

THE RHETORIC OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

This is a course about the potential and practices of everyday people, including students, writers, and teachers, to criticize injustice, affirm commitments, and act in community with others. We will mine the American tradition of prophetic pragmatism to design an intercultural rhetorical tool kit for making a difference. And we will take local action through a Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank which in 2003 will work with learning disabled teenagers and focus on “Naming the LD-Difference.”

American Pragmatism: The Philosophical Foundations for Our Inquiry

The tradition of American philosophical pragmatism is a tradition of inquiry into differences that make a difference.

One foundation of this tradition is laid in the lives and writing of the New England transcendentalists—especially Emerson and Thoreau—in the 1850s. In 1900 William James named pragmatism as a theory of truth and an “attitude of looking away from first things, principles, “categories,” supposed necessities,; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts (“ What Pragmatism Means,” 1907). And in the hands of John Dewey this “attitude” laid the groundwork for a new vision of progressive education, social inquiry and cultural critique. We will look at what writers, activists, and everyday people, standing in different convictional communities, operating in different fields of action, have made of this tradition—in the Civil War 1850s, in the Civil Rights 1960s, and the present.

The Four Questions We Must Answer

The rhetoric of making a difference is driven by two conflicting but complementary impulses—the move to critique and build distance and the move to connect and build community. The Concord transcendentalists helped frame this conflict as four questions each of us must answer—questions which those who followed them have answered in very different ways.

What form should non-conformity take?
What form should critique take?

What is the grounding of my commitment?
What is the nature of my connection/community with others?

The Rhetorical Tool Kit and The Field of Action

The rhetoric of making a difference is a situated rhetoric—it is a way of responding to your own time and place. It adapts to the field of action you have entered and the network of people to whom you speak. We will build our own toolkit of rhetorical moves (for critique and connection) by looking first, at the moves other people have made in different fields of action.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson in the lecture hall and journal and Henry David Thoreau in the woods
- Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in political action for civil rights & Saul Alinsky in radical action for community organizing;
- Cornel West and bell hooks as border crossing writers, professors, public intellectuals, and prophetic pragmatists;
- College students and faculty in mentoring and inquiry with an urban community.

Then we will enter, as our own field of action, a community problem-solving dialogue with partners in the community and schools. We will mount an inquiry with urban teenagers, teachers, and parents into how we represent (and misrepresent) students with learning disabilities. We will use our rhetorical tools to create a community dialogue and a body of knowledge that brings the expertise and insight of young people into understanding how to explain the reality of learning disabilities to mainstream teachers and students.

Books for the course (available in the bookstore)

Linda Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College & Community*.

Harcourt Brace

bell hooks, *Talking Back*. South End Press

Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*. Routledge

Other Readings (available in class)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance”

Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” from *Walden*

Walt Whitman, excerpts from “Song of Myself” and “A Patient Noiseless Spider” from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855

Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “I Have a Dream” speech, and segments from *Eyes on the Prize* documentary

Saul Alinsky, From *Rules for Radicals*

Spinosa et al, From *Disclosing New World*

Linda Flower, Elenore Long, Lorraine Higgins, From *Learning to Rival: Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*

Linda Flower, “Talking Across Difference” CCC Sept. 2003

Linda Flower, “Intercultural Knowledge Building”

http://wac.colostate.edu/books/selves_societies/
 Glynda Hull et al. "Remediation as a Social Construct" CCC Oct, 1991
 Intercultural Inquiry <http://english.cmu.edu/research/inquiry/default.html>
 Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank www.cmu.edu/thinktank
 Readings on Learning Disabilities
 Creating a Community Think Tank: Process Documents

INQUIRIES

The writing for this course is designed as a cumulative series of inquiries. The goal of this series is to let you engage in a dialogue with the people we read and others in the class and to help you consolidate what you are learning into a progressively more elaborated rhetorical toolkit.

Inquiry #1. Critical Incident and Reflection on Making a Difference

Part 1. Write a brief autobiographical account of a time you attempted to "make a difference," to be an agent of change, or felt the need to take a stand and act on your commitments for (and possibly with) others. These brief accounts will let us give each other a wider range of situations to think with. Use the "critical incident" strategy described on p. 340 (PSSW) to interview yourself and get at specifics. As you tell us the story of this incident and its situation, try to reveal the thoughts and record the talk of some of the people involved. This should help you craft a well-specified critical incident that locates your rhetorical act in a specific field of action.

Part 2. Draft a 2 page reflection on the critical incident you wrote earlier. Use the three discussion questions about convictional discourses from the "Why Am I Here" class to reflect on the convictional discourse in which you were standing at that particular moment. Following this class, push your thinking with your collaborative planning partner. Then post on the B-Board and hand in a copy by the next class. Save this paper for your Rhetorical Portfolio.

Criteria for grading: a closely observed, elaborated incident, a thoughtful, questioning reflection, and a rigorous use of the 3 categories of analysis (values & assumptions; rhetorical moves; outcomes enabled & disabled). 10 points

Inquiry #2. Dialogue on the Four "Questions"

Invite at least 4 people (from among Emerson, Thoreau, King, Alinsky and West) to your table for a dialogue with you on the 4 Cs:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What form should <u>non-conformity</u> take? • What form should <u>critique</u> take? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the grounding of my <u>commitment</u>? • What is the nature of my <u>connection/community</u> with others?
--	---

What do you see as the *significant options* these writers raise for someone trying to answer these questions? Give everyone at your table the chance to speak from their strength and enter the dialogue in your own voice as a participant if you wish, but also as an *interpreter* who can step back to explain what this dialogue reveals. Keep focused on what you see as the significant options, discussing them in enough depth to really explore their meaning and rivals. Why write this review of options? The goal of the assignment is to let you construct an intellectual scaffold for own inquiry—one that does justice to the ideas of your guests and to your own purpose in holding the conversation with them.

Here are some criteria for evaluating yourself and supporting your collaborative partner, based on the requests in the assignment.

- Did you maintain a real dialogue between people on a significant issue? Did you let them go into any depth with each other?
- Were you able to use the language and claims of your participants in precise ways that did justice to the complexity of their thought (rather than just expressing their “drift”)?
- Did you bravely entertain real rivals to a position (not just throwaway lines, but ones the first person would have given serious thought to)?
- Did the dialogue on each issue “add up”? Did you as a writer use it to articulate a new level of understanding of that issue?

25 points

Inquiry #3. Develop a Rhetor’s Portfolio

Throughout this course you will be writing a number of Inquiries and Discovery Memos that will add up to a toolkit of rhetorical strategies and a portfolio of ideas, questions and affirmations about making a difference.

What Is a Discovery Memo?

These brief (1 page), to-the-point memos are designed to share insights with the class through the B-Board and to help you prepare your contribution to class discussions by putting your ideas in writing. Use a standard To/From/Subject/Date format. Whether you are writing about what you read or something you observed, we don’t need a summary. We want to know what you learned, discovered, found intriguing. In sharing any discovery, elaboration based on specific, telling details is critical. So spare us from the fuzzy abstractions and sweeping generalities that “nobody could disagree with.” Make every word count. Focus on a couple key points and make every word count.

To build your portfolio, please keep a copy of your Inquiries, your 5 Discovery Memos and your documentation of dialogue data (plus any comments you may have received from readers).

Tensions in the Transcendentalist Vision Using Prophetic Pragmatism Negotiating Representations Collaborative Planning Session Articulating Your Affirmations	Critical Incidents from Shadowing Documentation of Dialogue Data
---	---

For this Inquiry, review this record of various rhetorical tools for making a difference that you have examined, drawn from the Transcendentalists, the Civil Rights movement, contemporary cultural critics, rivaling researchers, and community literacy. Write a 2-3 page introduction to the Portfolio that describes what you see at this point as the most *significant* rhetorical stances and strategies, moves, styles or techniques it contains—and *why*.

Push your thinking beyond golden rules and inspirational ideas into a working description rhetorical actions. Comment on connections you are making between theory and the actually practice of such a rhetoric in the Think Tank project or other contexts. 2-3 pages

Portfolio completeness and quality: 10 points. Introduction: 10 points

Findings: From A Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank on Explaining Learning Disabilities

Our term project will culminate in the publication of the *Think Tank Findings*. This group project will include your team’s Briefing Book and Findings, documentation, and permissions. 20 points

Inquiry #4. The Rhetoric of Making a Difference for Everyday People

As we moved from reading and writing to action and writing, what has this experience added to your rhetorical tool kit of ideas, stances, and strategies? Use this final inquiry to consolidate for yourself and others your best thinking on the rhetoric of making a difference. What does it mean for everyday people? (Develop/test your ideas with concrete examples drawn from a specific field of action—considering rivals to your own best ideas.) 10 pages. 20 points

I encourage you to make this an “intercultural inquiry” which you can submit for publication to the Intercultural Inquiry Web Site. If you would like your paper to be considered, you will need to enclose a signed permission form with the paper and send me an additional electronic copy.

Grades:

Because of the collaborative nature of this course, a grade of C or above requires that you come *prepared* to participate in/contribute to all classes and meet the deadlines of handing in and posting all Inquiries and Discovery Memos. Two or more unexcused absences will lower your grade. Prepared class participation will raise grades on the margin. Written work is weighted:

Inquiry # 1. 10 points
Inquiry #2. 25 points
Inquiries # 3, # 4 & the Think Tank Findings: 20 points each
Prepared class contribution. 5 points

I. THEORIES OF RHETORICAL ACTION

August

Tu. 26. Introduction

Th 28. The “Rhetoric” of Making a Difference

What are the critical features of this rhetoric when it turns up in academic discourse, in community writing, in political or social activism, in personal statement? Do any of the voices in Chapter 1 or 14 support or challenge the feature(s) you are going to put on the table?

Read: *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College & Community (PSSW)*,
Ch. 1 A Portrait of Writers in Action
Ch. 14. Out of the Classroom and into the Community

Prepare: To describe a critical feature of such a rhetoric as you see it.

DUE: A Critical Incident . (See Inquiry #1, Write Part 1.)

September

Tu 2. Why Am I Here?

What are the different convictional discourses—ways of thinking, and talking, and acting on your commitments—at work in our incidents? And what role did dialogue and inquiry play in them? We can use these three test questions to compare our various discourses:

- 1) What are some important assumptions or values within these discourses?
(These are often reflected in the big questions they pose, and debates or conflicts within the discourse.)
- 2) How do they operate? I.e., what rhetorical moves do they rely on? Do dialogue or inquiry, in particular, play a significant or minor role?
- 3) What kind of thinking, talking and acting do they tend to enable (or disable) ?

Our readings sketch different forms inquiry can take.

Read: Flower Long, Higgins from *Learning to Rival*. Ch 1 & 2.
PSSW Ch 17 Dialogue and Inquiry.
Ch 5. On Collaborative Planning (p. 101-119)

DUE: Draft of Reflection (See Inquiry #1. Write Part 2)

Th 4. The Manifesto of American Pragmatism

Turning their backs to the traditions of Europe and facing the wrenching divisiveness of the impending Civil War, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman framed the rhetoric of making a difference in terms of four issues/ actions that lay the foundation for the inquiry we will pursue in this class. These are **non-conformity** but also **conviction; critique** but also **connection**. The question for today is: what did these ideas/ideals mean for them in their field of action? Where does transformation begin; where is it located?

Read: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance”

Cornel West on Emerson and action from *American Evasion*: 14-18

Tu 9. Living the Rhetoric

Thoreau turns non-conformity and critique into lived action. But how would he define the source of conviction—that is, you may be poised for action, but how do you know what to do? And where does he locate the ground for connection? What do Thoreau and Whitman contribute to American pragmatism’s rhetorical tool kit?

Read: Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” & Conclusion from *Walden*; from *Civil Disobedience*.

Walt Whitman, excerpt from “Song of Myself” and “A Patient Noiseless Spider” from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855. *Excerpt from A Better Angel*

DUE: Discovery Memo: Tensions in the Transcendentalist Vision

Is self-reliance just another name for rampant, self-serving individualism? How does Emerson and Thoreau’s vision of looking within the self meet the challenge of achieving mystic vision—a state in which

a) mean egotism vanishes (see West, p 18) and

b) we are acting with his definition of “Reason” (“an instantaneous in-streaming causing power”) as well as understanding? (West p.16)

A second tension: does Emerson’s desire to celebrate moral (i.e., transgressive) vision and Thoreau’s retreat come at the expense of social action and a sense of community? How do you respond?

Th 11. The Field of Action 100 Years Later—The Civil Rights Movement

As we watch the historical documentary in *Eyes on the Prize*, note what form non-conformity and critique is taking in the 1960’s field of action. What are the moves in this rhetoric which are open to everyday people?

Read: Cornel West. Chap 17. The Paradox of the African American Rebellion

From Spinoza et al, *Disclosing New Worlds*

See: *Eyes on the Prize*

Tu 16. The Rhetoric of Conviction and Connection

What is the pragmatic “meaning of love” in King’s thinking? What does this discourse enable/disable? Does it open up rhetorical moves for everyday people, or only leaders, preachers, culture figures?

Read: Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”
“ I Have a Dream” speech

Th 18. A Rival Rhetoric of Community Organizing

Alinsky presents an alternative image of community organizing. And asks whether King is using the rhetoric of a dream or of shrewd conflict manipulation?

Read: From Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*

Tu 23. The Rhetoric of Prophetic Pragmatism

This stance is perhaps best described as a balancing act in the midst of tensions and contradictions. Consider the ways its two defining terms and 4 key concepts are linked to one another

Prophetic		Pragmatism	
Relentless & compassionate critique of injustice	With a vision of alternative reality & transformative praxis	Inquiry stance	Locates meaning in action & consequences
Expressed in resistance and struggle	Rooted in <ul style="list-style-type: none">• democratic faith• Christian tradition of love and justice• struggle with a sense of evil	Rooted in <ul style="list-style-type: none">• an experimental way of knowing• fallibility• humility	In social, historical & cultural contexts

Read: Cornel West, *Keeping Faith* Read Ch 7,8,9 . Focus on pps, 139-141; 131-134, 107-118

These chapters talk about how one can still act in the face of evil; after the decline of traditional religious belief; and after a loss of purpose in the humanities. The selected pages focus on the key features of prophetic pragmatism.

Michael Lerner , from *Jews and Blacks*

Cornel West, “Introducton” from the *Cornel West Reader*

Prepare: How would you explain what is significant about prophetic pragmatism to either 1) a fundamentalist (of any stripe—political, religious, philosophical) or 2) a cynic, or nihilist?

DUE: Discovery Memo: Using Prophetic Pragmatism

Now look West’s description of how this stance plays out in his own work and his attempt to answer the question “what it means to be human, modern, and American.” What aspect or feature of prophetic pragmatism (based on the 1993 account in *Keeping Faith*) seems to dominate West’s thinking about his own work in 1999 in his Introduction to the *Cornel West Reader*?

What aspect of prophetic pragmatism speaks most strongly to you, given your different background and field of action?

Th 23 Culture Workers Build Representations

West describes “ a new kind of **culture worker**,” who can “understand, analyze, and enact representational practices” (p21). He seems to have special critics and artists in mind, yet this sounds like the work of a rhetor/writer more generally. Does it make sense—realistically—for an everyday college student (or young professional) to see him/herself as this kind of “new” culture worker responding to West’s “political challenge” (p. 28)? Or is this a job for the pros?

West devotes most of this article to describing a “new cultural politics of difference” that is highly attuned to the “**representation**” of marginalized people. Since we all engage in the politics of difference and the act of representing others, the question becomes, what are we doing and how aware are we of the “political” meaning of our choices.

Read: Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference”

Schedule : A collaborative planning session with your partner for the small window after Tuesday’s class on CP and Before your draft is due on Thursday.

Due: Discovery Memo: Negotiating Representations

Below is a list of seven college student culture-workers from PSSW describing an experience with a person who could be categorized with a marginalizing term.

Student at community organization	Represents someone who could be placed in category of	Page
Kevin at NHO	Low income home buyer	361-63
Judy at Role Models	Minority staff member	368-73
Robert at SNCC	Young idealistic black activist	313-315
Dan at CLC	Urban “tough guy” teen	344-46
Carla at C.F.L.	“Macho” literacy tutee	348-49
Nicole at CLC	LD (learning disabled) Teen	337-48

Laura at Tutoring	LD Child	338-39
-------------------	----------	--------

In these accounts, students seem to be negotiating among, and at times struggling with, alternative representations of others. Use Cornel West’s complex notion of a “new cultural politics of difference” to interpret what is happening in these accounts and the conflicts the writers may be negotiating. Reach for an intellectually sophisticated analysis: pick one account that speaks to you and another that perplexes or makes you think and use 3 or 4 of West’s key features to analyze how each writer is negotiating the politics of difference and representation.

PART II. STRATEGIES FOR RHETORICAL ACTION

SEPT Tu 30 Building Knowledge—Collaboratively

We start the Strategies section by looking closely at your own planning process, your current plan for Inquiry #2, and ways to use collaboration. We will then use the introductory materials on learning disability to uncover some of the problems in representation/misrepresentation we as writers may need to address.

Read: PSSW Ch 5 Making Plans (on Collaborative Planning p 101-126)
 Glynda Hull, “Remediation as a Social Construct”
Succeeding with LD stories by Megan Wilson & Paul Orfalea
 “Could It Be Dyslexia?” (read between the lines: what does this text assume people *already* think?).
 Julia Carter, “Inquiry.” SOS Special Ed page and Think Tank Brief

Due: Bring informal but written planning notes for your Inquiry #2. Identify the significant issues and options you want to explore in this paper and some of the strong rivals you want to consider. Bring PSSW to class.

Schedule a CP session with your partner BEFORE THURSDAY.

OCTOBER

Th 2 Reflecting on Knowledge Building

Read: Ch 10. PSSW. Writing Reader-Based Prose (for another perspective on your own writing and on ways to persuade people who may hold “misrepresentations.”)

Prepare: to give us a 2-3 minute presentation on what you discovered about your own writing/planning process in your CP session.

Then we will continue working on our inventory of “misrepresentations” that can be inferred from the readings on Learning Disabilities

DUE: Discovery Memo on your Collaborative Planning Session

DUE: Inquiry #2.

Tu 7 The Rhetoric of Talking Back

How is “talking back” different from what my Grandmother called “back talk?” What drives the rhetoric of making a difference in bell hooks? What are her key moves?

Read: bell hooks, *Talking Back* Chap. 1,2, 4, 5

Th 9 The University as a Field of Action

What would a “cultural worker in the everyday world” do at Carnegie Mellon?

Read: bell hooks, Chap. 11, 14, 21, 23

Step 1. Understand the Context

OCTOBER Tu 14 Developing a Community Dialogue

Read: PSSW. Ch 15 Observation, Reflection, and Conversation

Review Critical Incident examples: p 340 & 368

Read About the Think Tank Process @

<http://www.cmu.edu/thinktank/process.html>

More explorations in the “Disability Discourse”

Prepare: Using the above texts and Ch 14. prepare to propose 3 features we should use in building our own “Guide to Shadowing and Getting Good Critical Incidents”

We will make a plan for how to discover a larger set of critical incidents through library/web research and through shadowing and working with our SOS Partners:

1. On the Job (tape where possible)

With Intern: Do LDs ever present problems Interns have to cope with? How do they do it? How do you explain LD?

From Manager/Staff: Have you even had to explain LD to others? How did you do it? What is the most important thing for people to understand about LD?

2. At school (tape this one)

From teachers: Have you even had to explain LD to other students?

What is the most important thing for (other students; mainstream teachers, parents) to understand about LD?

Th 16 Meet Your Partners (SOS Interns)

Use this meeting to discover learn about the out-of-school talents and skills of the SOS Interns and to schedule a time and car pools to shadow an Intern on the job or at school (or both).

CMU Students: Introduce yourself & a job you have had
Interns: Explain your job. Skills it requires to do it well
Team: Schedule a time to shadow on job and visit school

Step 2. Understand the Common Conflicts

Tu 21 Discovering and Documenting Diverse Representations

Read: Flower. Talking Across Difference & the Search for Situated Knowledge
PSSW Ch 18 Community Problem-Solving Dialogues.

Prepare: to give us an example of your own “situated knowledge” of having some kind of “disability” in the midst of other people who seemed comfortably competent. How does this affect your understanding of “disability”?

Carry out your Shadowing plan

Th 23 Naming the Conflicts/ Writing a Scenario

Our Think Tank builds on the work of the 2003 Community Literacy class which made it clear that people need to understand LD as 1) a Personal, Learning Problem and 2) as a Social, Coping Problem about Identity. Our job is need to construct two problem scenarios that will capture each of these realities, and will let us then ask our participants, “how do you explain these sides of LD to teachers and parents and to students with LD and their peers?”

Read: Community Literacy project inquiries from the set titled “Agency & LD” to collect critical incidents. <http://english.cmu.edu/research/inquiry/two.html>

Prepare: Please come prepared to work with your team and to develop a set of events or details you could include in a rich, representative scenario

- 1) On a **Learning** Incident & Coping Strategies
- 2) On an **Identity/Social** Incident & Coping Strategies

DUE: Discovery Memo plus Critical Incident Data from Shadowing
Post on the B-Board and bring a copy of your Critical Incident Data to share with your team.

Tu 28 Designing a Community Think Tank

Our goal is to create a new volume in the Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank series based on our question:

How Do You Explain LD—To Teachers and Students?

*A Community Think Tank on Explaining Learning Disability as Both a Learning Problem
and a Problem of Social Coping and Identity –Building*

Our discussion will focus on how the design of a discourse affects nature of deliberation.

And on how you can use the document design of Think Tank Findings as a heuristic for gathering information.

Read Intercultural Knowledge Building: The Literate Action of A Community Think Tank. Download PDF with Acrobat. Focus on Sections I. Designing an Intercultural Forum and II. Designing a Dialogue to Use Difference.

Recall a time you participated in a group rap session, forum or decision making discussion within an organization. How would you describe the rules of that discourse. Were there competing models of deliberation at work? How did it compare to the discourse of a community think tank as this paper describes it?

Read: Get to know your way around the Think Tank Web site www.cmu.edu/thinktank
Review the *Findings* of the Think Tank on Health Care. Look at the its rhetorical/document design. What will you need to include or discover to create your own volume?

Step 3. Holding the Story-Behind-the Story Sessions

Th 30 SBS Session with Interns

Each team will get to hold two sessions with a group of Interns

- Get the Story Behind the Story:
What are people in this scenario thinking?
What's going on? What is the problem?
- Seek Options & Rivals on How to Explain
- Tape the session. Document with transcription notes

Step 4. Construct A Briefing Book

NOVEMBER

Tu 4 Debrief and Draft Briefing Book

DUE: Transcription Notes from SBS for team and posted to BBoard

Step 5. Decision Point Sessions on Explaining

Th 6 Decision Point Session With Interns

Rehearse Facilitating a Dialogue

Document Options

DUE: Inquiry # 3. Rhetor's Portfolio

Tu 11 Debrief and Start Findings

Due: Completed Briefing Book for TT
Transcription Notes from Decision Point Session

Th 13 Decision Point Session With Community

Step 6. Document Findings

Tu 18 Debrief with Interns

Due: Transcription Notes from Think Tank

Th 20 Develop Document

Tu 25 Teams Present Findings

Th 27 THANKSGIVING

December

Tu 2 & Th 4 Present Your Personal Discoveries: Inquiry #4

DUE: December 11 5:00 pm

Your group Briefing Book and Findings & Memo

Send me an individual memo giving me an assessment of the kind and level of contribution you and each member of the team made to this project. List each writer and give your estimate of the per cent of total effort (it should add up to 100%!). Feel free to nominate an MVP.

Inquiry # 4 Your Personal Discoveries about the Rhetoric of Making a Difference for Everyday People

Optional Extra Credit Discovery Memo

Discovery Memo: Articulating Your Affirmations

As you educate yourself “to live deliberately,” an important part of your tool kit is the attempt to say what you affirm, what you stand for. Hershel says “to be is to stand for; to be is to stand with.” We all already stand somewhere in the world with what philosopher Katie Cannon talks about as our “biases” when she described herself as “biased for hope, love, and action.” The flip side of these enabling affirmations is of course the restraints you put on yourself—what you won’t do. For Niebuhr the question to struggle with was, how do I contend without becoming wrongly contentious? Or when does “helping” others become “controlling” others.

Think about a specific field of action that matters to you and, being as concrete and operational as you can, try to articulate what you affirm, what you stand for not only in your attitudes but actions. West would argue that action for freedom calls for improvisation not dogmatism, and that a statement of what I affirm is necessarily tentative, provisional, open to critical reflection and revision. So make this a first step toward articulating this understanding for yourself.