

# FREEDOM FROM SPEECH:

## *An Address to Speech Teachers\**

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IN SPITE OF the pressures in and about Chicago on the necessity of reading the Great Books, I have instead, in recent years, been going back to the speeches in some of this country's Great Debates: Abolition, Evolution, Immigration, Prohibition, Isolation. I began the reading of these speeches as one interested in the techniques of persuasion and social control to see whether or not the victors used some techniques more tellingly than the losers. That study, though it filled a half dozen folders with data is not yet, and perhaps never will be finished, because I am now beginning to wonder whether the acceptance or rejection of a doctrine is ever a function of the rhetorical method only. The success or failure of the persuasion seems related to too many other factors. The study was, however, not without effect. For I came away from that reading with an impression, a reservation, and a fear about the debate phenomenon, as such, that I should like to think about with you.

I have the impression that the well of idealism from which American speakers draw is a very deep one. Whether it is a Brooks or a Grady, a Webster or a Calhoun, a Bryan or a Darrow, a Volstead or a Smith, there are unlimited reservoirs of sincerity. Even in the speeches which make

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the eagle scream, in the patches of deepest purple, there are overtones of honesty. If a man ever loses his hope in the American Dream, let him go to these speeches for refreshment. At least if he reads well, he will know what he has lost, for in them there is neither cynicism nor malevolence. When men took different positions on these great issues, it seemed not so much from hatred of opponents as from affirmation of another idea. And these are not the characteristics of despotisms anywhere.

I was struck in the reading of these speeches again and again with the prevailing atmosphere of sincerity and earnestness. These men meant and believed what they said. I could see in them little of the side-show barker or the tinsel of the carnival.

And it is this very quality of sincerity, this evident seriousness, which is so very, very appealing, that is the source of my reservation. I have come to wonder whether sincerity is enough, for the very fascination of this human quality keeps us from seeing the risks.

## II

The man who speaks with sincerity is presumed to be 'free from deceit, dissimulation or duplicity.'

In debate, however, sincerity is most often accompanied by conviction, a rather

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settled belief in the accuracy and wisdom of what is said. What is said is said with firmness and assurance. Having come to a position, the speaker becomes immersed in it.

There is something dramatic in the presence of a man who speaks in the mood of sincerity and conviction. The pallid prose of labored exposition gives way to a fevered and ardent persuasion. Sedate, plodding sentences give way to cadence and climax. He no longer says it, he asserts it.

It is on this mood that my fear centers. For the line between the assertion of a belief and the feeling of certainty about it is a thin one. When certainty shades off into fanaticism, we are up against what I fear most. Over-intensity leads to extension of the argument. A man protests too much. Whatever differences exist are magnified. The arguments of contending parties push them further and further apart. Defense and attack become so sharply defined that common ground is obliterated. In short, when there is sincerity plus conviction, there is the magnification of the points of difference.

Of course, there are speakers who are not sold on their subjects and who somehow communicate their hesitation. I am not interested in them as much as I am worried about those who have come to feel an attachment to an issue so deeply that they develop a kind of restricted way of looking which solidifies into arrogance. When a man has become so lost in the visions of his idea, his words may not be the words of God, but they become god-like. The speech is no mode of deliberation, it is the call to crusade. Counter-argument or criticism is not considered a means of testing what is said but rather a reflection on another's dignity and probity. Such a man finds it impossible to distinguish between an argument *ad ho-*

*minem* and an argument *ad rem*.

Again and again, reading Bryan and Darrow or Wilson and Lodge, for example, I have the impression that the very form of the pro-and-con situation forced each to insist on more than was necessary. Each seemed driven by the necessity of his own certainty to believe more than he had to. Then, having edged to the furthest position possible on the tug-rope, each dug in. What was assurance became intransigence. What had been an argument on a question became a Maginot Line to be defended no matter what.

### III

Now, I have come to wonder whether sincerity or earnestness or a sense of immersion in an idea is a sufficient foundation for a speech-making philosophy, for by itself it seems no measure either of a man or a doctrine. For sincerity keeps a varied company. I have no doubt that Adolf Hitler was one of the world's most earnest salesmen of hate. And where can one find more evident expressions of forthrightness than in the confidence-men, the yes-men, the court flatterers, the paid publicists? Indeed, I have been hard put to find a public figure outside of the soap-opera, slick-paper-popular-novels-world who did not reveal qualities of *ethos* in his public arguing. On the basis of this 'ethical magnetism' I can find little difference between a democrat and a demagogue, between a William Lowndes Yancey or a Robert Toombs and a Harriet Beecher Stowe or a Wendell Phillips.

When intransigence is the prevailing attitude, how hard it is to get an accommodation of views. The more a man speaks, the harder it is for him to recognize the limits of his position. Even though he sees the world as through a peephole, he is able to speak as though

his horizon is unlimited. When this happens, the hope for a 'meeting of minds' goes. All too cavalier and contemptuous is his dismissal of anyone who would say or see anything else. Conviction is now handmaiden to recalcitrance. What William James called 'the habit of trained and disciplined good temper toward the opposite party' disappears. I recall an experience Josiah Royce had in Scotland:

After presenting what he thought was a rather cogent and profound discussion before a philosophical assemblage, Royce sat back to await questions. None came, until finally a little Scotsman spoke up sharply from the far corner: 'I have been thinking over what the learned visitor has said, and I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in it.'

The drama of the performance takes on a tragic note when the issue is joined so sharply that men move from the issue to a concern with each other. Antagonist and Protagonist now are locked in effort against each other. And the problem as such is not dealt with. No longer do the participants look for fresh ways of working on it. The ingenuity which should be focused on new ways of dealing with the situation is diverted to ways of making the other ridiculous. Effort which should be spent on integrative measures is spent on invective. The search for solutions is turned to the organization of adherents. I do not have to remind this audience of what can happen when 'unresolvable group antagonisms' seek expression. Debate then gives way to decision by war.

#### IV

There is a deeper aspect, still, to this drift from the problems to the persons. It involves the glorification of principles

to the neglect of experience. When support for any position, whether states' rights of national sovereignty or free enterprise or public ownership, becomes intense and intemperate, the principle has a way of jelling while the streams of life flow on in other directions. Sometimes adherence to well-formulated solutions is maintained even as the life referred to shifts its course. Just think how the psychiatric findings on alcoholism are making obsolete the arguments both for and against prohibition. Yet with what unquestioning certainties were we assured of salvation or destruction in the 20's unless we found the faith of either Wets or Drys. The beautifully cogent and tightly-knit speeches so bristling with moral warmth and so violently earnest helped to build a wall around the problem which clinical researchers are only now breaking through. In a world so marked with crisis and change as ours, it is all too easy to cling hopefully to any fixed mooring point. But that is a vain security if it would keep us from facing the issues and coping with them. Failure to look to the onrushing tide of events is to be engulfed by them.

I am not, of course, urging any principle which would stress the elimination of principles. I would rather like to face the fact that an exclusive emphasis on the maintenance of a position sometimes leaves one flagging trains on unused tracks. I would have us see the germ of the truth in Gregory Zilboorg's argument that 'the common sense of today is the uncommon nonsense of tomorrow.'

There is, moreover, a point where the solidification of programs is an invitation to disaster. There are examples in world history where a sharply drawn, clearly diagrammed and outlined plan of either political or social organization became the procrustean bed to which people

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were driven and on which they were mangled. When a people is governed in the name of eternal verities and doctrines which may not be questioned, then the individual is degraded and rendered insignificant.<sup>1</sup>

We in this country have been able to keep free from the blinding effects of such dogmas, but I question whether it was because of the contenders in our Great Debates that we have succeeded.

In short, what I am really afraid of is the finalistic mood, the surging insistence that this, my view, is the everlasting and only one, that what was said is all that could be said. It is the 'surrender to simplicity' that frightens me.

### V

If the intransigent attitude brings with it an unwelcome cargo, and if we as teachers of speech would do something to pre-

<sup>1</sup>From her studies of primitive peoples, Margaret Mead comes to a similar view: 'A clear picture of the end—a blue print of the future, of the absolutely desirable way of life—has always been accompanied by the ruthless manipulation of human beings in order to fit them, by the use of rack, torture, concentration camp if necessary, to the decreed pattern. When such attempts have been merely the blind intuitive gropings of the fanatical and the power-driven, they have been sufficient to destroy all the values upon which the democratic way of life is based. . . . Only by devoting ourselves to a direction, not a fixed goal, to a process, not a static system, to the development of human beings who will choose and think the choice all important and be strong and healthy and wise in choosing, can we escape this dilemma.' Quoted in *Science News Letter*, September 20, 1940, pp. 186, 191.

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, in his speech at the University of Florida in March, 1948, echoed this notion in these words: 'The Creator gave man the same amazing diversity that he gave the mountain meadows in June. Those who try to hold man to one set of aspirations, to one pattern of conduct or belief, must resort to secret police and armies.'

vent its growth in our students, with what can it be replaced? I have only a modest proposal. A friend of mine, a botanist, often refers to viable plants, those able to live and grow and develop. I find the notion of viability a congenial one and the image of The Viable Man the one I should like to find in the flesh more often. Indeed, it is this image of viability that I missed in the Great Debates.

The day in March I wrote that paragraph, a crocus bloomed in my garden. One bit of yellow in an acre of mud. It was just big enough, though, to make my point. No library in our time could hold the volumes it would take to describe in full the complexity of that flower. As Cassius J. Keyser said:

There is indeed nothing that admits of *complete* description, for things are so interrelated that however much we may say of a given thing, there ever remains more to say of it; and complete description of one object would involve, in fact would be—complete description of every other.

If this is true of a flower, must it not be as true for any of the great issues?

It is easy to argue this, but how shall we learn it? How can we become so sensitive to it, as an article of wisdom, that it is made manifest even in debate? I can only urge that we try. For its awareness might open the fences built by the vanity of the speaker who so readily comes to believe that he covers more than he does. Indeed, the very neatness of a speech or an essay must belie the tangled involvements it is about. The orderliness of the beginning, middle and end, the trimness of the points in partition, the symmetry of assertion and proof, of statement and support—these are the esthetic strivings of speech-making and we must be ever alert to keep from supposing that the tidiness

of our talking necessarily describes what Housman called 'the general untidiness of the universe.' Thoreau's insistence that 'the universe is wider than our views of it' is the literary version of a physicist's conclusion that the 'new physics has definitely shown that nature has no sharp edges and that there is a slight fuzziness . . . We are wrong if we try to draw a picture with hard outlines.'

In the hurly-burly of argument, when they have not been immunized, the volubility of the contestants leaves little time for recognition of the boundaries superimposed on problems and solutions. It is then too late for a show of viability. Advocates have usually stilled their doubts. John Stuart Mill's comment on this in his essay 'On Liberty' is still relevant: 'The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful, is the cause of half their errors.' Stringfellow Barr put this matter in another context: 'The aim of education is to lengthen the gap between juvenility and senility . . . By assuming that you have now finished studying you can induce incipient senility in a matter of months.'

Could we but teach our young people that senility goes with know-it-allness and that viability is a better guide for maturity, we should, I think, have learned one lesson from the Great Debates. And with an abiding consciousness of the limited character of our positions on any subject we might yet create the atmosphere in which we can debate with wisdom rather than bitterness, with an eye to the problem rather than to the persons.

It may seem that I am urging a kind of academic waiting-until-all-the-data-are-in-before-acting philosophy, but I really am not. We must come to decision, but I should like to have the decision based on a larger sense of what is involved, so that

the advocates are not paralyzed by their own perspectives. I should like to develop a sharper awareness of the flux and flow of experience so that men do not discuss the realities of the present in terms of doctrines which apply only partially. In 400 B.C. Chuang-Tse put it this way: 'With a learned person it is impossible to discuss the problems of life, he is bound by his system.' If we could but loosen some of those bonds which tie men to their systems, we might well create the conditions in which men talked with rather than at each other. We might set the stage, in Frederick Lewis Allen's words, 'in which unexpected opinions and fresh solutions and ingenious compromises have a hearing.'

There were probably few periods in our history when there was greater need for talking about problems than at this moment. We need the freedom and the urge to speak almost as never before, for in an atomic age the silence that comes after the dropping of the bomb is one that men cannot endure. But we need also freedom from the speech that sterilizes and stills by its very air of omniscience.

An essayist whose name I do not know once said, 'The mark of a civilized society is its ability to tolerate or absorb differences of opinion.' It would seem to me that teachers of speech have a profound and unique opportunity to help young people realize that the capacity for such absorption is as mighty as, and even more useful than, the power of obliteration.

Bertrand Russell put the problem in terms much more pointed than mine: 'To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy in our age can still do.' It is also something that we might do something about.