

VALUING THE SELF

What we can learn from other cultures



rothy Lee

logue by Jeffrey Ehrenreich

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*What We Can Learn
from Other Cultures*

Dorothy Lee

Prologue by Jeffrey Ehrenreich



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Cover: Lee family portrait. Dorothy Lee stands between her mother and father in the center of the photograph. Cover photo and text photos courtesy of Zoe Demetracopoulou, Dorothy Lee's sister.

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“she steeped herself in the lives of children and families, bringing with her a unique human presence, sparkling humor, vital dialogue, and determination to awaken the full power of individuality within community and in schools”

PROLOGUE: VALUING DOROTHY LEE

Unfortunately and sadly, I never met Dorothy Lee. Edmund Carpenter, one of her close friends and colleagues, introduced me to Lee's work in graduate school. Her famous collection of essays, *Freedom and Culture* (considered a classic in anthropology), provided the first clues to this remarkable woman. Recently, interviews with close friends, colleagues and relatives disclosed more information about Dorothy Lee.

My special interest in Lee's life and work began shortly after her death (April 1975). I was teaching in a small, interdisciplinary program called the New School of Liberal Arts at Brooklyn College, CUNY. NSLA's purpose was to create a learning environment for students who had experienced difficulty in education. One of my classes was a seminar called “20th Century Social Institutions, Ideas, and Philosophy.” The course focused on the individual in society from cross-cultural perspectives. In 1976, a second collection of Lee's essays was published under the title *Valuing the Self: What We Can Learn From Other Cultures*; it proved to be a perfect text for the class, full of wonderful commentary and anthropological insight. General principles and specific ways to generate positive learning and development of individuals in communities and societies were discussed. Given the nature of the NSLA program and the students it served, these were

central and practical issues. The book also sensitively and clearly distinguished thought and behavior in primitive cultures. It raised questions and offered answers as to how the individual might be nurtured and taught to enjoy life with greater personal fulfillment, to engage others and to be engaged by them, and to live life to its fullest potential. Through comparative analysis of numerous cultures both Western and primitive, Lee suggested that in order for the individual to achieve *autonomy* (defined as “being in charge of myself”) it was essential that the *community* (defined as “people around me”) truly *value* the *self*.

As indicated in the book’s subtitle “What We Can Learn From Other Cultures,” the work emphasized a theme which had been central to early American cultural anthropology as practiced by Boas, Henry, Radin, Mead, and others, namely that there are fundamental and profound lessons to be learned by us (members of this culture) from examining *other* cultures. To a very large extent, this basic theme was steadily eroding as the perspectives of “anthropology as science” and “applied anthropology” grew in importance and stature within the discipline during the 1940s and 1950s. Not only were anthropologists promoting “objectivity” as an obtainable goal, they increasingly took their role to include telling their native “subjects” what they (the natives) were “actually” doing as well as what they needed to know. In contrast to these trends, Lee’s work held that learning *from* other cultures and valuing *their* significance and worth were more central to what the discipline of anthropology was and should be about. In both the teaching and practice of anthropology, according to Lee, “what we can learn from other cultures” and apply to ourselves and our own world is precisely what gives *meaning and value* to the pursuit of anthropology as an academic discipline. *Valuing the Self* essentially captures the essence of anthropology’s humanistic potential while simultaneously providing a rich and accurate sense of what life and culture are about in small-scale traditional societies. Lee’s presentation of life in primitive cultures attacked the essence of the ethnocentric myth that human beings were necessarily better off in modern cultures.

Valuing the Self, despite its usefulness in the classroom and its important contribution to theory, stayed in print for only a few



Dorothy Lee with some of the Greek peasants with whom she did fieldwork.

years with little commercial success as a text. The book remains virtually unknown to most cultural anthropologists; it apparently was never reviewed in any of the major anthropology journals,

although it did appear in a cluster of short, one paragraph reviews in *American Anthropologist*. It would seem that anthropologists and their students have missed an opportunity over the last ten years to learn from one of the discipline's most original and articulate thinkers. In this regard, I am especially pleased that Waveland Press has reissued this valuable work.



Dorothy Lee with grandchild.

The neglect of *Valuing the Self* is at once a curious and tragic occurrence. Lee's other book, *Freedom and Culture*, found its audience. The question remains, why did *Valuing the Self* go virtually unrecognized? Consideration and appreciation of Dorothy Lee—the person and the anthropologist—might provide the answer. The theories, ideas and principles which she advocated in her work were directly reflected in the nature of her character, personality and in the quality of her life. Simply put, she was what she wrote and what she wrote was herself.

Dorothy Demetracopoulos (Lee) was born in Constantinople in 1905. From all available evidence, she was the last of nine children. Her father was a pastor in a Greek Evangelical Church, in a milieu dominated by the Greek Orthodox Church. Within her

own Greek culture, Dorothy was in the position of being an outsider. She attended an American school run by missionaries and eventually won a scholarship to Vassar College. Her Ph.D. (1931) was from the University of California at Berkeley where she studied cultural anthropology under Alfred Kroeber. She did field-work with the Wintu Indians, specializing in myth and language. After teaching briefly at the University of Washington and Sarah Lawrence, Dorothy married Otis Lee, who shortly thereafter became the Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Vassar. With Dorothy teaching anthropology and Otis teaching philosophy, the Lees settled in Poughkeepsie, New York to raise their four children. Otis died suddenly in 1948; in 1953 Dorothy Lee decided to leave Vassar to teach at the Merrill-Palmer School in Detroit. The move was apparently encouraged and supported by her friend Margaret Mead, although many of her other colleagues were appalled. The move might have marked the beginning of her position as an outsider within the professional establishment of anthropology.

[During the six years spent at Merrill-Palmer, Lee's work became increasingly more oriented toward practical problems and the home economics movement. Her concern grew that both foreign and American students were obtaining an unclear picture of American culture. While her commitment to and involvement with students as individual people increased rapidly, so did her impatience and disdain for academic gamesmanship. Dorothy Lee's words and actions were aimed at de-mystifying and de-constructing the ivory tower world of academe.

Freedom and Culture was published in 1959; that same year, Lee received a five year appointment to work with sociologist David Riesman in the freshman seminar program at Harvard University. In academic terms, Lee had arrived. However, she did not stay long! In 1961, Lee left Harvard *by choice* to join Edmund Carpenter on the faculty of San Fernando State College. After this point, the rest of Dorothy Lee's career was spent on the periphery of mainstream anthropology. She moved about the country as a lecturer, consultant, workshop teacher and visiting scholar in places such as Iowa State, Oklahoma State, Duquesne, and Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. Her affiliations were,

in fact, with departments of home economics and not anthropology.

She continued to write but far less frequently. As she explained in the introduction to *Valuing the Self*, she had discovered that anthropology students had found “the truth” when reading her earlier work. She believed students were denying their individual



Dorothy Lee, in her late 60's, talking and knitting.



Dorothy Lee as a young woman

perceptions of the world. Rather than using her ideas as a catalyst to formulating their own, they were following her views uncritically and unthinkingly. In Lee's own terms, they were giving up and losing their *autonomy*—precisely the opposite result of what she strived to accomplish as author and teacher. She had come to believe that she could best communicate the lessons of anthropology to students with no anthropology training and to non-anthropologists.

In comparing these facts against the description of Dorothy Lee given by those with whom she was closest, a clear picture emerges of an academic maverick. She loved anthropology with a passion, but she thought of herself first as a [mother,] family member and friend. She preferred to travel and to learn in the field (in later life, Greece was the place of her fieldwork) rather than to impress her colleagues at conferences or in print. Life was to be lived and people were to be engaged!

Lee was an accomplished and outspoken woman who knew her own mind. She was a doer who, without compromise, followed her convictions and conscience. She not only spoke and wrote from conviction—she also listened. Her life was lived on a personal rather than on a public level. Her approach to anthropology and to life was engaging, concrete and real, never abstract or ephemeral. She criticized the discipline of anthropology and talked about putting “man [to be read today as “humans”] *back* into anthropology.” Her complaint was that attention to real human beings, their lives and thoughts, was systematically being relegated to the back burners of the discipline in the name of “science” and objectivity.” In Lee’s mind, humanistic approaches were being stripped away from the core of the field.

In her introduction to *Valuing the Self*, Lee describes true autonomy and what occurs when community fails to nurture it. When it is present, she said, individuals are encouraged to see with their own eyes as opposed to being told what to see. They are encouraged to relate to the world with inquiry, to trust, to decide and to be involved. When, on the other hand, they “come home filled with desire to share their adventures; when they bring forth new ideas and no one listens; when what they say is dismissed as unimportant; when they are not recognized and are told they are wrong...when community does not value the self...[they] come to regard their own senses and thoughts as worthless, and they substitute instead what they are supposed to think and feel.”

The legacy of Dorothy Lee’s strength as a person and her brilliance as an anthropologist is *Valuing the Self*. I hope that the community of anthropology will take advantage of the chance to appreciate and to value fully Lee’s work—as it so richly deserves to be valued.

Jeffrey Ehrenreich
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*To Clark Moustakas
whose encouragement enabled this volume
to come to be*

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INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this collection of essays is autonomy and community as these relate to the individual self and recognize, affirm, and encourage the growth of the self. By *community* I mean the people around me—my parents, my teachers, my friends, even a passerby who looks at me or nudges me. By *autonomy* I mean being in charge of myself. I mean that I see with my own eyes, not what I am told is there. I mean that I relate to the world with inquiry, *my* inquiry. When I look at the tree, I am not even limited by the expectation of my own self. I look at it freshly, alertly; I become involved in the miracle, I create it out of my own perception. It does not occur to me to question my perception. I trust it. *I* decide if I like it or not, *I* am filled with joy or concern or disgust. In all my being, when I feel, when a thought buds and develops, I greet my feeling and my thinking. I am myself.

However, when children come home filled with the desire to share their adventures; when they bring forth new ideas and no one listens; when what they say is dismissed as unimportant; when they are not recognized and are told that they are wrong: the tree is really ugly, the robin's song is really grating; when community does not value the self, children come to regard their own senses and thoughts as worthless, and they substitute instead what they are supposed to think and feel.

Community, however, can also recognize and honor. The mother can listen with excitement to what her child tells her, asking questions, transacting. The child responds and suddenly realizes

[that he or she has not looked carefully enough, has not thought hard enough. Creative perception, original thinking are tremendously demanding. It is so much easier, for instance, to read a review of Kafka first so as to "know" what he says, or to "know" whether the book is good. It is so much easier to see "a" tree rather than "this" tree. So community has a further function. It evokes. It shakes the individual into greater effort. It does this because it honors the autonomy of the individual.]

cannot separate autonomy & community.

Some years ago, I published a book of selections of my articles. I had written them for my colleagues as a form of communication. When they appeared as a book, they were used in undergraduate courses. And I found out, with horror and guilt, that the students I talked to had found *the* truth. I was the author, I gave the authoritative statement. I could not even argue with them because they answered me back from the authority of my book. I felt that I had dumped a load of gravel on new, thin, weak, gloriously alive grass, or even on seed that had never had a chance to sprout. I had killed. I vowed that I would never publish a collection of papers again.

I no longer wrote with joy and anticipation. My writing became a withdrawal from life; I had to withdraw from the world around me—from people, birds, houses, clouds, trucks, everything—in order to concentrate on some abstract idea or respond to questions that were no longer alive in me. I had to struggle to bring myself to the point of writing. Finally, I refused to write. When invited to a conference, I simply lectured. I had a carefully worked out outline; I arrived with my notes all carefully arranged so that my C followed my B logically and my B followed my A logically; but they were always *my* C following *my* B and there was no room for community to affect what I was saying; there was no crack through which community could enter. Eventually, I gave a talk without notes and it was then that I realized what I was really moving toward: I was trying to reach the point where I could help people whose thinking and sensing had not been honored and had been substituted by the "correct" ideas and perceptions of their teachers and textbooks. I stopped writing or lecturing. I started forming graduate seminars, usually with young adults and middle-aged students. I could not wait to hear what the students said. If I waited it was because the other members of the seminar, recognizing a valid idea, were full of their own responses. I listened not patiently until they were through, but impatiently, because I was entranced watching the weak, little blades of grass begin to grow in

stature and strength. The students forgot to feel shame in case they were saying something silly or presenting unacceptable, "wrong" views or asking foolish questions. They wrote me papers full of their own thinking and feeling, with immense margins so that I would not simply "correct" their papers but discuss with them as an equal. They learned to value their own fleeting responses. It did not take long for the whole seminar to learn to listen with interest and participate with involvement. Nothing was dead. The struggling sprouts had not been killed; they only needed to be greeted.

I held to my decision not to publish another collection for years. (Parenthetically, I cannot imagine life without reading and am grateful to the writers I like.) But gradually I realized that for many I was really offering and opening alternatives, not laying down dogma.

This last year, I received many letters from former students, academic colleagues, and others, for whom something I said furnished a crack for a new idea or helped stretch out the vision of an old one. At that point, I decided to publish this small selection.

In the chapters that follow I have chosen to explore ideas that recognize community and autonomy as basic to the emergence and development of the creativity and health of the individual. I am concerned with distinguishing between value as residing in a situation, as inherent in reality, in contrast to values that are the basis for making judgments, for determining right or wrong. I want also to show that where the individual is fully engaged in life that motivations are autonomous, that the person is invited to act, moving, thrusting forward, striving, aspiring, rather than being motivated by needs, drives, and tensions. The behavior of the autonomous individual is prodigal, exuberant, unpredictable in its reach.

In this book, I am also questioning the heavy price we pay for literacy, the damage to wonder, curiosity, questing, and sense of mystery. I am pointing to the destructive consequences of formalized conventional education when it robs the individual of unique, unpredictable experience and offers mainly authoritative statements, facts, and labels. I am concerned with the cultural factors that inhibit or encourage the development of the potential to learn—whether through society, family and community, or through the school, whatever it is that incites individuals to develop their potentials to the utmost, or what interferes and robs learners of the expression of this potential.

Another important focus of *Valuing the Self* is the relationship between freedom and structure, what I regard as the essential

conditions of freedom, what I mean by freedom itself, and how “social constraint” frees me from the interference of others and makes it possible for me to act.

Throughout this book, when I speak of other societies the people I know best are the Sioux, whose education and life I know in great detail. I refer to them often to illustrate the way in which autonomy and community work together in creating individuals who value the self, individuals who speak to the powers within and reach out to life with new energy and vision.