

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The topic of this issue of the newsletter is forms of communication. The previous issue was on the topic of truth, which cannot really be understood outside the form of communication in which truths are located. It may seem that truths can exist on their own beyond the messy give and take of human communication. Mathematical formulas can exist on their own but they become true statements within human language. The claim that something is a truth of science is not quite accurate; it is always a truth of scientists who are formulating truths about the world we live in.

If all scientists or practically all scientists agree on something we don't bother with the difference between the truth of science and truth spoken by scientists. The vast majority of us presume a statement is true if all scientists say it is or even if 97 percent say so. But some people may side with the 3 percent. They are not irrational although the odds are heavily on the side that they are wrong.

The word science simply means knowledge. We trust the mathematical and experimental approach so much that we simply equate its findings with knowledge itself. But truth did exist before the advent of modern science and other kinds of truth are still important today.

There are more facts than scientific facts and other kinds of truths than scientific truths. For example, there are historical facts and historical truths. The meaning of historical events can be debated endlessly but we do know some things about the past with certainty because historians have spent long hours sifting through documents from the past. There can be consensus about some facts from the past which is practically as certain as scientific facts.

There are even truths to be found in fiction. Myths that have survived for centuries, such as the Book of Genesis, are likely to contain a truth of some aspect of human life. Would anyone deny that there is truth in Shakespeare's play, "Julius Caesar" Flannery O'Connor short story, "A Good Man is Hard To Find," or the poetry of Archibald McLeish that is quoted in the following essay by Jill Lepore. The truth of any statement depends on the form of communication in which the words are found.

PREACHING AS A POLITICAL ACT

By Gabriel Moran

The most common form of communication in politics is preaching. Most politicians do not recognize this fact. They would be insulted to be called preachers and would deny that they ever preach. The form of communication called preaching is closely identified today with the Christian church. But even in church circles there is surprisingly little analysis of preaching as a form of communication. Aside from the content of the sermon, one can ask about the conditions for a sermon to be an effective form of communication.

Each form of communication has its own rules for when it can work and when it is hopelessly ineffective. The place where a sermon is delivered may be important or the number of people that one is trying to communicate with. One of the most important conditions for preaching to be successful is for the listeners to share with the preacher the beliefs on which the content of the sermon is based. That condition runs counter to one of the most common criticisms of preaching, namely, that someone is “preaching to the choir.” Like many sayings that are assumed to be obviously true, it completely misses the point. The “choir” or people who share the preachers beliefs are precisely who should be preached to. People who do not share the preacher’s beliefs are likely to find a sermon unconvincing or offensive.

If one wishes to convert people to one’s beliefs another form of communication is needed, such as a lecture which presumes rationality. Wittgenstein called understanding a form of conversion. The lecturer presumes that an audience can look at a question with the tools of reason; a lecture requires strict conditions of time and place and an audience that is ready to question what one usually presupposes. On Donald Trump’s first overseas trip he told the Saudis that he was not there to lecture them but it is a place where he should have lectured the audience on human rights. He proceeded to give a sermon on religion that few people disagreed with because it was innocuous. He then went to NATO where he should have preached on the basis of the common beliefs of the Western countries. Instead, he gave a lecture on military budgets and the United States being treated unfairly.

What good is a sermon if the same beliefs are shared by speaker and audience? That is a question that every preacher should ponder. Some preachers simply repeat what people already know instead of rousing them to action. What a person believes may just be lying dormant in the mind rather than generating action. The action can be precisely specified by the preacher or left to an individual’s choice. John Oliver is an effective preacher on Sunday night television. Unlike many late night comedians who tell a string of jokes (which can be valuable for retaining one’s sanity), Oliver usually has a central segment of about 15 minutes on a topic that he has thoroughly researched. He passionately stirs up the beliefs he shares with the audience. And then he tries to draw some practical conclusion that may involve individual members of his audience in calling a government office or boycotting a product.

What is often unrecognized about the sermon is that it has to be dialogical. One person does all (or nearly all) the speaking. But effective preachers react to the reactions they get from the audience. The good preacher in fact is lifted up by the hearers and their responses. He or she has thoroughly prepared what they are going to say but does not know exactly how it will emerge in the moment. Sermons are spoken not written. There is nothing wrong with writing down what had been a sermon so that future generations may appreciate what was said at crucial moments of the past. But reading Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural today is not what was heard in 1933.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech was a sermon on the steps of the capitol on August 28, 1963. Unfortunately, the speech is always called the "I have a dream speech." The speech was actually a severe indictment of the history of the country appealing to the supposed beliefs of every American. That speech, and much of King's work, has been sanitized for acceptance by white people. King, like most black preachers, had not given up on the country despite the horrors of slavery and the discriminations since then. King had not prepared exactly what he was going to say in conclusion. But carried by the crowd and his own sentiments, he rose to the moment and expressed hope that this country might some day fulfill its promise.

In the 1980s, Jimmy Lee Swaggart was the most prominent tv evangelist, widely regarded as the country's most effective speaker. Every Sunday night he would pace back and forth on stage for an hour, speaking without notes and holding an audience of thousands enthralled. I was fascinated by what he could do. However, at the end of the show when he would beg for money to continue his "ministry" (the television show), I used to shout at the television screen: Switch to radio, Jimmy Lee, it is much cheaper and you would not have to raise the 150 million dollars. And radio is the great means of communication for preachers to this day.

Many people would be surprised to find that radio remains the main source of knowledge for a sizeable part of this country. A poll a few years ago found that 62 percent of people said that radio was their main source of information. A preacher needs an audience physically present; an audience of thousands may be especially desirable. However, there is no limit to how far the preacher's words can be effective. Many of the great preachers of the twentieth century made their mark on the radio. It is doubtful that Roosevelt, Churchill or Hitler would have made it on television but they could move a nation with a 15 minute radio address. The effect could be very good or very bad. The good possibilities of preaching are always in danger of being channeled into corrupt uses; money, power and sex are never far away.

Bill Clinton was a great preacher. He could talk for an hour without notes although he knew almost exactly what he would say. He knew how to play off the emotions of the audience, adjusting his language to the particular audience. It was said jokingly of Clinton when in office that he was our first black president. That was true of the cadence of his sermons. He had some of the feel for preaching that in the United States is found mainly among black preachers.

The dialogical nature of preaching is most evident in black preaching. If someone says something aloud in the audience during the speech, that is not an interruption, it is the hearers providing appreciation and support for what is being said. I once was so foolish as to preach in a black church at the invitation of the minister. I prepared diligently but I knew I was a flop when the congregation remained quiet and attentive during the sermon, and afterwards thanked me.

Black slaves developed the art of preaching when it was illegal for a slave to preach. The slave masters recognized the power of preaching and were fearful of someone stirring up a group of slaves to take action. The art has been passed down to blacks today not only among church ministers but among many others, including politicians..

Barack Obama is an excellent preacher who knows how to read an audience. He could have a career as a stand-up comic playing off the reactions of the audience and delivering lines with precise timing. I never fully understood the cadence of Obama's speaking until he preached a sermon on June 28, 2015 in the Charleston church where members of the congregation had been slaughtered. Obama could identify with the emotions in the church on that sorrowful occasion. Almost every line he spoke was met by something spoken from the audience. Far from these comments acting as interruptions, they filled the space which Obama usually leaves in his speeches. He finally had an audience that was completely in tune with him. It was surprising and yet almost inevitable that the sermon finally became a hymn. The audience was startled for a moment but then joined right in the singing.

Then we must come to Donald J. Trump. One must admit that, whatever he was advocating in his sermons during the campaign of 2015-16, he could preach. I think he was surprised that he was so good at it. So good in fact he would like to continue his campaign preaching even as president. On taking office, he immediately registered himself as a candidate for 2020 so that he could continue to raise money and hold rallies.

It is sometimes noted that what is said by presidential candidates during the campaign is hardly a good test of what kind of president they would make. Campaigns for the senate make sense but not the presidency. The president is the chief executive. He is supposed to execute the laws that the Congress has passed. In his role of head of state (in contrast to prime minister) he may have to preach a sermon to the nation at a time of national crisis or mourning. Such a presidential sermon to the nation has to rest on the beliefs that are embodied in the founding documents of the nation and its subsequent laws, court rulings, and traditional practices. However, most of the president's job is working with Congress to pass legislation that will improve the lives of citizens.

When his handlers tried to rein in Trump with a teleprompter, he was a dud as a speaker. He does not even read a speech well. What he was best at, and which the television and internet found irresistible were what appeared to be throwaway comments (even though often repeated) in the form of outrageous claims and personal insults. He may not have known whether or not what he was saying was true but he was a master at getting a response from the audience. His language was widely ridiculed by people who said it was

at a fourth grade level. But a sermon, in contrast to a lecture, depends on getting an emotional response from the audience, not leading them through a chain of reasoning.

At the early stage of the Republican campaign, when there were as many as 18 candidates on stage, the event was ridiculously called a debate. What the evening consisted in was each candidate giving mini-sermons to their followers. Trump stood out above all the others because he knew how to use his one or two minutes to say something memorable even if demonstrably wrong. And Twitter and Trump were made for each other. There are no arguments on twitter. It is best at attacking someone with a choice phrase and the perfect place for mini-sermons.

When it came to an actual debate with Hilary Clinton, Trump just kept giving his mini-sermons regardless of what the question was. Clinton was thoroughly prepared and had the facts to answer all the questions. Anyone judging the debates by the logic of a debate would have to score a knockout for Clinton in all three debates. But polls did not agree. Trump was the winner with all his followers who celebrated his punchy sermons.

Hilary Clinton was superbly prepared to be president but she was not a good campaigner. In large part that means she was not a good preacher. She is very effective with small groups and can talk in intimately personal ways to individual people. Preaching does not come naturally to her.

Hilary Clinton's unease with preaching raises a touchy question. Is it a personal characteristic or is it generally true of women? Most famous preachers have been men. The response to similar claims that women are not good at something is that they have not had the chance. In this case, we will not have the data to decide until there are more women in a position to be important preachers. Certainly, there are many effective women preachers in Protestant churches today. And the small number of U.S. Senators has produced some good preachers, such as Elizabeth Warren. Still, it may be that women are not as numerous or as notable at being preachers because they are not as interested. Women may be more interested and more effective at other forms of communication.

Women may be better at personal interviews, speaking with small groups, or working collaboratively with larger groups. The forcefulness of a sermon may have a connection to male sexuality; the language can be dominating or manipulative. Women may have more success at creating dedicated work and winning people over by quiet reasoning; that might suggest that men are more emotional, women more rational. It also suggests that women would make excellent presidents, cool under fire, well organized, and attentive to bringing about consensus. Unfortunately, it would also mean that women will continue to have a difficulty in getting elected to the presidency because they are not as effective at speaking in football stadiums, delivering mini-sermons at "debates," and hurling insults on twitter.

FACTS AND PROPOGANDA

By Jill Lepore

In June, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt gave a commencement address in Virginia. “Every generation of young men and women in America has questions to ask the world,” he began. “But every now and again in the history of the Republic a different kind of question presents itself—a question that asks, not about the future of an individual or even of a generation, but about the future of the country.” He was arguing against America Firsters, who wanted the United States to be an island, a vision he declared to be a nightmare, “the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitiful masters of other continents.”

Roosevelt had been trying to gain support for entry into the war in Europe, but he knew that it was possible to push too hard. In 1917, to marshal support for another war, Woodrow Wilson had created a propaganda department, a fiction manufactory that stirred up so much hysteria and so much hatred of Germany that Americans took to calling hamburgers “Salisbury steaks” and lynched a German immigrant. John Dewey called this kind of thing the “conscription of thought.” It was a horse’s bit crammed into the people’s mouth. The bitterness of that experience determined a new generation of journalists to avoid all manner of distortion and error.

In 1923, when Henry Luce and Briton Hadden founded *Time* (their first name for it was *Facts*), the magazine hired a small army of women to check every fact. (“Add Fact Checking to your list of chores,” the founder of *The New Yorker* instructed an editor, not long afterward.) In 1929, Luce hired as an editor of his new magazine, *Fortune*, a poet named Archibald MacLeish. He had fought in the First World War, then lived in Paris, where he wrote poems about places where lay “upon the darkening plain / The dead against the dead and on the silent ground / The silent slain—.” He worked at *Fortune* until 1938. F.D.R. appointed him Librarian of Congress in 1939.

“Democracy is never a thing done,” MacLeish said. “Democracy is always something that a nation must be doing.” He believed that writers had an obligation to fight against fascism in the battle for public opinion, a battle that grew more urgent after the publication, in 1940, of “The Strategy of Terror,” by Edmond Taylor, the Paris bureau chief for the Chicago *Tribune*. Taylor reported firsthand on the propaganda campaign waged by Nazi agents to divide the French people, by leaving them uncertain about what to believe, or whether to believe anything at all.

In “Mein Kampf,” Hitler had written that most people “are more easily victimized by a large than by a small lie, since they sometimes tell petty lies themselves but would be ashamed to tell big ones.” Taylor called propaganda “the invisible front.” Roosevelt decided that he could delay his assault on that front no longer. In October, 1941, he issued an executive order establishing a new government information agency, the Office of Facts and Figures. He appointed MacLeish to head it.

“The duty of government is to provide a basis for judgment,” MacLeish insisted, “and when it goes beyond that, it goes beyond the prime scope of its duty.” Under his leadership, the office mainly printed pamphlets, including “Divide and Conquer,” which explained how foreign agents weaken a nation’s resolve by undermining confidence in institutions like elections and the press, and by raising fears of internal enemies, like immigrants and Jews. Still, some reporters suspected that the agency was nothing more than a propaganda machine, the wartime conversion of fact to fiction. MacLeish was worried, too. In April, 1942, he spoke at a meeting of the Associated Press. To counter the strategy of terror, he proposed a new strategy:

That strategy, I think, is neither difficult to find nor difficult to name. It is the strategy which is appropriate to our cause and to our purpose—the strategy of truth—the strategy which opposes to the frauds and the deceits by which our enemies have confused and conquered other peoples, the simple and clarifying in the act of finding truths by which a nation such as ours must guide itself. But the strategy of truth is not, because it deals in truth, devoid of strategy. It is not enough, in this war of hoaxes and delusions and perpetuated lies, to be merely honest. It is necessary also to be wise.

Critics called MacLeish naïve: winning a war requires deception. F.D.R., to some degree, agreed. In June, 1942, he replaced the Office of Facts and Figures with the Office of War Information. MacLeish left, and the agency drifted. Much of the staff resigned in protest. When a former advertising director for Coca-Cola was hired, a departing writer made a mock poster that read, “Step right up and get your four delicious freedoms. It’s a refreshing war.” I

In 1946, the year that Donald Trump was born, MacLeish published a poem called “Brave New World,” about Americans’ retreat from the world: “Freedom that was a thing to use / They’ve made a thing to save / And staked it in and fenced it round / Like a dead man’s grave.”

A lifetime later, Barack Obama greeted Roger Ailes at the White House. “I see the most powerful man in the world is here,” Obama said. “Don’t believe what you read, Mr. President,” Ailes answered. “I started those rumors myself.” Other rumors that Ailes helped start include Trump’s charge that Obama is not an American. Also: science is a hoax, history is a conspiracy, and the news is fake. It’s not always possible to sort out fact from fiction, but to believe that everything is a lie is to know nothing. Ailes won’t be remembered as the man who got Trump elected President; he will be remembered as a television producer who understood better than anyone how to divide a people. And Trump’s Presidency, long after it ends, will stand as a monument to the error of a strategy of terror.

THE TRUTH OF PLAYS

By Howard Jacobson

Let's look on the bright side: The spectacle of ireful Donald Trump supporters disrupting Shakespeare in the Park's production of "Julius Caesar" and the subsequent tweetstorm of abuse directed at any company with Shakespeare in its name prove that plays retain the power to shock and enrage. Who said the theater is all anodyne, feel-good musicals? There are a few things about the nature of Shakespearean drama in general — its subtle shifts in sympathy, the shocks it administers to our prejudices, its suspension of the drives to definitive political action — that obviously weren't apparent to protesters.

The first of these is that a play, however incendiary its plot, is a very different thing from a political speech. A speech asks us to go out and do, or at least to go away and believe; a play by Shakespeare moves through time, measures action against motive and shows us consequence. We might enter the theater in rash spirits, but we leave it consumed by thought. Plays don't tell you what to think, let alone how to act. A good play won't even tell you what the playwright thinks. What did Shakespeare believe? We don't know. Meaning emerges, in a drama, suspensefully, out of the interplay of forces, from the collision of voices. There is no such thing, in art, as non-contingent truth.

Mr. Trump's appeal is to those who think truth comes in a capsule. But their rage at the depiction of the president as the soon-to-be-assassinated Caesar is encouraging to the satirist. Satire is less subtle than Shakespearean drama. It lowers its head and charges. The questions always asked of it — will it do any good, will it change minds, will it even be noticed by the people satirized? — are hereby answered. Yes, no and yes. Vexation is its own reward. We've always known this about people of an absolutist bent. Just before the war, Adolf Hitler tried diplomatic means to get the British cartoonist David Low barred from drawing cartoons of the Führer. It has even been suggested that Mr. Low's name was on a list of people to be killed when the Nazis occupied Britain.

Communism's failure of humor is the subject of Milan Kundera's first novel, "The Joke." For writing the words "Optimism is the opium of mankind! A healthy spirit stinks of stupidity!" on the back of a postcard to a girlfriend, Ludvik Jahn is expelled from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and sent to work in the mines. The more monocratic the regime, the less it can bear criticism. And of all criticism, satire — with its single ambition of ridiculing vanity and delusion — is the most potent. This can be only because the boastful are thin-skinned and the intolerant are forever looking over their shoulders.

"Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?" the great satirist Alexander Pope asked. The question was rhetorical. Wounding the vainglorious is a pleasing pastime in itself and contributes to their demoralization. Fire enough salvos of comedy and their solemn edifices start to crumble. It might be a slow process, but it is at least the beginning. Derision is a societal necessity. In an age of conformity and populist hysteria, it creates a climate of skepticism and distrust of authority. If mercy droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven, derision spurts up as though from a pantomime geyser, drenching the braggart and the fool in the foulest ordures.