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PROLOGUE

From Jagged Landscapes to Possibility

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Blue tents on the crushed rocks of the Pakistan mountain; the upheavals of the ocean at Sri Lanka; the stagnant brown waters in flooded New Orleans; wild fires, mine disaster: and here we all are—educators, technologists, artists, people of power, and those without power, struggling to survive. We are not the first to feel a slippage under our feet, to grope for a “point d’appui,” something to stand on, a platform, a ground. Like so many of our predecessors, many of us grope wildly for security. We seek a certainty of protection, of salvation. We want (what with our resources, our technical competencies, our capacity for control) to assert our superiority, our deserved invulnerability. Whether through a confidence in an “intelligent design” that favors the truly fit, or through a faith in a “higher power” that has singled out the faithful for a special providence, many of us picture ourselves in a select domain, see ourselves as the entitled ones. Those at the lower end of the bell curve, those remote from our canons, our traditions, are today’s infidels. Without knowing it, we have become ‘Social Darwinists’; and that frees us to pay little, if any attention to those lost in the freezing mountains, to the women of Darfur, to the survivors of the Rwanda massacres, to those thrust into a mass in a New Orleans astrodome.

And yet, it seems to me, the crucial demand of our time is to attend, to pay heed. Only as we do attend to those pressed into invisibility by disaster can we save ourselves from the corruptions of indifference. Only as we notice—intentionally notice—the person, in the windblown robes in Darfur (the young woman raped by her enemy, now holding a baby, the fruit of that rape, in her lap) can we avoid becoming objects ourselves because of the ease of transforming that young mother into a thing, a mere object. And the problem today (or one of the manifold problems) is to enable the young to develop a sense of agency through learning to learn, to imagine, to empathize. Only through that feeling of agency, even in the face of the uncontrollable, can young people collaborate to develop some mode of making a difference, even without a promise of completion or success.

Apathy and indifference must be understood and overcome if we are to reinvent the democratic community in a pluralist moment. The greed, the moral decline, the falsifications, and (yes) the acceptance of a groundless war must be confronted in the context of critical dialogue in the various idioms and languages marking the pluralist society. To speak of dialogue is to suggest multiple relationships, multiple perspectives. There must be a connectedness among persons, each with a sense of agency, each with a project. And there must be a capacity to imagine, to think of things as if they could be otherwise. As John Dewey reminded us, facts are mean and repellent things until we use imagination to open intellectual possibilities. Imagination may be viewed as a passion for possibility; the possibility of replacing the blue tents with houses; the possibility of rebuilding the levees, of nurturing and teaching all the children, wherever they are; of enabling those in futile quests of certainty to envisage horizons—horizons to be sought as persons come together in the light of incompleteness. This is where the effort to achieve freedom begins—freedom as the opening of spaces in which choices can be made and action undertaken. Thoughtfulness, imagination, encounters with the arts and sciences from the grounds of lived life: this is the beginning and the opening to what might be.

There must be an ability to anticipate and accept incompleteness. Even when a controversy appears to be resolved, gaps and spaces remain, and the need for open questions. And where there is a space, a gap, there is the possibility of new choices, renewed reflection. This journal opens and reopens spaces for thoughtfulness and concern.