

SCATTER-BRAINED: LIFE IN POST-COVID, POST- GEORGE FLOYD AMERICA

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These days I feel like I am riding a perpetual digital carousel: Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Instagram, work email, personal email, CNN notifications, press briefings, text messages, Google, scrolling, scrolling, half reading, sharing, commenting, deleting, blocking, replying, alerts, repeat, repeat, and repeat. To live right now is to feel scattered-brained—utterly fragmented through dozens of technological algorithms all pulsating, all pushing, all demanding attention. As we wade through the swamps of digital mis-information, consuming the facts of overwhelming systemic oppressions, and witnessing the blunt force of human cruelties, the words and images hurt. We stare in disbelief at the posts of friends, a meme shared, a comment made, wondering why it was never quite as clear as it is now, as to whose side everyone was on, or that there were even “sides” in these debates. We look away. As rage simmers some of us take action, attend a community event, shout in the streets with like minded strangers, form a reading group, listen to some podcasts, or buy those books a friend recommended. The waves of emotional experiences that accompany this historical moment are the midwife to any future democracy that can survive Trump’s America. This moment, if it is anything at all, is an emotional educative experience of our collective conscience in the United States.

Democracy Born Anew

Dewey (1916) famously argued: “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife” (p.139). In the United States, this ethos has been the philosophical essence of the common public school experiment since its inception. Public schools, as an institution, sought to create democratic sensibilities in citizens and secure a democratic society, yet countless instances of institutional power coalesced around inequitable notions of difference (in

particular, class, race, gender, language, sexual orientation) and white supremacy to thwart this logic (schools as the midwife to democracy) and deny a nation the promise of democracy. Yes, exceptions to this gloomy assessment exist within public schools every day, but the general rule that schooling has not resulted in a democratic society remains central to this essay. The underbelly of the American experience has been exposed and the catastrophic consequences of assuming democracy could self-perpetuate itself without a moral street fight have been revealed in Post-COVID, Post-George Floyd America.

Dewey (1939) reminded us that institutions should not be counted on to secure democracy, and he was absolutely right. He argued that we must “get rid of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life is to realize that democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact” (p.231). Dewey rightly argued that democracy must be considered as a *way of personal life*, but how do current ways of living limit or extend the possibility of Dewey’s conception of democracy?

Scatter-Brained Living

The opening sentence of this essay offers a snapshot into the life many of us find ourselves living in this moment that has required us to retreat home and stay put, but also rearrange the mental furniture that has sustained oppressive forms of living in a pluralistic society. Without question, we are experiencing a radically different *form* of living than the world Dewey counted on to birth democracy. Surprisingly, Dewey’s (1939) description of the scatter-brained seems most relevant to life in Post-COVID, Post-George Floyd America:

...experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. Energy is then dissipated and a person becomes scatter-brained. Each experience may be lively, vivid, and ‘interesting,’ and yet their disconnectedness may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits. (p.26)

While I’m not sure that what is being lived through is “agreeable or even exciting” in the common way most understand these words, certainly current lived experience is disconnected and disintegrated, and life seems to have a rapid centrifugal quality. These qualities are exaggerated by the hyper-speed of information, the multiple fronts to the war on truth and facts, and fascist forms of leadership that seek to deliberately confuse and mis-educate.

Although written for a pre-digital time, Paulo Freire (2004) described the epistemological difficulties presented by media and television as follows:

The fact is that, in order to confront the ideological guile in which its message is enveloped in the media—whether on the news or in commentary on current developments along the lines of certain programs, not to mention in commercial advertisements—our minds and our curiosity have to operate *epistemologically* all the time. That is not easy to do. (p.95)

By extending Freire’s concern regarding the difficulties of our “minds and our curiosities” having to operate epistemologically at all times, we must also recognize that the disjointed, rapid-fire, ideological guile of our engagement with non-human digital spaces force a perpetual emotionality that influences the possibility of sense-making in this moment.

However, even in the midst of my scatter-brained lived experience, I am persuaded to believe that much of the *content* of life has stayed the same: outrage, birth, illness, love, hate, joy, laughter, death, grief and heartache. These events and emotions have always troubled the human soul, but we now “live” these events and emotions in isolation, often through non-human mediums that limit meaningful experiences from occurring. Bits of relief often come in the form of incongruency and disruption, or when we feel someone else has unexpectedly echoed how we feel too. But, make no mistake, we are distanced from actual life, and Post-COVID, Post George Floyd reality has exposed that we have been socially distanced for far longer than we may have suspected. With all this in mind, I’m left to question if this form of “associated living” can birth democratic sensibilities as Dewey hoped?

Unfortunately, I suspect that much of what is passing for experience has all the markings of what Dewey deemed as an anesthetic, mis-educative experience. In *Art as Experience*, he wrote:

In much of experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after. There is no interest that controls attentive rejection or selection of what shall be organized into the developing experience. Things happen, but they are neither definitely included nor decisively excluded; we drift. *We yield according to external pressure, or evade and compromise.* There are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and concluding. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not an experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic.... (p.39-40)

This description is partially helpful, as Dewey somehow captured in

1934, how the digital mediums of today often feel to the user. Yet, in addition to experiencing the anesthetizing forms of digital communication, the content we consume is a terrifying cocktail of social, political, and economic chaos that often elicits an exaggerated fight or flight response. Thus, I contend that this moment forces us to exist within a hyper-vigilant-anesthetic experience where fight and flight, riot and lockdown, have collapsed in on themselves to one all-consuming malaise.

Today's hyper-vigilant-anesthetic experience is reflected in Freire's (2004) dated description of the challenges of a world mediated by television:

How can the extraordinary power of the media be met, as well as that of television language, whose "syntax" reduces past and present to one single place and suggests that what is not yet there is already done? Further, how can the power be met in this language that jumbles diverse themes on the news without time for reflection on the various topics...The world is shortened and time diluted. Yesterday becomes now, and tomorrow is already made. It is all very fast. (p.93-94)

Re-Educative Experience

This form of experience, or living, bears all the markings of Dewey's notion of mis-educative experience which must be overcome if we desire to remake society in the image of democracy. It seems the central task before educators as they return to the classroom is to critically examine the mis-educative, hyper-vigilant-anesthetizing experiential qualities that have shaped Post-COVID, Post-George Floyd America. Only then, can experience regain its aim of democracy. And before you stop reading and shout, "yes, yes, but you can turn 'it' off," I ask readers to consider if "turning it off" to avoid the

scatter-brained existence is in fact a viable option, and possibly the very essence of what has sustained Jim Crow logic well into the 21st century in the United States, and solidified the logic of anti-maskers uninterested in a social contract that values the lives of others. Might “turning it off” be even more dangerous?

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