

## John Dewey's Call for Meaning

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In astrology, soothsaying, the reading of palms, and the legend of Nostradamus, people find mirrored back to them their recurring wish to predict the future and thereby obtain greater mastery over their destiny. People also sometimes turn to fundamentalism as a response to the unpredictable, the uncertain, and the unstable. At present, there exists in the world an astounding array of political, religious, cultural, economic, and educational fundamentalisms. Their very number and diversity ought to call into permanent question their claims at having the proverbial last word. In practice, however, each seeks to trump the others, while also casting open-minded postures as vacuous, suspicious, or fraudulent. In an ethos of fear of the future, understood as the fear of uncertainty, unpredictability, and instability, the prospects for genuine, harmonious human exchange, much less for human flourishing, can seem remote.

In 1922, John Dewey published a text in *The New Republic*, entitled "Events and Meanings," that can be read as a direct response to the recurring struggle between fear and hope. Dewey's text consists of ten paragraphs and about eighteen hundred words. Its principle theme is the necessity of communication in making human life worthwhile. Without communication, Dewey contends, there can be no meaning. Without meaning, life becomes nothing but events. If there are only events and no meanings, the world becomes, from the point of view of humanity, "dumb, preposterous, destructive" (p. 280).<sup>1</sup> It becomes dumb in the sense of silent and uncommunicative. It becomes preposterous, or absurd, because humanity's existence could no longer be differentiated from Shakespeare's tale told by an idiot. It is destructive because its silence and its absurdity crush the life out of any attempt to make meaning.

I have called what Dewey wrote a "text" because I am not sure what else to name it. "Events and Meanings" is, of course, a publication: it has become public. In that respect, the text embodies a communication. Dewey "speaks" to a public, in an organ whose very name evokes the importance of a public.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Dewey's speaking constitutes art, at least if we concede his claim that all art,

either literally or metaphorically, is “public conversation” (p. 278). The text is also an essay, which is to say a trial of ideas rather than a demonstration or airtight argument. It has features of a sermon. Dewey warns, cajoles, heartens, and waxes positively biblical in some of his language. Above all, as Dewey himself seems to imply, the text is a composition, as are all meanings (or so he will suggest). He composes, in all the aesthetic senses of that term. He poses to readers a string of words that come together artfully to form a meaning. Dewey describes how to picture and treat human affairs as meaningful rather than as merely random or chance. He illustrates how to give or to impute meaning to what might otherwise have the character of a brute event. He does so, in part, through the very fact that his text embodies a composite of multiple modes of communication.

Dewey writes against a backdrop of what historians have called the acceleration of history that took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which appears to continue unabated in our time. Dewey was born before the Civil War, when America was an agrarian nation, and writes his essay in the early 1920s in the wake of massive industrialization, rapid population growth, a revolution in communications and transportation, and a horrific world war whose corrosive if not cataclysmic consequences were evident everywhere. “Events have been too much for us,” Dewey observes. “Too many of them and on too vast a scale” (p. 278). He senses anxiety, confusion, and fear in the American psyche, even as the nation plunges forward into what would be called the roaring twenties with their feverish business activity, cultural experimentation, and consumer mania. From the point of view of Dewey’s text, the acceleration of events appears to have catapulted humanity beyond its limited wisdom and insight. People thrash about in unknown, unanticipated, often frightening waters. However, Dewey bears witness to how the act of communicating can generate oars with which to paddle against the tide of events—and even, perhaps, establish more stable (if always flowing) waters.

In this article, I will try to show how Dewey accomplishes this gesture, which I take to be characteristic of the way in which he merged social, cultural, individual, and educational questions. I will adhere closely to the movement of his text, to what he will call “tone, color, and form.” Those terms illuminate the process of transforming raw events into vivid meanings.

### ***Taking Meaning Out of the Academic Cloister***

“The words that compose the title are redolent of centuries of technical philosophical discussion” (p. 276). So Dewey commences his text: in the beginning are words. Words are how we communicate. Dewey expresses the centrality of communication before his text is more than two words old. A writer who did not typically employ the personal pronoun “I,” Dewey implies that it is not he but “the words” that have sprung forward to “compose” the title. The words—

“events and meanings”—have their own biblical simplicity and majesty, connoting a comprehensive basis for human experience.

Those terms are “redolent” of the history of philosophy. They evoke or suggest that history. But they are not identical with it. As he does elsewhere in his writings, Dewey distinguishes between “technical” philosophic discussion, the kind found in academic tomes and conferences of philosophers, and non-technical or everyday philosophic discussion, the kind that requires no technical vocabulary but only a desire to inquire, to understand, to engage, and to think. Such discussion does not need the qualifier “philosophic”; understood in its broadest sense, the qualifier becomes redundant. Dewey will go on to emphasize that conversation is indispensable if humans want to form a meaningful world.

“Words,” “composing,” “discussion”: in his first sentence Dewey has foregrounded terms central to the art of communication. They are also reminders to himself, for he is a professional (read: “technical”) philosopher, as he makes plain in his second sentence: “It is not wholly possible for one who has been steeped too deeply in the history of the discussion to extricate the issue from the technical apparatus which has grown up around it” (p. 276). Philosophers have let the growth sprout around the issue of events and meanings, until the issue is hidden from view to everyday passers-by. Dewey is not confident he can hack away adequately at the brush. After all, he has helped it grow. He has been steeped “too deeply” in it. And part of him does not want to leave the enclave. “Redolent” connotes terms like “evoke” and “suggest,” but it also means “aromatic,” “scented,” and “fragrant.” The enclave of technical philosophy may be wild-looking, thorny, and unsculpted, like an agora long neglected by town authority. But while it may not look like a botanical garden, it has its own organic smells, feels, and appeals, seductive and narcotic to those addicted to philosophizing. By the time he pens this essay, Dewey has dwelled there a long time, despite countless forays (more than most other “technical” philosophers) into more public places. Throughout the text, Dewey will lean hard against some of his own habitual tendencies.

He hopes his readers will push against their own tendencies as well. Many of those readers themselves dwell too often in enclaves removed from the hurly-burly of human life. Those who read *The New Republic* include academics and intellectuals like himself. They include liberals, socialists, democrats, and people interested in civic life and the arts. Some of these people wield considerable material and cultural resources, and in some cases political resources, too. It is also an audience, Dewey seems to imply in the tone and substance of the text, that is sometimes prone to remain on the sidelines of public life, taking a disdainful view of the restless, apparently business-obsessed mentality of many fellow citizens. Dewey will strongly criticize that mentality elsewhere in the essay. But the manner in which he begins his text underscores the dangers of taking a spectator's view of life. That view mirrors the spectator theory of epistemology that Dewey persistently sought to undermine, since he saw it as bound up intimately

in the ways people actually dwell.<sup>3</sup> According to the spectator view, human beings face a formidable problem, which can be cast in personal terms: If my mind is “in here” (my head), and the world is “out there” (outside my head), how can I come to know the world? The view presumes an ontological gap between person and world, and overlooks the fact (at any rate, a fact for Dewey) that such a view could only have emerged from ceding priority uncritically to theory over experience. According to Dewey, we are not here because we *think* we are here. We think about being here because we already and always *are*. We are—or can be—both event and meaning, as he will go on to claim.

In the first two sentences, Dewey has spotlighted elements of communication—words, composing, discussion—which he regards not only as central to human life but also, in what amounts to the same thing, as helpful in “extricating” himself and readers from a “technical” view of the issue. That issue, he states next, “was one of supreme human importance before philosophers made it their own and it will remain of supreme importance when all professional philosophers disappear.” Dewey unabashedly sets up a hierarchy. The issue is “supreme”—he repeats the word twice—which is to say *there is no other issue of greater human importance*. Moreover, it is an issue *which will endure as the most important so long as human beings endure*. According to Dewey, the stakes are as high as they can reach in what is at hand.

The issue: “Things are happening about us and to us all the time and to some of them we impute meanings” (p. 276). Dewey explains:

Be the meanings imputed by different persons the same or different we cannot avoid the imputing. We are made for conversation with our kind. When we are not urged into talk by the necessities of mutual dependence and assistance, we are brought to it by an inner push: communicate and share in the communications of others we must. Solitary confinement is the last term in the prison house of man, and speech with our fellows is the beginning of any liberation from the jail of necessity. (p. 276)

People dwell constantly under the influence of their environments, from the physical (the cloudiness outside, the chair on which I sit) to the cultural (the bus noise on the street, the computer with which I write). As Dewey says, endless things do happen “about us and to us” at every moment. The idea that people “impute” meaning to many of these events is also familiar. Human beings everywhere seem to have an impulse to make meaning, to interpret their experience, to contribute to and abide within what Clifford Geertz calls “webs of significance” they themselves have spun.<sup>4</sup>

Dewey underscores the *imputing* of meaning, rather than of *particular* meanings, as characteristic of human beings. Moreover, he emphasizes that meaning-making has a social dimension: “We are made for conversation with our kind.” To become a person (an “I”), and for persons to form any kind of community (a “we”), seems to presuppose conversation. There is no alternative.

There exists no other path to becoming human: “communicate and share in the communications of others we must.” Dewey denies the possibility of a “private language,” and thus the possibility of meaning in a solipsistic world.<sup>5</sup> An individual born on an island who thereafter never saw or interacted with another human being would certainly exist, and might exist for a long time if by some miracle he or she became skilled at hunting, gathering, fishing, and the like. But lacking *communication* with others, with its connotations for imagination, symbolization, and narrative, the person would hardly have a life, in the sense of a life of meanings. Dewey makes the point more strongly later in the text when he speaks of “the necessity to converse which we are under” (p. 277)—“under,” that is, if we wish to be human rather than remain at the level of “dumb beasts which perish” (p. 280). The key term is “dumb,” as in silent or outside a realm of meanings. Dewey employs the term “dumb” throughout the text as a contrast to communication. Moreover, by “speech” he does not comprehend merely verbal expression, but has in mind any successful mode of communication. Obviously, for example, deaf or mute persons are quite capable of developing means of communicating and, thus, of participating in a life of meanings and “webs of significance.”

Dewey has more to say about isolation. “Solitary confinement is the last term in the prison house of man,” he concludes the opening paragraph, “and speech with our fellows is the beginning of any liberation from the jail of necessity.” Solitary confinement, or solipsism, evokes the “last term” of humanity, the last, final word of the human withdrawing from the world. Just as Dewey begins this paragraph, and the text as a whole, with “the words,” he closes the initial paragraph with a forbidding image of a world without words. That world would lack Dewey’s very text and all others like it. It would lack the act of meaning-making in which he is engaged. It would be a world without art, which for Dewey constitutes a mode of communication.<sup>6</sup> For the ancient Greeks, whose philosophizing Dewey cherished, an *idiotes* meant a person without a community: a person without communication, without speech that could be discerned and answered. For Dewey, persons denied communication or those who refuse it revert to the “jail of necessity.” Henceforth, like the “dumb” beasts, they can only react to conditions rather than *respond* to them in meaningful ways, in ways that make possible a distinctively human environment rather than one ruled by fate and event.

The idea of necessity does not in itself imply a jail. In a manner that echoes Immanuel Kant’s historic perspective on morality, Dewey suggests that there can be a necessity born from freedom. In Kant’s terms, we human beings can provide our own laws of conduct to which we freely bind ourselves. Laws such as “Treat others as ends in themselves, never merely as means to our ends” can inform, or make possible, a pattern of ethical human action. Human beings can give a pattern or habitual form to their collective life, rather than resigning themselves to the force of events. Dewey portrays a world characterized by neces-

sity—“communicate with others *we must*” (my emphasis). But that necessity is self-legislated, albeit not by reason alone, as Kant argued. We adopt, accept, choose, select, embrace the necessity. The “we must” issues from our response to the call of the human, the call to become human, the call to be human, all of which *necessitates* communication. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” signals to the reader (and to himself) that to make meaning from events, rather than to remain a mere event oneself, “You must change your life.”<sup>7</sup> You must liberate yourself, through communication, from the jail of necessity—a universe of pure events—to the freedom of a necessity that allows the human to emerge. Only the necessity imposed by *silencing* incarcerates the human spirit.

Our particular communications, our particular choices to render meaning, may prove to be arbitrary, mistimed, or wrong-headed. In such cases, Dewey points out, critical reflection will not “approve” those choices. But the need to communicate, and the *fact* or *phenomenon* of choice in communicating, “is not arbitrary, not in a universe like this one, a world which is not finished and which has not consistently made up its mind where it is going and what it is going to do.”<sup>8</sup>

The idea of communication triggers questions about human agency. Can we *in fact* speak, or does language “speak us,” as some recent (and technical) philosophic claims have it? The question does not challenge the biological conditions for speaking. Rather, the question highlights the fact that all persons are born into a language that not only precedes them but that sets boundaries around what can possibly be said in that particular language. As we have seen, Dewey begins his text by speaking of “the words that compose the title,” as if those words had their own agency. There is no personal pronoun here. Yet we saw that in the second sentence he vividly declares his presence by revealing that he has “steeped” himself “too deeply” in technical philosophy. Language hasn’t done that. Dewey has, and he knows it. These first two sentences mirror, sequentially, the substance of the title. “Events and Meanings,” it reads, not events *or* meanings. Language can certainly be an event, no different in kind from a rainstorm, a falling leaf, or digestion. Perhaps that’s how it first appears to the infant: the noises of mother, father, and siblings are events. That’s also how it frequently appears to adults when they do not listen to others. What others are saying is shunted into the realm of events. And when people do not listen to us, we often feel like an object rather than a person; not to be heard is not to be perceived as human. Thus, language can be an event. But it can also be (literally) meaning-full. Each speaker can bring agency to bear on and in language, by virtue of his or her history as a speaker and as a person with a particular array of experiences. Whether language will be event or meaning depends, in part, on the context and situation. In itself (Dewey would say there is no “in itself”), language constitutes neither event nor meaning. In metaphorical terms, it can “speak us”—for example, when we uncritically mouth

platitudes that suppress reflective thinking—but we can “speak it,” for example when we say: “No, I disagree, that’s not what I mean.”

Michael Oakeshott, a thinker very different from Dewey but with several comparable views, argues that “we must” make what he calls “utterances” if we are to be human. “We are concerned with ourselves,” he writes, “and what we may be said to know about ourselves” (1989, p. 17). We are “concerned” enough to keep asking questions of our lives. We want to understand, appreciate, feel, and generate meaning, rather than accept our lives as mere random events. Thus, we speak of them. We sing of them. We dance of them, paint them, sculpt them, and dramatize them. We *express* our sense of ourselves and of the things happening “about us and to us,” as Dewey poses the matter. Oakeshott rehearses briefly some familiar “utterances” humans have made about themselves: that they are creatures who reason, that they are intricate biological organisms that have evolved over the millennia, that they are sentient creatures driven by the pleasure principle, that they are creatures of God. Then he comments:

Now, each of these statements about human beings is capable of elaboration in which its meaning may become clearer, thus allowing us to consider it from the point of view of whatever truth or error it may contain. They may all turn out to be (in some sense) true, or they may all be convicted of some error or obscurity. But with conclusions of this sort we are not now concerned. What concerns us is that each is itself a human utterance expressing a human understanding of the character of a human being, and that the capacity to make such utterances, whether they be true or false, itself postulates a man who is something besides what these, or any other such statements, allege him to be. They postulate what I shall call a ‘free’ man. (p. 18)

In Dewey’s terms, the “freedom” to make such utterances mirrors the very possibility of meaning. Without that freedom all would revert to mere event. Our knowing, thinking, feeling, wondering—all that we say of ourselves, of others, of the world—would be mere sound and fury, the workings of a deterministic or random universe. Dewey will conclude his text by claiming that these facts render the qualifier “free,” as in free speech or free thought, redundant. Speech, thought, communication, can enact or embody freedom.

In the first of the ten paragraphs that comprise his text, Dewey has summarized a philosophy of meaning and of human agency. An alert reader, with a posture unlike that of a spectator, can hardly help being drawn into “the issue” of events and meanings. An awake reader is experiencing the issue even as she or he reads.

In the second and third paragraphs, Dewey continues to rescue the issue from technically minded philosophers. On the one hand, he criticizes idealists who are so enamored of language and its ability to impute meanings that they

“have pretended to eliminate all events, and admit only the meanings of meanings” (p. 276). But these “closet attempts” at understanding the human condition are soliloquies, he claims, not conversations. “Where there is speech there are two,” he continues, “each of whom remains to some extent to the other a bare brute event, something to whose acts and words meaning can be imputed but who is not himself a transparent meaning” (p. 276). Moreover, if persons often remain opaque and unknown to one another, “how much greater is our failure with that vast dumb stretch of happenings in space and time which we call the world?” (276–77).

On the other hand, Dewey criticizes materialists who claim, in effect, that our imputing of meaning—our ability to make “utterances,” as Oakeshott writes—makes no difference to the nature of the world in which we live. Dewey acknowledges that “perhaps our speech is already senescent when most juvenily fresh; while talking of one event we are already being overwhelmed by some new event” (p. 277). However, in response to the demand that we must demonstrate the efficacy or impact of our meanings in order to determine their reality or truth-value, Dewey simply replies: “It makes no difference . . . whether events themselves have meanings or not; have them, that is, apart from us. We shall go on giving them meanings as long as we are human. ‘The rest is silence’—that is not life but death” (p. 277). If idealism threatens to lock us up in soliloquies, closeted off from the very real world of events and leaving us passive before them, materialism threatens, perversely, to generate the illusion of a dead world lacking even events.

Framed differently, the very posing of the question about the efficacy of our meanings presupposes a world of events and meanings. Dewey observes that even if we take “the most extreme view about the inability of imputed meanings to make a difference to things, . . . it still remains true that they make all the difference in the world to us” (p. 277). The truth of which Dewey speaks emerges the moment we realize that we are imputing meaning when we claim that our imputed meanings make no difference. In other words, there is no escape from the imputing, from the uttering, from the human, if people are indeed to *be* human. Moreover, our meanings don’t make just any difference to us; they make “all” the difference. Without our meanings, all is silent and dead. There is literally nothing, no thing, including a conception of ourselves. These facts do not mean that only what humans think and say is real. Rather, they affirm that what we can know, understand, perceive, and appreciate reflects meanings and not the sheer event-like quality of things. One way to read this ten-paragraph text of Dewey’s, buried deep within his lengthy corpus of writings, is as a call to accept fully the possibilities of communication, and thus of meaning, and thus of *coming into life* rather than settling for mere existence.

## ***The Need to Rescue the Business of Life from the Busyness of Events***

Dewey's call to life takes on new "tone, color, and form" beginning in the fourth paragraph. Having left behind the cloisters of technical philosophy, he now speaks directly to the public reading him. We are worried about America, he observes, and worried about ourselves. Echoing earlier accounts of life in America by the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Alexis de Tocqueville, Dewey writes that "Everyone who tries to tell us what is the matter with us tells us that we are just rushing about, doing things, on the move without caring where we are going if only movement is accelerating. We call the result 'business' because at present business is our most conspicuous form of keeping busy with things" (277–78). But meantime, Dewey remarks, those who worry about the country—for example, the intellectual, critically minded readers of *The New Republic*—continue themselves to rush about keeping busy. "Perhaps our fundamental trouble is lack of conversation. We do so much and say so little. Or our saying is so much of it just a little more doing rather than a conversation" (p. 277). Dewey's remarks ring true in 2004. They anticipate our present environment, at the university, of a thousand and one centers and institutes, a thousand and one programs, a thousand and one organizations. "For every professor a program, For every professor a center" could be today's motto. "Perhaps we need just one more Foundation or reform society," Dewey urges, tongue-in-cheek, "one to encourage sitting down and talking things over, and to discourage other organizations from doing any more things which only add to the infinite heap of things which already oppress us" (p. 277).

Dewey's choice of verb—to oppress—recalls the language of confinement and imprisonment that he highlighted in his initial paragraph. By allowing our "saying" to become mere "doing"—to revert into an event—we continue to sunder our own prospects for a stable response to the problems we see in the nation. Unwittingly, we oppress ourselves by surrendering ourselves to the rain, or reign, of events rather than of meanings. "Stable" does not imply permanent or fixed. Rather, it connotes continuity through response, a theme to which Dewey will return in his conclusion.

Why do we oppress ourselves? Dewey's answer is that we fear "thought and art which should say something" (p. 278). That fear, Dewey continues, proceeds from our dismay at the pace of events in the modern world, which I touched on in the introduction to this article. "Events have been too much for us; too many of them and on too vast a scale. We can't find anything to say about them—except ejaculations. And so we just plunge into them and add to their overwhelming mass." Note, once more, the use of the verb "say" in both quotes, contrasted now with mere ejaculations, sputterings, and reactions, wherein language itself constitutes event rather than reaching toward meaning. To say, to speak, to generate meaning, requires a commitment to employ time and talk well. But that

means raising our heads above the rush of events, which seems to necessitate courage, since we cannot predict the consequences of putting questions to ourselves.

Closely connected with the fear he names, Dewey diagnoses a second reason for our lack of “saying”:

Those in power are after all afraid of ideas, of conversation. They are afraid that conversation is more powerful than the power of the events upon which they so triumphantly ride. They give out jobs to keep the rest of us busy, and they dispense indulgences, called sport and amusement. And we are afraid of losing our jobs or of missing the latest show if we idle to engage in converse.

In days of yore bishops sold indulgences to the wealthy as the key to heaven’s gate. Today’s captains of business dispense indulgences of sport and amusement to all and sundry as the key to happiness. They fill the world with endless noise, hubbub, and flash. They do so as rapidly as current technology permits, as if they were engaged in a race *against* the human propensity to seek meaning through conversation. At all costs, or so it seems, they must keep things spinning fast enough so that conversation cannot break out, or break through. Dewey’s biting commentary calls to mind subsequent critiques by public intellectuals as varied as Hannah Arendt, Christopher Lasch, and Bruce Wilshire.<sup>9</sup>

In the middle paragraphs of his essay, Dewey has gauged the temper of his times. People feel all too viscerally the vicissitudes of events and meanings, even if they cannot name their causes or the conditions that give rise to them. Things are on the *move*, and there seems to be no stopping them. Dewey has no panacea to offer, nor is he interested in vending another way to bury one’s head in the sand while the storm of events blows by. He aspires to a way of “saying,” a way of communicating that can bring balance to the human world. He will take up this task in his final three paragraphs, which begin, however, with what sounds like a strange, self-deprecating apology.

### ***Beyond Fear: On Transforming Events into Meanings***

“As one too weak to dare to converse freely,” Dewey writes, “I would take refuge in a plea to our overlords” (p. 278). Why does Dewey describe himself as “too weak” to converse freely? Why would he imply that he has been muzzling himself all along in his essay, when he has been sharply critical of politicians, business leaders, intellectuals, and everyone else? What *else* has he been doing up to this point if not “conversing freely”? Does Dewey mean that as an academic, as a professional (“technical”) philosopher, he remains implicated in the system? By the very act of writing yet another paper, is he contributing to the “oppression” we feel under the “heap” of doings in the contemporary world, an ever-growing pile of stuff that crowds out clarity of perception, simplicity of expression, and

graciousness of response? Is Dewey unable to escape the tentacles of the system, just as he could not (and would not) shake off the trappings of technical philosophy? He admitted previously that he is “steeped too deeply” in that mode of work, just as he is bound up, after nearly forty years in the academy, in the commitments, compromises, and trade-offs of a university professor. If he “dared to converse freely,” perhaps that might mean launching a contemporary version of Emile Zola’s “J’Accuse!” It might mean decamping to whatever version of an agora he and others could fashion in which, like Socrates in the *Apology*, he could charge the state with the miseducation of its people. Or it might mean joining Walter Lippmann and others on the staff of *The New Republic*!<sup>10</sup> Dewey may also be acknowledging that he is *of* his time, rather than merely commenting *on* it. He is a participant in its ethos, not merely a spectator. He is afraid, too, of what lies on the other side of events. He does not know what resides there nor whether it will redeem the quest to find out. He does not know whether the finding out will undermine the fundamental, perhaps comforting structures of his life.

As if in response to his doubts, Dewey makes a characteristic move familiar to readers who have observed him elsewhere come up against a wall. He declares to the “overlords” that “the assignment of meanings to what is doing and happening is not so powerful and so dangerous as you fear” (pp. 278–79). Earlier Dewey had referred to “the power” to attribute meaning to events as a redemptive gift to human beings, enabling them to rise up from the sheer swirl of events (p. 277). His use of the term echoes ways in which he employs it in his educational writings, where he often speaks of developing students’ “powers” of observing, thinking, discerning, judging, interpreting, and more. Now, in addressing the overlords, he means power in the competitive sense: the ability to defeat others. Those in command of resources employ the power of the state and of the economy to keep others down and out, and to keep themselves in. For all of that, however, the power they wield is belittling and renders them dwarfs of the persons they could be. Their power reduces them to surfers on the tide of events, knocking others out of the way as they struggle to stay out in front. Unknowingly, Dewey avers, they serve the very forces that will eventually undermine them. “The God of events,” he writes, “has no intention of abdicating, least of all in favor of you who are creatures of events. The events that will make a past event out of you are already beginning” (p. 278).

As if sensing that his “plea” to the overlords has become yet another damnation of their blindness, Dewey conjures an image of how much more “interesting” life would become “if only composed and articulate meanings are assigned to the happenings amid which we live.” His next-to-last paragraph proceeds as follows:

If you first permitted and then took part in a give and take of ideas, in a conversation which assigned meanings to the events which willy-nilly

involve us, that ennui, that fear of the future, that now leads you to plunge further for an escape into busyness might be lessened. Thinking about events and celebrating them in tone and color and form might become more important than being an event. It is even possible that temporary abstinence from the course of events for the sake of conversing about them might moderate their violence, and by tempering power render it more stable. And then when the great change in the event does come, you and your children will be infinitely more prepared for it. For you will have developed a frame of mind which gives meaning to things that happen; and to find a meaning, to understand along with others, is always a contentment, an enjoyment. Events that have no attributed meanings are accidents and if they are big enough are catastrophes. By sufficient preliminary conversation you can avert a catastrophe. For nothing is a catastrophe which belongs in a composed tale of meanings. (p. 279)

It might seem Dewey is proffering advice to diplomats on how to avert strife, an understandable urge given the fact that in 1922 northeast France remained a devastated wasteland, German inflation had exploded beyond comprehension, Soviet forces were finishing off a horrible civil war with czarists, the American congress had recently passed draconian immigration laws, and more, much more. Isolationism, fear, competition, war, seemed endemic the world over. In other words, to paraphrase Charles Dickens's opening to *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was a time not unlike our own.

However, as we have seen, Dewey remains acutely aware of how frightening the scope and pace of world happenings can feel. He avoids mentioning *specific* events in the text precisely because he wants to urge people to respond to them with something other than either paralysis or violence. Thus, he returns to the theme of composition. How can we learn to *compose* a world in which to dwell? The answer, once more, is through communication and conversation, processes through which we learn to articulate and to compose meanings out of the sweep of events. Such a world can be "more interesting" in the full sense of how Dewey employs the concept "interest." "Self and interest are two names for the same fact," he writes elsewhere; "the kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists."<sup>11</sup> In other words, people do not "have" interests. They *are* interests. If they attend to sunsets, the shades of blue in the sky, the turn of clouds, and the like, they are *that* kind of person. If they ignore such phenomena, they are a different kind of person. There is no person outside of an interest of one kind or another; there are no interests without a person embodying them.

The world we inhabit will be "more interesting" if we fuse ourselves with an interest in imputing meaning to events. If we do that, Dewey opines, we will be ready for "the great change in the event," that is, for the guaranteed continued rush of life on the planet. We can temper fear through a critical awareness of the

aleatory, event-full nature of the world. Rather than cowering and withdrawing from nature—of which meanings as well as events are part—we can habitually seek understanding through communication. Through this process, we avoid setting up two worlds: one a narrow, isolated band of comfort and consolation that we occupy with others like us, and the other a raging pandemonium of events. A two-world human universe is ultimately uninhabitable. As modern times relentlessly confirm, such a universe features one catastrophe after another. In contrast, “nothing” is a catastrophe that forms part of a “composed tale of meanings.” Dewey does not mean that the imputing of meanings eliminates pain, loss, terror, or death, much less earthquakes and tornados. King Canute cannot turn the ocean’s tide just because he prefers meanings to events. To speak of events, to give them meaning, to weave them into a story of our lives on the planet, does not eliminate them. Rather, the process allows us to live in hope rather than merely to exist in fear. Dewey elucidates the difference between these two states in his final paragraph.

“An intelligent imputing of meanings,” he suggests, “. . . may also be an event which affects other events propitiously” (p. 279). The sentence echoes Dewey’s wide-ranging comments elsewhere on the importance of the educational environment. According to Dewey, it is impossible to educate other people *directly*, as if we could open their heads or hearts and rearrange the internal wiring. From his point of view, the only way we can influence others is through the intermediary of the environment. Moreover, we can treat the environment as event or as meaning: we can leave its shape up to fate and chance, or take steps to fashion it in ways that, hopefully, spur learning and growth. To consider a familiar contrast, if we plant children in rows of seats and present endless information to them all day long, that environment will call out certain kinds of responses, such as a capacity to appear interested even if one is not, an ability to sit in one place for a long time, perhaps a capacity to write things down rapidly, and so forth. If we engage children with texts or text-analogues they can access and that are provocative, if we give them time to think about them, and if we ask them questions about how they interpret them, that environment will also call out certain kinds of responses, in this case a capacity to read, to reflect, to speak publicly, and to consider alternative accounts and explanations.

This perspective on the environments in which we dwell, and on the agency we have to alter them, resides behind Dewey’s claim that we can influence the quality of events themselves. We cannot affect the course of events *directly*, as if we were gods who could interfere with the passage of time, or titans who could rearrange the constitution of space itself. Events will happen “willy nilly” despite any and all of our actions. Many will unfold for no reason whatsoever, despite our heartfelt attempts to make things appear otherwise. Nonetheless, Dewey contends, we can fund future events with more “propitious” consequences and effects through the “intelligent imputing of meanings.” By “intelligent,” Dewey denotes an interpretive process that is social, public, communicated, and connected

to as many other doings and events as is possible, those in the past as much as in the present. “The striving to make stability of meaning prevail over the instability of events,” he writes elsewhere, “is the main task of intelligent human effort.”<sup>12</sup> That interpretive process, that collective enterprise of imputing meanings, becomes an event that fuels subsequent interpretation and imputing of meaning. In other words, the process can trigger continuous meaning-*generating* events because those that precede them are meaning-*laden*.

“And if such should turn out to be the case,” Dewey pledges, “you who love your children even if you do not love all the sons of men, by encouraging conversation, encouraging thought which is more than a speciality and art which is more than an ornament, will have enabled your children to take part in some future course of events instead of being overwhelmed by them” (pp. 279–280). Dewey’s biblical invocation of the love of children reminds readers that to fail to regard others with compassion means reducing them, in effect, into mere events. It means casting them out of the realm of “ends-in-themselves,” a term of art from Kant that helps characterize a crucial aspect of love: namely, to regard the other person (whether child or adult) as an end in his or her own right, not merely as a means to our ends. Dewey also chides, for a final time, “technical” philosophers like himself who render thought into a “speciality” rather than a public resource and a public process. He upbraids readers of *The New Republic* for forgetting that art fundamentally implies public communication with any and all who come our way. Art that is an “ornament” reflects truncated communication sealed off in private places, divorced from the “issue” of how to respond to events and meanings in the world. Secluded talk with like-minded, perhaps beloved others is very fine and is very necessary for retaining a balanced state of mind and spirit. But Dewey, lifelong lover of cloistered philosophic conversation, implies that we should learn to share the wealth, learn to share as freely as events allow the meanings we have imputed in our lives. “Apart from conversation, from discourse and communication,” he warns, “there is no thought and no meaning, only just events, dumb, preposterous, destructive.”

### **Conclusion: An Invitation to Communicate**

“Events and Meanings” can be read as a prologue to *Experience and Nature*, which Dewey would publish three years later, in 1925. For example, he says of communication in that book:

Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales. When communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they

are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking. Events turn into objects, things with a meaning.<sup>13</sup>

When Dewey describes the “wonder” of communication, he places this human capacity alongside the two things that Kant (whose work was at the center of Dewey’s doctoral dissertation) claimed filled the mind and heart with awe: the starry heavens above us, with their majestic portrait of the universe, and what he called the moral law within us, by which he meant the impulse and ability to fashion a morally better rather than worse world. “Because of its characteristic agency and finality,” Dewey adds, “communication and its congenial objects are objects ultimately worthy of awe, admiration, and loyal appreciation. They are worthy as means, because they are the only means that make life rich and varied in meanings. They are worthy as ends, because in such ends man is lifted from his immediate isolation and shares in a communion of meanings.”<sup>14</sup>

In “Events and Meanings,” Dewey holds out a tantalizing prospect to readers bewildered, confused, and frightened by the rapidly changing times in which they live. To recall a sentence quoted previously: “Thinking about events and celebrating them in tone and color and form might become more important than being an event” (p. 279). The possibility allures with its vision of artful life and human interaction.

However, the idea of “celebrating” events consternates in the same way as Dewey’s absurd-sounding claim that the imputing of meanings can eliminate catastrophes. Are we to “celebrate” pain, grief, and death, as well as hurricanes, epidemics, and crop failure? Don’t all such phenomena constitute events, as surely as do a happy marriage, a good school year, and a delicious dinner, all of which we quite naturally celebrate?

Dewey might respond by emphasizing that the first term in the sentence is “thinking.” To think is not to react, but to respond. As he writes elsewhere, thinking means drawing events into connection with one another and considering their meaning, with an eye on precedent as well as prospect.<sup>15</sup> If we accept this viewpoint, the idea of celebrating events becomes something other than a pollyannaish, hubristic, or insensitive undertaking. In marked contrast with our contemporary notions of a celebrity, Dewey underscores that celebrating means respecting. It means honoring. And it means doing so publicly, which means together with others. To respect and honor an event necessitates probing its meaning, its place in the pattern of life. The process presumes a critical examination of the “tone and color and form” of the event.

Two brief examples might help illuminate Dewey’s meaning. Union and Confederate forces collide at Gettysburg in July 1863, in the most costly battle in the history of American arms. The tone of the event is shrill and awful terror. The color is bloody red, covering blue and gray alike. The form is mayhem, great bravery, and bottomless fear. President Abraham Lincoln journeys to the site in

November of that year and delivers his famous address. He gives a meaning to the event. He transforms its tone, color, and form. He *says*—in the fullest possible sense of the verb—that the event represents the start of a new birth of freedom. He *says* that the event dramatizes why America exists in the first place, as a place where there might be government of, by, and for the people. In short, he celebrates. He respects and honors those who have given “the last full measure of devotion,” even if he (mistakenly) believes his words themselves will not long be remembered. The fallen soldiers, Lincoln’s audience, the millions who have heard and read the address since that time, and Lincoln himself in his act of saying, have been transformed from event into meaning.

A storm destroys a home and puts a family on the street. The tone of the event registers violent winds and rains, the power of nature. The color encompasses pale fright on faces and darkness dominating other jagged, jumbled hues. The form features a sudden shock, a ragged break in time and space that creates a peaceful before and a despairing now. But these meanings are being generated and communicated by the family themselves and others who may be around. The public, visible nature of the process anticipates and forecasts the steps that will lead to a new home. People move from reaction to response. They respect and they honor the desire for home that will lead to a recovery. Posed differently, they *celebrate* their very agency as human beings, although hardly in those particular terms. Nobody remains helpless before the event—nobody *is* an event—if the habit of thinking and celebrating events has taken hold. “Even the dumb pang of an ache,” Dewey writes elsewhere, “achieves a significant existence when it can be designated and descanted upon; it ceases to be *merely* oppressive and becomes important; it gains importance, because it becomes representative; it has the dignity of an office.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, through communication we convert the event into a meaning, into a moment that can educate and urge us to move onwards.

As we have seen, the tone of Dewey’s text on events and meanings is itself one of celebration, understood as respecting and honoring the human impulse to communicate and to impute meaning. The text is colorful in its wide-ranging criticism of both its famous author and his contemporary world, and the color splashes across the boundaries of printed page to paint our world today, so fundamentally alike with Dewey’s in its unpredictability, fear, and hope. The form is that of poetry, of compressed meanings, terms surcharged with possibilities, and power coiling below the surface. Dewey celebrates his ability, and ours, to make meaning. If only for a moment, he fills the void of a silent and silencing world with the word. Whether his moment and his word will help generate other moments and words depends on us. “It is thought itself, the life of meanings, which is at stake” (p. 280).

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are from Dewey's "Events and Meanings," in *Essays on Philosophy, Education, and the Orient 1921–1922, The Middle Works of John Dewey 1899–1924, Volume 13*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 276–280.

2. *The New Republic* was launched in 1914 by Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, Walter Weyl, Francis Hackett, and others, to serve as a source of public criticism and dialogue devoted to progressive ideals. Its founders sought to reimagine what America had been and what it could become. In 1915, the editors invited Dewey to become a regular contributor, and over the next twenty years he published over 150 articles in the journal on a wide range of national and international issues. Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 181; Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 290–291; Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), pp. 189–190.

3. See, for example, his *Experience and Nature*, in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 1: 1925*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).

4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

5. For a powerful critique of the notion of a private language, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

6. "All communication is like art," Dewey argues elsewhere, just as "all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative." *Democracy and Education, The Middle Works of John Dewey 1899–1924, Volume 9: 1916*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 9, 8, *passim*.

7. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. & trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 61.

8. *Experience and Nature*, p. 67.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978); Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

10. A full-page subscription advertisement in the September 6, 1922 issue of *The New Republic* features a long quote from Dewey's "Events and Meanings" (published in the journal's previous issue of August 30), followed by the statement: "We thank Dr. Dewey for having inadvertently written in these excerpts the best *New Republic* house ad of the season." In the tear-off portion below, next to a place for name and address, the ad reads: "Sirs: I am willing to take Dr. Dewey's word for it that my world would be more interesting, and living more fun, for the addition of more thought, more give and take of ideas, more communication." Subscribers can then check a box for a 12-week trial subscription (\$1.00), a full year's subscription (\$5.00), or a year's worth of the journal along with a copy of "Dewey's latest book," *Human Nature and Conduct* (\$6.25). What did Dewey think of the marketing of his thought, in the very space where he worried about the "oppression" of things piling on top of us in the modern world?

11. *Democracy and Education*, pp. 361–362; also see pp. 132–133.

12. *Experience and Nature*, p. 49 (also see pp. 325–326); *The Quest for Certainty*, in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 4: 1929*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 160, 170–171. Dewey writes that “Meanings having been deflected from the rapid and roaring stream of events into a calm and traversable canal, rejoin the main stream, and color, temper and compose its course.” *Experience and Nature*, p. 132.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

15. *Democracy and Education*, pp. 146–158.

16. *Experience and Nature*, p.133, my emphasis.

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