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Recovering Wildness: “Earthy” Education and Field Philosophy

Abstract:

This essay invites a recovery of “wildness” as a way for philosophers to respond to the present moment which includes: an ongoing global pandemic, economic uncertainty, increasing cultural division, and a crisis in higher education broadly that persistently threatens the status of philosophy programs. Drawing on the American thinkers John William Miller and John Dewey and elaborating on their own philosophical defenses of liberal education, I propose a turn to wildness and freedom in our pedagogies through active and embodied philosophical pedagogy, including field philosophy. I offer two examples of courses that begin to invite wildness into the process of philosophical inquiry. The aim of this essay is to consider how wildness in teaching and learning and in doing philosophy might make philosophy stay alive.

Keywords:

John William Miller, John Dewey, wildness, field philosophy, pedagogy

In an undeniably tumultuous time in higher education, pitching to administrators a philosophy course in which students need to carry bear spray and where lounging in a hammock, fly fishing, and sitting around a campfire are parts of the curriculum may seem as foolish as it is implausible. And yet, my experiences teaching outdoor philosophy courses continually affirm to me that active and embodied approaches to philosophical inquiry can have profound impact on students’ ability to see philosophy as a way of engaging with the world in an ongoing, even lifelong way.

The liberal arts, we know, are operating in crisis mode, and philosophy departments, in particular, are suffering – continually at risk of being eliminated at colleges and universities around the United States. In the name of self-preservation, many in philosophy see this state of affairs as a reason to tighten up and take fewer risks, a time for departments to metaphorically “keep their heads down,” avoiding making unnecessary requests or demands from administrators, and avoiding the ever-present suspicion of our often-mysterious, misunderstood work.

On the contrary, I suggest that the moment we are in – amidst an enduring global pandemic and persistent economic crisis which threatens higher education – calls for philosophy professors and departments, indeed, for philosophy itself, to take even more risks now – to practice being *wilder*. Siloed, safe, and often mechanical teaching – frequently characteristic of theory-driven and expert-driven pedagogy – is unsustainable. These kinds of pedagogies are restrictive, locking out the potential for agency and for creativity – for spurring practical action that is responsive to the unique challenges of the day, for philosophy that is suited to become a way of life. In contrast, *wilding* philosophy draws out and draws on the humanity, and perhaps the animality, in teachers and students alike, attuning them to their environments and their local communities. In a rich and open sense, wilding philosophy is growth-oriented and democratic. It is embodied, relational, and emergent. What this moment calls for is a philosophy that is, at its core, wilder.

In working to imagine and to justify a wilder philosophy, I draw on several American thinkers, including Douglas R. Anderson, John William Miller, and John Dewey.¹ More than twenty years ago, Doug Anderson called for a “recovery of wildness” in teaching. In this paper, I argue that a recovery of wildness is even more urgent today. Aiming to recover wildness in philosophy, we should embrace a thoroughly “earthy” philosophy, to use the words of Miller, and develop philosophies which awaken the moral imagination, to use the language of Dewey. As an example of wilding philosophy, I describe some of my own pedagogical experiences in which I attempt to make philosophical inquiry wilder. In particular, I describe a course I teach called *Nature Writing as Public Philosophy* – an immersive outdoor course that allows students to connect environmental philosophy, twenty-first century ecological literature, and personal, localized experience in order to develop their own responses to our present social and ecological crises. This experiment in wilding philosophy is only one example of doing so, and it is a very literal one, as the course is taught primarily outdoors. The ways that philosophy can become wild are certainly not limited to experiences as non-traditional as these. But this example is one that may demonstrate the relevance of philosophy and its potential to respond to a world in flux with openness and democratic practice.

I. Recovering Wildness – “Uncivilizing” Our Philosophy

In a 1998 essay, Doug Anderson warned of a “paralyzing dilemma” in higher education: “Either adapt full-scale to the current technology of teaching and its corollary technique or be left behind as relics of another time.”² With the language of the “technology of teaching,” he was referring to the educational norms and expecta-

1) These three figures serve as a jumping off point to my interest in wildness because of connections among their work that I find compelling. Each offers a particular academic approach to the topic of liberal education, and they share a historical grounding in the American philosophical tradition. That said, examination of any number of other figures offers a different lens through which to explore wildness in philosophy, and I find many of those in the feminist-pragmatist tradition including figures such as Jane Addams, Grace Lee Boggs, and Margaret Fuller, and others less often associated with that tradition such as Terry Tempest Williams – all of whom taught through embodied, active pedagogies with their own wild characteristics. Continuing to develop a distinctively feminist consideration of wildness in philosophy is a part of my larger philosophical project out of which this essay emerges.

2) Anderson, “In the Face of Technology,” 297.

tions of late twentieth-century America, which he understood to be “underwritten by philosophical principles whose origins reside in traditional British empiricism and more recent Anglo-American analytic philosophy.”³ In the two decades that have passed since Anderson posed this dilemma, the discipline has changed in some important ways, its canon being reshaped and slowly becoming more inclusive and self-critical. For example, trends in philosophy show the uptake of decolonizing philosophies, philosophies of the city, and public philosophy in recent years. But the status of philosophy in higher education indicates that not enough has changed. Philosophy departments continue to shrink, and many programs have been cut entirely in recent years.⁴ The status of academic philosophy is, at best, precarious.

The dilemma Anderson presented is that we can either succumb to mechanical teaching “which effect[s] an objectification of human existence,” or we can write ourselves out of relevance, which might actually eliminate our disciplinary existence.⁵ That risk remains palpable today. Anderson’s recommendation is that we “dissolve the dilemma”⁶ by turning our attention to wildness. Thoreau famously claimed, “the most alive is the wildest.”⁷ The aim of this essay is to consider how wildness in teaching and learning and doing philosophy might make philosophy stay *alive*.

John William Miller was keenly attuned to this problem of philosophy’s relevance. Miller, who had been a student of William Earnest Hocking, C.I. Lewis, and Josiah Royce at Harvard, enjoyed a long and reputable teaching career at Williams College, where he served for decades as the department chair and where he was honored as the Mark Hopkins Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy. His courses at Williams and at various visiting appointments spanned the philosophy curricula, and his focus was not on a particular school of thought or figure in philosophy. Rather, his primary focus was on teaching. For Miller, “research and scholarly interests were made subordinate to the primary task of liberal education and [his] own sense of scholarship – that is, the thoughtful apprehension of the conditions of one’s endeavors. Miller’s interest was in educating responsible citizens who would bring philosophy to life in the worlds of art, business, law, or politics.”⁸ Miller’s writing on liberal education and the liberal arts, as well as his own legacy of teaching at Williams, offer a great deal to our consideration of recovering the wildness. His offering, through his legacy, was a “thoroughly earthy philosophy,” from which we can draw insights about the direction that the discipline of philosophy can go. Miller’s emphasis on “earthy” philosophy draws a contrast between philosophies that aim toward understanding the here-and-now experience and those which rest on the transcendental, and thus do not adequately connect with reality. Earthy philosophies, as Miller’s work embodies, are not “disengaged intellectuality,” nor are they primarily aimed at abstractions; rather, earthy philosophies are concerned with connecting history – “prior ordinary experience” – with what is “directly present to us.”⁹

In the short, posthumously published essay “Reflections on the Liberal Education,” Miller resists the mechanical pedagogy which Anderson warned could be the demise of the discipline. He invites the reader to question what it is that the liberal arts offer: “There is no *particular* good to be derived from Plato, or Shakespeare, or Emerson, or Einstein. These are disinterested minds and their meaning is lost in so far as one is not prepared

3) Ibid.

4) For a glimpse at the range of programs cut or under threat of elimination: <https://dailynous.com/category/cuts-and-threats-to-philosophy-programs/>

5) Anderson, “In the Face of Technology,” 297.

6) Ibid.

7) Thoreau, “Walking,” 611.

8) McGandy, *The Active Life*, viii.

9) Miller, *The Task of Criticism*, 41–42.

to walk in their steps, however remotely.”¹⁰ Provocatively, he claims that there is no value in teaching save “the intrinsic worth of critical adventure.”¹¹ The task, then, is to figure out how to make the study of figures like Plato and Emerson *an adventure*.

Although Miller did not use the term wildness, he praised freedom in teaching, explaining that the way to increase liberality in education is not to offer new technology or measurements, but to eliminate barriers: “There is no affirmative way of dealing with the technical and practical problems of curricula and of instructional devices. One can only remove hindrances to the attainment of liberal outlooks.”¹² The removing of hindrances amounts to a certain freedom or wildness in the adventure of learning.

Teaching content alone, such that students can repeat it back or have a command of an argument, is not teaching philosophy liberally. “All knowledge is power,” Miller writes, “but not all power breeds liberality of mind. The training of animals enlarges their powers, but it also leaves them slaves of masters and the signals which prompt their activities.”¹³ Any subject can be taught either liberally or illiberally, Miller claimed. And teaching illiberally, perhaps, is in part responsible for philosophy’s status in the academy – a status which continues to risk “relic-hood.”

What Miller aspired to offer his students – and what he offered by his own example and “presence” for his students – was the chance to live a philosophical life. And the philosophical life involves chance, contingency, action, and some wildness. The “classic posture of philosophy,” Miller explains, has been to dismiss the present moment, celebrating abstraction and observation rather than the active role each human plays in co-creating history. According to this classic posture of philosophy, “it is the wild and thoughtless [person] who seizes the moment. From this heedlessness [this person] is to be rescued.”¹⁴ To rescue others from seizing the moment, from living into their wildness and heedlessness, is a critical mistake, not only for the professional philosopher, but for all who benefit from a philosophical life: “The poet, the statesman, the lover establish a present and that is the reason for their authority and attraction. The wisdom which does not express itself in the present omits the here-and-now as part of itself.”¹⁵ The “immediacy of the person and [his/her/their] acts” is devalued in what Miller seems to see as the inclination of philosophy.¹⁶

Thus, Miller concerned himself not with his students’ ability to excel in philosophical argument but with their potential to participate actively in the world, applying philosophical insights to their own lives with a “calm possession of a confident mind.”¹⁷ What Miller established in his philosophical writing and embodied through his teaching amounts to an “earthy philosophy” – one that centers embodied, active experience in the world. This *earthiness* affirms people’s potential to transform the present, to make a mark on history, which is always becoming. Miller’s earthy philosophy is both liberal and liberating – it is wild, neither mechanized nor futile. It invites *adventure*.

10) Miller, “Reflections on the Liberal Education,” 35–36. Emphasis mine. This essay, found in the Miller Collection at Williams College, is dated 1943. It is not known if the essay was ever publicly presented. It is published now here: Frank, *Being a Presence for Students: Teaching as Lived Defense of Liberal Education*.

11) Miller, “Reflections on the Liberal Education,” 35.

12) *Ibid.*, 36.

13) *Ibid.*, 34.

14) Miller, “The Owl,” 406.

15) *Ibid.*, 399.

16) *Ibid.*

17) Miller, “Reflections on the Liberal Education,” 38.

Jeffery Frank explains that, for Miller, “a main purpose of liberal education is to graduate students with morale.”¹⁸ He distinguishes between superficial morale, a false optimism or hope that denies complexity and tragedy, and mature morale, “built on a clear-eyed vision of the world.”¹⁹ Mature morale helps students “develop the resilience to square up to a difficult situation and draw on – or cultivate – resources necessary to get through.”²⁰ The term *resilience* may not immediately conjure a quality of wildness. But, I suggest that it ought to due in part to its relationship to contingency and uncertainty. One does not need resilience to meet a future that is determined. Resilience is required to respond to indeterminacy and chance – to respond to unscripted problems with uncertain outcomes. It is required to continue on in the adventure, wherever that leads, or to redirect when the path meets a dead end.

In an important but underappreciated work in the philosophy of education, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Charles Weingartner and Neil Postman emphasize the transformative function of education. They ask: “What is the business of the schools? To create eager consumers? To transmit ... dead ideas, values, metaphors, and information? To create smoothly functioning bureaucrats? These aims ... undermine our chances of surviving as a viable, democratic society.”²¹ Schools should not produce and reproduce the status quo. Instead, Postman and Weingartner argue, the role of educational institutions is to embolden students to respond wisely and creatively to an ever-changing world. On this account, teaching is liberally educative when it works to subvert attitudes and beliefs that are creating societal problems or allowing them to persist.

Weingartner and Postman’s subversive education project is a distinctly pragmatic one which directly ties to the sustainability of educational programs and models of teaching. Their claims rest on two presumptions: first, that “society is threatened by an increasing number of unprecedented problems,” and second, “that something can be done to improve the situation.”²²

We fail to teach sustainably when we fail to harness the meliorative power that allows citizens to imagine that the situation can become better. One barrier to effective and sustainable teaching, Weingartner and Postman claim, is the distinction that traditional teaching often makes between content and method. In many mainstream teaching environments, content is primary and method is, at best, secondary and, at worst, inconsequential. If content is passed from teacher to student, education is thought to have occurred. Of course, this presumes a number of things: that there is a certain set of knowledge that is to be disseminated, that the instructor is the possessor of knowledge, and that the students are the recipients of knowledge. This passive reception of knowledge is troubling, failing to engage students as active participants in their own learning and inadequately situating them to respond to problems as they discover them.

A result of content-driven models of education is that students find themselves unprepared for the world they will encounter. Postman and Weingartner call this “future shock”:

Future shock occurs when you are confronted by the fact that the world you were educated to believe in doesn’t exist... There are several ways of responding to such a condition, one of which is to withdraw and allow oneself to be overcome by a sense of impotence. More commonly, one

18) Frank, “Liberal Education and Pedagogy’s Value in Challenging Times.”

19) Ibid.

20) Ibid.

21) Postman and Weingartner. *Teaching as Subversive Activity*, 14.

22) Ibid.

continues to act as if [his or her] apparitions were substantial, relentlessly pursuing a course of action [he or she] knows will fail.²³

Many traditional models of education – and, I suggest, specifically the kinds of philosophical teaching Miller and Anderson are critical of – set students up for future shock by their very structure. Often, even when students have command of philosophical concepts or problems, they still feel inadequately prepared to do anything about or with them. Overwhelmed by the scope of the problems they encounter, they find themselves disheartened by a perceived inability to impact change. Future shock is often characterized by apathy, ambivalence, anxiety, and stunted creativity. But future shock can be mitigated by allowing students to realize that they have the power and resources to address some problems using the skills, interests, and social capital that they possess.

If their moral obligations are understood to be relative to their own resources, they can understand the potential to effect change very differently. The scope of our problems is, indeed, significant, and we cannot each, individually, bear the brunt of those burdens. But neither should we be apathetic about our potential to impact change. We should, instead, take stock of our own resources and those around us and work to ameliorate specific problems using the collective social intelligence and skills of diverse stakeholders.

In the context of philosophy, then, content-driven pedagogies which assume a fixed body of knowledge are markedly insufficient, since the circumstances are rapidly changing. To avoid future shock and to prepare students to effectively respond to the constantly in-flux world and its crises, we need to significantly reconsider our approaches to teaching. A pedagogical model that places the instructor in the role of ultimate knower and students in the passive role of recipients-of-knowledge cannot produce citizens equipped to respond to an ever-changing world.

What is needed, instead, is a recovery of wildness in teaching and learning. Although risk is inherent in this kind of education, the result can be students empowered and motivated to respond to their world and its problems with the philosophical tools they have developed, and with confidence. Miller’s critique of much of mainstream philosophy is that it artificially separates the contemplative from the active, and privileging the contemplative “results in a lack of control, an occlusion of power, and a loss of authority.”²⁴ This may be in part why philosophy feels like an outdated and unnecessary relic of a former time, but it need not be so.

Thoreau once wrote that “the highest we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence.”²⁵ Anderson aligns Miller with Thoreau in this sentiment: “Miller, like Thoreau, does not reject measurement and fact-finding altogether, but alerts us to the failure inherent in substituting them for the world in which we live and, especially, for human experience.”²⁶ Experiential learning which creates space for wildness can be one important way to respond to the crisis in philosophy and in liberal education, as well as offering resources for responding to the contemporary social, political, and ecological crises students face, including global climate change, increasing income disparity and widespread poverty, racial division, rampant nationalism and xenophobia, and more. In other words, wildness – and understanding the world in which we occur – awakens us to the relevance of philosophy in the here-and-now.

23) Ibid.

24) McGandy, *The Active Life: Miller’s Metaphysics of Democracy*, 69.

25) Anderson, “In the Face of Technology,” 300.

26) Ibid.

II. Field Philosophy: Teaching Wildness in the Wild

Miller's emphasis on the active life in a contingent and uncertain world supports the idea of a wilder philosophy, but for some it may leave something to be desired. That is, it does not *feel* very wild. Miller was a beloved teacher, and by being a "presence" for his students,²⁷ he empowered them to *be* present in the world, to respond to the moment and to understand their actions and their implications philosophically; for his students, he made philosophy come alive. But his was still a conventional classroom, and he was still its head. Based on accounts by his students, he maintained formality in the classroom and kept a certain emotional distance from his students, as was conventional. Although lived experience and the active life – the adventure of learning liberally – were central to his teaching, his classroom itself was a fairly typical one. It takes some effort to uncover the wildness in what and how he taught. Nevertheless, his message remains salient, and perhaps those who have opportunities to experiment with pedagogical approaches can bring out wild philosophical qualities of teaching even more.

My suggestion is that one way to invite wildness and adventure into philosophy is literally to engage it *in the wild* – whether in entirely field-based philosophy courses or in field components of a given course. In the sciences, it has long been understood that learning by doing – like that which takes place in laboratory and field research – is a necessary component of subject mastery. Philosophy, as a discipline, has never thoroughly followed suit, although the history of philosophical teaching contains many examples of active, embodied teaching we can draw upon. Of course, there are many reasons why field philosophy is not mainstream, not the least of which are financial and logistical barriers. But as the discipline of philosophy struggles to maintain its place in the academy, to recruit and retain majors and minors, and to assert its own significance, I suggest that field philosophy holds great potential and that efforts to remove barriers which hinder field-based philosophical experiments in teaching actually support liberal learning. My own experience teaching field courses attests to the promise of critical adventure that teaching in the wild can offer.

III. Dewey's Lab School and Experiential Learning

John Dewey's philosophy of education can be used to support field philosophy as a helpful pedagogical direction for the discipline and as a method of building and enriching democratic community. Dewey maintains that educational institutions are unique in their capacity to mold individuals into engaged, imaginative, and active inquirers – citizens who, utilizing habits of moral imagination, have tremendous meliorative power and potential for social change. He writes: "In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future... Since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter's nature will largely turn upon the direction children's activities were given at an earlier period. The cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth."²⁸ If education is to be aimed at social change, as Dewey rightly suggests that it is, in the good company of Miller, Postman, and Weingartner, then what students need is not simply more information, but a radical re-making of "what has previously been a

27) Jeffrey Frank, in *Being a Presence for Students*, describes Miller as, above all, being a "presence" for his students: "Miller focused on two elements of teaching and liberal education that tend to be ignored: presence and morale. For Miller, liberal education is less about a curriculum and more about a way of being with students. A teacher must take seriously his or her *presence* in the classroom and also must see his or her purpose as building a student's *morale*. What is striking about this way of thinking about liberal education is that it does not look outside of the classroom for a justification of this form of educating. Rather, liberal education, in Miller's view, is defended each day by the way it is lived and enacted in the classroom," see Frank, *Being a Presence for Students*, 5.

28) Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 38.

matter of course”²⁹ – that is, a re-making of education. In the face of profound global and local problems, we can and should re-think how what we teach and the ways we teach are positioned to motivate social change.

In support of field philosophy, I begin by reflecting on Dewey’s commitment to progressive education, particularly in its emphasis on nature study and experiential learning in the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago. The Laboratory School was a progressive, experimental school where Dewey tested his own philosophy of education. He envisioned the school not merely as an opportunity to put his ideas into the public sphere, but an experiment in student-driven learning.

Dewey envisioned his school as a scientific “laboratory” staffed with college trained teachers and devoted to research, experiment, and educational innovation. He expected his school – as part of the University’s Department of Education – to perform two functions: first, to test and evaluate his theories about schooling and teaching and, second, to appraise the findings of these studies and work out subject matters and teaching methods for a curriculum that did not focus on books and recitations but on children and activities. The ultimate aim Dewey strived for with his experimental school was laying the foundation for a reform which would revolutionize the educational system and, over time, transform the society into a great democratic community.³⁰

Dewey’s progressive education was grounded in a faith in its potential to cultivate the moral imagination in its students. Although the Laboratory School was a children’s school, and my interest in field philosophy is for college-level students, there are insights to be found in its practice, particularly in light of the nature study elements Dewey included.

In 1896, already well known for his educational philosophy, Dewey began an experimental school with support from the University of Chicago’s Philosophy, Psychology, and Pedagogy Department, where he had recently come to serve as Department Head. The aim of the school was to test the principles and methods of Dewey’s educational theories. He had long been promoting education reform, and the Laboratory School was his attempt to put his reform practices to the test in a systematic way. Because Dewey’s pragmatism actively resists the chasm between theory and practice, the Laboratory School was one way to embody this commitment – “by trying, by doing – not alone by discussing and theorizing – whether these problems may be worked out, and how they may be worked out.”³¹

The traditional curriculum of mainstream schools at the time, Dewey believed, insufficiently prepared students to engage with the world. While he acknowledged that skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic were critically important for young students, he felt that the singular focus on the mastery of these skills failed to invigorate students to interact with the world on their own terms. A goal of the Laboratory School’s curriculum was to develop in each student the “capacity to express himself [or herself]” (DS, 118) in a variety of ways within society. Educational institutions, Dewey believed, were uniquely positioned for this task: “The formation of the attitudes ... is the work and responsibility of the school more than of any other single institution.”³² But, while the capacity of schools to produce social change exists, they were – and certainly are still today – failing to fulfill that capacity in important ways.

One problem Dewey saw in traditional educative practices is the significant gap between the content of coursework and the skills desired for active lives within democratic society. Critical of lessons that had little or no traction with students’ daily lives, he believed that the promise of progressive education lay in its potential to “affiliate with life itself, to become the child’s habitat, where he [sic] learns through directed living; instead

29) Ibid., 174.

30) Knoll, “Laboratory School, University of Chicago,” 455.

31) Dewey, *The School and Society*, 120. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as DS along with page numbers.

32) Dennis, “John Dewey as Environmental Educator.”

of only being a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future” (DS, 31). Thus, Dewey’s radically re-envisioned education aimed to embody habits of democracy even in its youngest students. He argued that the isolated and highly individualized character of modern schooling was in tension with the habits of collaboration, deliberation, and cooperation that societies attest to desire. He imagined, instead, that the school should embody “embryonic community life, active with the types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science” (DS, 44). Because educational institutions ought to be instruments of social transformation and should be aimed at growth rather than a pre-determined end (i.e., a fixed set of information understood to be “knowledge”), the habits taught in school ought to be the desired habits for democratic citizenship. For Dewey, these desired habits were what make possible the social intelligence – the pooled, cooperative experience – that allows democratic society to flourish.

The emphasis on individualism that is so prevalent in traditional schooling both in Dewey’s time and now – where collaboration is often viewed as academic dishonesty – inhibits the possibility for social intelligence to develop. Dewey writes:

Mutual assistance, instead of being the most natural form of cooperation and association, becomes a clandestine effort to relieve one’s neighbor of his proper duties. Where active work is going on all this is changed. Helping others, instead of being a form of charity which impoverishes the recipient, is simply an aid in setting free the powers and furthering the impulse of the one helped. A spirit of free communication, of interchange of ideas, suggestions, results, both successes and failure of previous experiences, becomes the dominating note... The school life organizes itself on a social basis. (DS, 30)

Dewey imagined educational practices that encourage – rather than disparage or even forbid – mutual assistance. Gently and intelligently guided through the development of cooperative learning skills, students develop habits that are fitting for participation in democratic society, as they grow individually through processing the experiences, successes, and failures of themselves or others. Dewey saw the isolated nature of students’ school activities as “the tragic weakness of the present school” (DS, 28). He writes: “It endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium where the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting” (DS, 28). The highly individualized nature of modern schooling is antithetical to future participation in social life which requires cooperation and mutual assistance. For Dewey, the medium is the message, whether it is intended or not. Thus, new mediums – new methods of growing students – are urgently needed.

In addition to the emphasis on mutual assistance, Dewey’s educational ideal – like his philosophy writ large – tethers theory to praxis all the way through. A lesson not readily applicable to lived experience, in Dewey’s view, is not yet a useful lesson. As Dewey echoes throughout his philosophy, the starting place for inquiry ought to be from the problem itself. So, in Dewey’s educational vision, students discover their own problems, and education unfolds from there. It is a bottom-up model of learning rather than a top-down model. Counter to a traditional pedagogical model where an instructor teaches a lesson and hopes that a student can apply it appropriately, making it vital and relevant, in Dewey’s curriculum, students first discover what they feel to be vital and relevant to their lives and then, with guidance, follow out these impulses to the desired end of gaining knowledge. In this model, activity precedes information. This is the most organic and natural form of education, according to Dewey: “The child is already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his [sic] activities, of giving them direction. Through direction, through organized use, they tend toward valuable results, instead of scattering or being left to merely impulsive expression” (DS, 53–4).

Students interested in an activity ought to be encouraged to pursue it and explore it, discovering all that is involved with the activity. Of course, this sort of method is not without challenges. Students often need direct guidance and, in cases, a more firm hand to ensure that they receive the education they need, irrespective of whether it aligns with their interests. This is, indeed, a challenge. But, for Dewey, the challenge – the problem itself – is always the proper starting place for theorizing. Although there may be a need for mixed methods in many educational contexts, the driving idea, I suggest, is that the student should be encouraged to take an active role in his or her own learning. The student should be understood as the central active figure in the process of education, not merely the passive recipient.

Dewey offers many examples of ways to encourage students’ natural impulses and interests to develop into constructive lessons with educative import. Students interested in cooking alongside their parent can, for example, follow that impulse beyond the activity itself to learn about chemistry, biology, history, and so forth. It is important to recall that, for Dewey, the activity alone is not what is educative but the ways in which the activity is developed:

For the child simply to desire to cook an egg, and accordingly drop it in water for three minutes, and take it out when he is told, is not educative. But for the child to realize his own impulse by recognizing the facts, materials, and conditions involved, and then to regulate his impulse through that recognition, is educative. This is the difference, upon which I wish to insist, between exciting or indulging an interest and realizing it through its direction. (DS, 57)

In support of increasing practices of field philosophy, a useful example of these directed impulses and their educative and transformative power is found in Dewey’s comments about nature study and the Laboratory School. Nature study was a significant element of the science curriculum of the Laboratory School. Dewey had been critical of nature study in other educational programs, claiming that their sterility stunted the imagination. As he had criticized other disciplinary studies for their abstraction and seeming irrelevance to daily life, so too did he criticize mainstream science curricula for failing to thoroughly embed students in their natural environments in order to follow their own impulses to learn. He saw in traditional nature study “an inevitable deadness of topics ... which are so isolated that they do not feed the imagination.”³³

Yet these topics are not dead; Dewey knew well. Children’s own experiences in the natural world often feed their desires to learn, and so these experiences are prime opportunities for growth through education. Nature study was woven throughout not only the curriculum of the Laboratory School, but also its very architecture. Gardens, fields, and woods surrounded the built structure of the school itself with the express intention of bridging the gap between schooling and daily life: “The school building has about it a natural environment. It ought to be in a garden, and the children from the garden would be led on to surrounding fields, and then into the wider country, with all its facts and forces” (DS, 89). For Dewey, education was to be unifying, rather than isolating and fragmenting. Schooling ought not be something separate from daily life but an informing element of daily life – “keeping alive the ordinary bonds of relation” (DS, 91). Because life outside the school-house necessarily involves connection to the natural world, the school itself ought to be thoroughly engaged with those connections. The nature study component of the curriculum of the Laboratory School included students’ hands-on, active engagement with their surroundings. Students collected and observed natural artifacts from the school grounds, nurtured seedlings, and watched the changing of the seasons, all while being encouraged to inquire about their interests and dig deeper for more information, independently and collectively. According

33) Ibid.

to Dewey, even these most basic scientific observations allow students to connect their lived experience in the world with the knowledge necessary for transforming their world. Through nature study, Dewey's holistic philosophy emerges. In school as in the world, scientific knowledge, lived experience, and emotional dispositions are unified, rather than kept separate. In our life's drama, "action, feeling, and meaning are one."³⁴ A task of the educator is to direct the students' observations in ways that make them useful in daily life:

The pedagogical problem is to direct the child's power of observation, to nurture his [sic] sympathetic interest in characteristic traits of the world in which he lives, to afford interpreting material for later more special studies, and yet to supply a carrying medium for the variety of facts and ideas through the dominant spontaneous emotions and thoughts of the child. Hence their association with human life.³⁵

Certainly, the concerns we face – those to which students and their education must be responsive – are markedly different today than at the time of Dewey's writing. And descriptions of Dewey's college courses indicate that he did not carry all of his insights about young children's education over into the college classroom. Nevertheless, it is clear that Dewey had great faith that education could give students the resources to address social problems of any scale. And it is worth considering how philosophy, whether at the college level or in the discipline itself, can adopt this open, democratic, embodied approach to inquiry for which Dewey and Miller advocated.

IV. Field Philosophy Courses – Two Examples

In the last few years, I have developed and experimented with two philosophy courses that take place almost entirely outdoors, outside of a traditional classroom. One is a semester-long introductory course for first-year students called *Walking and Talking: Active and Embodied Philosophical Inquiry*, and the second is a month-long summer study-away course in environmental philosophy called *Nature Writing as Public Philosophy*. Although they differ in many respects, both courses invite an element of wildness into the critical adventure of studying philosophy.

The course *Walking and Talking* draws on the peripatetic tradition in philosophy in order to invite students to engage in philosophical inquiry through the body – walking each class day with different routes and with different practices and objectives each period. Students read thinkers like Thoreau, Rousseau, Rimbaud, and Nietzsche, among others, considering how their practices of walking informed their philosophies. They experiment with different walking techniques, such as the *derive* method developed by Guy Debord and the French avant-garde group *Situationist International*. Students examine social and political aspects of the very concept of walking, exploring topics from accessibility and universal design in community planning to protest marches and migration. Each day we walk and we talk, for more than an hour. Occasionally, we encounter surprises – road construction or driving rain or poorly functioning footwear – and students have to figure out how to respond to the challenge presented.

The course *Nature Writing as Public Philosophy* is a philosophy course I teach that uses American environmental literature and practices of embedded nature writing geared toward a public audience as a vehicle for studying environmental philosophy. The course itself is a road trip; over the course of a month, we visit nine national parks and other public lands across the American West, tent camping for all but three of the nights on the journey, when we stay in a cabin or lodge in order to refresh and recharge. All while covering more than

34) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 15.

35) Dennis, "John Dewey as Environmental Educator," 5.

5000 miles of American roadways and dozens of miles of hiking trails, the students are doing environmental philosophy – in fact, they are living it. They read texts loosely categorized as American nature writing as a lens into environmental issues, place-based inquiry, and advocacy for the natural world, including such classics as Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire: A Year in the Wilderness*, John Muir’s *My First Summer in the Sierras*, and Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac: Sketches Here and There*. They study the work of more contemporary thinkers like Terry Tempest Williams and Kathleen Dean Moore, and they develop a daily philosophical writing practice of their own where they aim to record their experiences and insights, ultimately working toward a public philosophy piece of their own that helps them articulate the value of public lands, ecological restoration, and more. Meanwhile, they attend lectures from philosophers, environmental writers and activists, and scientists around a campfire. Throughout the month, students integrate what they are reading, what they are gathering through lectures and engagement with experts and stakeholders, and what they are discovering through the immersive outdoor experience.

The course presents a unique challenge for students, most of whom have been taught through traditional pedagogical styles, to learn in the field like this. On a hike, or around a fire, particularly at the beginning of the course, students ask questions like: “Are we supposed to be learning right now?” It is not an unreasonable question. So much of their experience informs them that there is a particular time for learning, often demarcated by a lecture, quiz, or some kind of assessment. But immersive experiences like this disrupt that paradigm, hopefully demonstrating that the whole experience is an occasion for liberal learning, from the lectures and texts to the van rides, missed exits, wildlife encounters, and leaky tents.

These are just two examples of field philosophy courses, and they are imperfect ones, to be sure. Particularly the latter cannot be replicated frequently or easily. In fact, I offer it only every other summer, and it serves fewer than twenty students each time. It would not likely be suitable for an upper division philosophy course, particularly one serving a large number of students or requiring an intensive research component. But what these examples offer, I hope to have demonstrated, is an opportunity for philosophy to be practiced and lived, not merely consumed. How might other courses incorporate field work in order to give students the chance to actively co-create, with each other and with the natural world, the conditions for liberal learning?

Wildness does not require field philosophy, but field philosophy invites it. It opens us up to uncertainty and allows us to *live* philosophy in the moment. Chance and contingency – always with us – are made evident when challenges are unscripted and when students are asked to employ what they are learning in the moment rather than storing it away for later assessment or application. Field philosophy, always, is experimental, and this is the quality of wildness we should seek, whether in a traditional classroom or out on a hike with students as we study environmental philosophy or the Ancient Greeks. Anderson writes: “To teach and teach well, we must live in risk and face the possibility of failure. We must be experimenters, not in a calculated way, but in the actual art of teaching, as we teach; if we know where each class, day, or term will end, we will be something other than teachers – drill instructors, perhaps.”³⁶ If a goal of philosophy is to transform the lives of those who engage with it, then a recovery of wildness is a desirable shift in the way we teach and learn philosophy. Wildness invites philosophical inquiry to be risky and experimental, to be responsive to the present, and to seize the moment. The moment we find ourselves in now is indeed a complicated one, characterized by wide-ranging uncertainty due to social unrest, an economic crisis, a largely uncontrolled global pandemic, and much more. Philosophy cannot be sustained, at least in the context of higher education, if it is experienced as abstract and a-contextual, or if it does not push the status quo. In contrast, if philosophy works to liberate thinkers from that which hinders them from open, free, creative responses, then there may well be a place for us in whatever indeterminate state of affairs emerges.

36) Anderson, “In the Face of Technology,” 299.

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