

THE GIFT

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Abstract. As an approach to concisely explain my thoughts on teaching, I here use John Dewey's approach: the belief statement. Here follows, in Dewey's words, "My Pedagogic Creed."

CHAPTER I: THE GIFT

I have seen the Gift.

In the beginning, there was nothing. Then, light – an explosion from nothing, and from nothing came everything.

Stardust then beget stars. And stars beget planets. And planets, continents. And on one small corner of the universe came an unlikely creation: the forms of matter collided in such a way as to progress, to grow, to change, to truly be aware, as no rock or dust had before.

When I point my telescope at the Infinite and stare in wonder for hours, I know I glimpse something beyond: the scale of time; the wonder of distance; the indescribable wonder at where we sit in the universe. Whether a gift from God or Cosmos, it cannot be seen as anything other than a Gift.

Astronaut Michael Collins knows. He has seen it for himself. He said, "When I travelled to the Moon, it wasn't my proximity to that battered rockpile I remember so vividly, but rather what I saw when I looked back at my fragile home – a glistening, inviting beacon, delicate blue and white, a tiny outpost suspended in the black infinity. Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that must endure."¹

FRIENDS, I BELIEVE that we have but two purposes in life. First, to enjoy the gift we were given. Second, to give back so that others are able to enjoy the gift as fully or more so than we.

¹ Collins, M. 1980. Foreword. R. A. Gallant (ed.), *Our Universe*. Washington, DC, National Geographic Society.

CHAPTER 2: TO ENJOY THE GIFT

The Gift – Keane Richards

*I am skiing. My backcountry skis cutting through the snow,
My dog plowing behind,
Cold, forest snow glistening and beautiful.
No thoughts now, and my body moves for me.
I am here.*

*I rest. The December Alaskan sun
Sets in an explosion of pink on clouds.
Shady breathes, her breath billowing
I feel the cold on my sweaty clothes.
I am here.*

*I am climbing. It's just me and the rock,
My belayer a trusted friend below
I am focused on every move. I smile and find a hand.
A crack holds my weight. Such peace!
Such peace in movement of centimeters
Because I am here.*

*The waves of the ocean!
They roll toward me, man,
Like an angry smile,
Such beauty and play and fierceness.
When the waves come over the board,
And crash over my head,*

It's dark. Just the sound of water now.

What fish hear, now.

And I am here.

I am alone. Up a birch tree I have named.

What racial memory to sit on top of the forest,

Watching a robin sing.

The cabin's asleep, but the forest and I

We watch twenty four hours of light

Turn desolation into paradise

And I am here.

So let the wind speak to me, for I need no other words.

I am awake, in my bed,

But I'm not here.

I'm in Middle Earth, or Westeros.

Some of my friends say they'll never read such books.

They read only "great" novels.

But I don't care.

I thank these authors,

Because right now I'm on an adventure vacation.

For an hour, I am not here.

I am there.

And that's beautiful writing to me.

I am in a tub of water,

And I catch my second daughter as she enters the world.

We traded 24 hours for 12 this time

But it still felt like days.

I'm holding my baby now.

What a miracle! What a life!

*I can't remember being here like I am now.
Great god or cosmos, what a miracle.
What a life.*

*I'm working.
The axe swings,
The wood splits,
My back bends and aches.
The axe swings,
And the wood bursts apart again.
It's time to work. And I'm here.*

*I am learning.
We're just people in a circle in a fluorescent room.
Talking about education philosophy.
Yet we're all here. And somehow, from us,
We're constructing magic from ourselves.*

I BELIEVE that to enjoy the gift, we have to create experiences that are meaningful. We must stop conceiving of “experiences” as byproducts of human existence, and realize that experiences make or break human existence. We must differentiate our experiences into those that, as John Dewey said, “live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”² Let's not waste the gift being afraid to work, to play, to love, to give, and to live.

² The Philosophy of John Dewey. Edited by John McDermott. *University of Chicago Press*, 1981. p. 507.

CHAPTER 3: THE WAY OF GIVING IN TEACHING

From “To be of use” by Marge Piercy

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.³*

I BELIEVE that a fantastic public education system promotes the health and progression of a society, and improves virtue, knowledge, and wisdom. I believe that a mediocre public education system stagnates society, degrades virtue, stymies knowledge, and limits wisdom. And I believe it should not be taken lightly that we are controlling the Gift in the most beautiful of minds, for the better part of a whole day, for the better part of thirteen whole years.

I BELIEVE that great teachers have compassion. They believe in making a better Earth, and the reward of theirs is not summers off, but the silent and anonymous gratitude of a better future.

I BELIEVE that great teachers are, first, great learners. They study the science and art of learning. They seek the deepest difficulty in education: to understand oneself. And like all great learners, they seek to grow themselves until the day they die.

³ Piercy, Marge. “To be of use.” Accessed online 07/26/15 at Poetry Foundation: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/249346>

I BELIEVE that great teachers are not teachers at all. They are guides in the life adventure, a vital trail on which is learning. I believe that great teachers are holistic in their approach – in other words, they teach the whole learner, not just their brain. We must embrace it all: one's strengths, weaknesses, core beliefs, biases, spiritual leanings, and much more. We must see the connection between the mind and body: a holistic educational system fails when it graduates students with a deep understanding of subjects, yet who are obese and die at age 50 of heart disease. Similarly, rather than see religion as taboo in education, we must embrace a person's value system, making room for discussing with others to understand and appreciate diverse views. We must grow *as people*, not just as minds. Our experiences in education should promote the desire to learn and to become better in all areas, intellectually, physically, and ethically.

Let us care about our students as people. We must treat them with dignity and respect, with interests and will, as a life that we often only get a chance to glimpse. Anybody can teach minds – great teachers must teach people.

I BELIEVE that great teachers foster *inquiry* and *discovery*. We must foster the inquiring mind, allowing it choice in learning, and to delve into material as deep as it wishes. No baby is born bored with the world. Educators have a responsibility to expand the student's horizons, to ensure students are exposed to opportunities for fascination they might not yet see, and to push the student to achieve more, to dig deeper, and to become better. But this can only happen if a student's sense of inquiry is first fostered and not destroyed.

And we must refrain from the natural desire to *present* knowledge. It may be that the facts are known to someone else; but until then, it is a new world being explored for the first time, just as we stumble upon a place we have never been before and are drawn forth unexplainably, to satisfy the desire to make the unknown known. Learning is not industrial; we cannot merely instill knowledge into people as if they

are cans waiting to be packed. The fascination with the unknown can only occur if *there is an unknown*. As John Dewey said, "We sometimes talk as if 'original research' were a peculiar prerogative of scientists or at least of advanced students. But all thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of what he is looking for."⁴

I BELIEVE that a great teacher believes in *rigor* as pushing a student to go beyond what the student thought they were capable of, but in a way that the student knows, "I did that on my own."

⁴ The Philosophy of John Dewey. Edited by John McDermott. *University of Chicago Press*, 1981. p. 502