

1-1-2018

Writing, Silence, and Well-Being

Robert P. Yagelski
State University of New York

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>

Recommended Citation

Yagelski, Robert P. (2018) "Writing, Silence, and Well-Being," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 23 , Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl23gioh>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol23/iss1/4>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

Writing, Silence, and Well-being

Robert P. Yagelski

Presidential elections are always significant events, but the 2016 U.S. presidential election seems to have been unprecedented in a number of ways. In particular, what seemed unprecedented was the reaction to the outcome. In the days immediately following the vote, protests drew thousands of people in dozens of cities throughout the U.S. Organized as well as impromptu demonstrations occurred on college campuses and public spaces in cities large and small at which protesters carried placards with slogans like “Love trumps hate.” There were fliers and handbills and chants. Meanwhile, in every possible medium, people were ranting, commiserating, gloating, worrying, and wondering. Among the many so-called “post-mortems” on the election that appeared in thousands of publications, online and in print as well as on social media, were shrill and panicked calls for activism on the part of progressives and others who opposed Trump.¹ There were also calls for reconciliation, calls for more concerted efforts to listen to and understand one another, calls for reflection on the current state of public discourse. And there were *mea culpas*, not only from the many journalists, pollsters, and political prognosticators who predicted a different outcome, but also from public figures, who for various reasons believed they could have done more to oppose Trump or improve the state of American politics.¹ It was a remarkable, tense, uncertain time for many, many people in the U.S. and around the world.

It was indeed tense and uncertain in the university writing program where I work. In the days following the election, many of us wondered what to do. Some of my colleagues felt an intense need to do *something* in their classes, though most were unsure whether that something should be overtly political or a kind of open discussion or something else altogether. At the end of that week, a group of faculty and students who are part of our Peer Writing Mentor Program gathered for a regularly scheduled meeting that inevitably ended up being about the election. At that meeting, students thoughtfully shared stories about harassment and conflicts they experienced or witnessed on our campus in the days leading up to and immediately following the election. They expressed feelings of concern, fear, anger, sadness, uncertainty, regret, and hope. The meeting reinforced the feeling on the part of many of our faculty that they must do something, that they must act in some way, that they should speak out.

No doubt many educators have similar stories to tell about the election and its aftermath. I suspect many of them felt that same need to do something, not only to

1. Here is a sampling of headlines related to the election in the days and weeks after the vote: “A Few Thoughts on the Unthinkable” (*New Yorker*, 11-9-2016) ; “Behind Trump’s Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education” (Pew Research Institute, 11-9-2016); “What to Say to the Women in Your Life Today” (*Esquire*, 11-9-2017); “‘Dear God, America What Have You Done?’ How the World and its Media Reacted as Donald Trump Became US President-Elect” (*Telegraph*, 11-9-2016); “How Did Pollsters Get Trump, Clinton Election So Wrong?” (*USA Today*, 11-9-2016); “No, Donald Trump is not Beating Hillary Clinton in the Popular Vote” (*Politifact*, 11-14-2016); “What I Got Wrong About the Election” (*Bloomberg News*, 12-23-2016).

express their views but also to act on them. One manifestation of this impulse to act that emerged from the election was the call among many academics, including many in the field of Rhetoric and Composition or Writing Studies, to engage more effectively in public discourse. The listserv sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators was electric with discussion along these lines, and participants offered various takes on why and how the election results were directly relevant to our work as educators and specifically as teachers of writing. One participant wrote that those of us who teach and study writing “have failed miserably to educate an electorate in the thinking skills needed to sustain our democracy” and went on to ask whether higher education bore some responsibility for the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Nelms, “Trump”).

In the midst of this discussion, someone posted a link to an essay that was published on the *Atlantic Monthly* website a few days before the election titled “Americans Don’t Need Reconciliation—They Need to Get Better at Arguing.” The author, Eric Liu, the founder of Citizen University and executive director of the Aspen Institute Program on Citizenship and American Identity, had been a speechwriter and deputy domestic-policy adviser for President Bill Clinton. In his essay, Liu makes the case that it would be a mistake to rush to reconciliation in an effort to repair the deep social, political, and cultural divisions in the U.S. that seemed to be exposed by the 2016 presidential election. Instead, he argues, what we need is “reckoning,” which he defines as “naming the inherited power inequities that have brought us our contemporary conflicts.” We must reckon, he writes, with “all the power imbalances now creating tectonic pressures in our politics: the squeezing of local labor by global capital, the formation of a meritocratic elite detached from everyday Americans, the rigging of public policy to benefit that elite, the depopulation of the middle class, the relative decline of whites and the rise of the rest.” To achieve this reckoning, Liu believes, requires three steps: “more listening, more serving, and—perhaps counterintuitively—more arguing.” As Liu writes, “We don’t need fewer arguments today; we need less stupid ones.” He goes on to assert that America *itself* is an argument: “between Federalist and Anti-Federalist world views, strong national government and local control, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, Pluribus and Unum.” The point of civic life, he says, “is for us all to wrestle perpetually with these differences, to fashion hybrid solutions that work for the times until they don’t, and then to start again.” To be a citizen, Liu concludes, is to engage in a never-ending fight “to make our fights more useful: more honest, more open to change, more human.”

Liu’s angle on the 2016 presidential campaign is a compelling one, and it resonated with many subscribers to the WPA listserv. Many of us in the field and many educators in general embrace the idea that what we do is part of a larger project of helping to create a just, equitable, inclusive society, an essential part of which is substantive, informed discourse about fundamental issues of living together in a complex, diverse, and seemingly threatened world. Integral to this discourse is a kind of epistemic argumentation in which all sides engage in an ongoing collective problem-solving. We as educators contribute to this project by teaching our students what it means to engage in such discourse, how it works, and how it constitutes a kind of political and social action. For some, including me, Paulo Freire offers both a theoretical framework and a practical

method for teaching writing and reading as vehicles for political agency in the never-ending struggle to create a just society. Many educators still embrace the Jeffersonian ideal of an informed citizenry, for whom a kind of critical literacy plays a central role in public life. Some of us continue to espouse the ideals from classical rhetorical theory of education for public engagement and deliberation that is so beautifully summed up in Quintilian's famous definition of rhetoric as *vir bonus dicendi peritus*—a good person speaking well (“From *Institutes of Oratory*” 12.1.1). To my mind, these are all versions of a fundamentally similar vision of education in general, and the teaching of writing in particular, as vehicles for individual political agency and collective social progress.

This intense, heartfelt discussion was taking place on the WPA listserv a few days after the election even as the president-elect returned to his Twitter account, which, arguably, he had used so effectively during the presidential campaign. Twitter is one of the most visible of social media platforms, one that has become indispensable to social and political movements. It is a powerful means for individuals and groups to make their ideas and concerns and arguments instantly available to millions of users, in 140 characters or less. Twitter makes argument, often in its basest forms, starkly visible. Twitter also makes visible the need for less stupid arguing, as Eric Liu puts it—that is, for *better* arguing. The very nature of the medium makes the kind of in-depth, genuinely engaged argumentation that Liu advocates and that many teachers of writing embrace difficult, if not impossible. It may even contribute to the binary thinking and superficiality that characterizes so much public discourse today. Twitter seems to expose and reinforce the very human impulse to react: to make an in-the-moment response to a comment, controversy, or event. Along with some other social media platforms, Twitter seems to magnify and encourage our collective and very human tendency to react and engage—a kind of textual version of our physiological fight-or-flight response to a threat.

I think Liu is right that we need better, less stupid arguing, and nowhere is that need more visible than on Twitter. But I think Twitter makes something else visible: a desperate need for *less*—for *less* arguing, less discourse, less talk, less reaction, less in-the-moment exchange of opinions, positions, critiques. In fact, I'd like to propose that what we might need most today is a kind of silence. Not *silencing*, which Twitter and other social media platforms can be used so effectively to accomplish or to resist, but *silence*: intentional, aware, deliberate, responsible, mindful silence. This kind of silence is integral to our well-being as individuals, as members of communities, and as inhabitants of the earth. Indeed, I will propose in this essay that writing itself can be a powerful form of silence, a *practice* of silence as a means to well-being.

A conception of writing as silence rests on an understanding of the experience of writing-in-the-moment, as I have examined it elsewhere (“A Thousand Writers; *Writing as a Way of Being*; “Writing as Praxis”). It begins with the distinction between the writer's writing—that is, the text a writer produces as a result of an act of writing—and the *writer writing*—that is, the act of writing in the moment. The experience of writing-in-the-moment has value that is separate from that of any text that might be created as a result of that act of writing. For reasons that I will examine more fully below, this

experience of writing-in-the-moment has the potential to be a vehicle for understanding ourselves and the world around us; it has the capacity for transformation and therefore can be a means to well-being, both individual and collective. As I have noted previously,

. . . as we write, we inhabit the moment so thoroughly that the act of writing becomes almost synonymous with our consciousness and shapes our awareness of ourselves as our selves, selves that exist at a moment in time that is connected to other moments in time through the act of writing, selves that exist both separate from and yet part of what is around us. In this way, writing has the capacity to intensify our sense of being. (Yagelski, "Writing as Praxis," 192)

This is a complex phenomenon that I have explored more fully elsewhere (see *Writing as a Way of Being*, 101-105; 108-125), but the key point here is that an act of writing-in-the-moment is an act of being. And, significantly, this act of being is also inherently an act of connection. At the moment of writing, we enact "a sense of self as existing in that moment and at the same time inhabiting the physical place where we are writing as well as whatever we are writing about and whomever we might be writing to, all of which is removed from us in time and space at that moment but at the same time connected to us at that moment because of the act of writing" (193).

This sense of connection can be intensified when we engage in acts of writing-in-the-moment with others. Such collective writing-in-the-moment occurs in silence, and though that silence is, paradoxically, filled with our words, those words remain unspoken to others, unread by others, unshared with others. Writing together in silence, we share the moment of writing but not the words produced at that moment. And in that silent sharing of writing-in-the-moment without sharing our words resides a potential for transformation.

To illustrate, let me describe such a shared moment of writing that occurred at the annual conference of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning in Estes Park, Colorado, in June 2017. The conference participants gathered on the first evening of the conference for my talk, during which I invited everyone to take a few minutes to write. I invited them to write about anything that seemed relevant or important or necessary at that moment; what we each chose to write about did not really matter. For five or six minutes, the forty or fifty of us assembled in that room wrote in silence. No one spoke, and when we were finished writing, no one shared aloud what he or she had written. The texts we produced in those five or six minutes were, in large measure, irrelevant. What mattered at that moment was the experience we shared in our individual acts of writing. We, all of us in that room, wrote for ourselves as individuals, but we also wrote together as a community, temporary and fleeting though it may have been. In that sense, our individual acts of writing-in-the-moment were an enactment of our connection to one another, no matter what words we had written or whether anyone other than us would ever hear or read them. And I propose that in that context of writing-in-the-moment, our words, written in silence and left unshared, might have a better, a greater—certainly a *different*—impact and import than if we had spoken them aloud or shared them in some published form.

Let me pursue this point.

The words we wrote—individually but together—at that moment in Estes Park were not necessarily written with the intent to publish, to speak to others, or to share in con-

versation; rather, we wrote to think and *be* in the moment, perhaps to reflect, to wonder, to worry, to hope, but ultimately to be in that moment. We wrote at my request but without a rhetorical exigency. And that's the crucial point. For the conference participants who wrote together at my request at that moment did not write *to* me or *to* each other but to be *with* me and *with* each other. In that regard, the impact of their writing, at least in that moment, was primarily on them, individually and collectively. The potential effect of their writing-in-the-moment, however, could extend much further. If this practice of writing-in-the-moment—of writing not to produce a text to be shared but to *inhabit* the moment—if this practice encourages the writer just to *be* rather than to speak, it opens up the possibility for that writer to be *differently*; that is, it opens up the possibility of redefining the writerly self in relation to other selves present at that moment as well as others who were not physically present at that moment *but might have been present in the writing that happened at that moment*. This potential for redefining our selves in relation to one another resides in our individual acts of writing-in-the-moment, in which we engage in silence. In this way, the silence of writing-in-the-moment, this silence that is paradoxically filled with words, provides an opportunity to *be* without speaking, to think without thinking aloud, to be mindful without speaking your mind.

This silence of writing-in-the-moment might thus give voice to our humanness, our inherent connection to one another, to our oneness. Yes, it is possible that the writing itself—that is, the texts we create in the moment—might emphasize difference or highlight discord, if we were to share them. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that those of us who were writing together in that conference room in Estes Park in June 2017 created texts that diverged in ways that might lead to disagreement or even conflict if we had shared them. But the *act* of writing-in-the-moment—as distinct from the texts produced in that moment—the *act* of writing-in-the-moment might illuminate our inherent connection to each other and perhaps create a space to pause, to reflect, to listen. To be. Together.

I think of this kind of writing as a practice of living. This practice—especially when it is engaged in communally—can illuminate our humanity and foster a sense of our oneness rather than highlight difference and encourage discord. That, at least, is my hope. Writing *in* silence can become writing *as* silence—a powerful kind of silence that, paradoxically, can give voice to our humanity. Writing is aptly conceived as a powerful vehicle for agency and action, and we must continue to teach it and practice it as such. We absolutely must understand the word as *praxis* in the way Freire has described it. “To speak a true word,” he famously wrote, “is to transform the world” (87). But I believe we must also practice writing as a way of being silent. These are not mutually exclusive practices but different versions of the same practice. For if language is one of the attributes that makes us human, then a certain kind of silence can help make us *humane*. And writing *as* silence can be a way of proclaiming our humanity and engaging with each other humanely.

To understand this dynamic requires revisiting how we think about silence.

In the past two decades, a small but growing number of scholars in rhetoric, led by

Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, have examined the rhetorical power of silence and listening. In their collection *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, Glenn and Ratcliffe quote scholar Michael V. Fox, who reminds us that in ancient Egyptian rhetoric, silence was conceived as a “moral posture and rhetorical tactic”—not to be confused with ‘passivity or quietism’” (Fox 12; qtd. in Glenn and Ratcliffe 1). In particular, Glenn illuminates the complexity of silence as something other than “the absence of text or voice” (*Unspoken* 2). She writes that silence is “like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function, and a rhetorical one at that” (4). Glenn goes on to explore that “absence with a function,” illuminating the capacity of silence to disrupt and resist. Following her lead, other scholars have emphasized this capacity of silence to become a form of resistance (e.g., see Ephratt; Middleton; Ronald).

But silence can be generative as well. Kennan Ferguson has described silence not only as “a nexus of resistance” but also as “a potentiality for creation” (in Glenn and Ratcliffe 114). According to Ferguson, “Silence itself establishes private and public commonality, where it is not merely an impediment to connections between people”; silence “can be used to create the self, or to create communities” (114-115). This, in part, is the kind of silence that the participants in the AEPL conference might have experienced for a moment as we wrote together that evening in June 2017. This kind of silence—as Ferguson, Glenn, and others so poignantly demonstrate—is integral to being human. It can be a powerful form of resistance, yes, but also a form of inquiry, an epistemic act by which we come to know our shared humanity. More important, as Ferguson suggests, silence can be an act of creation, and in this sense it can also be ontological. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes that “human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (88). In a footnote to that passage, however, he distinguishes the silence of political inaction from what he calls “the silence of profound meditation,” which he writes can be part of our effort “to consider [the world] in its totality” (88). Here, I take Freire to be pointing to the nondualistic conception of being that informs his pedagogy. In this formulation, both word and silence—that is, an epistemic, generative kind of silence—are part of what it means to be human. *Both* are integral to our being. And writing, as a way of being, can also be a practice of silence, a practice whose meaning is both extra-linguistic and steeped in language.

In a wonderful 2001 essay, Pat Belanoff illuminates this complex relationship between words and silence by exploring the essential role of silence in claiming voice. We are, she writes, “a culture that is fearful of silence” (400). Yet silence and words are integral to one another. To illuminate this connection, she quotes Ortega y Gasset: “The stupendous reality that is language cannot be understood unless we begin by observing that speech consists above all in silence” (Ortega y Gasset 246). She cites Kathleen Yancey and Michael Spooner, who argue that “to have voice, in the West or elsewhere, requires silence, too. . . . Silence is thus a necessary if not sufficient condition for voice to occur” (Yancey and Spooner 302; quoted in Belanoff 402). Yancey and Spooner note that “[s]ilence remains, inescapably, a form of speech . . . and an element in a dialogue” (367). They remind us that our notion of “silence as a mark of oppression, denial of self, dependency, or, at best immaturity, is itself a cultural construct, a corollary of our obsession with individuality” (Yancey and Spooner 304).

This obsession with individuality, which is a defining characteristic of American culture, helps define silence as weakness, as invisibility, as capitulation. In this cultural milieu, we speak out not only to claim voice but also to construct and proclaim our identities. And in doing so, we foster, emphasize, and promote difference in a way that is all too often characterized by “othering.” This understanding of silence in American culture emerges from the fundamentally dualistic worldview that tends to characterize Western culture and provides a foundation—a problematic one, in my view—for our ways of thinking about self, language, knowing, and being that inform not only our educational system, including how we teach writing, but our political discourse as well. Within this Cartesian framework, silence and speaking are not only cast in binary opposition to each other, but they are also set in a hierarchical relationship in which silence is subordinated to speaking out.

Belanoff looks beyond the seemingly ubiquitous Cartesianism of mainstream Western culture for other ways to understand this relationship between silence and speaking. She quotes M. Scott Momaday, who provides a Native American perspective on this relationship:

Silence . . . is powerful. . . . In the Indian world, a word is spoken or a song is sung not against, but within the silence. In the telling of a story, there are silences in which words are anticipated or held on to, heard to echo in the still depths of the imagination. In the oral tradition, silence is the sanctuary of sound. Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence; they are sacred. (*Man Made* 16; quoted in Belanoff 402)

At a time when words are overwhelmed by more words in an increasing digital cacophony of social media, never-ending news cycles, and constant connectivity, Momaday’s assertion that words are sacred “in the hold of silence” is particularly striking. In this formulation, silence is not a retreat from words but a necessary component of their power and their sacredness.

As Belanoff reminds us, Western thinkers have also examined this relationship between words and silence. She cites Saint Augustine, for instance, as well as others in the tradition of Christian mysticism, and she finds her way to Mary Carruthers’s discussion of Quintilian, who, Belanoff notes, identifies “the need to practice achieving *silentium* in crowds” (Carruthers 331; quoted in Belanoff 404)—that is, to train oneself not to be disturbed by “crowd-noises.” The goal of this training, says Belanoff, was “to achieve inner silence in the midst of outer clamorings” (404). Reading that passage today, it is not difficult to think about how loud those “outer clamorings” have become; it is easy to feel that achieving the inner silence that Quintilian and Belanoff sought is further beyond our grasp than ever.

Nevertheless, this “inner silence,” Belanoff believes, can foster reflection, which can be a pathway to understanding—of the subject, of the self, of the world around us and our relationship to it. One form of reflection is meditation, which is usually practiced in silence. Significantly, Belanoff notes that meditation became a way for medieval women to redefine the silence that was imposed on them:

Robbed of the right to speak, women became open to something “other.” And whatever revelations came to them as the result of a mystical experience could be claimed as the words of God—and thus the men of the church were forced to allow it. The end of this

meditation is thus not . . . discursiveness but a mystical transcendence that transports the meditator . . . out of worldly consciousness in some way. But there is a parallel, as both discursiveness and transcendence are movements away from or out of oneself. And it is meditation that engenders the transcendence that in turn broke the bonds of silence for the medieval woman. Silence and inwardness became for women mystics a doorway out of the constraints set up against their voices. (406)

In other words, silence in the form of meditation became a way for silenced women to claim voice. It was not only resistance but also a coming into being. It was not only a form of agency but also an ontological act, a way of being in the world.

The parallel Belanoff sees here between silence and being is too compelling to ignore. We are schooled to think that we come into being through language, that we proclaim our selves and construct our identities discursively. But Belanoff reminds us that the relationships among language, identity, and being are complex—and fraught. In speaking our identities, we come into being in a certain sense, but at the same time we also potentially separate ourselves from others; conversely, in remaining silent, we run the risk of becoming invisible. This is the legacy of Cartesianism and a function of what I have described elsewhere as the Cartesian view of writing (*Writing as a Way of Being* 39-68). But a conception of writing as a way of being opens up the possibility of embracing silence as generative and also, significantly, as nondualistic. For in the act of writing in the moment, one can achieve both discursiveness (that is, *without* a rhetorical exigency) and transcendence. In this formulation, transcendence is not necessarily a movement “out of worldly consciousness,” as Belanoff suggests, but rather an act of bringing consciousness and world together, of unifying self and world, and thus eliminating the mind-body split. This kind of writing is thus an ontological act that is inherently nondualistic.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that language is representation—an idea that rests on the fundamental Cartesian duality of mind and body. Rather, Merleau-Ponty argues that thought is a function of consciousness and that thought and speech are “coterminus.” For Merleau-Ponty, speech—and, by extension, the written word—is “the presence of . . . thought in the phenomenal world” (211). It is inherently physical and metaphysical all at once. In conceiving of speech in this way, Merleau-Ponty erases the mind-body split, which provides the foundation for mainstream conceptions of writing. Because thought is a function of lived experience—that is, thought is embodied in the sense that it is inseparable from our experience of ourselves in the physical world—speaking becomes an act of embodiment and thus of being in the world. Writing, which is a form of speech that in some ways intensifies its physical qualities, is also an embodiment of thought and thus an act of being. It is in this sense that writing can be understood as an ontological act.

Understood in this way, writing can become a practice of silence that is both generative and nondualistic. Writing together in silence, then, is not simply a respite from the cacophony of contemporary political and cultural discourse, a momentary cessation of the spoken word. Rather, writing is an affirmation of the sacredness of words, as Momaday describes it. For at the moment of writing, words and silence merge and then emerge. Our written words are conceived in silence, their energy derived from that silence rather than by their use in a rhetorical context. Without a rhetorical exigency,

our words do not demarcate our selves in relation to other selves; they do not delineate boundaries. Instead, our very being emerges in the act of writing words that are not meant to be spoken or read, and our inherent connection to others is reaffirmed through the writing of those words. In silence, we speak *with* rather than *to* others by being in our writing in that moment.

If we engage in writing as a practice of silence in this way, rather than writing exclusively as a means of doing, as a communicative or rhetorical act, we open up the possibility of writing as a way of being human together, a practice that can foster individual and collective well-being.

Let me return once more to the 2016 U.S. presidential election to illustrate this possibility.

Ten days after the election, we held what we called a “Write-In” in our first-year writing program at SUNY-Albany. The event grew out of the felt need on the part of the faculty in our writing program to do something in the wake of the election. The Write-In was not intended to be a forum to air political views or to debate the election and its outcome. Nor was it intended to be some kind of therapy session. Rather, it was intended to be a time for students and faculty to gather together and simply write—to *be* together in our writing. We hoped the very act of writing together with no real agenda other than to write would provide comfort and energy to those who felt so unsettled by the election.

Late on an unusually warm and sunny Friday afternoon just before our Thanksgiving break, a dozen students and nearly as many faculty came together in our conference room. Bethany, one of our faculty who helped organize the event, offered a series of open-ended prompts that were designed to give us a starting point for our writing and, if anyone wanted to do so, explore their feelings about or experience of the election.

- “List ten emotions you have been feeling since the election; select three and describe a moment when you felt these emotions.”
- “Imagine yourself in another person’s shoes, someone with whom you disagree: What does that person feel or think? What are their reasons?”

These prompts were presented as choices, but we could write out of some other feeling or need or pursue a completely different idea, unrelated either to the election or the prompts. The focus was not the election. Rather, the election was the impetus for this gathering and for our writing together.

So we wrote. Together. In silence. For the better part of an hour. Near the end of the hour, Bethany invited all of us to talk: to share feelings or ideas or reactions to our experience in that moment. Some spoke. Some said nothing. One student, a young woman of color, wrote about a moment when a white student asked her why she felt so threatened by the election results. She could not answer that question because it would, she felt, inevitably lead to debate and argument or worse. And so she chose at that moment to be silent. It was a powerful rhetorical choice, but it was also a way to be fully present, to resist division, to avoid conflict without denying it. Other students also shared moments when they had no words for the conversation, for their feelings, for others. And so they

chose not to speak. And again, those choices were powerful rhetorical moves, but they were also moments of self-awareness, of presence.

Those who spoke at the Write-In affirmed their need to find comfort and safety at a moment when they felt threatened, and their spoken words gave voice to that need. But our talk at the Write-In was in a fundamental way tangential, like an appendix or addendum. What really mattered was that we two dozen-or-so students and faculty wrote together and had an opportunity to *be* together in the moment. It was powerful. And the power lay both in the writing and in the silence.

I am suggesting that the writing and the silence were, in ways that I have tried to explain in this essay, one and the same. The writing enabled us to use language as a way to be silent, to be *in* silence. It was something like Donald Murray's encouragement to listen to our own writing, but with this significant difference: There was no intention to use the texts we created at that moment, to share them or publish them in some venue. Our purpose was not to create a text; our purpose was simply to write. We were gathered there because we felt a need to *act*, but our writing was not driven or circumscribed by a need to act *through* the writing. Our writing at that moment *was* action, but not action in a rhetorical sense, not action directed at an audience, or an other. At that moment, there was no other. We were together because we wrote together without any purpose other than to write together. The wonderful paradox was that, freed of the need to raise our voices through writing, we could be silent in our writing even as we were full of words. We raised our voices without raising our voices. Our silence was full of voice. And that silence was power.

At that moment we needed to be silent in that way. At *this* moment, I believe, we need to be silent in the same way.

As I think now about our "Write-In" in November 2016, what matters most to me is that we all—students and faculty—came together to write in a way that contributed to our individual and collective well-being. It was a fleeting moment that, in some ways, stood in stark contrast to the cacophony in which we all live our lives today; it was a fleeting moment that also stood in contrast to how most of us—students and faculty—write most of the time, maybe even *all* of the time. We would be better off, all of us, I think, if we engaged in the practice of writing as silence more of the time, if writing in this way became a tool for living together on this earth we share. We would be better off, all of us, if we taught writing as such a practice rather than only as a rhetorical tool and a necessary skill for "success" as it tends to be defined in our consumerist-capitalist culture. If we were somehow able to do so—to engage in writing as a practice of silence that is as routine as testing and grading and credentialing and consuming have become—if we could do this, I think we might learn how to be together differently. At least I hope we would.



Works Cited

Belanoff, Pat. "Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 52.3 (Feb. 2001): 399-428. JSTOR. Web.

- Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.
- Ephratt, Michal. "The Functions of Silence." *Journal of Pragmatics* 40.11 (2008): 1909-38. Print.
- Ferguson, Kennan. "Silence: A Politics." *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, edited by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, Southern Illinois UP, 2011. 113-129. Print.
- Fox, Michael V. "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric," *Rhetorica* 1 (1983): 9-22. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th anniversary ed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, 2005. Originally published in 1970. Print.
- Glenn, Cheryl. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- Glenn, Cheryl, and Krista Ratcliffe, editors. *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*. Southern Illinois UP, 2011. Print.
- Liu, Eric. "Americans Don't Need Reconciliation—They Need to Get Better at Arguing." *Atlantic Monthly*, 1 Nov. 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/post-election-reconciliation/506027/>. Web.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge, 1958. Originally published in 1945. Print.
- Middleton, Joyce. "Echoes From the Past: Learning How to Listen, Again." *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, edited by Andrea Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, and Rosa A. Eberly, Sage, 2009. 353-71. Print.
- Momaday, N. Scott. *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1997. Print.
- Murray, Donald. M "Listening to Writing." *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching*. Boyton/Cook, 1982. 53-65. Originally published in 1980. Print.
- Nelm, Jerry. "Trump." 10 Nov. 2016. *Writing Program Administration*. WPA-L@asu.edu. *Archives of WPA-L@asu.edu*. <http://lists.asu.edu/archives/wpa-l.html> 1 July 2017. Web.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. "What People Say: Language—Toward a New Linguistics." *Man and People*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Norton, 1957. Print.
- Quintilian. *Quintilian's Institutes of Oratory; Or, Education of an Orator*. Ed. J.S. Watson. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1856. Print.
- Ronald, Kate. "Feminist Perspectives on the History of Rhetoric." *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*. Ed. Andrea Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, and Rosa A. Eberly. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009. 139-52. Print.
- Yagelski, Robert P. *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*. Hampton Press, 2011. Print.
- . "Writing as Praxis." *English Education* 44.2 (2012): 188-204. Print.
- . "A Thousand Writers Writing: Seeking Change Through the Radical Practice of Writing as a Way of Being in the World." *English Education* 42.1(2009): 6-28. Print.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake, and Michael Spooner. "Concluding the Text: Notes toward a Theory and the Practice of Voice." *Voices on Voice*. Ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994, 298-314. Print.