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Contemplative Practices as Rhetorical Action for Democracy

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While there is a general overlap between contemplative values for compassion, empathy, and awareness and democratic values for equality and human flourishing, relatively little scholarship has examined the specific ways in which the two might be connected (for important exceptions, see Hyde & LaPrad, 2015, and Mariotti, 2020). I argue that delineating the rhetorical facets of contemplative practices provides one angle of productive insight into how such practices can be seen as action for democracy. I develop this argument from four vantage points: the context of classroom experience and scholarly conversations with which my argument intersects; an examination of resonances among rhetoric, democracy, and contemplative practices at the conceptual level; a description of three classroom contemplative practices that focus on equality; and an exploration of how contemplative practices can function as rhetorical statements of resistance to anti-democratic forces. I call for further scholarship to examine the connections between contemplative practices and democracy from multiple angles.

Today, we feel both despair and hope for democracy with compelling directness. As the consequences of historic inequality unfold ever more visibly in our daily experiences, the need to care for equality and human flourishing lands in our hands with painful urgency. If there ever was a time when we felt that legal and institutional structures could do the bulk of the work to protect democracy, that time is gone, and it is increasingly a matter of all hands to the plow. Therein, of course, also lies our increasing hope for democracy. If we make a point to look for them, we see more people from more walks of life taking up

the challenge to care for democratic institutions and people's everyday wellbeing in direct ways.

Particularly inspirational is the variety of scales, sites, and methods people are engaging to take up this care. There is much hope and energy to gain by witnessing the creative variety of people's responses to our historical moment. At the same time, this variety invites us to act for democracy in our own ways. Action for democracy always includes doing new things. But it also includes examining our existing activities, especially our particular strengths, to discern any capacities for promoting democratic values that we may not have noticed before. Overall, the resulting variety of means to care for democracy is significant both quantitatively and qualitatively. More hands, plus more ways, equal *more* democracy. At the same time, the full flourishing of individuals, each living out their set of unique gifts, makes for *better* democracy.

It in this spirit of variety and invitation that I examine, below, the importance of contemplative practices to democratic life. For this article, I use Owen-Smith's (2018) definition of contemplative practices as "metacognitive modes and first-person investigations that nurture inner awareness, concentration, insight, and compassion" (p. 24). Like many others, I have long felt a general overlap between contemplative values for compassionate care, ethics, empathy, and critical awareness and democratic values for equality, human flourishing, and transparency. However, there is significant room to scrutinize the specific and direct ways in which contemplative practices and democracy are connected (Hyde & LaPrad, 2015, p. 2). In our current moment of both crisis and opportunity, the potential connections between contemplative practices and democracy should be examined from multiple angles. In this essay, I argue that studying the *rhetorical facets* of contemplative practices can help us understand more precisely how such practices constitute essential action for democracy.

Below, I develop this argument from four vantage points. I first describe the classroom experiences and scholarly conversations that contextualize my thinking. Second, I examine connections among rhetoric, democracy, and contemplative practices at the conceptual level. After that, I zoom in to describe three contemplative practices I teach in Civic

Discourse, an upper-division course focused on rhetoric in democracy. Finally, I explore how contemplative practices can function as rhetorical statements of resistance to anti-democratic forces. Throughout, my goal is to help round out our collective understanding of the precise ways in which contemplative practices can strengthen democratic life. Rhetoric is one connector among many.

A FRAME FOR INQUIRING INTO CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES AND DEMOCRACY

My thinking about this topic dates from an early teaching experience in which I first experienced the clash between assumptions and reality in teaching civic discourse. (While “civic” and “democratic” aren’t synonymous, they are often conflated in rhetorical pedagogy.) A typical approach to teaching civic discourse focuses on outward-facing, high-visibility communication acts. These include evidence-based arguments, policy deliberations in public settings, the persuasive texts that accomplish advocacy, and the communications that motivate and organize activism. The first time I taught civic discourse, I was a graduate student and grateful for the textbook, which covered just those things. But the students I was teaching, many of them first-generation college students like myself and including a large population of Somali immigrants, complicated these textbook assumptions about civic discourse. The tools of democratic, rhetorical action I was teaching didn’t seem to fit the hands of many of my students. The contradiction disturbed me. On the one hand, I was teaching the importance of equality and participation. On the other, I was teaching and grading students on skills decidedly *not* equally accessible across differences in class, culture, temperament, and recourse to technology. For example, the types of arguments and critical reading we typically assign in higher education depend on middle-class experiences and identities (Iten, 2017). Similarly, we cannot assume students’ equal access to and facility with digital communication platforms. Nor can we assume that the temperament required for activism is universal.

From this experience, I developed three questions for choosing what to teach in a civic discourse class. Out of the many capacities and rhetorical practices I could teach as democratic, which seem most need-

ed by *these particular students* in this historical moment? Which will support students in being *resilient*, capable of promoting democratic relations over the long haul, through upheavals in governance, conditions, technologies, and genres? And, which rhetorical practices are *accessible* to a wider range of people? Gradually, over several years of teaching undergraduate rhetoric classes, I came to see contemplative practices as fulfilling all of these criteria. They offer students alternatives to today's preponderance of rushed and shallow relations to self, knowledge, and others. Amid dizzying turnovers in ways that people learn, communicate, and take action, contemplative practices provide students with stable methods for improving their individual and social wellbeing. Found throughout history and across cultures, contemplative practices "are the core of human beings and, therefore, have an innate integrity" (Owen-Smith, 2018, p. 109). Finally, contemplative practices are more accessible to a wider range of student literacies. They constitute a form of rhetorical action for democracy available to those who don't come in to the classroom with the privileged literacies of writing research-based arguments and facility with multiple digital communication technologies. At the same time, they provide vital balance to all students, whatever their particular literacies.

In sum, it was navigating the clash between assumptions and reality in teaching civic discourse that opened my eyes to thinking of contemplative practices in the context of democracy. Over time, I became more convinced that communicating in specifically democratic ways—e.g., with critical acuity *and* empathy, reason *and* passion—requires the awareness of self and others that contemplative practices can engender. Recently, I began to examine that felt conviction, to ask "In what specific ways do contemplative practices intersect with democracy?" Now, amid accelerated depredations to equality and wellbeing, it seems increasingly important to articulate answers to this question.

On one level, my essay responds to the broader call to articulate why and how contemplative pedagogies belong in the university curriculum. Owen-Smith (2018) suggests we look for opportunities by asking, "What does the university need, and how might a contemplative curriculum respond to this need?" (p. 107). One such need is educating stu-

dents for civic engagement, which gives us an ongoing opportunity to make the case for including a contemplative curriculum in civics education. As Palmer (2011) notes, while students need to learn about the history and institutions of American democracy, higher education should also “[instill] democratic habits of the heart” (p. 120). Such habits are not synonymous with contemplative practices, but a contemplative civic curriculum aligns well with Palmer’s injunction “to invite [students] into a lived engagement with democracy’s core concepts and values” (pp. 129-130).

My examination of democracy and contemplative practices also runs parallel to conversations about the importance of such practices to mental, physical, and social health. I am interested to expand our understanding of contemplative practices and holistic wellbeing by adding “democratic health” as well. In this, I am assisted greatly by what contemplative practitioners already know about the link between, for example, care of the self and “care-for-the-world” (Doran, 2017, p. 105); between work on the self and social change (Hyde & LaPrad, 2015, p. 6); between Buddha’s Eightfold Path and engagement in democracy (de Castro, 2018); and between intimacy with our own experience and the democratic “authority” to affect conditions around us (Mariotti, 2020, p. 473).

Finally, my essay intersects with two works that forge direct links between contemplative practices and democracy. Hyde and LaPrad (2015) connect mindfulness with “a democratic way of being” (p. 1). Drawing on Dewey and Freire, the authors delineate a three-part mindfulness pedagogy and build the concept of mindfully democratic schools. Like Hyde and LaPrad, I ground my argument in pedagogy, emphasize democracy as a mode of associated living, and assume that contemplative practices have political and social dimensions. We aim at the same goal of specifying how contemplative practices are important to democracy, but we take different (though complementary) paths. For Hyde and LaPrad, mindfulness is important to democratic education for its connection to awakening, critical awareness, empowerment, and solidarity. In my argument, I emphasize the rhetorical function of contemplative practices in promoting equality and resistance. Mariotti (2020) connects meditation and everyday democracy as embodied practices. While Mariotti links Zen modernism and radical democracy to emphasize the impor-

tance of unsettling default perceptions, I bring together an expanded understanding of rhetoric with democratic multiplication (described in more detail below) to position contemplative practices more generally as political action. However, we share a concern with the “practical deficit” of democratic theories that “tell us where to go, but not how to get there” and join in the assertion that contemplative practices “can provide a practical supplement, a form of inner work on the self, that ultimately enables, enacts, and extends democratic ideals” (473), including resistance to neoliberalism. Taken together, the work of Hyde and LaPrad, Mariotti, and myself provides a range of answers to the question, “How, specifically, do contemplative practices support democracy?” In the next section, I move to the background of this discussion, providing definitions of rhetoric and democracy that ground my teaching and identifying some conceptual resonances of each term with contemplative practices.

CONCEPTUAL RESONANCES AMONG RHETORIC, DEMOCRACY, AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

The term rhetoric encompasses three things: an area of study and scholarship, found today mostly in the disciplines of English and Communication; a dynamic body of principles for crafting and criticizing texts; and a human practice that is both technical and artistic. Broadly, rhetoric focuses on how humans influence one another through using language. Thus the adjective rhetorical essentially means “exerting influence,” as in arguing a claim or persuading others to think or act in a certain way. Such influence is usually regarded in the discipline as action, so the terms rhetorical text, rhetorical action, and rhetorical activity are roughly interchangeable. Rhetoric as something people do is considered both a technical practice, one that can be taught and that comprises myriad strategies of crafting language, and an artistic practice, one to which each rhetor (someone who produces a rhetorical text) brings individual creativity. Rhetoric as an activity is also commonly called an agency, or power. Finally, rhetoric is often described as “situational” or “an art of the singular.” A core principle in rhetoric is that we can best understand how people use language to influence others by looking at rhetorical

activity in specific contexts of time, place, and participants (i.e., rhetors and audiences).

Beyond these broad brushstrokes, literally hundreds of definitions of Western rhetoric have been propounded. This is likely due to rhetoric's characteristic focus on situationality, which also extends to the activity of defining rhetoric itself. Many rhetoricians (those who study and teach rhetoric) consider it essential to argue a definition of rhetoric they find most functional for understanding the practice of rhetoric in a certain society, genre, or medium. In my teaching, for example, I have students engage different definitions of rhetoric depending on whether the class is focused on civic discourse, the art of rhetorical style, or professional writing. As I explain next, in my current attempt to better understand how contemplative practices function rhetorically to support democratic ways of life, I draw on four definitions specifically for the ways they expand rhetoric.

In 350 B.C.E., Aristotle defined rhetoric is "an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion" (Kennedy, 1991, p. 36). From this, we understand rhetoric as the capacity to adapt language to a particular context, and rhetorical language use specifically as that which aims at persuasion. Over time, however, rhetoricians have come to expand "persuasion" into an umbrella term for a continuum of language uses that exert varying levels of influence on others. In this way, using language to "persuade" can range, for example, from implicitly shaping perception and knowledge, to explicitly arguing claims and making cases, to directing people's attention, to fostering feelings of identification, to influencing beliefs. However, rhetoric in ancient Greece was about more than persuasive language, as argued by Walker (2011). Defining the term *rhêtorikê* as naming "'the art of' the *rhêtôr*, the speaker, not the speaker's speech or its devices," (Kindle edition loc. 103), Walker asserts that rhetoric is about not only crafting texts, but developing the people who produce them. In his definition, "[r]hetoric' is an art or discipline not so much of producing speeches, but an art of producing rhetors capable of creatively constructing or improvising effective discourses in particular situations" (loc. 5457). The Roman professor Quintilian also focused on the person of the rhetor in defining rhetoric. Writing under the strictures

of empirical governance, Quintilian in his 12-volume treatise on rhetoric pedagogy (95 C.E.) often couches implicit critiques of the era's corrupt rhetorical practices in "descriptions" that actually function as prescriptive ideals. Thus he defines oratory (another name for rhetoric) as "the science of speaking well . . . [embracing] all the virtues of oratory at once, and [including] also the character of the true orator, as he cannot speak well unless he is a good man" (Watson, 1892, p. 148). This is often shortened to "rhetoric is the good person speaking well," an injunction that rhetoric is about more than achieving successful persuasion; it should also always engage us in scrutinizing the goodness of our character, especially our ethics as relative to our society's shared goods.

Finally, the contemporary rhetorician Hauser (1986) defines rhetoric as "the management of symbols in order to coordinate social action" (p. 3). On one hand, the term "management" underscores a boundary traditionally used to distinguish rhetorical language use as that which is consciously planned and intentionally strategic. (Notably, many scholars now contest this, positing rhetoric as emergent within a society rather than the intentional acts of individual rhetors.) At the same time, Hauser's term "social action" invites us to look beyond rhetoric's traditional areas. Beyond law, sermonics, and electoral politics, we can see rhetoric in any site or genre where people use language to get things done in group life, from prisons to parents' groups, from artists' statements to mission statements. Perhaps most important, the definition opens up rhetoric beyond linguistic symbol systems to include others, such as the symbol systems of images, the body, sound and silence, music, algorithms, architecture, and so on. In addition, Hauser's definition is considerably enriched by the reminder from contemporary feminist rhetoricians to read the negative spaces of a historical or contemporary account in order to multiply our understanding of rhetoric and its functions. Specifically, Royster and Kirsch (2012) enjoin us "to look at people at whom we have not looked before . . . in places at which we have not looked seriously or methodically before, at practices and conditions at which we have not looked closely enough, and at genres that we have not considered carefully enough" (p. 72). By asking, "Whom do we not typically regard as rhetors?" and "What activities do we dismiss as 'not rhetorical'?" we can considerably

expand what counts as the places and genres of rhetorical agency, that is, the power to communicate in influential ways.

In conceptualizing contemplative practices as rhetoric for democracy, the point of these expansive definitions is to move us past assumptions. At first glance, “rhetoric” can conjure images of a hectic, often fractious sociality, marked by wins and losses, a battle in which we target the audience (listeners and readers) with linguistic strategies. Indeed, rhetoric does encompass that scenario, and it is a strong contrast to the measured pace, inward focus, and non-judgmental holding that characterize many contemplative practices. But the expansive moves in the definitions above provide ways to understand that rhetoric can also encompass contemplative practices. As a brief illustration, picture someone in solitude and silence, focusing her mind to reflect on her engagement in a past activity or ongoing situation. From an expanded understanding of persuasion as a continuum of influence, we can see that she is taking rhetorical actions that influence her perceptions and perhaps her future activities. She is re-seeing herself, invoking others, processing encounters, evaluating her engagement, re-arranging priorities, re-thinking first impressions. Focused on developing her capacities and ethics for relating to others, she is attending to herself as rhetor, crafting the narratives and commitments that shape her use of symbol systems to interact in group life. Or, picture someone engaged in mindful breathing. He is using the symbol system of the body—posture, circulation, involuntary and voluntary movement, and so on—to influence and develop himself. But he may also be asserting a rhetorical message of solidarity and resistance, as suggested by the recent (2019) workshop, “To Breathe is to Live—To Breathe is to Resist,” led by Alberto López Pulido and sponsored by the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education.

These brief examples simply hint that we might gain additional insights into contemplative practices by looking at them with an expanded understanding of rhetoric. Specifically, if we posit rhetoric as a continuum of ways to use diverse symbol systems to influence others, we can begin to see contemplative practices as rhetorical action. Doing so helps us fruitfully contest the restrictive assumption that there must necessarily be separation between “the purported pole of mind and spirit in

contrast to that of service and action" (Brown, 2005, p. 54). Regarding contemplative practices as rhetorical action can, in turn, help us understand more about how contemplative practices constitute vital support for democratic life.

Many rhetoricians assume a "mutually interdependent and complex relationship" between rhetoric and democracy (McDorman & Timmerman, 2008, pp. xii-xiii). Many also agree that democracy is both a form of governance, residing in a set of institutions and laws, and a method of associated life, embodied in people's everyday relations with others. Beyond those shared assumptions, rhetoricians argue about which political virtues (e.g., equality, individual liberty, the common good, diversity, justice, human flourishing, dissent, majority rule, etc.) should take priority in distinguishing democracy from other forms of rule and group life. They also differ on whether a certain type of democracy—deliberative, aggregative, creative, horizontal, radical, liberal, actually lived, and more—offers the best lens for understanding the relationship between rhetoric and democracy. Ultimately, in order to make practical decisions about what kinds of texts and practices "count" as democratic rhetoric for the purposes of criticism and pedagogy, individual rhetoricians must decide what they mean by democracy. I make this point to emphasize that the choices for teaching democracy I describe below *are* choices, and not necessarily exclusive to other ways of understanding democracy.

In my classes, I acknowledge democracy as both a form of governance and a method of associated life. I emphasize that democracy is unique among other forms and methods by its priorities for equality, human flourishing, and multiplication above other political virtues. Readings and assignments focus on democracy as a set of practices for making those three virtues real and visible in our relations with ourselves, with knowledge, and with others. I describe this democratic relationality as social, transcending the public-private dyad and fusing the cultural with the political. I also use the term "participants" rather than citizens to emphasize that democratic relationality is not restricted by legal designation. In addition, I emphasize the importance of taking personal responsibility for democratic equality. If we assume that equality is already guaranteed by its inherence in human nature or by constitutional fiat, we

run the risk of outsourcing the care for equality. In contrast, in democracy conceived as a way of living together, the only way we make equality more than an abstraction is by taking up the daily challenge to create visible conditions and relations of equality.

Along with equality, the political virtue of multiplication makes democracy unique. “Multiplicity” names a positive condition synonymous with diversity and pluralism: the presence of many different things, such as identities, methods, viewpoints, and modes of expression. “Multiplication” names an activity—the deliberate pursuit and generation of multiplicity—and as such, emphasizes the ongoing, deliberate work required to include more rather than fewer things. From the beginning, democracy’s enemies have decried its more-ness as dangerous, seeking to contain the so-called excess of a diverse citizenry’s appetites and interests and to restrict people’s direct access to political power. For democracy’s friends, however, the continual expansion of means by which to make equality and human flourishing lived experiences is what distinguishes it from other ways of living in political association. For example, Dewey (1939, 1988) characterizes the democratic task as the daily, ongoing “release” of more of “the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched” (p. 233). Democracy gains shape from our attempts to “extend, permanently and in every domain, access to equality and citizenship” (Bensaïd, 2009, p. 43) and to “ceaselessly [displace] the limits of the public and the private, of the political and the social” (Ranciere, 2005, p. 62). Specifically, part of the productive power (*kratos*) that the *demos* (people in a democracy) takes up is proliferating the forms by which we make democratic virtues and relations visible. A democratic politics “must ceaselessly renew the possibility of the unfurling of forms or registers of meaning” (Nancy, 2009, pp. 73-74); indeed, the multiplicity of forms by which to live out democratic values is democracy’s “very condition of existence” (Mouffe, 2009, p. 74).

Finally, I also introduce the metaphor of democracy, and the rhetorical activities that support or subvert it, as a tapestry. The front of the tapestry is democracy as a form of governance. Students and I look here for rhetorical opportunities to promote democracy at the legal, system-

ic, and institutional level. The back side of the tapestry—less visible, but every bit as essential—is democracy as an everyday lived experience. It takes its unique shape from our commitment to bringing the abstract values “equality” and “human flourishing” to life in our interactions with others (and ourselves). We look here for the myriad but often overlooked rhetorical activities that we can take to live out democracy in quotidian and ephemeral moments. These include, for example, being present or being absent, using some words rather than others in our conversations, habitually using certain postures and gestures, and so on.

In sum, the tapestry metaphor helps students and me in the civic discourse class to broaden democratic rhetoric beyond electoral rhetoric, political debate, deliberative decision-making, and the exchange of opinion. All are essential to democracy, but they represent only one type of the rhetorical activities we can engage to advance democratic conditions. Most important, the tapestry metaphor emphasizes the imbrication of democracy at the systemic and everyday level. The front and back of a tapestry look different, but are merely two sides of one entity, comprised literally of the same thread.

Contemplative practices are similar in that they often engage us in integrating, intellectually or spiritually, two or more seemingly opposite things, or in cultivating diverse but complementary capacities. In many ways, contemplative practices are powerful for helping us move us beyond the paucities of Cartesian dualism to a richer mindset of holism. In particular, there are four seeming dualisms that democracy, democratic rhetoric, and contemplative practices are all aligned in seeking to integrate. First, the tapestry metaphor spotlights the multiple, connected sites of democracy. In rhetoric for democracy (i.e., rhetorical action that promotes democratic conditions and values), for example, it is equally important to know how to be with oneself in a quiet place, to talk to strangers in a store, and to deliver powerful arguments in the meeting room of a city council. Similarly, while democracy’s conditions are often forged in government offices and law courts, “democracy’s heart does not beat in the halls of Congress or in the voting booth but in everyday enactments of citizenship” (Asen, 2004, p. 197). Thus, we should attend to democracy in both “the invisible dynamics of the human heart and the

visible venues of our lives in which those dynamics are formed" (Palmer, 2011, p. 9). In these expanded notions, the individual interiority we engage in contemplative practices emerges as a vitally important site for democracy. In a second integration, democracy—along with effective rhetorical narratives in democracy—require us to see personal experience and systemic factors as connected in one thread. This is also valued in contemplative practices, as in O'Donnell's (2016) critique: "approaches to 'mindfulness' that teach people how to 'surf' their uncertainties and anxieties without seeking to understand or become aware of the causes of suffering are at odds with the Buddhist origins of these practices which seek to...cultivate compassion, ethical skillfulness, judgment, right action, and right view" (p. 33). In a third integration of two things frequently regarded as separate, developing the full capacities of an individual in democracy and improving the vitality of society as a whole are not a matter of before and after, but both-at-once. Similarly, if we understand rhetorical activity as a synthesis of developing the rhetor and producing rhetorical texts to influence others, we can see contemplative practices not as *pre*-rhetorical, but rhetorical in their own right. Brown (2005) offers a corollary conception of contemplative practices: often, we "conceptually [separate] the deepening of mind and spirit, the acquisition of wisdom, from the act of bringing that wisdom into the world so that society may be deepened as well. But of course the processes more typically happen simultaneously or in rhythmic alternation" (p. 65).

Finally, democracy requires participants to integrate formal and experiential knowledge. Participants should be widely informed to contribute to sound policy-making, yet they should also be able to humanize that knowledge with awareness of the lives and bodies that bear the consequences of a society's policies. In teaching rhetorical argument, I emphasize the importance to democracy of treating both factual information and narratives of experience as valid sources of evidence. They work together to provide a fuller, and thus more responsible, picture of a particular social problem. Similarly, "[c]ontemplative educators call for an integral model of knowing that canvasses both interior and exterior epistemologies," seeing first- and third-person ways of knowing, not as conflicting, but complementary (Owen-Smith, 2018, p. 27). In summa-

ry, the tapestry metaphor helps us see the ways in which democracy, rhetoric for democracy, and contemplative studies align in their shared preference for regarding seemingly opposed or separate things as two ends of the same thread.

In this section, I provided some definitions to ground subsequent discussion. I also aimed to sketch the beginnings of some conceptual resonances among rhetoric, democracy, and contemplative practices. Next, I describe three contemplative practices I teach in my current civic discourse class, highlighting their rhetorical and democratic dimensions. To reiterate, I see the examination of the rhetorical facets of contemplative practices as one means to a larger end, that of understanding more fully and precisely how contemplative practices are vital to democracy.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES TO EXPLORE EQUALITY

Each practice described below aims to engage students in using contemplative methods to explore equality as a concept and practice. In that sense, the practices constitute contemplative inquiry, seeking to enhance third-person knowledge with first-person knowledge. At the same time, when we join an expanded understanding of rhetoric with the notion of our selves and our daily lives as sites of democracy, these contemplative practices also emerge as action for democracy in and of themselves. Below, I aim to highlight the activities' rhetorical and democratic functions. (Further research would focus on the practices' pedagogical dimensions and generate more details about their curricular location and students' responses to them.)

Reflecting on Equality

One contemplative practice I teach in civic discourse is daily reflection focused on accounting for one's actions relative to the democratic value for equality. Essentially, this is taking regular, quiet time to ask oneself, "Did I manifest equality today in my actions toward others? How and how not?" I encourage, but don't require or evaluate, this practice; however, students do have time in class to plan and review their practices. We begin with the idea that accounting is not quite the same as the Christian examination of conscience, which involves the emotional experience of

joy or sorrow and is a prelude to confessing. Rather, accounting is part of developing oneself as an effective and ethical rhetor. Accounting involves positioning oneself mentally in a more objective stance to one's self; holding up one's actions against a measure, in this case a value for equality; and registering the result in the metaphoric ledger of one's own consciousness. We also discuss the larger purposes such reflection can support. One is for us to more closely identify with our chosen political virtues, simply by spending more time in deliberate thought about them (itself a rhetorical argument for what should be priority). At the same time, focused reflection on our actions can help us see "the links, or gaps, [among] our avowed political commitments, our actual exercise of social power, and collaborative political practices" (Orlie, 2001, p. 139). Finally, another purpose is to cultivate more habitually democratic responses to others, as we become aware of what frustrates or encourages our ways of treating others with equality, and what those ways look like.

After these discussions, students brainstorm preliminary methods for themselves. I walk them through a process of considering the different symbol systems involved in focused reflection, including place; timing (e.g., pace, duration, sequences of thought, and ways of opening and closing the practice); bodily posture; sound and silence; whether they want to involve writing; and whether certain objects might help them recall the encounters of their day. We discuss how making choices about these things function rhetorically, that is, how one's choices for a reflective practice convey a meaningful argument or express a persuasive message (to self, and perhaps to others). In this way, self-accounting for our handling of equality is not merely preparation for democratic action in the future. It is also democratic action in the present, which we can see more clearly by illuminating the practice's rhetorical facets. From one angle, the practice is active development of the rhetor; from another angle, the practice itself can be seen as rhetorical text, an influential message we craft through conscious choice. For the rest of the semester, after these discussions of purpose and method, students have regularly scheduled class time throughout the semester to write to themselves about their experiences with the practice.

Logging Inequalities in Public Discussion

In another contemplative practice, inspired by Levy's (2016) first-person explorations of technology use, both students and I keep two logs of certain activities and write to analyze the data. In the first log, we track all of the sources from which we get our news over the course of a day. Part of our written reflection on the resulting data has us engage the concept of attention that underlies many contemplative practices. Specifically, we reflect on the data as painting a picture of our personal relationship to information and its role in the way we use rhetoric for democracy. The picture emerges from the assembly of choices we make about where to put our attention. The goals of this focused reflection are to help us see what may be largely unconscious choices on our part and to think about their democratic implications. We ponder, "What does the picture show, and does the picture align with how I think, or want to think, about myself as a participant in democracy?" Choosing, defined by Levy (2016) as "when we become aware of more than one potential object of attention and decide which of them to focus on" (p. 38), is inherently rhetorical: our choices send a message that we value some things over others. As O'Donnell (2016) describes, "Asking the question, 'to what do I ordinarily give my attention?' helps us to understand what we value in our lives, and perhaps to make us more aware that our attention is, in fact, oriented in ways that are at odds with our values or ideals" (p. 39). Part of developing one's integrity as rhetor and crafting responsible rhetorical texts for democracy is ensuring that our actions match the injunctions or claims we make to others. In this way, focused contemplation on our relationship to information, as revealed in the log of our choices about sources, can help us be more effective, ethical rhetors for democracy.

The second log comes when we study the democratic concept of *isegoria*, defined as equality in bringing topics forward for public discussion. More broadly, *isegoria* is the responsibility in democratic life to keep public discussion diversified, in particular by spotlighting under-reported social problems that have daily, urgent consequences on health and human flourishing. Readings in the class introduce students to the role of political action committees, special-interest lobbies, advocative

think tanks, and algorithms in determining what topics get covered and ignored in news and social media. For the written argument at the end of the unit, students also learn strategies for isegoria as a rhetorical practice, which involves crafting compelling messages to draw attention to a particular problem. However, both the democratic and rhetorical dimensions of isegoria become clearer and more meaningful when we first engage the concept on a personal, experiential level, the purpose of the second log. We preface this log activity by generating together a list of what we perceive as the most prominent, most widely discussed issues facing us as a society. Then, for one day, we each log all the topics we actually discuss outside classes, online and in person. In the subsequent written reflection, we ponder the data for gaps between those issues presented to us as the most important ones, and those that we experience as most affecting our daily lives. We also look at our data to identify factors that promote and discourage our own practices of isegoria: when do we raise certain issues, and when do we remain silent? On one level, the log and reflection help students learn that many so-called hot topics arise, not from the concerns of the people, but from a conflux of motivated and systemic influences on what does and doesn't get talked about. On a larger level, however, both this log and the one described above aim to give students concrete experience of a central idea in the course: that using rhetorical discourse in democratic ways requires significant self-awareness. The logs provide visible evidence that not only social media platforms, the voting booth, and government buildings, but also our selves and our self-practices are vital sites of rhetorical, democratic action.

Contemplating Impediments to Equal Listening

A third contemplative practice I teach in civic discourse involves inquiry into voices that we find difficult to listen to. Understanding how we perceive various voices is essential to ethical democratic rhetoric, which involves trying to listen to all voices with equal respect and attention. For example, in my class, prior to writing an argument to justify their position on a controversial issue, students write to report on a wide range

of perspectives on the issue. They conduct both primary and secondary research to find, listen to (literally or by reading), and responsibly summarize several different voices weighing in on the issue. In order to help students do this with depth and fairness—e.g., to avoid making assumptions and misrepresenting another’s view—I have us discuss the difficulty of listening deeply to all voices with equal care, given our biases and resentments. Early in students’ research process for the report on perspectives, I engage them in a contemplative inquiry into voices they dislike. As with the reflection on equality, participation is voluntary. I also alert students that this practice can raise powerful feelings, and that it won’t culminate with articulating an insight or other closure, but will simply end.

I begin by asking students to think (individually) of a voice they “can’t stand” to listen to, one they turn off or move away from when they hear it. I then ask them to write to describe that voice: “What does it sound like, both literally and metaphorically? What does it typically talk about? What character traits does ‘that voice’ symbolize for you?” After a pause for all of us to breathe deeply, I introduce the next writing prompt: “How did you feel during or after writing to describe the voice?” We then pause again to visualize ourselves letting go of those feelings. The final writing prompt asks, “What single thing about this voice angers or frightens you most? What do you fear will happen to you if you listen to this voice at length? What do you fear will happen to society if this voice dominates a national discussion or policy decision?” I close the practice by asking students to take a few minutes to breathe and empty their minds, or to focus their minds on a thought coming out of the practice, as each person prefers. I then move the class into another activity.

As a rhetorical practice, the contemplative inquiry into voices engages students in developing themselves as a responsible rhetor, one able to listen more widely and accurately. The inquiry is also an essential part of the process for producing rhetorical texts, the report and argument mentioned above. Both rhetoric and democracy call on us to multiply, as opposed to silence or ignore, the voices weighing in on an issue. Contemplative inquiry assists us in this admittedly challenging multiplication in three ways. First, we must consciously choose to cul-

tivate our ability to listen deeply, for “to choose not to listen and, therefore, not to see absolves us of our responsibility to act” (Owen-Smith, 2018, p. 42). Similarly, in writing about democratic habits of the heart, Palmer (2011) explains a tendency that we can see as clearly calling for contemplative practices to help us resist: “Within me is a power of darkness that may tempt me to want to ‘kill you off’ when you threaten some concept of reality or morality that I cherish. I will not do it with a weapon but with a mental dismissal, some way of putting you into a category of people whose opinions mean nothing to me” (p. 127). As Hyde and LaPrad (2015) note, “self-investigation and reflection are necessary to uncover and challenge long-held mental scripts that see different others as the competition or the enemy” (p. 2). Second, contemplative practices support both the deconstructive and constructive critical thinking necessary for helping students build democratic relations with others. On one hand, contemplative practices support students’ exploration and critique of their prejudices (Berila, 2014; Sable, 2014). At the same time, Sable’s research found that contemplative practices in the classroom helped students go beyond critique to also “feel more connected and empathetic with people they disagreed with than people they easily agreed with at a superficial level” (p. 13). Finally, contemplative practices aimed at deepening can help students face difficult emotions (Burack, 2014, p. 43), in particular those that result from democracy’s demands for maintaining equality amid difference. The voices exercise engages students in the truth that deepening requires “expending the effort to be critical and to see the world anew and risk whatever may follow—the discomfort, disorientation, and anger or fear that might greet us if we venture into the unfamiliar” (Brown, 2005, p. 63).

Overall, my goal in describing these classroom activities is to emphasize the way in which contemplative methods can help us bring the abstraction “equality” into personal and lived experience. A robust variety of practical ways to help us regard and treat others as equals must be at the center of democracy and democratic education, “for outside of these practices, what will inspire a commitment to the virtues relevant to democratic flourishing?” (McIvor, 2011, p. 81).

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES AS PRO-DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE

Underlying this examination of connections among rhetoric, democracy, and contemplative practices is the assumption that democracy is never guaranteed. Instead, we must continually re-enact it at both the institutional and everyday levels. Above, I illustrated some classroom practices by which I aim to keep students and myself conscious of the daily work involved in regarding and treating others as equals. In this final section, I suggest two ways in which contemplative practices in general can function as powerful rhetorical statements of pro-democratic resistance to anti-democratic forces.

First, contemplative practices can help participants cultivate a form of resistance I call *democratic resilience*. When participants don't show up to democracy, other forms of rule—e.g., authoritarianism, oligarchy, and technocracy—rush to fill the vacuum. The opposite of showing up is dropping out, disdaining democratic engagement out of fatigue, despair, cynicism, or the opportunity to benefit from conditions of inequality and repression. In contrast, one's ongoing and visible presence in democracy is itself a rhetorical statement, asserting a judgment that democracy is better than other ways of life. In this way, "staying in" democracy thus constitutes an important form of resistance. Democratic resilience is the ability to continue enacting, remembering, and promoting democracy over the long haul, amid both the stressors of democracy itself and anti-democratic conditions. Contemplative practices can help us cultivate democratic resilience by strengthening our capacities to engage, rather than retreat from, democracy's particular difficulties.

One such difficulty is the very multiplicity—the proliferation of diverse voices, ideas, and ways of knowing—without which democracy would not be democracy. The conditions of pluralism that offer the best hope for democracy itself to endure can paradoxically overwhelm us as individuals, causing us to drop out and become politically passive or to barricade ourselves in enclaves of identity. Yet, as Palmer (2005) notes, "the litmus test for a democracy is not merely whether it allows our differences to be in display: we must be willing to engage each other around those differences" (p. 234). Such engagement can often be rewarding. But it is always challenging, especially in the rhetorical wrangle of mak-

ing decisions and crafting policies under time pressure and in the knowledge that multiple right answers exist. The rhetorical activities that make democracy work—the continual listening, coalition-building, contest, and consensus-building among multiple voices—can cause us to withdraw in exhaustion or frustration. Hence the importance of staying on the lookout for things that “‘keep one coming back for more’ in the midst of [democracy’s] continual frustration, difference, and disappointment” (White, 2001, p. 181). By helping us find meaning, integrate knowledges, and recommit to care and right ways, contemplative practices can provide us with the resilience to keep coming back to democracy with its profusion of different voices.

A related difficulty of democracy that we must continue to weather is ongoing disagreement. “In a healthy democracy, public conflict is not only inevitable but prized” because it allows us to “adjudicate critical questions of many sorts: true versus false, right versus wrong, just versus unjust” (Palmer, 2011, p. 61). Similarly, adjudication is in large part what distinguishes rhetorical discourse from expressive or objective discourse: rhetoric is characteristically concerned with making judgments and arguing claims with which a rational person could disagree. While some people thrive on disagreement and argument, many others (myself included) find them fearsome, draining, or otherwise difficult to engage repeatedly. And yet, the alternatives—the dominance of one view, complicit silence in the face of injustice, the eliding of difference—are unthinkable. What participants in democracy need, then, are meaningful methods of remaining resilient in “converting this inevitable tension [of disagreement] into creative energy” (Palmer, 2011, p. 9). Contemplative practices can help heal and re-energize us, making it possible for us to keep returning to democracy and its generative but taxing clash of disagreement.

In addition to helping us cultivate the resilience needed to stay present in democracy, contemplative practices can be regarded as resisting notions of time that would crowd out democracy in favor of speed and profit. First, by slowing us down, contemplative practices can help us disagree in non-weaponized ways. Among the immense challenges posed to American political life by acceleration (McIvor, 2011) is the tendency to replace disagreement over ideas and policies with personalized verbal

combat. The volume of people and mediums with which we interact; the swiftness of our encounters; and the biases that we use to sort and script our interactions: all of these encourage automatic, often combative, responses. However, contemplative practices can provide us the breathing room to attend to social controversies with deliberation and expanded vision. From this room, we have a better chance of replacing the language habits of mere stimulus and response with the thoughtful rhetorical arguments required for productive democratic disagreement. Seen from this angle, contemplative practices offer direct support for democracy. Further support for democracy emerges when we consider the time that contemplative practices give us for “seeing” others as equals. In particular, as practitioners of contemplation have known for centuries and theories of neuroscience now suggest, empathy, a key requirement for treating others as equals, requires inherently slow neural processes. In contrast, inequality thrives when we make fast judgments about others based on surface qualities. Contemplative practices that cultivate empathy also help us live out democratic, relational equality. In this way, taking time for contemplative practices constitutes important democratic resistance to the type of frenetic and shallow connectivity that encourages stereotypes and division.

In another act of resisting anti-democratic notions of time, contemplative practices can help us push back at the neoliberal capture of time. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is the prioritization of economic growth as the most important activity of governments, societies, and individuals. It is characterized by permeation: neoliberalism “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue” and “converts every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise” (Brown, 2015, p. 31, 28). As Mariotti (2020) points out, “many are concerned with how easily mindfulness and meditation can be co-opted by neoliberal capitalism to cultivate productive and efficient workers, pacified and docile bodies, self-absorbed and self-optimizing subjects” (p. 471). To push back at this co-option, we must recognize how the permeation of neoliberalism is incompatible with democracy. When economic growth becomes “both the end and legitimation of government,” the result is that “democratic state commitments to equality, liberty, inclusion,

and constitutionalism" are actively pushed aside (Brown, 2015, p. 26). As part of this permeation, neoliberalism invades and forcibly occupies citizens' time, asserting that time spent on anything else besides economic growth is meaningless (Amsler, 2015, p. 43; Mariotti, 2020, p. 485; Doran, 2017, p. 106). From this perspective, to engage in contemplative practices with any eye toward democracy constitutes an overt rhetorical argument against understanding time as solely economic. For example, cultivating democratic resilience through contemplative practices pushes back at the economic notion of time involved in planned obsolescence. In reflecting on our actions toward others or otherwise contemplating democratic relationality, we direct our attention to the everyday-ness of our democratic participation, helping us see our own *ongoing* vitality and relevance. Such a view contrasts sharply with the image of "citizen" as someone invoked every four years and discarded as obsolete the minute an election is concluded. In this way, to devote time to democratic reflection is to make a rhetorical argument for people's long-term durability in an era of disposability. In another important act of resistance, engaging in contemplative practices contests the neoliberal perception of time as scarce. This particular perception is the necessary foundation for maintaining a robust market for time-saving devices. It also drives people's increasing acceptance of deep surveillance in order to have the faster, more efficient consumer experiences they are convinced they need. However, to engage in contemplative practices is to critique this seemingly self-evident reality about time. Engaging in contemplative practices advances the argument that we can understand time in other terms besides the economic. For example, we might measure time in terms of our psychological, spiritual, or ethical development. Or, we might measure time in the basal sense of "political," seeing time as a resource, expression, and movement of power. A concept of "democratic time" might attune us to the link between choices of how to use our time relative to democratic values. In a final example, we might measure time as relational, seeing it as a series of markers in the development of our capacities to relate to others.

Throughout this essay, I have aimed to go beyond a felt resonance between contemplative practices and democracy to delineate some specific conceptual and practical connections. In particular, I have argued

that looking at contemplative practices as rhetorical action can help us see how they might also constitute action for democracy. Employing the various symbol systems of language, time, posture, sound, and more, contemplative practices develop rhetors and constitute rhetorical texts. In turn, in their rhetorical capacities to exert influence, contemplative practices can support the everyday work of democracy's participants to promote equality and human flourishing. Contemplative practices are both older and broader than democracy; they don't need to support democracy. However, in order to sustain democracy amid ongoing attempts to erase it, it is increasingly important for future scholarship to examine from many angles why democracy needs contemplative practices.

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