



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

Writers of the Lost Art: “Rhetorical Perspective,” and the Future of Speechwriting

A celebrated speechwriter and rhetoric scholar offers a brief history of rhetoric—and gives you the intellectual foundation you need to counsel clients with confidence.

By Boe Workman, Ph.D., CEO
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With Introduction by David Murray,
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Introduction: Speechwriters, Let's Stop "Faking It"

There's a conventional case to make for publishing "Writers of the Lost Art: 'Rhetorical Perspective,' and the Future of Speechwriting"—and, for giving the legendary speechwriter Boe Workman a platform to deliver it at the 2022 World Conference of the Professional Speechwriters Association in the first place:

It's that today's speechwriters and other leadership communication professionals aren't properly educated in the principles of rhetoric and the history of their application.

But the truth is, they mostly never were.

The leading reason for becoming a speechwriter has always been "falling into" the work, after stumbling off another rocky communication career path. Writers plan and God laughs—and nudges them into a speechwriting role.

In many cases, the newly minted speechwriter scrambles and makes the grade—and finds with happy surprise that working for a corporate CEO, nonprofit head, university president or government leader is neither uninteresting nor badly compensated.

That's why I know many speechwriters who have done this work for twenty, thirty, even forty years.

I also know many speechwriters who have done this work for decades without knowing the intellectual underpinnings of rhetoric. They've gotten accustomed to the uneasy feeling that they might be more effective—as writers, and also as advocates for their writing—if they knew these fundamentals.

As one veteran speechwriter who succeeded at the White House and in the highest reaches of corporate speechwriting said after listening to Boe Workman's speech: "One thing that's clear after hearing that is, the rest of us have been faking it all along."

Boe Workman is not faking it. Boe is the rare speechwriter who studied and taught rhetoric academically—he received his PhD in rhetoric from Indiana University—before practicing it professionally in various roles, most notably while writing for four CEOs of AARP, an institution he believed in enough to give his very best, for 30 years.

That meant asserting with bosses and colleagues alike what he calls—as you will learn—"rhetorical perspective." And defending its legitimacy as equal (at least) to other perspectives offered by attorneys, finance experts, marketing executives or policy analysts.

Always, he defended rhetorical perspective in a diplomatic way, in a genial style—but with the unblinking, plainspoken confidence that only the learned can project.

Boe's approach led not only to a long career, but also to a highly successful one, that helped shape the leadership presence of this major institution for three decades and culminated in his co-writing national best-selling book with AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins—*Disrupt Aging*, on whose cover his name proudly appeared.

Throughout his career, Boe has also served as a mentor and example outside his organization, sharing his signature brand of professional seriousness and warm good humor with hundreds, thousands of fellow leadership communicators.

And now, with you.

In terms of sheer word-count, this is one of the longer white papers the PSA has ever issued. In terms of knowledge offered per word, it's one of the briefest. This is not a complete education on rhetoric, obviously. But it's a remarkable one, that takes its reader from the dawn of the study of rhetoric to the most practical considerations of leadership communicators now.

In short, it gives working speechwriters shoulders to stand on. And strong, stable shoulders, at that.

David Murray, Founder and Executive Director
Professional Speechwriters Association
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Writers of the Lost Art
Rhetorical Perspective and the Future of Speechwriting
Boe Workman, Ph.D., CEO Communications Director, AARP

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It's nice to be back together after two years of virtual conferences brought on by the pandemic and still be able to have many more people attend virtually. The pandemic disrupted our lives, and it most certainly disrupted our profession.

We've all experienced it, and we've had a lot of discussion about it throughout this conference.

The PSA's 2021 Speechwriters' Census found that after two years of working through the pandemic, many speechwriters are lonely, bored, exhausted and unmotivated. Some are angry and fearful about the society in which speechwriting must be done.

And, as David observed in releasing the study, "Many are worried or sad about the changing nature of speeches themselves: All bullet points, few full texts; modern exec comms is too much social media fluff and informal virtual presentations, and too few major addresses."

It's making many of us feel like speechwriting is a lost art. The pandemic has left us all wondering what the future will look like for speechwriters.

It's raised a lot of questions in our minds.

- Is there still a place for traditional speeches in our new post-pandemic, Zoom world, or is speechwriting, indeed, a lost art?
- In a world increasingly dominated by social media, are we as speechwriters reduced to writing tweets, talking points, and 20-second sound bites? Or, is there still a place for well-thought-out, seriously articulated ideas that can't be expressed in a sound bite?
- On a personal level, we ask ourselves—How do I fit into this new world? Am I still relevant as a speechwriter, or should I think about polishing up my resume and looking for a new career?

Winston Churchill once observed, "the farther back you look, the further ahead you can see."

So, I would like to take us back—not just to our pre-pandemic state— but all the way back to the beginning. And, in doing so, I think we can find a foundation for what the future of speechwriting can be.

The Nature of Rhetoric

The art of speechwriting goes back to ancient times. The Greeks and the Romans called it Rhetoric, and, it was one of the original seven liberal arts to be studied and mastered by all students.

The seven liberal arts were the subjects outlined by Plato in his utopian work, “The Republic,” written around 375 BC. He believed these seven subjects constituted all the essential skills and fields of knowledge required by a free, well-educated citizen and created a foundation for continued learning.

He broke these down into two parts: the first 3—grammar, rhetoric and logic—were the *trivium*—also known as “the arts of the word.” These were the basic tools of reasoning and expression, and they had to be mastered before students could go on to study other, more complex topics, or the *quadrivium*—consisting of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy.

Now, to be fair, Plato didn’t invent the liberal arts. Most well-educated Greeks would have studied these subjects in his time. Nor did he believe that you could just study these 7 subjects and call it a day. It was that by studying these 7 subjects you would gain the ability to tackle any other kind of learning you might face in life.

But Plato took it one step further. He defined these subjects, as not just the ideal for education in general, but as necessary for anyone who leads in a society from a place of love and wisdom.

As democracy began to emerge with an understanding that every citizen was, in part, responsible to lead in society, the Romans embraced the 7 liberal arts as the appropriate way to educate all free and sovereign citizens in the Roman Republic and viewed a knowledge of rhetoric as essential to a thriving democracy.

The Rhetorical Process

Rhetoric, in its broadest sense, is the study and practice of persuasion. And, perhaps the most detailed, practical, treatise on the topic is *The Rhetoric*, written by Aristotle. Aristotle defined the art of rhetoric as “discovering in any given situation, all of the available means of persuasion.” This definition implies the relationship of a number of rhetorical principles which he discusses quite systematically and in great detail under the delineation of the five canons of rhetoric:

1. Invention
2. Disposition
3. Style
4. Delivery
5. Memory

Since we know that public speaking is a utilitarian art—that its purpose is to elicit practical responses from an audience or audiences—we are inevitably involved in making decisions and explaining or defending those positions.

In making decisions, we draw upon all the knowledge we have concerning the issue we must decide. We weigh the choices we could make according to our knowledge, and we choose a course of action or position relative to the issue...and in the process we build an argument to explain or justify the decision.

Central to all these decisions we make in developing a speech are four variables:

1. A speaker
2. A message
3. An audience
4. A situation

It is our understanding of the relationship of these variables which guides our decision-making process in writing a speech. If we go back to Aristotle's definition, we find that rhetoric is about persuasion. This implies that we have a point of view, or knowledge (a message) that we want to convey (through a speaker) to an audience.

But Aristotle also includes in his definition "the given situation," or "in the particular case," (depending upon the translation) which indicates that persuasion is particular to the situation. Understanding what makes a situation "rhetorical" goes well beyond knowing the event, the occasion, the setting, etc. A situation is "rhetorical" when it can be altered via discourse.

So, the question we must ask as speechwriters is: How do we want our speech to change the situation? And, the answer to this question usually boils down to determining what kind of response or reaction we want from the audience. How will our speech cause the audience to behave or think differently?

For us as speechwriters, this means we must make choices concerning the kind of information to include in a speech and what will and will not work as communication in a given situation before a given audience. This process of decision making leads us to what Aristotle calls rhetorical invention.

Once we have discovered all the available means of persuasion, we must

choose the appropriate ones and invent the arguments we will use to elicit the response we want from the audience. This is achieved by using the building blocks of reasoning—facts, expert opinion, examples, analogies, statistics, etc.—to create the right mix of logical, ethical, and emotional appeals—or, logos, ethos and pathos.

- Logos recognizes that people are rational, thinking human beings and by developing logical arguments supported by credible evidence, we can persuade people to accept a particular belief or take a specific course of action.
- Ethos recognizes that people are persuaded by the character, intelligence and good will of the speaker toward the audience. No matter how trustworthy, honest and likable a speaker is, their ethos is only as strong as the audience believes it to be. Ethos is much more than reputation. As such, speakers need to prove their trustworthiness through their delivery and content within the speech.
- Pathos recognizes that people are deeply emotional and that we are most emotionally comfortable when our beliefs and actions align. So, pathos is the art of engaging the emotions of the audience to persuade them toward a certain point of view or to take a particular action.

Developing effective persuasive argument requires all three. That is to say that ethos is not a substitute for evidence and pathos is not a substitute for logical argument. And, logical argument presented by a speaker whom the audience doesn't trust or believe and who doesn't engage their emotions to align their beliefs and actions won't work either.

So, we have to find a way to achieve the right balance to be persuasive with the audience. And, how we balance them is often dictated by the relationships among the speaker, the audience, the message and the situation.

When it comes to developing logical appeals or arguments, we are not so much concerned with theories of logic in the mathematical or philosophical sense as we are with the practical application of logic in the rhetorical sense.

The mathematician or philosopher would define logic as the science of rational argument because their focus is on absolute truths. We, on the other hand, would more aptly define logic as the art of rational argument because we are not concerned with absolutes, but with probabilities.

Aristotle addresses the issue of probability in his discussion of the enthymeme. He notes that persuasion by argument is affected either by the example (which we think of as inductive reasoning), or by the enthymeme, which Aristotle calls a rhetorical syllogism, but we think of as deductive reasoning. And, he notes that the premises from which enthymemes are formed are

probabilities and signs. This is where the argument begins, with an acceptable truth, or a common belief held by the audience and the speaker.

To persuade an audience, we do not have to prove absolutely, or beyond a shadow of a doubt; but we do have to convince them that the outcome is probable. And, the more probable we can make our argument—or the closer to absolute we can get—the more persuasive we are. The argument ends, then, with an acceptable conclusion. And, for a conclusion to be acceptable, it need not be absolute, it must only be probable.

Once we have invented the arguments—or decided what we want to say—we must again make a decision regarding the best way of organizing those arguments for disposition to the audience.

Remembering Aristotle's definition of rhetoric and the phrase "in any given situation," it's important to recognize that public discourse may be impromptu—an immediate reaction to a rhetorical situation. It may be extemporaneous—prepared and thought out but not planned in all specific details. Or, it may be a more formal, manuscript speech in which the exact language has been carefully thought out and selected.

The point is, no matter how formal or informal, long or short the discourse, some degree of structure must be imposed. Otherwise, it will sound like hopeless ramblings from a speaker not capable of delivering a coherent message.

A speech is not a random relation of information. It requires creating order within limitations imposed by other factors—time, space, the physical setting, etc. For example, do we want to use a problem-solution sequence, simply state our point and prove it, use a motivational sequence, or tell our story in chronological order?

The nature of the audience and the situation may also suggest relationships that call for certain organizational patterns. Likewise, the purpose—which defines the relationship between the speaker and the audience—also helps determine how to organize the speech.

Next, we must determine the style of the language we want to use in the speech. The words we choose indicate the way we perceive and feel about the world around us. The way we say things is ultimately related to who and what the speaker is.

A speaker's style is essentially a culmination of other rhetorical factors. It tells the audience much about how the speaker views them and the situation, about how the audience identifies with the topic and how the audience

identifies with the speaker.

So, we have to make decisions related specifically to the language we use in the speech: At what level should the speaker address the audience? Should it be formal or informal? What's the right tone? How technical should we be? Will the audience understand our acronyms or catchphrases, or should we avoid them? In other words, we must consider the precise words and tone we want to use to convey the message.

Finally, the speech is delivered to the audience. The audience, purpose and situational factors that influence how the speech is organized also influence how the speech is delivered. Some situations call for a formal manuscript-style presentation. For others, a conversation, "fireside chat," or panel discussion is more appropriate. And still others may call for detailed visual support incorporating slides or video.

What I have just described is the basic rhetorical process. As speechwriters, we engage in this process every day. But in the daily routine of speechwriting, the strategic and tactical elements of the rhetorical process often take a back seat to other demands and concerns, causing us to often lose sight of what all is involved in our work.

Greater understanding of the rhetorical process and the demands of rhetorical situations will not only lead to greater mutual understanding and appreciation of the roles of both the speechwriter and speaker, it will help us evolve and define the future of speechwriting.

AARP's founder, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, once wrote, "whatever many may say about the future, it is ours, not only that it may happen to us, but it is in part made by us. The essential values will never change, only our adaptation of them and to them. Each generation either brings new values by bringing vitality to our ideals or allows them, through indifferences, to decay."

The Future of Speechwriting

So, as speechwriters, we have to ask ourselves: Should we just sit back, bemoan the fact that our profession—and for that matter, the practice of public discourse—is changing and let it happen to us? Or should we bring new value by using our skills and talents and knowledge of rhetoric to help shape that future?

I think the answer is clear. And I would like to offer three ways that we as speechwriters can bring new value to help shape that future.

Embrace Disruption

First: **Embrace disruption**—Realize that the disruption we've experienced

during the pandemic was not the first time rhetoric and speechwriting have been disrupted—nor will it be the last.

We can go all the way back to the Greeks and Romans and find that rhetoricians have seemingly been locked in a constant battle between content and delivery. During the Middle Ages, the power and virtue of rhetoric declined—it was thought to be a “pagan art,” but it re-emerged during the Renaissance.

From the 1600s to the mid-1800s, when Western Culture began to transition to the social and political systems we have today, rhetoric was again disrupted by The Belle-Lettres Movement— which emphasized style and the beauty of language over informative or persuasive content—and the Elocution Movement of the mid-1800s which was all about delivery.

As we moved into the Gilded Age of the mid-1800s into the early 1900s, public speaking took on a whole new persona and level of importance. Politicians and traveling speakers would go from town to town, addressing large crowds and delivering long, impassioned speeches on topics of the day.

The ability to speak for hours in a loud boisterous style incorporating flowery, artistic, poetic language was considered a sign of intelligence and personal power. Likewise, a speaker who could not speak in this way was considered to lack personal strength and character. Debate was very highly regarded, and good debaters were very highly respected.

Then came mass media—radio, television, film, and the Internet and that changed everything. Former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan wrote a column in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011 that summed it up well:

“In the past quarter-century or so, the speech as a vehicle of sustained political argument was killed by television and radio. Rhetoric was reduced to the TV producer’s 10-second soundbite, the correspondent’s eight-second insert. The makers of speeches (even the ones capable of sustained argument) saw what was happening and promptly gave up. Why give your brain and soul to a serious, substantive statement when it will all be reduced to a snip of sound? They turned their speeches into soundbite after soundbite, applause line after applause line, and a great political tradition was traduced.”

And, then she went on to say, “But the Internet is changing all that. It is restoring rhetoric as a force... Speeches are back.”

And, in a way she was right. The Internet has brought us a proliferation of speeches, TED Talks, fireside chats, interviews, podcasts and panel discussions on a wide range of topics that are being viewed by millions of people— Speakers delivering messages to audiences in a given situation, trying to

persuade them to accept a particular point of view or take a specific course of action. In other words, practicing rhetoric.

Then came the pandemic. Our speakers were grounded, live events were canceled, and everything went virtual. We got a crash course in writing Zoom presentations—fewer and shorter platform speeches; more conversations, fireside chats and panel discussions.

In the process, we lost the connection and sense of community that comes from sitting in an audience, seeing and hearing a speech live.

It's not just the connection between the speaker and the audience, it's the connection and feeling of community that audience members get from each other. It's the ability to sit in audience and look around to see how other people are reacting—to get that sense of where you agree and disagree.

As we emerge from the pandemic, live events are returning because people crave connection and community. It's the reason we go to movie theaters and concerts and sporting events—to share that human experience.

The point I would make, is that throughout all these disruptions going back centuries, the basic rhetorical process that I described to you is still basically the same.

Using Aristotle's definition, the basic "means of persuasion"—logos, ethos, and pathos—haven't changed.

What has changed—and will continue to change—is the relationship among the variables—the speaker, the message, the audience and the situation. These changes are driven largely by technology and audience expectations.

Today, we have many more places to practice persuasion—many more situations in which to persuade—many more channels to funnel the messages we create.

Technology has brought us many more tools we can use to help us inform and persuade audiences. I've been around long enough to remember the times when, if you wanted to use visuals in your presentations, you either had to use a poster board on an easel or bring a slide projector and a carousel of 35-millimeter slides—which often got stuck or ran out of order.

Then came PowerPoint and video to replace all that. And now we have YouTube and iPhones that allow us to create and incorporate visuals into our presentations quickly and easily. And now, we're seeing speakers use emerging technologies like virtual and augmented reality to create incredible presentations.

What's also changed is the makeup and expectations of the audiences we address. They are much broader; much more diverse; and in many cases much more polarized. They expect speakers to talk to them about their wants and needs and speak out on an ever-widening range of issues to show how they align with their organization's values. And, they're not shy about sharing their views and opinions on social media when they don't.

All of these changes are really quite an amazing if we think about it. They give us the opportunity to engage directly with millions of people we could not have reached before—allowing our speakers to reach publics and constituencies that shape an enterprise's success and identity.

Think about our purpose and role

As we adapt to these changes and begin to shape the future of speechwriting, we also need to **think about our purpose and the role** we have as speechwriters in our organization. This is the second thing we can do to shape the future of speechwriting.

I'll never forget what Jim Holland, AARP's Chief Communications Officer at the time, told me when he hired me in 1993. He said, "I'm hiring you as a speechwriter, but that's not your job. Your job is to make Horace [Horace Deets, AARP Executive Director] look good and build his reputation. And, you're going to do that by writing good, well-thought-out, compelling speeches and articles that help showcase him as a leader. And, by doing that, you'll help us achieve our goals. In other words, your job is to help him lead this organization."

Isn't that what we all do—Help leaders lead? Whether you write for the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, a department head, an elected official, a university president or dean, a graduation speaker, or anyone else, you're writing for someone who is trying to influence an audience, someone whose purpose is to lead an audience to accept a point of view or take a specific action, often in pursuit of a larger goal. Our purpose—our role—is to help that leader lead.

In order to do that, we need to know the leader's goals—where they want to lead; what they want to accomplish. I'm not talking just about the organization's vision and mission; I'm talking about their personal goals. What kind of imprint do they want to leave on the organization? What do they want to be known for? How would they want to define their legacy?

I think of the story Clare Boothe Luce once told about a conversation she had with President Kennedy at the White House in 1962.

She told him that a great leader is "one sentence"—that his or her leadership can be so well summed up in a single sentence that you don't have to hear

that leader's name to know who's being talked about.

"He preserved the union and freed the slaves," or "He lifted us out of a great depression and helped to win a World War." You didn't have to be told "Lincoln" or "FDR." She then urged Kennedy to think about what his sentence would be.

As speechwriters, we need to do the same thing. We need to urge our leaders to think about what their sentence will be. And then, we need to use our skills and talents as speechwriters to help them get there.

And, we need to view every speaking engagement as an opportunity to help our leaders lead—whether they're addressing a small gathering or an large audience, a formal speech or a fireside chat, a major policy address or product launch, or a ceremonial ribbon cutting.

Regardless of the occasion, the audience will come away with some impression of our speaker and our organization and our message that will either advance our leader toward their goal or detract from it. Our job is to make sure it advances them toward their goal.

Embrace "Rhetorical Perspective"

This leads me to the third thing we can do to shape the future of speechwriting: **Add value to our organizations by providing a "rhetorical perspective."**

Rhetorical perspective is what distinguishes speechwriting from other types of writing. If you think back to the original seven liberal arts and especially the Trivium that I talked about earlier, one could develop good writing skills by studying grammar. And while rhetoric was a clear outgrowth of grammar, it required much more—it involved learning how to express opinions and make arguments in dialogue.

One can be a good writer and not have a rhetorical perspective; but being a good speechwriter requires both. In other words, you can be a good writer and not be able to write a good speech. But you can't write a good speech without being a good writer.

I'm sure we've all been told at some point in our careers that we have a "knack" for writing, or that we're a good "wordsmith."

While I hear that and appreciate that people think I'm a good writer, I also see it as kind of a backhanded compliment because it doesn't recognize the strategic and tactical elements of the rhetorical process that go into writing a speech.

Executive speechmaking is a vital function in any organization. The fact that

millions of dollars are spent each year for people to go out and give speeches validates that importance. Likewise, YouTube and other sites are filled with videos of people giving speeches—TED Talks, Commencement Addresses, Issue Debates, Interviews, Convention Addresses, you name it—Many of them written by members of the PSA.

The Edelman Trust Barometer, year after year, finds that when a company is facing a crisis or challenging times, people want to hear from the CEO, and in case of a product recall, they want to hear also from product experts.

One conclusion that comes through time and time again, is that the CEO had better have something to say, and he or she had better say it well.

That's where we come in. As speechwriters, we offer a unique perspective to our organizations by our ability to look at a situation rhetorically—a perspective often missing from other points of view, yet one that is vital to the organization.

We may not be the ones who determine what our organization's positions will be on issues, but we are the ones who give audiences the reason to believe. And, when we are able to demonstrate the value of rhetorical perspective, we become recognized as more than "wordsmiths"...we become valued as strategic thinkers.

This is our lane—our expertise—it's what we bring to the table and how we add value. We bring a perspective as to what works and what doesn't work as communication. Rhetorical perspective is as important as a legal perspective, or a political perspective, or a financial perspective. And, we shouldn't be shy about offering it.

Rhetorical perspective requires us to know our organization, understand our principal's goals—personally and professionally—and what we can do to help them achieve them. It requires us to think holistically—to understand how each assignment can contribute to achieving those goals and move the organization forward.

It requires us to think about audiences, issues, strategy, positioning, perspective and how to bring value. And, it demands that we use all the tools in our toolbox to develop and communicate our messages—and that we do so in an open environment of trust and authenticity.

- Traditional speeches play a major role—both in-person and virtually
- Print media plays a major role
- Social media plays a major role
- Our in-house Intranets play a major role
- Broadcast, videos, and podcasts play a major role
- Face-to-face communication plays a major role

These strategies aren't in competition with one another, they are enhanced by each other. We can't let ourselves get boxed in—we have to be adept at using all of them.

We have to remember that regardless of the channel or format, **content is still the king**. And as speechwriters and/or executive communicators, we create content. That's our forte.

Applying Rhetorical Perspective as consumers

There is another aspect of rhetorical perspective that I want to address briefly, and that's our role as consumers of communication.

While rhetoric and public speaking can be used to inspire, to enlighten, to move people to action and to articulate the aims of society, it can also be used to destroy, to demean and to discredit the opposition. It can be used to, as Lincoln said, appeal to "the better angels of our nature," or to play upon our greatest fears and insecurities.

This is as evident today as it has been in many years. As we strive to figure out what to believe and accept from the millions of messages we are bombarded with every day, we need to develop a way to sort out and evaluate this onslaught.

In a democracy, citizens not only need to know how to communicate well, they also need to know how to critically evaluate the speaking of others.

When U.S. Senate Chaplain Barry Black addressed our conference in 2020, he urged us as speechwriters to "release the power of responsible rhetoric," and he talked about the "moral power" of responsible rhetoric to promote the common good. This also has its roots in classical rhetorical theory. Quintilian, for example, defined rhetoric as a "good man speaking well."

It's not enough for us as speechwriters to practice responsible rhetoric in the speeches we write, we must also use our knowledge of rhetoric to demand that all people who speak in public live up to high ethical standards to promote the common good.

In a democracy where we are not only free but obligated to debate and consider differing ideas and points of view, we all need to become more critical consumers of public discourse.

And who better than us as speechwriters—the people who create public discourse—to lead the way?

Rhetorical perspective gives us a way to do that. It's not so much about creating a long list of rules from which we can make final judgments as about

developing a rhetorically critical screen that allows us to filter those messages.

The rhetorical process is one of sifting through and sorting ideas in an attempt to determine what is best. And, we should recognize that without the presentation of strongly and passionately defended and articulated arguments, without the presentation of clearly defined alternatives, there would be no distinct ideas to sort through.

I am a firm believer in and practitioner of rhetorical perspective, having made its study and practice my chosen profession.

I think Barry Black's message was right on target. I believe, as Aristotle wrote, that "what makes a man a sophist is not his skill, but his moral purpose." As such, I also like to think that in the long run (sometimes a very long run) the worse cannot be made to appear the better reason.

I also believe that people have the right to make up their own minds, but that they also have an obligation to search out and weigh the evidence and arguments on all sides of any question. A knowledge of rhetoric provides the means by which to do that.

Conclusion

As a speechwriter, I believe in the power of rhetoric to initiate and energize ideas, and in the principle of public discourse to illuminate, refine and resolve public issues.

Ted Sorensen, President Kennedy's speechwriter—and someone who inspired me to become a speechwriter many years ago— said it best in his book, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*:

"The right speech on the right topic delivered by the right speaker in the right way at the right moment ... can ignite a fire, change men's minds, open their eyes, alter their votes, bring hope to their lives, and, in all these ways, change the world. I know. I saw it happen."

I have a quote framed in my office that I look at every day when I go into work. It's an excerpt from *Antidosis*, written by Isocrates in 354 BC at the age of 82 as a defense of rhetoric. It says:

"There is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things honorable and base; and if it were not for these ordinances, we should not be able to live with one another. It is by this also that we confute the bad and extol the good. Through this we educate the ignorant and appraise the wise; for the power to speak well is taken as the

surest index of a sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul...We shall find that none of the things that are done with intelligence take place without the help of speech, but that in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts speech is our guide, and it is most employed by those who have the most wisdom.”

As a people, our values, aspirations, wildest dreams and even our fears must be communicated before they can be acted upon. Rhetoric does that. What otherwise may be vague, or misinterpreted, or even imperceptible is made concrete and actionable through rhetoric.

The hopes of a small group of colonists struggling to battle one of the most powerful countries in the world became the foundation and lasting aims of a new nation and an inspiration far beyond when Thomas Jefferson verbalized them in the Declaration of Independence.

The tragic death of George Floyd was one of hundreds that occur every day in this country until community and national leaders began speaking out, causing people to understand it in the broader context of the nation’s centuries old struggle for racial and social justice.

Speeches are the artifacts of humankind’s thoughts and visions; hopes and fears. Humans by our very nature are constantly seeking to influence others and are influenced by others. This isn’t necessarily good or bad—it simply is—and will continue to be.

As speechwriters, very few of us will have “a life at the edge of history” as Ted Sorensen did. But we all have an important role to play in our little corner of it—practicing rhetoric to influence, convince and persuade—helping leaders lead.

What we do is fundamental and timeless: we practice rhetoric to help humanity find words to guide itself.

And that, my fellow speechwriters, is an art that will never be lost.

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