warnings that proclaim the necessity of not allowing bonds to form between human caregivers and the animals they aim to protect. Our modern politicians echo the same sentiment in their speeches as they justify withholding too much direct support for the needy because "a government that says 'Don't worry, we will solve your problems' is a government that tends to crowd compassion out of the marketplace."⁹ Whether we are witnessing debates on the consequences of too much direct governmental support for the needy, or the complicated mating habits of panda bears, modern mediation is an odd mix of good intentions and hands-off helpfulness. It is not necessary to agree or disagree with these methods in order to appreciate their illustrative value as typical of our modern "independent" discourse. They pertain to our modern morale, the keep-your-chin-up morale that keeps us confident that anyone can survive hardship with enough individual commitment and determination. Our modern myths would have us believe that the world exists like one big phone booth providing each of us the opportunity to perform like Superman: To experience personal metamorphosis through the promise of social mobility that is necessarily grounded in the will of the modern decision-maker.

The promise of mobility, in all of its many modern manifestations, is a birth rite as fundamental as the freedom to make an independent decision about where this motion should lead. Naturally, some moderns are angered when anything stands in their way. Who can blame them? We are reared on popular platitudes that tell us to "be anything." We are charmed by simplistic jingles that tell us to "just do it." Is it any wonder that moderns are prone to bouts of intense frustration when their movements are constrained? This has certainly been the case in the state of Pennsylvania where police are getting an increasing number of complaints about cases of road rage. Road rage is defined as an "incident in which a driver intentionally harms or kills another, or attempts to."¹⁰ The distinction between an aggressive driver and an individual embroiled in an instance of road rage is a matter of intent even though fatal outcomes are indiscriminately dispersed. In 1999, aggressive drivers caused 52, 926 accidents and killed 327 people and, while these statistics offer no clues as to the intentions of the drivers, they have encouraged the creation of a program called Target the Aggressive Driver, or TAG-D. Over the course of one year, TAG-D prompted Pennsylvania's state police to issue 24,000 citations to individual motorists driving aggressively. This includes citations for speeding, tailgating, and changing lanes without signaling. It is noteworthy that the decisions of a modern deviant are frighteningly similar to those engaged in the routine affairs of modern living.¹¹ Still, modern protocol requires that we remedy our most widespread problems through the narrowest channels. Consequently, our modern collectivities do not always amount to much. If they did, then surely, 24,000 traffic citations would suggest something more imaginative than individual penalization and personality traits. After all, driving under the influence of alcohol disappears when walking is an option and road rage is made irrelevant by transportation systems that are conscientiously

designed. Nevertheless, these solutions do not speak to the shortcomings of individuals, they speak to public needs.

As we have seen, moderns prefer collectivities to accrue unintentionally like the “participants” in a traffic bottlenecks or the audience at a rock concert. We gather as test scores, statistics and marketing demographics. Meanwhile, concepts like criminality and illness blossom to include higher and higher percentages of our modern populations while the prospect for healthier aggregations are allowed to dissipate into the mental states of specific individuals; we are deducted from collective participation one personality disorder at a time.

Our Bodies as Built-In Barriers

Fortunately, our bodies keep us visible as they move us back and forth like the well-defined beads of an abacus. They offer us at-a-glance margins that seem to tell us what is within our control and what is not. This system works well for certain purposes but its applicability is always proportional to the complexity of the situation. A body awaiting capital punishment or cancer treatment is a body spreading outward as its condition assumes public implications that strip away the cloak of a single skin.¹² Human skin is a deceptively porous sheath. We experience the fragility of our own covering when we step on a small sliver of glass or handle a piece of paper in the wrong way. We know its microscopic vulnerabilities through the chills of flu or the fever of infection. Still, we derive a sense of our own independence through this flesh; assuming that it contains us like the bricks of a house contain and narrow its interior spaces. This interpretation befalls us when we are born modern when keeping others at bay is a function of our own embodied birth. For some moderns, it is only death that can diminish this pride of ownership leaving body parts to be donated freely, like the spare parts of an automobile. The human body becomes a bolt of fabric capable of carrying about 4 square yards of skin to be taken mainly from the chest, thighs, calves and back.¹³ In this state, the body ceases to be the well-worn attire of a uniquely tailored individual and takes on its broader value as the renewed tissue of another modern human. It is this sort of disrobing, this interchangeability of bodies that makes them suitable not only as sites for the particular and personal but also for the general and abstract so that new layers of meaning are continually attached to our modern bodies. In the meantime, we continue to probe each other at the most intimate and infinitesimal levels, but still we find no definitive edge of person-hood. We are urged on to smaller and smaller scales as we seek assurance in the domain of the invisible but even here we remain vulnerable to our customary modern biases.

It is probably the need for assurance that led Jane Koppenhaver to evaluate the actions of her nephew in the specialized language of bioengineering. Her comment, “maybe it’s genetic” refers to the fact that her nephew’s father was also involved in a murder case.¹⁴ Landon May was only 10 when his father was sentenced to death by lethal injection for murdering a young woman. At 19, May junior is at risk for a similar fate because of his alleged participation in the murder of a man and woman in their mid-40’s. It is not clear why the young man’s aunt is qualified to speculate on the genetic link between father and son but apparently the editor of the newspaper found some justification for using the “maybe it’s genetic” comment as the story’s headline. Perhaps the editor is also reassured by these words. We moderns are certainly acquainted with this sort of assessment, as we are increasingly accustomed to the casual delivery of such phrases. These phrases reduce the complexities of genetic research to the mystical properties that allow any one of us to speak prophetically on issues of personal behavior and physical expression. Perhaps we are attracted to the stability of these declarations. They add depth and predictability to an otherwise transient and seemingly random modern milieu. It is as

if we fear our own flexibility, taking perverse comfort in what has been called “the erroneous belief that heritability means unchangeability.”¹⁵ Researchers who question simplified accounts of genetic influence, suggest a telling counter example that makes an important point:

The variation from person to person in the ability to do arithmetic, whatever its source, is trivial compared to the immense increase in calculating power that has been put in the hands of even the poorest student of mathematics by the pocket electronic calculator. The best studies in the world of the heritability of arithmetic skill could not have predicted that historical change.¹⁶

In spite of our modern fascination with the certainty of hard wiring, our strict allegiance to biological determinism is tempered by the rhetoric of individual autonomy. In the case of Landon May, the same relative who unwittingly binds him in the determinism of a particular genetic predisposition also liberates him by adding that he may have acted as he did because “he wanted to be like his father.”¹⁷ We moderns strut casually between the paralysis of determinism and the vacuity of an ill-defined free will.

Our ability to manage such conflicting notions about the nature of human nature is nicely captured in a modern slogan advertising long distance service: “Styles change. Values don’t.” The ability to hold certain attributes constant while other attributes change, is a skillful adaptation to the bewildering assortment of demands that march through our modern bodies as breakthroughs in science or revolutions in information technology. We humans have incredibly well-honed adaptive skills, manufacturing new, usable traits with the dexterity of chameleons adeptly mixing shades with the setting that supports them. We too mix and mingle with our environs but being modern implies a built-in distance between our native individuality and the social spaces we occupy. We are born loners in need of a soul, an ego, or a gene, some container that captures the essence of who we are, something that defines each of us as unique and resolute individuals. It is through the demand of all of these incarnations that the individual stands steady as an organizing structure providing a ready-made vehicle for the expression of modern entitlements such as freedom and equality. It is not surprising that a character in possession of such mythic dimensions should be a character deserving of special services, making many moderns both the masters and beneficiaries of customization.

Individual Character as Consumer Preference

Predictive Networks Incorporated is one of many companies catering to the modern demand for customization. The company’s chief executive Devin Hosea says that *Predictive’s* software products are designed to capture the “personal signatures” that we moderns leave behind as we casually click and scroll through our various media.¹⁸ *Predictive’s* latest software replaces earlier programs that provide only limited information or “profiles” of a particular computer’s users. These so-called “silhouettes” tell advertisers which sites are being visited and for how long, but it is information that lacks the kind of “laser like targeting of ads” that could give companies a “better chance of showing users an ad they will respond to.” *Predictive’s* response is a biometric tool that provides a more detailed user silhouette. By measuring the rapidity of a “clickstream” or the span of a mouse-moving gesture, *Predictive* promises “a raised level of micromarketing” that turns an ambiguous figure at the keyboard into a more tangible and marketable sampling. With this goal in mind, *Predictive’s* research turns up seemingly trivial tidbits about shared modern motions, like children’s tendency to use broad sweeping movements across a mouse pad or the fact that men click through television channels more frequently than their female counterparts. These seemingly subtle gestures hold sought-after secrets about the

stopping points of our visual wanderings, wanderings that make moderns with disposable incomes objects of great interest.

Being an object of great interest is a fitting tribute to our modern penchant for stories set around the value of unique personal expressions. Although being reduced to “clicksteams” and other forms of demographic data may be a lackluster interpretation of individuality it is an interpretation that affirms the distinctiveness of our modern choices as it supports an expanding global economy that uses distinctiveness as a sales pitch. Of course, this is not the kind of distinctiveness that moderns consider an inbred and immutable trait inherited by every single human but, as it turns out, this sort of distinction is not really relevant to transnational corporations interested in an expanding global market. A consultant for a 1998 survey of thirty-five thousand consumers in thirty-five countries explains it this way: “People aren’t all that different. Their tastes are very similar...when selling Whirlpools in Korea...you’ve got to make sure that you don’t use the taboo color, but the cultural stuff is just a wrinkle.”¹⁹ Given the fact that personal autonomy is so often expressed as personal choice, our modern consistency on matters of marketing takes on the characteristics of a colossal coincidence.

It is no coincidence that transnational corporations customize their products and images to coincide with local customs. Marketers appreciate the fact that moderns are flattered by customization and act accordingly, localizing content as needed so that “when U.S. magazine publishers expand overseas they cheerfully adjust the content and language to appeal to Germans, Japanese, or Russians.”²⁰ As one executive at Walt Disney explains, “For all children, the Disney characters are local characters and this is very important. They always speak local languages.”²¹ Of course, this process is more prevalent in some places than in others. Robert McChesney, a professor in Communications Research, points out, “the global system is best perceived as one that best represents the needs of investors, advertisers, and the affluent consumers of the world. In wealthy nations this tends to be a substantial portion of the population; in developing nations, a distinct minority.”²² This is why, in 1999, the United States accounted for nearly one-half of the world’s approximately \$435 billion dollars in advertising.²³ And, these numbers are shifting with countries like China increasing their advertising at rates of 40 to 50 percent annually.²⁴ Although many moderns flinch at the thought of being typecast, catalogued or classified, we are oddly at ease with being grouped according to our consumer preferences. When it comes to being an accessible marketing statistic, modern demands for recognition of our diverse histories and unique voices of experience seem to disappear like stubborn stains being washed away through encounters with a favorite laundry detergent.

For moderns living in wealthy countries, mentioning items like laundry detergents or tooth pastes easily evokes a list of brand names and an accompanying hierarchy of personal preferences. There is no necessary correlation between financial wealth and the extensiveness of this hierarchy. Moderns from many economic strata are encouraged to invent themselves as individuals through particular personal preferences. Advertisements make suggestions and we respond. An automobile ad says “Drivers wanted” but it doesn’t say which drivers. We do this ourselves and this is why so many moderns speak fondly of the democratizing influence of the marketplace. It is possible to live at varying income levels and still be active consumers with specific styles and spending habits. Enormous amounts of money are spent convincing moderns that this arrangement automatically cultivates individuality. And, since few channels dispute this message, self-sufficiency is often synonymous with being sufficiently dependent on and represented in the marketplace. There is nothing necessarily conspiratorial about this approach to selling; it is simply the logic of capitalism expressed through a global media system “that

advances corporate and commercial interests and values, and denigrates or ignores that which cannot be incorporated into its mission.”²⁵ The overwhelming evidence suggests that modern conceptions of the individual are ideally suited to this mission. When an automobile manufacturer announces its need for drivers, a fitting demographic will make itself known.

The degree to which modern values seem to ally themselves with the profit-driven motives of transnational corporations is suggested by the ready access they are given to our modern children. According to James McNeal, a professor of marketing, this access is not necessarily accompanied by any parental agenda: “Although being a consumer is as fundamental as being a worker, faith worshipper, or student, it is not something that is carefully and deliberately taught—by anyone. It is taught by everyone, so to speak, with no one claiming primary responsibility.”²⁶ By age seven, the average American child is watching fourteen hundred hours and twenty thousand TV commercials per year.²⁷ By 1998, advertising revenues from ads directed at children approached \$1 billion. This is not surprising given the rising level of children’s disposable income. In 1997, children between the ages of 4 and 12 spent \$24 billion, a figure that is three times higher than during the previous decade.²⁸ Obviously, many modern parents do not view these trends as evidence of neglect toward their children. On the contrary, increased purchasing power on the part of their offspring reflects positively on them as both providers and helpful guides in their children’s initiation into life as a consumer. In the U.S., this initiation is aided by parental attitudes toward child rearing. According to the findings of a survey conducted from 1972 to 1998, the top-rated trait desired by parents, both then and now, is that their children be able to think for themselves.²⁹ Even with our notoriously short attention spans we moderns have established relatively long history of commitment to the notion of thinking for ourselves.

We have exhibited an enduring faith in what John Dewey calls moral individualism or, “the notion that the consciousness of each person is a wholly private...self-enclosed continent, intrinsically independent of the ideas, wishes, [and] purposes of everybody else.”³⁰ Moderns have created advantages to being sequestered in this lonely command center with endowments such as reason, freedom and equality gaining significance through our modern faith in their inevitable fusion with the essential solitary self. Modern parents desirous of children who can think for themselves are speaking to the inevitability of this fusion, secure in the notion that the human capacity for reason is matched only by the countless modern opportunities available for its expression. Unfortunately, the practical consequences of this arrangement often prove less spectacular than the rhetoric of choice and opportunity would lead us to believe.

Reason as a Private Resource

The fact that Kenneth Sahr believes that his web site is more than an opportunistic perversion of pedagogical strategies is not because he is unreasonable. Mr. Sahr and his two business partners, defend their web site, Schoolsucks.com on the grounds that it sends a “red flag to educators that something is seriously wrong.”³¹ The reason that something is wrong is that Schoolsucks is one of several “digital paper mills” established to provide students with access to downloadable book reports, essays and term papers. Some of these sites charge a fee, and others provide their services for free. Admittedly, this particular service lacks quality control so Sahr is frank in telling his clientele that they “could be downloading garbage and...probably are.”³² Apparently, this admission does little to deter the 10,000 people who visit the site daily, contributing to its two million page views per month and raising demand for the site at an annual rate of 10 percent. Sahr is unabashedly unapologetic about the success of Schoolsucks.com, which he sees as “the end result of our educational system.”³³ Although we may find Sahr’s

business pursuits questionable, they are certainly not lacking in the kind of well-reasoned business savvy that we admire in moderns who can think for themselves. In addition, given the intense emphasis we place on certain kinds of student achievement, it is difficult to chastise young people for adapting themselves accordingly. Both Sahr and his renegade students have an intuitive appreciation for the way that reason seems to carve itself out of whatever materials are available in the environment, including the inhabitants of that environment. This is why distinguishing the good guys from the bad guys in this modern scenario is no easy task. Why would it be? Reason can be a reckless bet when its emergence is dependent on the isolated consciousness of independently acting individuals. Attempting to extract common ethical guidelines out of this clamor of inherently isolated perspectives is as difficult as attempting to find a single definition for love, god or happiness. Still, we continue on, undaunted by the futility of past efforts.

Being moderns we expect a certain amount of exclusivity in our explanations. Highly abstract concepts like freedom, evil, and justice are spoken with a casual confidence that bespeaks what Neil Postman identifies as “the tyranny of definitions” or inattention to the fact that words take their meaning from the purposes to which they are put.³⁴ Consider the traditional approach to teaching vocabulary words where students are instructed to find THE single meaning of a word rather than one of its possible meanings. Postman elaborates:

From the earliest grades through graduate school, students are given definitions and, with few exceptions, are not told whose definitions they are, for what purposes they were invented, and what alternative definitions might serve equally as well. The result is that students come to believe that definitions are not invented; that they are not even human creations; that, in fact, they are . . . part of the natural world, like clouds, trees, and stars.³⁵

A prominent politician makes a speech in which he says that “Americans want human rights and individual freedom to advance” and that “open trade advances those American values.”³⁶

A pharmaceutical company markets medications for Generalized Anxiety Disorder, a condition marked by “persistent worry and anxiety” and said to afflict 10 million people. The politician does not define individual freedom or what it means, “to advance” and, while the pharmaceutical company assures us that GAD is a “real illness that can interfere with daily life” its promotional brochure says little about how daily life creates real illnesses.³⁷ These qualifications may or may not have bearing on the claims made in these specific instances but they are instances deserving of conscientious interpretation, that is interpretation that supersedes what might be expected by those crafting the statements. Is persistent worry about global warming, lack of health care coverage or an unlivable minimum wage worthy of persistent worry? Moderns are continually confronted with these sorts of defining moments, prompting Postman to rightfully conclude that power is the capability “to define and make it stick”.³⁸ For moderns, indebted to a tradition where reason resides well within the confines of each individual, but promises little guidance in the ethical domain, we are confronted with an abundance of challenging, ambiguously defined conditions. This ambiguity is the silent sidekick for so many of our modern projects that we rarely recognize its customary presence. So, we proceed gallantly, assuming that our cues and directives will emerge from internal sources, bequeathed to each of us as the reasoning inhabitants of a silent universe. Of course, being modern, we make this silence a one-sided affair by creating the policies and practices of people confident in their human capacity to make choices, even if still uncertain about which of these choices is a better one. Meanwhile, the debris of this uncertainty gathers as we search for ways to mediate between the modern belief in individual free will and the practical demands of living among others.

A favorite and familiar technology that contains possible solutions to the renowned uncertainty of modern living is the disciplinary guidebook. Although rarely described as such, it is a tribute to the carefully controlled balancing act that must be performed between single-minded, free choosing moderns and the demands of collective spaces. In Lancaster Pennsylvania teachers and staff working within the County public school system are expected to: “facilitate learning activities so students learn to think and reason, to assume responsibility for their actions and to respect the rights of others.”³⁹ Teachers are also expected to demonstrate respect, to aid in the development of appropriate behavioral skills and to show “genuine concern for the individual student.”⁴⁰ By necessity, words like respect, genuine, and appropriate presuppose the attainment of shared purposes and mutual understanding. These verbal vehicles presume a mutually extant coterie that casts words about like a great net able to effortlessly capture each meaning as it is heard by each listener. What simplifies this otherwise complex process to the casting of a net is our modern belief in rational choice. The belief that each listener is capable of an identical and unerring interpretation is expected to be sufficient to the task of being modern. Cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson disagree. In the following passage they describe the limitations of our reliance on unchecked metaphors such as rational choice:

To bring an area of life into accord with “rational choice” is to force life into the mold of a specific complex of metaphors—for better or worse, all too often for the worse. An example is the trend to conceptualize education metaphorically as a business, or through privatization to make education a business run by considerations of “rational choice.” In this metaphor, students are consumers, their education is a product, and teachers are labor resources. Knowledge then becomes a commodity, a thing with market value that can be passed from teacher to student. Test scores measure the quality of the product...this metaphor stresses efficiency and product quality above all else. In doing so it hides the realities of education. Education is not a thing; it’s an activity. Knowledge is not literally transmitted from teacher to student, and education is not merely the acquisition of particular bits of knowledge. Through education students who work at it become something different. It is what they become that is important.”⁴¹

The availability of words to describe and to reason may be signs of our best intentions but they only point to purposeless outcomes when they are used as familiar filler, lauded but not fully explored within the practices and consequences of daily living. A disciplinary guidebook that makes it the teacher’s responsibility to express “genuine concern for the individual student” is only a choice when the circumstances of the classroom allow for “genuine concern.” It is tempting to be attracted to the powerful possibilities that are inherent in the modern traditions of free will and innate rationality. They are profoundly flattering conceptions that elevate the single self to the height of supreme decision-maker while making various social and economic hierarchies a matter of personal choice where each one of us assumes responsibility for the current distribution of resources. It may be this perception that explains our high tolerance for lopsided living arrangements. In 1980, the average corporate executive officer at a major corporation earned as much as 97 minimum wage workers. By the year 2000, this same position earned as much as 1,223 minimum wage workers.⁴² For many moderns this arrangement is the rational and reasonable fall out of a meritocratic system that makes this sort of dramatic discrepancy in income both fair and reasonable. Our modern reasoning has the power to turn discrepancies in wages, education and health care into lifestyle choices born of varied degrees of individual determination and will. Being in possession of a strong will offers more than the possibility of a modern meal ticket; it also offers us freedom, whatever our dietary conditions. At

least, this is the way we moderns talk about freedom. It is the mythic space that we can claim regardless of the constraints placed upon our bodies. It is the hackneyed reference of melodrama where the imprisoned protagonist's declares "they can chain my body but they can not take away my will to live, fight or love." It is frequently used as the empty promise of automobile ads where lovely isolated landscapes provide the sort of imaginary physical freedom that daily commuters rarely experience. When freedom and its director, free will, are thought to exist encapsulated within the private domain of the individual the substantive requirements that we need for its expression often fall by the wayside. What happens to freedom of motion when our speedometer tells us that our automobiles are capable of speeds in excess of 100 MPH but our roads are impassable? In the U.S. most Americans send their children into classrooms where they pledge their allegiance to the concept of liberty and then spend the school day acting under the rigidly structured dictates of class schedules, lesson plans and even seating arrangements. It is as if we assume that these acts exist apart from some real, more authentic sort of freedom which is only brought out on special occasions. In the absence of these occasions, we take our place in the traffic jam and teach our children that following directions supersedes their boredom with lesson plans or imposed seating arrangements. Since most moderns consider freedom a private matter it is not surprising that its enactment is expected to emerge in the pursuit of private pleasures.

When Dennis Tito seeks private pleasure he can afford a very expensive travel itinerary. Tito is a Los Angeles financier who prefers to think of his trip aboard a Russian rocket as the dream of a lifetime rather than a holiday. Still, the fact that Tito paid 20 million dollars for the privilege of joining a crew of trained astronauts has made the vacation analogy a tempting one. Whatever we choose to label Tito's trip to space, it is clear that his experience of freedom varies greatly from that of most of his modern counterparts. And, Tito's good fortune extends beyond his personal financial circumstances. His particular lifelong dream of space travel includes decades of publicly funded space programs and the labor of countless researchers, scientists and engineers who laid the foundation for a program that gives Tito the tools to travel beyond the earthly boundaries most moderns experience. Tito's freedom is indebted to a knotty labyrinth of interconnected social resources that give support to his private ambitions. Raymond Boisvert describes why modern descriptions of freedom tend to disregard these other sources:

Once the notion of antecedently existing completed selves endowed with equality and freedom, is accepted, political discourse is channeled in a particular direction. Within such a context the formal entry into any sociopolitical association is viewed as a fundamental abandonment of the original freedom and equality. Political discourse then focuses on the question of how the original liberty can be protected in the new social arrangement. The topic of the individual versus society then comes to be a primary concern. Within such a context democratic aspirations gravitate toward securing more autonomy for the individual.⁴³

A few years ago my daughter's elementary public school chose the phrase "Be Anything!" for its annual slogan. This motif followed the children around all year, on hand-outs and bulletin boards and banners, a relentless modern mantra exhorting nine year olds to experience existence as a wide open smorgasbord with no overseer beyond the limits of their own developing appetites. Of course, there were constant qualifications; the students could not be loud or be late or be any number of ways that could be considered anathema to the mission of the school. We moderns have a tendency to exaggerate our own freedom as if locating it in specific circumstances might lessen its value. We dole it out as an abstraction and then await its revelation individual by

individual. The problem with this asocial distribution style is that it limits our outlook. If freedom is awarded one by one how do we gain a broad enough perspective to recognize when the social conditions necessary for its existence are being eliminated? Not only do we risk the loss of freedom we risk the opportunity to nurture the relationships through which freedom has any meaning in the first place. Unfortunately, the last place we moderns look for freedom is in our relationships with each other.

The Psychemedics Corporation markets products that take into account the scope and complexities of modern relationships. The PDT-90, is a personal drug testing kit, advertised with a slogan that mimics the response of potential parental operatives as they succumb to the stirring sales pitch: “If you don’t know, you can’t help.”⁴⁴ The test makes initial confrontation unnecessary because it requires “only a small snip of hair to provide a 90 day detection period.” Performing this sort of underhanded surveillance on our own children is an eerie tribute to the debased relationships moderns endure as we search for ways of piercing each other’s concealed core. Meanwhile, we tally the pros and cons of testing Billy’s hair without considering the implications of this specific act within a larger social context. For moderns, the context *is* Billy and, therefore, presumed to be irrelevant to anyone else’s concerns.

The ability to single out certain moderns is a marvel of modern reckoning but it is disturbingly simplistic in light of a more comprehensive definition of Reason like the one suggested by Dewey in which Billy’s irrelevancy is itself un-reasonable:

“Reason” is just the ability to bring the subject matter of prior experiences to bear to perceive the significance of the subject matter of a new experience. A person is reasonable in the degree in which he is habitually open to seeing an event which immediately strikes his senses not as an isolated thing but in its connection with the common experience of mankind⁴⁵

To deny the social grounding of our decisions limits our ability to reason effectively. The option of performing a drug test on our children is an individual choice in only the most limited sense. It is a decision that surpasses our own personal circumstances to include those that not only make this product available but also make its use acceptable and advisable. Our loss is in thinking that we make decisions alone. Perhaps this is why testing our children for drug use is an option in the first place. Only an impoverished social milieu spawns such debased measures, making our perennial modern concerns about freedom of choice pale in comparison to what is lost in defining these choices as consequences of an asocial decision making process. Sometimes it is easier to see the partiality of our choices when we are able to consider alternatives that have yet to be presented as options.

I have a number of acquaintances that seem to suffer a condition still not identified by any of the pharmaceutical companies. I have labeled it informally as Chronic Speed Syndrome because the afflicted seem to be in constant motion, always in preparation for their next engagement or appointment. CSS is a condition that is most common among those who own automobiles and have ready access to airplane travel. Without these technologies the affliction may diminish in intensity. This also holds true for other enabling tools like watches, cell phones and computers. These busy people seem to sense that every encounter is simply a send off to the next stop. I await the more formal description for this condition and the attendant drug that will help these people to cope with the impending sense that they should be somewhere other than where they are.

This fictitious example may sound contrived but contrivances abound in a modern milieu. Consider Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder:

For many years, children with symptoms identical to those that now add up to ADHD were considered to have “Minimal Brain Damage.” When it was eventually acknowledged that there was absolutely no proof that these children’s brains were actually damaged, the label was changed to “Minimal Brain Dysfunction.” This in turn gave way to the diagnosis of “hyperkinetic reaction,” which became “Attention Deficit Disorder with (or without) Hyperactivity,” which became “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.”⁴⁶

The reasons for these alterations are broadly dispersed across a range of influencing factors. These factors include but are not limited to various branches of medical research, the profit motives of corporations and the desperation of modern parents. A reasonable approach requires recognition of the sweep of these factors and the consequences engendered by their acceptance or rejection. These consequences take root in our modern lives granting us powers that surpass the role of consumer and demand the action of a reasonable citizenry, a citizenry that recognizes in itself the makings of a modern public. The difficulty is that the span between these very different roles is closed one relationship at a time.

Rethinking Our Reasoning

A few years ago my husband was offered a job while I completed work toward a doctoral degree. For most of our friends and acquaintances the question was not when we would be moving but whether or not our family of three would be moving together. Our modern context makes this inquiry a reasonable one. We all understand the demands of modern living well enough to know that our priorities are in need of regular revision. The prized relationship of today may be an obstacle by the measure of tomorrow’s demands. These sorts of castoffs are the predictable eventualities of a tradition that downplays our social attributes, or what we have in common, in favor of solitary selves destined to go it alone. And, of course, this process is exacerbated by allegiance to an economic system that favors a similar sort of selectivity. Nevertheless, there is another dimension to our modern sensibility. A nineteenth century poet writing about the value of marriage says that it gives young people the ability “to reach farther into the future than they did before.”⁴⁷ The value of reaching into the future is experienced in the present. It is the feeling that what we do matters and has consequences that surpass the span of a single lifetime. Being modern makes this sound strangely fanciful and impractical when, in fact, its practical import imbues the most mundane modern tasks with the enticement of purpose. Obviously, marriage is only one way to generate security, there are many others, all requiring the coupling and gathering of people intent on participating in a conscientious grouping. Individual security derives from these groupings and is available through decisive action like the planning of neighborhoods and community schools and any other forums where people come together. Stability and freedom are achieved not in spite of our relationships but as a part of them. Of course, there is an element of subversion in this sort of stability because it defies our modern consumption habits. It forces us to reconsider what it means to express individuality. It turns inward gazes outward toward each other and demands social skills too often neglected by modern accounts of individuality.

A blurb in the “names and faces” section of the local paper describes the dressing room requirements of a pop star idol. Her demands are straightforward and oozing with the deliberation that the modern media portrays as individuality: “white room, white flowers, white tables and or tablecloths, and Evian water-room temperature.”⁴⁸ Encouraging the development of individuals through which individuality can be distilled to a bullet list of products preferences is a far easier task than encouraging the development of individuals who are capable of expressing

preferences born of social imagination and purpose. If we are to behave as billboards for the cult of customization then our reasons for encouraging this sort of individuality are irrelevant. Our best hope is a closet full of fashion and the freedom to turn so far inward that only the right blend of anti depressants and shopping excursions will pull us out again. Of course, even these prospects are fleeting in a modern milieu, a milieu where, as Marshall Berman points out, whole categories of people become obstacles, “in the way of history, of progress, of development,” and eventually, “classified and disposed of, as obsolete.”⁴⁹ This obsolescence is our own fault. We shape our modern landscapes out of materials that make our human presence superfluous.

I believe that John Dewey is correct in asserting that the “stability of individuality is dependent upon stable objects to which allegiance firmly attaches itself.”⁵⁰ The examples in this essay are intended to suggest that our modern preoccupation with individualism has deprived us of the stability that derives from looking beyond one’s self and into the needs and experiences of others. This is a neglected source of security, readily sacrificed for the promises of freedom and financial independence. Our modern environs are a tribute to these sacrifices and like their individualistic inhabitants they too reflect a particular trajectory of development. In the next essay, I will explore the medium through which individuals take on their roles *as* individuals. Like so many of our modern influences, the environment we live through has been cordoned off, contained as a separate vessel we drink from but are not shaped by. This is like trying to understand the shape of a fish without acknowledging the water. This is the subject of the next essay.

¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1926) p. 244.

² *USA Today*, "Letter: McVeigh wished to kill Reno," April 27, 2001, By Richard Willing.

³ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 263.

⁴ *The New York Times*, "Church Group Provides Oasis for Illegal Migrants to U.S." June 10, 2001, By Laurie Goodstein.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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⁷ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 150.

⁸ In *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) John Locke writes: Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.

⁹ *The New York Times*, George Bush quoted in *New York Times*, November 1, 2000.

¹⁰ *Sunday News Lancaster Pennsylvania*, "Road Rage at work: Seminar, run by police, teaches professional drivers how to handle aggressiveness on roads," August 19, 2001 By: Gil Smart.

¹¹ While this passage is intended to suggest that conditions of modern living often place us in positions which breed particularly un-social behavior like road rage, there is data suggesting that the "gender and age profiles of those involved in crimes unrelated to traffic offenses (say, burglary) show remarkable similarities, suggesting that the activities share some common sources." See, Leonard Evans "Traffic Crashes," *American Science*, May-June, 2002. p. 244.

¹² See *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* where Michel Foucault explores the "history of the body," and writes "the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." (p. 25)

¹³ *Harper's Magazine*, "Choice Cuts" December 2000, pg. 92.

¹⁴ *The Intelligencer Journal*, "Maybe it's in the genes," September 8, 2001, By: Brett Lovelace Lancaster, PA.

¹⁵ R.C. Lewontin, Steven Rose and Leon J. Kamin, *Not In Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) p. 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁷ Lovelace, "Maybe it's in the genes," September 8, 2001.

¹⁸ *The Wall Street Journal*, "Software uses clicking patterns to customize ads," May 25, 2001, By: William M. Bulkeley.

¹⁹ Martha Farnsworth Riche cited in Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, (New York: The New Press, 1999) p. 105.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.105.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.106.

²² *Ibid.*, p.107.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ James U. McNeal, *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, (New York: Lexington Books, 1992) p. 8.

²⁷ McChesney, p. 5.

²⁸ McChesney, p. 45.

²⁹ *Washington Post*, "Parents' Top Goal: Raising thinkers, obedience is less valued, study says," November 24, 1999, By D'Vera Cohn.

³⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: The Free Press, 1966) p. 297.

³¹ *The New York Times*, "The Wonder Years: Homework is free online," Sept. 10, 2001 By: Laurie J. Flynn.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining The Value Of School*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) p. 183.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁶ George W. Bush at the Council of the Americas Meeting, May 7, 2001 in *Sierra Adventure* September/October 2001.

³⁷ Brochure: Generalized Anxiety Disorder, GlaxoSmithKline, 2001.

³⁸ Postman, p. 184.

³⁹ The School District of Lancaster: *Guidelines on Discipline*, 2000 Revision.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p. 532.

⁴² Knight Ridder/ Tribune News Service, "Minimum Wage—It just doesn't add up" By: Holly Sklar August 29, 2001.

⁴³ Raymond Boisvert, *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) p. 53.

⁴⁴ <http://www.psychemedics.com>

⁴⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 343.

⁴⁶ Alfie Kohn, *What to Look for in a Classroom...and Other Essays*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass publishers, 1988) p. 114.

⁴⁷ Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke

⁴⁸ *Sunday News* Lancaster Pennsylvania, "Names and Faces" November 4, 2001

⁴⁹ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) p. 82.

⁵⁰ John Dewey, *Individualism Old And New*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999) p. 26.

Chapter 3 Modern Spaces and the Reconciliation of Selves and Settings

You shall above all things be glad and young
For if you are young, whatever life you wear
it will become you; and if you are glad
whatever's living will yourself become.

ee cummings¹

There are specific good reasons for the usual attribution
of acts to the person from whom they immediately proceed. But to
convert this special reference into a belief of exclusive ownership is
as misleading as to suppose that breathing and digesting are complete
within the human body.
John Dewey,²

Daniel Mintz admits that videoconferencing is no replacement for being at home with his family, but he finds it a useful tool in adapting to the demands of modern living. Mintz explains that maintaining a visual connection with his young daughter helps him to avoid the “stranger treatment” other “frequent flier” parents endure as they return from extended business travel and attempt to become reintegrated into the daily lives of their children. In a *New York Times* article entitled: *My Money, My Life: For a Dad, Videoconference Ties that Bind*, Mintz describes how his own family benefits from technology that provides the illusion of condensed geography. He describes how this illusion and its benefits are passed along to the family’s youngest member, Noa:

Noa was only 4 months old when I first used videoconferencing. I was thrilled to see her, but unfortunately it was a one-way street. She fidgeted and barely noticed me. Since then, however, she has quickly mastered the medium. Now she squeals with delight when I appear on the screen; she leaps at the camera, updates me on the latest gossip in her own largely unintelligible language and shows off her latest tricks. During our last call, she happily tooted on a harmonica and then proudly clapped at her own two-second recital.³

Although many parents exaggerate the talents of their offspring, this passage includes more than the subjective musings of a proud father. Mintz is expressing a more subtle bias, one that permits him to assume that Noa has mastered the videoconferencing medium and that the videoconferencing medium has not mastered Noa. His confidence in the outcome of this exchange is apparent in his eagerness to acquaint Noa with this technology during her early infancy. There is no malice or negligence in this arrangement, simply a loving modern father confident that he and his daughter are in possession of a relationship that can be selectively shielded from the conditions that mediate its unfolding. Many moderns share this confidence, this notion that we are in possession of a sort of psychic pop-up tent that can secure our autonomy from select elements within our surroundings. At least one modern indicator insinuates why this might be possible.

A recent Gallup poll confirms that 45 percent of Americans support the claim that “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.”⁴ With such an enduring and static timeline in place, we are bound to cast ourselves against an equally static backdrop, one that appears to move in the same linear direction that

accompanies our own progress forward. In Philadelphia, hired actors walk the historical district and greet visitors wearing the costumes of eighteenth century America. They speak with heavy English accents and ask tourists questions that require contextually sensitive responses so that, for example, a visitor from modern Miami might inspire a bewildered gaze and a clarifying prompt such as, “which colony houses this unfamiliar territory?” For many, the answer to this question is the sort of historical detail that separates us from our forbears and, eventually, from our progeny, but it does not change our fundamental humanity. This exists in a more passive and purified form, apart from the contaminating influence of our surroundings, retrievable under any circumstances given the determination of a committed believer. But, not all moderns are believers.

Some ascribe our humanity to external forces, forces that act on us the way a sculptor acts on an awaiting medium. We fill space like fluid in a cup taking shape from what is already in place and placing faith in the individual capacity to make cup and fluid work in some sort of comforting and conforming unison. These explanations use the present retroactively, fitting our self-proclaimed attributes with the necessities of a distant past. Modern human traits like competitiveness and territoriality become the inevitable byproducts of ancient ancestors who dwelt in caves and had particular agricultural practices. Of course, allying ourselves with either end of this pole can have paralyzing consequences. After all, what influence can we exercise on our own circumstances when our trajectories come fixed whether by internal or external constraints? Obviously, both sides offer contributions to our modern repertoire, but neither awards us a particularly privileged position in relation to our environs. Instead, these seemingly antagonistic positions sit like a pair of opposing parentheses, each claiming the appropriate subtext for understanding the motives of human behavior and offering up some trait or circumstance to tip the scale in favor of one side or the other. We live in the ambiguity of this struggle, this divide that puts even the most ardent modern go-getter at the mercy of constraints that emerge either through the inside or the outside, through nature or nurture.⁵ In the meantime, we continue to live out our lives in local environs that make these questions less dire and dramatic gathering purpose through our own momentum, and casting seemingly stray intentions outward as unwitting contributors to the modern social milieu. Of course, this is where our parenthetical gap collapses and the rift between interior and exterior influences merge into an experiential melange that mixes people, places and possessions into configurations as difficult to pull apart as the ingredients in a loaf of baked bread. This coherency warrants caution. It is too easily overstated; prone to usurpation by “the environment,” that familiar and massive backdrop that stands in opposition to “the individual” much like our modern use of “society.” While these abstractions are useful for descriptive purposes, they are dangerously counterproductive when, as is so often the case, they are used as convenient filler to counterbalance an equally abstract and problematic claim.

This chapter proceeds from a less imposing and grandiose understanding of the environment, one more humble in its conception but more powerful in its implications, one that presupposes an active and ongoing negotiation between ourselves and our surroundings. In this chapter I will explore some of the thinking that informs our reluctance to appreciate and use this negotiation and leaves us scrambling to explain ourselves with only ourselves as a reference. I will consider our predicament against the alternative that Dewey offers in the following passage:

we can recognize that all conduct is *interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social. Then we shall see progress that proceeds in two ways, and that freedom is found in that kind of interaction which maintains an

environment in which human desire and choice count for something...When we look at the problem as one of an adjustment to be intelligently attained, the issue shifts from within personality to an engineering issue, the establishment of arts of education and social guidance.⁶

This chapter seeks to corroborate this conclusion while considering why it is that many modern stories unfold upon a very different premise.

The Limitations of a Limited Locus of Power

The unfolding story of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold ended at Columbine High School in April 1999. After shooting thirteen others, Harris and Klebold shot themselves. Apparently anticipating the inevitable questions surrounding such a brutal act Harris dedicated a journal entry to the exoneration of everyone from his own family members to toy manufacturers and school administrators: “i want to leave a lasting impression on the world. and god damnit do not blame anyone else besides me and V [Klebold] for this...don’t blame my family...don’t blame toy stores or any other stores for selling us ammo, bomb materials or anything like that because it’s not their fault...if there is any way in this fucked up universe we can come back as ghosts...we will haunt the life out of anyone who blames anyone besides me and V.”⁷ Harris’s determination to leave an impression on the world seems equally matched by his conviction that the world has not left an impression on him. It is this conviction, this capacity to believe in his own utter psychic impenetrability that may have made the most significant contribution to Harris’s tragic “personal” choices. He is solely to blame insofar as he has carried this conviction to its own logical conclusion. But, let’s suppose Harris had an alternative understanding of his motivations, one conscientiously indebted to the language and lifestyles surrounding him. Suppose he encountered the notion that we do not choose to enter a social life the way we choose to elect a public official; suppose Harris had made contact with a different message one suggesting that, “conduct is always shared... [and that]It is not an ethical “ought” that conduct should be social. It is social whether good or bad.”⁸From this perspective Harris’ checklist of final pardons is a sad salute to relationships that never took root and the misguided notion that a spectacular act of cruelty is as good a mark of unique individuality as any other.

If Harris has left us haunted by any phantoms, this is where they reside, in a modern environment that permits individuals to embrace indifference to their social environments as a mark of personal distinction. Clearly, the majority of moderns would heartily disagree with Harris’ choice of self-expression but his belief in the ability to disentangle himself from the complex webbing of his surroundings is not as rare as the deed he used to propel himself into infamy. And, while we may feel little sympathy for the author, we have an intuitive understanding of where this confessor is leading us. Our disapproval of his violent acts does not lessen our ability to appreciate the span he is attempting to create between himself and the various social factors that could conceivably lay claim to his actions. For many moderns this is a familiar and intimate kind of display one that makes issues of responsibility and relinquishment of environments a matter of personal choice rather than necessity. And, while Klebold and Harris cooperated in acts that take this possibility to its extreme, the conceptual underpinnings that allow them to believe in the possibility of this relinquishment are common enough.

Dr. Phillip McGraw routinely advises a very large audience on issues of relinquishment and responsibility. In fact, McGraw or “Dr. Phil” as his fans know him, is credited with developing a “matter-of-fact, tell-it-like-it-is philosophy” that has “put an end to the ‘everyone’s a victim’ attitude that had taken hold of our culture.”⁹ In his book, *Self Matters: Creating Your*

Life from the Inside Out, McGraw describes the “authentic self,” that forms the basis for modern brands of self-discovery and self-betterment:

the authentic self is “the *you* that can be found at your absolute core. It is the part of you that is not defined by your job, or your function, or your role. It is the composite of all of your unique gifts, skills, abilities, interests, talents, insights and wisdom...it is the you that wants to require you to be more than you are, that doesn’t even know what it is to settle or sell out...”¹⁰

McGraw claims that if we don’t know this authentic self “in vivid detail” then a “vital life energy” will have been wasted. He believes each of us has a “core purpose” in the world and that if it is suppressed we are “doing something entirely unnatural...draining precious life energy that could otherwise be [spent] on what you are really all about.”¹¹ McGraw’s contribution toward this revelatory journey is in providing his audience with the tools to whittle away the inauthentic, the non-essential residue that obscures this core at the center of each of us. This may sound oddly ethereal for someone credited with providing a straightforward, “get real” approach to problem solving but, McGraw recovers with a confrontational approach and a number of provocative exercises designed to shape the highly abstract notion of an authentic self into something more tangible and manageable, something capable of concrete expression. One of these exercises prompts readers to create a list of five “pivotal people,” people who have “left indelible impressions on your concept of self.” As it turns out this list is more than a compilation of influential external associations, it is also a possible gauge for understanding the list maker’s own sense of self worth. McGraw explains what this list can reveal:

If your own name does not appear anywhere on your list, consider what that means. It may mean your self-concept has been molded and shaped primarily by other people. It means that you attribute your most basic, core characteristics to the actions and behaviors of others. For better or worse, you have yielded your power entrusted it to someone else.¹²

Perhaps this is the incapacitating judgment that Eric Harris sought to avoid as he penned his final journal entry, preferring to take personal responsibility for an appalling act of violence than to surrender the sense of self-determination that he believed this act would achieve.

Clearly, McGraw’s intent is not to encourage such extreme perversions of personal power. Still, even without judging his counsel too harshly, it is possible to appreciate that defining the characteristics of an authentic self in terms of an individual locus of power can have serious and unintended consequences. McGraw uses this phrase, “locus of power” to help his audience evaluate how they “assign causation” for the events in their lives. Of course, if McGraw is willing to concede that this locus of control is malleable enough to allow us to welcome shared responsibility for our personal habits, whether good or bad, then why does he assume that the authentic self resides in the dark recesses of an inner self? Why not define the authentic self within the social and historical framework that gives these words their meaning? This is the approach repeatedly expressed in Dewey’s work:

Honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility are not private possessions of a person. They are working adaptations of personal capacities with enviroing forces. All virtues and vices are habits which incorporate objective forces. They are interactions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out-door world.¹³

Those who urge participation in the kind of soul-searching that promises to elevate its practitioners beyond the influence of their surroundings must downplay this coming together of

selves and settings. They must sacrifice the guidance of a social, much less physical, context for the narrow confines of particular personalities and people stripped of their places. The very elements that make us co-constructors of our world become impediments that need to be stripped away in order to reveal the veiled splendor of our hidden autonomous selves.

The Lost lessons of Squirrels and the Lure of a Splintered Social Realm

The enigmatic nature of modern self-discovery does more than heighten the sense that private pathways are the surest routes to personal fulfillment. It also makes it seem as if these pathways are utterly self sustained and independent, as if their construction were simply the doings of strong willed individuals lacking any coordination with the social and physical components of their surroundings. Of course, this is no truer for humans than it is for any of the creatures living on earth. We all share ourselves with what surrounds us, the difference is a matter of degree and design. For instance, consider the fact that researchers suspect a correspondence between the nourishment of squirrels and the subsequent lay-out of their forested surroundings.¹⁴ The distance between certain saplings and their parent trees appears to be at least partly linked to the coordination between the nut preferences of feeding squirrels and the maturation of the acorns. Since red oak acorns do not germinate until the spring the squirrels opt for the already ripened white oak acorns which they can eat on the spot. What they fail to eat is left to sprout near the white oak parent tree. Meanwhile, the unripe red oak acorns are carried away from the parent tree where they are buried for later consumption. Since the squirrels do not always remember to retrieve their earlier stores, these forgotten acorns mature into more widely dispersed oak trees. While this *may* explain why red oaks trees are more widely dispersed than their white oak relatives, it certainly explains what Dewey had in mind when he penned the following passage:

The thing essential to bear in mind is that living as an empirical affair is not something which goes on below the skin-surface of an organism: it is always an inclusive affair involving connection, interaction of what is within the organic body and what lies outside in space and time...thinking functionally we soon realize no organism's activity, including that of Homo sapiens, is ever simply located; all activity, including cognitive activity, involves spatial, social, and historical distribution.¹⁵

Like squirrels, human actions are similarly coordinated with the physical spaces in which we live our lives. Like all earthly organisms, we humans shape and then reshape the landscape to suit our needs, but the landscape is not passive, it answers back with responses that create new needs so that this process does not necessarily leave either of the contributors unchanged.

The squirrels drop the acorns, and the output of the trees will help to determine the future of the squirrels' eating habits. As one biologist explains, "the development of most organisms is a consequence of unique interaction between their internal state and external milieu. At every moment in the life history of an organism there is contingency of development such that the next step is dependent on the current state of the organism and the environmental signals that are impinging on it."¹⁶ Humans are awash in the future possibilities of this contingency, while other of our less flexible cohabitants must succumb to whatever dictates are mandated by these signals. If the oak trees stop dropping acorns, it is unlikely that the squirrels will cooperatively create a new breed of edible nuts. Humans have a fluid range of possibilities for cooperating to co-author the terms of existence. Clearly, this is a powerful position, one that allows us not only to assemble and arrange the physical environment but also to use what we build for social purposes. To paraphrase Dewey, we humans have the capacity to share in the social purposes to which our individual actions are put.¹⁷ Of course, using this capacity as a means of achieving a fertile

bridge between individual ambitions and social aims is not implicit in its endowment. We must choose to be attentive to our human capacity for a significant social life. If we are not, it will be lost to us, much the same way that an acorn is lost to the forest without a watchful squirrel to decide the course of its fate. We are no more fated to a significant social life, than a forest is fated to a particular arrangement of trees and, in fact, the growth of an acorn is far more predictable than what may emerge when human growth is divorced from the support of a meaningful social environment. This counters our modern rhetoric of self-determination by questioning the notion that personal freedom is a state of being unencumbered by the presence of others. Still, without others nothing about us would be the same. Every specific genealogy has its obscure links to more general factors that have as much bearing on the circumstances of an individual as the fortuitous union of a particular sperm and egg.

Each of us enters a world that is already well underway, stocked with languages, gestures and the promise of a fruitful coupling between ourselves and what is already in place. This is where the cultivation of ourselves begins to blur at the edges, where the modern self-centered, decision-maker is forced to consider the ways in which selves and settings speak to each other. Dewey describes a way to understand what this conversation must take into account:

A being whose activities are associated with others has a social environment. What he does and what he can do depend upon the expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations of others. A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities, without taking the activities of others into account. For they are the indispensable conditions of the realization of his tendencies. When he moves he stirs them and reciprocally.¹⁸

Moderns assume that socially charged notions like reciprocity belong to the exceptional hero or saint who intentionally extends his or her actions into the social realm. For the rest of us, participation is optional and piecemeal like moving through the ranks of any voluntary organization. The result is a modern milieu brimming with debates like the one addressed by Terri Bartlett, a spokesperson for the Toy Industry Association. Bartlett is certain that toys do not contribute to acts of childhood violence. She believes that, “toys do not make a child violent. . . their environment, including their home and surroundings are responsible for the violence.”¹⁹ A similar distinction is made by Dianne Jacob, a former teacher attempting to explain why a fifteen-year-old boy walked into a suburban California High School, wounded thirteen people and killed two of his classmates. “The community did not produce this kind of child—he is the product of two parents and I say with some hesitation that he did not have a very strong family.”²⁰

Bartlett’s ready exclusion of toys from her definition of “the environment” and Jacob’s ability to define “family” and community against each other are some of the interesting outcomes spun from our selective packaging of the environment and the individual. Of course, these sorts of proclamations are under constant scrutiny with adversaries lining up like survey teams ready to confirm and refute the correct placement of fencing on a property line. Since this fencing is thought to conform to the topography of individuals, our calculations promise customized ratios, with some percentage of personal action attributable to internal sources and some left to the influence of external factors. This static divide provides a great well spring of modern speculation, offering purpose to a wealth of expert commentators prepared to present conjecture on everything from the personality profile of a serial killer to the relationship between toys and childhood violence. Of course, these speculations vary according to the particular leanings of the commentator and the particular individual being scrutinized, which underscores a dramatic

drawback to using the individual as the most favored point of reference for our judgments and assessments of human behavior. Although it is difficult to conceive of the individual as less than an ideal and objective reference point from which to debate our practices, the neutrality of our host is open to interpretation. And, our attempts to reconcile internal and external influences at the site of the individual often fail to acknowledge that “to measure is to create” and that our modern measurements simply keep recreating the same familiar forms.²¹

The Bias of Modern Bodies

Humans have a long history of assigning meaning and purpose to objects based on their external forms. In ancient China, the upper half of plants was used to cure ailments afflicting the upper parts of human bodies while below-ground plant parts were used for the lower body. In the West, humans have also relied on visual cues to indicate how a plant should be used. This “Doctrine of Signatures,” revealed that “some aspect of a plant’s appearance, usually its leaf shape or coloring, [provided] a clue to its medicinal properties.”²² While the evidentiary basis of these cures may elude moderns, their influence remains with us in plant names like “Liverwort,” and “Boneset,” humbly alluding to an earlier belief in the affinity between appearance and utility.²³ The assumption that purpose is inscribed in the shape or the color of a particular object seems like a rather simplistic notion compared to our modern methods of assigning meaning, but we have not entirely rid ourselves of this approach. While few scientifically savvy moderns would be willing to admit more than a coincidental resemblance between walnuts and human brains, we are willing to cede some power to the dictates of appearance. After all, we still use the tight fit of human skin to affix meaning to bodies, meanings that surpass the strict physical functioning of a particular skin color or a specific blood type. Our bodies offer the containers that make ourselves manifest, and as moderns we are apt to take this manifestation as another measure of our potential for indifference to social conditions.

Our modern bodies mark the inherently private and individualistic nature of being human. They serve us as a sort of abbreviated symbol of our propensity for privacy and competition. While the herbalist of an earlier age found meaning and purpose pressed into the leaves of a flower or illuminated in the red sap of Bloodroot, we find meaning and purpose contained within the outline of individual human forms. Of course, if we have learned anything, it is that appearances can be deceiving and that just because a flower is shaped like a butterfly does not mean that it will cure insect bites. Still, our skepticism about the illusory nature of certain sensory experiences stops abruptly at the surface of the body, where flesh appears to encapsulate the self with the resolution of a crisply shot photograph, offering up the physical evidence of our psychic independence. Obviously, for some purposes our bodies do reflect a concrete circumference, making connections between bodies and human identity profound and inseparable. The countless ways in which our bodies belong to us seem hardly worth mentioning except to highlight how enigmatically they contribute to bolster the modern preoccupation with individual autonomy. It is clear that limbs, lungs and facial features matter, but how do physical traits lead us to conclude that our bodies offer evidence of an inherent detachment from each other or from any of the other elements around us? And, if our bodies do not provide physical support for our modern preoccupation with the private world of the autonomous individual then on what basis do we claim justification for our preferential treatment of this modern icon? Surely, whatever physical evidence we might rely on is matched by the ceaseless susurrations of the human circulatory system, a system constantly trading internal and external elements with the agility of seasoned relay teams nimbly passing their batons back and forth. This is the condition that Dewey summons when he states “a living organism and its life processes involve a world or

nature temporally and spatially ‘external’ to itself but ‘internal’ to its functions.’²⁴ Why then do our bodies prompt us to assume that physical properties are the extension of our inner isolation rather than confirmation of the fluid exchanges between ourselves and our surroundings? Perhaps we take our physical stature too seriously; perhaps we have misjudged ourselves the way we have misjudged the physical properties of other creatures. Consider more recent insights into the lives of seemingly familiar sea creatures.

It is easy to assume that the radial shape of a starfish reflects its inability to function as if it has a head. We know now that starfish do quite well without heads or centralized brains. In recent years underwater time-lapse photography has revealed the active lives of starfish as they jostle for positions along a submerged food source. With rays held high, starfish press against each other like contestants participating in an arm-wrestling match. The ability to capture these movements on film has allowed us to recognize starfish behavior that would have been impossibly “social” for creatures that have no centralized brain and appear to languish lifelessly on any available sea surface. It is easy to misread body cues in even the most seemingly straightforward bodies. If a headless sea borne creature can mislead us with its distributed sensory system and a comparatively unhurried pace, then it is not hard to imagine why human bodies might leave us with an assortment of equally questionable impressions. The predicaments that emerge through these impressions do not necessarily follow the boundaries of individuals or even human bodies for that matter. When humans make decisions about their own bodies, the consequences can reach out to the bodies of other creatures as well.

It appears that this may be the case in the United Kingdom where the bodies of male fish are showing signs of their contact with human reproductive choices. While the research is not conclusive, it appears that the hormones contained in contraceptive pills may be responsible for causing male fish to develop some of the reproductive traits of their female counterparts.²⁵ These hormones, unknowingly excreted by women and carried to rivers via sewage effluent, may be responsible for such freakish anatomical permutations as male fish developing eggs in their testes. While each of us is the active repository of personal experiences, employing and embodying our own collection of personal habits, these habits do not arise without the support of a social context and they do not necessarily end in an individual body. This is where our embodied significance lies and why Dewey makes the following claim,

the strictly organic conditions which lead men to join, assemble, foregather, combine, are just those which lead other animals to unite in swarms and packs and herds. In describing what is common in human and other junctions and consolidations we fail to touch what is distinctively human in human associations.²⁶

By the time a contraceptive pill makes its way into the very clearly defined personal space of an esophagus, it has already traveled through a profoundly dense social fabric. At this point, its ingestion seems almost trivial in comparison to all that had to be in place for it to reach the mouth of a woman in her childbearing years.

Moderns have notoriously short-lived memories, and we seem to be more comfortable flattering ourselves with the heroics of individual choice than acknowledging the elaborate convergence of personal and collective habits that are required to bring this sort of technology to the body of a single modern woman. Dewey recognizes the significance of this convergence when he refers to customs as “collective habits” and explains that “everywhere customs supply the standards for personal activity. They are the pattern into which individual activity must weave itself.”²⁷ When the Jacobs’ family of Boca Raton, Florida decided to become the first family to have computer chips implanted into their bodies, they may have been pressing the outer

limits of what is currently customary but they are working in exactly the kind of weave that Dewey is describing. From the customary marital arrangement that is implicit in the “Jacob’s family” title to their enthusiasm for hi-tech participation, the Jacob’s choice is as much a question of timing as it is proof of a particularly innovative group of individuals.

A Transfer of Power: Private Cures and Social Maladies

The inevitability of being socially affiliated and having this affiliation mediate our connections to the physical environment is particularly difficult for moderns to accept. After all, how can a single individual be in control of his or her destiny, if this destiny must take into account not only the influence of our own particular circumstances, including the actions of others, but also the more vaguely defined conceptual legacies bequeathed to us from the past. For moderns to think in these terms is to elicit images of unadorned, gray-suited armies peopled by automatons incapable of marching to the sounds of their own drumbeats. Why this image is more daunting than the equally dictatorial and deceptive notion that there is some value in being able to exist without the thoughtful and conscientious support of our surroundings is a telling clue to our most pervasive modern biases. This bias is typified in the words of Daniel Kadlec, who proclaims that, “in the long run there is no turning back this age of self-determinism.”²⁸ The fact that Kadlec’s claim makes our modern condition sound like an inescapable directive is even more notable, since it accompanies a *Time* magazine “survival guide” strongly suggesting that being “self-determined” may have some very unappealing consequences. Kadlec describes the “widespread” “yearning for reliable advice” by those who “feel helpless and paralyzed” in a society where the “social safety net” has been “loosened” and “pulled back.” And, while Kadlec offers the reassurance that “responsibility is always the price of freedom,” it is difficult to grasp the meaning of this freedom if self-determinism is inevitable and its dictates only leave us surrounded by choices we feel too vulnerable to make. Perhaps Kadlec intended a different use of the phrase “self-determinism.” Here, as in so many modern references, the meaning of self-determinism is thought to be so obvious that it requires no definition. This is typical of our modern rhetoric concerning individuality and what it means to be free and self-determined, allowing us the luxury of using these modern buzzwords as designations without the burden of actual referents.

Our willingness to leave certain abstractions undefined is a constant source of inspiration for those who reap the benefits of employing our favorite tenets without having to explain how they will work in an actual practice. A typical instance of how this is done is exemplified by a U.S. military slogan that promises its new recruits that they can “be an army of one in the U.S. army.”²⁹ Of course, it is an oxymoron to speak of an army of one, but if there is a way to grant individuals select status even in circumstances that are, by definition, social enterprises, we will find it. Michel Foucault investigates the development of discourse that allows us to participate in the contradictory creation of an “army of one.” Foucault chronicles the emergence of a “new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality” and explains that “as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized.”³⁰ If this sounds like a one-sided prospect, it is not. In fact, as Foucault explains, “individuals are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising...power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.”³¹ We are accustomed to power’s representatives, suited heads of state gathered around a conference table or standing on some green patch of land shaking hands and speaking in sound bytes, but power also travels more mundanely. It is found in the mother’s

reprimand, the teacher's grade book or the boss's memo. It is marked on calendars when we commemorate certain historical events and omit others.

Power takes many complicated guises and compels many acts. It is formal and informal, encoded in laws and captured in a spontaneous slap across the face, where it can instantly redefine the rules if only for as long as the hand print stays marked on the face. Of course, this kind of power can be fleeting and illusory like the triple digits on a car's speedometer promising speeds that can never be practically traveled. For many moderns, it is customary to treat power as possibility rather than reality, like an un-played lottery ticket that inspires hopeful stories about what could be if its dormant numbers were brought to life. Since power lives through us, it changes as we change, making its distribution highly dependent on how we understand the relationship between our environs and ourselves. If this relationship is anchored to an unchanging, internal privately possessed personality core, than self-determination has little to do with what goes on "outside" and very much to do with deciphering whatever self revealing tidbits we can draw from our own private coffers. As Dewey explains, "the idea of perfecting an 'inner' personality is a sure sign of social divisions. What is called inner is simply that which does not connect with others—which is not capable of free and full communication."³² Given an internal "locus of control" there is little incentive to recognize the social nature of individuality and how our understanding of self-determination is most meaningfully expressed among other people and within the places we occupy and from which we craft our habits. We lose our ability to use what surrounds us in favor of what we think we surround.

Bernardo Carducci challenges the custom of searching for solace in solitary self-reflection and turns to soup kitchens, hospitals and nursing homes as places where people can practice the empowering principles required for communicating with each other. As the director of the Shyness Research Institute at Indiana University Southeast, Carducci finds that excursions into social settings can help patients overcome the "tyranny of self-centeredness" adding to his conviction that "shifting the focus away from the self is the most therapeutic thing a shy person can do."³³ This sort of conscientious immersion into a social setting is not a typical response to the problem of socially challenged moderns. More typical is the "educational campaign" funded by drug companies intent on raising awareness about the problems of social phobia and prodding potential customers with slogans like, "imagine being allergic to people...."³⁴ It is not clear if social anxiety produces effects that are actually commensurate with the effects of allergens but its existence is becoming more common place as it has ceased being the "nameless affliction" of the 1960's, and has become a fixture in psychiatry manuals since 1980. In spite of the transformation from being an unnamed affliction to being one that is experienced by "millions of Americans," Lynne Henderson, a Stanford University researcher, says that being socially fit may simply take practice. Henderson has the following advice for those suffering from the ill effects of social anxiety: "just as our gym workouts get easier as time goes by, to stay socially fit we must push ourselves to engage with others until it is second nature."³⁵ While this behavioral approach may be effective, it offers little monetary incentive resulting in more profitable solutions that often "blur...the line between public service and marketing" and highlight the ambiguity of some of these so-called anxiety disorders.³⁶ According to Elliot Valenstein, professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Michigan, "Shyness can't be marketed because most people recognize it as a normal variation on personality...but 'social phobia' sounds like a disease."³⁷ Valenstein's point is signaled in the pharmaceutical industry's marketing brochures, which share common motifs in spite of the fact that they address different diseases. From depression to obsessive-compulsive disorder the themes are the same; "no one

knows the exact cause,” the afflictions are real medical conditions, and they affect or afflict millions people who can be treated through some customized dosage of drugs and therapy. Of course, every prescription filled is more than a topping off of our pill dispensers. It is more than increased profit for a financially driven pharmaceutical company; it is also an explicit admission that when it comes to evaluating the culprit responsible for our emotional distress we need look no further than our own mirror.

For the millions of Americans who look in the mirror and see sufferers of depression and panic disorder these afflictions lose their abstract status and become the very painful experiences born of modern living. A perusal of the marketing brochures produced by SmithGlaxoKline in 2001 is staggering: 10-14 million Americans suffering from depression; 3-6 million more suffering panic disorder and 6 million others suffering or experiencing the affects of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The marketers of modern “lifestyle medications” offer us a strange sort of camaraderie where we are assured that “people from all walks of life, even celebrities, have suffered from mental illness” but little mention is made of the social conditions that might precipitate the popularity of certain symptoms.³⁸ The diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a case in point. One of the eight symptoms for determining whether or not a child suffers the symptoms of ADHD is that they “often” behave as if they are “on the go” or “driven by a motor.”³⁹ Of course, the familiarity of these symptoms reminds us that under different conditions these same behaviors might be considered signs of hard work and stamina. ADHD may be an irksome and tiring condition but it is a condition with attributes that are firmly rooted in the circumstances of modern living. From fidgeting to forgetfulness, there is nothing about this condition that does not say as much about the demands and expectations of our social settings as it does about the specific individuals who suffer its symptoms. This is what makes the symptoms recognizable. How else would we know what it means to “talk excessively” or to distinguish between the healthy enthusiasm of an engaged child and the far more onerous act of “blurt[ing] out answers before questions have been completed.”⁴⁰ Even the marketing literature counsels that in addition to the persistence of symptoms—“for at least 6 months”—we must compare these symptoms to those exhibited by other individuals to see whether they are “more frequent and severe than typically observed in individuals at a comparable level of development.”⁴¹ It is noteworthy that the point of comparison is explicitly social and external while the cure is not. And, it is the cure that may warrant more skepticism than the condition.

Suppose the comparison stretched beyond individuals and asked us to compare behavior not between “individuals at comparable levels of development” but between individuals at different places, exercising their individuality within different contexts. Not surprisingly, the brochure is silent on this alternative, but it is an informative silence, one that should lead us to ask whether medication is a solution that furthers our control of the environment or weakens it. If we are the makers of our own destinies, a “locus of control” born with the capacity to be an “army of one,” then why is the alteration of brain chemistry a better choice than altering the conditions of our workplaces and our classrooms? If the rewards of being self-determined are not counted among the daily practices that we participate in and they are not in the places that we occupy, then where is this determination made manifest? And, if we cannot locate this control, is it fair to say that we control our environments or do they control us?

Surrounding Ourselves with Worthwhile Sources of Self-Definition

It is probably disingenuous to suggest that it is even possible to control an environment as daunting as the one that moderns are confronted with, the one that includes everything from global warming and the ecosystem of a tadpole to the home life of our neighbors. Only a

character of super human powers could possibly assume control of such a grandiose conception, and even then it is unlikely that much could be done to fix it. Our conception of the environment is as grand as the individual who inhabits it, but in order to direct the environment for our purposes we need to address it on a scale that makes it meaningful. Dewey provides this scale by defining environments in relation to who and what they house,

the particular medium in which an individual exists leads him to see and feel one thing rather than another; it leads him to have certain plans in order that he may act successfully with others; it strengthens some beliefs and weakens others. Thus it gradually produces in him a certain set of behavior, a certain disposition of action. The words ‘environment,’ ‘medium’ denote something other than surroundings which encompass an individual. They denote the specific continuity of the surroundings with his own native tendencies.”⁴²

In practical terms, Dewey is suggesting that an overcast day can be a study in cloud formation for a meteorologist, a deterrent for the sunbather and entirely unnoticed for the windowless office worker. Of the many manifestations that this cloudy day may have for its “participants” none of them will exist outside of the social and physical context that makes a cloudy day identifiable as a cloudy day. This is as inevitable as the fact that they will also participate as individuals with particular interests and physiological propensities. These propensities matter in a context where the individual is no longer eclipsed by a large and looming environment that makes personal action appear random and idiosyncratic. When the environment is given a “personality” and treated as continuous with who we are as individuals, the quest for an essential self may be best traded for a serious commitment to one’s surroundings.

The way we define ourselves is very much related to the way we define our selves in relation to our surroundings. My daughter’s teacher evoked this relationship during a short speech celebrating the children’s graduation from elementary to middle school. She described the challenges and possibilities the children might face as they moved from one setting to another, but in spite of the grandeur of these possibilities she repeatedly reassured them that “no matter what you do or where you go” you will always have a part of you “on the inside” that will always be the same as it is today. If the teacher’s musings are correct then where these children travel may be less important than what they already possess as they begin their journeys. Clearly, this “possession” was not intended to dampen their enthusiasm for the future, but to give them an anchor from which to consider it. This is an anchor many moderns cling to, using the self as a source of constancy in a modern milieu that seems to openly defy the possibility for ever really achieving it. While the world reels, we attempt to console ourselves with the steadfast, and unique qualities that define us as individuals. But are we consoled? As Dewey notes, “stability of individuality is dependent upon stable objects to which allegiance firmly attaches itself,” and as the examples in this chapter are meant to demonstrate, there is nothing inherently stable about the way we define ourselves as individuals.⁴³ For this we need more than the promise of an evasive inner self and more than the porous outlines that mark our distinct physiology. We need some purpose to which individuality can be directed and this purpose requires an active acknowledgement of a self that is centered not in relation to itself but in relation to the enviroing conditions that transform “it” to a specific person with both a personal and social history.

¹ e.e. cummings, 100 Selected Poems, “you shall above all things be glad and young” (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1926) p. 66.

² John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Volume 14* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1988) p. 15.

³ *The New York Times*, “My Money, My Life: For a dad, videoconference ties that bind,” By: Daniel R. Mintz, June 10, 2001.

⁴ *Scientific American Magazine*, “The Gradual Illumination of the Mind,” By: Michael Shermer, February 2002, p. 35.

⁵ In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey uses the example of criminal intent to explore the challenges of landing on either side of the nature/nurture debate: Our entire tradition regarding punitive justice tends to prevent recognition of social partnership in producing crime; it falls in with a belief in metaphysical freewill. By killing an evil-doer or shutting him up behind stone walls, we are enabled to forget both him and our part in creating him. Society excuses itself by laying the blame on the criminal; he retorts by putting the blame on bad early surroundings, lack of opportunities...Both are right, except in the wholesale character of their recriminations. But the effect on both sides is to throw the whole matter back into antecedent causation a method which refuses to bring the matter to truly moral judgment. (pp. 16-17).

⁶ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 9.

⁷ *Harper's Magazine* journal entry, Eric Harris published in, February 2002, p. 14.

⁸ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 16.

⁹ Phillip C. McGraw, *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) book jacket.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.156.

¹³ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *National Geographic Magazine*, “Choosy Squirrels Shape Oak Forests.” July 1999.

¹⁵ John Dewey, Experience and Nature. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Later Works, Volume I* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1925/1981) p 215.

¹⁶ R.C. Lewontin, Genes, Environment, and Organisms. In Robert B. Silvers (ed.), *Hidden Histories of Science*, (New York: New York Review Book, 1995) p.124.

¹⁷ In *Democracy and Education*, (1916) Dewey distinguishes between training and educative teaching and uses the example of a trained horse to make the point that the horse “does not really share in the social use to which his action is put.”

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1966) p. 12.

¹⁹ *The New York Times*, “Group issues violent toys list,” By: Patrice Dickens, December 10, 2001.

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- ²⁰ *The New York Times*, “Santee is latest blow to myth of suburbia’s safer schools,” By: Timothy Egan, March 9, 2001.
- ²¹ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) p. 14.
- ²² Lesley Bremness, *The Complete Book of Herbs* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) p. 11.
- ²³ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, (1970) for a thorough exploration of the social and historical components of the doctrine of signatures where “the space inhabited by immediate resemblances becomes a vast and open book.” (p. 27)
- ²⁴ John Dewey, Experience and Nature. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Later Works, Volume I* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1925/1981) p. 212.
- ²⁵ Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, www.defra.gov.uk/ February 28, 2002.
- ²⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1927/2000) p. 11.
- ²⁷ John Dewey, Custom and Habit. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Volume 14* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1988) p. 55.
- ²⁸ *Time Magazine*, “You’re on your own: The Enron lesson in making critical decisions, consumers are at sea. Here is a survival guide.” By: Daniel Kadlec, January 28, 2002 p. 27.
- ²⁹ GoArmy.com
- ³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975/1995) p. 193.
- ³¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977* ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) p. 98.
- ³² Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 122.
- ³³ *U.S. News & World Report*, “Social Anxiety: For millions of Americans, every day is a struggle with debilitating shyness,” By: Joannie M. Schorf and Stacey Schuktz, June 21, 1999 p. 57.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- ³⁸ Brochure: Family Matters: When a Loved One Suffers From Depression Or an Anxiety Disorder. GlaxoSmithKline, 2001.
- ³⁹ Brochure: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Guide for Parents in Effective Management of ADHD. ALZA corporation, 2001.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 11.

⁴³ John Dewey, "The Lost Individual" (1930) In *Individualism Old and New*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999) p. 26.

Chapter 4

Recognizing the Consequences of Collateral Lessons

To possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few nameable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming through association with others in all the offices of life.

John Dewey ¹

Parents who are concerned with the success of their children's academic achievement are able to supplement the simple fun of a birthday celebration with the fact filled challenge of a "hitting the books" party. The Score Learning Chain, an offshoot of Kaplan Educational Centers, the well-known tutorial business that specializes in test preparation services, hosts these parties. Jeffrey Conlon, the chief operating officer at Scores, originally argued against having birthday parties at the learning centers because of practical problems like keeping keyboards and carpets clear of birthday cake crumbs. He worried that the "certain amount of mayhem" that characterizes birthday parties might interfere with the goals of the learning center, and, explains Conlon, "if the party isn't done well, the learning slips."² On the other hand, a parent whose daughter celebrated her eighth birthday at a Score center, says that the advantage of a Score party is that the partygoers "don't really know they're learning."³ These informal remarks on the conditions of learning suggest a perilous interval between the learner and what is to be learned, as if flattening facts into digestible pieces may not be enough to insure that they remain intact as they are delivered to their awaiting recipients. These commentators seem to realize that humans are capable of greeting environs with a variety of responses and that even at a specific event like a "hit the books" party, one tailored to meet a specific agenda, some may leave the party having learned the wrong lesson. Dewey suggests a complementary understanding of human learning and considers "the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time" to be "perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies."⁴ This fallacy is one that gains its legitimacy from assumptions discussed in previous essays including our modern tendency to characterize individuals as isolated and atomistic agents born laden with the demands of a free will that is inherently independent of any social context. Presumably, this birth rite should allow us to learn what we will and leave the rest behind, enabling us to disinterestedly celebrate birthdays seated at keyboards or blindly batting at piñatas. In either case the dictates of free will should determine the lessons of the day. Of course, they do not. For children celebrating birthdays at test preparation centers the learning includes more than the formulas on a computer screen. It includes countless spoken and unspoken messages about economic privilege, competition, and intelligence. Furthermore, by acquiring the appropriate social skills for this type of celebration all involved in this endeavor are passing on the message of its acceptability. The same is true for the children blindly batting at a piñata. Obviously, the implications of collateral learning are not limited to classrooms or to childhood pursuits. Where there is the possibility for learning there is always the possibility to learn more than what is explicitly assigned or experienced. It is a great gift to be so abundantly amenable to our circumstances, but with no pre-specified boundary to limit our learning we must become skilled at crafting circumstances that embellish this predisposition rather than debasing it. In previous essays, I have repeatedly asserted that the modern milieu is not very charitable in generating the sense that gaining one's social bearings has much to do with being a unique individual. In this essay, I will explore what

the modern milieu does offer with the understanding that it is “by means of the action of the environment in calling out certain responses” that we come to create the circumstances that ultimately come to create us.⁵ Such acts of creation mean that we cannot understand selves or settings without understanding how they work together. In this essay I want to explore some of the environing conditions that are constitutive of this effort. I want to consider what these conditions may teach us and if there are ways to improve on these lessons. I want to examine some of the variables of modern living to see what purposes they serve, what skills and standards they generate and how they contribute to our future prospects.

The Amish and the Anachronism of Community Standards

Since moving to Lancaster county Pennsylvania I have had the opportunity to learn about the Amish inhabitants who live in this area. I have enjoyed taking visiting friends and family on tours of the Amish countryside and hearing their comments on the old-world lifestyle that makes the Amish experience an exception to many of the modern dictates the rest of us take for granted. Perhaps just as striking as the Amish lifestyle is the consistency of the commentary that peppers these informal tours. Typically, our guests express their amazement at the fact that the clothes hanging out on the pulley-operated clotheslines are so much the same. They marvel at the simplicity of the hand-sewn dresses and speculate about how life must be for people who dress so much alike. They see this sameness as a curse and suppose that the lack of contact with the accoutrements of modern living keeps the Amish secluded in a dull and lifeless world of labor and community conformity. Of course, the Amish have a very different understanding of their existence, one that subsumes most of these concerns to the integral role that religious faith plays in their lives.

It is religious belief that leads the Amish to eschew commercial insurance, a modern “necessity” that they feel “signals a lack of faith in divine protection...and symbolizes individualistic attempts to control the future.”⁶ Modern zoning ordinances also conflict with Amish beliefs because “in contrast to the larger society, where many employees see their homes as shelters from work, the Amish see their homes as a context for work.”⁷ The Amish have chosen to reject electricity from public power lines fearing the influence of a faceless power source and they are wary of telephones for similar reasons. Although the seemingly idiosyncratic manner in which the Amish pick and choose their collective preferences may strike many moderns as odd, they are not without their reasons. The authors of *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*, describe what the Amish must consider as they struggle to “bargain with modernity:”

The weight of their traditional culture constrains their use of technology. They do not assume that novelty and improvement necessarily go hand in hand. Although they do not reject all new technology, the Amish worry that its use may erode communal life. A given instrument or mechanical device, while harmless in itself, might trigger broader social consequences. The productive value of a new piece of technology is often weighed against its potential impact on the traditional patterns of work and community. Their selective use of technology, thus hinges on an implicit assessment of its long term impact on community life...technology that improves efficiency or reduces physical labor is generally accepted, if it does not compromise basic social arrangements.⁸

If we compare this description with a more typical list of modern concerns we can see a distinctively different set of values emerge. Consider the message that marks the envelope carrying my monthly gas bill:

*Technology and literacy are the building blocks for a strong 21st century workforce.

*As never before, there is—and will increasingly be—a premium on American workers who can read and understand complex material, think analytically and use technology efficiently.

*The current and future of America’s 21st century economy depends directly on how broadly and deeply Americans reach a new level of literacy.

The imperative to aspire to a “new level of literacy” on behalf of the “21st. Century economy” and not on behalf of something more concrete and recognizable like the well being of our children or our social arrangements is telling of more than the symbolic distance between the presumed low-tech world of the Amish and the high-tech world so many more of us inhabit. It is also evidence of a brazen willingness to march willfully onward without any idea of where we are going. It is another modern tribute to the predominance of unintended consequences.

The value of the Amish example is not in the particulars of their lifestyle but in the purposefulness that they bring to these particulars. For every anachronistic peculiarity that the Amish bring to their actions they also bring the discriminating guidance of purpose, purpose that is informed by the “cardinal Amish virtue:” *Gelassenheit*, or “one’s willingness to yield to the community.”⁹ This notion of yielding to one’s community is like fingernails across a chalkboard for many moderns. It implies the kind of clothesline conformity my visitors mention when we tour Amish country. Of course, what these visitors often fail to notice is that it is not at all uncommon for people to behave similarly; the evidence for this eventuality is all around us. Perhaps this is why it is easy to forget that even in the throes of the most personal and poignant expressions we are forced to use languages that have been generated outside of ourselves and that part of their poignancy derives from the fact that they can be communicated at all. It is in this regard that, to some degree, we must all yield to the community that makes this communication possible.

For the Amish, community standards always define what is possible but this sort of explicit constraint does not appear to dampen their resourcefulness. In fact, as noted by the authors of *Amish Enterprise*, “without computers, splashy advertising, or personally owned vehicles—without the tools any CEO would consider essential—the Amish have built an impressive array of vigorous shops and industries.”¹⁰ This is not to imply that the Amish are not without their own set of burdens especially those that emerge through their constant contact with the non-Amish community and the special challenge of meeting this community with their renowned attempts at mixing intentional living with providential reasoning. There are phone booths set apart from family dwellings and inventive distinctions between formal ownership and actual use. There are no power lines linking Amish homes but there are methods for creating hydraulic and pneumatic power. For many moderns these strange concessions may seem like superstitious gestures, but, to the degree that they secure the Amish way of life, they are at least as realistic as ill-defined demands for “new levels of literacy” and supercharged “workers who can read and understand complex material.” Such calls rarely offer any mention of the educative value of utilitarian skill acquisition and brazenly undermine what we know about the transfer of skills from the classroom to particular jobs.¹¹ In fact, the Amish themselves demonstrate the questionable connection between schooling and skills. About 94 percent of Amish business owners have no formal training beyond the eighth grade and yet “60 percent of all Amish businesses have been started since 1980, and 31 percent have opened their doors in the last five years alone.”¹² The Amish reject formal education because it “encourages individualism,

competition, critical thinking, and bold faith in scientific progress.”¹³ They fear these values will undermine their tradition of communal living and an emphasis on practical experience. We may chide the Amish for leaving their ultimate fate to the will of God and flatter ourselves for taking fate into our own hands but with every unquestioning sacrifice that we make to the functioning of some ill-defined “21st. Century workforce,” the closer we come to confessing our own commitment to a particular destiny without the benefits and guidance of its dictates. We assume the fatalism of the Amish with less specific reasons for choosing one plan of action instead of another. In the process we reveal a profoundly debased sense of what it means to choose while simultaneously learning to live with constrained choices.

The Pressure to Perform

The capuchin monkey that lives with Robert Foster did not choose to come to the aid of a quadriplegic but this is exactly what she has been doing for about the last twenty years. The monkey’s name is Hellion and she is part of a program called Helping Hands, an organization that places trained monkeys in the homes of people with physical disabilities. Hellion was trained to help human clients through conditioning that rewarded her positive behavior with pellets of monkey chow and discouraged negative behavior with small electrical shocks to the tail. The staff at Helping Hands no longer uses this method to prepare monkeys for their work. Today they are trained “solely with affection, repetition and persistence.”¹⁴ While the Helping Hands approach to training has changed through the years, Hellion’s behavior remains much the same as it did when she was first taught to assist Foster. In fact, aside from some signs of aging, Hellian’s earlier training was so effective that, when Robert Foster recently regained some slight movement in his hand Hellion became startled by his motions. While another live-in aid of twenty years might find Foster’s more mobile condition a cause for celebration for Hellion this movement is disorienting because it clashes with what she has been trained to know about the world and her place in it. Hellion’s inability to create new meanings out of novel experiences provides a helpful illustration of the distinction between training and education, a distinction marked by the rigidity of her response. Dewey provides a useful point of comparison for understanding Hellion’s behavior:

A child might be able to bow every time he met a certain person by pressure on his neck muscles, and bowing would finally become automatic. It would not, however, be an act of recognition or deference on his part, till he did it with a certain end in view—as having a certain meaning. And not till he knew what he was about and performed the act for the sake of its meaning could he be said to be “brought up” or educated to act in a certain way. To have an *idea* of a thing is thus not just to get certain sensations from it. It is also to be able to respond to the thing in view of its place in an inclusive scheme of action; it is to foresee the drift and probable consequence of the action of the thing upon us and of our action upon it.¹⁵

Hellian’s aspirations appear to be sufficiently satisfied by the pleasantries of positive reinforcement for few to argue that she is educated and yet the kinds of retrieval skills that guide her behavior are not unlike the “educated” behavior we equate with some of our modern methods of assessing accountability for competent work. While Hellian is rewarded with pellets our school children are rewarded with percentage points. Hellian receives a shock to the tail and our low scorers limit their chances at unlimited material gains. At least this is the threat. Unfortunately, neither the threats nor the rewards offer much in the way of enduring and inspired practices. Instead we are left with the unfortunate fact that “when there is no intimate organic

connection between the methods and materials of knowledge and moral growth, particular lessons and modes of discipline have to be resorted to.”¹⁶ Clearly some of our modern efforts are labors of last resort. Consider the story of Stacey Moscovitz, a teacher in the New York City school system.

Like so many modern instructors Stacey Moscovitz finds herself in the awkward position of being a teacher in a public school system that promotes the work of trainers. In her efforts to boost both the students’ and the schools’ academic standing Moscovitz provided her students with the answers to examination questions. Her efforts were successful but the improved test scores had the undesirable effect of depriving “successful” students of the remedial help they became ineligible for as their test scores increased. This is what prompted Moscovitz’s confession and led to an investigation that uncovered cheating in a number of New York City schools. The strategies for these plots ranged from turning test taking into class projects where questions were called out until agreement was reached on the correct answer to taking a scrap paper exam before filling in the bubble sheets of the actual exam. Chester Finn, a former assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration says that these episodes should not dissuade us from the necessity of using standardized testing. According to Finn, educators have been artificially insulated from modern demands and he offers this commentary to make his point:

Pressure to perform is not a bad thing. Educators have been spared it for so long that they’ve forgotten that it’s part of life in almost every other line of work...bus drivers are under pressure not to crash their buses. Prison guards are under pressure not to let their prisoners escape. Doctors are under pressure not to let their patients die. Lawyers are under pressure to win their lawsuits. Everybody is under pressure in their job. Educators have had this sort of charmed life in which results doesn’t matter¹⁷

It is certainly not surprising to find moderns who appreciate the ability to work under pressure. We want surgeons who can work efficiently under the demands of a medical crisis and we want pilots who can react to the intense pressure of an airplane’s mechanical failure. In fact, given the way we organize ourselves, the ability to function with pressure whispering in our ears is practically synonymous with being modern. Even our food is fast. Still, it is one thing to recognize the pressures of modern living in an effort to understand our pace and practices, but it is quite another to use it as a guide for ordering educational policy. This is like requiring novice automobile drivers to practice their driving skills by sitting stopped in traffic because most of their drive time will be spent in much the same way. Of course, Finn’s logic is hardly novel. He is simply ministering to what Neil Postman refers to as “the god of Economic Utility,” a god that fails to see that even “economic utility is a by-product of a good education,” and a good education is one that extends its purpose beyond economic utility.¹⁸ To limit the purpose of schooling to the demands of the modern work world is to risk losing the very lessons that might make the choice of working to minimize pressure as reasonable as working to satisfy it. The ability to distinguish between the two is the difference between living purposefully and simply living.

The lack of clarity regarding the purpose of our workaday world and our personal contributions to its imperatives has not inhibited us from involving other species in our ill-defined plight. Consequently, the issue of simply living has become a dire one for modern elephants. According to Scholastic News, a school newspaper that is widely circulated in the U.S. and seems to routinely make its way from my daughter’s backpack to the dining room table, the news for elephants is not very good. In Vietnam and Cambodia their numbers have dropped

from approximately 2,000 to 100 in only ten years.¹⁹ The cover story for this issue of *Scholastic News* is about some of the measures that are being taken to modify these gloomy numbers. As it turns out, the agile trunk of an elephant provides a receptive vehicle for all sorts of instruments and the coupling of this physiological fact with the right medium is making it possible for elephants to create sellable wares. In turn, these wares have become the inventory for programs that employ elephants to earn money on their own behalf. The photograph accompanying the story depicts an elephant painting at an easel and standing beneath the words, “Elephant Artists: Talented Trunks Paint and Play Music to Preserve Their Species.” Of course, it was not the elephant’s idea to take up painting or music and yet by doing so they join the ranks of millions of moderns who spin their skills into currency. The fact that this unwitting aspect of elephant artistry is left unmentioned in the *Scholastic News* article may be because its “participate-or-perish” message is so commonplace that we take its imperatives for granted. Still, even without explicit discussion of our nearly inevitable subordination to these demands, like our elephant counterparts we will paint, play, plow and practice for our own survival.

The Conditions of Our Performance

For many moderns the work world offers the possibility for an important and profitable channel of individual expression. Whatever our career path, the most desirable one is the one we choose for ourselves. In the United States the promise of this possibility fuels much of the rhetoric concerning equality of opportunity and issues related to educational advancement. The first challenge to my own belief in this rhetoric was during a Women’s Literature course that I attended in my early twenties. The readings in the course prompted me to consider the possibility that some of my own skills and the opportunities that they engendered might be less attributable to “me” than they were to my circumstances. With the clarity of hindsight it is safe to say that I was indebted to the same kind of limited training that makes painters out of elephants and servants out of monkeys. It was as if my “personal” habits had been laid out for me in advance, like a well-pressed costume awaiting its performer. I found this realization reiterated in books like *The Feminine Mystique*, where Betty Freidan provides particularly graphic descriptions of how women’s roles were being tampered with by a modern marketing industry savvy enough to include just enough domestic drudgery to make a guilt-prone mother amenable to purchasing products promising convenience. In the following passage Freidan chronicles her encounter with an unidentified member of the marketing profession, a man whose “professional services in manipulating the emotions of American women to serve the needs of business” will contribute to the feminine mystique that Freidan is attempting to articulate for her readers. While Freidan is quick to suggest that there is no “economic conspiracy against women” the material garnered through her interviews clearly articulates how the obligatory demands of a particular social role can intersect with the interests of profiteers ready to exploit its enactment:

After an initial resistance, she now tends to accept instant coffee, frozen foods, precooked foods, and labor-saving items as part of her routine. But she needs a justification and she finds it in the thought that ‘by using frozen foods I’m freeing myself to accomplish other important tasks as a modern wife and mother....’ This means essentially that even though the housewife may buy canned food...and thus save time and effort, she doesn’t let it go at that. She has a great need for ‘doctoring up’ the can and thus prove her personal participation and her concern with giving satisfaction to her family...the yearning for creative opportunities and moments is a major aspect of buying motivations.”²⁰

By the standards of today’s hyper-commercial environs, Freidan’s account seems almost passé and outdated. We expect and accept that commercial interests are routinely attempting to

anticipate our next purchase. This is old news if it is news at all. Instead, we are likely to feel ourselves empowered by the choices laid before us and flattered by a marketplace that itemizes the needs of motherhood and sells them back to us as customized conveniences. In fact, we might point to a highly successful item like Botox, its initial financial success “without a peep of promotion” and deem this success not a tribute to a culture preoccupied with youthful appearances but as evidence of a market that accurately mirrors the intricacies of individual desire.²¹ This allows us to bend ourselves and our surroundings to the demands of the marketplace without ever feeling like we have fundamentally compromised ourselves in the process. If we choose to pump paralyzing toxins into our facial skin it is a decision we make independently and alone. Initially, Botox, or botulinum toxin A, was used to treat spasmodic disorders of the eye muscles but more recently it has become a way to erase wrinkles. The Botox user’s facial muscles are given a case of botulism that temporarily paralyzes these muscles while simultaneously performing the sought after wrinkle erasure that makes the drug so popular. The drug’s popularity prompted one writer to claim “it is now rare in certain social enclaves to see a woman over the age of 35 with the ability to look angry.”²² Obviously, these enclaves remain relatively exclusive, but the manufacturers of Botox believe that once the marketing begins, the number of Botox users could rise by 30 to 50 percent, a notable increase since 1.1 million people received these injections in 2000. These are particularly high numbers in light of the fact that modern individuals consider themselves individual thinkers with their own private purposes. Of course, the Botox phenomenon like so many others begs the question of how truly independent we really are, and if this independence defines us as individuals, then why do we choose to behave the same way. According to Stephen Etcoff, “plastic surgery is not something restricted to a small group of people who are seen as merely vain, because, really, we are all vain now.”²³ But, how did we “all” get this way? As moderns we are accustomed and encouraged to define our purposes as individuals and yet we are inevitably confronted with the collectivity that we form even as we believe ourselves to be going about our own business. This state of denial about our collective convergence has consequences that range from the frighteningly flip ability to “play havoc with facial expressions” to creating less playful circumstances of our children.²⁴

Much to the dismay of the toy industry American children are abandoning toys at an increasingly early age. The phenomenon is so common among American youth that the industry refers to it by name as “age compression.”²⁵ For the industry this means a market with a narrowing age range and for both the industry and the children it means, in “market-speak,” KGOY or “kids getting older younger.”²⁶ According to Dorothy G. Singer, a senior research scientist at Yale University’s department of psychiatry, the high tech options that are on the market such as education-oriented electronic toys, talking robot pals and computer games produce “convergent thinking.”²⁷ In other words, the toy dictates the response and leaves very little to the imagination. Singer says, that these “tech toys may teach skills but they can also alter children’s learning styles in ways that don’t become apparent until later... parents wake up and find themselves wondering how their 8-year-old became so addicted to electronic stimuli, so impatient with three-dimensional objects.”²⁸ Of course, toy makers disagree, claiming that “lights and sounds can add fun, make a toy more magical.” For Neil Friedman, president and chief executive of the Fisher-Price division of Mattel Inc., “if a child is enjoying a toy and coming back to it, how can that not be good?”²⁹ Mr. Friedman chose his logic purposefully and might consider rewording this comment if the word “toy” were replaced with “cigarette” or “robbery” or hatefulness.” It is unlikely that Friedman will be called on to reword his comments because any savvy modern understands his motivation. After all, the toy industry gives us the

concept of “age compression” not as a social issue in need of address but as a problem of profit. We may retreat to the seclusion of our individual purposes when it comes to many things, but we all come out to play when it comes to matters of finance.

It is not really necessary to invoke a modern story of greed to introduce its thematic prevalence among moderns. Most of us can conjure up our own familiar tales because the quest for monetary gain is practically synonymous with being modern. Consequently, we are unscathed by the existence of a software program like “CASH” which compresses the space between a radio announcer’s words so that the station can run four to six more ads per hour. We do not flinch when the greeting card industry creates a category of “support and encouragement” cards to sell after the most horrendous disasters.³⁰ The sort of ease with which we greet the crass commercialization of our modern landscapes is made less offensive by the fact that we believe ourselves immune to its influence. We assume that we take in our environment in bits and pieces, all the while determining which jingle or logo we will assent to wearing, humming or having. If there are broader implications with regard to age compression, Botox or painting elephants they rain down on us one drop at a time and cannot pool because we are acting on behalf of no one but ourselves. This logic has its perverse and tangible expression on many modern settings, settings in which “ten thousand highway strips across the land...have made commerce itself appear to be obscene.”³¹ Unfortunately, commerce does not come with a book of etiquette or a moral code to guide us to appropriate ethical standards. These standards *are* the highway strips and wrinkle-free faces and depleted elephant populations. Our morals are in our methods and many modern methods assume that morals are a private matter. Of course, they are not. Dewey elaborates:

Morals is as much a matter of interaction of a person with his social environment as walking is an interaction of legs with a physical environment. The character of walking depends upon the strength and competency of legs. But it also depends upon whether a man is walking in a bog or on a paved street, upon whether there is a safeguarded path set aside or whether he has to walk amid dangerous vehicles. If the standard of morals is low it is because the education given by the interaction of the individual with his social environment is defective. Of what avail is it to preach unassuming simplicity and contentment of life when communal admiration goes to the man who ‘succeeds’—who makes himself conspicuous and envied because of command of money and other forms of power?...The notion that an abstract and ready-made conscience exists in individuals and that it is only necessary to make an occasional appeal to it and to indulge in occasional crude rebukes and punishments, is associated with the causes of lack of definitive and orderly moral advance. For it is associated with lack of attention to social forces.³²

It is appropriate that Dewey refers to an assortment of walking conditions in a passage devoted to the signs of inattention to social forces. This lack of attention is rarely as visibly pronounced as it is on our modern landscapes.

Learning Lessons from Landscapes and Lifestyles

Any urban and regional planner knows that before creating an active pedestrian area you have to create meaningful destinations that are accessible by foot. According to the authors of *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, this prerequisite sets the stage for the other necessary factors of a successful pedestrian street including the need to create a setting that feels comfortable and safe. These authors claim that unfortunately, “the problem with street design standards is not that engineers have forgotten how to make streets

safe but that they don't even try."³³ This lack of concern for the well being of pedestrians is not due to a lack of funding for the roads. On the contrary, "the United States has the most luxurious road systems in the world" with new highways being built at a cost of \$30 million per mile. Unfortunately these roadways are not for walking; they are for driving and it is not as simple as blaming the engineers who design these roads.³⁴ As the authors of *Suburban Nation* suggest, "the engineers' strict adherence to their manuals is actually promising: rather than convincing the engineers to fundamentally rethink their approach, we need only amend the manuals in order to reform their profession."³⁵ In order to amend these manuals so that they encourage a human-centered rather than car-centered approach to street design it would be wise to include some reference to the kind of social environment we are interested in creating. Clearly, catering to the pedestrian or the motorist is more than mere street design; it is also a matter of priority with regard to the cascade of behaviors that emerge when people behave as pedestrians and as motorists. These amended manuals might include some reference to the kinds of ideals we aspire to, the kinds of citizens we seek to engender and empower and the kind of landscape we wish to will our children. After all, our modern manuals already influence these issues only they do it by default and not by design.

Although the conditions of a democracy are not met by living in close proximity to one another or by catering to pedestrians rather than cars these are the kinds of variables that create the scope of our communication that makes the social aims of a democracy possible. Consider what happens to the range of our communication when housing is clustered according to real estate prices or "ruthless segregation by minute gradations of income."³⁶ Consider the fact that this segregation is not publicly debated but simply evolves as a trendy marketing scheme in the U.S. housing market:

The segregation of housing by "market segment" is a phenomenon that was developed by developers who, lacking a meaningful way to distinguish their mass-produced merchandise, began selling the concept of exclusivity. *If you live within these gates, you can consider yourself a success.* The real estate business caters to this elitism so relentlessly that even some mobile home parks are marketed in this way.³⁷

While a modern real estate developer is unlikely to advertise the sale of homes to people with a specific ethnic heritage, age or appearance, the "neutrality" of the sign that says, "homes start at \$200,000" appears to eliminate the threat of intentional segregation. And these signs do not advocate segregation; they simply reflect our faith in the principled filtering of the deserving from the non-deserving. With this arrangement in place it is no wonder that those who can afford the privilege of a "personal archipelago" will probably take it.³⁸ Unfortunately, no matter how protected the entranceway or how extensive the security system the retreat into private sanctuaries has consequences for all of us. These consequences become clear when considered in light of Dewey's description of the conditions that are necessary for the workings of a democracy:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.³⁹

When we treat democracy as a tool that allows us to make decisions about how we want to live, we begin to see the necessity of coordinating our movements rather than privatizing them. We gain a standard for measuring the value or futility of our methods.

A logical place to look for the enactment of such standards is in the classrooms of our public schools. Unfortunately, U.S. public schools tend to rely on methods that reduce the lessons of *living* in a democracy to trivial classroom exercises like head counts during the pledge of allegiance. Aside from token gestures of civic consciousness the classroom is a confined space centered on teaching lessons of confinement. I recently visited several public schools in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where I did find some variations in the art projects lining the walls and some distinctive architectural details between the older and newer schools. Still, the structure of the day remained consistent across two counties and ten schools, a structure largely dependent on the constant monitoring of student behavior. Of course, the basis for this monitoring has many reasons, including the fact that we still believe learning and silence must always be synonymous. Some monitoring is simply for the sake of crowd control, making public school lunchrooms and gymnasiums noisy conflict-ridden places where screeching whistles compete with ever escalating chatter. In other words, if U.S. school children are learning about democracy it is not likely to be modeled for or by them in the schools. Jay Lemke describes what children do learn:

In Western society citizens in the age-group from about 12-13 to 18-21 are denied most legal rights and are *de facto* wards and chattel in just the same ways, or worse, than women were before the twentieth century, and peasants, serfs and slaves before that. They are denied access to most gainful employment, do not have exclusive financial control of their own property, do not have the right to marry, to make their own medical decisions, to control their own education...in practice they have practically no independent rights of assembly or petition. Not only parents, but school officials frequently and traditionally deny them even rights of free speech and expression in entirely arbitrary ways. They are forced to attend schools in whose curricula they have no significant voice...⁴⁰

Whether or not we share Lemke's concerns or find them to be overstated does not change the fact that the upkeep of democratic principles requires a population that can appreciate and monitor its own behavior as it contributes to the creation and maintenance of these principles. The proof of this ability is not in silent tribute to a waving flag but in the way we construct the places that prove these principles have some application in the world. This is why it is as valuable to consider the structure of schoolrooms as it is to consider street design and transportation systems.

If we aimed to create a method of transportation that would purposefully alienate populations of people from one another we would probably arrive at something similar to what is in place today. Our cars make contact with each other an unnecessary and even angering experience. Our streets become clogged "traffic sewers" where we collect to vent and hiss at each other like clams in a pot of boiling water. A modern roadway is no place to make friends or acquaintances and yet it is our most common meeting ground, a place where we exit as anonymously as we enter. Addressing the asocial influence of anonymity should be at the center of our efforts to live in a democracy, but anonymity cannot be overcome without the kinds of places that turn strangers into acquaintances and make possible the sharing of similar purposes. This is where the skill of good place making comes into play, but it is a skill many moderns know only as the arrangement of personal living rooms and closets.

James Kunstler, an avid critic of careless modern planning practices, describes the need for a more concerted effort at both broadening and passing on this skill. Kunstler explains, “the culture of good place-making, like the culture of farming, or agriculture, is a body of knowledge and acquired skills. It is not bred in the bone, and if it is not transmitted from one generation to the next, it is lost.”⁴¹ Of course, given Dewey’s definition of democracy, there is more at stake than idyllic vistas or quaint cobblestone streets; the role of place is a source of purposeful activity in our collective lives. This does not mean that place is a panacea. As one critic of the new urbanism explains, the notion that “community will rescue us from the deadening world of social dissolution, grab-it-yourself materialism and individualized selfish market-oriented greed” begs the question of “what kind of ‘community’ ” we have in mind.⁴² There is no simple and straightforward solution to this question, and it is especially challenging given the fact that so many of our modern places are momentary stopovers on the way to being something else.

The historic civil war battlefields at Gettysburg National Park tell an insightful tale about our modern relationship with place. The area has long been recognized as a site of historic significance and its commemoration dates back to the 1800’s shortly after the Civil War ended but it was not until 1974 that a new addition allowed visitors to get a birds eye view of the battlefields in their entirety. The new structure was a 393-foot steel observation tower that was built on private property at the edge of the park. The tower stood as a distinctly modern method of taking in the surroundings and showed absolutely no signs of continuity with the historic landscape that had initiated its construction. This fact loomed large over the tower and finally, its critics had their way and the tower was destroyed in May of 2000. The justification for the tower’s destruction was led by the U.S. Park service, which declared it inconsistent with efforts to restore Gettysburg to its “historic integrity.” The need to take in the visual scope of the park has been replaced by the need to recreate it in its contemporary yet historic glory. Today these restoration efforts seek to replace historic fence lines, orchards and farm lanes in order to convey “to people today what it was like for the men who fought there” but this stated objective only conveys part of the story.⁴³ This place also conveys our modern readiness to redefine and replace landmarks and landscapes to suit the demands of the day. Of course, these demands do not necessarily reflect consensus, but it is consensus that appears triumphant when all that is left standing stands as a tribute to the conclusion of a debate in which the losers have left the scene.

Our modern landscapes appear to swallow dissent while consensus waits in the wings, but as David Harvey notes, there is a “politics to place-making.”⁴⁴ He elaborates on this point with regard to the claims made by the authors of *Suburban Nation* and their espousal of traditional urbanism as the basis for city planning:

The presumption here is that neighborhoods are in some sense ‘intrinsic,’ that the proper form of cities is some ‘structure of neighborhoods,’ that ‘neighborhood,’ is equivalent to ‘community’ and ‘community’ is what most Americans want and need (whether they know it or not). It is further presumed that action at the scale defined by this new urbanism is effective and sufficient to solve problems that exist at all other scales⁴⁵

Harvey’s claim has a multitude of manifestations with varying degrees of subtlety and complexity. One of the less subtle forms is evident in the fact that a housing development in the U.S. can become a “community” with the installation of a security gate, a dividing wall and a sign that says “community” at the entryway. The fact that these assemblages suggests as much about keeping others out as they do about letting them in is appropriate in a “community” that exists regardless of the condition of the human relationships that thrive or falter within its walls. Such careless applications of the concept of community are not limited to the identification of

housing developments; after all, the U.S. judicial system routinely uses “community service” as a punitive measure. With such connotations in place it is hardly surprising to find degraded notions of what constitutes a community. Yet, it is the notion of community that must support any meaningful attempts at creating the conditions of a democracy. Without the “enlarged and changed experience” evoked by meaningful communication there can be no shared commitment to the social goals that are implicit in a democratic way of life. Dewey explains the importance of communication to the formation of a community:

Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others. A book or a letter may institute a more intimate association between human beings separated thousands of miles from each other than exists between dwellers under the same roof. Individuals do not even compose a social group because they all work for a common end. The parts of a machine work with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community. But this would involve communication. Each would have to know what the other was about and would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, for many millions of moderns the notion of forming communities is hardly an option or a concern.

Well Placed People as Public Participants

Richard Rogers, the author of *Cities for a Small Planet*, cites a number of statistics regarding the degraded conditions in which millions of people are cohabitants. Rogers notes that “30 to 60 percent of the residents of most large cities in developing countries live in informal settlements or shanty towns.”⁴⁷ The numbers specific to particular cities are staggering. In Mexico City, 40 percent of the population live in shanties, in Manila, 47 percent and in Bogota, 59 percent. Clearly, these populations confront serious constraints in the conditions of their cohabitation and to make comparisons between their circumstances and the circumstances of their more moneyed modern counterparts seems like an unfair likening. Still, even without denying the privilege of the affluent a definition of citizenship as the “notion of shared responsibility for one’s environment,” makes clear that functioning as a citizen may be as challenging in Bombay, where 5 million people live in shanties, as it is in a typical American city where parceled plots of real estate fracture the landscape into alternating pieces of privilege and poverty. Rogers, a highly acclaimed international architect, describes the relationship between cities and citizenship:

Active citizenship and vibrant urban life are essential components of a good city and of civic identity. To restore these where they are lacking, citizens must be involved in the evolution of their cities. They must feel that public space is in their communal ownership and responsibility. From the modest back street to the grand civic square these spaces belong to the citizen and make up the totality of the public domain, a public institution in its own right which like any other can enhance or frustrate our urban experience. The public domain is the theatre of an urban culture. It is where citizenship is enacted, it is the glue that can bind an urban society.⁴⁸

By treating places as necessary components to the enactment of our citizenship, we are able to measure freedom not by the frequency with which it is invoked as public relations maneuver but as a very tangible mark upon the landscapes in which we live our lives. This is why Rogers

maintains, “freedom of public space must be defended just as fiercely as freedom of expression.”⁴⁹ Of course, our willingness to act on behalf of public space presumes that we are able to discern the continuity between personal acts and public consequences, that we recognize “the essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those engaged in producing them.”⁵⁰ We cannot “hear” these calls unless we are skilled communicators as capable of conveying the status of our own conditions as we are at empathizing with the conditions of others.

It was concern for the condition of others that inspired a group of Florida State University students to attempt to pressure F.S.U. administrative officials to join the Workers’ Rights Consortium. The consortium is described as “an international organization that monitors the working conditions of Third World workers who make athletic clothing emblazoned with university names and logos.”⁵¹ Since F.S.U. has a lucrative endorsement deal with Nike, the students thought it appropriate to publicly express their support for an alternative course of action for the university. The arrests that followed were not the result of their actions *per se* but a result of the place they chose to engage in their actions. Having protested outside of the “free speech zone,” these students were briefly jailed and then released with a \$500 bond and the threat of further fines, jail time and expulsion from the university. Whether or not we agree with the political views of these students, these may seem like extreme measures for a response initially based on the rather benign claim that “alumni liked to take photos around the fountain” and university officials “needed to keep the place ‘looking nice.’”⁵² Of course, it is far more than appearance that drives this desire to maintain a tidy campus. The pressures of modern economic conditions have many moderns scrambling to perform in ways that are acceptable to who or whatever holds the purse strings. Rick Johnson, a civil rights attorney from Tallahassee, describes the outcome: “used to be we had a sea of freedom with some islands of restriction. Now the campus is a sea of restriction with some islands of free speech.”⁵³ These islands may provide consolation to university administrators who sense that a university campus should reflect more than the funding concerns of its caretakers, but they do little to suggest the significance of the kind of open and unimpeded communication that a public forum should be constructed to promote. Without places to enact the public role of a citizen we are left playing the role that seems to be the default model with the most modern emphasis, that of the individual consumer.

Being better consumers is a role that teacher Sandy Marciniak has no problem endorsing on behalf of school children. In praising the Field Trip Factory, Marciniak says that students who participate in its offerings will “be better shoppers and better consumers for it.”⁵⁴ Apparently, others share Marciniak’s sentiments. The Field trip Factory, which was started by marketing expert Susan Singer, has increased its locations from eight to 43 states in just two years. The concept is a simple one; clients like the Petco pet supply store and The Sports Authority sports equipment store pay the “factory” to organize field trips to their stores. Why go to the zoo when the Petco pet store is available and willing to pay for the trip? Like Singer says, “If you can take that lesson and teach it two blocks away at a local retailer and it’s really the same lesson, why not?”⁵⁵ It is helpful to return to the concept of collateral learning to appreciate the implications of Singer’s question. It is a question that encapsulates the commonly held belief that people learn only what is explicitly taught to them. We fail to notice that hearts beat, eyes blink and disciplined ears selectively listen all with varying levels of directed concentration, and yet we perceive ourselves to be vigilant sentinels with only the most censored materials making their way to where we can use them at our own discretion. This is where Singer’s logic is flawed; she

thinks a lesson has to be assigned before it can be learned. The same logic informs the thinking of university administrators who treat civic protestation as one might treat a street performer entertaining pedestrians who happen to walk by. In these examples we find an indifference to place that can only reflect an equally insensitive appreciation of what well-placed people can accomplish.

Since people always inhabit places, places should provide a perfect platform for modern expressions of freedom and equality. If these ideals are not present in our places, then where are they placed? Richard Rogers has this to say about the prospective relationship between people and places, cities and citizenship:

A new form of citizenship must be evolved that responds to the needs of a modern city. Greater emphasis on citizen participation and better leadership are vital. Involving communities in decision-making requires that the built environment become a standard part of education, and a major component of our National Curriculum. Teaching children about their everyday urban environment equips them to participate in the process of respecting and improving the city. Cities themselves can be a great tool, a live laboratory for education.⁵⁶

The presumption that a city can be an educative tool requires an imaginative range that exceeds our modern reliance on the individual as the moral compass for our actions. It implies a broadened geography that compels us to look beyond the confines of our own walls, wishes and wants. It forces us to confront the fact that individual morality is always social morality. Of course, the irony is that the practitioner of socially responsible behavior is always the individual. The good news is that by making this connection explicit we can invigorate not only our cities our classroom and even our customs, but also the individual who expresses and experiences the brunt of so many modern maladies. This is the subject of the concluding essay.

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- ¹ John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938/1997) p. 358.
- ² *The Wall Street Journal*, “Happy Birthday! Now do these sums and we’ll score you,” By Amy Dockser Marcus, September 19, 1999.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, p. 48.
- ⁵ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1966) p. 11.
- ⁶ Donald B. Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt, *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) p. 189.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of the transfer of skills from classroom to workplace see Gerald Bracey, *Setting the Record Straight: Response to Misconceptions About Public Education in the United States*, (Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997) p. 162-166.
- ¹² Donald B. Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt, p. 43.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- ¹⁴ CBS News/ *60 Minutes II*: A Monkey Named Hellion, January 10, 2002, CBS Worldwide Inc.
- ¹⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 30.
- ¹⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 136.
- ¹⁷ The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, “Cheating Teachers” April 26, 2000, MacNeil-Lehrer Productions.
- ¹⁸ Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) p. 27.
- ¹⁹ *Scholastic News*, “Painting for Peanuts: Two groups teach elephants to paint and play for survival.” Vol. 63 No. 16 edition 4, February 12, 2001.
- ²⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974) p. 204.
- ²¹ *The New York Times*, “In quest for wrinkle-free future, frown becomes thing of the past, By: Alex Kuczynski, February 7, 2002.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *The Washington Post*, “ ‘Toys? But I’m 10 Now!’ As the Barbie set gets younger, the industry retools” By: Fern Shen, February 17, 2002.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ In *Lancaster Sunday News*, “ ‘Hope and Cope’ cards for tough times” By: Richard Leiby, *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2001.

³¹ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

³² John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: The Middle Works of John Dewey 1899-1924* ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1922/1988) p. 219.

³³ Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Pint Press, 2000) p. 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 87.

⁴⁰ Jay Lemke, *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd. 1995) p. 137.

⁴¹ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-made Landscape*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) p. 112.

⁴² David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p. 170.

⁴³ The Associated Press, “Gettysburg tower gone but not forgotten,” December 02, 2001.

⁴⁴ David Harvey cited in *The Power of Place: Urban landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) p. 78.

⁴⁵ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p. 171.

⁴⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁷ Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Planet* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997) p. 57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵⁰ John Dewey, *The Public & it's Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press, 1999/1927) p. 27.

⁵¹ Diane Roberts, "Zoned Out," *The New Republic*, May 22, 2002.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ CBS News, Reading, Writing...And Retail, May 30, 2002, CBS Worldwide Inc.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Richard Rogers, p. 17.

Chapter 5

The Inevitability of Being Social and how it can help us to be Better Moderns

For how can there be a society really worth saving unless it is constituted of individuals of significant personal qualities?
John Dewey¹

As the end of summer vacation draws near, my twelve-year-old daughter and her friend discuss their plans for the upcoming school year. They decide that this year they will wear “hippie clothes,” learn to ride skateboards and identify themselves as “cool-hippie-skateboarding-chicks.” Being modern, they assume that they come to these roles through their own volition, as if “hippies,” skateboards and chicks were empty concepts awaiting their arrival, with no more than a coincidental blending of personal and social predilections leading the way. In previous essays I have examined why this is more than an age-related oversight. From poorly planned cities and classrooms to pathological personalities intent on demonstrating distinction through violent and destructive acts, I have used numerous modern stories to illustrate the drawbacks of privileging individual empowerment at the expense of securing an equally significant social milieu. By linking social autonomy with individual achievement we have created complicated and convoluted boundaries between our selves, our settings and each other. The good news is that these boundaries are as susceptible to alteration as any of our modern monuments and while the enthusiastic plotting of a preteen American adolescent is hardly the model of monumental thinking, the fact that this thinking is aimed at self-creation has monumental implications. As we have seen in previous essays, the weight of these implications is generally thought to reside in the self that is the subject of this creation. In this concluding essay I aim to diffuse some of this weight by suggesting that our modern capacity for self-definition must be informed by the inevitability of our social connectivity. I will proceed from the perspective that informs Dewey’s claim that “it is not an ethical ‘ought’ that conduct *should* be social. It *is* social, whether bad or good.”² We cannot act responsibly without recognizing this inevitable condition of human existence. In previous essays I have evoked a number of modern stories that suggest and exemplify our modern inattentiveness toward this social imperative. Here, I will consider some alternative modern stories, stories that express a more keen sense of the interplay that exists between our social circumstances and ourselves. If the examples used in previous essays can be said to represent our further entrenchment and imprisonment in an inner world of psychic separateness, then the examples in this essay can be treated as evidence of our possible escape and liberation from the confines of this self-imposed isolation.

Learning to Appreciate Our Socially Saturated Status

Humans continually make the empathic traversal that fuels any socially minded act and yet it is so commonplace that we hardly notice it.³ We have little incentive to think about how someone else’s misfortune can bring tears to our own eyes. As spectators we do not discuss the fact that we often suffer racing hearts and sweaty palms as readily as the participant who actually walks the tightrope or the terrified casualty jumping from the window of a burning building. We seem strangely inattentive to the social implications contained within these “personal” facts, satisfied that plain coincidence is enough to explain all those silent moments when conversations stop because both speakers forget the same word at exactly the same time. This inattention to our own empathic abilities is unfortunate, like missing the crucial details of a conversation because our ears are filled with the plugs of a private headset. As moderns we are prone to miss the fact that it

is from within moments of quiet social engagement that we generate insight into the depths of our public possibilities and the purposefulness that these possibilities generate. Of course, conjuring up private scenes of social sensitivity compels us to acknowledge contrasting examples where the failure to live up to this “built-in” sociability holds us hostage to such “asocial” devices as landmines, landfills, lie detectors, slavery and schoolyard bullying. With so many misanthropic devices strapped beneath our collective belt it seems naively optimistic to overstate our capacity for compassion or for examining our own behaviors with reference to how these behaviors might implicate others.

Fortunately, tallying our vices and virtues tells us little about our future capacities since what has passed says as much about our pliancy as it does about our predilections. Still, this pliancy does not make us entirely unpredictable, because in spite of the vast and varied ways in which human capacities are made manifest they are always manifest within the dictates of a social context. While moderns may choose to treat this context as a bothersome aside, a muted backdrop that simply sets our own unique qualities off in relief against all others, the inescapable fact is that we are never set entirely apart. This is why Dewey uses the potent phrase “social saturation” to describe our human condition, a condition that is as true for today’s “wired” modern city-dweller as it was for yesterday’s feudal serf. Of course, the fact that we no longer live on feudal estates but continue to labor on behalf of rent collecting landlords suggests that while our social entrenchment may be inevitable, the terms and conditions of this entrenchment are not, a fact that Dewey elaborates on in the following passage:

All of the actions of an individual bear the stamp of his community as assuredly as does the language he speaks ...this social saturation is a matter of fact, not of what should be, not of what is desirable or undesirable. It does not guarantee the rightness of goodness of an act; there is no excuse for thinking of evil action as individualistic and right action as social. Deliberate unscrupulous pursuit of self-interest is as much conditioned upon social opportunities, training and assistance as is the course of action prompted by a beaming benevolence...Consider the form commonly assumed today by self-seeking; namely command of money and economic power.

Dewey’s example of what constitutes a prevalent modern social opportunity remains a useful one: Money is a social institution; property is a legal custom; economic opportunities are dependent upon the state of society; the objects aimed at, the rewards sought for, are what they are because of social admiration, prestige, competition and power. If money making is morally obnoxious it is because of the way these social facts are handled, not because a money-making man has withdrawn from society into an isolated selfhood or turned his back upon society. His ‘individualism’ is not found in his original nature but in his habits acquired under social influences. It is found in his concrete aims, and these are reflexes of social conditions.”⁴

An enthralled child reading fairy tales may wish to be a knight in adulthood, but by the time adulthood arrives these early aims have been tempered and conditioned by what is made available to us by the social world of which we are a part.

For moderns, the affirmation of a personal social debt presents a challenge to long held beliefs about psychic autonomy and matters of choice. It threatens to steal the identity of both our heroes and our deviants by spreading the responsibility for their deeds outward in a thousand different directions covering us all like beds beneath a massive blanket. Although this may sound suffocating in its effects, it is a weight we carry effortlessly since we cannot know ourselves without it. These are lessons we learn early on, coming to the terms and conditions of our social

world with the sort of innocent accommodation that is similarly reflected in more adult matters like learning to laugh at road kill, sitting through a standardized test or even admiring silicone shaped breasts. Contrary to modern biases that suggest such cultural artifacts drop fully formed from the personal preference of a particular creator, these kinds of examples harbor a social dimension that makes them and our beliefs toward them make sense. Being able to appreciate that personal beliefs and desires have a social dimension allows us to conscientiously fill in the gap between ourselves and the outer social realm; it gives us tools for understanding why things happen the way they do and incentives for making them happen differently. Without these incentives we are left with an asocial, supposedly detached and “objective” accountability that makes our modern manners appear unrelated to the setting that spawned them and irrelevant to the creation of future settings.

The presumption that social circumstances simply appear like the default settings on a digitized piece of electronic equipment encourages us to create, accommodate and endure short-sighted and socially degrading decisions. These decisions do not change the fact that we continue to function within the boundaries of our social circumstances; they simply debase these circumstances by catering to concerns that appear to be irrelevant to them. Robert McChesney explores this subject as it relates to the modern media and notes that, “while advertisers and media giants have major incentives to exploit the children’s market, they have no incentive to consider the social implications of their combined efforts.”⁵ McChesney is alluding to modern marketing practices such as the 1998 decision by U.S. broadcasters to begin targeting toddlers in an effort to get “a toehold on the youth market.”⁶ Of course, more than a market is “gotten hold of” when we brazenly commercialize our children’s local landscapes. Alfie Kohn, a commentator who addresses issues of schooling and its relationship to human behavior, explains the relevant and consistent findings of social psychology,

much of how we act and who we are reflects the situation in which we find ourselves.

Virtually all the landmark studies in this discipline have been variations on this theme. Set up children in extended team competition at summer camp and you will elicit unprecedented levels of aggression. Assign adults to the roles of prisoners or guards in a mock jail and they will start to become their roles. Move people to a small town and they will be more likely to rescue a stranger in need.⁷

Ask a prison guard to describe the ways an inmate’s personal habits begin to conform to the demands of their environment and they will offer up a range of creative examples. At least this was my experience during a personal tour of a prison facility. The guard explained how female inmates fashioned cosmetics out of cafeteria fare, substituting instant mash potato mix for the facial powders normally carried about in a delicate compact case. He described hair styling gels concocted from mixtures of sugar and water. Of course, a prison setting exemplifies a very narrow and extreme set of circumstances, but this does not make its illustrative lessons irrelevant. While many moderns may be working with less constrained conditions, we are all still styling ourselves with the stuff of our social surroundings. Whether this “stuff” includes the twenty thousand ads that American children see every year by the time they reach the age of seven or the meager offerings of a prison cafeteria, we work with what we are given. This is how the “outside” gets in and why our modern deference to the individual, irrespective of a characterizing social context, is like trying to define a fish without mentioning water or trying to describe a case of Attention Deficit Disorder without also describing the social conditions through which this concept and its “carriers” have emerged.

The relationship that emerges between a fish in his watery habitat and human in hers is obviously quite different since a human can fashion circumstances through deliberate action. And,

while conditions are dire for a fish out of water, humans can glide through a myriad of circumstances and never lose a breath. Of course, movement and respiration may be essential for existence, but they meet only the most basic measure for life as a human. Ours is a far more burdensome existence replete with choices that compel us to decipher shades of meaning, to decode each other's words and to shape our living arrangements in ways that respond to these interpretations. Our modern tendency to treat these responses as evidence of self rather than social affirmation makes it irrelevant for us to concern ourselves with the link between the two, but this does not make the link any less real or significant. It is a link that is as potent in its recognition as it is in its neglect or, to revisit a previous example, U.S. broadcasters may ignore the social implications of advertising to toddlers but that does not make these implications disappear. It simply places them in a "private" domain where their benefits and deficiencies can be accommodated on an individual basis. The trouble with this accounting is that it *discounts* the fact that "morality is social" and encourages the view that personal attributes evolve apart from a social context. It is belief in this illusory detachment that may be as dire for humans as a waterless world would be for fish. To deny ourselves knowledge of the shaping influence of our social surroundings is to sentence ourselves to the utterly alienating quest for individuality through social disengagement rather than engagement. It is to define ourselves against each other rather than for and with each other.

Impediments to Securing Our Socially Saturated Status

The first grade teacher who confronts a classroom of twenty-eight six-year-old students is not intentionally setting her students against one another when she rewards their good behavior with five minutes of one-on-one teacher time. She is simply adapting to the demands of an overcrowded classroom, but it is a classroom in which the value of competition is adhered to with the kind of quiet tenacity that keeps the room's paint stuck to its walls. Alfie Kohn describes competition in its more tangible manifestations:

When students in American schools are not separated from each other—and sometimes even when they are—they are set against one another, told in effect that their success comes at the price of someone else's failure and vice versa. Grading on a curve...choosing only the best papers to be displayed on the wall, playing games such as spelling bees that sort children into winners and losers, forcing them to try to edge each other out for school-wide awards—all of these explicit contests, along with the subtler competition for recognition and approval in the classroom, teach children one enduring, fundamental message: *other people are potential obstacles to my own success.*⁸

For many moderns, competition is an open-ended concept that can be applied to anything from the marketplace to mating marsupials. In fact, the belief that we are perpetually and unavoidably pitted against each other is so embedded in our modern thinking that sometimes we assume this to be the case even when it is not. Barbara Benham Tye, whose research involves "uncovering the deep structure of schooling", has written on our tendency to treat the public schools as places doomed by a barrage of competing and incommensurate interests. Tye's analysis reveals that we share a greater number of expectations about the proper functioning of the public schools than we might otherwise acknowledge. Tye explains:

Every September the gallop Poll provides the nation with a summary of what Americans believe about and want from their schools. Of course, it reveals a range of opinion and some regional differences; but what sticks in most people's minds are those points on which large percentages of citizens agree. The fundamental agreement (despite outlying alternative viewpoints) is part of the deep structure of schooling. In this particular case, it

seems that conventional wisdom maintains a belief that simply doesn't hold up under scrutiny. We all assume that Americans don't agree about schools, when in fact they do.⁹ Among Tye's list of shared "conventional wisdom" about America's public schools is the belief that "any child can succeed if he or she works hard" and working hard means competing against those obstacles that might limit access to successful completion of one's personal goals.¹⁰ Competition provides us with the fodder for a strange and perverse sort of self-fulfilling prophecy that makes conflict a condition of our birth, a personal tribute to another successful "survival of the fittest" tale. And, since it is a tale with no conclusion, it is possible that the battle may bridge the course of an entire life span as we compete for test scores, jobs, housing, and even parking spaces. For many Americans the demands of a competitive world could become even more demanding since it appears that some of our battles may eventually have to be fought sitting down.

According to recent research on the occurrence of obesity among America's youth, "the percentage of 6-to-11-year olds who are overweight has nearly doubled in two decades [and] for adolescents the percentage has tripled."¹¹ It is not just our children who are gaining weight; there are approximately 50 million obese adults living in the U.S. The reasons for escalating rates of obesity include obvious factors like increasingly sedentary lifestyles, bigger "supersize" fast food meals, and more subtle factors such as the one mentioned in an *U.S. News and World Report* article entitled "Super Size America: How our way of life is killing us." According to the article's author Amanda Spake, "one reason Americans are so clueless about weight may be because they still see obesity as an individual moral failing not an environmental one."¹² For moderns, the most obvious place to look for obesity is where metal meets mouth, but Spake, taking her cue from a researcher who has studied thousands of obesity cases, describes the problem in different terms. She uses one family's circumstances to highlight the contributing factors that do not appear at the personal point of ingestion:

Judy Young is a professional in the computer business, who says her job requires 'sitting all the time in front of a computer screen.' She's a single mother, and at night, exhausted with a hungry child to feed, the temptation to run to a fast-food restaurant for dinner is often too powerful to resist. 'They make it so easy for you to 'biggie size' everything' Young says. She never thought fast food was a good choice, but it saved time for her to help Katie with her homework.¹³

Young goes on to explain other choices such as the decision to allow her daughter to have midday meals through affordable school lunch programs. These meals typically consist of hot dogs and pizza but for sixty-five cents, it's hard to complain. Meanwhile,

Young knew her daughter needed more exercise, particularly after physical education at school was cut to one day a week. But she was nervous about letting Katie walk to school. 'We live in a big city,' she says "and it just isn't safe."¹⁴

Not surprisingly, Young's daughter weighed nearly 130 pounds by the time she was seven. Although many moderns will credit Katie Young for her problems with obesity, if we consider the variables elicited by the aforementioned example, it becomes clear that drawing a direct link between Katie's personal eating habits and her weight gain may not be as straightforward as simply counting calories. The elimination of physical activity in the school, the perilous journey along city streets and the convenience of processed prepackaged food has nothing at all to do with Katie Young directly, but their presence and their absence are directly influencing Katie Young. If Katie Young is to be held accountable for her own obesity than she needs to know she is more than an isolated, self-determined being who is simply too weak willed to compete with those brave souls who are willing to walk big city streets. She needs to know that the city streets are not

entirely blameless, that city streets and fast food convenience have social tentacles that place them beyond the tightly bound orbit of the modern individual. It is from beyond this orbit that we can appreciate why it is that we have come to occupy our own particular position in it.

Our personal occupancy of a particular street, subway or school is made possible by a social infrastructure that values or devalues such spaces. This is why our landscapes can be likened to informants continually offering up clues regarding the social and economic hierarchies that promote and construct their particular layouts. In turn, these layouts provide the grid upon which we play out our lives, leading political geographer David Harvey to note, “within the context of specific practices, the organization of space can indeed define relationships between people, activities, things and concepts.”¹⁵ In other words, as we greet our neighbors, walk our dogs, collect the garbage or dead bolt the door we are experiencing both the emergence and convergence of our personal habits with the surroundings with which they arose and are integrally fused. Being aware of this fusion compels us to ask a very important question: What kinds of people are being made by our places? The architect Richard Rogers offers a rather gloomy assessment of our capacity to appreciate the significance of our surroundings:

The emphasis now is on selfishness and separation rather than contact and community. In the new kind of urban development, the activities that traditionally overlapped are organized for the purpose of maximizing profit for developers or retailers. Businesses are grouped into business parks; shops are grouped in shopping centers...homes are grouped into residential suburbs and housing estates. Inevitably, the streets and squares of this counterfeit public domain lack the diversity, vitality and humanity of everyday city life...The disappearance of ‘open-minded’ public space is not simply a cause for regret: it can generate dire social consequences launching a spiral of decline. As the vibrancy of public spaces diminishes we lose the habit of participating in street life.¹⁶

We have already examined the case of Katie Young, a case in which the habit of participating in city life is squelched by a mother’s fear for her child’s personal safety. Rogers elaborates further on the consequences of fearing and neglecting our public spaces:

The natural policing of streets that comes from the presence of people needs to be replaced by ‘security’ and the city itself becomes less hospitable and more alienating. Soon our public spaces are perceived as downright dangerous, and fear enters the scene. In response, activities become ever more territorial. The street market becomes less attractive than the secured shopping mall, the university district becomes the closed campus; and as this process spreads though the city the open-minded public domain retreats. People with wealth bar themselves in or move out of the city.¹⁷

Our so-called territorial behavior is apparent in rising numbers of gated communities, in the incessant calls for school vouchers and privatized “public” schooling. It is manifest in electronic communication technology that allows us “retreat” to a private domain even while our bodies continue to inhabit those public areas where we happen to stand while carrying on private conversations. Still, retreat as we may, even our personal paths to privacy inevitably intersect with the paths of others and in a competitive modern milieu this intersection can be socially disastrous.

What could be more disastrous for a teenager than having the personal and private details of their lives publicly proclaimed? The practice of scrawling names and phone numbers on bathroom walls pales in comparison to its modern corollary where names and relevant sexual gossip are posted to web sites and passed along through e-mail. Winnie Hu of the New York Times notes that “while a black book or a message scrawled on a bathroom wall may be seen by only a handful of people, Web-sites and e-mail messages can spread this gossip to thousands

within minutes.”¹⁸ Given the population density of many modern public schools it takes this kind of broadcasting efficiency to effectively tarnish someone’s reputation but Hu does not indicate that large student populations are considered a factor in these cases. In fact, she describes the school setting that inspired one incident of this sort as a “tight-knit high school, which has 1,016 students.”¹⁹ Since Hu’s article, “Now, High Schools’ Sex Gossip Is Scrawled on Web Site” does not include a definition of “tight-knit” it is not clear what this description is intended to indicate. Presumably, it means that the activities of some of the students are antithetical to the common goals and common interests that should characterize a “tight knit” community. Of course, some of the punitive responses to these slanderous cyber- episodes do not sound like the offerings of a tight-knit community either. Matt Stromber, a sophomore at one of the involved high schools was described as “outraged” and declared “I think that anyone who’d be stupid enough to post someone’s names on the Internet deserves whatever’s coming to them.”²⁰ While Mr. Donald Parker, the superintendent of schools in the Chappaqua school district, would not elaborate further, he did explain that “appropriate disciplinary action” had been taken against the culprits who had emerged from this otherwise tight knit school.²¹ Although some students expressed surprise at the identities of these culprits, commenting that they “would never think these would be the type of kids who would do something like this” none of the interviewees publicly pondered the social conditions that might contribute to the making of one type or another.²² It is as if these culprits and their crimes were destined to meet despite the context of their emergence, as if personal habits must have harbored the seeds of deviancy even before the vehicles of their expression arrived on the scene. Given such simplistic accounts of human behavior it is no wonder that many of our modern stories are recounted like this one where descriptions of particular deeds are peppered with general bewilderment at the identity of the perpetrator. An asocial accounting of individual behavior is bound to leave us guessing.

Honing Personal Habits to Meet the Conditions of Our Social Worlds

Fortunately there is a more satisfying explanation of individual behavior, one that does not leaves us pointing an unconvincing finger at another lone perpetrator. It is not inconsistent with our modern desire for self-creation and individuality, but it does compel us to treat individuality as “the distinctive manner in which someone participates in communal life.”²³ When Dewey uses a biographical sketch of Abraham Lincoln as a descriptive device to discuss “the connection of time with individuality” he is making this point clear:

Lincoln as an individual *is* a history; any particular event cut off from that history ceases to be a part of his life as an individual. As Lincoln is a development in time, so is every other human individual. Individuality is the uniqueness of the history, of the career, not something once and for all at the beginning which then proceeds to unroll as a ball of yarn may be unwound. Lincoln made history. But it is just as true that he made himself an individual in the history he made.²⁴

For the many moderns who do not feel as if they can make history there are many more who feel certain that they make themselves. The good news is that our belief in an infinite capacity for self-creation hides an equally compelling capacity for social creation and these two possibilities come together like two sides of the same coin if only we will treat them that way.

Such treatment is implicit in the work of the Institute for Social Inventions, a non-profit London based group that has been gathering socially innovative ideas since 1985. The ISI tracks what it calls the “world’s best ideas” and includes such innovations as a socially responsible Hippocratic Oath for Scientists, Engineers and Executives complete with signatures from 40 Nobel prize winners and university officials. Each year the ISI uses its collection of ideas as the basis for

a contest that awards “social ingenuity with an accent on community building, sustainability, and small-scale endeavors.”²⁵ The 2002 winners include the Gandhi Foundation for “its project to create a resource pack for teachers on the theories and practices of non-violent conflict resolution” and Maiden Bradley, a small village in Wiltshire, UK whose citizens purchased a local shop rather than let it go out of business. The ISI describes the positive outcome of this action:

the shop’s future has been assured, and the village now leases out the shop, with all proceeds going back into the community. This piece of direct action has strengthened the community as a whole, because people have an interest in the shop, use it themselves, and it provides a centre for the residents of the village to chat or make contact each day.²⁶

Another award was given to Birmingham Council for its creation of Learning Day on March 21st 2002. Here is the ISI’s description of the event

The council encouraged people to learn five phrases in a new language as part of the biggest simultaneous learning activity ever, and set a new world record. Participants were able to choose from 22 languages spoken in Birmingham, including Somali and Vietnamese, and learn how to say five phrases. The idea encourages learning at all levels, shows the city as a ‘learning organism’ and fosters understanding between the many different people who live there.²⁷

Whether the social invention is “student community service instead of tuition fees” or kids teaching elders Internet skills in return for personalized history lessons, each of these lessons contributes to the “learning organism” in ways that reinforce the fact that individual aspirations are made meaningful when they are socially grounded. Hopefully, the importance of this lesson has been made evident by the many contrary modern examples that fill these pages. As I have tried to indicate through these examples, it is not a lesson that we learn without careful attention to its cultivation and, like any lesson, the value of its content is partly dependent on an audience of ready and willing students.

The Circle School in Harrisburg Pennsylvania appears to cater to a student body that is ready and willing to engage the content of their school’s curriculum although the school admittedly “imposes no curriculum beyond ‘life’s curriculum.’ In keeping with this principle, The Circle School, part of the network of successful Sudbury schools, provides an environment in which daily decision-making is given great attention as students learn to “speak the language of The Circle School.” This language includes concepts like “assembly,” “school meeting,” “committee,” “mediation” and “Lawbook,” all concepts conscientiously connected to the schools’ philosophy of personal freedom, democracy and due process.²⁸ Further reflections of this philosophy are evident in the school’s various certification programs, programs in which a child interested in woodwork, cooking or pottery must show proficiency at handling the tools needed to pursue these interests. The demands of the certification will depend on the project being pursued. The students are also active in the school’s hiring process, voluntarily participating in three-hour meetings, lengthy brainstorming sessions and numerous deliberations and discussions related to the technicalities of hiring a new teacher. Of course, there is more to these events than technicalities; these students are learning habits of social engagement and the fact that it is through this engagement that we make ourselves. It is the same lesson gleaned by villagers buying and preserving a local business and urban dwellers practicing the foreign phrases of their neighbors. Each of these particular examples simply reiterates what is already all around us and what Dewey calls our “original plasticity” or “the ability to vary responses till we find an appropriate and efficient way of acting.”²⁹ It is a process being enacted in a million different ways; human habits being altered and amended to both meet and create the demands of our environing conditions.

In South Africa, village elders perform physical inspections of young girls in an effort to influence their sexual habits. The hope is that the revival of the Zulu rite of virginity testing will encourage girls to abstain from premarital sex and consequently reduce their risk of acquiring the AIDS virus.³⁰ While this ritual examination was originally performed as a means of insuring a larger dowry for future brides, whatever its purpose, whether past or present, the ritual serves to illustrate an intimate example of the link between our personal habits and the conditions of our social world. In another set of circumstances, parents try to influence the habits of their children by opting to medicate them so that personal habits conform to the context of modern classrooms. In an entirely different vein, Elizabeth May uses her personal habits to protest and change the conditions of her social world, a world in which the population of a small town is left to suffer the consequences of an abandoned steel factory. May embarks on a 17-day hunger strike to draw attention to the fact that the waste products seeping from the abandoned factory may be responsible for “hair loss, burning eyes, and high levels of premature births” among the city’s 25,000 working class residents.³¹ By the end of the second week of May’s protest, the Canadian government passes a program allocating funds that will lead to permanent relocation for those living within high-risk areas. These very different examples share a common appreciation for the fact that human activities can be directed and redirected toward different aims.

Dewey uses the term *habit* to identify this capacity and describes habit as a “special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts.”³² In other words, the elders’ inspection of young girls and the hunger strike of an angered activist may or may not alter the environing conditions in ways that cultivate a change in the habits of their intended audience because while some habits are fluid others are not. Dewey uses phrases like “embodied belief” and “intellectual efficiency” to describe habits, because they are so readily called upon to aid us in our various endeavors, but Dewey recognizes that this readiness can be both a help and a hindrance:

Outside the scope of habits, thought works gropingly, fumbling in confused uncertainty; and yet habit made complete in routine shuts in thought so effectually that it is no longer needed or possible. The routinier’s road is a ditch out of which he cannot get, whose sides enclose him, directing his course so thoroughly that he no longer thinks of his path or his destination. All habit-forming involves the beginning of an intellectual specialization which if left unchecked ends in thoughtless action.³³

The problems of unchecked and thoughtless action are particularly pressing in a modern milieu where the marketplace is made to thrive by the creation and negation of certain personal habits.

The combination of an asocial accounting of individual action combined with a highly commercial and commodified modern milieu is prone to produce a particularly virulent form of “intellectual specialization” one that threatens to make the marketplace both the measure and mediator of our human relationships. Mark Fowler, the chair of the Federal Communications Commission during the Reagan administration, may have summarized this modern perspective most accurately when he proclaims: “The marketplace will take care of the children.”³⁴ Other commentators provide a more critical assessment of this deference to the marketplace and its mythological “invisible hand.” Robert McChesney writes, “this market system may ‘work’ in the sense that goods and services are produced and consumed, but it is by no means fair in any social or political or ethical sense of the term.”³⁵ Whether we treat “the marketplace,” in all of its diffuse manifestations, as a benevolent babysitter or an ambiguous attendant, its role as a wellspring of modern meaning making is as difficult to deny as the fact that these meanings will be enacted through the habits of private persons.

As moderns we are accustomed to being called upon to alter our personal habits on behalf of an often-unspecified yet ever-demanding hyper-competitive marketplace. In the U.S., these calls are often most loudly broadcast through the public schools where everyone from administrators to students is expected to treat the demands of business as absolutely congruous with the making of individual well being. As Joel Spring notes, “by the twenty-first century most Americans seemed to accept business as a natural partner in the control of schools.”³⁶ Unfortunately, as Spring observes this “natural” partnering often advances the interests of business but does little to advance the interests of the “educated.” The example he uses to support this claim is taken from the 1950’s when business pressured schools “to educate more scientists and engineers and by the 1960’s there was a surplus of scientists and engineers, which caused low wages and unemployment.”³⁷ Spring concludes that this “situation worked to the advantage of the employer but not the employee.”³⁸ Gerald Bracey corroborates Spring’s claim with compelling evidence for the one-sided nature of this much-touted relationship between schools and business. As Bracey notes, a full “thirty-percent of college students currently take jobs that require no college” and the top three jobs listed on the Department of Labor’s list of “25 occupations with the largest employment in the year 2002,” bear these figures out.³⁹ The top three occupations, retail sales, cashier and clerical work, may be enhanced by a college education but schooling and education do not plug into job descriptions the way that our accountability advocates would like us to believe. The result is a great deal of controvertible personal habit making.

Our habits help us work longer hours at jobs we are not happy with, they help us to respond to eager calls for more testing and to know ourselves and our children as human resources and human capital. Harry Braverman describes how this willingness to make ourselves in the image of the marketplace alters our relationships with each other:

Social artifice has been destroyed in all but its marketable forms. Thus the population no longer relies upon social organization in the form of family, friends, neighbors, community, elders, children but with few exceptions must go to market and only to market, not only for food, clothing, and shelter, but also for recreation, amusement, security, for the care of the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped. In time not only the material and service needs but even the emotional patterns of life are channeled through the market.⁴⁰

If Braverman’s descriptions sound slightly conspiratorial, remember our personal habits make them possible. When we marry at Disney World, date at McDonalds, divorce in Las Vegas and express sympathy through the text of a Hallmark card we have begun to blend in the ways that Braverman elaborates on in the following passage:

The social structure, built upon the market, is such that relations between individuals and social groups do not take place directly, as cooperative human encounters, but through the market as relations of purchase and sale. Thus the more social life becomes a dense and close network of interlocked activities in which people are totally interdependent, the more atomized they become and the more their contacts with one another separate them instead of bringing them closer.⁴¹

Of course, this atomization only fulfills our modern conviction that isolation is a condition of our birth and not the result of personal cultivation that is synchronous with our social settings. The marketplace helps to legitimate our modern preconceptions of what it means to be an individual while simultaneously reminding us that social fulfillment is merely a coincidental byproduct of self fulfillment rather than a deliberate one. Unfortunately, the confluence of these customs or “collective habits” with the profit motives of the modern marketplace can leave our most personal habits vulnerable to the demands of some very crass concerns. Such concerns inform the

comments of Nancy Shalek, an ad agency president, who describes why kids make such good consumers:

Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product you're a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them they'll be a dork if they don't, you've got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable."⁴²

A modern marketer who boldly proclaims that "asocial behavior in the pursuit of a product is a good thing" expresses similar concerns, concerns that may be offensive but are hardly surprising given the power that we give over to the marketplace.⁴³ Alex Molnar, an expert on the commercialization of public education, explains the perils of relying on the logic of the marketplace:

Since the market is concerned with buying and selling it cannot represent the interests of the children. Turning children over to the market assures that they will be treated as an expense to be reduced or a resource to be harvested. In the process, some children and their families will necessarily be considered more valuable than others. For the market to produce winners, there always have to be losers.⁴⁴

By modern standards to be a "winner" is to be utterly dependent on the marketplace. It is having the ability to buy food not to grow it, to purchase clothing but not to sew it, to own a home but not to build one. It is being able to afford high quality day care for the children, the elders and the pets. It is mastering one's destiny by choosing the right antidepressant and assuming choices like these are a sufficient measure of personal empowerment and success. But, if these choices are strictly personal then why is it so many moderns "live as if economic forces determined the growth and decay of institutions and settled the fate of individuals."⁴⁵ Of course, when Dewey makes this statement he knows all too well that such conformity or "absence of vital interplay" merely confirms the fact that we continue to follow each other's lead even when "our sociability is largely an effort to find substitutes for that normal consciousness of connection and union that proceeds from being a sustained and sustaining part of a whole."⁴⁶ The good news is that we continue to seek out this social sustenance even while we adhere to the contradictory belief that we are socially autonomous individuals.

Cultivating the Habits of Social Self-Creation

What may be as remarkable as the fact that we are continually privileging individual pursuits at the expense of social ones is that social endeavors continue to captivate our modern imagination. The rise of community gardens is a case in point. According to the American Community Gardening Association, the number of community gardens in the U.S. has grown from 20 in the early 1970's to more than 550 today.⁴⁷ These enclaves of green space invite urban dwellers from all walks of life to reclaim lost city space while rekindling neighborhood solidarity and local ownership of place. The number of cities and community requests for assistance from the ACGA rose from 150 in 1992 to more than 400 in 1994, a rise the organization credits with sparing new gardening communities from "constantly re-inventing the wheel."⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the desire to limit the cost of being behind the driver's wheel has inspired the creation of Carshare programs in some U.S. cities. A typical Carshare mission statement enumerates the organization's community-based concerns:

To reduce automobile dependency in the Philadelphia region through community-based car-sharing-improving neighborhood livability; increasing transit ridership, walking and

biking, improving air quality...and increasing accessibility while alleviating the burdens of auto ownership.

A modern corollary to the message of “alleviating the burdens of ownership” is spreading the benefits and responsibilities of ownership. In the case of “Whole Foods... a funky little health food store that has grown into a nationwide chain of 112 stores with more than \$1.6 billion in annual sales,” this means involving all the company’s employees in the decisions of the workplace. Here is a description of what this means:

The main key to their success has been sharing control of day-to-day operations with rank-and-file employees. Workers are divided into small teams. They vote on who gets hired. They have a voice in almost everything from product selection to display, from recipes to pricing. They have access to virtually any financial information about the company, including salaries of every individual in the corporation, and whenever a team increases sales or reduces costs, the company shares the extra profit and savings with the team members.⁴⁹

The practical import of gardens that reinvigorate rundown neighborhoods, car sharing programs that aim to reduce traffic congestion or grocery stores that dispense with traditional hierarchies of income distribution all share common elements. These elements explicitly exemplify what so much of our modern problem solving does not: social problems require social solutions and these solutions can be synonymous with meaningful self-creation.

When parents in Scarsdale, New York decided to orchestrate a boycott to protest standardized testing it is not clear whether they were motivated by private concerns regarding their children’s self creation or public concerns about the state of society. The two domains seem to merge into one as the organizers explain their motivations. One of these organizers, Fran Antell, describes the need for socially-minded solutions: “Other communities look to us... that puts us in a position of power. I, for one, have a social conscience-part of what we’re trying to do is help other communities.”⁵⁰ Antell is not the only one with a social conscience. Deborah Rapaport makes similar socially motivated comments: “It’s been kind of insidious – states have introduced tests at a slow rate...I don’t think anybody began to put the whole picture together. Educators and parents have not until now understood that this is bigger than one school, one community, one state.”⁵¹ These women seem precipitously close to articulating what often seems doomed to remain in the chronicles of higher education: schools reflect the society they serve.⁵² This means that changing the practices of schools, like changing the practices of any of our institutions, will rely on collective and socially minded acts. The mother who proclaims, “we will not sacrifice our children so that some politician can wave numbers around to talk about how our schools are doing” is making the necessary translation between her private concerns and concerns that motivate discourse well beyond these concerns.⁵³ Without this social connection her views and her voice are wasted; they add up to nothing and simply vanish.

There is something terribly wasteful about our approach to modern problem solving, and this wastefulness has been the basis for many of the examples used in these essays. Our effort to treat the ailments of an age as the personal psychological property of modern individuals inhibits not only a more general approach to problem solving but also a more imaginative one. Dewey offers a summary of this approach:

There is much talk of ‘social problems.’ But we rarely treat them as problems in the intellectual sense of the word. They are thought of as “evils” needing correction; as naughty or diabolic things to be ‘reformed.’ Our preoccupation with these ideas is proof of

how far we are from taking the scientific attitude...the current way of treating criminality and criminals is, for example, reminiscent of the way in which diseases were once thought of and dealt with. Their origin was once believed to be moral and personal; some enemy, diabolic or human, was thought to have injected some alien substance or force into the person who was ailing. The possibility of effective treatment began when diseases were regarded as having an intrinsic origin in interactions of the organism and its natural environment. This pre-scientific conception of 'evil' is probably the greatest barrier that exists to that real reform which is identical with constructive remaking.⁵⁴

The good news is that the possibility of 'constructive remaking' is available to us. The challenge is to use these possibilities as opportunities for social expression rather than the usual tendency, documented here through so many examples, to rely on familiar habits that "treat new occurrences as if they were identical with old ones."⁵⁵

When we break old habits we begin to ask new questions: What happens to obesity rates when modes of transportation change, what happens to depression when jobs become meaningful, what happens to the deficient attention span when there is something worthwhile to attend to? What happens to driving under the influence when neighborhoods have local pubs? Constructing individual causes with no net social effect leaves questions like these not only unanswered but also un-asked. This is why Dewey describes generalization as a "social device" and describes science as having the potential of "changing the nature and inherent possibilities of experience" because it compels us to actively construct connections.⁵⁶ Science extracts what is common among variables and uses the particularities of individuals only where they contribute to these variables; yet the mission of science is general applicability. Dewey explains how we may use science:

It aims to free an experience from all which is purely personal and strictly immediate; it aims to detach whatever it has in common with the subject matter of other experiences, and which, being common, may be saved for *further* use. It is, thus, an indispensable factor in social progress. In any experience just as it occurs there is much which, while it may be of precious import to the individual implicated in the experience, is peculiar and unreduplicable. From the standpoint of science, this material is accidental, while the features which are widely shared are essential.⁵⁷

While individual peculiarities pass into irrelevance, science uses the tools of abstraction to put the "net value of individual experience at the permanent disposal of mankind."⁵⁸

This leads Dewey to call science the "organ of general social progress" not because it necessarily unveils any immutable truths about the prospects of humanity but because it is the best technology that we have for finding our affinities so that we may use these affinities for social betterment. For Dewey, science is just another tool for honing our social skills and like any tool the value of its utility will depend on the skills of the operator.

To use science skillfully we need people who believe in the value of experimentalism and recognize it as the "foe of every belief that permits habit and wont to dominate invention and discovery."⁵⁹ The scientist hunched over a beaker wearing a lab coat and mixing a bubbling chemical brew does not necessarily express this belief. The scientific attitude that Dewey is defending is much more than a tired and typecast icon that is remote from social life; it is an attitude that "is experimental as well as intrinsically communicative."⁶⁰ Of course Dewey is well aware of the widespread social consequences of having such an attitude "incarnated in individual mind" and describes the pressures against such incarnation:

Suppose that what now happens in limited circles were extended and generalized. Would the outcome be oppression or emancipation? Inquiry is a challenge, not a passive

conformity; application is a means of growth, not of repression. The general adoption of the scientific attitude in human affairs would mean nothing less than a revolutionary change in morals, religion, politics and industry. The fact that we have limited its use so largely to technical matters is not a reproach to science, but to the human beings who use it for private ends and who strive to defeat its social application for fear of destructive effects upon their power and profit.⁶¹

Fortunately, just as the lab-coat clad technician is not necessarily in possession of the scientific attitude and its “power to effect transformation” in a broad and meaningful social sense, so our own scientific attitude is not necessarily manifest in the pursuit of chemical reactions or cellular exploration. In fact, the experimental attitude is present in many modern projects; we just have to be curious enough to find them and to identify their fuller and more social application.

The pre-schools and daycare centers of Reggio Emilia, a city of Northeastern Italy, are an appropriate place to consider the possibilities of cultivating an experimental attitude. The Reggio approach offers more than a place to temporarily house children; it is a daily invitation for them to inquire into the stuff of their surroundings. Howard Gardner describes how school days progress:

In each of the classes in a school, groups of children spend several months exploring a theme of interest. These themes are ones that attract young children, usually because they offer rich sensory stimulation and raise intriguing puzzles. Among the many dozens of motifs that have been investigated over the years...are sunlight, rainbows, rain drops, shadows, the city, a city for ants...The children approach these objects, themes, and environments from many angles; they ponder questions and phenomena that arise in the course of their exploration; and they end up creating artful objects that capture their interests and their learning...⁶²

The physical context in which this curriculum unfolds only adds to the value of such artful experiences. Gardner describes the physical layout of the Reggio Emilia school:

If you walk into one of the preschools on any given morning, you will first be struck by the beauty and spaciousness of the building. Reggio buildings are ample, open, streaming with light; potted plants and inviting chairs and couches are strategically placed, adding color and comfort to the surroundings. There are secluded alcoves to which youngsters can retreat; interior gardens; and common space where the teachers can meet.⁶³

While the physical beauty of these schools is vital to their curricular concerns, Gardner is quick to note that what differentiates the Reggio environment “from hundreds of affluent, attractive, well-appointed schools for children throughout the world” is both the quality of its curriculum and the attendant quality of its social environment.⁶⁴ These qualities are themselves not surprising given the fact that the larger social environment of the city of Reggio Emilia is itself differentiated from other cities around the world. Gardner’s description of this city may provide us with some insight into why its preschools function the way that they do. Here is Gardner’s description of Reggio Emilia’s social history:

It is...an area with an unequalled history of civic cooperation and economic and cultural activities, dating back to the later Middle Ages; its arts, crafts, and theatre are admired all over Italy. Citizens belong to a multitude of associations, including hunting clubs, literary guilds, and cooperative agricultural enterprises; participation in the political process is among the highest in Italy.⁶⁵

It is unfortunately that there are not more modern cities benefiting from the kind of social history that makes Reggio Emilia and its preschools so distinctive today. The good news is that being modern we are unlikely to be dissuaded from changing the future because of what lies in the past.

Consider the social history that is being created by the current residents of Curitiba, a modern city in Brazil. When the mayor of Curitiba, Jaime Lerner, approached local shopkeepers to consider turning the downtown shopping district into a pedestrian zone, the shopkeepers resisted. Lerner suggested a thirty-day trial period and eventually the zone became so popular that shopkeepers from other streets asked to participate. Today the test zone is a pedestrian area lined with gardens tended by street children. The residents of this city, which has grown from 150,000 in the 1960's to 1.6 million today, are the beneficiaries of their own willingness "to inquire definitely and with particularity, to seek solutions in the terms of concrete problems as they arise."⁶⁶ Confronted with the problems of so many developing nations, the mayor of Curitiba sought "small, cheap and participatory" solutions beginning with a contest for the creation of city plan. The entries from this contest became tools of inquiry, circulated and debated among the citizenry they eventually made their way to "upstart architects" who "were not impressed by the urban fashion of borrowing money for big highways, massive buildings, shopping malls and other showy projects."⁶⁷ The result is a city with "90 miles of bike paths, trees everywhere and traffic and garbage systems that officials from other cities come to study."⁶⁸ The list of Curitiba's innovative and creative practical solutions to complicated urban problems demonstrates more than a utilitarian flare for problem solving. The mayor of Curitiba with his twelve-year incumbency and ninety-two percent approval rating seems a legitimate commentator on the key to both the city and the citizen's success:

There is no endeavor more noble than the attempt to achieve a collective dream. When a city accepts as a mandate its quality of life; when it respects the people who live in it; when it respects the environment; when it prepares for future generations, the people share the responsibility for that mandate, and this shared cause is the only way to achieve that collective dream.⁶⁹

By sharing such lofty collective goals the citizens of Curitiba have shown their own willingness to "to free an experience from all which is purely personal...so that it may be saved for *further* use." The experience of being a citizen in Curitiba means that individuals have innovative and imaginative vehicles for their expression. It means that the town meeting is not a staid and anachronistic tribute to meaningless formality but a living endorsement of our capacity to imagine and to create.

The example of Curitiba or any socially innovative project demonstrates savvy problem solving while also demonstrating how even our individual concerns necessitate social imagination. This attribute is one that Dewey alludes to in the following passage:

We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Our is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.⁷⁰

Being able to think about who will come after us requires a conscientious cultivation of social imagination. In many ways this cultivation is at odds with some of the fundamental ideological and philosophical underpinnings that define our age. My intention has been to identify the revelatory remnants of these underpinnings as they are expressed in the miscellaneous modern stories that come at us from so many directions. By using them here I hope to indicate that they are not as random and unrelated as they sometimes seem and, in fact, carry certain consistencies that reveal

our age as one that favors the rhetoric of individual autonomy even when autonomy begs for social expression.

The good news is that in spite of the rhetoric we do manage to meet and enact socially significant deeds. When I introduced this dissertation I used the story of light pollution and dimming stars to illustrate our modern predicament, a predicament in which ancient and unifying tales are routinely dispelled as starlight is carelessly obscured by encroaching human development. As I end this project, I have just become aware of the fact that the Czech Republic is the first country to enact a National Light Pollution Law to preserve and protect the nocturnal environment. As it turns out, the dimming of the night sky is not happening without protest. In Tucson Arizona, the International Dark Sky Association has more than 4,000 members in sixty-nine countries, and it was only established in 1988. Dewey observes that there is “instinctive wisdom in the tendency of the young to ignore the limitations of the environment.”⁷¹ We see the traces of this wisdom whenever we encounter each other ignoring the modern imperative to go it alone.

¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1966) p. 121.

² John Dewey. "Human Nature and Conduct." In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Volume 14*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1988) p. 19.

³ See Alfie Kohn *What to Look for in a Classroom* (1998) for a summary of the available research on early development "capacity to effectively experience the other's state." p. 42.

⁴ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 218.

⁵ Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, (New York: The New York Press, 1999) p. 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷ Alfie Kohn, *What to Look for in a Classroom...and Other Essays*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) p. 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹ Barbara Benham Tye, *Hard Truths: Uncovering the Deep Structure of Schooling*, (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2000) p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹¹ *U.S. News & World Report*, "Super-Size America: How our way of life is killing us" By: Amanda Spake, August 19, 2002.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 216.

¹⁶ Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Planet*, (Boulder: Westview Press,) p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸ *The New York Times*, "Now, high schools' sex gossip is scrawled on web-site walls," By: Winnie Hu June 6, 2001.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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- ²⁶ www.globalideasbank.org 11/18/02.
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- ³¹ *Sierra Magazine*, “Hungry for Justice,” By: Jennifer Hattam, , September/October 2001, p. 81.
- ³² John Dewey. “Human Nature and Conduct” In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Volume 14*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1988) p. 32.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ³⁴ Cited in, Alex Molnar, *Giving kids the Business: The Commercialization of America’s Schools* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).
- ³⁵ McChesney, *Rich Media*, p. 141.
- ³⁶ Joel Spring, *American Education*, 10th edition (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002) p. 20.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ United States Department of Labor, www.dol.gov/ “Occupations with the largest Employment in 2000
- ⁴⁰ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974) p. 276.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- ⁴² Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur, *Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995) p. 26.
- ⁴³ Affluenza, a Public Broadcasting television program produced by KCTS/Seattle and Oregon Public Broadcasting and now a book: John de Graaf et al., *Affluenza: The Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001/2002).
- ⁴⁴ Molnar, *Giving kids Business*, p. 183.
- ⁴⁵ John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1929/1999) p. 7.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kinder/acga.html>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ National Public Radio, Morning Edition, David Malpus, “Collective management” October 2, 2002.

⁵⁰ *The New York Times*, “Scarsdale Mothers Success in First Boycott of 8th-Grade Test” By: Kate Zernike, May 4, 2001.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See John Goodlad, *Teachers For Our Children’s Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990) p. 2. For discussion of why this is an unfortunate lack of awareness since educational researchers have long tried to suggest that a broader perspective on schooling is necessary to appreciate what goes on in the schools. In 1990 the preeminent educational researcher, John Goodlad writes: The designation of the schools as a major, if not *the* major, instrumentality in solving our social and economic problems in the short run is unrealistic and dysfunctional...so long as we fail to address today’s critical problems through political action directed at economic and social restructuring, schools will continue to be burdened with inappropriate, excessive demands; to disappoint us; and to serve as scapegoats for our incompetence and inadequacies in both domestic and international arenas.

⁵³ Scarsdale Mothers.

⁵⁴ Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 226.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, p. 75.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: Beyond Facts and Standardized Tests, the K-12 Education That Every Child Deserves* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶⁶ Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, p. 80.

⁶⁷ www.globalideabank.org “Curitiba and its visionary mayor” November 18, 2002.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

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⁷⁰ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934/1991) p. 87.

⁷¹ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p.118.

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My current teaching duties at Millersville University also extend to occasionally advising students. I also visit and mentor elementary and secondary student-teachers during their month-long field experience in an urban school environment. I am part of the liaison between the College of Education of the region's urban public schools. I also live in urban school district (Lancaster City), and my daughter attended a Lancaster city school.

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Certified to teach secondary education by the State of Florida, in the area of social studies, in 1988. Subsequent to earning my teaching certificate, I was a substitute in the city of Tallahassee public school system where I also did my teaching internship.

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