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A Rhetoric of Peace With Justice

A few weeks ago, an old friend e-mailed me a web page with the following question in the subject line: “Coincidence?” You see it reproduced on the handout. It tells you to take a twenty dollar bill – the new, pink-tinted variety – and fold it, origami fashion, until two hidden pictures are revealed. The first to appear shows the Pentagon on fire, the second, after you make another strategic fold, shows the twin towers gone up in smoke. Then, turn your folded bill over and, can you believe it? The name OSAMA appears. Coincidence? You decide!

Now you’re probably thinking that my friend sent me this as a joke. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Several weeks before, on February 14, to be exact, I had received another missive from this friend of thirty years, showing that when you arrange a particular biblical verse like poetry on a page, you can make out the letters V-A-L-E-N-T-I-N-E spelled vertically. That, she was sure, was no coincidence either. In fact, according to this college-educated peer with a successful career as a public school teacher, *nothing* is a coincidence. At least not since 9/11.

After my shock at the Osama dollar bill had subsided, or, I should say, my shock that otherwise smart, rational people have begun to fasten on signs and portents in US treasury bills as evidence of an underlying order and meaning in the world -- I began to reflect on our mission as teachers of comp and rhetoric in the post-9/11 era.

As writing teachers, we take responsibility, maybe more than teachers in any other discipline, for teaching our students how to think. For what is writing, we ask, but thinking made visible? And what is argument, but the manner of thinking that is valued among intellectuals in a particular cultural and social context? Students come to our classrooms with opinions, prejudices, unexamined assumptions, life experiences, and interactive skills of various degrees and kinds that they have learned as social beings growing up in their families and communities. It is our job to help them give shape to their ideas by giving them practice in the cultural forms that sophisticated written discourse – especially argument – may take.

Yet, culture changes, as all cultures do, and the approved forms of argument and evidence change too – sometimes in reaction to stress, such as the shock of 9/11, or the experience of the terrible effects that an economic crisis might have on already impoverished families and communities, or the general insecurity of the prospect of an endless war on terror. In such a climate, all the ways that people have learned to think and question critically, to untangle complexities, to form their own opinions, can soon fall by the wayside.

What's even worse than the magical fatalism in the Osama twenty dollar bill phenomenon, is the sense of powerlessness and defeat that affects students with a budding social conscience. In the current atmosphere of endless violence, economic crisis, and vicious, yet unacknowledged racism, many students seem convinced that nothing they do or say could make a difference. They may learn to form an opinion and write an excellent argument about a social issue, yet find writing to their Congressperson a waste of time. They are constrained and silenced by the thought that nobody listens, nobody represents them, that politics is corrupt and power rules all. They may learn the Greek term, *pathos*, in our classrooms, but when they see what is pathetic in the world, they feel only helplessness.

So I ask myself, is there something about the way we are teaching our students to think and write that contributes to this problem of powerlessness and fatalism? Or, put another way, is there a way of writing and thinking that is more resilient to shock and crisis than what we currently teach?

The kinds of argument popular in composition textbooks today are variations on two types, agonistic rhetoric and cooperative inquiry. Agonistic or pro/con rhetoric is adversarial, in-your face stuff, combative, and confrontational. It aims to convince by superior logic, hard hitting evidence, and the exposure of flaws in the opposition. Debate style thrives on skepticism, the rooting out of contradictions, omissions, and lies. This is crucial, of course, in the current political and social climate, where exposing propaganda, questioning media messages, and seeing the logical inconsistencies in the rhetoric of leaders is an everyday necessity. But critical thinking does have its downside.

Wayne Booth and Peter Elbow have both written eloquently about the danger of becoming so skilled at skepticism, so involved in being *against* something, that one doesn't know what one is for. Both writers argue instead for teaching our students to enter more fully into ideas that disturb or challenge their thinking, that is, to take on unusual, or disturbing views as if they believed in them, and then, from that new vantage point, look back at their own ideas to see how they appear to others. This is the project of dialogue and cooperative inquiry: listening carefully, refraining from interrupting or even thinking about a reply while a peer is speaking, coming to group consensus, or simply allowing all points of view to be heard without judgment. The focus is on the process, the act of experience or dwelling-in. These skills, it is true, prepare students to live in a globalized, multicultural world, where productive dialogue, cooperation, and compromise help bring all views to the table. But being skilled at listening and working things out is not enough. Why sit at the table at all, when each new view adds to the sense of complexity, uncertainty, and deepening crisis?

In this new century, with all its terrible and wonderful possibilities, students need more than decision-making skills and ways to get along. They need something emotionally powerful as well as intellectually and socially sound. They need something based on values, meaning, and belief, something deeply rooted in the spiritual, yet not tangled and mired in the supernatural. Something cross-cultural, yet something so basic, so human, that people from a variety of traditions can agree upon it, support it, believe in it, despite

their different faith practices and different ways of understanding the world. For when crisis looms, as it will increasingly during this century, and the complexity of living together on this planet becomes more and more overwhelming, our students will need conviction to persevere.

I believe it is possible to come up with a new rhetoric, a rhetoric that goes beyond critical thinking, beyond collaborative learning, beyond learning to appreciate a variety of points of view in a diverse democracy. I want to propose a more global rhetoric, a rhetoric of peace with justice. And I want to confess that I haven't gotten very far with this, yet the idea keeps nagging me. My classroom efforts are small, but encouraging

So I want to enlist you in this project –it's too important, too complex for me to attempt to dream up alone. What would this rhetoric look like? It would combine some of the best elements of the rhetorics we've been teaching over the past half century, yet it would add a crucial component of universal justice, universal human rights, universal human values. It would not dispense with logic, or evidence, or complexity, or fair, honest assessment of various points of view, but it would not stop there. It would be collaborative, rather than authoritarian, of course, but not so collaborative that any point of view is equally acceptable. It would speak to students' need for grounding, and courage, and would help them resolve the inherent contradiction of embracing complexity and multiplicity while insisting on core beliefs and values.

I think our students need information, too, along with rhetorical and interactive skills, as even the brightest among them are often strikingly ignorant about the rest of the world. Composition teachers have for many years provided students with readings and discussions of social issues: identity, race and ethnicity, gay and lesbian perspectives, media representations of women and men, the importance of personal experience and self-reflection. This is a good start. But it is somewhat inward-looking, American-centered, isolated from the larger world and from knowledge about the ways that our values and our unexamined assumptions affect *people*, and economic *systems*, and cultural practices, and social movements in Haiti, and Uzbekistan, and Colombia, and Iran and North Korea, and Senegal.

Of course it's not enough to teach students to be anthropologists, or savvy travelers. They need to understand the causes of global poverty and dissatisfaction, and that there are more complex precision tools at our disposal than "market forces" and self interest and other forms of violence. In today's globalized world with its winners and angry losers, despairing losers, refugee and warlord and child soldier and terrorist losers, our students need to be informed about conditions of life, the aspirations, the basic needs, and the humanity of *all* people in every corner of the earth. And we need to convince our students – and be convinced ourselves, that war as a means of solving human problems is not glorious, or productive, or inevitable.

Although we might not know it from our insular perspective, the world is moving toward a rhetoric of human rights. Regardless of the fact that our country is going its own way, ignoring cooperation, refusing to listen, using twisted logic and simplistic, aggressive

dualisms, there is a small but growing discourse in the world community about the need for global justice. Young people are involved, citizens are involved, human rights lawyers and NGOs and academics are involved. It's the only way we're going to survive this century: in a world community that agrees to international standards, rules, and ethics of justice and fairness. This means basing the teaching of thinking and argument on universal ethics, not on the ethics of a particular faith tradition or interest group or political party, not on the ethics of better listening, or the ethics of including everyone's ideas without judgment, or the ethics of leaving ethics out of argument entirely.

Does this sound like a lot for composition teachers? When I came into the composition field in the mid-1980s I knew nothing – *virtually nothing* – about many of the social and philosophical issues that were common in U.S. comp textbooks and classrooms. Coming from rural Quebec, where I had lived for the last fifteen years, I had never heard of postmodernism, or deconstruction, or how to analyze an advertisement. I had sympathy for, but no deep understanding of U.S. racial issues. I had never heard the term LGBT. I liked the term “social justice,” but that, too, was new to me. I was forty years old.

I learned very quickly, partly by making mistakes, partly because the information and the discussion was all around me. Composition teachers can learn about global issues in the same way. The fact that we would have to create a wholly new rhetoric of peace with justice, or a rhetoric based on universal human rights and values, is a bit more daunting. But only a bit. We can inform ourselves. Some of the best classes I've taught are those where I learn with my students. We can borrow from other fields and from knowledge and practices that reside in non-academic communities. And we can make things up, each of us taking on a small piece, a fragment that will add to the whole.

I want to share a fragment of my own with you. Actually, it's not my own invention – this is what I mean about borrowing. It's a technique called LARA, and it's the last two pages of your handout.

LARA This method was designed by an organization called “Love Makes a Family,” to promote dialogue between LGBT activists and hostile audiences. The roots of the method are in the training of civil rights workers in the South in the 1950s. The handout describes the practice of responding to questions orally. Once students have practiced the method with partners in class and in their lives outside the classroom (some students report using this method successfully with their parents), students can write dialogues around contentious issues that further develop the use of the method by one character to persuade another to adopt a more generous, humane point of view.