

Alive in the Basement

In a spacious bedroom on the upstairs floor of a Greek Revival home, a wife (or what was left of her) sat by a window overlooking the property's courtyard. A stroke had rendered her unable to speak, move, or hear. What she could see with her eyes, no one could say.

A marriage of 52 years, however, had created other languages that spoke. It was this communication that kept the couple conversing, at least in the mind of her husband.

He called up to her from the base of the winding staircase.

"Hungry?" he asked. He heard no response.

"Alice, are you hungry? And will you be joining the conference downstairs?"

Seymour walked up the stairs past the portrait of the man who was the subject of today's annual symposium, John Dewey. Born in this Vermont house 150 years ago, it had been 66 years since the great man's death.

Seymour held a plate with a sandwich on it for Alice, and a glass of water.

John Dewey, the 19th century educator who would replace schoolroom memorization with modern hands-on learning, changing education forever.

John Dewey, the 19th century philosopher who was a founding father to such great movements as the NAACP and the ACLU.

Seymour stopped for a moment on the staircase and gazed at the portrait of the old educator. From the frame, Dewey appeared to look out at the viewers as if they were

students about to ask a question. Since his death in 1951, the John Dewey Society had been holding annual conferences on his birthday, and today, Sunday, was the day.

At the top of the stairs, Seymour entered the bedroom he shared with his wife and found her staring out of the window at the giant pine trees in the courtyard.

"A beautiful day, is it not, Alice?" he pondered aloud.

When she did not move her head, he bent down to look at her. Her eyes were open, gazing at a blue heron that had gotten lost and was now resting on an upper extremity of one of the magnificent trees.

Seymour placed the glass of water on the windowsill.

"That bird does not look like it should be there at all!" he exclaimed, admiring its wingspan as it stretched.

He looked into Alice's eyes for comment, eyes that he could read after six decades of marriage.

It's a female, Seymour. I think she is building her nest on old George here. How exciting! I haven't seen the male yet. He is the one that gathers the branches, and the female arranges them. What a treat we have in store!

But as soon as he understood Alice's words, the great bird launched from the branch and headed west toward Lake Champlain. Its black disappeared into its blue and white feathers. The great bird bounced in the gravity before calling its strength to even out its flight.

Such a beautiful bird, Seymour.

From the northern windows around to the west, they watched the bird fly and then disappear behind a neighboring home. "That wasn't a Blue Heron! It was a Great Egret, Alice!"

Same old Seymour, always the biologist. It's a blue heron to me.

"Taylor will be here for dinner, Alice." She was always excited to see their only child. He always came on Sundays, sometimes bringing his wife and two teenage children.

Alice did not appear to be breathing.

He helped her into her favorite robe, because Deborah -- where the hell was Deborah-- was not caregiving as she should be!

"I'm going to join the conference downstairs, Alice. Is there anything else I can get for you? Deborah, come here please!"

No, thank you. I am just going to sit here and look out at this glorious day. If I need you, I will call.

"Well, I'll be downstairs," he said, mumbling Deborah's name as he left the room.

At the base of the stairs, the long hallway that stood before him spilled forth into the front parlor. He could see people sitting in chairs and hear the soft rumble of words coming from a speaker who was out of his view.

As Seymour entered the room, he leaned his weight against the doorframe. The attention of everyone in the room was toward the speaker. He wore round spectacles, and the flaps of his wide-collared shirt sprung out from his suit. It was finely tailored in Edwardian style and quite dapper. Seymour could not focus on his face. From where he stood in the back of the room, he could only make out the backs of the attendees' heads.

Even though the man at the podium spoke in a monotone voice, the crowd listened intently to every word. A man seated directly in front of Seymour (whose attire spoke of a clergyman) chose a random moment for a query.

"Mr. Dewey," the man began in a confident, southern drawl, "you put farthe that education in dis 'ere country should be based on, what choo call 'sperimention and hands-on activity, yet the lack of 'ligious faith in this cahntry, and indeed da worl', is what is truly lackin', Mistah Dewey. Saw-ly lackin'! Fact is, it seems to me that these two natural 'ccurances are in conflict with one another." The man turned his attention away from the speaker and addressed the crowd with open arms. "That not so, ladies and gentlemen?" A fly buzzed around his head.

John Dewey breathed in deeply and adjusted the spectacles on his face.

"Any trained observer of nature can answer your question, Sir. Perhaps in our company today we may be so lucky as to have a biologist." He looked up toward Seymour. "To the biologist, I ask, does there exist in the natural world two opposing forces that ultimately combine to serve one another?"

Seymour raised a lazy hand to the question, but simultaneously a hand shot up from another man seated nearby.

Seymour seized the moment, "Well, if it helps," he began in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "Alice and I were not ten minutes ago observing a large bird on the grounds. She was convinced it was a blue heron, while I could plainly see it was a great egret. They combine in nature to control the rodent problem along the shores of Lake Champlain."

No one responded or reacted to Seymour's statement, and the sound of a military jet now thundered overhead, shaking the house. No one in the room seemed to notice its deafening roar.

The clergyman seated in front of Seymour took the moment to elaborate.

"Mr. Dewey, I adhere to the science of our natural world as created by God. As a pragmatist..."

"It is the foundation of my studies, Mr..."

"McKain. Pastor Kevin McKain, at your service." He dipped his top hat toward the speaker.

Out of the paned window, Seymour watched as a delivery driver headed up the walkway with a package. The man tapped on his handheld device, looked up at the house, and placed the box on the porch. No one else seemed to notice.

"Thank you, Mr. McKain. Indeed, I profess that students would be better served by less memorization of fact. Instead, we should emphasize participation in learning experiments that bring out students' individual interests."

The clergyman brought forth a Bible from under his frock and held it above his head like a winning lottery ticket. "So, you profess that we should in fact build academic laboratories where students dilly dally about instead of realizing the tried and true word of God?" he exclaimed, his face flushed.

"The self is not something ready-made," the speaker continued. "It is something in continuous formation through choice of action," he said.

The clergyman stood up in a violent gesture. "I have a sermon to give," he declared. Still, no heads turned toward him. He brushed past Seymour and disappeared down the hallway toward the cellar door, which oddly cracked open as the man approached. The man abruptly stopped halfway down the hall and slowly turned toward Seymour.

To Seymour's great shock, the man had only the bare relics of a face, his grey skin stuck to his bones like puddy to a brittle surface. Where there should have been

eyes, there were only holes. Where there should have been a human hand, there were only frail remnants. As Seymour watched in astonishment, what appeared to be a great rushing wind sucked the man backwards into the basement. The door slammed shut behind him.

Incredulous, Seymour turned toward the front of the room where the conference continued. John Dewey raised his palms in question. "This is an open forum," he stated plainly. "Only ordinary citizens know what is best for them."

Now Seymour began to study what he could see of the attendees around the room. There were both men and women and their clothes hung loosely and without form over their bones. A woman, adorning a flower-pot hat, wore puffy sleeves that drooped over grey shoulders.

The phone rang, making a shrill noise, and repeated. Seymour ducked into the hallway and called out for the caregiver.

"Deborah! Answer the phone!"

The speaker continued. "Imagine, my friends, a school that is not a school at all, but a hands-on learning center. Where children not only learn how soil cultivates growth, but actually grow the food themselves."

Riiing!

Seymour ran to the kitchen, where he answered the phone in a huffed gasp.

"Hello!"

"Dad?"

"Hello?"

"Dad, it's Taylor."

"Hello, Boy, fine, fine."

"Dad, how's everything going? I should be there in a half hour. Do you need me to pick up anything special from the store?"

"Doing fine, fine, Boy."

No one spoke.

"Can I speak to Deborah?"

Seymour stared at a mason jar of herbal tea. His throat was sore. He turned on the gas burner, and it spurred on after a few seconds. Seymour looked around for the kettle.

"No, no actually." He held the phone to his chest. "Deborah! Deborah! Come here!"

"Dad, where is Deborah?"

"I don't know. I have not seen her all day." He held the phone out from his body. "Deborah!" he called. "Deborah!" He held the phone back up to his ear.

"Who is helping you Dad?" Taylor asked.

"We are having a conference here today. I'm fine."

"Conference?"

"Yes, and I need to get back to it."

There was no response.

"Dad, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here Boy! I am going to go check on your Mother."

"Dad, where is Deborah? What is wrong with Mom?"

Seymour held the phone to his chest. Where was Deborah? He tried to remember. She was not there because...ah, now he remembered. He had caught Deborah stealing his wallet from the top drawer of his bureau a couple of days ago.

"You stole my wallet! Get out of this house!" he had said to her. "Leave right now, you wretched...THIEF!"

"Taylor says that I should hold onto your wallet for you," she had said in a sing-song Bahamian accent. "It is safe here in my bag. I will not be spoken to in that manner, Mr. Seymour. Goodbye." She handed over the wallet, gathered her belongings, and left.

"Deborah! Deborah! Come back here! I'm sorry," he called out. Only the great pine trees were there to hear his words.

"Dad? Are you there? I'll be there in a half hour."

Seymour placed the phone down, missing the cradle that was next to the lit pilot. There was still no kettle on. He exited the kitchen and rejoined the conference.

"We are engaged right now in a great public experiment," John Dewey continued. "The stark contrasts between William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley in the upcoming election are perhaps the greatest this country has seen in its grand 100-year history."

The suffragists in the room smiled, and again the tension became its own elephant. The woman with the flower-pot hat sat up straight. "Indeed, Professor. Two more old men to decide for all women," she said. It came out as a joke, a question and a statement. The sound of female laughter filled the crowded room.

A man who was well-known in the railroad circles of Burlington took his turn to speak up. "It is not that the current system disqualifies women from voting." His voice was high pitched, and he spoke as if he were an instructor to those of lesser intellect. "In any household, Madam, a man and a woman discuss the issues, and the man merely registers the opinion of both." He appealed to the audience with his logic.

A debate ensued as Seymour observed from his perch by the doorframe. Another military jet screamed across the sky, drowning out the speaker, but he neither raised his voice nor seemed phased by the deafening sound that shook the house.

A smell began to permeate the room, horrible and stinging. Seymour followed the stench into the kitchen.

The stove burner was spitting out its blue flame, and someone, somehow, had left the phone receiver directly on the raw flame. A black mound of melting plastic was cooking on the flame, and the sight was so odd and fascinating that Seymour could not break his gaze from it.

In the front parlor, he heard the murmur of the ongoing social debate.

"What will be next for women? Females soldiers in the Spanish American War?"

Seymour stood still and watched the angry flame grow. Its stain began to paint the ceiling in dripping black soot.

"Deborah! Deborah!" he called out. He realized that he had hardly dressed this morning, and his pajama bottoms were now soiled from his panic.

"Fire! Fire! There's a fire!" He grabbed a towel Deborah had left in an unfolded laundry pile in the pantry. He ran over to the flames and began patting the source. He left the towel on the flame, exited the kitchen, and ran into the parlor.

"Fire! Fire! I say, there's a fire!" he screamed.

The woman in the flower-pot hat ignored him and continued. "There can be no democracy without the full participation of its citizens, and by citizens I mean WOMEN!" She spoke in the tone of someone who is no longer interested in giving an opinion, but rather stating facts.

The railroad man again addressed the woman. "Then perhaps, Madam, you should have no objection to enlisting your daughters to fight in the Indian territory."

The remark drew gasps from some and stifled laughter from others.

"People, please! All of you, GET OUT OF THE HOUSE!"

The woman addressed her accuser. "Be careful Sir, because Manifest Destiny has a way of sneaking into your own house," she hissed.

Now Seymour began to shout louder. The thick smoke was starting to permeate the front room.

"FIRE!"

Alice.

Alone upstairs.

"Everyone, please save yourselves! LEAVE THIS HOUSE!" he screamed and ran into the hallway, passing the closed basement door through which the clergyman had been swept downward. From the staircase, the portrait of John Dewey looked down at him. The man sat in his wingback chair. Papers spilled from his hands. The flaps of his shirt sprung out.

Murmurs from the front room continued. "As we enter the 20th century, we need to envision a planning society where workers and consumers would participate in decisions affecting their lives and communities."

Thick smoke was now beginning to circulate in the hallway and make its way up the stairs.

Alarms sounded.

Answer the phone!

No, these alarms were louder and even more shrill.

"Alice! Alice! There's a fire! I'm coming, Alice!" He ran back into the kitchen and grabbed a shirt from the folded laundry. On the stove, the towel was now fully aflame and what was once the phone was oozing burnt plastic onto the floor. He ran over to the stove and switched the burner off, but the dials started turning on their own in confusing circles. Another burner hissed and lit up. Again, Seymour ran out of the kitchen.

He began to ascend the stairs again, struggling to catch his breath. He stopped and rested on the ballister which snaked its way up out of sight toward the second floor. He crashed on the third step and smacked his face. He felt warm blood emit from his eye.

Alice, I'm coming! We need to get out of the house!" He gasped for air.

Seymour, what is that smell? What is that smell, Seymour? Please, I can't walk. The stroke, Seymour! Remember, I cannot move, Seymour.

"Education, women's rights, unions....it all must evolve with our society, or our great melting pot will disintegrate before our eyes."

Seymour, help me.

"Please, everyone leave. There's a fire. Deborah! DEB-O-RAH!"

Help me Seymour.

"This annual meeting is now adjourned. Ladies and gentlemen, this debate is far from over. It will rage on. Until next year!"

Seymour lay on the stairs and struggled to open his eyes. He glimpsed down the hallway toward the conference now adjourning. As he watched, a comet-like ball of wind began to form in the parlor. Slowly at first, and then picking up speed, it appeared to suck up all the souls in attendance, whooshing them into a blinding whirlwind of faces,

limbs, clothing, and strewn papers. Having inhaled its meal, it started to barrel down the hallway toward Seymour. As it approached the basement door, the orifice began to slowly open. It then paused for a moment as if to digest, and the door slammed shut with a satisfactory bang.

"I am...coming, Alice. I am...coming for you!" Choking.

There is thick smoke all around me.

Seymour struggled to gain his footing as the blaring alarm rang out, but found that he only fell deeper into a contorted position on the stairs.

The fire raged on.

The End