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Social Activism in Documents of Declaration and Testimony

In exploring human right issues in my English 100 (pre-transfer level) composition classroom I connect historical writings from the *Declaration of Independence* to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions* advocating the rights of women (1848) to Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) to Jimmy Santiago Baca's poems and his prison memoir, *A Place to Stand* (2001) to Rosie J. Spink's "Refusing to Bend," published in *Sierra Magazine* (2011), focused on a local Watsonville family of farmworkers and the use pesticides where they live. The center of my teaching, and student writing in response to these texts, focuses on extension of human rights through historical movements for increased inclusion and in personal and collective movements, particularly as expressed through written narrative and declarative discourse, for social and political change.

I would like to begin my presentation with the idea that many of us deeply care about human rights, which means we care about what it means to be human as reflected in how we interact with one another. Human rights, and the realm of humanness recognized in human rights, makes primary dignity and respect for each being. Such rights are not easily attained in societies and are rarely guaranteed in a way that makes most people's lives free from and invulnerable to the multiple possibilities of physical and mental violation. It is important, I believe, that students recognize both the freedoms and limitations of their own lives as they've experienced them. In creating intellectual

and physical space for students to explore the history of freedoms and unfreedoms within the purview of human rights discourse, I create a classroom of safety where student work is respected, life situations as affect the classroom and academic work are honored, and questions and conversations are encouraged and fostered over the course of the term.

I assign an autobiographical narrative essay with which to begin our studies. Accordingly, the students read several essays by writers who have experienced difficulties, in education, in family situations, within or around cultural, racial, and gender differences. I am sensitive to the fact that a number of students have experienced difficulties, losses, and suffering in their own lives. As instructors assign texts, films, essays, and other assignments that confront human suffering in compelling, difficult, and sometimes graphic ways we must be aware of the various reactions student may have in receiving or refuting such material. If a student feels unready to read a particular writing or to view a certain film, I provide alternatives. Such unpreparedness, often unwillingness and fear, has happened. Most times such requests come from students who have experienced some form of intense suffering, even trauma. Students have a choice whether to write a personal narrative, read only by me and not by their peers, or a critical essay in analysis of a theme that appears in the writer's work. The critical choice in this assignment asks students how a writer deals with difficulty and uses story to negotiate situations imposed by culture, environment, gender, education, and social beliefs that make for a difficult situation—and, for many writers, such difficulty is not isolated to a single event but occurs over an extended period of time. The autobiographical narrative allows students to make their own connections through story to how writers work life problems in and through narrative. One autobiographical choice requires the student to

write a narrative reflecting on a time when she was outsider, isolated because of (social, intellectual, ethnic, gender, sexual) differences between her and others. How did she work through the problems the isolation created? Did she discover resolution or insight? The student is then asked to relate how this happened, or failed to happen, and encouraged, but not obligated, to turn to assigned writers for inspiration. Most students choose to write autobiographically. This first autobiographical work helps students to engage the written works of others as relevant to their own lives. Students begin to see, in entering the minds and thoughts of writers, that personal stories bear some cultural weight and that life experience merits reflective time and expression in written language. We discuss personal narrative as a form of social critique and analysis that renders the writer's life experience and knowledge in written language to argue for change and expose injustice or suffering.

Then we move to an essay of social analysis in which the students, not without resistance and struggle induced by exposure to and engagement with older forms of written language, read historical documents, *The Declaration of Independence* and First Wave feminist activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions* modeled on Jefferson's original declaration for independence from Britain. I help students to make connections between the two documents, to discourse how Stanton parodies Jefferson in making a case for (white) women's rights and freedoms outside the domestic sphere. Women in Stanton's view are included within public life as participatory and vocal citizens. She envisions the route to women's social position through authority in the pulpit, in speaking and teaching within the churches. Despite and because of limitations of each writer's viewpoint and the dictates of his/her historical

placement, the two documents allow rights first to white men and then to white women. People of color are omitted from early (American) discussion of rights. Importantly, students note and discuss these limitations in the fledgling moments of rights discourse as it has happened within the development of American democracy.

These readings the students follow with the lengthy “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Dr. King, which they read in tandem with and as response to *Statement by Alabama Clergymen*. Engaging King’s work we begin to see how writings for justice and social change are often authored during periods of imprisonment, that writers who are also activists write not infrequently from the prison cell. King, as many of us know, wrote his letter over a period of several days on the edges of a newspaper, essentially outlining the four steps for nonviolent direct action within the social justice aims of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly as envisioned by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Those aims are: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and, direct action.

There is a spiritual or interior element to any social protest work in which each individual must, in order to be most effective, develop her capacity to withstand physical assault and to remain nonreactive to adverse circumstances in service of the protest work at hand and the larger vision of the social movement. Of course, certain moments in history are more appropriate for nonviolent direct action than others. History and current events dictate cultural climate and public openness to social change. Leaders of movements are aware of such openings, as was, in exemplary fashion, King and his contemporary Civil Rights leaders. Interestingly, in reading *A Train in Winter* (2011), Caroline Moorehead’s historical narrative of women in the French Resistance and their

detention and later imprisonment at Auschwitz, she comments that those who had developed a long commitment to and practice of political work were better able to organize and support one another within the camps. I think the theme of inner training and dedicated practice in service of a cause also arises for Jimmy Baca in solitary confinement as he reclaims both pleasurable and painful memories of childhood family and place connections. My point here is that the interior cultivation of certain qualities and practices assists in the work of survival and in attaining to particular freedoms and rights.

The students also view some of Taylor Branch's *Eyes on the Prize* published as a video series in 1994 by PBS and currently available in DVD format. In viewing this video, they are exposed to archival images, many violent, of the movement and to interviews with a range of rights activists. After the film's painful and inspiring content, I've found that they need to sit quietly and write their immediate impressions as well as what new things they learned in their viewing. They then share their responses in small groups before we join together as a larger class to talk about the film. Their papers contain source material from all of these readings as well as the film.

From here the students move into reading New Mexico poet Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir, *A Place to Stand*. The memoir serves as a statement for Baca's life and how he became a poet. The students read about ten to twelve poems, culled from Baca's many volumes of poetry published since his release from prison in 1977. I distribute these poems as a handout and label each one with publication year and the title of the book in which it was published so that we can together trace Baca's evolution in poetry and witness his changing concerns and passions as a poet. The students work in groups to

analyze one poem, which I assign to them, and as a group present the poetry analysis to fellow students. The rhetorical, metaphoric, and critical work they do to understand Baca's poems deepens, I believe, their experience of poetry and helps them to understand Baca's autobiographical account of early life and imprisonment, informed by the will to poetry and coupled with the need to freedom. That need for freedom is represented in Baca's oath to no longer tolerate the many betrayals he has experienced in his life. He begins to take life in his own hands and work deeply with his mind. The poetry is a way of sculpting and strengthening his mind, his ability to think, ponder, understand, know, and to confront the basic fact of unknowing. I love to see the students engage each line of a poem and to figure out what a poem means as a whole, such as "Who Understands Me But Me." In this poem, published in *Immigrants in Our Own Land* in 1977, he writes of learning to live with himself, his limitations and beauty, even while imprisoned and mistreated by guards. "I practice being myself/and I have found parts never dreamed of by me" (84). It is this multiplicity of selves he engages and inhabits and comes to love. He finds his own best company within his fallible and injured body. That love arrives in total acceptance of all that he has incurred; following the signs like an old tracker into himself "deeper into dangerous regions" he finds so many parts of himself. He is not alone. He can live with himself now (84). We read the poems aloud in class so that we hear how poetry contains a music of being human, that it hums and sings and shouts past the walls by which ill-intentioned others would confine Baca.

Finally, we conclude the class by bringing our new understandings of human struggles back home. Rosie Spinks, a recently graduated journalist from UC Santa Cruz, has written for *Sierra Magazine* in 2011 a journalistic essay on a Watsonville farm

family. She examines how pesticides affect families living inches away from the fields that they tend and focuses on the social activism of Carolina Rios, the family's high school daughter, as she fights against the use of pesticides in her community. Carolina works with fellow students in educating her community to the health risks of pesticide use and the importance of keeping new, increasingly stronger pesticides out of the Central Coast farming lands. As Spinks relates:

In December 2010, the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) approved methyl iodide for use in the state. This despite fierce and ongoing opposition from scientists, environmental advocacy groups, and agricultural communities, who say methyl iodide poses a danger to farmworkers and residents—though not to consumers, since this particular fumigant degrades long before it can leave residue on a crop...the manufacturer, Arysta LifeScience, insists it's safe. (*Sierra*)

The dangers of pesticides are very real for those of us who live along the Central Coast, but are most urgent for those who work the land and live intimately with crops and the chemicals used to treat them. Spinks herself provides a model of a young journalist who works in community, as well as abroad, to expose issues of political urgency. She makes the address of human rights local and personal, in her use of narrative and in compelling interviews within the Rios family. She also reveals the vitality and value of young individuals to affect movements for social change. Narrative journalism, in part, acts to humanize and make urgent the problems of pesticide use. I ask the students to introduce and identify the arguments at stake in the article. They then explore the blending of

personal story with objective reporting (which details oppositional viewpoints and experiences) as a means of presenting and making argument.

At the end of the semester the students must take timed essays exams. I offer prompts based on a combination of readings the students have studied over the duration of the course. One prompt asks them to consider if nonviolence works as a form of revolutionary protest and an impetus for social change. Are there times when violent response is needed or unavoidable? I include as social protest Baca's refusal to work in prison, his realizations through solitary confinement, and his first attempts to read and then compose poems. Students can draw on current events, as one student effectively argued that the Palestinian Hamas uses violence to address community needs, to secure resources, and to create political resistance and energy within community.

In another prompt students analyze an important statement Baca makes in his memoir when he writes, "I felt more outside of my cell than in it." What does Baca mean by this statement? Students explore his sense of freedom in *A Place to Stand* as he learns to inhabit memory in body, mind, and soul within the physical prison. I encourage, sometimes require, the integration his poems into students' work. In writing about and sharing these assignments with you, I recall a former student who commented on the irony that Baca had to suffer through abandonment, neglect, abuse, and, finally, drugs and prison to write his story so that others could read and partake of his experience. Does one have to go to prison to find freedom and write his story? I felt his disbelief, disgust, and sadness in response to familial and social situations that give rise to literature and the creation of many declarative documents. I had no immediate answer to his response to *A Place to Stand*, though I told him that, yes, writing allows us to process suffering and to

share it with an audience of readers, of fellow humans, for ourselves. One means of articulating and sharing human experience—joyous and painful—is through writing. Still, I want to put forward his observations and offer them to you today in asking: must we suffer in order to make good literature? Or, is literature simply an expression and a means to confer meaning on what seems formless, chaotic, and insufferable? Desire travels through declaration; desire finds its imprint in narrative. Does the representation of suffering offer entertainment, distraction, or engagement in another's pain? If so, the question seems to be: what must we bring within ourselves, as fellow humans, to our reading so that we engage stories not as voyeurs but as those invested in creating situations of support, wellness, and efficacy for all beings, particularly those at a remove from our immediate time and space? We live now in a world of print and of speaking. Elie Wiesel expresses in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 the absolute need and yearning to speak in the face of injustice. Silence becomes a way to encourage oppression:

I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe. (*Nobel Prize*)

I think there is much to contemplate and debate in Wiesel's words. Those words nourish us, but there is also little room for ambiguity, and the reason of rights is not immune to the ambiguous and complex nature of embodiment. It is this embodiment and its expression in our relations to others, in relationship to the personal self, that we continue to navigate—in story, in talking together of rights and in witnessing and struggling with the violations of humanness in our history and in our current day

We share human rights concerns as a specific discourse and as a global movement for protection of peoples whose rights are threatened and who are vulnerable to abuses by governments, hostile groups, within the family, and in places of war, and social and political instability. Human rights campaigns makes issues and abuses visible that would have otherwise been hidden. Literature, poetry, film, journalism and other forms of written discourse and artistic expression participate in this effort. I talk about rights and the extension of rights to more and more individuals and categories of individuals as we move forward in time and continue to evolve our ways of thinking about how we want to treat and include each other. I also ask students to consider who gets included, who excluded, who is marginalized, within the purview of how rights are extended and withheld.

I've recently added to my classes more discussion and reading on the political discourse around immigration policy and the treatment of immigrants, particularly those considered "illegal," a term that implies an absence of basic rights and, thus, complete vulnerability with regards to the law and those, both sanctioned and unsanctioned, who would enforce it. The term also makes absent the wellness and stability people seek in making a life that nourishes them economically and socially. As I teach Baca's memoir

and his poetry, along with the works of other writers, I want to share with students that these works have been banned from Arizona high schools, and the movement is also to abolish Ethnic Studies programs in secondary and higher education in that state. Reading these works in an environment of academic and political freedom continues to be a vulnerable and unprotected right, even within a democracy, as we call our form of government in the United States.

I have not yet made part of my classes the notion of inclusion as one that confers some power in relation to dominant and pervasive power sources. I find helpful to my own thinking, via Michel Foucault, that power relations occur between those who have power and those who do not, or those who give up something to participate in normative society and those who fight against power's manifestations in dominance that limits freedoms. What do we give up in inclusion? What powers do the excluded have that are lost through inclusion? These are larger philosophical concerns, but they are, I think, important to contemplating human rights within academic discourse—those who are included within the reach of certain rights and those who are omitted.

I thank you for your attention today and feel honored to participate in a gathering of educators who value our shared humanity and our work in discussing and envisioning rights that would guarantee or at least create spaces that allow fledgling, careful, sometimes wild and vibrant flourishing of the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness of fellow beings. Teaching and learning with our students constitutes work toward this wellness.