Bard Prison Initiative Commencement

Woodbourne Correctional Facility

June 5, 2010

Marion Nestle

It is a great honor and privilege to receive the John Dewey Award for Distinguished Public Service, and even more so to be able to accept it in person on this splendid occasion.

Congratulations to graduates on your remarkable achievement. Obtaining an associate’s or bachelor’s degree is a major achievement for anyone. To be awarded a college degree under your challenging circumstances deserves the greatest respect and admiration.

And congratulations also to your families, your teachers, and the far-sighted people at Bard College who make this program possible.

In accepting this award, I am especially honored that it is named for John Dewey. Dewey is known for his many achievements in philosophy, psychology, and education, but to me he stands out for another reason.

John Dewey was a passionate champion of liberal democracy.

Dewey argued that education is good for individuals, but that it also has an important social purpose—that of encouraging students to become active and effective members of a democratic society.

Education, Dewey said, should involve students in real-life activities that fully engage them in the life of their communities, a method of education that we now call experiential learning.

Subjects such as mathematics, history, biology, and language, Dewey said, can be learned not only by reading books, but also through activities such as—and he mentioned these specifically—growing plants, raising animals, and cooking, activities deeply embedded in daily communal life.

In growing a garden and producing food for yourselves and for others under these particular and peculiar circumstances, you are carrying out John Dewey’s ideals better than he ever could have imagined.

Today in this country, we are in the midst of a food revolution unprecedented in American history. This revolution differs from traditional revolutions and social movements--and the women’s suffrage, civil rights, and environmental movements leap to mind as examples.

In contrast, the food revolution is fragmented and dispersed among many smaller movements focused on one or another aspect of our food system. Think of the Slow Food movement, the organic foods movement, the local foods movement, the animal welfare movement, the support-your-local-farmer movement, the grow-it-yourself movement, and—my favorite--today’s backyard chicken movement.

All of these food movements together create a revolution aimed at transforming our present industrialized and corporatized food system to one that is more sustainable, fair, and just, and that is demonstrably healthier for people, for the planet we live on, and for our democratic political institutions.

Make no mistake. The food revolution is about democracy. Everyone eats. Growing food is democracy in action--of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Growing food is worth doing because it is an expression of democratic values. Besides that, you can eat it.

Today, we live in a world characterized by profound disparities between rich and poor, those who have and those who have not. In today’s world, highly centralized, wealthy, and powerful institutions control vast areas of public life.

Growing food is about giving individuals and communities the power to control their own resources. I cannot think of anything more revolutionary.

You are participants in this food revolution and I salute you for what you have accomplished both in and out of the classroom. John Dewey would have been proud of you. I certainly am.

So congratulations again to you who are graduating, your families, and the Bard Prison Initiative for making this remarkable program possible. No award has ever meant as much to me. Thank you.