



***Democratic Transformations:  
Eight Conflicts in the Negotiation of American Identity***  
**By Kerry T. Burch**

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*Reviewed by Matthew Mercer, Missouri State University*

Burch issues his book as not so much a cure for America but a vital nutrient that can help America toward becoming all it can be. Without self-examination, without truly learning from the past, the mind's growth is stilted and ignorant. Through examining the fundamental belief systems that govern America's present identity and future growth, Burch urges educators to instill a sense of active democracy in tomorrow's adults.

In the prologue, he references the political scientist, Wendy Brown's, reclaiming of the words *crisis* and *critique* from the Greek etymology of the words and how she shows them to share common meanings. Burch also draws from Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational philosopher, in taking a public rhetoric approach toward examining America's identity. He finishes setting the stage for his proposal by citing America's premier educational philosopher, John Dewey, and how Dewey recognized that, "Conflict is not only 'ineliminable' in democratic politics; it is essential for the achievement of social reform and justice."

In the first chapter, Burch examines arguably the most defining meme of the contemporary American identity, piecemeal as though it may be, *The pursuit of happiness*. He effectively dissociates that very *pursuit* from the materialistic, capitalistic, and corporate-driven self-satisfaction and reminds the reader of its civic dimension. Making note of the predatory nature of corporate influence in the schools over the past several decades, Burch laments corporations' influence in school reform and bemoans the ever-increasing presence of TV advertising in schools.

These things are important to note because they feed into the devolution of *the pursuit of happiness* from something that intended to maximize the achievement of public good into a slogan that intended to encourage everyone toward maximizing individual satisfaction and pleasure. Burch provides what he intends to be a "conceptual road map" for shifting from the consumer focus to a democratic vision of the future.

Burch briefly examines the ancient Greek and Roman idea of happiness and references Socrates' work. In *The Apology*, Socrates is put on trial for "corrupting" Athenian youth, "no doubt because he was urging them to question popular images of happiness and to take care of their souls," Burch observes. He wrests the term *idiot* from the contemporary pejorative and examines its origin: "Idiot (idios) was invented to describe those who could legally participate in the polis or political community, but instead chose to live a private existence. Idotes is defined as 'a purely private person.'"

Burch goes on to note that Thomas Jefferson's original idea for *pursuit of happiness* had inherent in it a public dimension, and he shows why Jefferson was different than John Locke who held the idea of a possessive individualism. Burch celebrates Jefferson's intent, extols the

value of being an active citizen, and observes, “This desire to care about a common good is paramount, for it works against the reduction of politics to the assertion of one’s narrow self-interest.”

He instills genuine concern and reason for examining the American identity in the first chapter, and closes by referring to the origins of public education, that from its very inception, it was meant to educate the citizen of his citizenship. Burch assails No Child Left Behind and its curricular bias against civic education, and goes so far as to say that “young citizens’ ‘unalienable right’ to the ‘pursuit of happiness’ [in the truest sense of the phrase] is being systematically infringed.”

Burch’s first chapter is a call to arms. He sets up, looks back at, and redefines the nature of the phrase *pursuit of happiness* in order to help the reader understand how vital it is that a shift toward an active citizenry happen and soon. Through addressing how things are and adding the ingredient of an active citizenry, Burch helps the reader see how things could be. He says, “While some may want to cite this absence of self and civic caring as a positive example of a politically neutral education, it would be more accurate to say that it represents a tectonic shift toward the mass production of idiocy.”

Throughout the rest of the book, Burch spans time from the concept of Democracy in his second chapter, “The tyranny of the majority,” all the way to contemporary climates in his eighth and final chapter, “The personal is political.” He examines America’s racial history in the fourth chapter, “Forty acres and a mule,” America’s morality in his fifth chapter, “The moral equivalent of war,” and takes a hard look at the culprit for feeding the idea of individualism above all else in his sixth chapter, “The business of America is business.” Burch also examines the threat that militarization poses to America’s democratic identity in his seventh chapter, “The military-industrial complex.”

In each instance, Burch encourages the reader and, hopefully, educators in America to take a focused look in the mirror through the lens that these memes and ideas provide. When educators encourage the youth of today to examine these things carefully, to have civil conversations about different opinions, and to begin to understand what is at stake when public inactivity results in oligarchic rule, the youth are then more apt to harness their indomitable hope and potential to make the world into one where we all want to live.

Burch’s writing and thinking are both wonderfully academic, and while the book itself provides the roadmap Burch set out to design, his epilogue gives a destination of sorts. Titled “Educating the *souls* of democratic folk”—a riff on W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*—Burch asks directly, “How could we better negotiate our relation to the contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities and ironies of our history far more honestly than we had to date?” He goes on to utilize jazz as an apropos metaphor for understanding America.

The integrated process of jazz, the unending improvisational quality of the music itself, and the rising gestalt that comes from individuals working toward a common sound are all effective in understanding the idea of America. Still developing and growing as jazz music is even today, America stands to bloom even still through understanding the strength of the component parts of our history and our identity. Burch draws from Duke Ellington’s concept of jazz to speculate, “One must be one’s own leader rather than being content to take cues from another, an orientation to the world which also holds true for the achievement of democratic individuality.”

Like a vital nutrient missing from my diet, this book really nourished in a way I haven’t experienced in most of my education classes. Burch’s courageous stand against the ignorance

endorsed by the dominant curriculum is necessary and addresses what can be done toward making a better tomorrow. The way Burch is able to present the ideas is both friendly and practical, and I think it will take courageous educators to begin the march he encourages. I look forward to helping my students understand themselves and where they live more thoroughly, and I look with even greater hope to the world they will help to fix.

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