

THE DEATH OF ORATORY

by Dale DeLetis

"Have you always been like that?" A Class II English student verbally pounces on me after I have finished an impassioned discourse on Jay Gatsby. My mind races. Like *what?* Too brash? Too loud? Did I wave my hands too much?" "Like what?" I sheepishly ask, fearing I have inadvertently revealed some secret. "Have you always *talked* like that?" Oh, that problem again. "Yes," I answer brashly, loudly, with a huge smile and arms waving. "When I was born, I looked up in that first moment and said in my deepest bass, 'Hello, mother dearest!'"

From the time I came to Milton Academy 25 years ago, students have mocked me (with some affection, I hope) for what they hear as my overly-articulate speech, what I think I produce as normal American speech. It's just the way I talk. Yes, I hit my "t's" and "b's," my dentals and plosives; yes, I tend to speak (too much) in paragraphs; yes, I have had voice training. But do I really speak so differently from *everyone* else that I become an object of student amusement? And, now, not just student amusement, but faculty guilt! A colleague of more than a decade said to me recently at the Xerox machine, after I gave nothing more than a simple word of greeting, "You know, Dale, whenever I talk to you, I feel I have to watch my speech." What is a-foot here? a-mouth here?

The death of oratory. We no longer frequently hear formal language. More than 30 years have passed since John F. Kennedy implored, "Ask not what your country can do for you..." and Martin Luther King urged, "Let freedom ring!" Balanced phrases do not grace the lips of the daily news anchor; and the simple slogans of advertisements, five to seven between every section of television programs, have replaced cadenced discourse. Metaphor, repetition, conscious rhetoric, even puns; carefully selected and constructed verbal language is absent from public talk. When was the last time we heard a memorable political convention speech? Maybe Mario Cuomo in 1992. When was the last time a powerful speech came from Congress? Maybe William Jennings Bryan and his "Cross of Gold" in 1898. Churchill? Lincoln? Pericles? Gone. *O tempora, O mores*, as Cicero would say.

The times and the customs engulf us with a bad case of the mumbles. Students

are afraid to project their voices when they make announcements in Wigg Hall. They walk away from passionate engagement with a conversation-stopping, "Oh, whatever." Faculty members sometimes will not speak if they have to stand up in Straus.

Colleagues who speak for more than two minutes are derided. Television gives us voices which lack nuance, voices which are cool, smooth, "objective," unengaged. Talk show hosts praise the "authentic," the "natural," the stumbling struggle for some coherence. We find articulate speech phony, artificial, an act -- to be distrusted absolutely. Only speech which is conversational -- plodding, punctuated, and pained -- is believable. Even Cokey Roberts is sometimes too much!

The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, was senseless. But her brother Earl Spencer redeemed that tragedy, somewhat, by his funeral oration. British broadcasters reported that the audience outside Westminster Abbey broke into spontaneous applause after the speech. When the applause reached the mourners in the back pews inside the Abbey, they added their hands, and the wave of approbation spread forward. All these people were applauding because of the content, of course: Earl's criticism of the *paparazzi* and of the royal family hit responsive chords. But they were applauding, too, for the speech itself -- powerfully written and powerfully delivered. Listen to the balance and repetition of the opening sentence: "I stand before you today the representative of family in grief, in a country in mourning, before a world in shock." From family to country to world, Earl spreads the connection to Diana outward, and we know that we are in the presence of a man in control of his language. He describes Diana eloquently as "the essence of compassion, of duty, of style, of beauty." The rhyme mesmerizes, stays our attention. The words are right. He tells us not to "canonize" Diana and speaks directly to her of her endearing qualities: "your mischievous sense of humor..., your joy for life..., your boundless energy." Again, the balanced phrases capture the qualities and memorialize them. Earl Spencer even dignifies his sister by referring to her Roman namesake, who was the hunter, not the hunted. And, finally, he concludes with a sweeping cadence of soaring

adjectives: "the unique, the complex, the extraordinary and irreplaceable Diana."

Earl Spencer fulfilled the mission of the great speaker; he rose to the occasion. As William Safire has written, "There comes a dramatic moment in the life... of a nation that cries out for the uplift and the release of a speech. Someone is called upon to articulate the hope, pride, or grief of all."

Precisely. Eloquent, passionate language, at a funeral, at a wedding, at a time of crisis, can sustain us. But even in private life, we are called to rise to occasions all the time. A well-stated announcement brings clarity and erases confusion. The well-chosen word in a talk to a loved one or the careful talk to a colleague can bring joy or can help another through difficult times. Language -- simple, direct, deliberate, and beautiful -- can bring us connection.

I am not contending that my attempt to improve my own speech over the years can be equated with the work of the greats. But when that speech -- even filled as it is with slang, occasional bad grammar, and some halting phrasing -- merits mockery, I begin to believe that we are in trouble, indeed. I hope we do not need a funeral of a princess to encourage us to eloquence, and I hope at Milton that we can continue to inculcate good habits of speaking in our students through lessons and example. But what I really hope is that each of us can take delight in colorful and precise language so that, in these times, we do not hear rhetoric as dishonesty and that, in our customs, we give well-crafted speech the honor it deserves.

(Dale DeLetis, former coach at Milton (MA) Academy, was one of NFL most successful coaches: Eight students reached major final rounds including firsts in Boys Extemp and Drama and seconds in Oratory and Girls Extemp. Dale coached Milton to 8 top 10 sweepstakes finishes and the 1986 Bruno E. Jacob Award. This article was reprinted with permission from Milton Magazine.)

