

“THE POWER OF WORDS TO TRANSFORM”

Another political season is behind us, the balloons popped, the tinsel swept away. We've listened to thousands of speeches and sound-bites until we grew numb and each phrase began to sound like the other: “My fellow Americans....” And yet, over the centuries, some words, some phrases, remain in our collective memory. Long before humans began to write, we spoke. Long before we had politicians, we had shaman priests, warriors, and elders who inspired the tribe to undertake dangerous migrations, hunt wild beasts, give honor to the gods of the stones, trees, and sky. These speakers employed musical speech – speech you listened to, answered, perhaps danced to, words that entered our emotional brains and made us want to follow. In Arabic, traditional spoken poetry is used to argue politics, persuade opponents. Barack Obama is the latest in a long tradition of such speakers. Read his great speeches on a screen or on paper, you'd miss the calm, devout cadence. But to have been in Grant Park that night, or listened in on television or YouTube, you understood why the repeated phrases “Yes we can,” brought tears to Jesse Jackson's face, and to so many others. “The power of words to transform,” as Obama has written.

I was at the Lincoln Memorial, right up front, that warm, clear August day in 1963 when Martin Luther King gave the rhapsodic ending to a long speech: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.... Let freedom ring...from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city...when all of God's children — black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics — will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!’” The Kennedy administration had worried that there would be violence; instead the hundreds of thousands of us who there were transformed, joyful, King's energy strengthening ours; we were ready to do anything peaceful, non-violent to help him realize his dream.

Yet not all speeches are intended to uplift. Some convert a murmuring crowd into a mob. Shakespeare wrote such a polemic. His Marc Antony gives the peroration over the body of the assassinated Julius Caesar: “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.... The noble Brutus hath told you Caesar was ambitious... (For Brutus is an honourable man; so are they all; all honourable men)... He was my friend, faithful and just to me: but Brutus says he was ambitious; and Brutus is an honourable man.... I thrice presented him a kingly crown, which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition? Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; and, sure, he is an honourable man.” The crowd well understood the bitter irony in the ‘honourable’ nature of Brutus and turned their rage on the assassins.

Adolph Hitler – his voice almost screeching, exerted a furious spell over his crowds, abetted by torch lit night-time parades, goose stepping troops, black and red banners,

enraging his listeners to a frenzy with his “*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer!*” (One People, One Empire, One Leader.)

Compare then Abraham Lincoln – his high-pitched speaking voice embarrassed even his supporters – whose long first inaugural address is familiar only to historians, until we come to the very end – his timeless, emotional appeal to the Southern States not to rebel: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” We hear Lincoln’s cadences in Obama’s speeches, not by accident surely.

Winston Churchill, also at the end of a long speech, had to rally his people (a child, I was one of them) to resist the Nazis threatening to invade the British Isles: “We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”

Speeches that are honest with the people inspire the most. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his first inaugural speech almost four years into the Great Depression, could have spoken to us today: “This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” In another setting, President Ronald Reagan gave heart and courage to the West Berliners closed in by the infamous wall, guarded by Communist tanks and troops – “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace... Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Not long after, Berliners did just that.

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