Book Review

John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope

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In John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope, Stephen M. Fishman, Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and Lucille McCarthy, Professor of English at the University of Maryland, join forces to experiment with John Dewey’s ideas in the classroom. They focus on the topic of hope, something they notice lacking in the world. Living in these dark times, they admit, wears on their own confidence. Like many people over thirty years old, they came of age during a time that encouraged optimism. Today, in contrast, evidence of growing political and religious unrest, including war, widening gaps between rich and poor, and perilous ecological conditions, despite our best and most reasoned efforts to improve the world, often engenders a sense of despair. Failure can seem inevitable. A significant problem becomes that of recovering and sustaining a sense of hope.

Fishman is determined to solve this problem by making "philosophy hit the ground" (164). As McCarthy and he have demonstrated in earlier collaborations, Fishman is comfortable making his classroom a laboratory to test ideas; his approach to recovering hope is to design and teach a course on it. McCarthy, his partner, graciously returns in her role as sensitive, insightful, and articulate observer. Sympathetic to Fishman’s challenges and dreams, she holds up a mirror to his teaching. The two professors also return to John Dewey’s works for inspiration. Fishman notes Dewey’s capacity to sustain hopefulness, even as he encountered difficult personal and public losses. This leads Fishman to find in Dewey what he calls a "road map" to a more enduring sense of hope. Moreover, Fishman wants to see if by taking his course, students "might better understand and enhance their levels of hope" (xx).
The book is divided into two parts, the first largely philosophical and the second more practical. Fishman devotes the first chapter to presenting his theory of "Deweyan hope." In the next three chapters, he compares and contrasts the set of ideas constituting Deweyan hope with those from other scholars who have written on hope, including French existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and psychologist C. R. Snyder. Believing that "Dewey's voice becomes clearer and more resonant when it is heard in dialogue with these other voices" (xxiii), Fishman devotes a chapter to each individual, although throughout the text, he does not treat them as fully as he does Dewey. He concludes this more theoretical part of the book with a chapter titled "Highlights of a Deweyan Theory of Hope."

With an audience of teachers in mind, McCarthy then takes on most of the second section, "The Practice of Hope," which comprises about a third of the book. Here she makes the course come alive by reporting on her empirical study of Fishman's upper-division course, "Philosophy and the Practice of Hope," which he taught to ten undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte during the spring of 2005. In chapter 6, "Teaching a Course on Hope," she explains Fishman's seminarlike approach to engaging in collaborative inquiry, discusses the aim of what she calls "constructed knowing," reports on the assignments, provides portraits of the students, and recounts a class discussion. In addition to viewing all the classes either directly or via videotape, McCarthy reflected with Fishman on student work and conducted at least four interviews with almost every student. In chapter 7, "Undergraduates in a Course on Hope," she reports on "ideas about hope that the students were most able to use in their own lives" (105). She concludes her section with "Highlights of a Deweyan Practice of Hope." For the final chapter of the book, Fishman and McCarthy reflect on their own collaborative learning experience.

In constructing a theory of Deweyan hope, Fishman offers an idea he calls "ultimate hope" or "living in hope." As he explains, "By living in hope, I mean having an ultimate hope of goal towards which one works that gives one's life significance in relation to nature and the human community. Living in hope means that one has a sense of belonging, purpose, faith in one's ideals, and unification" (4). Fishman offers three Deweyan concepts he believes to be keys to "living in hope" and achieving "ultimate hope." They are "gratitude," "intelligent wholeheartedness," and "enriched present experience." He argues that embodying these concepts changes our actions, making them more purposeful, unified, and significant because we are able to glimpse their place in a larger and more meaningful context.

Gratitude, the first condition for living in hope, for example, goes well beyond simply feeling thankful. Through gratitude, according to Fishman, we play a part in achieving a larger purpose. By fulfilling obligations to both our ancestors and descendants, for instance, we experience the deeper sense of belonging to the human community. Our charge is to find what is valuable in our inheritance. By improving these goods, we make a positive difference for future generations.
Wholeheartedness, according to Fishman, is not a case of simply being enthusiastically absorbed in an activity, loving what one is doing. To be considered a key to living in hope, wholeheartedness must also be informed by intelligence. "By choosing goals and ideals intelligently and wholeheartedly," Fishman explains, "we give ourselves fully to them . . . even though we may meet with defeat as we attempt to realize them" (9). His belief in the value of his endeavors, Fishman testifies, "helps [him] better tolerate, accept, and even, at times, treasure [his] frequent failure and disappointments" (10).

Fishman's third key to living in hope is what he calls "enriched present experience," that is, getting the most out of everyday experiences. Here he offers two interrelated Deweyan ideas. First, we can make our present experience richer by appreciating its connections to the past and the future. For example, we allow what we want from the future to inform what we are doing because we see that the consequences of our actions will become conditions for future actions. Similarly, "we experience present activity as a fulfillment" of what came before. Second, Fishman argues that our capacity to become engrossed in present activity can be limited by "too much focus on past successes and overanticipation of future ones" (12). He explains, "Accepting that our successes and failures are intimately related and of limited duration allows us to focus better on what is within our control" (12).

One of the delights of reading *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope* is Fishman's ease in writing about Dewey. His prose reads like a conversation with someone who not only knows Dewey's thinking well but also is not afraid to experiment with these ideas. For example, Fishman is not daunted that Dewey himself never chose to study hope. In fact, he testifies to eagerness "to see a little further than Dewey saw by building on his insights, by constructing a theory of hope that Dewey himself hints at but never explicitly develops" (165). Finding relevant passages in Dewey's work, however, demands careful reading, which Fishman calls "patient sifting." He especially sifts through Dewey's more mature writings, texts that Dewey wrote when he was past sixty and working through his ideas on art and experience. These writings include *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *Experience and Nature* (1925), the revised *How We Think* (1933), *A Common Faith* (1934), and *Art as Experience* (1934). Dewey's aesthetic theory finds its way into Fishman's thoughts on hope.

Right from the start Fishman makes clear that Dewey does not turn to religion to find hope. Instead, he turns to nature. For Dewey, Fishman argues, the "impulse to hope" is innate, in his words, "part of our animal 'pluck.'" As creatures living in a world of change, Fishman explains, "our most basic goal is harmony among our impulses and our environment. We want moments when we feel our needs have been satisfied, when we feel peace within ourselves and in our relation to the universe" (16). Moreover, we can be fulfilled by the experience of actually achieving harmony. Paraphrasing Dewey's claim from *Art as Experience*, Fishman writes, "the moments of passage from disequilibrium to equilibrium are among those when we are most alive and engaged, the moments of 'intensest life'" (16). The moments...
of fulfillment nature provides, however, are short lived and unpredictable. Dewey argues that by making the connection between the conditions and consequences of our actions we apply intelligence to improving them. Intelligence allows us to increase the frequency, depth, and duration of these moments. As we bring them under our control, we can refine and enrich them.

According to Fishman, so it is with hope. "Humans have a native sense that their activities will yield positive rather than negative results" (15), he explains. According to him, through the application of intelligence, hope, also, becomes refined and enriched. In fact, it can become disciplined and eventually, moral. Hope becomes disciplined when instead of just wanting something, we actually plan for it. Hope becomes moral when we temper wholeheartedness with reason, making sacrifices in order to serve a higher principle. Reasoned judgment "converts hopes that are immediately attractive into hopes that are pronounced good or moral upon critical reflection" (19). "Dewey's idea of living in hope," Fishman argues, "is that one's life is undergirded by faith in an ultimate hope for this-worldly social reform" (4).

Fishman also admits that Dewey's theory of hope points to significant contradictions. He asks, "What is the object of Dewey's ultimate hope?" and gets two different sets of answers. One set Fishman associates with what he calls the "familiar" Dewey and the other with the "unfamiliar." The familiar Dewey is content with what nature provides. His ultimate hope, according to Fishman, is "a life of challenge, creativity, and cooperative democratic living" (21), each of which is possible in a changing world. By applying intelligence, grasping the conditions leading to moments of fulfillment, we can cause them to be more frequent but not more enduring. To Fishman, this means, "the most I can hope for are moments in which I believe so strongly in the value of what I am doing that I am vitally alive and fully engrossed. These are moments of harmony that are limited in duration but that can help make the possibility of such future moments, both for myself and for others, more widely available" (31).

Fishman also reports feeling "something mystical in [his] turn towards Dewey" (30). He associates this feeling with the unfamiliar Dewey who describes "experiences of the enveloping whole that are akin to the religious ecstasy of communion" (31). "These harmonies, and the resulting peace of mind, are so powerful . . . that they endure for those who achieve them even through the darkest times" (25). This unfamiliar Dewey also "suggests that peace beyond understanding, a deep adjustment that lasts through all vicissitudes, is also a legitimate ultimate hope"(31). Yearning for this ultimate hope, Fishman reports being discouraged by Dewey's failure to provide a road map. Based on his reading of Dewey's Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (1938), Fishman expects that "all inquiry should provide a trail that others can follow to verify the inquirer's findings" (26). But, when Dewey speaks of these experiences that sound mystical, he uses words such as "ineffable" and "non-cognitive." Even so, in A Common Faith, as Fishman discovers, Dewey says that "religious experiences yielding lasting and harmonious adjustments can come about in three ways: philosophic reflection, poetry, and devotion to a cause" (26). Fishman argues that all but devotion to a cause demand what he calls "nega-
tive capability," a term he borrows from Keats, "the capacity to entertain apparently contradictory positions without choosing one over the other" (27). Fishman laments the challenge entailed in achieving this.

Fishman's candor must be one of the reasons his students enjoy taking his classes. He sounds like the kind of professor many students would want to learn from, regardless of the course's title. In fact, McCarthy reports that half the class reported choosing "Philosophy and the Practice of Hope," because Fishman was teaching it. McCarthy's classroom accounts make clear that he allows his students to see a more mature and experienced person enthusiastically thinking about something important. In fact, she describes his expression of genuine excitement. "When he felt he understood something in new ways—that he or his students had made new connections or found new 'harmonies,' to use a Deweyan word—Steven became excited. He waved his arms, punched the air, and spoke animatedly in response to the pupil whose comment had provoked the insight" (110). Fishman's "aha" moments may encourage students to think for themselves, discovering something new to say. "I've noticed that he gets most excited when he hears something that he hasn't heard before," a student reports, "especially when it's coming from one of us . . . He also likes it when we see things for the first time" (110).

There is, however, something troubling in an approach to philosophy where the emphasis is to emulate a thinker, rather than examine ideas critically. While Dewey's place in the pantheon of American philosophers makes hero worship easy for many of us, there is something to be gained from resisting the temptation to venerate him. For example, I wish Fishman had pursued more fully his distinction between what he calls the "familiar" and "unfamiliar" Deweys. I suspect Fishman has come across Dewey's own failure to distinguish his more spiritual leanings from his pragmatic ones.

All in all, I find more to praise than criticize in this book. Fishman, a professor who respects the power of ideas to transform lives, including his own and those of his students, has much to share. McCarthy's work not only stands as a testament to the power of a skilled classroom observer, but also demonstrates an effective and comprehensive approach to conducting classroom research. Teachers interested in developing a course around a single concept such as hope may also benefit from reading this book. The appendix, containing Fishman's syllabus, guidelines, and homework assignments, is especially complete. Students of Dewey's writings may also enjoy Fishman's unique approach to constructing a theory of hope.

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