

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Jane Blankenship
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Thank you, Ron. Who would have thought 20 years ago when we both began our first teaching jobs not 15 miles apart—at Amherst and Mt. Holyoke Colleges—that we would be here, together, on this platform in Minneapolis today.

You might as well know it *now*, Ron—you are about to begin a year of being asked by well-meaning colleagues: "Have you got your Presidential speech written yet?" During the *first* several months of that question, both questioner and questionee can laugh a bit at the small jest. Then about four months prior to the convention when that question is asked, one tends toward the silent, but nevertheless *knowing*, smile. It is only during the month immediately preceding the convention, Ron, when all of the psychosomatic ailments suffered during convention planning return to plague you, that you begin to make "blacklists" of those who *persist* in that question. It is only *then* that you begin to wonder, as Wallace Bacon told me he did last year, "Why did I ever tell Jane the name of my speech was 'The Seacoast of Bohemia'?" All of which, Mr. Vice-President, leads me to ask, "Why, about five months ago, did I ever entitle my speech, 'In the Presence of the Word'?"

So general a title leaves one considerable latitude. And I do intend to cut a very wide swathe. I might as well warn you at the very outset—I am a *rhetorician* who passionately believes in the possibilities of public discourse. Moreover, I am what Wallace Bacon last year termed in his Presidential Address—one of those poor benighted "rhetoricians interested in style." And I am thoroughly unregenerate about being both!

If nothing else today, I do want to persuade you that the problem I discuss is complex and central to our well being as a discipline and as a people. The problem may be summarized thusly: Today in our society many (including some in speech communication) have forgotten what it means to acknowledge that we do live "in the presence of the word." No, I am not here going to talk about Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Religion*¹ or even Walter Ong's extraordinary book from which I've borrowed the title of these remarks.² But I do propose that we put on our agenda of critical problems, our sometime embarrassment over, or at least inattention to, the presence of the word. I will argue, as I have around the country this year, that by our "embarrassment" or "inattention," we have helped impoverish our nation's rhetoric and abdicated much of our responsibility for sustaining its vigor. Briefly, I want to outline several aspects of that "forgetfulness" and suggest that to

our profession's agenda of pressing concerns we add these three: an increased concern with the "basics" and, in fact, greater care in defining "basic;" an increased concern for the sorry state of our *public* language; and an increased concern with the value-laden aspects of discourse. I will argue that these three concerns are, in practice, inextricably bound up with one another.

As United States Commissioner of Education, Ernest Boyer, observed at last year's SCA convention, we need to pay considerable attention to helping "our students become more sophisticated *themselves* as message senders and receivers. For no matter how much we rejoice in the new communication . . . one of the unhappy by-products of our current culture is the trend toward increased passivity. We are soaking up the messages of others and becoming less effective in formulating messages of our own."³ "It's time," he concluded, "for all of us to focus on clear and precise communication. It's time to teach children not only how to read and to look but to write and to speak."

There was considerable merit in the 1977 convention theme of the National Council of Teachers of English, "Forward to the Basics." I don't wish to be ungracious to my close colleagues in English departments, but it took a lot of prodding from the front page of the *New York Times*, a *Newsweek* cover and a nation of irate parents to move them to once again fully recognize their responsibility for teaching people to write.

I like to think that, in our own discipline's continuing search for "academic respectability" along with our much needed theory-building and along with the research which is still needed on almost every key question in speech communication—that, along with these tasks, we also take time to teach our students, and, in fact, our communities, to speak and listen more effectively. And that we do not have to undergo the 20 years or so of not-so-benign neglect of the basics from which English departments are just now emerging. The times are too troubled and our expertise too valuable for us to relive that bit of history in our own discipline! I will state our obligation quite directly. If we do not take seriously our obligation to help teach people from pre-K to old age to listen carefully and speak clearly and with vigor, then we will have helped relegate them to the passivity and inarticulateness of those who have no *effective* voices in our society—and our society, if it survives such neglect, will surely be impoverished by their silence—or by their less than full effectiveness.

Coupled with my concern over whether we, too, are willing to "look forward to the basics," is my concern over some of the current *definitions* of "basic." I fear that we speech communication educators

may fall into our *own* versions of defining the "basics" as the "mechanics" of writing and speaking whether in dyadic, small group or one-to-group settings. With Daniel Shanahan, writing in *Change* magazine, I am concerned that: "The cries for a return to basics often exhibit a failure to understand communication skills for what they really are: tools for sharpening perception."⁴

Many voices, often from disparate sources, and out of different specific motives, point out what some of the basics of discourse *really* are:

1. learning to identify inferences and assumptions
2. learning to support a thesis or point of view adequately
3. learning about different kinds of arguments and their strengths and weaknesses
4. learning the several ways to define terms and developing the sense to define them
5. learning to organize materials into coherent patterns

I expect an awareness of such a definition of "basic" is what recently led Robert Lumiansky, President of the American Council of Learned Societies, to ask us to quit indulging "ourselves at this point with high-flown talk about 'reaffirming humanistic values' . . ."⁵ "What we need first," he prescribes, "is effective attention devoted to the basic humanistic disciplines in our public education systems. . . ." He lists three such disciplines, first among them "written and oral communication in the English language." Our own discipline's Thomas Sloane well understood such a point of view when, at the 1976 SCA convention, he called for "a reassertion of pride in our work of teaching basic skills. Whether the basic skill is argumentation, public speaking, or reading aloud, we offer an educational program not available in any other discipline, and the skills we have to teach are essential ones to all educational enterprises in a way mere 'service' courses are not."⁶

Again, it would be too bad if we allow ourselves to be sidetracked by many of the same "detours" taken by some of the most vocal friends of the back-to-basics movement in English. (And nobody knows more vividly how embarrassing one's "friends" can be than the director of a communication skills program, which purports to teach 4,000 first-year students, when one's friends defend the program, often on the wrong grounds!). For just as "basics" means something far more important than spelling, the semicolon, and rule 69B in *The Essential Stylist*, so they include more for us than pronunciation, eye contact 80% of the time, and establishing a feeling of togetherness.

Many thoughtful people realize that even these "mechanics" are in fact *substantial*. In our own communication skills program in Amherst, our teachers consist-

continued, page 7

Blankenship, cont. from page 6

tently complain most about the lack of organization in student writing; that is, thoughts are randomly put down on paper and are presumed "organized" because that's the chronological order in which they occurred to the student. One may cite, for another example, an expository writing teacher at Stanford University quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: "The errors I see most of the time—dangling modifiers, overuse of the passive voice, and the failure to make the subject and the verb agree—are all indications of our uncertainty in point of view."¹⁷ Perhaps another way of saying this, the Stanford professor concludes, "is that I see in my students a lack of directness in confronting their own experience."

Now, if many in this room hold, as I suspect they do, that style is a revelation of epistemic stance, then surely such "mechanical" problems ought better to be viewed as *substantial* (and *not pun* is intended). In fact, any attempt to separate the "mechanics" of grammar and syntax from content seems pedagogically misleading. As I have observed elsewhere, "Through lexical and syntactical choices the [speaker] reveals his categorization and structuring of experience; style is inextricably associated with what the speaker says; it both shapes and is shaped by" meaning.¹⁸

But the "mechanics," however profoundly approached, are not the *only* basics. Surely among them is an overriding concern for the primacy of substance and ideas. Karl Wallace writing in *Spectra*, "On the Well-Being of the Profession," made this point crisply: "A communication in whatever medium, involves meaning, and the symbols used to convey meaning are not empty. . . . If the medium is that of speech and language, the utterance is always saying something. It has taken a long time for this to sink in. Rhetoricians in particular, and some teachers of English, know that they are dealing with something more than style and grammar. They are dealing with content, substance and ideas that are communicated only through signs and symbols and that involve all aspects of the human being's experience and culture."¹⁹

Among the "basics" a central place must be left for clarity and precision of language. It is slightly amusing to puzzle out that a "single environment growth chamber" is a "greenhouse." There is an inevitability about such pompous obscurities and, in any event, they may well be the least of our linguistic ailments. But students surely must be made aware of how our nouns, our *substantives*, have been stretched to near all-purpose meaninglessness when a well known politician bemoans that he lacks a "positive reference input"—translate that into "image"—and when a burglar becomes an "entry operation."

Not only have our substantives suffered, but we are flayed with the daily overuse of adjectives. In a *single* column,

one writer talked about "ugly facts," "ever-darker plight," "deeper and deeper peril," "unprecedented loss," "immensely deep," "desperately grave," "cruelly heavy" and "the fiercest sort." On the *same* day another columnist wrote in the space of 30 or so sentences of "agonized shock," "deeply foreboding," "massive help," "immense stakes," "flagrant example." (No, in this case it was *not* Massachusetts politics that was being talked about). Perhaps President Carter can add this kind of writing to his list of inflationary tendencies to be reversed!

Clearly I am not talking merely about the case of an "absolutely, pure, 100% fact" or "really dead" or about who/that substitutions or even about noun/verb agreement (although I do, in fact, in my most secret grammatical heart, long for that too!). Our "language problems" are more "basic" than that. The "frauds" we suffer from hucksters and shysters of all varieties do indeed, as Donald C. Bryant has pointed out, derive much of their strength from the merely superficial familiarity [we have] with the "live use of language."¹⁹ What is *most* basic about this "basic" is a deep awareness that language "is a system of imputation, by which values and percepts are first framed in the mind . . ."²¹ and that language "reveals every facet of the cognitive, connotative, and affective aspects of personality."²² We have, of course, known much of this long before Richard Weaver and Karl Wallace reminded us anew.

My second overriding concern this morning, then, is that those of us in speech communication pay more attention to the "public language." Lest I be misunderstood on this point, let me make it abundantly clear what I am *not* talking about:

—I am *not* talking about dialects of ideolects;

—I am *not* bemoaning the contemporary, youthful *verbal* correlates of our 1950 sloppy joe sweaters, brown and white oxfords and crinolines petticoats;

—In fact, I am not even bemoaning professional "jargon."

These are surely inevitable and often necessary to allow us to "say" new things and to express our sense of *particular* or *special* communities. In our own several "special" or "particular" communities we, like James Joyce, "methodically set out to produce a *private* language, a language that is, as far as possible, the sheer replica of *in-turning* engrossments" and devote those parts of our lives "to the study of its *internality*."²³ But most of us do not live *solely* in special communities and "internality" and we also seek after, what Burke calls, "consubstantiality" with larger publics and, thereby, we also speak the "public language."²⁴ Thus, what I *am* concerned about is the *public* language (in the broadest possible definition of that conception).

From earliest times, the bond between "being" and language seems an inextricable one. One of the earliest and richest attempts to examine that bond was that of Heraclitus' discussion of the *logos*.²⁵ He uses that almost bewilderingly rich concept in a variety of contexts but one of the most interesting features of Heraclitus' treatment of *logos* is the "opposition" between the "speaking subject" and the *logos*. According to Heraclitus, the majority of people live as if they had "understanding peculiar to themselves." This is true even though "reason is common." It is as if each person were sleeping, for each turns aside into a world of his own. People do not know "how to listen, nor how to speak" and fit the proverb: "Absent yet present" and it "is not meet." Heraclitus points out, "to act and speak like men asleep" because it "is necessary for those who speak with intelligence to hold fast to the common element of all. . . ." The universal, the common-to-all is characteristic of the *logos*: it is permanent and enduring. The striking feature of the "speaking subject" is that he is *alone*. For Heraclitus, togetherness is a feature *only* of the *logos*.

Again, lest I be misunderstood, let me approach this point by telling you what I do *not* mean to imply:

—I do *not* *secretly* long for a French Academy to provide us with a "purified dictionary." Thankfully language and language users will not be straitjacketed by such strictures;

—I do *not* *secretly* long to banish ambiguity from our linguistic map. I, too, know that ambiguity, especially when *systematically* exercised, is a rich source of new meanings or, perhaps still more accurately, new ways of looking at things;

—I do *not* *secretly* long to reduce the marvels of Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dylan Thomas to Basic English;

—And, yes, I *know* that language is ever richly diverse and ever changing;

—And, yes, I *even* know that meaning is "negotiated" between speaker and listener.

But none of this precludes a concern for clarity and precision in *public* discourse. For no matter how much some speakers try to make it so, a rose is *not* a "rose" by any other name, especially when it is called a "flower" (which is more *general*) or a "tulip" (which is simply inaccurate).

Today I think there are two major abuses of the public language that are particularly dangerous: Doublespeak and Psychobabble. I am concerned about Doublespeak, whether in government or educational circles, because it is *inaccurate*—it encourages us to call a "rose" a "tulip," sometimes with quite deadly consequences. For example, it allows us to live in a world of "clean bombs" (as if in anything other than the abstract, *people* are not still killed by

continued, page 8

Blankenship, cont. from page 7

them) and in a world where cheating is called "collaborative study" (as if all "collaborative study" were also cheating). Doublespeak is, of course, a kind of "exorcism by misnomer" where one merely "casts out demons by a vocabulary of conversion. . . ."

While Psychobabble may on the surface seem less harmful and humorous, I suspect it is not. For often Psychobabble calls "flowers" what should be called "tulips" and "roses." Psychobabble is a world in which "uptight" and "hangup" may indicate anything from a mild uneasiness to clinical depression. R.D. Rosen in the book *Fast Task and Quick Cure in the Era of Feeling* puts the matter more crisply. Psychobabble is, says Rosen, a jargon which "seems to free float in an all-purpose linguistic atmosphere, a set of repetitive verbal formalities that kills off the very spontaneity, candor, and understanding it pretends to promote. It's an idiom that reduces psychological insight to a collection of standardized observations, that provides a frozen lexicon to deal with an infinite variety of problems."¹⁶ In short, if Doublespeak lies directly, Psychobabble lies indirectly by reducing necessary variety to sameness. If our language use is the manifestation of what we see and how we conceive of the relationships between the things we see,¹⁷ if our language does reflect our interpretation of reality, then one may pause to ask: What does Psychobabble tell us about that "reality?"

As Bess Sondel reminds us, "We are born into an environment of words just as surely as we are born into an environment of weather." I am, here, suggesting that we place our public language on our broader list of "environmental concerns."¹⁸

But I do not think it enough for us to show an increased concern with the "basics" and with the precarious state of our public language; I think we must also show an increased concern with the value-laden aspects of discourse. Richard Ohmann's observation makes abundant good sense: rhetorical practice "grows out of deep intellectual and moral habits."¹⁹ I do not know if I would go so far as Barzun that "the state of the [language] is in fact the index to our control over destiny" but I do agree with him that as language reveals personal psychoses, it may well also reveal national psychoses. I do agree with James Andrews that "a choice of words is a choice of worlds."²⁰

In a paper entitled "The Mind's Eye: Creating in Language," Walker Gibson observes: "It is one of the many delights of the English Language that the word eye (e-y-e) is a homonym of the first person singular pronoun. Whatever school of perception theory pleases you, all agree that the interaction between the physical organ [eye] and the person doing the perceiving [I] is close, complex and absolutely inescapable. That interaction is en-
chained in the English language."²¹

While I do not want to engage in untoward one-upmanship with my Bartlett Hall colleague in Amherst, there is one other "close, complex and absolutely inescapable" link in the I-Eye connection. One might add another Aye—spelled A-Y-E.²²

This last member of that awesome triumvirate serves to remind us that "the 'stuff' of speeches springs from the essential character of the speaking act, choice-making."

In an article in the *Center Magazine* entitled "The Demise of Dialogue," Milton Mayer suggests that the "characteristic temper of the age is frenzy."²³ A writer in *The New York Times* has called ours a "decade of distraction."²⁴ Surely if nothing else, we can agree that we are subject to what Kai Erikson calls "sensory overload." And, as he describes it: "One result of all this is apt to be a flattening of affect, a sheer anesthetization of the moral and cognitive senses, as if one were suffering from a kind of psychological concussion."²⁵ He continued: ". . . human reactions to the age we are entering are likely to include a sense of cultural disorientation, a feeling of powerlessness, a dulled apathy, and a generalized fear about the condition of the universe." "These, of course," he adds, "are among the classic symptoms of trauma. . . ."

I would not be so bold as to suggest that these attributes alone describe the participants in that national "trauma" called Watergate. But one might pause a moment at least to listen to John Ehrlichman: "I lived fifty years of my life," says Mr. Ehrlichman, "without ever really coming to grips with the very basic question of what is and what is not important to me, what is and is not right and wrong, what is and what is not valuable and worthwhile. . . .²⁶ Perhaps such a massive and tragic debacle as the one in which Mr. Ehrlichman and associates engaged, prompted Boyer and Kaplan, in part, to suggest: ". . . the study of the future should involve . . . acts inherent in all values, the exposure of hidden assumptions, and the confronting of value-laden choices."²⁷ They are aware, of course, of how difficult such a proposal will be to effect. In his book *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E.R. Dodds puts the matter precisely: "It is so much easier to abdicate choice to a world of irrational forces *whatever their incarnation*."²⁸

"The valuable," the "worthwhile," and the choice-making entailed in those labellings—luckily, we in speech communication have a very long tradition of looking at people who do confront in their moments of decision "value-laden choices," and, not so coincidentally, who state those choices in language appropriate to their enacting. "It is," as Kenneth Burke has suggested, "the moral impulse that motivates perception, giving it both intensity and direction, suggesting *what to look for and what to look out for*."²⁹ Listen for a moment to those who *have*

spoken with intensity and direction, suggesting what to look for and what to look out for:

—Archibald Cox, on stage, pleading with Harvard students not to drive a speaker of the political Right from the stage. If we still *any* voice, he reminded them, then "Liberty will have died a little."

—Adlai Stevenson, in his speeches on the relevance of moral principle to politics, reminding his allies, "Better to lose an election than to misgovern the people."

—Margaret Chase Smith, rising in the United States Senate chamber in those dark McCarthy days, and announcing her "Declaration of Conscience."

—Lord Chatham, often ailing and after nearly 10 years of defending the rights of the American colonists, urging the immediate removal of troops from the homes of Boston: "When I urge this measure of recalling the troops from Boston, I urge it on this pressing principle, that it is necessarily preparatory to the restoration of your peace and the establishment of your prosperity. If the ministers thus persevere in misadvising the King, I will not say that they can alienate the affections of his subjects from his crown, but I will affirm that *they will make the crown not worth his wearing*. I will pronounce that *the Kingdom is undone*."

—Barbara Jordan, reaffirming at the impeachment proceedings: "My faith in the Constitution is whole."

—Eleanor Roosevelt, unafraid to be thought "sentimental," reminding us by her quiet example, that it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

—Or, Martin Luther King, discoursing, often at great personal peril, on "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," urging us never to forget that means are ends *in process*.

Nor would I restrict such glimpses of choice-making to the sole paradigm of the speech text but would urge also that we continue to enlarge our studies of what Herbert Simons calls "the materials of a post Gutenberg, post xerox, post RCA, post IBM society."³⁰ For, in a multitude of contexts, Herbert Wichelns was surely correct in saying that "considerable light goes up on human nature when you contemplate it in its moments of decision"—whether those decisions are made by persons in the historical past or present; whether those persons are functioning in dyadic, small group, or large group settings; whether they are communicating in face-to-face settings or those mediated by film, TV or "literary texts."

CONCLUSION

Last year, almost at this time, at the Washington convention, U.S. Commissioner of Education, Ernest Boyer, moved, as were many of us, by the scenes we had come from viewing on our TV

continued, page 9

Blankenship, cont. from page 8

screens, of two ancient enemies shaking hands on Israeli soil, commented: "Not many days ago an Egyptian head of State said in an interview, almost casually, it seemed, that he would like to address the Israeli Parliament. Hours later, satellites beamed to every inch of the inhabited earth the news of his remark. . . . Then, at Ben Gurion Airport, hundreds of millions of viewers around the world simultaneously experienced the electric moment as an Arab plane touched down on Israeli soil. . . . riveting the world's attention on one single, simultaneous breathtaking image—the image of two former enemies as they greeted one another. Instantly 500 million people felt their connectedness. They were drawn together, shared a common image, and for one fleeting moment, the center seemed to hold. In the end, of course, it's not *how* we send our messages but what we say that truly matters, and it just may be that as we speak more thoughtfully to each other [.] with more compassion and more care, our understanding will improve and our world may for all of us become a safer and more satisfying place."³¹

Later at the same convention, Wallace Bacon, moved by those same scenes, recalled a passage from *Genesis*: "Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold Esau came . . . and Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck, and kissed him and they wept."³² One realizes, of course, that words are but synecdoches of the whole events they exemplify. But such words! On both occasions, I am not ashamed to say. I was moved almost to tears by the words of Bacon and Boyer. For by such words we are reminded of the endurance of human hope, and that is no small purpose to applaud. Nor am I ashamed to tell you that, for *awhile* at least, my heart was gladdened and my spirits refreshed and we "true believers," in the presence of such words, like Ponce de Leon, believe for a brief time that we *may* just have found that "Fountain" after which the world has thirsted for so very long.

As the months passed, we were often reminded only too forcefully of how fragile such "transformations" may be. But their fragility does not belie their necessity. Such transformations, whatever else they entail, require an act of faith. But every once in a while words and the larger realms of meaning they sum up remind us that such a center just *may* exist. And when that happens we are transformed, however momentarily, like Coleridge's water creatures, into things blessed and beautiful.

The heroes of Homer, as we remember from our youth, spoke with "winged words." In the *Illiad*, for example, Odysseus "uttered his great voice from his chest, and words like unto the snowflakes of winter, then could no mortal man contend with [him.]" In an anti-heroic and

in a "words-can-cramp-your-style" age, it may be too much to ask for such winged words—but I for one do not believe it! Why are we not entitled to them? Why do we not ask for them, in fact, demand them from our public persons? And, to turn the question, why do we not inspire our public persons to utter such words? For while it is surely true that speakers shape audiences, it is also true, in more than a theoretical way, that audiences "construct" speakers. I realize that I am perilously close to a circular argument were it not for the inherently dialogic aspect of all talk, that holds accountable both speaker and audience for "what is said."

In our profession many of us are in the daily business of training both speakers and audiences. That the quality of public discourse be improved must surely concern us all as teachers and as citizens. In *Rhetoric and Criticism*, Marie Nichols observed: "I take rhetoric to mean the theory and practice of the verbal mode of presenting judgment and choice, knowledge and feeling."³³ Knowledge and feeling. Judgment and choice. How very far back those words reach in the history of our discipline. In that we are concerned with such words, we are all rhetoricians and I submit that we can not escape the presence of the word and its capacity for good or evil, even if we tried to. The presence of the word surrounds us as surely as the rest of our environment and we are just as surely responsible for its quality as we are that of the air we breathe.

—To train young men and women to speak with clarity and substance;

—to teach people that language is using us as we are using it;

—to put before young women and men (and thereby, to remind *ourselves*) what *others* in their moments of decision, in their giving of "good reasons," have said—often with courage and not infrequently with the elegance that comes of clear vision and a sympathetic heart;

—to remind them to *compose* (put together) *accurately* (from *ad cura*, with care)—to remind them (and thereby ourselves) to *put together* our words and our world with care;

—in short, *without* cynicism and embarrassment to remind our students of their humanity and therein to find our own. . . .

What task can be more urgent than that?

In his "Miltonic Sonnet for Mr. Johnson . . ." Richard Wilbur reminds us to beware of those who call for vision but who are weak of sight. As we go daily about the task of elevating the public discourse, may we manifest both vision and sight.

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