



**RETHINKING PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES**

*SERIES EDITORS:*

OLIVER P. RICHMOND · ANNIKA BJÖRKDAHL · GİZİM VISOKA

# Everyday Peacebuilding through Democratic Political Education


The Need for Radical Poise

Stephen L. Esquith

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# Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies

## Series Editors

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This agenda-setting series of research monographs, now more than two decades old, provides an interdisciplinary forum aimed at advancing innovative new agendas for peace and conflict studies in International Relations and other disciplines. Many of the critical volumes the series has hosted so far have contributed to new avenues of analysis directly or indirectly related to the search for positive, emancipatory, and hybrid forms of peace in the structural and ethical context of global justice and sustainability. Constructive critiques of liberal peace, hybrid peace, everyday contributions to peace, the role of civil society and social movements, international actors and networks, as well as a range of different dimensions, nexuses, and scholarly generations of peace (from peacebuilding and statebuilding, to youth contributions, photography, the arts, gender debates, spatial innovations, embodiment, and emotional aspects, and many case studies) have been explored so far. The series raises important critical and political questions about what peace is, whose peace is, and peace for whom, as well as where peace takes place. In doing so, it offers new and interdisciplinary perspectives on the development of international peace architecture, peace processes, peacebuilding, peacekeeping and mediation, statebuilding, and localised peace formation in practice and theory. It examines their implications for the development of local peace agency and the connection with theoretical advances about emancipatory forms of peace and global justice, which remain crucial in different conflict-affected regions around the world. This is related to the ongoing transition from a so-called liberal international order to a more multipolar and authoritarian version associated with older notions of conflict management and the post-colonial, economic, and environmental challenges against the Eurocentrism and inequalities associated with liberal peace. This series' contributions offer both theoretical and empirical insights into many of the world's most intractable conflicts, also investigating increasingly significant evidence about blockages to peace, counter-peace, the breakdown of the liberal order, and the rise of alternative approaches (for better or worse). Its monographs and edited collections contribute—we hope—to the potential for new innovative and transformative approaches to emerge that may radically improve the international peace architecture or its possible alternatives.

Stephen L. Esquith

Everyday  
Peacebuilding through  
Democratic Political  
Education

The Need for Radical Poise

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ISSN 1759-3735 ISSN 2752-857X (electronic)  
Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies  
ISBN 978-3-031-88299-9 ISBN 978-3-031-88300-2 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-88300-2>

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for Yoby Guindo

*Acknowledgments* I wish to thank several people for their support dating back to 2004. Yoby Guindo has been our guide, advisor, and collaborator from the very beginning. He has helped us meet and work with key partners in Mali, and his sound judgment has kept us moving forward at every stage. He has mentored our mentors, and his expert knowledge of teacher education and Malian culture have helped us see around corners when we didn't realize we were about to make a turn. He introduced us to the co-founders of the Ciwara School, Maria Diarra, Debbie Fredo, and Cheick Oumar Coulibaly, and to Kandiouara Coulibaly and Boubacar Doumbia of the Kasobané Bogolan fabric collective.

Michigan State University colleague John Staatz and the Department of Agriculture, Food, and Resource Economics provided us with critical logistical and administrative support in Mali to get our program off the ground. Beyond that, John's deep knowledge of politics, economics, and society in Mali, his personal contacts with key government officials, especially Ministers Nango Dembélé and Cheick Oumar Diarrah, and his constant encouragement have sustained us innumerable times as we encountered the inevitable ups and downs of international academic work.

Weloré Tamboura was the co-leader of our Photovoice Project in Mali from its inception in 2018 until 2023. As a visiting scholar in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities of Michigan State University, she built a strong connection between her Malian university students at the Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako and students in the Residential College. Under her tutelage ULSHB students served as the mentors for youth in the camps for internally displaced persons in Mali participating in the Photovoice Project, and during this period she and I co-authored two articles and gave numerous presentations to university audiences in the United States about this work.

Vincent Delgado, Director of the Network for Global Civic Engagement in the Residential College, has created a network for community-based teaching and learning that has supported our work and inspired us. He has enabled us to share our work with others also committed to the values of reciprocity and solidarity across this network.

The Michigan State Alliance for African Partnership under the leadership of Amy Jamison, Jose Jackson-Malete, and Richard Mkandawire has provided funding and collegial support for our work and made it possible for us to collaborate with Malian university faculty Macki Samake

and Weloré Tamboura at the ULSHB which has been one of the AAP consortium's member institutions.

The International Development Ethics Association has provided us with numerous opportunities to present our work. The comments and suggestions we have received from IDEA members David C. Crocker, Nigel Dower, Jay Drydyk, Des Gasper, Lori Keleher, Stacy Kosko, Anna Malavisi, Eric Palmer, Chloe Schwenke, and Melanie Walker among many others at IDEA international meetings in Bordeaux, France and Medellin, Colombia have come at exactly the right times.

Another organization that has been instrumental in our work is Scientific Animations Without Borders. Barry Pittendrigh, Julia Bello-Bravo, and their staff at SAWBO have enabled us to make the jump from printed picture books to video animations so that we could reach a wider audience. The next step to the Photovoice project depended upon the skills that we developed working with SAWBO on several animation projects that remain available on its web site.

Several universities and research institutes recently have given us an opportunity to present our work as it has matured. We are especially grateful for the constructive comments and suggestions from members of the Department of Philosophy, Michigan State University; the African Studies Center, Michigan State University; the Department of History and the African Studies Program, Georgetown University; the Department of Sociology, George Mason University; the Center for Values in International Development, College Park Maryland; and the Global Citizenship Education Program of the Peace Research Institute, Frankfurt, Germany.

Many people have offered constructive comments on the manuscript and the ideas in it. They include Bienvenu Azehoungbo, Mike Bratton, David Cooper, Massa Coulibaly, Moussodjie Dembélé, Kurt Dewhurst, Jay Drydyk, Sean Fitzpatrick, Debbie Fredo, Boubacar Garango, Des Gasper, Rich Hall, Ken Harrow, John Hunter, Andrew Jason, Stacy Kosko, Carolyn Loeb, Marcy Hessling O'Neil, Eric Palmer, Richard T. Peterson, David Robinson, John Staatz, Gordon Stewart, Todd Swanstrom, Boubacar Sy, Moussa Traoré, Joan Tronto, Melanie Walker, Tom Wartenberg, and David Wiley. I also want to thank Kwangsu Mok, Jong Hwan Lee, and their undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of Philosophy of the University of Seoul who on the day after Donald Trump's disheartening U.S. electoral victory in November 2024 raised important questions about the power of a praxis of radical

poise to counter anti-democratic populist emotions and beliefs and their fascist exploitation by predatory demagogues. All of these people have helped to improve the arguments and interpretations that make up the fabric of this book, but of course none is responsible for the stitches I have dropped.

I owe an immeasurable debt of thanks to fabric artist and quilter Chris Worland who has taught me how to see and do the work of everyday peacebuilding through a material lens. I have tried to piece the chapters and sections of this book together with the same sensibility she has infused into our picture books, video animations, political simulations, and photographs. Not all the pieces are the same size and shape; not all of them are cut from the same cloth, but for an interdisciplinary praxis modeled on Malian textile art and American patchwork quilts, this is as it should be. Our son Sam, who introduced Chris and me to Mali when he was a Peace Corps volunteer there doing local hands-on work with village water and sanitation crews, has read and provided invaluable feedback on this manuscript, and just as he has over many years, he has helped us remain realistic and hopeful for a more peaceful and democratic Mali.

A long-term project with so many twists and turns needs someone who can arrange the necessary travel, schedule the necessary meetings online and in-person, keep the budget balanced across multiple time zones and in different currencies, and then as the manuscript comes together, clear away the dead wood, organize the references, and secure the copyright permissions. Amber Waldburger has done all of this and more through a score of overlapping rough drafts and intersecting track changes. It has been a pleasure to work with her.

*Competing Interests* The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Stephen L. Esquith** has been working on ethical problems in developing countries since 1990 when he was a senior Fulbright scholar in Poland and then again in Mali in 2005–06. While in Poland he collaborated on two collections of essays written by Polish and U.S. scholars on the changes in Eastern Europe since 1989. His research and teaching since that time has focused on democratic transitions in conflict and post-conflict situations. He has written on the rule of law, the problem of democratic political education, mass violence and reconciliation, and moral and political responsibility. He is the author of *Intimacy and Spectacle* (Cornell, 1994), a critique of classical and modern liberal political philosophy, and *The Political Responsibilities of Everyday Bystanders* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010) on mass violence and democratic political education. He has been involved in numerous civic engagement projects in the public schools and has led a study abroad program focusing on ethical issues in development in Mali in summer 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2014. He spent the academic year 2005–06 teaching and working with colleagues at the University of Bamako, Mali, as a senior Fulbright scholar. There he taught two seminars on ethics and development at the Institut Polytechnic Rural and the Institut Supérieure de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée. He has co-edited a volume of critical essays on the human capabilities approach to development, and recently written on children’s human rights, peacebuilding, the role of film in democratic political education, human security, and philosophy for

children. He is currently working with colleagues on several dialogue and reconciliation projects with internally displaced youth in Mali in collaboration with the Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, La Commission Vérité, Justice, et Réconciliation du Mali (CVJR), and peace education projects for refugee youth in Michigan. Having served as chair of the Department of Philosophy for five years, upon returning from Mali to Michigan State University in fall 2006, he became founding Dean of the new Residential College in the Arts and Humanities. In fall 2023, he moved back to the Department of Philosophy to continue his research in Mali and to teach.

# ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AEEM	Association of Pupils and Students of Mali
AL	Alabama
ASU	Alabama State University
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CAR	Central African Republic
CCEP	Cours Collaboratifs Éducation à la Paix
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COVID-19	2019 Novel Coronavirus
CVJR	Commission for Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation
D.C.	District of Columbia
DEPA	Decolonizing Education for Peace in Africa
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EPP	Everyday Peace Power
HIJOS	Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetfulness and Silence
IDEA	International Development Ethics Association
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IEP	Institute for Popular Education
IMRAP	Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IUT	Institut Universitaire de Technologie
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MSU	Michigan State University
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RCAH	Residential College in the Arts and Humanities
SAWBO	Scientific Animations Without Borders
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
ULSHB	Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
U.S.	United States
WPC	Women's Political Council
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

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## The Need for Radical Poise

We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record... By May 2024, more than 120 million individuals have been forcibly displaced worldwide [including 68.3 internally displaced persons] as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations.

—The United Nations Refugee Agency<sup>1</sup>

The term radical poise may seem out of place at best in any effort to end the political violence that has led to this unprecedented level of forced displacement throughout the world. What possible formative peacebuilding role can a mere stance such as poise play at this time? In what sense if any can poise be radical? How can the arts and humanities be anything more than minor accompaniments to material development and humanitarian intervention against forced displacement?

Answers to these questions are neither simple nor obvious. The main idea is that when appropriately cultivated through a democratic political education in the arts and humanities, radical poise in theory and radically poised processions in practice together have the potential to limit negative political emotions such as anger, hatred, and fear and to coordinate a counter-vailing set of political virtues (self-restraint, resistance, political respect, humility, and protest) necessary for everyday peacebuilding.

<sup>1</sup> “Refugee Facts,” United Nations Refugee Agency, accessed November 21, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics>.

Fighting fire with fire too often has only accelerated the spread of political violence. Sincere calls for empathy, compassion, and forgiveness to heal the damage done by political violence by themselves have not fared much better. Radical poise and its constituent political virtues offer a collective path forward that is neither a continuation of the status quo nor a future in which power over forcibly displaced persons devolves into ever more extreme cycles of political violence.

While the impetus for this book is what the United Nations Refugee Agency called in 2024 the highest level of displacement on record, the demos of everyday peacebuilding is not made up of forcibly displaced persons alone. Everyday peacebuilding through democratic political education cultivates a wider demos that includes, in addition to forcibly displaced persons, their families and associates left behind, their new allies among professional counter-elites, and fugitives from political violence who have eluded forced displacement but remain fearful yet undaunted in its shadows. This emergent demos also will include some of the bystanders who, to one degree or another, have become coolly accommodated to and not yet adequately aware of their responsibilities as beneficiaries of the harmful consequences of political violence.

*Everyday Peacebuilding through Democratic Political Education: The need for radical poise* builds upon my earlier reflections on the theory and practice of political education and a series of practical efforts to design political education democratically on a local scale. My earliest reflections on political education centered on Anglo-American liberal political theorists, followed by an exploration of how poetry, theater, photography, film, and other art forms can prompt more critical self-reflection on the political responsibilities of everyday bystanders to political violence. At the same time, I began to participate in a series of community engagement projects using the visual and performing arts in Mali at a promising yet brief moment of peacebuilding and democratic reform, plus parallel peace education community engagement projects with refugee students and marginalized youth in Michigan. The work in Mali illustrates how a process of everyday peacebuilding through democratic political education can be imagined from the bottom up and the middle out at a time when autocratic rulers and their followers, as Eva Illouz and Avital Siron have argued in *The Emotional Life of Populism*,<sup>2</sup> do not feel that democracy

<sup>2</sup> Eva Illouz and Avital Siron, *The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy* (Polity Press, 2023).

can or should have a place in their lives. In fact, often they are openly hostile to it.

In the course of this collaborative work in Mali, we have found that the arts and humanities can play a significant part in the process of everyday peacebuilding through democratic political education. Through combinations of still and moving images, emotionally honest stories, empowering reenactments, uplifting choreography, and steadfast refusals, the arts and humanities have demonstrated the capacity to reorient viewers and listeners toward power and violence so that they are better able to actively participate in this self-critical formative process. The demos can do more than passively bear witness to acts of violence, although there is an element of witnessing in their expressions and performances of radical poise. How the arts and humanities cultivate radical poise and its constituent political virtues will depend upon the form the arts and humanities take and the context in which they are practiced. In the right circumstances and in diverse ways, the arts and humanities can deepen emotional intelligence, widen the framework for understanding collective political responsibility, and gradually cultivate in the demos what the philosopher José Medina has called an “enactive imagination.”

But before describing this process, let me step back briefly and trace the path that brought me to this point. In *Intimacy and Spectacle: Liberal Theory as Political Education*,<sup>3</sup> I argued that the writings of major figures in the history of liberal political theory (Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls) have played significant roles in the making of liberal citizens as clients and consumers whose orientation toward power combines trust in expert authority and faith in spectacular showmanship, resulting in a docile yet stubborn acceptance of politics as expert policymaking. The making of liberal citizens, or what I call their political education, has not been primarily a matter of didactic moral instruction. It has depended upon the dialogical way in which the writings of these philosophers and their acolytes have become part of a discursive liberal political tradition. This dominant liberal ideology rests on neo-colonial beliefs in state-building and national sovereignty. For Mill, that meant a faith in national representative government, with a rebuttable presumption against intervention in the affairs of other states. For Rawls, the rights and duties of citizens of a sovereign “well-ordered society” are qualified

<sup>3</sup> Stephen L. Esquith, *Intimacy and Spectacle: Liberal Theory as Political Education* (Cornell University Press, 1994).

by a duty to protect individuals in other states when their human rights (including a right to minimum subsistence) have been violated and by a duty to help other states develop their own capacity to guarantee a level of minimum subsistence. As far as the need for global governance, in 1999 Rawls admirably agreed with Immanuel Kant who had written in *Perpetual Peace* (1795) that a world government would become either a global despotism or a fragile empire riddled with civil strife.

Liberal theories of politics as expert policymaking and private consumption have functioned *as* forms of political education, even though they contain very few explicit theories *of* political education. They have accomplished this through the stories they have told about their own genealogy and the polyphonic speech genres in which they have told these stories. My initial interpretation of this liberal tradition ended by promising a more democratic political theory that could serve as a form of political education capable of loosening the grip of a state-centered clientelism and consumerism by re-orienting citizens toward the actual structures of corporatist power and what has become known as neo-liberalism. The democratic alternative that I recommended but did not flesh out in *Intimacy and Spectacle* was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his *Journals*, Emerson wrote, “Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, today amidst this vertigo of shows and politics.”<sup>4</sup> It was this sentence in particular that caught my attention amid today’s dizzying spectacle of clientism, consumerism, and political violence.

In *The Political Responsibilities of Everyday Bystanders*,<sup>5</sup> I explored ways in which bystander beneficiaries of political violence could learn to recognize their complicity in political violence through the lens of artists such as William Kentridge, Sebastião Salgado, and Claude Lanzmann “amidst this vertigo of shows and politics.” As political violence has escalated, I have looked beyond the responsibilities of everyday bystanders to the political education of a heterogeneous demos. *Everyday Peacebuilding through Democratic Political Education* develops an overarching political virtue of radical poise capable of (1) coordinating the constituent political virtues and emotions of self-restraint, resistance, humility, political respect for civic dignity, and protest to counter the political violence that fuels forced

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience” in *Essays: Second Series, in The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2nd edition., ed. Joel Myerson (AMS Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen L. Esquith, *The Political Responsibilities of Everyday Bystanders*, (Penn State University Press, 2010).

displacement and (2) constituting a more inclusive demos that embodies these coordinated political virtues and emotions in the exercise of political power with one another, not over others.

The term radical poise may sound strange, not just unfamiliar. I first heard Sheldon Wolin use it in the early 1970s to describe an orientation toward political struggle that is needed by an emergent political community, the demos, that is divided and under assault. Today, the fog of war is thickening once more, and the very idea of a democratic political community sometimes can seem as out of reach now as it may have seemed to Emerson during the Civil War in the United States and to Wolin during the United States led war in Southeast Asia. To be radically poised in such moments of political vertigo is to be actively and imaginatively committed to expanding a diverse demos peacefully even when it seems to be splintering further apart.

To be radical in contexts such as these is to resist and protest against the cycles of hatred that sustain political violence, and at the same time to do this with humility and respect for the political dignity of others. To be radical is not to take an entrenched position against all forms of political violence, but to remain self-critically aware of the dangerous dialectic of power and violence so that political violence does not have time or space to take root. Radical poise is dynamically balanced poise, not a form of extremism, as some predatory demagogues have said all forms of radicalism are.

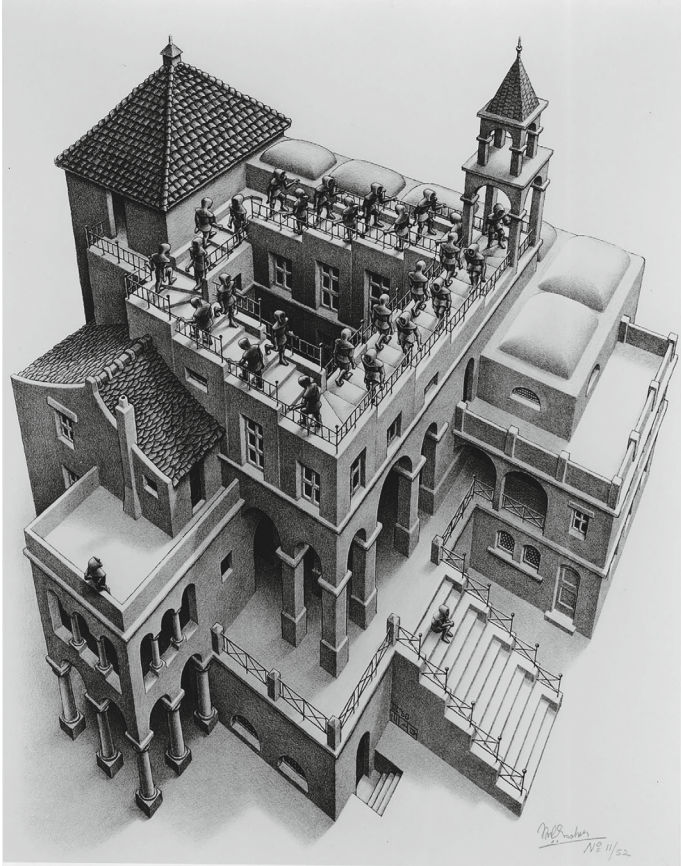


## Introduction

*Where do we find ourselves? We wake and find ourselves on a stair;  
there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are  
stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.*  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson’s characterization of experience as an uncertain process of climbing stairs and always being in mid-step, one foot pushing off from below and the other tentatively landing on the step above never quite sure where the process will end, is particularly true of political experience; but with two important qualifications.

First, political experience is an imperfectly shared process. There is more than one staircase, not all of them connect, and we are rarely if ever alone on them. Political experience is the experience of a plurality of diverse individuals and groups within and across borders, crisscrossing, pushing, pulling, and sometimes lending one another a hand. Second, political experience is not always an upward journey. There is backsliding, diplomatic stalemate, and unholy alliances, all with their own uncertainties, often leading back “to one’s shock, exactly where one had started.”<sup>2</sup> The famous 1960 lithograph by M.C. Escher, *Ascending and Descending*, captures this vertiginous feeling of seemingly inescapable “shock,” even when we feel that we have reached the top floor (Fig. 1.1).<sup>3</sup>



**Fig. 1.1** M.C. Escher, *Ascending and Descending*, lithograph, first printed in March 1960 © 2024 The M.C. Escher Company-The Netherlands. All rights reserved. [www.mcescher.com](http://www.mcescher.com)

As important as political experience is for the acquisition of democratic knowledge capable of complementing and correcting academic research and professional expertise, learning from this experience requires a political education beyond mastering a strategic bargaining calculus or sheer muscle memory. The exigencies of an imperfectly shared political life, with its dialectic of power and violence, require a political education that is at

once collective and self-critical. One can see this symbolized in this Escher drawing by the concentric patterns of figures walking in opposite directions and the two lone figures in the side courtyard and on the front steps, but who are still insiders pondering their collective fate.

From an outsider's perspective political experience is a gradual layering process, and everyday peacebuilding through democratic political education is, in Catherine M. Coles apt phrase, the deconstructive "delamination" of this layering process so that the cultivation of radical poise can occur.<sup>4</sup> Delamination exposes the residues, the glue, and the open spaces between layers, that is, the ambiguities, the uncertainties, and the opportunities most visible from offstage that may guide an emergent demos of citizens, prospective citizens, and conditional citizens in this delamination process. The border between citizens and non-citizens is never permanent as refugees, fugitives, immigrants, and other forcibly displaced persons press for greater inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Democratic political education, like the demos itself, is at best an imperfect work in progress.

An emergent demos of citizens, conditional citizens, and potential citizens—whatever their formal legal status—must learn to limit the negative political emotions of fear, anger, hatred, and resentment (their own as well as those of others) that drive the cycles of political violence in rich and poor countries alike. In addition to being victims of these cycles of political violence, an emergent demos also runs the risk of becoming a force for populist political violence. Everyday peacebuilding through democratic political education is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for limiting these negative political emotions and for cultivating the political virtues needed for an alternative, more democratic orientation toward power; one that values and exercises power *with* other members of a demos, not power *over* them. These demotic political virtues include,

- The knowledge and ability to act and speak with **self-restraint** in the face of political violence, matched by the ability to **resist** acts of political violence against oneself and others.<sup>6</sup>
- The knowledge and ability to maintain **humility** in the exercise of political power, matched by the ability to demonstrate **respect** for the civic dignity of others who are victims of political violence.
- The knowledge and ability to **protest** non-violently against structural and symbolic forms of political violence.
- The knowledge and ability to proceed with self-reflective and collective **radical poise** to coordinate this constellation of political virtues.

In the context in which the arrogance of power and the fog of war (and peace) can lead to cycles of political violence, individual members of an emergent demos may fail to recognize threats to the political dignity of others and to themselves, not only the threat of material deprivation. They may fail to see how symbolic and structural violence gradually can become overt forms of physical violence. Radical poise is necessary to coordinate the political virtues needed to avoid these dangers and break the cycle of violence that too often defines political experience.

For those who have been forcibly displaced, have benefited from forced displacement, or have just become aware of their complicity in this type of political violence, to maintain a radically poised stance is a continuing process of political learning. Radical poise is not a standing position but rather a pedagogical and emotional procession. It must be reconstituted through a formative process of resistance and protest on the one side and self-restraint, political respect, and humility on the other. Dignity and hope,<sup>7</sup> while not political virtues themselves, play important ancillary roles in this process that demands the demos learn to see its shared fate from both an inside (Emerson) and an outside (Cole) perspective.

Before going any further, I should enter one important caveat. The distinction between negative political emotions and political virtues is not yet another version of the traditional Western philosophical binary between emotion and reason. In the delaminating process of everyday peacebuilding, there are situations in which radically poised acts of protest motivated by anger and fear can lead to a more inclusive demos. In these cases, anger and fear can fuel political virtues, but in a contrapuntal way. For example, the balance between self-restraint and resistance depends upon a self-critical understanding of the importance of strong emotions for everyday peacebuilding, not the repression of all forms of anger and fear. The constituent political virtues coordinated by radical poise are not dispassionate and free from emotion. Paired together, these political virtues of self-restraint and resistance, when appropriately modulated, can be angry and fearful, but not always. The coordination of these emotionally charged political virtues and the constitution of an overarching radical poise together are designed to limit, not repress all negative political emotions and disrupt, not deny the dialectic of power and violence.

This leads to a third ancillary term: struggle. Unlike strict adherence to moral imperatives and unwavering expressions of moral virtue which can be used to justify both armed struggle and pacifism, everyday peacebuilding is a struggle against assaults on the dignity of the demos and