

Ramon Pimentel

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry

Texts: *The Portable Frederick Douglass*; Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*; President Barack Obama's eulogy for Senator John Lewis

Bio: Ramon Pimentel was born and raised in Queens. He currently attends the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, where he majors in Environmental Studies with a concentration in Environmental Policy Planning and Law. In his many adventures in the forest, he once encountered a young black bear twenty feet from him.

Profile: Ramon grew up in the “concrete jungle” of New York City, and as a result, he held a certain perspective about what the world looked like and how people should act in that world: “You rely on your instinct to get you to point A-B, often taking a glance at what’s behind you,” he wrote. This frenzied and wary attitude was, according to Ramon, how he lived his life for 17 years. “I took life as it is, always watching my back. I never felt at ease,” he said. But in his application for the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, he described a significant shift in this perspective when he took a trip to Black Rock Forest and “finally felt at peace.” He was given the book *How to Read Nature* by Tristan Gooley, and he tells us: “from then on, I couldn’t stop talking about nature for weeks.” The book had a lasting impact; he’s now a senior at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

When Ramon chose three texts to explore this summer—*The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, President Barack Obama's eulogy for Senator John Lewis, and “Lessons of the Hour” by Frederick Douglass—he was well aware that words have the power to change mindsets. Working with his mentor, Benji de la Piedra, he noticed that, despite the vastly different contexts in which each of these texts were written, they all carry relevant lessons for today’s democracy. President Obama’s eulogy for Senator Lewis, for instance, “highlighted that voting is the cornerstone of our democracy, and everyone who has a right to vote should have their voice and choice heard and implemented in their community, state, and country.” Democracy, after all, should not be for “one race and gender,” and Ramon pointed out that full participation in democratic processes will inevitably improve the democracy itself.

Ramon next considered democracy in the context of the current pandemic and considered how a just society grieves, expresses gratitude, and overcomes immeasurable loss. On this subject, he was reminded of Pericles’ eulogy for the soldiers who had fallen during the Peloponnesian War, which he compared to modern social media messages of thanks. Though speeches and posts are not nearly enough, they are the first step towards full recognition: “It won’t cover the full extent of how each soldier should be praised...a speech like this can also be an invitation for hatred and jealousy...these social media posts aren’t the full extent of the praise and thanks to the doctors who gave their lives saving and helping others deserve. But it’s what we do next in our society, how we will best honor them and not let their death go in vain.”