

An Exploration of Myles Horton's Democratic Praxis: Highlander Folk School

By **Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon**

Introduction

Highlander Folk School is an adult education center located in eastern Tennessee that was formed in 1932 by Myles Horton and continues today.¹ Myles Horton (1905-1990) hoped to create an independent adult learning center where people could come together and address their problems. He wanted to create a public space where people could learn from each other and use education as a means to challenge the unjust social systems affecting their lives. Highlander was built on principles of democracy; however, Horton resisted definitively defining *democracy* throughout his lifetime. In *The Long Haul*, he tells us people get angry with him for not carefully defining what he means by democracy, but he says, "I've never been able to define democracy. . . . it's a growing idea."² Horton began Highlander Folk School by relying on Dewey's concept of a democratic society as "a society

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which makes provisions for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life.”³ A democratic society is one with shared interests and fullness and freedom of interaction within the group as well as with other groups.

Great changes have happened in political philosophy and in societies at large since Dewey was writing and Horton was organizing. We live in times that Nancy Fraser describes as “postsocialist.”⁴ Today, key underlying assumptions of democratic theory are being questioned and dismissed. Dewey’s liberal democratic theory focused on individual freedom and autonomy, even as he offered us the possibilities of moving beyond individualism, with his theory of social transaction; and, he assumed an Enlightenment-type of rationalism, even as he showed us how to move beyond this rationalism in his arguments for truths as warranted assertions.⁵ Enlightenment rationalism and the idea of a unitary subject have come under serious criticism by postmodernists, feminists, and critical theorists. Fraser says we live in times when group identity has supplanted class interests and when the need for recognition overshadows the need for redistribution. She suggests we live in times when no credible vision of an alternative to the present order is available, that the visions we have lack the power to convince because they bracket questions of political economy. The visions she refers to include: radical democracy, multiculturalism, political liberalism, and communitarianism.⁶

Highlander Folk School did not bracket questions of political economy; rather it sought to address those questions head-on. It also did not bracket questions of recognition; instead, it embraced diversity with open arms. While Horton began with Dewey’s concept of a democratic society, he worked for close to sixty years on further developing this “growing idea,” based on what he learned from his experiences through Highlander during the socialist times of labor union organizing, the anti-racist times of the Civil Rights Movement, and beyond. Unlike Paulo Freire, who worked as an academic and wrote many scholarly publications about his ideas for academic audiences, Myles Horton wasn’t worried about trying to reach an academic audience. Horton preferred to spend his time helping people come together and learn how to organize and work toward “replacing, transforming, and rebuilding society so as to allow for people to make decisions that affect their lives.”⁷ He wrote next to nothing about his ideas, not trusting the written word as a medium for expressing living ideas that are contextual to specific settings and change over time. Horton preferred to rely on oral transmission to share his ideas, so he shared them through the meetings he attended, the stories he and others told and the protest songs they sang. Fortunately, many others have written about Horton’s ideas as well as captured them in interviews and on film. Also, he talked about his philosophy of education at length with Paulo Freire for a “talked book” project they completed together right before Horton died.⁸ Still, I am surprised at how little Horton’s work in adult education is discussed today, given the incredible success the staff and

students attending Highlander have enjoyed over the years. We seem to have a new generation of academics and teachers who do not even recognize the names of Myles Horton and Highlander Folk School. It is my position that there is much we can learn today from Horton's work at Highlander as we continue to consider the concept *democracy* in postsocialist times. I want to suggest that Horton and Highlander offer us a credible vision of an alternative to the present liberal democratic order, though Horton would be the first to say that vision must continue to grow and develop and be critiqued, as times change.

In this paper I want to explore how Myles Horton was able to take Dewey's concepts of democracy and education and further develop these as he attempted to live them through the daily practice of his pedagogy and curriculum at Highlander Folk School. I want to consider what Myles Horton and Highlander can teach us today about a democracy always-in-the-making,⁹ as I seek to further develop a relational, pluralistic democratic theory that moves beyond liberal democracy and closer toward achieving social justice and caring. A relational view of democracy does not begin with an assumption of individualism, as classical liberal democracy does, but starts with Dewey's concept of transactional relationships, that individuals affect others and others affect individuals, for we are all selves-in-relation-with-others. A pluralistic view of democracy emphasizes identity and differences without falling into the trap of thinking there is a unitary subject, and without embracing extreme pluralism that emphasizes heterogeneity and incommensurability.

Horton always said you must begin with practice and move to theory, he tried it the other way around and it didn't work with his students. I will follow his advice and begin by giving a historical background to Highlander and describing what Myles and his staff did as teachers, trying to tell the story in a style similar to Horton's. Then I will explore some of the theoretical implications their practice has to teach us about a relational, pluralistic democratic theory. Of course, we can not really separate theory and practice anymore than Horton was able to. In fact, Horton advised that we get theory and practice together, so I will follow that advice as well. There will only be room to do some exploring here, for this is a very rich example that I will be exploring in a variety of ways for some time to come.¹⁰ Taking a close look at Horton's philosophy of education is a good place to start in my own efforts to further contribute to helping us move beyond liberal democratic theory and consider how to translate a relational, pluralistic democratic theory into the daily practice of education in public schools in countries like the USA. I will conclude by highlighting some recommendations for public schools, as potentially relational and pluralistic democratic social institutions.

Highlander Folk School

Myles Horton wanted to find ways to help poor, rural people in the South, and particularly in Tennessee, become empowered to think and act for themselves and

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change their lives. He knew these people very well and had a great deal of love and respect for them, for he grew up in rural Tennessee with the mountain folks of the Appalachians. He knew that these people were suffering from the violence of poverty, due to lack of employment, because his own family suffered as well. Horton was raised in a Christian family, by a grandfather who taught him a strong biblical sense of the differences between rich and poor, by parents who taught him the value of an education, and by a mother who taught him the importance of love and service, and that education is meant to help you be able to do something for others. Myles took these lessons to heart and sought to use his education to help his neighbors find ways to improve their lives. His focus was on social justice. He sought to help make America a more democratic nation through an adult education center.

As a young adult, Myles Horton had only a vague idea of how to go about creating an adult learning center that fostered democratic citizenship. He knew he did not want a regular, traditional school, and he did not want a vocational school. He did not want to offer therapy for people; he wanted to teach people to be social activists. He wanted to create a place where people could come to think and plan and share knowledge. Horton believed that people gained knowledge through their experiences, especially work-related experiences. He also believed strongly “that nobody should have their rights interfered with as long as they are attending to their own business.”¹¹ He was raised in a family that was outspoken and independent, coming from an individualistic frontier tradition.

Horton sought to sharpen his vision of what kind of adult learning center he wanted to create by reading various scholars' works, by attending universities and seeking out other students and teachers to talk to about his ideas, and by visiting various school sites, utopian communities, and settlement houses. He attended college at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee (1924-1928), as a literature major, where he says he learned to educate himself due to the lack of good teachers. While at Cumberland University he began testing out organizing ideas on campus and in the summer with his Bible school classes in Ozone, Tennessee, which he extended into evening adult community meetings about social problems. To his surprise, Horton discovered that the people of the Ozone, Tennessee area would walk miles to come to these meetings, and they didn't care if he had the answer to their problems either. They gained a great deal from hearing that others had similar problems and finding out that they could help each other solve some of them.

The next year, Horton worked as Student YMCA Secretary for Tennessee and he traveled around and visited utopian communities. Horton learned that he did not want an adult learning center that was isolated and separated from society, as utopian communities tend to be. With the advice of his minister friend from Cumberland County, Rev. Abram Nightingale, he went to Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1929, to, as he put it, “try to figure out how to get social justice and love together.”¹² There he met several students who later came to Tennessee to work with him. He had the good fortune of having Reinhold Niebuhr

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as a teacher who also became a friend and mentor, and later helped to raise funds for the school. Niebuhr introduced Horton to other socialist scholars in the city, in particular John Dewey and George Counts, at Columbia University and Teachers College, who also supported Horton's efforts through the years. During this time, Horton explored the ideas of pragmatism and progressive education, Marx and Lenin, attended rallies and observed labor strikes in the area, and joined the socialist party.

In 1930 Horton went to the University of Chicago to study sociology with Robert Parks, where he learned about group problem solving and how to use conflict and contradictions to promote learning. In Chicago he also had the opportunity to become acquainted with Jane Addams and her work at Hull House. Through Addams, Horton gained introductions to settlement house directors throughout the country who became staunch supports of Highlander Folk School through the years. Horton realized he did not want what Addams's settlement house had become, but he wanted something like what she had begun with. He wanted a school that was kept from getting too organized and too set in its ways. He wanted a school that would continue to adapt and change based on the needs of its students. In Chicago he met two Danish ministers who encouraged him to visit the Danish folk high schools, and so after a summer earning the money to travel to Europe, Horton spent the fall of 1931 in Denmark studying these schools as another possible model for his adult learning center. From Denmark he gained the ideas of having a school that was free from state legislation and did not have a standard curriculum or examinations. The school needed to be one where students and teachers live together and sing together, where there is much opportunity for peer learning, including through social interaction in informal settings. The school needed to have clear principles and a highly motivated purpose. By Christmas, 1931 Horton realized he had all the book learning and examples he could use, that he needed to come home to Tennessee and get started. In 1932, Myles Horton began Highlander Folk School, and during the next 60 years, until his death in 1990, Highlander became a major catalyst for social change. It still seeks to serve that role.

Horton began Highlander with Don West as a fellow teacher who was recommended to him by Dr. Will Alexander in Atlanta. They had one student in residence. Two students from Union Theological Seminary who later joined the staff were James Dombrowski and John Thompson. Horton wanted the school to be located on a farm, surrounded by beauty, where people would be able to find solitude. Once again, his friend Rev. Nightingale came to his aide and suggested he talk to Dr. Lillian Johnson. "Dr. Johnson was a wonderful educated person, one of the first women in the South with a Ph.D., a former college president who had been a student of John Dewey before the turn of the century."¹³ Dr. Johnson had 200 acres of land and a home in Grundy County that she wanted to donate to educational support for people in Tennessee. She offered her property to Horton and West on a one-year trial basis, and eventually deeded the property to Highlander in 1935. The school remained at this location until its charter was revoked and the property and supplies were taken

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by the state of Tennessee in 1961 due to its anti-racist activities and accusations of being a communistic school. The Highlander staff relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee, and renamed the school Highlander Research and Education Center, which is the name it still retains today. Highlander remained located in Knoxville until 1972 when it moved to a farm 25 miles east of Knoxville to New Market, Tennessee, on a hillside overlooking the Smoky Mountains, which is its current location.

We can see easily that Highlander did not bracket questions of political economy but instead sought to address these questions head-on just by looking at their beginning years. When West and Horton began their work at Highlander they were hoping to train local leadership for “a southern labor movement that was barely stirring.”¹⁴ 1932 was a time when people were in desperate economic situations. Grundy was among the eleven poorest counties in the United States. The Highlander staff decided that their first task was to get to know their neighbors in the community of Summerfield, Tennessee (and Monteagle), in hopes of building a trusting relationship with them. Myles informally interviewed the residents and invited people to Highlander for discussions of whatever they wanted to discuss. Horton served as a host and fellow discussant. The center held meetings that were as much social as they were problem-oriented. The people's ideas and interests shaped Highlander. The center started with social evenings because that is what the local people wanted. They needed a place where they could sing, dance, share food and stories, talk, and get to know each other. The people needed a place where they could overcome their individualism and the isolation that resulted from it, and begin to work together as a community.

Horton believed that his job was to learn as much as he could about his students. This meant the staff had to learn a new language, body language, and to watch people's eyes, for the people of Summerfield were not used to talking. The staff also had to learn not to ask certain questions for the people of the community were private people who wanted their privacy respected. Horton demonstrated that he genuinely respected the ideas of the people of the community and that he trusted them, and slowly they learned to trust him. The staff of Highlander found that their biggest stumbling block to getting people talking was their own academic backgrounds. They had to unlearn their years of schooling and stop trying to be experts so the people would not turn to them for advice, but would turn to each other. Horton strongly believed that people learn to make decisions by doing it, that people have the capacity to govern themselves but they need to exercise that capacity. He wanted the staff to let the people run the school so they could learn how to make their own decisions and develop leadership skills. He believed the teacher's role is one of helping empower students to think and act for themselves.

Between 1933-1939, Highlander developed a countrywide educational program for the mountain poor. As he had first learned in Ozone, Tennessee, Horton rediscovered that he did not need to know the answers to peoples' problems; amongst the people attending Highlander, there were lots of answers available if

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people pooled their knowledge together. Myles didn't try to solve their problems, he helped to raise questions, and sharpen them, and get people discussing them. The first classes offered at Highlander were based on requests the local community made: child psychology, cultural geography, and economics. As much as he could, Myles would get the working people themselves to teach the classes students wanted, for he found that his students made the best teachers. Depending on who was in residence in the school at the time, and who was on the staff, this effected what was taught: gardening, fiddling, drama, piano. The teaching staff received only living expenses and they participated with students in the work of maintaining the school. They grew their own food and lived as a socialist-co-operative community. The money they raised was used to develop educational programs

Horton never aimed to have Highlander become a large adult education center. He wanted to work with a small number of people and trust that they would multiply. As he puts it, he believed that if he could make the concept of education yeasty enough, it would grow.¹⁵ The early Highlander staff thought there would be Highlander schools in every state, but this did not happen. There is just the one started by Myles, in Tennessee. Highlander sought students who already showed signs of being grassroots leaders, students who wanted to change society. The staff learned to invite to Highlander only those who were learning to define their interests and who were already committed to struggle against oppression. The staff or former students would personally invite students to attend workshops or residential sessions, for the students they sought were not people who would normally come to a school. They were poor people who had to be persuaded to leave their homes, and they needed sponsoring in order to be able to attend.

The first strike the Highlander staff was involved in was with Wilder mining company. When a strike was called the Highlander staff went to help by bringing food and clothing. For this support, someone attempted to bomb Highlander, Myles was arrested, and the leader of the strike was shot in the back. The strike failed. The next strike the Highlander staff participated in was the Grundy County bugwood cutters strike in the summer of 1933. Bugwood was used for wood alcohol and cutters were paid seventy-five cents per day to cut. Again Highlander helped with food and clothing for the strikers, and again the strike failed. However, the people were beginning to learn more about how to handle their daily problems and to show their power and strength by organizing. The next projects Highlander got involved in were the starting of a co-operative nursery school and a co-operative canning and gardening project. The staff at Highlander learned with the local people how to put together grant proposals, and after several denials they won a federal grant for \$7,000.00 for their co-operatives. However, when the local politicians in Tennessee complained to the federal government that they were giving money to a communist institution, the grant was rescinded. This action resulted in the Highlander staff and people of Grundy County learning they needed a broader affiliation base and they began to work to get people supportive of their causes elected into political offices.

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Through local strikes and walkouts, the people began to learn how to act as an organization, how to help themselves and co-operate and work together. The Highlander staff and the students visited and participated in strikes and union meetings as a field method of staff development, and as hands-on experiential learning for the students. Staff and students formed close relationships with the strikers and their families. There were times in the labor movement years where the school's program took place mainly in the field, and there were times when the school offered intensive residential terms. Weekend workshops were often offered too. The staff also sought to continually broaden the social objectives and perspectives on the labor movement. They often invited guest speakers from various organizations to help stimulate concern with larger problems and issues affecting society and the labor movement.

Highlander became the main center for worker's education in the South until the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) began running their own programs in 1947. Mary Lawrence, a Highlander staff person, helped develop the educational programs for the unions in the south. She used the union meetings as her place to work/teach and she would invite promising union leaders to Highlander for residential workshops. Eventually Mary left Highlander to work for the CIO. Aimee Horton tells us that when the CIO took over the Educational Programs for the labor movement, Highlander pulled out because it did not want "to compromise its broad goals for political and social as well as economic democracy in the South."¹⁶ Myles suggests that Highlander's work was done, they had accomplished what they set out to do.¹⁷ He never intended to stay in the business of running educational programs for the CIO, he just wanted to help people get organized until they could run their own programs. However, he adds to the story by telling us that when the CIO insisted that Highlander put in its charter an anticommunist clause, Highlander refused. This was during the Cold War and Red Scare period, after WWII, and the school was opposed to silencing anyone from participating in the unions. During the late 1940s and the early 1950s Highlander tried to help farmers organize co-operatives so they would be given a voice in the market place. This organization activity was not as successful as their union organizing, or what was to come.

We can see easily with the example of Highlander's significant contribution to union organizing in the South that Highlander did not bracket questions of political economy in its concept of democracy, thus meeting Fraser's criterion that a postsocialist democratic vision needs to address political economic questions in order to have power. Her second criterion, that a democratic theory needs to address questions of recognition, is also something Myles and Highlander addressed. We can see an indication of Highlander's commitment to diversity and to addressing questions of recognition with their refusal to silence anyone from participating in the unions including communists or Blacks. Highlander sought to include African Americans in its educational efforts from its very beginning. In fact, Myles organized an integrated conference for students during the year he worked as

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Student Secretary of the YMCA, in 1929, when it was illegal to do so. Professor Daves and his wife, both African Americans, were invited to teach a course at Highlander in 1934, and by 1942 Highlander had distinguished Black scholars on its Board, the first being Dr. Lewis Jones. In 1940 Highlander informed the unions it served that it would no longer hold workers' educational programs for unions that discriminated against Blacks. During the textile strike in North Carolina, Horton was able to get Blacks a doubled pay raise that brought their salary up to the same level as the Whites by convincing all the workers to stick together and threaten to strike if the Blacks were fired for costing as much as White workers. It was 1944, though, before Horton was able to convince Black students to risk attending Highlander workshops with White students, in defiance of the law and custom, in order to achieve economic advantage. In 1944, Blacks and Whites studied, worked, and played together at Highlander, a new experience for those attending.

Between 1953-1961 Highlander developed 3 major educational programs to encourage and strengthen Black Southerners' efforts to achieve their full rights as citizens. In 1953, in anticipation of the Supreme Court's ruling to desegregate schools, Highlander began having workshops on school desegregation. In the same year, at the urging of Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark, Highlander applied for and won a three year grant to study the need for night schools on St. Johns Island to help Blacks become voting citizens. Myles set up a school in Jenkins store, in back, with no books or curriculum, and he didn't use regular teachers. He figured out the unsuccessful programs were embarrassing and humiliating to the citizens; their dignity as adults and their reason for wanting to learn how to read was being ignored. The teacher had to be a peer. They talked Septima Clark's niece, Bernice Robinson, a seamstress and black beautician, into being the teacher. Bernice had a lot of status in the Black community because she was an independent business person who didn't need Whites. The first school was a great success. Illiterate Blacks learned how to read and write so they could pass the citizenship tests and qualify to register to vote.

The Citizenship Schools were run by African Americans from the very beginning, at very low cost (\$8.00/pupil). The teachers were trained at Highlander. The people who attended Highlander during this time-frame included: Septima Clark, Rosa Parks, Bernice Robinson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Esau Jenkins, and Andrew Young, people who sparked the Civil Rights Movement. In 1960 Highlander also began to sponsor workshops related to the Southern Student Movement, and these were the students who began lunch counter protests in restaurants that refused to serve Blacks. Like what happened with the union organizing education, when Septima Clark, director of education for Highlander, and Andrew Young went to work for Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1961, Highlander transferred the Citizenship School Program over to them. Again, the Highlander staff felt that they had done their job and the people directly involved and effected should keep the work alive. By 1965 over 50,000 African Americans successfully registered to vote and in 1970 Clark estimated 100,000 had

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learned to read and write through the Citizenship Schools. Highlander's work was so successful it triggered the closing of the school by racist Southerners who did not want to give up their racist ways.

By 1964 Myles was trying to get Highlander out of the Civil Rights movement and back into Appalachia, the nation's poor, as part of the national War on Poverty. Later the school got involved in helping people protest environmental destruction that was occurring in poor areas of Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, where large manufacturing companies were dumping toxic wastes into land fills in their mountainous areas and poisoning the water, etc. More recently, under the directorship of its first woman, Suzanne Pharr, Highlander has been involved in gay rights issues and women's issues, and has worked with Mexican migrant workers to help them organize.

As we can see from this review of Highlander's history, Myles Horton was an idealist who remained dedicated to the goal of a "new social order" based on political and social democracy. Like Dewey, he believed strongly that education is one of the instruments for bringing this new social order into being. Throughout Highlander's long, often strident history, Horton and Highlander "remained steadfast in [their] espousal of radically democratic social-educational goals."¹⁸ Horton and Highlander offer us a example of democracy-always-in-the-making that does have the power to convince us in these postsocialist times we are living, for they offer us a model that seeks to directly address the need for recognition as well as the need for redistribution.

Getting Theory and Practice Together

I want to turn now to exploring some of the theoretical implications of Myles Horton's and the Highlander staff's practice, and see what we can learn from them toward the further development of a relational and pluralistic democratic theory. In particular I want to consider what caused Horton to move away from his earlier assumptions of individual freedom and autonomy in the direction of a view of individuals-in-relation-to-others. This change that Horton made helps move the concept of a democratic society beyond classical liberal democracy in the direction of a more relational view of a democracy that views individuals embedded within larger social contexts, where the way to help individuals is to address the health and well-being of their larger social contexts. Horton's move away from an assumption of individual freedom and autonomy toward a connected, pluralistic, social view is a key reason why I think Horton and Highlander have things to teach us today about democracies-always-in-the-making. Horton's move away from individualism and autonomy is a central reason why I turn to Myles for assistance as I seek to further develop a relational, pluralistic democratic theory that is based on a more transactional view of individuals-in-relation-to-others, the roots of which can be found in Dewey's work. I will explain what I mean, as I go.

When we look closely at Horton's younger years we find that his early concept of democracy was very much rooted in individualism. He learned this value of individualism from his family, whose ethnic roots were seeped in Scottish individualism, and he found this value strongly reinforced by the mountain folks of his home region area of Appalachia. These folks represent the American ideal of mountain men and frontiersmen who helped to settle the wild west, people like Davey Crockett and Daniel Boone who were adventuresome loners, staunch individuals who would continue to move further west as soon as folks moved in and began settling.

The valuing of individualism can also be found in classical liberal democratic theory, upon which American democracy is based. Liberal democracy takes on a variety of forms, from Locke's emphasis on man's ability to reason, to Rousseau's focus on the natural development of a self-made man, to Mill's description of man seeking to maximize his pleasures and minimize his pains.¹⁹ Still, in all these descriptions man is described as an individual who must decide whether to join up with others, or not, based on the benefits others offer to the individual (e.g. protection from enemies and sharing of resources) weighed against the costs (loss of individual freedom and autonomy). The classical liberal described social groups as hindrances to man's individual freedom. For classical liberal political philosophers the role of government/the state is to protect individuals from others, and otherwise to stay out of individual's lives and allow them to live as they freely choose. It is an argument for the primacy of the individual over the state, with the state serving a patriarchal kind of role that can be changed as individuals' needs change. Early liberalism depended on a conception of individuality as something ready-made, already possessed, and needing only the removal of certain legal restrictions to come into full play.

More recent development of liberal thought, since the mid-19th century according to Dewey,²⁰ expanded the patriarchal role of the state beyond protection from invasion and the breaking of laws to include a benefactor role of helping those in need who cannot help themselves. The idea developed that the state should be instrumental in securing and extending the liberties of individuals. Thus we find in the late 1800s arguments for why the government should help pay for the education of children whose parents could not afford to educate their own children. Doing so will benefit everyone for putting poor children in schools will get them off the streets and keep them from defacing property and being public nuisances. Educating lower income children will help them become better citizens and neighbors, therefore improving living conditions for all of us. Liberal democratic theory agrees with the paternal role of government to help those who cannot help themselves. However, the classical liberal, and more evolved liberal democratic views bracket very important questions of equity and distribution of economic resources, as well as questions concerning culture and power. Because of the assumption that individuals develop on their own, naturally, they are able to avoid seeing the embedded social context within which individuals develop, and the need

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to address the health and well-being of that larger social context (social institutions like: families, communities, schools, churches, and the economy).

Horton began to suspect that individualism may be a value that gets in the way of democracy through his studies and travels. While still an undergraduate student at Cumberland University, the people of Ozone, Tennessee showed him that they would walk miles at the end of a hard day's work in order to meet with others and talk over their problems. They sought a way to overcome their isolationism. In New York City, while studying at Union Theological Seminary, Horton was exposed to Marx's and Lenin's socialist political theory and learned more about workers' needs to fight for equity and better working conditions. He participated in union strikes and learned about union organizing. He also was exposed to the ideas of Niebuhr, Dewey, and Counts. Horton was in New York City during the later years of Dewey's writings, long after Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* (1916).

Already in *Democracy and Education*, we can find Dewey working out a democratic theory that begins to move away from a strong individualistic focus toward a more transactional view. Dewey, for example, was greatly influenced by Mead's social theory and his description of individuals developing out of social settings, where social groups are not described as hindrances to individual development, but as the foundational base and source for individual development.²¹ Dewey's definition of democracy recognizes the interactive, interrelational, interdependent qualities of individuals in relation to others. He describes societies that need to make sure all their members are able to interact and communicate with each other and have the chance to develop shared interests, as well as make sure that the society as a whole interacts with other societies so that they do not become isolated and insular. His description pointed Horton in a relational direction. So did Jane Addams, with Hull House. And, when Horton traveled to Denmark and saw schools where the students and teachers lived together and therefore had much opportunity for informal social interaction and peer learning, he once again was exposed to an example of a social community model for democratic theory, not an individualistic model.

However, we can still see the values of individualism influencing Horton when he decided where to locate his adult education center, for he did not choose to be located in a major city, and seek the anonymity, plurality, and diversity that Iris Young thinks an "unoppressive city" offers.²² Whereas Dewey and Addams sought to be located in Chicago and then Dewey moved to the even larger city of New York, Horton sought a farm in the hills of eastern Tennessee where people would be able to find solitude. In fact, he built a one-room cabin for himself in the woods of the two hundred acres farm that was isolated and removed from the main building and activities on the farm, so that he could find even more solitude. Horton only moved closer to the main building of the farm after he married Zilphia Mae Horton and their children, Thorsten (1943) and Charis (1945), were born and their safety became a concern.

Yet we can find an emphasis on creating a space where people could come together and get to know each other in how the actual school at Highlander was

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designed, and still is designed today. In Horton's days the staff hosted square dances and sing-a-longs, and these continue to be a regular offering today. The center was furnished by simple, used living room furniture that was meant to put people at ease. Today there is a central room in the main building that holds around fifty people and is circular in design, with many windows that look out of a gorgeous view of the Smokey Mountains. The central room is furnished with rocking chairs with padded seat cushions, and they are arranged in a large circle, with more chairs along the wall, so that the number of chairs can be adjusted to the needs of the group size. In fact, a rocking chair has become the symbol of Highlander and is used on their flyers and stationary. In Horton's time, the staff at Highlander lived in the same conditions as the students and cooked, washed dishes, and gardened together. Still today, there are bedrooms at the center that are like simple dormitory-type rooms, with single beds and chests of drawers, and there is a kitchen and dining area for cooking and eating, as well as a play area for children, indoors and out. When people come for weekend workshops they can board at the school.

Even more important than Horton and his staff designing Highlander so that it is a place that welcomes people to come together and creates comfortable ways for them to interact with each other, is the position Horton developed and the Highlander staff continue to maintain concerning how they view individuals and their problems. Myles and Highlander learned to view individual problems as being community-wide problems, as well as state and federal problems, as problems of ideology and beliefs, not due to individual character flaws or bad luck. Myles started his work with a deep love and respect for the people of the Appalachian area, and that love and respect helped him not pass judgment on them as individuals. He did not blame their problems on the troubled people who sought out Highlander to learn how to change their oppressive conditions; he blamed their problems on oppressive social conditions. While liberal democratic theories blame the individual for their own failures, due to lack of hard work, or lack of education, or character flaws such as dishonesty, Myles's more relational democratic theory described individual problems as embedded within a larger social, cultural, economic, and political context. Horton saw problems such as poverty, not earning a living wage, or dangerous working conditions as social problems not as problems due to individual laziness, carelessness, or lack of ambition. Horton and the Highlander staff learned to see the problems of unequal pay and denial of the right to vote as problems that are embedded within a larger social, cultural, economic, and political context that is racist, sexist, and dependent on cheap labor (capitalism), to name a few qualities of that context.

Horton's work in labor organizing and in dealing with racial conflicts convinced him that it was only by overcoming individualism that Highlander was going to be able to help people solve their problems and improve their living conditions. Horton learned that individualism keeps people isolated and separated from each other; "individualism is a dead end." He learned that it is only by joining

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forces and working together that people can hope to be effective in changing oppressive social conditions in their lives. "(T)he path to freedom grows from cooperation and collective solutions."²³ Later in his career Horton realized that individualism was a privilege for Whites that was denied to Blacks, and that with individualism Blacks were forced to become like Whites in order to be free. Individually, people could easily be absorbed into an oppressive institution; it was only as a collective group that the poor or Black had a chance of actually changing oppressive social institutions rather than just being exploited and changed by them. Like Myles, the students attending Highlander learned to let go of their individualism too, for their individualism kept them isolated and trapped in their own ideas. They needed a place where they could experience what it was like to work together as a community and Highlander offered them this place. For many, this was the first time they had the chance to experience what a democratic community might be like.

In this section I explored some of the theoretical implications of Horton's philosophy of education and Highlander's practice as a democracy always-in-the-making. We learned that Horton began Highlander with a strong assumption of individualism, placing his democratic theory clearly within the realm of liberal democracy. Still, even before he began his work in 1932 he already was exposed to seeds of change in his democratic theory due to his exposure to socialist theory and Dewey's and Addam's pragmatism. By the time Horton met Dewey, Dewey had already been influenced by Mead's social theory, and he was already developing a transactional view of selves-in-relation-to-others. Once Highlander was started, Horton allowed himself to remain open to others' influences. He had an uncanny ability to place himself in the background of a discussion and serve as a facilitator and welcoming host, instead of positioning himself as the expert authority. He didn't present himself as the charismatic leader or strong individual that he could have been, and in fact people at times tried to insist he be. Horton tells stories about having a gun pointed at him while angry strikers yelled at him to tell them what they should do.²⁴ He didn't comply, but instead insisted he did not know what they needed to do, they had to figure that out among themselves. Myles did not let himself or Highlander's staff dominate and take over the workshops and classes offered at the education center. Rather, right from the start he insisted that the students make significant contributions and lead the discussions and be the teachers and decisionmakers.

My argument is that Horton learned to overcome his individualism and the isolation that results from it, and embrace a more transactional view of selves-in-relation-with-others. He overcame the either/or logic in which he was raised, one that all Americans are immersed in still today, either the individual or the group. He learned to see the world through a both/and logical frame that recognizes we are both individuals and members of a social group, greatly affected by our social context but also greatly affecting that larger social context as well. Consequently, he helped to develop an adult education center that serves as an excellent example of a democracy always-in-the-making.

I would like to conclude by considering some possible advice Horton and Highlander might offer public schools and their teachers, in a country such as the USA, which claims to embrace democratic values. What would Horton recommend toward helping teachers and students learn how to overcome their individualism and understand themselves to be transactionally related in a democratic society of their own making?

Living What You Believe

I must begin this final section by reminding us that Horton decided he did not want to try to create folk schools for democratic citizenry at a mass level, and he did not want to work with children. Horton wanted to work with people who would be able to make decisions for themselves and be responsible for their own actions. He did not want to start a school that would have to answer to state or federal legislation and he did not want to have a curriculum that was standardized and/or subject to examinations. Any discussion of what Horton would recommend for public school education must begin with the large caveat that he did not think his ideas would work in state controlled schools.

Many times I think Myles was right, what he accomplished with Highlander cannot be done in public schools with children. I write this article during the controversy of President Bush attacking Iraq due to fears of “weapons of mass destruction.” My son attends a public middle school where little to no discussion of this very controversial decision to attack is occurring. Instead the children in his middle school are preparing for proficiency exams. However, I was observing in an urban alternative high school that is 53% Native American, with the rest of the students representing a diverse mixture of minority students, the week that the war with Iraq broke out, and that is all the students and teachers could talk about there. Questions concerning culture and power were debated all week, including who is in the military serving and what are the dangers they face, and whose interests are being served through this “preemptive strike?” When I think about those students, ones who failed out of public high schools in their city but found a home in a small partnership high school that modeled Native American values, while not denigrating other cultural values, I cannot give up on our public schools. Like Dewey, I think public education is one of the instruments for bringing about a more caring, more equitable and more just society. I do not think we can afford to wait until our children grow up to teach them how to be politically and culturally aware citizens if our country will ever have the chance of being a democracy — someday. I do not think we can continue to bracket questions of political economy or recognition and pretend that schools are not political spaces where issues about culture and power continually surface and must be dealt with one way or another. Even if we accept the need for state legislation and curriculum standards in our public schools for children in grades K-12, there is much room for improvement over what exists that will help us move closer to structuring

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our schools to support relational, pluralistic democratic goals. There is much we can do to help us overcome the strong individualism assumed in liberal democratic theory and embrace a more transactional view of selves-in-relation-to-others who are embedded within a larger social context.

I limit myself here to implications that focus directly on helping students overcome their isolation and begin to see themselves as contributing members of pluralistic communities that are embedded within a larger social, political, and economic world. Other recommendations will have to wait for other opportunities. Based on what we have learned about Highlander, I believe Horton would advise:

- Schools should be comfortable, welcoming places that put students at ease and offer places for them to interact with each other and teachers in informal, social ways.
- Schools should be kept small enough in size that it is possible for staff and students to get to know each other. The staff and students need space and time to get to know each other and share experiences together.
- At the same time, wider vistas need to be opened up for students and they need exposure to a variety of perspectives. Schools should seek to be diverse in enrollment and staffing and should bring in outsiders and encourage disagreement. Making people uncomfortable will help them grow in their understanding and critical consciousness. All objections must be heard. Local problems need to be connected to larger social problems so as to help enlarge students' and staffs' views and stretch their imaginations.
- Teachers should serve as facilitators and welcoming hosts/hostesses, instead of as expert authorities. The students should be encouraged to make significant contributions and lead the discussions and be teachers too.
- The curriculum needs to address questions of equity *and* recognition. Students need to learn that social problems are embedded within a larger cultural, political, and economic context, instead of treating them as isolated individual problems due to lacking individual qualities. Social problems need to be discussed through the lens of culture and power.

There are many examples of private schools that meet these recommendations in the USA, however, the best examples I am aware of, of public schools that are small, welcoming, open to student input, offer a curriculum that embraces cultural and political issues and addresses questions of redistribution and recognition, are schools that have historically been underfunded and marginalized.²⁷ Often they are alternative schools for students who have failed out or dropped out of our public schools, like the Native American urban school I had the good fortune of visiting. In the poorest schools in the USA, filled with the most minority students, we can find lots of examples of teachers and students talking together about their conditions in comparison to the

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other schools they play sports against, where they perform music and dance, and that they must compete against for academic recognition. In these schools social problems are examined within larger social, political, and economic contexts, through a lens of culture and power. Here students are recognized for their efforts and their talents, but always within the context of their supportive families and communities that help them grow and achieve. Here students are encouraged to work hard and strive to succeed, but always with an understanding that they can only succeed when they help others do so too. Here students are challenged to take responsibility for their actions, but not to blame themselves or others for what is beyond their control. Instead they are taught that it is only by working together that they will have opportunities to change things for the better.

The urban high school I visited during the week that war broke out between the USA and Iraq has no more than one hundred students with seven teachers. I saw an average of around ten students per classroom, which may sound low, but these are students who had a history of chronically missing school. The students and teachers all know each other, and are on a first name basis in this smaller, more personalized school. The size of the school makes it possible to adapt to students' needs, consider their interests, and adjust curriculum to make it relevant to their lives. It has been a lifesaver for these students, helping them return to school and graduate. It is also a school that seeks to empower the students so that they will become the next generation of "war ponies" who will be able to continue to work for a democracy that will someday include them. Just going to school each day exposes these students to tremendous levels of diversity. Pluralism is all around them. Still, they seek even more diversity, through their research projects and community service work. At the same time, they come together daily for a group meeting that reminds them all they have in common. As these students struggle to keep a roof over their heads and clean clothes on their backs, questions of equity and recognition are never far from their minds.

* * *

As I said at the beginning, Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School offers us a very rich example of a democratic school always-in-the-making and it will offer much for us to think about for years to come. In this article I have turned to the staff and students of Highlander to teach us the lessons they learned about letting go of their individualism in order to overcome their isolation and work together collectively to help solve their problems. After reviewing the history of Highlander, especially during Horton's lifetime, and exploring ideas upon which Highlander was built, I turned to considering the assumption of individualism in classical liberal democratic theory, and how Horton learned to let go of this assumption and adopt a more relational democratic theory. I have argued that individuals exist in relation to others, at an intimate level as well as at a generalized level. There is a direct relation between our individual subjectivity and our general sociality, for personal

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relations are embedded and embodied within larger social contexts. The relationship between individuals and others is a transactional relationship relying on a both/and logic that describes individuals affecting their social groups and social groups affecting their individuals, for we are all selves-in-relation-with-others.

In the end we must search our own souls and try to answer Horton's question, do we really believe in a democracy and value it? If we do we need to try to live our beliefs. I am adding to Horton's question by asking what kind of a democracy do we believe in? I have suggested we need to question our assumptions concerning democracy, even ones we treasure such as the value of individualism. I have made the case for a relational, pluralistic view of democracy-always-in-the-making, that views selves-in-relation-to-others.

Notes

¹ I rely on four sources for the biographical and historical information I present on Myles Horton's life and on Highlander Folk School. These four sources are: Frank Adams, with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1975); Aimee I. Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932-1961* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1971/1989); Myles Horton, with Herbert and Judith Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Horton did not personally write any of these texts, but the texts record his words and his stories, many of which are repeated in all the sources, and he did critically review what was published. Together they offer a full, vivid picture of Horton's life and of Highlander.

² Horton, *The Long Haul*, p. 174.

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, MacMillan, 1916/1944/1966): p. 115.

⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*; John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, (1949, 1960), *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949/1960); and John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938).

⁶ Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*.

⁷ Horton, *The Long Haul*, p. 174.

⁸ Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*. At Highlander there is a library that is full of documents related to the history of Highlander, and many more texts than the ones I rely on are included in their book store for sale to the general public. An example of a film about Highlander is "You Got to Move." I do not discuss Freire in this essay in comparison to Horton because I want to put the spotlight on Horton's work and Highlander. Much has already been written about Freire's work.

⁹ Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

¹⁰ There is unavoidably some overlap in this text from a previously published article of mine, "An Exploration of Myles Horton's Caring Reasoning at Highlander Folk School," *Thinking*:

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The Journal of Philosophy for Children, 16(1)(2002): 32-41, although the concepts I explore in each text are different.

¹¹ A. Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, p.14.

¹² Horton, *The Long Haul*, p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁴ A. Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*.

¹⁵ Horton, *The Long Haul*.

¹⁶ A. Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*. p. 152.

¹⁷ Horton, *The Long Haul*.

¹⁸ A. Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, p. 256.

¹⁹ John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960, edition used originally published in 1823); John Stuart Mills, *On Liberty* (London, UK: Dent, 1910); Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, M. Cranston (Translator), (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1968, originally published in 1762). I use the term “man” on purpose, for aside from Mills who argued for women’s rights in *The Subjection of Women*, classical liberal democracy is based on a description of individualism that is androcentric in its focus.

²⁰ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1935).

²¹ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, C. W. Morris, Editor. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

²² Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

²³ Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, p. 208.

²⁴ Horton, *The Long Haul*.

²⁵ For examples of schools that I refer to see: Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown Books, 1991); Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994); Michele Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: The New Press, 1997); and Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*. (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).