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Arete CEL Final Report

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ARETE CEL Final Report

Even years after the fact, it's difficult to effectively summarize what I learned at Arete and how it changed me. For me, Arete was a singularly formative experience, a period of absolute shock that adjusted many of my beliefs and completely eradicated others. It was not a simplistically pleasant experience. There were many moments of discomfort and frustration when I came up against my own limitations and those of my cohort, when our visions for the future were frustrated by the reality of our scarce resources and fraught emotional states. There was no clear beginning and end date: long before I ever arrived in the Blue Ridge mountains, I was dealing with new questions posed to me by the application process and by the change in values it took to decide to go to a summer seminar in an isolated North Carolinian farm instead of taking classes at university or finding a paying job. Long after I'd left the Arthur Morgan School campus, I was still intimately involved with Arete through my work as the Recruitment Committee Chair, which took up a good deal of my time this past year. And the questions, dilemmas, and joys of the Arete experience continue to haunt and inspire me every day.

1. Education

Of Arete's three founding pillars, which are academics, self-governance, and labour, I was most comfortable with academics. I've always had a frustrated relationship with my education: at times, I felt completely invested, unbelievably excited to continue learning and thinking about difficult problems. At other times, I felt that it was all needlessly competitive, achieving very little other than an arbitrary measurement of an intelligence that I myself didn't

value. Classes were something that I worked at dutifully, often with more annoyance than joy. At Arete, however, I had neither my traditional motivators (grades, the knowledge that I was paying an inordinate amount of money for my degree) nor my traditional sources of frustration (rigid class structures, overly competitive cohorts, professors so distant and so abstract I felt I was listening to an alien) to structure my relationship with learning. I needed to negotiate a new relationship to education, one that was grounded in my own interests and capabilities.

This process was complicated by my cohort's decision, three weeks into the program, to completely re-write our syllabus. Frustrated by the disconnect between classroom hours spent following a Great Books syllabus that involved hours of poring over ancient texts with no secondary sources and the ongoing political and social turmoil in the areas surrounding our community, we decided to re-focus the syllabus to discuss the intersection between theoretical frameworks and practical action. This was a radical exercise of our own agency in the educational process and led to a restructuring of the patterns of power inherent in education. Our professor took on the role of a coordinator and consolidator rather than a storied receptacle of knowledge; we began to see ourselves as active co-producers of a communal educational process. This process was more complicated than we'd originally expected, and the truth is that the second half of our course was marked by as many failures as successes. Still, the effect this experience had on me is unmistakable: my center of attention in class shifted radically from a singular focus on the professor to a much more dispersed understanding of learning as a group activity.

The same concerns that led to our restructuring of the course have coloured my academic experiences ever since, in ways that have often been fraught and emotional, but have also been personally rewarding and productively challenging. After spending a summer combining the

academic and the personal, I found it difficult to separate them again upon returning to Western. On the one hand, I finally began to realize which topics truly interested me and to develop my own academic and creative interests and find ways to combine them. But, I also found it difficult to divorce my emotions from my classes at times. I spent most of my History of the Modern Middle East class in a rage over the state of Middle East studies, both in general and specifically at Western. Before Arete, I would've been able to navigate the class with a more distant outlook, separating the valuable historical information from the colonial ideologies that frame it. Having spent a summer thinking about the importance of educational spaces on both a personal and societal level, and dealing with my own largely sublimated thoughts about race, I could no longer dismiss the explicitly and implicitly imperialist aspects of the course—even though doing so would have led to me to a higher grade and a better experience in the course. But, I think that my inability to do so, and my frustration with the course's shortcomings, reflects the increased value I now have for education. My attitude towards learning has moved away from an unthinking absorption of ideas and skills towards a space for creative and critical work that privileges ideas about access, agency, and purpose.

2. Relationship to Land

Although living with nature is not explicitly one of Arete's pillars, I personally found the prolonged contact with nature to be one of the most affecting parts of my experience. I'd never been particularly comfortable in the outdoors, and I felt that I was too old to become truly comfortable with outdoor activities. Nature was a romantic notion that I understood to be valuable in a self-consciously abstract way, not something that was relevant to my own life. Living outdoors 24/7 for two months meant that I was completely isolated from the urban, cosmopolitan landscapes that I'd always identified with and was forced to reorient myself

without my traditional guideposts, which were as limiting as they were comforting, and to forge new relationships outside the bounds of convention.

I quickly realized just how disconnected from nature I really was. Our resident naturalist quickly diagnosed me with a severe case of “plant blindness,” or an inability to distinguish individual plants from a wall of green. Eight weeks later, I could still identify only a handful of plants with any certainty. But, I did gain a new capability for attention to and respect for nature that could only come from prolonged exposure: from the cuts on my legs during the hours spent pulling invasive rose bushes out from the roots to the long hours spent planting seeds and watching them grow to the joy of harvesting those same plants for my dinner. I no longer feel that I live a life apart from the nature around me.

Particularly interesting to me was an essay called “A Native Hill,” written by Wendell Berry, a famous South Appalachian writer. In it, he writes about his choice to return home to Kentucky, his rediscovery of the landscape around him, and the re-integration of his identity with his local nature. I’ve read this essay five times now, and every reading leaves me feeling excited and disturbed, wondering where my own native hill is and whether I would even be able to recognize it if I ever came across it.

3. Labour

Labour was divided into three main sections: gardening, maintenance, and kitchen work. I was most interested in maintenance work, but I secretly feared that I didn’t have the strength for it. Within the first two weeks, I realized that, far from being a chore, labour was the highlight of the day for the entire cohort. I spent most of my time at Arete working as part of the maintenance crew—I was happy playing with power saws and cement mixers, drawing designs for the freestanding roof.

The major project of the summer was a freestanding roof covering an outdoor freezer. Building the roof took about six weeks. Every member of our cohort worked on some stage of its creation, but I'd worked on it for so long that, at some point, I'd gained some feeling of ownership over the process. It was such a huge project that I couldn't even imagine implementing it at first, but by the end of the summer, I had been the one to design the shape of the roof, calculate all the measurements, and plan out our installation. For the first time, I felt a sense of absolute responsibility to the community: if I'd done everything right, then the project would go well. But, if I was wrong, it could mean a major loss of time and resources or even major injury. I checked and double checked my calculations anxiously, and on the day we were raising the frame of the roof, we decided I should stand on top of the freezer roof and direct the other maintenance workers. Thankfully, all went well, and the Arthur Morgan School campus will now be home to our roof.

In my free time, I took on an additional task: taking apart, cleaning, and putting back together an antique blower in the forge. I knew from the beginning that it would be a thankless project. The blowers were so old that there were no surviving operations manuals. At first, I told myself that I was primarily interested in fixing the blower so I could work in the forge. But, the truth is that I wasn't much interested in blacksmithing, which I found tedious and hard on the ears. Yet, I wasn't willing to abandon the blower, even though I quickly came to realize that I wouldn't be able to finish the project during the summer. Nor was the process of working on the blower particularly rewarding: it involved hours spent greasing bolts in the hope that one of them would be kind enough to come loose. A product of my generation, I'm usually much more comfortable doing ten things at once than doing a single thing for long periods of time. The hours I spent in the forge working on the blower created a space of forced mindfulness.

For most of my life, I'd never really considered myself someone who could "do work." I didn't consider my academic efforts real work, nor did I think of my summer office jobs as particularly valuable labour. I idealized the idea of service-based manual labour as the only form of true work, even though I knew little about it and had never seriously considered pursuing my interest. My parents had both come from poor, working-class families: for them, escaping manual labour and getting into university was a victory, but for me it had become a source of anxiety. I felt that I was part of some privileged class entirely separate from the real world (nature) and from real work (manual labour). Working at Arete allowed me to explore the trials and rewards of manual labour, learn to invest myself physically in the projects we undertook, and strip away some my anxieties and romantic notions about physical work. It also made me understand how arbitrary some of the distinctions I'd made between intellectual and physical labour were: going to class after three hours of manual labor made me realize the physical stresses of sitting in a lecture for three hours, and I began to notice that the repetition and focus of manual labor both required and encouraged serious intellectual exploration.

4. Self Governance

Going into Arete, I was most interested in the concept of self-governance. I've always been resistant to rules, especially rules that I feel I've had no say in choosing. At the same time, I've always been involved with student councils and interest groups, interested in the idea of creating specific spaces and communities. Arete's radical commitment to isolation and self-governance provided an opportunity, for the first and possibly last time in my life, to be completely responsible for the shape and culture of the spaces I live in. The task we set out for ourselves, to create a society within those eight weeks that was completely equal, intentional, and sustainable, was monumental. Failure, in some way, was guaranteed.

From our first self-governance meeting, where we aimed to set out our isolation and technology policies, it immediately became clear that self-governance would be the most difficult part of our experience. We began eagerly, trying to find new ways of speaking and organizing meetings that would disperse power more evenly. We used a speaker's list, decided every decision would be made by consensus, and created a system of hand signals to quickly communicate acceptance, rejection, and reservations. In terms of our actual policies, we often hesitated between choosing to commit absolutely to our values and to preserve individual freedoms. Although we all wanted to limit our technology usage, different people had different needs and limitations, and None of us felt comfortable forcing others to cut themselves off from the outside world. While our compromise (only allowing technology usage before breakfast and after dinner and only in two specific rooms) was meant to balance radical experimentation with individual freedom, it eventually devolved into a slightly surreptitious re-enactment of the exact patterns of behaviour we'd been trying to break. I'd oftentimes find myself sneaking off during lunch to check my phone and even, to my shame, re-downloaded Snapchat to check my messages.

This isn't to say that self-governance was entirely a failure. Certain decisions we made we were able to follow through on completely. Our decision to eat only what we could grow or what we could certify was grown locally and sustainably was one that we all felt strongly about and one that we stuck to despite the vast limitations it placed on us. Arete is not a particularly rich program, and locally sourced organic produce is prohibitively expensive: we formed a committee to plan out how to make our meagre funds support our food decisions, but even so, we were often left for days with certain food shortages. Many of us got used to eating less than

we were used to, although the food was certainly much healthier and could rival any farm-to-table restaurant for taste.

One central theme throughout our self-governance experience was the intersection of the personal and political. We were keenly aware of the political nature of our self-governance work, and in light of the contemporary political issues during the summer of 2018 (most importantly the Muslim Ban and the beginning of the migrant detention camps) we were particularly attentive to issues of race and class. Our academic work had also made us particularly interested in the idea of “taking up space” and wondering who should take up space and when. For many members of the cohort, this led to self-consciousness about how often they spoke. It led to tension about “blocs” forming in the cohort and the expression of privilege in our cohort. I think it was no coincidence that the three girls with the most confidence and authority in our self-governance sessions all came from expensive, prestigious universities. I think it was no coincidence that the two girls who expressed the most frustration as to their voice being unheard in self-governance spoke English as a second language. But, I do believe, given enough time and resources, that we would have found some way to mitigate, if not erase, these differences.

I spent much of my time in self-governance sitting silently. Oftentimes, the facilitator for the meeting (a position we alternated every meeting) would have to go out of their way to make space for me to speak, either by calling me out directly or repeatedly asking for those who’d stayed silent to make a statement. I’m not sure if my silence came from insecurity or arrogance. I’ve often justified my silence, even as it cost me participation marks and put me at odds with my friends and professors, by saying that, if the matter had been important enough, interesting enough, personal enough, I would’ve opened my mouth. The truth is that my grades could weather the loss of a few participation marks and that I was crippled by a fear of seeming stupid,

of saying something to betray my own persistent uncertainty about my literature studies and my place in the university.

Certainly, I was intimidated by the many Ivy League students in the cohort. Next to them, I felt inarticulate and boorish, incapable of grasping the high-minded ideals of Arete. But, the truth is that these people were my friends and many of them had said and shown repeatedly that they valued my opinion. At the same time, there were others in the cohort who had far less privilege than I did: less education, greater financial responsibilities, more intense racialization and marginalization, even the comparatively mundane insecurities that come from being younger and in an earlier stage of their degree. At several points, I could have intervened to ease the burden on them, leveraged my comparatively comfortable position to help make space for them in our cohort. For a long time, I told myself that I was not “good representation” anyways (too pale to really count as Middle Eastern, too Middle Eastern to count as a feminist, too femme to really count as queer) and, consequently, that I had no responsibility to others like me. Later, I told myself that my silence was its own subversion and that I was contributing in my own way by living as honestly as I could. At Arete, I realized that my neutrality in self-governance, my desire to remain close friends with everyone instead of taking sides in an argument I was tired of living, meant that others were silenced at moments where I could easily have made room for them to speak.

I began to push myself to speak more often in self-governance. I chose to put myself forward as the Recruitment Committee Chair and continue my involvement with the Arete Project in a major way throughout this past year. I spent a lot of my time in that role dealing with existential questions about the Arete Project that I hadn’t expected to come up, due to the decision by Laura Marcus, Arete’s founder, to separate herself from the Blue Ridge Session, and

even more time arguing for the ideas of the people on my committee, sometimes against Laura Marcus herself. I still find myself mute and resistant in many of my classes, partially because the university continues to give off a discipline-and-punish aura that was, thankfully, lacking at Arete, but my confidence and passion for community organizing, as well as my knowledge about the kinds of roles that I can play in public spaces, have greatly expanded. I also find that I have become much more articulate about my emotional state than I ever was before, which has been greatly helpful in my personal relationships.

5. Self Image

Spending two months completely separated from all my lifelong frameworks, in a space where all interactions felt intentional and where every relationship was looked at with a critical lens, forced me to come to terms with my self-identity and self-expression. Like most people, I perceive a gap between how I think of myself, how I try to present myself, and how I think others perceive me. I am hardly unique. I'd never been bothered by the fact that I wasn't seen as a serious student or a capable organizer. In fact, I rather enjoyed the disconnect— or, at least, I'd convinced myself that I did. Partially, this was motivated by my continued discomfort and disinterest in traditional discourses about "leadership," which I think are fundamentally opposed to service. I've never understood the desire to be seen as an authority, either in terms of knowledge and experience or hierarchical leadership, and I was overcompensating by refusing to take on any sort of intellectual responsibility.

The parts of my personality that most people focus on—the risk-taking, the reticence, the sexual openness, and the inability to focus—are certainly important aspects of my personality. People connected me with those ideas because those were the aspects of myself I was comfortable presenting. At university, I drew some enjoyment from occasions when people

would dismiss me out of hand as a loafer, more interested in jokes than work, or as an unwilling student completely unaware of the course, its requirements, and the ideas discussed in class. Because most university work is individual and seen only by a professor or TA, people's opinions of me didn't really matter, and I could comfortably sit at the back of class without anyone ever asking me what I thought of the lecture. But, at Arete, there was a much more personal relationship with my cohort members, who fulfilled every interpersonal role imaginable and who worked with me in a variety of circumstances. For the first time, I began to realize just how limiting the way I presented myself really was.

During a casual conversation about re-structuring our syllabus around student-led seminars, I joked that I wouldn't have anything to contribute because I made sure to never know anything. A nearby friend responded by saying, "I'm sure you'd have interesting thoughts if you tried hard enough." If I tried hard enough? I was sure I'd been having interesting thoughts all along, even if I'd kept them mostly to myself. At a campfire during our four-day-long backpacking trip, we played a game of superlatives and, halfway through, my friend Rachel told the entire cohort that they felt I was being represented in a one-dimensional way and that other parts of my personality were being ignored. It was a vague and high-minded statement, but we all knew what they meant: everyone should stop joking about sleeping with me. A weak voice from the back of the cohort said, "Fun fact: Rose is actually really good at math!" I laughed off the incident, but I was sullen and preoccupied the rest of the night—I hadn't realized that my joking nature and openness about my experiences had overshadowed the rest of my personality.

I don't actually think any of the other cohort members think I was stupid, and by the end of the summer, I was much more open about my ideas and capabilities. I realized, though, that I myself had "trained" them to only interact with me in particular ways and that the patterns of

behavior I had encouraged, all the while telling myself I didn't care or found them funny, were beginning to limit not only myself but my entire cohort. After all, half the point of Arete was to create a community where we can expect availability, support, and investment from each other; if I was actively hiding or diminishing my ability to contribute, I was doing more than just sabotaging myself, I was hampering the entire cohort. So much of my life and my energy, I felt, had been wasted rebelling against social norms that I found stifling. At Arete, many of these norms were immaterial, completely disregarded now that we were separated from greater society, from the messaging of the internet and the telephone, from the gaze of men, from the rhythms of the city. Yet I was still trapped in the angry, insecure patterns I had brought into this space with me.

Learning to take and present myself seriously was and continues to be a complicated process. This change in attitude was possible because my cohort had created a community where high performance and investment were expected from everyone. In that environment, I became increasingly conscious of the ways that I was signalling to people that I was not willing/able to fully contribute to our work, and this realization has bled over to many of my other day-to-day interactions. I'd always idealized silent competence, but at Arete, I realized that there needs to be a middle ground where I can be honest and generous with my capabilities in a way that supports myself and my community. How this has translated to my behaviour, I'm not exactly sure. I think I have been a lot more upfront with my professors and extracurricular organizers about the kinds of work I am willing to take on and the situations in which I need some sort of accommodation in order to do my best work. I don't think I could've been as successful a Committee Chair if I wasn't so committed to finding new ways to present myself. I am still suspicious of traditional leadership and the hierarchical structures it implies, but now I see that non-hierarchical structures

come not from a place of refusing to acknowledge skills and abilities but from a place of honesty and mutual investment.

6. Presentation

A year after handing in my summative report, I returned to my memories of Arete to put together my CEL Presentation during the COVID-19 quarantine. The two situations felt both similarly and vastly different: the pressure and isolation were familiar, but the images of Arete's wild landscape and the intimate ways of living with my fellow cohort members inspired an intense longing in my new, isolated situation. Given the organizational split from Laura Marcus, the funding crisis, and the cancellation of our 2020 Summer Seminar due to the COVID-19 crisis, the future of Arete seems increasingly uncertain. As one of the alumni that has been involved in transitioning the Blue Ridge Session into its new, independent form, my thoughts of Arete had been tinged with stress and anxiety related to this transition. Returning my own experience at Arete helped to remind me why I was continuing to invest my time and energy in this project and why it is so important to find a way for the Arete Project to continue existing.

One challenge of putting together a presentation was finding images and documents to put on the PowerPoint. Because of our strict technology policy, there were very few photos of our experience at Arete, since no one was carrying their phone or cameras day to day. Reaching out to my cohort members in search of documentation was an interesting experience in tracking the Arete network: many of my friends were again living in Intentional Communities, and some had gotten involved with other Nunnian Institutions after they had left Arete. I was particularly excited to incorporate images of our planning and organizational documents in the presentation, as they were visual and physical reminders of the work we had put into building our community.

Much like with my summative report, I struggled to summarize and describe the Arete experience in the given timeframe. Trying to find a balance between explaining the structures of our daily life, which were complex and informed by a variety of material, political, and personal considerations, and my own reactions to and experiences with the Arete lifestyle was difficult at first, but I quickly realized that the two topics were much more closely entwined than I had at first expected. Putting together the presentation was a valuable chance for me to reflect on the totality of the Arete experience and get back in touch with my cohort. In a moment of anxiety and isolation, it was a particularly striking reminder of the value of community-building and mindfulness.

Working with VoiceThread was also interesting because it allowed me to record and listen back to my slides, rather than present all at once to a group. The chance to “edit” my presentation in this way definitely changed how I communicated my ideas. Given the opportunity to fine tune my diction, I found that much of my phrasing grew closer and closer to what I’d written in my summative report, as that was the most thorough explanation I have managed to form of my experiences at Arete. I am glad to have a version of my presentation that will stay with me as a reminder of my time at Arete.

7. Conclusion

If I had to summarize my experience at Arete in a single word, I would choose the word "inconclusive." Arete was never meant to be a self-contained experience, as it relies on alumni self-governance for its continued operation and it explicitly states that its aim is to prepare students for lives of service. There are certain areas of my life which I can clearly demarcate as having been revolutionized by the Arete experience, such as my relationship to nature, my

understandings of power and community, and my thoughts about the role of education. But, many other areas of my life were also touched by Arete, in ways too subtle and precious for me to put into words (yet!). Nor can I clearly indicate how this experience is going to shape my career and intellectual path going forward, except to say that it has unquestionably been formative in every way. Arete was, and continues to be, a central experience that influences how I think and go about my work. I am interested in continuing to explore alternative ways of living and learning, systems of communication that reject hierarchy, and ways of being in good relation with my community and with nature. I am certain that I will return to the Intentional Community lifestyle sometime soon. I think incessantly about what it means to lead a life of service, about what I would have to sacrifice to do so, and about what kinds of service I'd be best suited to do. Perhaps the best explanation of Arete's lasting impact on me is that it has put my entire life into question. As terrifying as this has been, it is exciting, too; having tasted the promise of a society free from old patterns of behaviour and thought, I feel a need now to find my own ways of relating to and interacting with myself, my thoughts, and the world around me.