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The Difference Between Poetry and Rhetoric

It's been an off and on tradition to publish the text of the year's Baccalaureate address in the Earlhamite. This spring, the senior class voted to ask Assistant Professor of English and Women's Studies Coordinator Barbara Caruso to do the honors on Chase outdoor stage. She told them she would if she could "think of something to say." She did, and it was something.

By Barbara Caruso

When I was a little person I was told, in almost printed neon letters, that education is power. And I have frequently had that notion confirmed. Of course, I can't remember the speech some fellow offered on the occasion of my college graduation - and I can't remember him either - but I can remember a couple of other lessons I have learned from my parents. Since we come here today as students, faculty, friends and family, with a particular concentration of parents, and with a 50-year reunion class approximately the same age as my parents, it seems appropriate to share these memories with you.

When I first started to think about going to college my father, an Italian immigrant and at the time an oilburner repairman with a third-grade education, told me a story about a Yale professor whose heating system my father repaired. What my father told me about this man was that he would come down and sit on the cellar steps while my father worked, and together they would talk about heating, oilburners, the varieties of the various Sicilian dialects my father could speak, and whatever two men who like and respect each other talk about in a sooty basement.

"Daughter," my father said to me as he told the story, "that's an educated man." My mother, a Jewish woman, a homemaker who had graduated from high school at 16, and who had been sitting with us at the dinner table as my father told this story, nodded in confirmation and said, "a truly educated person can talk with anyone.."

The second lesson I learned about education, from my parents came several years later when I earned a Ph.D. The occasion had all the trappings of a wedding. In fact, I traveled all the way back to Ohio from a job in Maine in order to meet my parents who had come all the way from Connecticut, to see me walk across the stage in a disconcertingly clumsy robe and get a slippery diploma container that didn't have a diploma in it. They were going to send that later. I wasn't at all sure *what* I was doing there or *who* I was there for - perhaps you understand.

In this way it was very much like the movie version of a wedding where it's clear the partners are enduring the event for the sake of their parents. While in retrospect I am glad, for me, that I encountered that ritual, I can remember that at the time I entertained visions of eloping with my degree.

When we, the graduates, had all dispersed to picture-taking and handshakes, I went to find my parents who were still standing by their chairs. My father had been crying and he didn't know whether to shake my hand, hug me, or, as I was soon to find out, do something more dramatic. My mother was searching through her purse for a collection of envelopes the relatives had sent, each laden with money and Hallmark cards proclaiming "Congratulations, graduate." At just about that time my father said, "If you grandfather were alive he would get down on his knees and kiss your feet."

As I think about these two events - first, the story of my father and the Yale professor talking with each other in the basement and my mother's pronouncement that "an educated person can talk with anyone", and the implication that the educated person would want to, and second, the vision of my father telling me that my very patriarchal grandfather, a twenty-five year man at Bloomingdale's refinishing shop and a respected member of the New York City Sicilian-American community, would kiss my feet because I had a Ph.D. - as I think about these two events, it is clear to me that education is power. But what kind of power is it that can allow two men to talk in a basement and at the same time can compel one person to kiss another's feet? And what of this power would I choose to have for myself and what would I wish for you, my students, graduate seniors?

Academicians are strange people. When everyone else measures time from January to January, making long lists of ultimately unfulfilled resolutions, many of them repeats from previous years, we measure things by a different calendar. For us the year begins in September and ends, or at least slows down a bit, in June. And so now we are at the end of a year. It has been a particularly good year for me, I think. And as I have thought about these two notions of the

power of education I have been drawn to reflect upon this past year, some friends I have made, books I have read, and crises, bit and small I have survived.

Looking for a lesson in all of this, I have come away with the notion that if I could understand the difference between poetry and rhetoric, I could make sense of my year and also gain insight into how to choose between the powers of education I have already outlined. What follows, then, is a bit of chronology, a sort of "This Is Your Life," and like many things in life, or at least the life of an English teacher, it is based in metaphor and association. And it begins with poetry.

The Difference between
poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I read those lines many times before this fall, but it wasn't until I shared a class in contemporary literature that I really understood what Audre Lorde, a contemporary Black poet, might be saying in this piece:

"The difference between poetry and rhetoric," she said, "is being ready to kill yourself instead of your children." I was confused. Surely, I thought, she doesn't mean to suggest we should kill ourselves or our children; so what does she mean? In the course of the class it became clear that she was talking about the *potential* in rhetoric to move people to action while keeping yourself safe, and the *requirement* in poetry that ensures that the person speaking take her-his own risks. The story of the poem makes this very clear.

In this poem, entitled, "Power," Audre Lorde is wondering what she must do in the face of her rage over the acquittal of a white police officer who has shot and killed a ten-year-old Black boy in Queens, New York. And she wonders what she is supposed to do with her sadness that a Black woman was on that jury which voted, unanimously, for acquittal.

Her choices, she would have us believe, have to do with using her power of rhetoric to incite other young people to rage and kill, or to use the power of poetry to find an alternative. In this poem Lorde expresses anger at and compassion for the Black woman on the jury who "let go of the first real power she ever had," and Lorde reminds herself that "unless I learn to use/the difference between poetry and rhetoric/my power too will run as corrupt as poisonous mold/and be limp and useless as an unconnected wire."

On the surface it may appear to be a category mistake to compare poetry and rhetoric. It is not surprising to me, however, that Lorde uses the differences between poetry and rhetoric as a metaphor to explore the possible ways of participating in the world and as a tool to get at whatever it is that is ultimately powerful. Poetry, you see, is frequently maligned and misunderstood. Its intent is not to confuse, but to not admit to an easy and quick understanding of that which is complex. It does not lend itself well to aphorism- the small pithy statement the rhetorician elevates to truth - but blends around and through the circumstance of individual lives and events to weave a pattern of association that must be participated in by both reader and writer in order to be powerful.

In this way it is unlike rhetoric which, well or poorly intended, is done by one person to represent a general truth and which is then bestowed upon many others. In one of its connotations rhetoric is intended to persuade and it is often far removed from the writer or speaker who takes little or no responsibility for its effect. It is not a personal activity that has public purposes, but is a public activity devoid of the personal. Rhetoric can be evaluated by its cumulative effect, by the number of persons moved to action, by a quantification of its result. Rhetoric represents power *over* someone else for the purpose of imposing one's own will. Poetry is valued by its ability to express the truth in an individual human heart and by its ability to communicate that truth to another. Poetry is a road to empowerment of self and others. It is not accomplished in isolation or at a distance. Rhetoric is a pronouncement; poetry is a conversation.

It is not surprising to me, then, that in the course of our conversation my students and I came to understand the difference between poetry and rhetoric. Certainly the notion of coming together into the poetic conversation is one that resounds to the actual poetry of Lorde and many of her contemporaries. It is a process: to first know who you are; in Adrienne Rich's terms, to know you "are neither ice nor mud nor winter light but wood, with a gift for burning," and then to join that clarity in the face of adversity, with others. This is to really know the power of poetry.

In her poem "Hunger," dedicated to Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich talks about the rage she feels over the individual and collective hunger of women and children and suggests that "until we find each other, we are alone." In these words

Lorde and Rich make it clear that *in life* one of the differences between the power of poetry and the power of rhetoric is friendship.

It wasn't long after I read Lorde's poem that Ferron walked into my life. Ferron is a Canadian singer and songwriter, and I first met her while raking leaves. She was resplendent in designer sunglasses and high-heeled boots. She represented everything I associate with a sort of "cool" that caused me to instantaneously regret the circumstances that would keep her in my house for several days. Now, months later, I find myself calling her friend, and knowing it to be true, in spite of the fact that we have known each other for four days, a few letters and one short visit. I have puzzled about how this came to be and how an understanding of the difference between poetry and rhetoric and the role of a poetic conversation could help make it clear.

The word friendship is familiar to many of us. We use it to talk about the people we love, but do not hold to be lovers, or to talk about those for whom we feel an affinity based on common activity. In an Earlham context we use the term friend in an easy and often rhetorical fashion. It comes at the head of our letters and begins announcements.

There is, for some, a certain discomfort with this habit, for it creates a dissonance between what we understand to be a relationship based in personal events and an association which takes life in a much more public sphere. It is, however, precisely this willingness to take friendship out of the exclusively personal realm and put it into the public one, which allows us to come together in the poetic conversation. And this conversation, we have already seen, is important to overcoming adversity and living a powerful life.

Still, the Earlham memo that comes addressed to some generic friend is potentially offensive. Why? I think it is that it may imply an orthodoxy, although a benevolent one, and that it runs the risk of denying or condemning difference and separations. At some point it can appear to be an admission ticket into an exclusive club and rather than encouraging conversation and discovery it can reinforce sameness and conformity. It can become little more than a rhetorical toy. This is, I believe, a danger we cannot entirely escape and I suppose that the very danger of its possibility can increase our awareness of what friendship should really mean.

This year in Humanities I, we read Plato's *Lysis*, and in that dialogue we came to understand that once a person, Lysis, experienced a friendship based on the search for wisdom and clarity, he would no longer be susceptible to or interested in superficial conversations. He would no longer be interested in comparing age or wealth or beauty, and would not be moved by flattery or the promise of membership in a special society based on things other than knowledge.

This sort of relationship, which retains that which is personal but adds that which is public, which demands that friendship be a bond that embraces the spirit and intent of what one does as well as of who one is, is, in May Sarton's terms, a friendship of the work.

This friendship of the work is, I believe, what happened between Ferron and me. There we were: a college professor and an itinerant musician; an odd couple until, eating Chinese food we discovered names in common: Williamson, Dickinson, Rhyes, Levertov, Christian, Woolf, Rita May Brown, Alice Walker. . .the list went on. In the middle of Richmond, Indiana, we had, in Adrienne Rich's terms, "found each other" and had discovered, in celebration, "that we were not alone." Yet we were also not identical, not engaged in the same activity, and not bonded by ties of love or long association. This was a friendship of the work and one that encourages conversation as opposed to pronouncement and poetry instead of rhetoric.

Elizabeth Minnich, a dean at Union Graduate School, suggests that . . . "friendship is a relationship between equals . . . It grows with being shared . . . and is non-exclusive. It delights in differences, in separateness, demanding the honesty of full, mutual recognition, of seeing and being seen. It cherishes less than it admires, and comforts less than it challenges. Friendship and criticism go together," she suggests, "each being a condition for the other."

I learned another thing from Ferron during that visit. In the first ten minutes she was in my house she told me that she had little formal education, and it seemed to me that she was saying that she didn't think much of colleges, degrees and, specifically, college professors. Since we have become friends I have often reflected upon that conversation and have wondered what it was about the power of education, or how it has been used, that so affected Ferron. It seems clear to me now that she had experienced the rhetoric of education, and it is this notion of how poetry and rhetoric can be seen as metaphors for kinds of education and how friendship functions in that relationship that I would like to look at now.

Four years ago we read Plato's *Gorgias* together, and in that text we have a fine example of the difference between

poetry and rhetoric in education. Plato finds his way, through a conversation, to warn us of the dangers of false power in oratory: an oratory which puts all of its emphasis on means – that is, puts its emphasis on the persuasive face of things. On the surface the power of oratory makes it possible for one person to impose his or her will on another, but it is a will that is often devoid of a sense of moral ends and which certainly doesn't take into account the development of the personal relationship or its importance to seeking wisdom and truth.

Orators can, Socrates tells Polus, "Kill whoever they please and effect confiscation and banishment on anyone they choose." While at first Polus believes this to be very great power, Socrates comes to show us that this kind of power is empty. He shows us that the orator does great harm by teaching not how to come to knowledge, but to "engender belief without knowledge."

To engender belief without knowledge is the skill of the person who deals in rhetoric. That is not to say that the rhetorician does not provide information, but it is removed from the personal, and consequently individually unusable. It is, at best, impotent. At worst it is "power" in Audre Lorde's terms "as corrupt and poisonous as mold."

We use this power in education. And it is the kind of power that encourages one person to think it right and fitting that another person kiss his or her feet. This is not the power of friendship, which we have seen depends upon equality. And it is not the power of friendship because it is not reciprocal. It accepts homage and does not share it; it seeks to be cherished but does not itself admire others. It depends upon one person's mastery and another person's subservience. It admits no criticism. It in no way allows for a conversation. It in no way allows for a conversation. In short, devoid of friendship and conversation, and dependent upon the presence of one who bestows favors and one who accepts them. This sort of power is rhetoric and very, very far from poetry.

And what are the consequences of such power of education? In *Three Guineas*, a Humanities III text, Virginia Woolf suggests that "the finest education in the world does not teach people to hate force but to use it. [That] . . . far from teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity, [it] makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions, that 'grandeur and power' . . . in their own hands, that they will use not force, but much subtler methods than force when they are asked to share them." And she asks, "Are not force and possessiveness very closely connected with war?"

Now, I'm not suggesting to you that the inevitable result of an education which teaches or envisions power as something that one person has *over* another will inevitably lead to war. And war and peace are not my subjects today. It is, however, what I think Audre Lorde is saying when she implies that rhetoric causes us to be ready to kill our children. Remember, Lorde says:

The difference between
poetry and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill
yourself (poetry)
instead of your children (rhetoric)

If what I have been showing you is the very lined face of the power of education at its worst, the rhetoric of the power of education, then what is the poetry?

When Virginia Woolf envisioned the way a college must be rebuilt, because "the old education of the old colleges breeds neither a particular respect for liberty nor a particular hatred of war," she asked for an experimental college, an adventurous one. A place that would teach "not the arts of dominating other people; not the arts of ruling, of killing, or acquiring land and capital . . . but the art of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people's lives and minds, and the little art of talk." The teachers, she said, should be drawn from those who live well in addition to those who think well: "Devoid of competition and the fear of transgressing some chalk mark or displeasing some dignitary, the college would attract people who love learning for itself." This, she believed, would be a "college of the poor" – a place "where society was free, not parceled out into the miserable distinctions of rich and poor, of clever and stupid, but 'a place where' all the different degrees and kinds of mind, body and soul merit cooperation." And what would the power of education be in such a place as this?

You will not, I know, expect me to say that the poetry of the power of education is what you have experienced at Earlham. And I am not saying that, exactly. I suspect that you have had ample opportunity to observe rhetoric at work here, perhaps at this very moment; but I will suggest that you have been able to come closer here to this vision of the power of education as poetry than would have been possible almost anywhere else.

Part of this is because of the College's Quaker heritage. Although constantly in danger of codifying its own sort of orthodoxy, of becoming merely its own best rhetoric, the Quaker nature of the place provides an *opportunity* for equality. That sense of the value of equality, when practiced by individuals in and outside of the classroom, in the private as well as the public world, results in the development of friendship. And that friendship, which exists in an atmosphere of criticism, allows us to have the conversations which lead to discovering knowledge. Unlike the teachers, pedagogues, in *Lysis* who interrupt the conversation at the end of the dialogue just when it seems to be getting somewhere, most of us, here, want the sort of personal connections with each other and with students which will lead us to poetic conversation.

Well, it seems like a long time since we left my father in the cellar and my grandfather kissing my feet. I suspect that you know by now which lesson about the power of education I would choose to make mine.

What my grandfather would experience, I think, is a vision of education which is based upon power *over* someone else, based upon the power of rhetoric. I understand this notion; I experience it when I find myself wanting the approval of someone who I know doesn't respect me and who I do not respect. That gives him power and it takes it from me. It diminishes us both. This is not the power of education I would choose.

Instead, I'll take the cellar, for it is there that the values of equality and respect, the ability and desire to enter into conversation with anyone, are the marks of education. And it is there that real change can happen and there that the poetic life can be led.

I am afraid it is June 5th, the end of this year, and consequently near to the end of this talk, and I have continued to discover that it's not always easy to make these distinctions between poetry and rhetoric nor to understand how they are attached to the power of education. These last weeks I have been in crisis - one more important to me at the end of writing this piece than at the beginning. How, I wondered, could I wear a gown and still be faithful to Virginia Woolf? I must remember, I thought, what she says about pageantry and its contribution to Fascism. I must remember that toward the end of *Three Guineas* she writes of a new breed of people who would "dispense with the dictated, regimented, official pageantry, who would dispense with badges, hoods, gowns, not from any dislike of personal adornment, but because of the effect of such distinctions to constrict, to stereotype, and to destroy." I must remember this. Yet I have come to understand this gown differently; to understand it as a representative of the poetry of education that I love. This gown doesn't keep me out of the cellar.

It's not easy to make these distinctions. And so I stand here, possibly compromised and using a lot of words - poetry, friendship, education - that have probably turned up in baccalaureate addresses across the country. And in some ways I suppose this is a basic graduation speech. It offers hope for the future and best wishes for the graduate. If my father were here right now he would probably say, daughter, stop all this yapping and spit it out. I think I will.

I in no way mean to suggest to you that if you will only recognize poetry, shun rhetoric, develop friendships of work and cling to those aspects of the power of education that allow you talk with everyone and demand genuflection of no one, that things will go merrily forward. In fact, I have grave doubts about our collective future. What I do mean to suggest, however, is that survival on its own terms - and too often those terms of fear and secure individualism and the clawing for power that protects one's own and denies others - is truly not worth the energy it takes to maintain. It is self-defeating. Remember Lorde's poem where she distinguishes between poetry and rhetoric and suggests that the Black woman on the jury who voted for the acquittal of the white police officer who shot and killed a ten-year-old boy really let go of the first real power she ever had. She refused to speak.

We are, I believe, people who in Audre Lorde's terms, live on the edge. In a "Litany for Survival," she writes

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we
are afraid
it might not rise in the
morning
when our stomachs are full
we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty
we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it's better to speak.

And I agree - it is better to speak. It's better to use the power of education to speak. And if we can manage a life that speaks poetry, all the better. In fact, I am sure of only one thing, and that is that a life without friendship and conversation, whether on the cellar steps, over coffee or between two people who live continents apart, is truly a life without power.

It is difficult to have a conversation when only one of us is actually speaking, but I hope that this is no more than a reply to the question you asked when you invited me to be with you today. You asked: What do you think? I heard you. I'd like to believe that we have come to this conversation as friends of the work, and that it was that friendship which caused you to offer me this opportunity to speak. I am honored by your invitation. And, my friends, for this one more moment of at least implied conversation, and for the many years of trying for poetry that we have had together, and the I hope we will continue to have, though apart, I thank you.