

DISCOURSE

Where Ideas Meet

Rhetoric Creates Opportunities for Abundance

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Several years ago, I was socializing with friends in a local bar. Being on the north side of Chicago, the bar was diverse but predominantly white. While I ordered a drink, a Black man about my age struck up a conversation. I don't recall exactly what we discussed, but I remember thinking it was a good way to spend the time waiting for a drink in a crowded bar. As I said goodbye and began to go on my way, he stopped me. "Hold on," he said with a noticeable sense of urgency. "Yeah?" I said, eager to get back to my friends but intrigued about what could be so important. "You know how to talk to white people. How do I do that?"

I honestly do not remember what I said, but I will never forget what I thought: How, exactly, did he think white people spoke? I assumed it was less about dialect and more about discourse: the values, attitudes and beliefs a person or group expresses through language. What I think he was really asking was not just "How do white people talk?" but also "What do white people talk *about*?" He may have stood out physically, but he wanted to know how to fit in rhetorically.

I tell this story because it informs the connection I make between rhetoric and abundance. I think about all the social moments, the good conversations, the connections a person can miss out on because he or she doesn't exactly know "how to talk" to certain people or groups. Rhetorical skill can help people acquire a different kind of abundance—an abundance of social capital, an abundance of opportunities that arise upon meeting new people, an abundance of interests and insights we can receive.

Thus, I agree with Gonzalo Schwarz when [he writes](#) that social mobility is "the economics of flourishing." I define abundance as Schwarz defines flourishing; it goes

beyond financial richness and “is also about achievement, purpose, aspiration, poverty reduction and developing the skills and personal characteristics necessary to thrive in our current economy.” This is an apt definition for abundance. “Understood this way,” Schwarz continues, “an abundance agenda is critical to increasing social mobility and enhancing human flourishing,” and I would argue that rhetoric is critical to an abundance agenda. Therefore, rhetoric is critical to human flourishing. The Black man who approached me in the bar felt like someone on the outside looking into a party he didn’t know how to enter. Rhetoric can be the way into that party—the key, or even the door itself—and the more rhetorical savvy a person has, the more there is potential for abundance.

Acquiring the Means of Persuasion

Abundance, or the ability to acquire it, is in a sense foundational to rhetorical theory and practice. One can infer it from Aristotle’s [traditional definition of rhetoric](#): “the faculty of observing in *any given case* the *available* means of persuasion” (emphasis mine). Means of persuasion are only “available” if one has enough awareness of the “given case” to make the best of them. To be skilled in rhetoric is to have an abundance of awareness and methods of expression, which, in turn, better ensure an abundance of achievements. Knowing a variety of ways to express the same thing can make possible a variety of circumstances that are unavailable to the person who only has one or two modes of expression. Desiderius Erasmus focuses on this idea in “[On Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style](#)”:

Variety [of expression] is so powerful in every sphere that there is absolutely nothing, however brilliant, which is not dimmed if not commended by variety. . . . Also, this form of exercise will make no insignificant contribution to the ability to speak or write extempore, and will prevent us from standing there stammering and dumbfounded, or from disgracing ourselves by drying up in the middle. Nor will it be difficult to divert speech, even when we have embarked upon it rather hastily, into the course we desire when we have so many expressions lined up ready for action.

I believe the man from my introductory anecdote was suffering from a lack of such variety. He felt he needed to translate his interests into a rhetoric more familiar to his listeners. He lacked “the ability to speak and write extempore,” i.e., to improvise communication on the spot. He inadvertently echoed Erasmus’ warning that “if we are not instructed in these techniques, we shall often be found unintelligible, harsh, or even totally unable to express ourselves.” In other words, the abundance of speech, and therefore of social interaction and community, becomes inaccessible.

I infer from Erasmus the belief that rhetorical skill can make a person “polytropic,” a rhetorical term that literally means “turning in many directions”—in other words, taking advantage of new opportunities for speech and action. Polytropic people have many “directions” from which to approach a topic, available to be used whenever most prudent. If people enter a situation with the rhetorical skill to take advantage of potential opportunities, they are more likely to succeed in doing so; opportunities flourish. The term “polytropic” denotes planned improvisation; a person learns many ways of saying the same thing, but a specific situation will dictate which ones are used.

I want to borrow a tactic famously used by Erasmus to further explain the polytropic approach. Let us play with the sentence, “I have nothing to say to you.” This sentence can be expressed differently while conveying the same general message:

“I ain’t got nothing to say to you.”

“I fail to find anything I need to convey to you.”

“Nothing I have to say is worth saying to you.”

“For the life of me, I cannot think of a reason to talk to you any further.”

“When I think about what to say to you, I think of nothing at all.”

“To you, I need say nothing.”

“I harbor no words worth having you hear.”

“I find conversing with you to be unnecessary.”

Which statement a person chooses to use depends on the situation—the time, place, subject matter and, especially, audience. The ability to choose a kind of expression based on the dictates of a situation can enhance a person’s ethos—his or her credibility as someone worth listening to. Knowing the values, attitudes and beliefs of others—and noticing what they have in common with your own values, attitudes and beliefs—can be the difference between a forgettable conversation and one that enables abundance.

Creating Opportunities

Using rhetoric to identify with an audience can open doors that would otherwise remain shut. Speakers who reference the particular history an audience shares, or who use a local landmark as a metaphor to support their point, may attract more attentive and active listeners than they would by referencing their own hometown histories and landmarks. To be knowledgeable of what an audience values and believes, and to be savvy enough to incorporate those values and beliefs into speech, is to better ensure an abundance of opportunities and an abundance of angles from which to approach a topic. Rhetoric discovers opportunity in a given situation. This, in turn, may lead to an abundant life.

Rhetoric can also make doors already open remain open. Take, for instance, “[narrative insurgency](#),” a concept activist Jonathan Smucker describes as the discovery and utilization of “points of connection—i.e., common ground between their belief system and yours.” Smucker uses an argument between a climate change activist and a creationist as an example: “When someone wraps climate change-denial views in the rhetoric of creationist beliefs, it is tempting to directly attack.” However, “narrative attack,” as opposed to narrative insurgency, may shut down conversation and shut the metaphorical door for either debater to change the other’s mind.

[Narrative attack](#), explains Smucker, is the attempt to disprove someone’s “whole belief system” outright. Like many things, there is a time and a place for narrative attack. However, narrative insurgency is more conducive to abundance; it opens up the conversation to new possibilities because it provides new points of entry through which to approach the situation. In Smucker’s example of the climate change activist and the creationist, “An effective point of entry might be to emphasize humanity’s Biblical mandate to care for God’s creation.” Now a commonality has been discovered, and what looked like a conversational dead end has paradoxically kept the conversation alive; it keeps our metaphorical door open. The creationist in this story may still end up unconvinced, but at least the potential to convince him or her is still available. A focus on commonalities may prolong an otherwise finished and unproductive conversation.

Rhetoric done in the spirit of abundance sees the world as a collection not of oppressive and repressive forces, but of different potential strategies that can be used to a speaker’s and audience’s advantage. Speakers abiding by the spirit of abundance have faith in their ability to craft the best argument for a particular audience. The improvisational aspect of rhetoric means that a speaker or writer becomes a “[bricoleur](#),” a term used by the anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss to describe someone with “the skill of using whatever is at hand and recombining them to create something new.” A rhetorical bricoleur creates an argument constructed on the available means of persuasion in any given case. In the spirit of abundance, speakers or writers do not look for obstacles to fulfillment; they look for opportunities to build such bricolages.

Simply put, the more a person can use rhetoric to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities, the more that person will be able to access abundance. I am reminded of Henry James' insistence that to be a good writer, one must strive to be "one on whom nothing is lost." A rhetorician is one on whom no opportunity is lost! Of course, becoming a skilled rhetorician is easier said than done, but the more we can identify the "available means of persuasion," the fewer opportunities will be lost to us. Perhaps saying rhetoric aids abundance is to understate the situation. Maybe it is more accurate to say rhetoric *is* abundance.

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