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The Style of Good Speech

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At the beginning of every school year, I always explain to my students and their parents the purpose of my English courses. It is to teach clear reading, writing, thinking and speaking to help students develop their individual sense of style and to be confident, sensitive, thoughtful citizens of the world. The reason for teaching reading and writing and perhaps even thinking might be obvious, but why would it actually be important to teach speech and model good speaking, not only in school but also at home? Why doesn't students' ability to engage in discourse and to present themselves effectively in public, well, just come to them as a natural progression of academic life? Because it usually doesn't just come like the mail or taxes and because, as the critic Dwight Macdonald said, "Great ideas can only be expressed in a great style. There is no such thing as a clear message delivered in a confused style. The message is the style and the style is the message."

The Power of Speech

My first notion of the importance of speech as a powerful tool came during President John Kennedy's inaugural address in January of 1961. I was in Cleveland, Ohio, probably skipping school because I was terrified of fifth grade math and eager to watch something on my family's new portable TV with rabbit ear antennae. Kennedy exhorted his fellow citizens to put a human on the moon within the decade, to join a corps of workers around the world for peaceful ends, and to ask what they could do for the country, not the other way around. What I remember most is that, before Kennedy himself spoke, Robert Frost, the aged poet, attempted to read his new poem "Dedication" at the lectern. But with his glasses fogging up, his papers flipping annoyingly in the stiff wind, I waited to see whether he would give up the attempt. He did finally give up, and instead he recited from memory another one of his poems, "The Gift Outright." How, I wondered, could that old guy actually do that in front of all those people? What a wonderful thing that such a young and powerful leader would call on Frost to ground his administration in humbleness, and that the poet, although seemingly

frail, would unexpectedly show the world how intellectually and physically rigorous he was. How reassuring it is that, fifty years later, another young president at his inaugural would also call on a poet, Elizabeth Alexander, to show us that clear thinking must be matched with clear speaking and that political muscle must be tempered by contemplation. As reassuring as these two events many years apart might be in terms of the importance of speech, the battle for clear speaking must continually be fought.

The Reverend F. Washington Jarvis was the Headmaster of The Roxbury Latin School just outside of Boston for thirty years until his retirement in 2004. The oldest school in continuous operation in the country and unabashedly all-boys, Roxbury Latin says its mission is to prepare its seventh through twelfth graders not just “academically but morally, aesthetically, physically, and socially.” One of the ways that Tony Jarvis would seek to develop the character of his boys for service to the world was to speak to all of them in a chapel service at the beginning of each of its three academic terms. For years I read the transcript of each of these talks. They never failed to move me; they must have moved generations of boys. Ten years ago his talks were collected in an anthology called *With Love and Prayers*. In his introduction to the collection, Jarvis addresses the “agenda of hedonism” pressed on youth by the purveyors of popular culture. He says, “This is no time for principals and teachers to stand timidly aside, sounding either an uncertain trumpet or no trumpet at all. . . . Those of us who believe that life has meaning and purpose—who believe that honesty, simplicity, respect, and concern for others are eternal and life-enhancing values—cannot in good conscience remain silent.” If there is one model for the power and importance of speech in schools, the importance of being able to communicate a vision to develop the character of students for the betterment of the world, Jarvis is it.

A couple of years ago, I was walking on the campus of a New England boarding school, and I happened to be following a student who was headed in the same direction. Suddenly he veered off the sidewalk to pick up what turned out to be a small piece of paper; he casually put it in his pocket, and

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he proceeded on his way to wherever he was going. Later, I was escorted to a mid-morning chapel service. After the usual announcements from students and faculty, the Dean of Students stood up. He was an impressive young man in looks, but what he said in his impromptu remarks was more impressive, though it was about a seemingly mundane subject: keeping a clean school. He said that he had noticed some stray pieces of paper about the school, and he said that he again encouraged the students to take pride in their school, to show a good face to visitors, and to be sensitive to the maintenance staff that was technically in charge of school cleanliness. Now I understood that the student I happened to be following earlier had been following the dean's eloquent but simple exhortations. Indeed, had this man recommended that I take up bungee jumping off my apartment building as a weekend sport, I might have given it some consideration. Such is the impact of effective speech.

A Good Reader Makes a Good Speaker

My most articulate students tend to have parents who value books, who love to talk about them, and who discuss books with their kids. Yet, despite all of the hype about the gazillion books that can be stored in handheld devices, and the blossoming of supermarket-sized chain bookstores, there seems to be general agreement that people don't read as much as they used to. I saw a statistic recently that one quarter of the United States population does not read even one book in a year. The sad part about this decline in book reading is that, as students get used to bite-sized pieces of information, almost instantaneous results from an internet source, or a commercial break every few minutes, their ability to sustain concentration without a distraction declines. The author Nicholas Carr describes this phenomenon as thoughtful people slipping "comfortably into the permanent state of distractedness that defines the online life." As Norman Cousins, the former editor of *Saturday Review*, observed 20 years ago—before the proliferation of cell phones and iPods and iPads and iPhones and every other kind of wireless device, "People communicate in chopped-up phrases, relying on grunts and chants of 'you know' or 'I mean' to cover up a damnable incoherence."

Literature fights the good fight for coherent communication, for when you expose challenging literature to young people there is an improvement in their power of observation, their ability to communicate their ideas

thoughtfully and forcefully, and their ability to sustain their concentration. I am not responsible for the improvement in students' ability to observe, look more deeply into life, and communicate better: it is Mary Shelley, William Shakespeare, William Golding, Arthur Miller, Harper Lee, Geoffrey Chaucer, Willa Cather, Richard Wright, Ernest Hemingway, and so many of their literary buddies. Give students a good book, and the book can practically teach the class.

Many parents have asked me why I put so much emphasis on class participation from every student. A parent may say, "In your term comments, you say that you want my son to be more engaged in class discussion about the literature. Isn't it enough that my boy reads well and writes well? Can't he learn a lot just by listening to what the other students and you are saying?" I often tell the parent of my own experience in school when I did just that: read the books and listened to the discussion. Oh, I was a good boy and wasn't passing notes to other students. But I haven't a clue as to what was discussed. I just have very little memory of the books or the discussion because I didn't really "own" them; someone who was speaking did—maybe the teacher or one of the students who was participating in the discussion. It's only when you express your ideas verbally, try to put your personal stamp on what you have read and thought, and get feedback from the teacher and your peers, that you really "own" the book or the idea.

When students or parents are perplexed about how to participate when it doesn't come naturally, I usually advise the boy to do the reading and then make sure he has at least three things he would like to say in every class, and get that hand up early. At first it really doesn't matter what he has to say, as long as he gets in the habit of giving voice to his ideas. The larger purpose for getting students in the habit of making themselves heard in class is to carry that goal beyond the scope of the classroom: to have the confidence to stand up when they see a group of students bullying another, to shout out when they see someone accidentally drop a credit card on the

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street, to speak out when they see insensitivity or prejudice, or to make a difference when they see the country is headed in the wrong direction.

The Special Effect of Poetry

Similar to the way in which good books draw out the wonderful ideas that are in students, poetry elevates students' communication to an even higher level. My own parents and grandparents told me that part of school for them was to memorize and recite poetry. An uncle thrilled the socks off my siblings and me on summer campfire nights reciting "Abou Ben Adhem," "Kubla Khan," and "The Raven." This is a dying art, and what a shame it is, for not only is revisiting a memorized poem a wonderful distraction when you're getting your teeth drilled or waiting for a subway delay to

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clear, but poetry shows, as no other written form, the beauty and the compression of ideas, the complexity of the world, and the comfort that others have experienced similar emotions and problems. Part of my English curriculum has always been to have students periodically memorize poetry, to recite poems to the class, and to elicit responses to the poems from the listening students. At the least, such memorization expands students' brain power, builds confidence to stand up in front of an audience, develops the ability to listen carefully, teaches the appropriate way to recite different styles of poetry, and fosters an appreciation for the cadence and rhythm of language.

Schools as Havens of Good Speech

Adults, especially teachers, need to be models for good speech. Though it's well established that young people follow their peers in so much of their behavior and attitudes, it's likely that young people won't consistently express themselves rigorously and precisely if the significant adults in their

lives don't either. The many teachers I've observed over the years give me faith that most are articulate in the classroom, expect good speech in the classroom, and can communicate well in their discipline. Dismaying to me, however, is when, outside the classroom, some teachers, for reasons of their own, drop their expectations for good speech. Kids can sniff out this intellectual hypocrisy like coyotes around a prairie dog hole. One doesn't necessarily want to be like my wonderful aunt who would return my youthful, agonizing letters to her with red-marked grammatical corrections. On the other hand, if I teach proper grammar and speech in the classroom, I expect to maintain that decorum in myself and in students outside the classroom. At the risk of being a fussy grammar curmudgeon, I expect students not to say "I'm good" when I am asking how they are (feeling); I throw a fit when a student informs me, "Me and Johnny are going to get some paper from the stockroom"; and I insist that the word "like" should be used as a verb or a preposition and not an interjection or an adverb. In and out of class I explain why the use of this kind of language is improper grammatically, not because I feel that language can stay static but that students should be in the habit of looking closely at what they say and how they say it. My sixth graders will often ask me in the hallways how I am that day, with a twinkle in their eye, not really interested to hear about my health, I suspect, but hoping to catch me saying, "I'm good, thanks!" (They never succeed.) Becoming more alert to the way I am speaking means that they are becoming more alert to the way that they are speaking and presenting themselves, and that means that I am reaching them.

Because our school ends at the ninth grade, every Monday in the fall the boys in my homeroom and I will usually talk about the secondary schools they and their parents have visited on the previous Friday or Saturday. One Monday this past fall, a boy was telling us about a visit he had made to one of the finest secondary boarding schools in the country, and I was most interested in his impressions, for he was a highly qualified candidate. Surprisingly, the boy told us that his visit was terrible and that he was considering not applying to the school. He said that the student giving his tour of the school didn't look him in the eye, couldn't answer his questions

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succinctly, and mumbled. Naturally I tried to put this experience in perspective for the boys: an experience with one student should not put them off to applying to a wonderful school. But my homeroom student felt that if this tour guide could not speak and present himself well, and therefore not represent his school well, he wasn't interested.

Although speech, unfortunately, may not seem as exciting for a school as the purchase of new computers or a winning football team, what better marker is there of a school when the students can speak confidently, thoughtfully and sensitively? It is one thing for a school to encourage open discussion in classes; it is another to rally the school's resources to make speech and the teaching of good speech a priority in order to understand the power of the human voice and of words. During their last year, seniors could present a speech to the student body to reflect on their life and education so far. At various age levels, students could give brief talks modeled on the National Public Radio "This I Believe" series. All students could be required to take acting classes, join the Glee Club, and give poetry recitations in school assemblies. Students could recite, indeed memorize, important historical speeches. Tours of the school could be accompanied by its students, who can answer the questions of prospective parents and students. Lively courses in debate, current events and geography should be requirements rather than electives, for we need alert and articulate citizens who can think and speak based on knowledge rather than ignorance or prejudice.

We should not leave good speech to chance. It should be modeled and taught and practiced, for it was important in 1961 when we were encouraged to serve our country and in 2009 when we needed to be reassured about a rumbling recession, and it will be important in 2031 when one of our students has to make a presentation to the local school board. In the face of e- and i-everything and attempts from all sides to dumb us down, speech is still the touchstone of how well we are thinking. Or is it how good?

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