

## John Dewey's Disciples

William Van Til

It was one of those rare mornings when they could linger over coffee. The night before he had met with the curriculum committee and also addressed the junior high school PTA. At the PTA he had valiantly explained the common learnings course to assorted upper middle class matrons obsessed with little Willie's college entrance requirements. This morning was a time of deserved armistice.

Over the coffee cups and the peaceful rustle of the morning newspaper, his wife said, "I see by the papers that there were big doings in celebration of John Dewey's ninetieth birthday. Editorials on the grand old man of modern education, dinners at \$7.50 a plate, a special issue of the New Republic, meetings and papers in universities across the nation. Here's an educator who says that Dewey is forever enshrined, for his writings are the fount of all educational knowledge. He goes on to say that Dewey has pronounced the ultimate word in world thought."

"To think that it's happening to John Dewey too," he said. "John Dewey of all people. Confucius, Aristotle, the Christian saints, Plato, Marx, Ghandi. And now John Dewey. A murrain upon his disciples!"

"And what on earth is wrong with being a disciple of John Dewey,"

"Menace to experimental education," he said briefly.

"Look, darling," she said. "You're a curriculum director. You've spent your life putting John Dewey's ideas into practice in public schools. You're a disciple of John Dewey yourself!"

"Not guilty, Judge."

"The number of pork chops and frilly dresses I've sacrificed while you pursued advanced degrees and the understanding of John Dewey! The quotes housing unquotes I've lived in during the process! The good things you've always said about John Dewey in your talks and in your graduate papers! And now you tell me that John Dewey's admirers are a menace because they give him birthday parties. Now you tell me!"

"Not John Dewey's admirers, dear," he said, "and nothing to do with his birthday celebrations either. For that matter, nothing to do with societies that carry forward his work or with the many creative educators who study and use and extend Dewey's insights. I said disciples. Is there any more coffee?"

"This," she mused aloud, "is probably one of those cases of self-hate I've read about. Or maybe it's the death wish. Shall I make you an appointment with a psychiatrist, dear?"

"Ever hear what Sam Goldwyn is supposed to have said about people who go to psychiatrists," he asked, returning from the kitchen with the coffee pot. "Anybody who goes to a psychiatrist should have his head examined."

"Or maybe," she pursued, "at that PTA last night you were converted by those matrons out of the Helen Hokinson drawings in the *New Yorker*. So now our school system will advance briskly backward to the classics. Mental discipline, and college entrance requirements *uber alles*. I'll have to brush up on the hundred great books."

"I think I'll heat up this coffee," he said, "Cold."

"I can wait," said his wife. "Schoolmen's wives are a patient lot. I can wait."

"It's like this," he said from the kitchen. "By disciple I mean the person who treats Dewey's writings as though they were the final authority, the truth with a capital T, the eternal verity. A Dewey disciple--not Dewey student or admirer, mind you--seems to regard Dewey's writings as a book of sacred writ. He quarrels with other disciples over the 'true' meaning of the writ. To prove pet contentions, he cites something Dewey wrote near the turn of the nineteenth century. His opponent, in turn, proves the contrary by quoting something Dewey wrote forty years later. Each regards deviation from Dewey as the ultimate in heresy--unless the master can be cited to justify the deviation. They sound like two comrades confounding each other with quotations from Marx and Lenin on the correct interpretation of the current party line. Unconsciously, these disciples are authoritarian, not experimental. Regarding Dewey's great contribution as a gospel denies everything Dewey stands for! That's not what old John means at all!"

"Care to quote from his writings to prove that?" she inquired delicately. Properly, he paid no heed.

He summarized. "There's a great difference between the students of Dewey and the disciples of Dewey. Disciples turn Dewey's magnificent contribution into authoritarian dogma, complete with writ, expounders, and disputatious sects. They turn Dewey into a saint." He chuckled. "I suppose he's the first relativistic saint in all history."

As she poured their last cup of hot coffee, his wife said, "Maybe we should leave confusing things like these to philosophers, dear."

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