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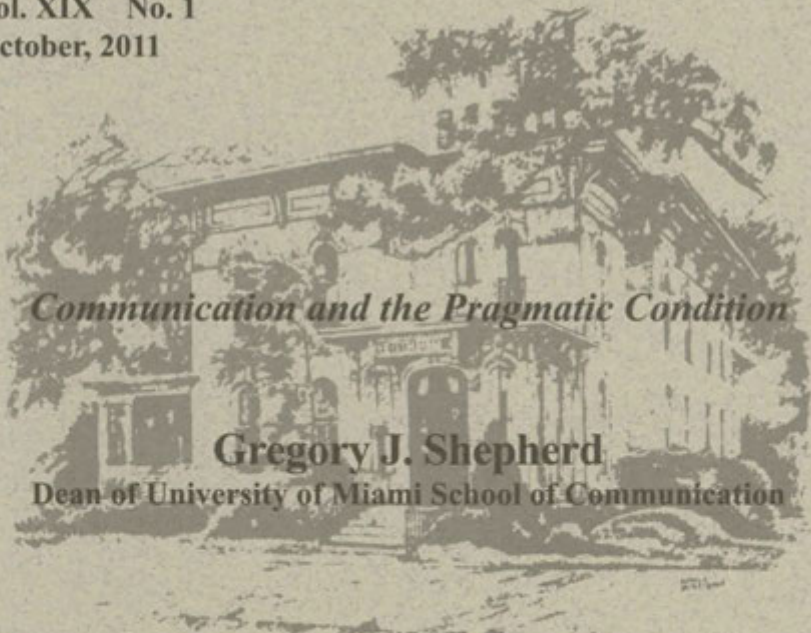
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Communication and the Pragmatic Condition

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Dr. Gregory J. Shepherd

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Communication and the Pragmatic Condition

Gregory J. Shepherd

“We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” ~*Jefferson*

There was not in July of 1776, as there is not now, anything “self-evident” about these truths—not if by self-evident we mean something like unarguably the case. This summer I visited Monticello and a walk down Mulberry Row there—site of slave manufacturing on the beautiful grounds—is evidence enough that, to Jefferson himself, there was nothing unarguable about the truth of equality. No, this self-evident truth of equality is an argumentative assertion in support of independence. It is an assertion of freedom. And this, the assertion of freedom, is, in essence, the American project. “We” hold this to be our self-evident truth. Not everyone does, but we do.

It is tempting to take this assertion of independence literally, and come to believe that we desire to be a nation of people who don’t need other people. Indeed, this ultra-libertarian reading seems to be on the rise in present-day America. But the great irony of democracy is that freedom requires social support;

there can be no “me” without “us.” The second line of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence—the one I opened my remarks with that we all know so well—is heady, but the last line of the declaration, much less known, is its musculature: “and for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” The 56 men who asserted their independence in Philadelphia knew that their individual freedom depended upon one another. It was Benjamin Franklin, one of the signers, who characteristically captured the interdependence of these independence-seeking men: “we must hang together or assuredly we shall hang separately.”

This is the great irony of freedom and the problem that pragmatic philosophy was born to reconcile. Freedom requires cooperation (and there can be no cooperation that is coerced). It is, of course, no accident that pragmatism is the American philosophy—that it was born here, that it expresses us, in all our fitfulness—and that reconciling the irony of freedom required the idea of communication and its elevation as America’s idol.

So walk with me today on pragmatism’s path. It is a road that feels meandering, but runs in a definite direction. It is one we build together in order to form a more perfect union, a union of individuals. We’ll begin the walk with a bit of talk about democracy in America, trying to catch a glimpse or two of the

need it produced for a new philosophy. We'll then spend a bit of time with that American philosophy, pragmatism, and see in turn its need for the miracle of communication as the reconciler of democracy's dilemma. We will, finally, wind up with some words about what all this might mean for us as academics. What might all of this say to us about our teaching, research and service?

Democracy in America

Alexis de Tocqueville came to study democracy in America in 1831 and published his famous observations between 1835 and 1840. Here is how he introduced his work:

“Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence which this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a peculiar direction to public opinion, and a particular tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities, and peculiar habits to the governed.

I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the county, and that it has no less empire over civil society than over the government; it creates opinions, engenders sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that the equality of conditions is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived, and the central point at which all my

observations constantly terminated.” (Tocqueville, 2001, p. 26)

Now, what did he mean by “equality of conditions?”

Certainly not that people were equally rich in material circumstance. Not then and not now. No, rather he meant something more—he meant what Jefferson meant when he wrote that *we* Americans hold the truth of our equality to be self-evident, and how that permeates everything about us.

In 1899 William James published a collection of essays under the title “Talks to Teachers” and it contains two of my favorites of his, one called “On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings” and the other “What Makes a Life Significant.”

Together they provide insight into Tocqueville’s observation about the fundamental fact of equality in America. James concludes “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” this way:

“And now what is the result of all these considerations and quotations? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.” (McDermott, 1977, pp. 644-645)

He continues in his opening remarks on “what makes a life significant”:

“In my previous talk, “On a Certain Blindness,” I tried to make you feel how soaden and shot-through life is with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view. The meanings are there for the others, but they are not there for us. There lies more than a mere interest of curious speculation in understanding this. It has the most tremendous practical importance. I wish that I could convince you of it as I feel it myself. It is the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, and political. The forgetting of it lies at the root of every stupid and sanguinary mistake that rulers over subject-peoples make. The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours. No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.” (McDermott, 1977, p. 645)

This recognition, however unarticulated, is what Tocqueville saw being lived out in most every corner of American life. The equality that arises with the faith that none of us has all of the truth or all of the good is what distinguishes us. No king or queen has more of it than do you and I; no priest or shaman. And this fact about the democratic character of truth is also; as we will see, what makes communication primary in democratic life.

So, Tocqueville comes to realize that this fundamental fact of equality influences the entire course of American society. One such course is an especially good example of both the ranging and lasting influence of equality on American society, and of the resulting need for a philosophy peculiar to America. Chapter 10 of the first volume of *Democracy in America* is titled: “Why the Americans are More Addicted to Practical than to Theoretical Science.” He introduces the chapter, writing: “Equality begets in man the desire of judging of everything for himself: it gives him, in all things, a taste for the tangible and the real, a contempt for tradition and for forms.” (Tocqueville, 2001, p. 163)

Let’s take these one by one.

- (1) Equality begets the desire to judge everything for ourselves. One hundred eighty years ago, Tocqueville was struck by how little Americans granted authorities, “Who are you to say?!”—how unimpressed they were by credentials, and how willing they were to argue and point out weaknesses in the opinions of others. You see, no one has more truth or good than anyone else.
- (2) Equality gives us a taste for the tangible and the real. Tocqueville argued that self-reliance requires leading rather constantly active lives—who has time for nonsense (stuff that doesn’t matter)? Time is a wasting.

Tocqueville said, “Men who live in democratic communities not only seldom engage in meditation, but they naturally entertain very little esteem for it. . . . And the habits of mind which are suited to an active life, are not always suited to a contemplative one.” The cost and reward of faith in equality, of embrace of independence, is mobility. We could be elsewhere, doing otherwise, living life even more fully, experiencing even greater freedom, pursuing even more happiness. What tangible things will help us in these regards?

- (3) Equality provides us with contempt for tradition and for forms. Of all the cultural criticisms of America over the years, this is perhaps most common, and the one of which many Americans are most proud. Age or longevity is not, in and of itself, much valued. We have relatively few enduring cultural traditions. If something better comes along, we throw out the old. We dislike and distrust systems of all sorts, holding little faith in institutions. We don't much cotton to the jargon they engender. Heck, Tocqueville wrote way back when that we didn't like “big words.” (Tocqueville, 2001, p. 163)

Can you begin to see the need for a different kind of philosophy to capture this democratic way of life?

Pragmatism

How, in a nutshell, to summarize the American philosophy? I think by concentrating our attention on three interrelated points.

First, if, as Tocqueville noted, the “fundamental fact” of American life, the one that influences every corner of our society, is the equality of our conditions—the fact that none of us possesses all of the truth, that we each have our share—what does that tell us about truth itself?

Pragmatism is, first and foremost, a theory of truth that breaks radically from the long dominant, Old World, deterministic, absolutist, positivistic one. Pragmatism asserts that truth is made, not found. It is, after all, America’s philosophy. Truth is under constant construction. It is a social product, one that, as James says, is verbally built out. Louis Menand, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Metaphysical Club*, writes about Charles Sanders Peirce, the brilliant and mercurial man who first coined the term pragmatism, “in a universe in which events are uncertain and perception is fallible, knowing cannot be a matter of an individual mind ‘mirroring’ reality. Each mind reflects differently—even the same mind reflects differently at different moments—and in any case, reality doesn’t stand still long enough to be accurately mirrored. Peirce’s conclusion was that knowledge must, therefore, be social. It was his most

important contribution to American thought, and when he recalled late in life, how he came to forward it, he described it—fittingly—as the product of a group. This was the conversation society he formed with William James, Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr., and a few others in Cambridge in 1872, the group known as ‘The Metaphysical Club.’ (Menand, 2001, p. 200)

Truth is socially constructed. Can you see how that philosophical conclusion fits with a society that asserts equality, freedom, to be self-evident? And the implications that then holds for how we live our lives? Why would traditions be much valued if truth is under constant construction? It’s not like anything we know is forevermore. And why would we much value authority, or credentials, when truth isn’t something discovered by a few, but made by all? And in a society that values the tangible over the meditative, is it a surprise that our philosophy defined truth as what it is best to believe? That was James’ definition: Truth is what is best to believe. As Menand put it, “If behaving as though we had free will or God exists gets us results we want, we will not only come to believe those things; they will be, pragmatically, true.” (McDermott, 1977, p. 355)

In sum, pragmatism, James said, talks “about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness, about the success with which they ‘work’.” (McDermott, 1977, p. 385) How very American.

Second, William James famously asserted the will to believe. Free will is an essential character of American pragmatism. James said that “‘Will you or won’t you have it so?’ is the most probing question we are ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the most theoretical as well as the most practical things.” (McDermott, 1977, p. 716)

We all know well the experience of hearing the alarm go off in the morning, hitting the snooze or off button, and lying in bed seemingly unable to get up. We know the feeling of telling ourselves, “OK, I have to get up now,” but feeling unable to do so. But, finally, we know the feeling of willing ourselves out of bed. Of forcing ourselves. Of saying “I will have it so.” Oomph. That is the exertion of free will. So is the avoidance of temptations, of all sorts, when we will ourselves to say no, or walk away. We sometimes fail. The will is not fixed, you see. And, as James noted, if it is not fixed, it must be free. We exert more or less of it, saying “I will have it so,” or not. And what is true of our behaviors is also true of our beliefs: We can will ourselves to believe. As Americans we are, importantly, called to believe that we are all created equal. Pragmatism wants people to understand that their wills are free and that leading significant and good lives requires the strenuous exercise of those wills.

This pragmatic assertion of free will is another expression of the American condition. We are a nation, not only of doers, but also of believers. As James said, "When we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself." (McDermott, 1977, p. 726) In fact, we are a nation not only of doers, and believers, but of searchers as well. James wrote of two commandments, believe truth and shun error. They are "two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative and let truth take its chance." (McDermott, 1977, p. 727)

James, of course, wants us to choose truth because to choose otherwise is to be the kind of person American pragmatists tend to most dislike: a skeptic. James summed it up nicely: "Skepticism is not avoidance of option; it is option of a particular kind of risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error." (McDermott, 1977, p. 732) And isn't one of the negative stereotypes we collectively hold toward Europeans, especially elite ones, that they are skeptical about everything?

The third and final point about pragmatism I want us to concentrate on is its character as what James called a "melioristic doctrine." Pragmatism is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but

melioristic. It is concerned with “the possible,” with recognizing what might be, and taking action to enact it. The universe isn’t fixed; it is malleable to human thinking and effort. This is, in part, the power of the idea of free will: James argued that “free-will is a general cosmological theory of promise” (McDermott, 1977, p. 403)

OK, so what does it mean to say something is possible? Here’s James’ answer: “It means not only that there are no preventative conditions present, but that some of the conditions of production of the possible thing actually are here.” (McDermott, 1977, p. 466) *The pragmatic life, the democratic life, the American life, then, consists largely of identifying conditions that already exist in order to exert will to enact certain possibilities.* That bears repeating, because it is as good and concise a summary of the pragmatic sensibility as I am likely to offer: *The pragmatic life, the democratic life, the American life, then consists largely of identifying conditions that already exist in order to exert will to enact certain possibilities.*

Pragmatism is rightly associated with progressivism, with action, change, and, most commonly, with experimentation. Try something; if it doesn’t work, try something else. Consider something, and if it doesn’t work, consider something else. Which reminds me of a Nick Lowe lyric: “If you ever get to thinking I don’t love you, think again.”

Also, realize how this fits with a constructivist conception of truth. If truth is made, not found, then we are responsible for exerting our wills on the side of making good truths, better and better ones. Finally, it should be clear why pragmatism elevates communication to the status of miracle worker: In Dewey's famous characterization, communication is a miracle by the side of which transubstantiation pales.

If truth is socially constructed, then communication must be what makes it. In a world where everyone has his own corner of truth, her own will to freely exert, communication must be what makes communal activity possible. And remember that our equality extends not only over what is known, but what is good. James wrote, "There can be no final truth in ethics, any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say." (McDermott, 1977, p. 611) See how this is the philosophy for the democratic way of life, where we are all free and equal. Again, James writes, "The absolutist calls upon the phenomenal world to be, and it is, exactly as he calls for it, no other condition being required. In our world, the wishes of the individual are only one condition. Other individuals are there with other wishes and they must be propitiated first. So Being grows under all sorts of resistances in this world of the many, and, from compromise to compromise, only gets organized gradually." (McDermott, 1977, p. 468) And we are now back to democracy's dilemma:

We are individuals, each free. But our freedom depends upon reconciling ourselves with others. And, that requires communication.

Implications for Us, as Academics

I want to spend the remainder of my time with you talking about what all of this might mean for us as teachers, scholars, and folks with an obligation to serve our communities. What are some of the implications of a philosophy that treats truth as a social construction, wills as free, a different universe as possible, and communication as key to it all? First, to our teaching.

Teaching

My mother, Amanda, was a teacher. Her sister, Gladys, was a teacher, as was Gladys' husband, Walter. My mom's brother, Arnold, was a teacher. So was his wife, Ada. Arnold and Ada's daughter, Jane, is a teacher. My mom's brother, Elmer, was . . . a farmer. But he and his wife, Glenda's, daughter, Margaret, was a teacher, and her husband, Roy, is too. If you shake the Kittleson family tree, teachers rain down. I share this with you for a couple of reasons. First, I thought you'd enjoy hearing all those Americanized Norwegian names: Gladys and Glenda, Elmer, Arnold, and Ada, Amanda. Second, I want you to know that, no matter what else, I think of myself first and always

as a schoolteacher, and I hope all the faculty here, and those aspiring to be, do too. It is too easy to forget the first reason why we are here.

So what does all this talk of pragmatism and communication mean for us as teachers? A very great deal, but there is one most important lesson, and that is the melioristic nature of the universe and the place of our free will therein. Wittgenstein opens Part II of *Philosophical Investigations* with a question: “Can only those hope who can talk?” And he immediately responds in the affirmative: “Only those who have mastered the use of language.” (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. i) Wittgenstein’s point here is a pragmatic one: Communication is what allows for the creation of new and better truths. That is what lends us hope. Nothing is fixed, and that fact allows for the hope of creating something better. Gadamer wrote similarly: “Language is not its elaborated conventionalism, nor the burden of pre-schematization with which it loads us, but the generative and creative power to unceasingly make this whole once again fluent.” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 549)

Pragmatic teaching aims toward communicating this power—the power to unceasingly make this whole once again fluent. Nothing is more important. Imagine the opposite. Imagine preaching to students a doctrine of determinism, that whoever they are born being is who they will forever be. Or fatalism, that

all is beyond their control, so there's no use fighting it. No, the single most important thing we can teach our students is that the power to make and remake all is possible because truth is under constant construction, their wills are free to be exerted in building what is true, and communication allows for the possibility of what James called the building of a perfected pluralistic pattern.

Concretely this means a few things, at least. First, we should take as a primary responsibility the challenge of helping students to become stronger and stronger at recognizing the conditions that exist for the creation of better and better possibilities. This is what we are called to do as teachers. It isn't about teaching found truths, but ever growing pluralistic ones. And this means there is an always-present moral dimension to our teaching. We must understand that in a universe where truth is pluralistically constructed, we have a moral obligation to help build good truths. Do not ever forget the moral responsibility of teaching. Truth is not neutral. With your students, make good ones. Never be afraid to talk with students about what is good to believe and right to do.

Second, do all you can to fight the instructional ideology, still dominant in many quarters, that educated men and women are skeptics; that teaching young people to be skeptical is the first goal of education. Telling students that their primary allegiance is to the "shun error" commandment, rather than to the "seek truth"

one will color not only their whole intellectual life, as James claimed, but their whole social one as well. Our democracy requires doers, believers, and searchers, not lumps, cynics, and sleepers.

Third, determinism, fatalism, skepticism, and that family of anti-pragmatic anthropologies tempt people who fear responsibility. Help your students embrace responsibility. One way to do this is to help them get over the fear of decision-making. Most of us worry far too much about decisions we have to make, and far too little about realizing the possibilities that accrue as the result of whatever those decisions are. Life isn't about choices; it's about what we do with the conditions that arise from the choices we make. If a student is struggling over the choice of a major, help her to understand that she cannot know which is best. She can only know that a certain set of conditions will be present for the realization of a certain set of possibilities if she chooses Major A, and a different set of conditions will be present for the realization of a different set of possibilities if she chooses Major B. And, for certain, some of those possibilities arising from either choice might be good, and some might be bad. What matters is her ability to create the good ones. And what is true of majors is going to be true of all the decisions she will face in life. Teach her to be pragmatic in her decision-making outlook,

and you will also give her what she will need to be decisive and happy about it.

In short, when it comes to our teaching, pragmatism tells us to make good truths with our students; not to let them be skeptics; and to give them practice identifying already existing conditions for the creation of new possibilities. And what does this American philosophy advise with regard to our research mission?

Research

When I was a 17-year-old freshman at the University of Minnesota, I did a typically unthinking and boneheaded thing: I enrolled in a huge lecture class, probably 500-plus students, in physics and astronomy. I did this even though I'd never been in a classroom with more than 30 students and I had almost no science background from my mediocre public school education (made especially mediocre, no doubt, by the time I spent smoking cigarettes in the parking lot as opposed to studying or attending class). The physics and astronomy course was taught by a famous professor at the university, a man by the name of Karlis Kaufmanis. Professor Kaufmanis was a tiny East European man, with a shock of white hair and a very foreign accent. He was every bit a professor. He was also a marvelous lecturer, with eyes

that twinkled and an obvious love for both his subject matter and his students.

On the day he lectured on Einstein's theory of relativity, where he gave some attention, of course, to "curved space," I summoned the courage to make my way to the front of the auditorium to address the great Professor Kaufmanis. I waited my turn in line as he shuffled his papers, talked with students, and prepared to leave the auditorium. I finally got the chance to speak to him and said, "Professor Kaufmanis, I know space is curved, but I haven't a clue what that means. I mean, what does it mean to say that? To say that space is curved?" He looked up at me with those twinkly professorial eyes and said, "No one knows for sure, but isn't it wonderful?" That was the day, I think, that I understood what it meant to love ideas. The unknown is full of wonder. It may also have been the day that a latent thought was planted in my late adolescent brain: I might like to be a professor.

Wonder. The great economist E.F. Schumacher wrote this: "It is wonder—not mere curiosity, one of the lower virtues common also to cats, but wonder, a sense of enchantment, of respect for the mysteries, of love for the other—that is essential to the information and techniques and knowing that seeks insight and understanding." (Cited in Smith, 1991, p. 99) Enchantment, respect for mysteries, love of other. We toss around the word "wonderful" as if it carried no weight, but it does. To say, for

example, that someone is wonderful is to say something very significant: Such people are full of enchantment, have a deep down respect for the unknown, and an abundance of love, not for self, but for others.

The first thing I want to say about our research, then, is that we professors should be full of wonder, and much of our lives should be devoted to the search, not for truths that pragmatism teaches are nowhere to be found, but for wonderments that we might imagine and create. Any of you who have read James' "Varieties of Religious Experience" know that he was a man of wonder, in search of wonderments.

Pragmatists—James in particular—were always riled by those who confused their philosophy with mere practicalism, or base utilitarianism. James, for example, always argued that metaphysical beliefs are the most pragmatic of beliefs because they influence how we live our lives. Does God exist? Is space curved? I have, in a practical sense, never much "used" Professor Kaufmanis' class. I was no physicist in the making, and I've never used the stars to navigate my walks around the neighborhood, but, after taking his class, I never experienced the universe in the same way. The sky looks different to me now than it did when I was 17. Life feels different. How could it not? Space, darn it all, is curved. Isn't that wonderful?

With all of that said, I do want return to Toqueville's observation about Americans' addiction to practical, rather than theoretical, science and to James' famous insistence that there can be no difference that doesn't make a difference. I think that democratic experience and pragmatist philosophy urge us to do research that makes a difference. What difference does it make if this or that be the case? We should feel compelled to chart the implications of our thoughts and actions. We should identify the possibilities, the better truths, that might be enacted and rally others to help bring them about. And this leads to two large points from the pragmatic tradition. The first is about the important role of public intellectuals. From Ralph Waldo Emerson, to William James, to John Dewey, and on to Richard Rorty, Robert Putnam, and Cornel West, pragmatists have brought their ideas to the public. We desperately need to revitalize that tradition. Second, because truth is under constant construction, we need to be aware of the responsibility we bear to create good, rather than bad, truths. Consider this example: What sort of universe are we calling into being when we ask questions about intelligence and race? It isn't as if either intelligence or race is real in any objective sense. Why ask the question? What are the implications of it? Pragmatism asks us to wonder, and to do work that matters, but that matters for the wonderful good.

Spinning a phrase from James, truth should be a species of the good.

Service

Last, but far from least of the three traditional areas that organize our work lives, is service. And it seems to me to be the one most in need of redefinition and most likely to benefit from pragmatist influence.

In a letter to Horace Meyer Kallen, his friend, colleague and Jewish-American philosopher and advocate for cultural pluralism, Dewey considered alternative metaphors for capturing the assimilative experience of America: “I quite agree with your orchestra idea, but upon condition we really get a symphony and not a lot of different instruments playing simultaneously. I never did care for the melting pot metaphor, but genuine assimilation *to one another*—not to Anglo-Saxondom—seems to be essential to an America.” (Cited in Menand, 2001, p. 400)

Assimilating to one another is what is required in this land of individuals. I would like to say that this should also be our overarching sense of what is demanded of us in fulfilling our service obligations. Realizing our self-evident rights requires that we assimilate to one another. We communicate: We simultaneously experience others and ourselves. We contribute to the real work of building community. That is how we serve.

Rorty wrote about this as the democratic demand to ever-expand our definition of “us.” Who we consider to be one of us is a building project (since there is, of course, no objective definition of belonging to the democratic tribe). After the horrible shootings in Tucson earlier this year, David Brooks penned a very pragmatic essay in the *New York Times* in which he argues that our civility rests upon the humility that comes with what I am arguing is the distinctly American sense that none of us possesses all of the truth or all of the good. If we want to serve our communities, we would, in turn, be well-served to remember our modesty. Let’s go out and work with others to realize better possibilities, knowing, as James knew, that:

“We can create the conclusion, then. We can and we may, as it were, jump with both feet off the ground into or towards a world of which we trust the other parts to meet our jump—and only so can the making of a perfected world of the pluralistic pattern ever take place.”
(McDermott, 1977, p. 740)

When I “serve” on a graduate student’s committee, or a departmental or college one, I need to be mindful of what I do not know, and see my part as one player in the orchestra that is that committee. Western Michigan University will not realize its possibilities without you leaping in to help create its pluralistic pattern. Without you, some piece of the truth will always be missing. Be humble, and you will be civil; but be quiet, and you will disappear. Remember, our equality means that each of us has

some piece of truth and goodness—therein lies our self-evident equality and our attendant freedom from determinism—but that also means that the whole of truth and goodness cannot be grasped without our participation, without the experience of community, or communication. And this takes us back to where we began: The dilemma of democracy is that our individual freedom depends upon our social commitments. I cannot realize my life, liberty and pursuit of happiness without your cooperation, but I cannot, of course, demand it of you. As a free person, you can only give it voluntarily. This dilemma can only be reconciled in communication. *E pluribus unum*, right? Out of many, one. James and his fellow pragmatists fixated on the question of the one and the many. How is it possible to be both? Well, how is it possible to be a married individual? Same question. The answer is that self and other, without loss of self, what we know as communion, is a product of the process we call communication.

I know this sounds terribly idealistic, but idealism is what we need to rescue us from afterthoughts. It's the tremendous upside of America's willingness to disdain tradition, refuse to believe in fate or any kind of determinism, its eager embrace of the power of social construction, and its faith in the transcendent powers of communication as manifestation of freedom and responsibility. The true miracle is that it is so common an

experience, and I mean “common” in multiple senses—that it is unaffected, or unadorned, and rather usual, or familiar, as well as being joint, or shared, but, for all of that commonness, no less miraculous. Dewey wrote of the “satisfaction that comes from a sense of union with others, a feeling capable of being intensified till it becomes a mystical sense of fusion with others”—the satisfaction, we might say, that comes with what I want to call “service.”

I know Professors Autumn and Chad Edwards, together with their students, have been researching the satisfaction people have in experiencing what they are calling “peak communication,” so let me conclude my discussion of service with an excerpt from Keith Richards’ recent autobiography; it is eloquent and ironic, coming from the man who so famously penned, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” Here Keef articulates the unique and democratic satisfaction of being both a free individual and a member of a social whole, experiencing the simultaneous experience of self and other by being a guitar player in a band. Listen to this and imagine saying something similar about being a member of a committee:

“You’re sitting with some guys, and you’re playing and you go, “Oooh, yeah!” That feeling is worth more than anything. There’s a certain moment when you realize that you’ve actually just left the planet for a bit and that nobody can touch you. You’re elevated because you’re with a bunch of guys that want to do the same thing as

you. And when it works, baby, you've got wings. You know you've been somewhere most people will never get; you've been to a special place. And then you want to keep going back and keep landing again, and when you land you get busted. But you always want to go back there. It's flying without a license." (Richards, 2010, p. 97)

Our task, as Americans, particularly, is to assimilate, as Dewey said, not to a culture, but to one another; to become players in a band as good as the Rolling Stones. If, as academics, we began to think of our service requirement as the requirement to assimilate to others, and to lead in helping others assimilate to still others, building our sense of we-ness, well, then service in the academy would be something, wouldn't it? It would be perfectly pragmatic.

I want to thank you for the honor of this invitation and close with something of a plea. The world is a hard place. I don't have to point out examples, for they are everywhere. All pragmatists share a deep sense of life's tragic character. Lincoln had it, so did Pierce, James and Dewey. But it is our experience of the senselessness of so much of life that drives us to assert our freedom to make it otherwise, to make it, in fact and practice, sensible. And we do this with the certainty that only together can we make good sense of it all. Remember this as teachers, scholars, public servants, and as disciples of communication, because the truth of our equality, the assertion of our freedom, depends upon it.

Dr. Gregory Shepherd is Dean of the School of Communication at University of Miami. He delivered this talk at Western Michigan University on March 9, 2011, as part of the Visiting Scholars and Artists Program. His talk was co-sponsored by the Ethics Center.

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