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Gleaves Whitney on Great Communication

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Gleaves Whitney on Great Communication

How do the best leaders get their message across?

Leaders persuade by addressing the wants of others. The best leaders persuade by addressing the deepest wants of others. What are the deepest wants? It is really very simple. People are persuaded ultimately by four things. (1) We want to know the truth: truth is *what is*. (2) We want to act in accord with goodness: goodness is knowing *what we should do about the truth we know*. (3) We want to experience beauty: beauty can be defined as *the most satisfying, edifying expression of the reality around us*. (4) We want to love and to be loved: love is the *deep connection we have and need with others*. Truth, goodness, beauty, love -- these are the transcendent values that frame a meaningful existence. So the orator's appeal to transcendent values is a powerful way to change people -- how they think, feel, believe, and act. Unfortunately, many lesser appeals work, too, as the trials of Socrates and Jesus demonstrated long ago. Will people let a sophist lead them astray with superficially plausible but fallacious reasoning? No question. Will they rationalize the pursuit of unenlightened self-interest? You bet. Will they be seduced by clever speechifying and scintillating stagecraft? Likely. Will they allow hatred to win them over? Absolutely.

The antidote to sophistry, selfishness, seduction, and scorn are usually not found in public speaking how-to guides. The antidote to sophistry is truth; to selfishness it is goodness; to easy seduction it is genuine beauty; to scorn it is love. These are timeless weapons against lies, bad acts, ugly works, and hateful speech; and the best leaders know it.

(Incidentally, that's why a liberal arts education -- whether formally acquired as in the case of John Adams, Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson; or informally pursued as in the case of Washington, Lincoln, and Truman -- is a boon to leadership.)

At the heart of a leader's relationship to followers are words. Leaders must use words to convey transcendent ideas and values. University of Chicago scholar Richard Weaver liked to say that "ideas have consequences." But before we can know consequential ideas, there must know consequential words. It is on the wings of words that ideas are born. It is on the strength of words that ideas either take flight or fall flat. That is why words, language, and rhetoric are so important in a deliberative system of government where the people are sovereign and where they must sort out how to live together. As Weaver's friend Russell Kirk explained, "we cannot dissociate political principles and the methods of persuasion.... Some genuine connection subsists between the order of rhetoric and the order of society."^[1]

America has been fortunate to have many gifted leaders who have been able to forge rhetoric, politics, and ethics into a powerful unity. They know that the best way to persuade others is to address their deepest needs in a disinterested way. Disinterestedness is key; people need to sense that the leader is not trying to manipulate them in a self-serving way, through guilt, fear, shame, judgment, lies, or false hope.

Below are the four things people really want to hear from their leaders.

Truth

For starters people want the truth. The truth is *what is* -- reality -- and Abraham Lincoln understood this as well as any president ever has. He knew from years of experience addressing juries that the truth is a great ally in the effort to persuade others. Among his favorite ways to argue for the truth was to use logic's Three Laws of Thought (the laws of identity, contradiction, and the excluded middle). He was especially masterful at using the law of the excluded middle (e.g. a woman cannot be a little pregnant -- either she is or she isn't). Lincoln no doubt perfected his use of the excluded middle in the courtroom, where unambiguous guilt or innocence had to be established before a defendant could be judged. He used the excluded middle in his bid for a U.S. Senate seat in 1858. Lincoln's argument was that if the United States was born in freedom, if it defined itself in terms of freedom, if its destiny was freedom's very destiny, then it inevitably followed that -- here come the famous words -- "A house divided against itself cannot stand.... This government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.... It will become all one thing, or all the other."^[2]

Lincoln explained why this must be so, with a series of powerful rhetorical questions and imagery: "When ... you have succeeded in dehumanizing the Negro [sic]; when you have put him down and made it impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul in this world and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out as in the darkness of the damned," what is the effect on a freedom-loving people?

Furthermore, Lincoln asked:

What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and our navy.... Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage and you prepare your own limbs to wear them.^[3]

There's an interesting story behind the "house divided" line, which is an allusion from the Bible.^[4] Lincoln had actually tried the line out in 1856, two years before the contest with Stephen A. Douglas, but had been severely criticized. Advisers said he had put the issue of union too bluntly, and they actually got him to agree never to say it again. But two years later, faced with a formidable opponent in Douglas, he just could not resist. He first rehearsed the House Divided speech before an audience of one, his partner William Herndon, who liked most of it, but questioned whether the "house divided" passage was politic. Lincoln responded: "I would rather be defeated with this expression in my speech, and uphold it and discuss it before the people, than be victorious without it."^[5] How many politicians can you imagine talking like that today?

Next, Lincoln tried the speech out on a dozen of his closest supporters and asked what they thought. All but one condemned the "house divided" line, one going so far as to call it a "damned fool utterance."^[6]

Lincoln this time stood resolutely in disagreement with his advisers. He said the people needed to hear the stark choice before them -- in other words, the law of the excluded middle. "The time has come when these sentiments should be uttered, and if it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth -- let me die in the advocacy of what is just and right." As one of Lincoln's biographers noted, this was "Rather a memorable pronouncement of a candidate to his committee" -- especially on the eve of the nominating convention.^[7]

Now, a minute ago I said that people respond to the truth. And you are thinking, "Yeah, and Lincoln lost to Douglas." Technically, that's true. What is forgotten nowadays is that Lincoln actually won a majority of the popular vote in 1860. This, despite running against a very well-liked, charming candidate. It was a majority of the new Illinois legislature that sent Douglas back to the U.S. Senate.

And yet, in the long run, who lost to whom?

The "house divided" allusion would go on to win the heart of the Republican Party, then only four years old, and after Lincoln's death, it would



Thomas Jefferson

Also see: [Effective Leaders](#)



win the heart of the American people. The fact that these words are studied and memorized to this day shows that human beings do indeed respond to truth.

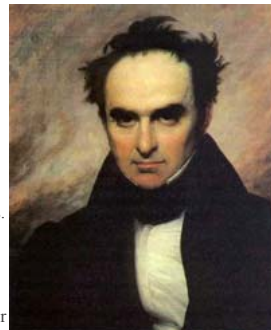
Goodness

In addition to the truth, people want to know what to do with the reality they understand. How should they act consistent with their own higher purposes? That's where goodness comes in, and the

American leader whose speeches demonstrate the value of harnessing goodness is Daniel Webster. Like Lincoln, the Massachusetts Senator knew all the sources of persuasion. But for him the essential thing was that people are moved by good acts that conform to our highest moral precepts. Psychological research confirms scientifically what Webster knew intuitively, that our brain is wired to enjoy listening to a bard recount the great and heroic deeds of others. That's why storytelling and historical narratives are such a satisfying way to communicate.

A student of Webster's oratory writes that "True eloquence is not an ordinary occurrence; it demands the right person, the right subject, and the right occasion -- but when it breaks out it is godlike."^[8] That was precisely the effect the 38-year-old Webster had on Americans with a speech that captured the nation's imagination. The occasion was the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims. The date was December 22, 1820, and the site was the First Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It's difficult to imagine a more historic occasion or more historic site for Americans in the new republic. To a packed audience that included former President John Adams, Webster began:

We have come to this Rock, to record here our homage to our Pilgrim Fathers; our sympathy in their sufferings; our gratitude for their labors; our admiration of their virtues; our veneration for their piety; and our attachments to those principles of civil and religious liberty, which they encountered the dangers of the ocean, the storms of heaven, the violence of savages, disease, exile, and famine....



Webster proceeded to build up the speech with powerful images of the Pilgrims' first years. The audience was visibly moved. A young Harvard professor made a remarkable confession after leaving the church. "I was never so excited by public speaking before in my life," he said. "Three or four times I thought my temples would burst with the pulse of blood... When I came out, I was almost afraid to stand near him. It seemed to me he was like the mount that might not be touched and that burned with fire. I was beside myself and am so still."^[9]

John Adams was not given to being easily impressed by thirty-somethings. Yet even he was so moved by Webster that he urged Americans to read the address "every year forever and ever."^[10]

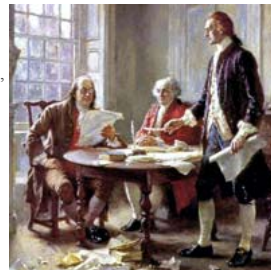
The key to understanding the power of this speech is in part Webster's charisma; he was an extremely impressive individual to be with. But it is also the stories he told, stories of good women and men whose example showed what Americans were made of. We are reading the stories still.

Beauty

In addition to wanting the truth (what is) and goodness (what to do about it), people want beauty. To see what I mean, let's turn to perhaps an unexpected source -- the Founder responsible for the most famous political statement in American history: Thomas Jefferson, the lead author of the Declaration of Independence. If Lincoln was the rhetorical master of truth, and Webster the rhetorical master of goodness, then our nation's third president could claim rhetorical mastery of another source of persuasion -- beauty. He knew that people are moved by beauty.

In rhetorical terms, beauty involves using apt words effectively arranged. The task, as Richard Weaver put it, is to use the gift of imagination "to make words even in prose take on wings."^[11]

In the English language, there are many ways to achieve beauty in the written and spoken word -- through parallelism, alliteration, simile, metaphor, and other figures of speech. For our present purposes, I want to focus on Jefferson's use of parallelism. In American political discourse, arguably the greatest example of the repeated beginning (what is technically called "anaphora") occurred at the beginning of our nation, in the Declaration.



Now, I'm going to say two things that surprise most people. First, to the Continental Congress that adopted the Declaration, it was not the beginning that was regarded as most important. ("When in the course of human events.... We hold these truths to be self-evident...") It's heretical to say nowadays, but political philosophy was not the only thing on the minds of the signers; that's our modern reading of it. To the delegates assembled in Congress, it was rather the middle of the document that was every bit as important. That's the part which justified independence by listing all the ways in which the king had violated their ancient rights as Englishmen.^[12] It's the most conservative part of the Declaration, and it consists of 18 well-crafted statements, each attacking George III, and each beginning with the words, "He has...." To cite a few examples:

"He has erected a Multitude of new Offices, and sent hither swarms of new Officers, to harass our People, and eat out their Substance."

"He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People."

"He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection, and waging War against us."

Without a doubt, the parallelism is one of the most striking rhetorical features of the document. Which leads to the second thing that surprises people, which is that the Declaration was written to be read aloud. It's as much a part of our oral as our written culture. To prove this, I'd draw your attention to the formatting in Jefferson's original draft. It is preserved in the Library of Congress. If you ever have the opportunity to see the original or a facsimile, look at how he wrote out the eighteen "He has" statements. They don't all run together in a single paragraph. Rather, they are broken out in clauses, each having the same left-margin and indent pattern. This makes them visually as well as rhetorically parallel. Not accidentally, the first printing of the document was typographically true to Jefferson's layout.

After examining the original draft, what strikes me as a former speechwriter is this: the left-margin and indent pattern is precisely the format I have used crafting speeches. I give each sentence its own paragraph, and I line up parallelisms for ease in reading aloud. The Declaration looks to me like the scripted text of a speech.

This thesis is further buttressed when you recall how news spread in the eighteenth century. It was not just by reading newspapers. It was not just by posting documents for passersby. It was also by reading aloud to people gathered in the town squares. It was a form of entertainment. And sure enough, during that hot summer of 1776, the Declaration was proclaimed -- read as a speech -- in hundreds of town squares up and down the 13 states. When it was read in Boston on July 19, Abigail Adams suggested in a letter to her husband that the crowd grew quite excited when the reader went through the series of charges against George III. As Jefferson had intended, the parallelism created an irresistible drumbeat, inspiring resolve to fight the War of Independence to the finish.

Love

Truth, goodness, and beauty are powerful appeals in persuasive speech, but there is another source of persuasion that crowns them all, and that is love. Every great rhetorician knows that people are moved -- moved deeply, inevitably, and finally -- by love.

To illustrate I wish to turn to the man, the 207th anniversary of whose passing we recently celebrated, and that is George Washington. We don't usually think of Washington this way, but the historical record bears out that the father of our country was a master rhetorician when it came to expressing love to, and eliciting love from, an audience.

The most famous example of this is the speech he delivered on the Ides of March in 1783. This was literally the speech that kept his army from marching against Congress. (Which shows you how little things change; people were even mad at Congress in those days.) The officers were understandably upset that Congress had not given them back pay for their many years of service to their country. They had willingly left their families and farms to aid the cause of freedom, and they simply wanted to be able to pay off their debts. As frustration mounted, someone high up the chain of command circulated a memo through the officer corps, urging insurrection. The malcontents planned a secret meeting.

Washington caught wind of the caucus and intervened swiftly. He denounced the treasonous plot and postponed the gathering by three days. This gave him critically needed time to think about how to give perhaps the most important speech of his life.

Now Washington, as you know, was crafty. He kept his own counsel and didn't alert the officers that he would be confronting them personally. So when they met on March 15th, they assumed their commander in chief would exert his authority through a surrogate. In this, they miscalculated badly. Remember, Washington had a keen sense of drama. All his adult life he had been a devotee of the theater.

Imagine the officers' surprise when, in the middle of their meeting, their commander strode in and made straight for the lectern. There was a tense silence. The General spoke from a prepared text for approximately five minutes. The remarks were built around a series of parallel constructions that emphasized the men's common sacrifice. They had become like family, and he only wanted what was just and right for them. But they must not be imprudent or disloyal, not after having gone through so much together, and not when so much was at stake. The men were moved by his appeals -- in fact, it was the most powerful speech they had ever heard him deliver.

But all this, powerful as it was, was just contrived to set the stage for the final act. After Washington finished his prepared remarks, he removed a letter from his coat pocket that he said he wished to read aloud. He began to read, then all of a sudden fell silent. Not a word came from his mouth as he fumbled awkwardly with the letter. Then he pulled a new pair of eyeglasses out of his pocket and remarked, "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind."

The high drama had its intended impact. The men stood in stunned silence. The gesture and words did more than any armed force could have to dissolve the insurrection, for it dissolved the rebellion in their hearts. As one officer later recorded, Washington's action was so disarming that it brought tears to the eyes of every man present. They suddenly felt inexpressible shame mixed with a renewed love for their leader. They pledged their abiding support to Washington and to the new republic.

A narrow escape for the new nation, this, and it was pulled off by love -- the love that Washington expressed for his men and his country, and the love that they returned to him.^[13]

Mirror or Lamp?

Truth, goodness, beauty, love -- these are transcendent values, the Permanent Things, the wellsprings of persuasion that are never out of season. The good rhetorician instinctively knows that they move people more deeply than anything else.

But these days there are two competing schools of thought about speechwriting, especially as it applies to political discourse. One school of thought says that a speech should hold a mirror up to the public. It should reflect the fashions of the day. You study focus groups and polling data to get a sense for who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out. The speechwriter, merely one "consultant" among many, is typically brought in at the end of the process. He is a clever fellow, a merchant of sophistry who knows how to package flattery for mass consumption.

Another school of thought says that a speech should be more than a mirror; it should be a lamp lighting the way for the better angels of our nature. It understands that the act of speaking is one of the most ethical things we do, and thus that "language is sermonic," as Richard Weaver so memorably put it. It apprehends that rhetoric, at its best, seeks union with the Permanent Things. "The rhetorician," observes Weaver, "is a preacher to us, noble if he tries to direct our passion toward noble ends and base if he uses our passion to confuse and degrade us."^[14] At the very least, such a rhetoric should issue some challenge to be stronger, truer, and worthier of our blessings. It should remind us to keep the roots of our American order embedded in the Permanent Things.

There's no doubt in my mind which school of thought orators like Washington, Jefferson, Webster, and Lincoln subscribed to. As in much else, we would do well to follow in their footsteps.

(Question from Patrick R., of Conklin, Michigan)

[1] Russell Kirk, "Rhetoricians and Politicians," *Kenyon Review*, Fall 1964, p. 768.

[2] Abraham Lincoln, speech to Republican State Convention, Springfield, Illinois, June 16, 1858.

[3] Abraham Lincoln, speech, Edwardsville, Illinois, September 11, 1858.

[4] Mark 3:25.

[5] Quoted in Lord Charnworth, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*, Introduction by Peter W. Schramm (Lanham, Md: Madison Books, 1996; originally published 1916), p. 110.

[6] Charnworth, *Lincoln*, p. 110.

[7] Charnworth, *Lincoln*, pp. 110-111.

[8] Irving H. Bartlett, "Daniel Webster: The Orator and Writer," in *Daniel Webster: The Completest Man*, edited by Kenneth E. Shewmaker, foreword by William H. Rehnquist (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, 1990), p. 80.

[9] George Ticknor quoted in George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of Daniel Webster*, vol. 1 (New York, 1870), p. 194. See also Bartlett, "Daniel Webster," p. 83.

[10] Adams quoted in Bartlett, "Daniel Webster," p. 83.

[11] Richard M. Weaver, "Language Is Sermonic," *Language Is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric*, ed. Richard J. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 202.

[12] To say that the conservative heart of the Declaration was the most important part to the Founders is hardly an unorthodox historical interpretation. It has even made its way into common reference works. See, for example, Jack P. Greene, "Declaration of Independence, United States," in *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1986 ed., vol. 8, p. 592.

[13] Virtually every competent biography of Washington recounts this pivotal event. One of the most detailed accounts, based on a primary source, is found in Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of Major Samuel Shaw*, p. 104. See also Washington Irving, *George Washington: A Biography*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 603-607, which draws from Shaw's observations; and Richard Norton Smith, *Patriarch: George Washington and the New American Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), which takes a less idolizing view of Washington's thespian talents.

[14] Weaver, "Language Is Sermonic," p. 201.