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THE BAREFOOT PHILOSOPHER: FRED JOHN BROWN,  
1914-1983

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Trumpeter

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## Introduction

Fred John Brown was a philosopher who first became known to us back in the old radical days at Simon Fraser University, where he taught in the Behavioural Sciences Foundation, and then later in the Communications Department. I met him in graduate school in 1966, but it wasn't until 1973 that we really came together around the idea of building a community.

In 1975 a small group of us left the university and moved away from town. We bought a piece of land in the mountains, suitably remote, lived there by the rushing river for a number of years. We learned new skills, adapted to place, planned, talked. When the logging show came on, we moved farther back in the hills, settled down for the long haul.

To our sorrow, five years ago Fred died of cancer. It was a terrible shock, shaking our confidence in ourselves and our purposes. He was 69 years old. While his death changed everything, we continued on, built up our settlement. Over time we were fortunate, we connected up with neighbouring friendly households, and together grew into a new form of community, distinctly hand-made by these particular people in this particular place.

So it is the case that Fred's values, the values he brought to us, live on today in their new green guise. The memory of his person remains strong with us. He becomes the one acknowledged elder of our developing tribal experience.

## To Make a Start

After Fred's death, the years flew by rapidly. We saved his ashes. We did not follow a weak impulse and scatter them abroad on the snowy ridges of Fred Peaks (the high point to the east that bears his name), nor did we scatter them close by, on Home Hill. We let the issue go, and waited.

Then, during September of 1988 (on his birthday), the entire community assembled at his home commune for a simple ceremony of remembrance lasting two days.

According to plan, folks walked up the trail with food, sleeping gear, children,

all assembled, there was feasting. Afterwards a fire was built by the creek. We gathered round and made a circle and for long hours told stories that characterized our friend. Every story was about Fred, but it was also about the teller. We said what we knew of him, how we first met, and what effect he had on us. Episodes welled up easily, his travels around the world, his adventures everywhere. Children stayed in the circle as we went around. They listened and heard. A young one told one of Fred's bear stories, one that always got us laughing. (Fred knew a thousand bear stories, and delivered them in a rustic drawling manner.)

Even those present who had not known him directly, but had joined our community later, gave testimony to Fred's influence on them. They felt they knew him. He was a relative, an ancestor common to us all.

### **Flight From the City**

Listening to ourselves one after another, it became plain that from the start what we shared with Fred was the same overall dilemma — the dilemma of retaining our sanity in a crazy world. We had all been uprooted and severed from our pasts. In the confusion of changes, we were separated from loved ones, our relatives were scattered. Even our own characters, our personalities, seemed partial and carelessly thrown together. It was plain that moderns lacked the kind of integration of habits derived from an upbringing in a whole community. As humans, as civilized people, we had lost our communities, lost our cultures. The entire species, native and non-native, appeared to have fallen out of fit with Nature and was losing its ability (and its freedom) to adapt. The machinery of civilization had taken possession of the people — the machine had taken priority over people. In a state of violent disorganization, human beings threaten to destroy the land.

We saw also in those days the impossibility of defying the powers that towered over us. How could you dream of stopping those powers, when they were so strong? We decided on more subtle methods. Our hope was not in fighting, anyway — that was not our work. Our work was to find alternatives to present conditions. Hope lay, we concluded, in what we ourselves could do together, taking positive action.

Fred told a story illustrating our situation. This story is like a dream. Once there was a train, and it was full of people, and although nobody seemed to know it, it was bound for absolutely Nowhere — headed for destruction. It was speeding along on a dark, dark night. A handful of people glimpsed what was happening. Although they were few, luckily, they had found each other. Right away they acknowledged their fears and put their heads together, conspired. When the train slowed down at one point, they jumped out a side door, baggage and all. Over and over they rolled. They were stunned. When they got up, they turned

to see the light of the train fading away into nothing.

Now the air was still. Stars glistened brightly in the sky. And there was the land, lying peacefully, outstretched, rolling to the mountains. Soon the little band of travellers felt joy. At last they had arrived. They were Somewhere. They were back on the planet, and a future opened up to them.

### **On the Threshold of Community**

Friendly, face-to-face action in the substantial present was the solution for us. This was our response to a weird and hazardous modern world. Fred made it clear that joining forces with Mass Society would not be intelligent. We believed he was right. What was most needed, and what we were attempting to act out, was the springing up like grass of small communities, small bands of folks previously scattered about as fragmented individuals. These groups would learn to cooperate and build together. Life depended on it. Improvement would not come from above. No government was going to take power and solve primary human problems. Small, informal groups of people, chosen families at first, could show the way to needed changes. Small groups could experiment, they could learn new ways, develop adaptive customs in place over time. This was the sort of logic we were following out. And Fred was always there for the effort of making it happen. It was all a social romance, anyway.

The hard work was changing personal habits, getting down to the immediate, everyday stuff. Meanwhile, we concentrated on learning how to get by in the bush, how to swing an axe or repair a roof. It was all new to many of us, finding paths not known before. We made a domestic scene that would nurse along our utopian hopes. Fred was playful and light on his feet in this game. He was one with the idea and always up for inspiration. We received the worldview that he taught. It was learned by heart. Like renegades who made it to another country, we laid the foundations for a new hearth, stuck together, grew vegetables, and gained strength from the routines of self-reliance. Eventually, we were able to re-connect with the wider world, this time according to limits we set ourselves as a community, and in ways that made a lot better sense.

### **The Human is a Cultural Animal**

Build community, yes. But what direction does the community take? Fred pointed out the necessity of building towards a cultural form of society. We studied anthropological sources. Here we found that we had become human in small groups to begin with, in our primary stage of existence. Until relatively recent times, we lived among our familiars in bands of maybe 25 to 50. Our anthropological ancestors roamed free in a wilderness that was home and that provided for them. Of course things have changed since then, but as a species

we have never outgrown the need to live in the context of culture. It is organized customs that do the adapting for humans. Customs are practices passed down through the generations. Every culture is characterized by particular sets of stable habits. So it will be with us, if we get to live long enough to gain the necessary focus and momentum. A community develops a way of life. It can take many forms. However, it has to be fitting to place and continually capable of change for changing times.

### John Dewey and George Herbert Mead were Ancestors

Fred was a lifelong student of the American Pragmatists, Dewey and Mead. Dewey and Mead were inseparable in their day and in their philosophy. They were friends and members of — conceivers of — the same school of thought. Fred discovered in them a theory of Cosmos and of experience that satisfied him. He felt it was a perspective adequate for the doubtful situation we faced. It was adequate as a picture of what the world is like.

Our philosophy was focused on "method." We knew that we didn't know exactly what we were doing. It was genuinely new, the territory we set out to explore. How do you build a culture? We literally had to find out how to live. The way was to borrow, improve, modify, invent, try customs and actions out, test for fitness in the Here and Now.

Mead certainly helped us by sketching the origins of the social self. We carried this model before us.

Our conversational method was the result of using and developing certain common terms, so that we had a particular language and set of perspectives to guide us in our explorations. When we fell into confusion (or for the fun of it), I remember Fred would find occasion to read from *Human Nature and Conduct*. That book reminded us of our basic psychology. It made great sense to a bunch of people trying, through mutual aid and intelligence, to change their characters.

Also, whenever possible, Fred brought out *Experience and Nature*, reading passages like epic poems on the Cosmos.

Fred was forever making additions to Mead and Dewey. He poured over Dewey's *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry*, paying heed to every implication, writing commentaries in the margins.

What Dewey could not provide was a relevant Who to carry out social inquiry. To the theory of social inquiry, Fred added the "inquiry group." It wasn't a classroom group he had in mind, or colleagues who separate at night and go back to different homes. That was more like Dewey's and Mead's form of education. Fred thought the inquiry group should not bother to drive home at night, but

stay together after the theoretical talk, have dinner, chat around the common hearth, make music, plan the next day. A domestic inquiry group, making their living together, was a good start towards a community or cultural group. Thus, when Fred looked up at the dinner table, he saw his own chosen family. It was far from perfect, but it was the kind of company he kept. Here the general and the particular become one. Theory and practice became one. Talk and action became one.

Fred brought his conceptions down to earth. He was humble in his expectations, though daring. He was willing to work in the medium of everyday life.

If the world is to be re-made, it will have to emerge among real people like ourselves, in a real place and time.

### **The Barefoot Philosopher**

This man who taught us how to split wood, and walk up a steep slope without getting exhausted, had grown up in Wyoming. In this place he enjoyed the most wonderful and complete phase of his past, and one that we could most easily relate to. He grew up in view of the Grand Tetons. He had the run of a big ranch in the valley outside of Jackson Hole. He was not the indoor type, and was better acquainted with horses than people his own age in school. He was used to broad expanses, used to keeping up fences, packing out, trapping, skiing, climbing. For a time he lived in the high meadows in a teepee, alone, communing with the elements, birds, bears and wildflowers. A child of high wild place, our friend developed a standard of health, of economy, of freedom that put him a little beyond the reach of civilization. Fred was more like a native person than a civilized, post-European. He was a natural anarchist, tutored by periods of cold, fatigue and hunger. He scaled the peaks. Through guiding in the bush, Fred learned the value of cooperation in small groups. He knew what the process was all about. It was an ability that served us well as we negotiated our everyday actions.

But in those days of guiding, of loafing in the mountains, you can be sure he was talking plenty philosophy around campfires at night. In his pack he carried a volume of *Human Nature and Conduct*, along with a sack of Bull Durham and other essentials.

### **His Ashes Under a Fir Tree**

These memories we passed around in our circle, while flames lit up our faces. After all the words, after everyone had spoken, we stopped talking. We ate more food, we made music, just as Fred would have preferred. (He played the harmonica and accordion.) We danced and made music until we couldn't go on,

and then fell into bed.

Next morning, after breakfast, ceremonies continued. We built another fire by the creek, had further memories in a peaceful mood, appreciated each other and what we were doing together. We love our tribal view. We felt well-expressed and united, and soon trekked up to the Philosopher's Grove. There, between the grove and the garden, there waited a bucket containing a young, hardy-looking fir tree, a shovel beside it. When the people had all arrived and the circle was once again complete, a friend turned over the sod. Soon stepping aside, another picked up the shovel. This continued on around the circle. The children came up and dug, too. Then another couple of friends got down and poured the ashes into the hole, a white powder blowing off. For a while there was silence. Then the tree was lifted and planted and packed down with hands. Another friend, Fraser Lang, stepped forward and read us a poem. It had been written five years earlier, commemorating Fred's death. It was called "F.J.B." (for Fred John Brown).

The barefoot philosopher  
winds his way  
up the slopes of the Grand Teton,  
mountains in mind.  
From ridge to ridge, and upward,  
rocky trails, twists and turns,  
always towards the vista,  
always towards the view.  
Jaw forward, wiry, resolute,  
hard as New England,  
soft as summer,  
spirit indomitable,  
embracing the mountain.  
Alpen glow on high snows,  
mind clear and sharp,  
climbing the slopes of the Grand Teton,  
one last time.

All was silent. The sun was out, the wind. The creek sounded from the canyon. So there he was. Our friend was buried under a fir tree in the middle of home. We who remained would keep living out his dream.

When folks had all gone off, someone threw on a handful of moose turds, to nourish the roots.

Here is one, much loved, who died among his friends, a philosopher and a mountain man.

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