

Value-Creating Education and the Dewey-Soka Heritage in the Context of the Trump Phenomenon

Jason Goulah, PhD

I direct the Institute for Daisaku Ikeda Studies at DePaul University, the largest Catholic university in the United States. The Institute's purpose is to research Soka, or "value-creating," education propounded by Ikeda, Jōsei Toda, and Tsunesaburō Makiguchi, and to provide workshops and symposia to students, educators, counselors, academics, and educational leaders in the Chicago area. We also offer multiple courses on Ikeda's and Makiguchi's educational approaches; and next year, we'll launch an online and in-person master's degree in *Value-Creating Education for Global Citizenship*. All of our work in the Institute engages students in what Makiguchi called the "courage of application."

Professor Ito kindly invited me to speak today about John Dewey and Soka education. I must admit that I'm more than slightly embarrassed to come to Japan, specifically to Soka University, to speak on Soka education to students and faculty who live it daily. It'd be more appropriate for me to hear from all of you. Thus, at the outset, I apologize for any errors or unintentionally patronizing aspects of my remarks. Further, there is now extensive literature on the Dewey-Soka heritage in Japanese and English from many renowned scholars, including Prof. Ito, and of course from Daisaku Ikeda, most substantively in his published dialogue with Dewey scholars Jim Garrison and Larry Hickman (cf. Garrison, Hickman, & Ikeda, 2014). I won't recapitulate their work here but do encourage you to read it. Instead, I'd like to consider the Dewey-Soka heritage and the courage of applying value-creating education in the context of the Trump phenomenon. In short, I contend that value creation and value-creating education are the means to enact personal improvement, democratic engagement, deep dialogue across difference, and the type of human becoming the current moment demands.

The Context: The Trump Effect

Donald Trump's election has caused shock and fear among many in the U.S., with many

wondering how the country could have elected such a candidate. Some are even equating the November 9th election results with the trauma and fear felt after the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Twitter is ablaze with tweets about “11/9” as the new 9/11.

Personally, the day after the election, many of my colleagues and students looked like zombies, numb with disbelief. A number of teacher friends said they called in sick to work because they couldn’t even get out of bed the next day, they were so physically ill at the thought of a Trump presidency and the harm it would cause nationally and globally. After all, as is well documented even on book stands here in Japan, Trump won by regularly maligning entire groups, spewing vulgarities, and offering few substantive proposals other than to “make America great again” by walling off Mexico, “repealing and replacing Obamacare,” and banning and registering Muslims.

Days after the election, the Southern Poverty Law Center published a report titled “The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on Our Nation’s Schools,” which indicates a dramatic increase in instances of racist and xenophobic harassment and intimidation across the country. In less than a week between Nov 8 and Nov 14, four hundred and thirty seven incidents targeting women, people of color, immigrants, Muslims, and the LGBT community were reported. Hate crimes and racist and anti-Semitic graffiti have risen, as have teachers’ concerns about increased hatred, fear, and bullying in schools, the report says. One woman in Colorado told the Southern Poverty Law Center that her 12-year-old daughter was threatened by a boy who said, “Now that Trump is President, I’m going to shoot you and all the blacks I can find.” Even before this report, news outlets published stories of increased cases of children vomiting in school and requiring counseling because of fears related to Trump’s election. They, like many of my colleagues, students, and friends, feel utterly helpless, hopeless, and powerless. They believe democracy has let them down, and it’s clear that real dialogue across difference isn’t happening.

Considering the Dewey-Soka Heritage

So what does any of this have to do with the Dewey-Soka heritage? With regard to Dewey, in April this year, New York University professor Catharine Stimpson (2016) reviewed Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, contextualizing the book a century after its publication in Trump’s campaign. She begins her review this way:

The rallies during Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign feature exuberant call-and-response exchanges. Denouncing immigrants from south of the border, Trump shouts, “We’re going to build a wall.” He pauses to let the crowd’s emotions storm up. Then he

asks, “And, by the way, who’s going to pay for that wall?” The crowd roars back, “Mexico.” Happily to the rally-goers, these words simplify our pluralistic world into two warring blocs: the good Trumpeteers and the bad Others.

With liberal notions of communication and tolerance subjected to this violence, I have turned to the ideas of a Vermonter, although one who passed away in 1952, John Dewey, for their defense. Dewey’s Democracy and Education is a firm rebuke to today’s hate-filled campaign, even 100 years after its publication.

Likewise, three days after the election a law professor tweeted the following [though slightly edited] excerpts from the pragmatist Deweyan philosopher Richard Rorty’s 1998 book *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th Century America* (This book was published in Japanese in 2000 as *アメリカ未完のプロジェクト—20世紀アメリカにおける左翼思想*; 晃洋書房):

[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers — themselves desperately afraid of being downsized — are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for — someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. ...

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past 40 years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words “nigger” and “kike” will once again be heard in the workplace. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. (pp. 89-90)

According to the *New York Times*, this professor’s tweet was retweeted thousands of times, “generating a run on [Rorty’s] book — its ranking soared on Amazon and by day’s end it was no longer available.” It’s being reprinted for the first time since 2010.

The argument underlying Rorty’s ostensible prescience warrants examination. His basic

premise is that the Left can be categorized into two groups: The pragmatic reformist Left, rooted in the rhetoric of Walt Whitman and John Dewey, and the cultural Left, rooted in post-structuralist philosophy. The former ushered in the *action*-oriented reforms of the first six decades of the 20th century. Rorty calls this Left the “agents.” The latter, shaped by the events of Vietnam and manifest in the 1968 student movements around the world, including here in Japan, he calls “spectators.” This Left became mainly detached cosmopolitan academic-types who *theorize* injustice to the racially, sexually, and ethnically marginalized. The former offers an inspiring vision of hope, economic possibility, national pride, and a universal identity; the latter works in the “politics of difference,” “of identity,” and “of recognition,” and is concerned more with stigma and psychosexual motivations than with money. Both groups seek happiness and meaningfulness but disagree on the ends and means to achieve these.

Rorty concedes that while the reformist Left accomplished much, particularly in terms of economic advancement, White males benefitted the most from its initiatives. Its belief that racial injustice was a by-product of immiseration didn’t pan out, however, paving the way for the cultural Left to form and, Rorty agrees, make equally important gains for minorities and the marginalized. However, Rorty argued that, as the above-mentioned tweeted excerpts indicate, the shift from the reformist Left to the cultural Left would result in working-class and impoverished Whites, feeling ignored by the cultural Left, voting for a strongman—like Donald Trump—who will lift them out of economic poverty.

In all of this, Rorty concludes that we should *not* take the perspective of the detached cosmopolitan spectator: “We should face up to unpleasant truths about ourselves, but we should not take those truths to be the last word about our chances for happiness, or about our national character. Our national character is still in the making” (Rorty, p. 106). In other words, Rorty urges Americans to recapture the spirit of Whitman and Dewey, and to engage in embodied dialogic democracy, the continual engagement through which we become fully human and create our happiness.

Walt Whitman and Daisaku Ikeda

Rorty’s focus on Whitman and Dewey here is especially germane to our discussion, particularly in light of my contention that value-creation is the means to enact personal improvement, democratic engagement, deep dialogue across difference, and the type of human becoming the current moment demands.

Rorty affirms that “for both Whitman and Dewey, the terms ‘America’ and ‘democracy’ are shorthand for a new conception of what it is to be human—a conception which has no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority, and in which nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all” (p. 18). Rorty offers the following from Dewey in support: “Democracy is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature”¹. Or, as Ikeda simply puts this relation at the opening of his dialogue with Garrison and Hickman: “It is dialogue that is the essence of democracy” (灯台, Dec 2009, p. 53).

For Ikeda, as Prof. Ito and I state in our co-authored article (Goulah & Ito, 2012), dialogue takes many forms within the context of education (and I don’t mean “schooling”). At the Soka schools, this includes dialogue with nature, great books, and great works of art to dialogue among students, between students and faculty, and between students and many of Ikeda’s dialogic interlocutors who visit the schools. Walking among statues of Leonardo da Vinci, Walt Whitman, Alisher Navoiy, Marie Curie, Rabindranath Tagore, and other great thinkers that adorn the Soka University campus, one also imagines Ikeda entreating students to engage the cultural and linguistic Other in life-changing dialogue. Like Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), Ikeda considers dialogue a process by which we become “fully human”: “We are not born human in any but a biological sense,” Ikeda states; “we can only learn to know ourselves and others and thus be trained in the ways of being human. We do this by immersion in the ocean of language and dialogue fed by the springs of cultural tradition.” (Ikeda, 2010a, p. 228).

But this is no easy task when done “correctly.” We must be vulnerable, patient, deeply reflective, and persistent. Again, to quote Ikeda (2010b): “It is only in the burning furnace of intense, soul-baring exchanges—the ceaseless and mutually supporting processes of inner and outer dialogue between one’s “self” and a profoundly internalized “other” —that our beings are tempered and refined” (p. 43).

Yet, this type of deep dialogue that Ikeda envisions across difference clearly isn’t happening in the U.S. Factions seem to remain in their bubbles, “dialoguing” among themselves while fear and ignorance of the Other remain in what Ikeda, referencing Gabriel Marcel, calls the spirit of abstraction. It is here where consideration of Whitman and Ikeda is essential for our understanding of the Dewey-Soka heritage, that is at least if we agree with Rorty that Whitman informs Dewey. In other words, for Ikeda, the Dewey-Soka heritage may fully take shape in his relationship with Whitman. Those familiar with the Ikeda corpus know well his affinity for and with Whitman. For example, in

the poem “Like the Sun Rising,” written for Whitman on the centenary of his passing, Ikeda writes:

On that day our dialogue began—
the sheer and solitary
nobility of your spirit
fanned within me flames of courage;
your vision of a light-filled future
brought up surging energy and hope.

The utter overflowing freedom
of your soul
struck me like a bolt
of empathetic lightning—
sundering the dark,
making bright the path of my progress,
inviting me toward the great way of humanity.

And,

Like a bird bathed in the sun’s light
as it flies through the sky,
like a sailor on a night sea
addressing the stars,
I have spoken with you
of humanity’s tomorrow,
sung songs of praise to life,
pondered the laws
that govern the infinite universe.

Whitman scholar Kenneth Price (2015) addresses the Whitman-Ikeda relationship, arguing, “The ability to love even one’s enemies—always an unusual trait— was manifested in Whitman’s life just as it is seen in Ikeda’s generous response to American thinkers and culture” (p. 71). He adds, “[Ikeda] and Whitman are after the same goal—democracy that permits common humanity to flourish” (p. 88). The persistent pursuit of such love even of one’s enemies must become the hallmark of our actions toward deep democratic dialogue of becoming.

Value-Creation: Happiness as Dialogic and Democratic Becoming

Ikeda maintains that such a pursuit allows us “to advance along the road of value-creation” (Tu & Ikeda, 2007, p. 142). The Soka tradition of course teaches us that value-creation is the means to achieving absolute happiness. Makiguchi ([1930] 1981-1988) states:

Other than “happiness” there is no word that fully and accurately expresses the unhindered pursuit of the cultural life that is the objective of education. From my own experience of the past several decades and from pondering this question over that time, I have come to believe this word gives the most realistic, straightforward and apt expression to the goal of life desired and sought by all people. (Vol 5, p. 124).

In his beautifully titled *A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe*, Todd May (2016) explores the difference between meaningfulness and happiness as the fundamental aim and purpose of life. He casts these two as separate and unrelated, arguing that someone can have meaningfulness without happiness, and vice versa. He concludes, “There is something *democratic* about focusing on happiness, especially when compared with meaning” (p. 28). He views meaning as objective and externally defined, suggesting, “It is as though I must reach beyond myself, beyond my life, my desires and hopes and even what I love, in order to fulfill the requirement of meaning” (p. 29). Happiness is different:

[Happiness] is not about attaining a standard outside of me. Instead it concerns the character of my own life. It is personal. Happiness is about whether the trajectory of my day is unfolding in a way that is satisfying to me rather than whether it measures up to a standard outside of me. And this makes it more democratic. Each of us can decide whether we are happy or not. (May, 2016, pp. 28-29)

May seems unaware of the Soka tradition, unaware that within the philosophy of value creation happiness and meaning are contingent and always related. As Ikeda (1996) states, “Put simply, value creation is the capacity to find meaning, to enhance one’s own existence and contribute to the well-being of others, under any circumstance” (p. 25). And this relationship is important when we consider the tension between subjectivities of the reformist Left and the cultural Left, of the impoverished or working-class White and the marginalized minority, or of any Other demanding our dialogic engagement.

For as we know, our happiness through value creation—if it is to be democratic in the Whitman, Deweyan, Soka sense—is contingent upon the social good we create as much as on the personal gain we develop. And in this, Hatano (2009) argues, following Bakhtin, value-creation is inherently and necessarily dialogic, a process of negotiating the tension between one’s own internally persuasive discourse of gain, good, and beauty and that of the Other. In short, value-creation is the

dialogic process of co-living toward personally and socially beneficial ends. It is democratic.

Soka education, then, as we well know, is the process of fostering in students the character and ability to create such democratic value volitionally and dialogically in the space of the Other's character. This is why Ikeda calls value-creating, or Soka, education "human education," because it is a process of becoming fully human, "an endeavor that emphasizes the development of the kind of 'character' such that children can, of their own accord, open the way for a happy life" (see Ikeda in Gu & Ikeda, 2012, pp. 311-312).

Conclusion

Shortly after 9/11, Martha Nussbaum's book *For Love of Country?* was re-issued. In it, she holds that we should distrust conventional patriotism as parochial and instead see ourselves first of all as "citizens of the world." The book contains responses from sixteen prominent thinkers, some of whom, including Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amartya Sen, have elsewhere engaged the Soka tradition. In one response, McGill University professor Charles Taylor insists the following:

A citizen democracy can only work if most of its members are convinced that their political society is a common venture of considerable moment and believe it to be of such vital importance that they participate in the ways they must to keep it functioning as a democracy.

Such participation requires not only a commitment to the common project, but also a special sense of bonding among the people working together. This is perhaps the point at which most contemporary democracies threaten to fall apart. A citizen democracy is highly vulnerable to the alienation that arises from deep inequalities and the sense of neglect and indifference that easily arises among abandoned minorities. (Taylor, 2002, p. 120)

In the wake of the "11/9" Trump effect years later, Rorty's supposition that "[t]he spirit of detached spectatorship, and the inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action, may already have entered...students' soul[s]" (Rorty, 1998, p. 11) would seem to put Taylor's assertion—and Whitman, Dewey, and Ikeda's dream—in question. If such students are to develop hope and the courage of action, we must engage them, however unwilling they may seem, with the courage of application and the empowering human education of value-creation; for Ikeda encourages us to imagine possibility in the given, to find meaning in uncomfortable circumstances. He encourages us to create value and, thereby, to know others and ourselves and become fully human.

Notes

1. John Dewey, "Maeterlinck's Philosophy of Life," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 6, p.

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