

Discourse in Schools:  
A Lecture for the Port Washington Public School System  
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According to the Mishnah, "a fence about wisdom is silence." I am well-advised not to talk so much. But faced with an audience like this and with an opportunity to speak about something of importance, I will disregard that ancient counsel of prudence. When it comes to oral language, I'm a user.

What I will do, however, is pay attention to and practice what teachers have been teaching for centuries: I have worked out carefully beforehand what it is I want to say. I have even written it all out.

This is going to be a longer speech than usual for me. At commencements I follow a strict rule to speak for no more than 20 minutes: there is so much else to be done in those ceremonies. At faculty meetings I learned that prudence and brevity were necessary for survival. Eloquence and elaboration were fine for the faculty, but the president should watch his words. The less said, the better.

I've been asked to talk about instruction in oral language as a means to improved learning and discourse in the schools. The jargon changes all the time, and I gather that I could say that I'm going to talk about "speech communication" as well as "oral language."

But what I am most interested in is what is called "rhetoric" in the classical sense: instruction in the arts of language and thought as used in persuasion.

In the course of my remarks I'm going to talk about an attempted revolution in teaching thinking in Venezuela; about the erratic career of rhetoric as an educational idea; about

the triumph of populism in the 20th century, and about the place of oral language and rhetoric in the schools. The theme that I will try to pursue is the classical idea that democratic society can survive only if its people are able to develop their abilities of thinking and speaking about the issues that confront them. The only alternative to democracy is some form of oppression.

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Liberation from oppression is the goal of the new ministry for the development of intelligence in Venezuela. The ministry was created in 1978, and its purpose is to democratize scientific knowledge for the Venezuelan people. More specifically, the minister, Luis Alberto Machado, seeks to apply universally the knowledge that has been gained in the past fifty years about perception, learning, and thinking.

Minister Machado argues that the scientific opinion of fifty years ago that intelligence is fixed at birth and that intellectual development continues only to about age 25, at which time it begins a long, slow deterioration, is a set of ideas that have been demonstrated to be false or inadequate. What has been demonstrated is that each of us has a capacity to learn far beyond the potential we actually develop.

The Third World lags behind, he argues, because its people have not been taught to think. Underdevelopment is not simply a matter of changing the structures of society, as the Marxists have argued, but a matter of liberating individuals to realize their own intellectual potential. To do that means going beyond the boundaries of formal education in the schools. It means creating a climate of learning, an environment of stimulation of intelligence, from birth to death.

Minister Machado lays no claim to discovering new scientific ideas. His goal is to democratize -- to make available to the people -- what science already knows about how we think. Historically, thinking skills have been taught in a narrow tradition of deductive logic and analysis; only recently have we begun to teach thinking in broader

ways, reflecting both sides of the brain. What is now known and shared by the educated citizens of the developed countries must be made accessible to the ninety percent of those people of the world who do not yet know how to think, and thus how to act in their own interest.

The first projects in Venezuela are aimed at teaching teachers how to think, and how to teach students how to think. The minister has enlisted Edward De Bono, the British specialist in cognition who invented "lateral thinking" in the late 60's. As of this moment, 42,000 teachers have already completed the course. By the end of the year 100,000 teachers will have been trained. While this has been going on, thinking skills courses have been introduced into the civil service and the military. Civil service bureaucracy is oppressive because bureaucrats are not taught how to think. They are tied to rules and regulations and red tape. In the military, strategy now forbids concentration of forces because of the destructive power of weapons; survival requires dispersal of forces, and that requires intelligence: the ability to assess a situation, make decisions, communicate. The success of the guerilla soldier results from the constant exercise of intelligence at all levels of the military hierarchy.

Minister Machado's vision is profoundly democratic. It is also without ideology; thinking can be taught in totalitarian states as well as in democratic ones. But democratic states are democratic because the people participate in governing themselves. Democracy fails when governments begin to think for the people and the people cease to think for themselves.

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This is a lesson that began to be learned by the world in ancient Greece in the several hundred years between Solon and Alexander. The startling thing about Greek democracy was not that it was exclusionary and tolerated slavery but that it emerged at all. The enduring success of the Greeks was probably not that some great democratic leaders and spokesmen appeared, such as Solon and Themistocles and Pericles, but that Plato and Aristotle and the Sophists provided the theoretical understanding of practical democratic ideas.

Democracy meant a society in which public policy was created by public discourse. The mark of the free man was his ability to participate in the debate over issues that affected his life. Lacking the technology of the printing press, the free man had to be educated in the arts of discourse, and that is what the Sophists provided. Education was instruction in the arts of public discourse and debate. I know of no finer literature on the subject than that which the Greeks and Romans have left to us, unless it is the literature of our own early democracy and the pages of the Federalist.

The kind of understanding Plato sought had to do with the purposes of discourse. How can we tell whether what we are doing will lead us toward the good or toward evil? Discourse of this kind is not a matter of questions of fact, but of interpretations of fact, and of thought about principles of interpretation. The goal was persuasion toward decision and action. Persuasion was directed toward important things, things men care about.

The trap to avoid was the trap of eloquence without understanding, without morality. Language and thought are deeply tied up with morality and religion. In John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, for example, written about 1665, a character of particular interest is Mr. Talkative, son of Say-well who abides on Prating Row. Mr. Talkative is not faulted for talking too much, but for failing to see the necessary connection between words and understanding. "The soul of religion is the practical part" argues Bunyan's Christian, and Mr. Talkative is a man of glib facility and no commitment.

The Sophists of ancient Greece were the Mr. Talkatives of their time. Fluent in the techniques and tricks, they were barren of substance and conviction. Their name has come to stand for rhetorical facility at the service of any master. They cultivated technique and ignored truth, or put truth at the mercy of casuistry. Some of the most profound insights of western philosophy appear in Plato's dialogues and in Aristotle's essays on politics and ethics and rhetoric, but in time sophistry won out.

It was not possible to sustain that higher quality of thought. The high quality of Roman rhetoric at its peak in the years of Cato and Cicero and Caesar was also gradually undermined. In time the shift took place from discourse as the vehicle of public policy to discourse as the art of elocution, of rhetorical display. Empire replaced republic. Since then, the moments of greatness in public discourse have alternated with long, arid periods in which rhetoric became a narrow "academic" subject or the dramatic art of oratorical display. For every Lincoln there have been a thousand Edward Everetts.

The modern pattern, the 20th century pattern, has had two dominant characteristics: the first is reflected in the triumph of science; the second reflected in the triumph of populism. Science places greatest emphasis on neutral language, as does commerce. The spiritual and the poetic are modes of thought inappropriate to scientific discourse, and they are only devices to be used by commerce in its own behalf. Populism, expressed in the socialist tradition of identifying democracy with the worker, the poor, and the uneducated, speaks the limited language of the common man. Words and ideas in such a culture must be kept simple. If every man has one vote, every man has one voice; in fact, all voices and all ideas are equal.

While this was not yet true in the generation of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas or even Franklin Roosevelt, it is true today -- of all parties. And, unavoidably, the result is constantly shrinking vocabulary, the pidgin grammar, the abandonment as "elitist" of all standards of usage.

This has taken place, of course, in the century of truly mass communication and education. In fact, in the thirty year life of television during which we have taken our mass culture to a world culture. Is it happening at a time when American culture and American democracy are in decline?

The momentum of American cultural imperialism, transmitted by film and television, has been at its greatest during this period of deterioration of public discourse. The theater of Shakespeare and Shaw has been overwhelmed by that of Tennessee Williams and the

deliberate vulgarity of Marlon Brando in "Streetcar." Popular culture prides itself on echoing, even imitating and admiring, the language of the street, or of what used to be called "the gutter." An editor once told me that freedom of speech would finally appear in this country when a certain four-letter word could be used in Time Magazine. Trashing the language, as trashing the streets, is the self-indulgence of some at the expense of the rest of us. Eventually the situation may reach the point of graffiti on the New York subways -- lacking in imagination of design, just scribbles and marks, the frustration of the ignorant, the brute substitute for language and thought.

The primitive art of the cave-painting has more utility of expression than subway graffiti, but popular culture, especially in television, seems incapable of coping with subway language. It can only record it, for all of us. Communication is for the mass, and mass communication is increasingly television. Television, which is viewed as a triumph of the visual, is actually an oral/aural medium ... The spoken word has replaced the written word, at least in the lives of large numbers of people. It is as if we were back in the days of Hebrew and Greek and early Christian society. In those days, everything depended on oral tradition -- listening, remembering, reciting, and debating were the skills of social survival. Only a handful could read or have access to the written texts and documents. Now, a diminishing number depend on reading and an increasing number depend on what they hear. Listening is passive in its relation to speaking, as reading is to writing. Few of us speak on television; almost all of us listen to it.

We don't listen very well, I expect. I am much taken by the Sperry Television commercials that explain how that company teaches its employees how to listen. Listening skills are critical in an oral culture. Yet the Greeks didn't teach listening, and we don't, either.

We have not yet absorbed the impact of what it means to shift from a newspaper-reading-culture to a television-watching-and-listening culture. For one thing, we read faster than we listen, because speaking, like writing, slow and difficult is a process. The image of effortless fluency in the "rolling writer" commercials for the Pentel pen is an illusion.

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I won't address all of these matters as they are reflected in the schools where you teach and work. I pass over the terribly thorny problem of bilingualism, for example, saying only that it may be a wonderful opportunity rather than a threat, if it could be presented less as a factor of ethnic identity and more as a cultural resource.

While I'm at it, I will indulge a prejudice and speak in favor of Latin and Greek. (In doing so I borrow from Mark Twain: "I know that I am prejudiced in this matter, but I would be ashamed of myself if I weren't.") Latin and Greek are powerful tools for learning and understanding English, and a rich storehouse of the root words of our scientific and medical vocabulary. There is no quicker way to expand one's grasp of English than by linking it to those Greek and Latin roots. That Latin and Greek also greatly simplify the movement from English into Spanish, French, and Italian was lost sight of in the exhilarating arrogance of our belief that everyone else will have to learn English anyway.

Those who teach science should ally with those who teach language and insist that Latin and Greek be taught as resource languages if not as literatures. The strongest argument for learning a different language is to improve the understanding of one's own. There is a feeling of wonder as other habits of thought and expression are uncovered. Knowing other languages is the way we discover that the "metaphors we live by" can be different: the way we talk about time, for example, is, in another culture, talk about pathways; not about how long it takes, but about how one gets there.

The President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies put too little stress on foreign language as a means to language understanding. If you want to test the idea, try to read in French or Spanish something that is very familiar in English. At the time of a memorial service for Martin Luther King, an ecumenical and international service on the hillside at the Presbyterian seminary in Yaounde, Cameroon, I chose to

read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Because of my audience, I had to read it twice, in French and in English. It never seemed so powerful and clear to me in English before.

Rhetoric and literature have always dominated our discussions of language. But in recent years that emphasis has changed. Modern scholarship has explored depths of oral language that the Greeks and Romans didn't suspect. The language practices of small groups and the uses of non-verbal communication are subjects you know more about routinely than someone educated as I was before the behavioral science revolution of the 1960s. That language competence is essential in small group intervention is now accepted. Perhaps lost sight of in the process is concern for the language of poetry and love. With all the emphasis on touching and feeling and the obsession with sex there is an appalling decline in concern for the sensitive expression of emotion in words.

What I am most concerned about, as you know by now, is the question of educating our children as citizens. In my own days in high school forty years ago, "civics" was a required subject, and "public speaking" was taken for granted. We were saturated with courses about American tradition and history, and we were expected to participate as citizens in debate about matters of public policy. My first year in high school was the year of Pearl Harbor, and my childhood was dominated by the debates over war and peace. The rhetorical impact of Franklin Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler were evident to us all. Even Wendell Willkie displayed a concern for eloquence of expression, and Henry Wallace emerged as a persuasive champion of what he called the common man.

In such a setting it did not seem at all peculiar to require students to learn how to speak and debate. There was not as much emphasis on thinking as the classical tradition would have required, and there was no attention given to listening skills.

The generation of which I am a member has since put its highest value on analytical and scholarly modes of thought. Rhetoric fell into disfavor and disuse. In literary style, Hemingway triumphed over Thomas Wolfe, and Rudolph Flesch emerged as the guide to expression. Simple statements. Short sentences. Strong verbs. Secular not spiritual expression. In the

process we may have lost the ability to think with subtlety of understanding, and we may have lost the patience to deal with complexity. The protocol of civil discourse is ignored, and shouting and haranguing become acceptable public behavior. A school board meeting in Queens resembles nothing so much as a parliamentary debate in the new Iran. If the new behavior of verbal and then physical violence continues, what is pathetic on a small scale will become tragic on a larger one.

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It is not too much to say that the survival of our society depends very directly on how well we teach the arts and skills and sciences of language and thought. We have a rich tradition, still at our fingertips, and technology of infinite flexibility and application.

But we are only as good at what we do as citizens as our language permits us to express, as our attention trains us to listen and comprehend, and as our moral tradition compels us to act.