

# THE PERFECT RESPONSE

STUDIES OF THE RHETORICAL PERSONALITY

GARY C. WOODWARD

# **The Perfect Response**

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# The Perfect Response

## Studies of the Rhetorical Personality

Gary C. Woodward



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In Memory of the Sage of Andover,  
“Without Whom Not”

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# Preface

The ability to think about the past and present, the capacity for self-awareness, and the ability to grow into the miraculous resources of language—these are some of the core elements of what it means to be human. Each does its part to deliver to others our ideas, feelings, and intentions. And each contributes to growing layers of experience that somewhere by our second decade begin to surpass in importance the sensations of our biological selves. Worlds are created and sustained in acts of naming. Life literally gains significance in this process. And for the most loquacious among us it produces the compulsion to anticipate and exploit the feelings of others.

This book is a study of those who are so driven: individuals who have out-sized capacities for empathy, other-centeredness, and showmanship. It is about the ability to thrive and affiliate through varied acts of rhetorical affirmation.

Consider a representative case. I live in a rural hamlet of woods and streams where a large woodpile counts for more than a groomed lawn. Because this corner of rural New Jersey has more geography than people, it falls to local volunteers to keep community service organizations afloat. I have a friend in the area who works full time, but still offers to help in a senior center, a conservation group, and an EMS/rescue service. All of this is perhaps the legacy of growing up in a household with parents well-connected to social service organizations in her hometown. But it is not always easy. In a recent conversation she reminded me again that some of the community volunteers she works with have political and cultural views that seem to be just this side of the 1600s. We often laugh about this, perhaps out of a certain smugness that comes when professionals move into areas they like to think were islands of social isolation until they arrived. One person I'll call Bob whispered to my friend that he was pretty sure that the current president was a closeted Muslim extremist and "not a true American." On

another occasion the same man also passed on his fear that African Americans in an adjoining city would soon be moving to his own neighborhood. Others who could have easily overheard these comments remained complicit in their silence, apparently accepting these fantasies without comment or rebuke.

My own response to all of this was relief in knowing that I did not have to spend time in the company of such backwater bigots. “These people are fools,” I said. “How could anybody living in the twenty-first century still be so out of touch?” But my friend surprised me. In the next breath she was telling me how *nice* these people were, and how they would do anything to help citizens in need. She laughed at their beliefs more in regret than anger. If anything, she seems to enjoy the idea that her reputation as a liberal raised in a large northern city must give them pause.

Clearly, my friend is wired differently than me. Listening to alien political beliefs sends cold water through my veins. I want to remove myself from situations where I must keep a steady course through the social ice floes of people whose views I consider offensive. Not so for her; she rolls through her volunteer obligations from week to week with neither dread nor indignation. She accepts her colleagues as she finds them, remaining unscarred by their sometimes small-minded attitudes. In short, she is several degrees closer than I to the kinds of persons this study seeks to know.

This book’s title is an admitted simplification, and trades on what may be the single richest idea in psychology. We are all ardent appraisers of *personality*. Its language of temperament is an irresistible gateway to understandings of the otherness that sometimes can make a friend of a stranger. Even so, our approach here is more rhetorical and sociological than psychological. *The Perfect Response* is not a study of a simple clinical type, but rather of communicators who share certain dispositions about how best to relate to others. If the idea of the rhetorical personality is imprecise, it is helpful in pointing us in the direction we want to go. And while it includes a general “map” of the contours of a distinct type, the emphasis here is more on crucial similarities of effective communicators as revealed in their public words. Without question, this study owes something to the traditional markers of personality, especially the core traits of extroversion and openness. But its methodology intentionally mixes disciplinary perspectives, functioning in part as a sociology of interaction, a meditation on certain features of character and temperament, a philosophy of adaptive communication, and a phenomenology of rhetorical outcomes. To only focus on trait theory or any single psychological rubric would be the equivalent of asking a film director to shoot an entire film with only one lens. A motion picture of only close-ups would be claustrophobic, and as annoying as one locked exclusively on cover shots. We need the advantages of multiple perspectives and disciplines—a fortunate coincidence of subject and author, since (for good or ill) this is the work of a rather undisciplined mind.

This study suggests that there are relational patterns that can feed our better instincts. Some ways of connecting with those who pass through our circle of influence are better than others. It perhaps does not need to be said that the most obvious examples of effective rhetorical engagement are usually found in the public discourse of presidents, mayors, and other public figures. After all, those who gain power by placing themselves in the path of the journalism/celebrity juggernaut cannot help but be noticed. They create a public record and feed the collective memory of our national *agora*. Many of the nearly 30 individuals profiled in this study fall into this category. But we would miss the universality of the impulse this book seeks to document if it were limited to the familiar names that dominate the daily news cycle. The essential core impulses behind fluency—empathy, sympathy, identification, self-monitoring, engagement, acknowledgment, and listening—are distributed in equal measure to the anonymous and famous. The rhetorical personality is not necessarily the loudest person in a room, or the one who seems to dominate a conversation. What people who share this trait seem to have in common is the energy for accommodation to the needs of others. In a chapter that follows, for example, Teddy Roosevelt is judged to be lacking in some of the tendencies that make up the strengths of this kind of gifted communicator, even though the inventor of the “bully pulpit” loved to talk. Remarkably, he probably holds the record for giving the longest speech—90 minutes—*after* a gunman had shot him in the chest. The thick manuscript of an address that was in his pocket fortunately took most of the bullet’s energy, clearly doing more good than the one he gave. Roosevelt was better at acting than reacting. To read some of his words now is to experience a style of rhetoric that has shrunk from its intended grandeur. If its pattern of stale certainty is not quite the opposite of what we have in mind, it is some distance from the kind of other-oriented rhetoric we now expect from the prototypes of this study.

As this book attempts to chronicle in different ways, the rhetorical personality as a composite is more curious than ideologically committed, and gains as much from listening as talking. For want of a more nuanced phrase, we are interested in a particular kind of *adaptive fluency*. Our intention is to explore temperaments revealed in rhetorical style that increase the chances of transformative connections with others. Such effectiveness is typically a combination of *expressiveness*, *lucidity*, *persuasiveness*, and *sensitivity*. Others might have a slightly different list of core attributes. And readers should consider this project as an invitation to construct their own map of the sources of fluency. Communication mined from these richer veins holds out the promise of:

- giving form to feelings or attitudes that we already know,
- closing a destructive distance that exists between individuals,
- acknowledging others in ways that are affirming,

- extending insight about oneself or others, and
- compelling others to reconsider previously settled beliefs.

No single person can easily do all of these things all the time. And with such panoramic goals, there is always the risk of making assessments that can sound like a string of greeting card clichés. But various combinations of these traits are well represented in the individuals and contexts discussed in the following pages. Appropriately, the case-rich analyses that begin after the introductory chapter save us from the vacuity of empty theorizing. Although each section is quite different, our goal is always the same: to experience rhetorical grace with more insight and sharper acuity.

Thanks are due to a number of colleagues who have commented on parts of this analysis or provided other forms of support over the long sojourn of this project. They include Lois Robbins, Susan Ryan, David Blake, Jan Robbins, Hilary Woodward, Terry Byrne, Yifeng Hu, John Pollock, Michael Robertson, Carol Rowe, Beth Paul, Rebecca McCary, and Robert Denton, Jr. I am also grateful for the assistance of a number of scholars whose work over the past 50 years is generative of some of the analysis this study. Among the most influential social scientists in these pages are David Riesman, George Herbert Mead, Mark Snyder, Mark Davis, Erving Goffman, Eleanor Semel, Sue Rosner, and Daniel Goleman. This study also builds on the creative talents of a number of writers, including James L. Brooks, Temple Grandin, Annie Dillard, Buzz Bissinger, T. R. Reid, David Dobbs, Oliver Sacks, Bill Bryson, and many others. Their words and images were the sources of many of the ideas expressed in this book. They have also provided in their art what I sometimes could not adequately express as a critic.

This study also relies on the insights of many communication scholars and teachers, including John Durham Peters, Rod Hart, Trevor Melia, William Gudykunst, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, Richard Weaver, and Kenneth Burke, in whose memory the study is dedicated. If this book has a guiding spirit, it is Burke, who by example challenged critics to cast their nets toward the horizon rather than at their feet. To all I owe a large debt, though any shortcomings are my own.

I am grateful to the editors of *TCNJ Magazine* for permission to quote from an earlier study of former Attorney General John Ashcroft. This project was also completed with several grants of released time provided by my colleagues at the College of New Jersey.

## *Chapter 1*

# **Introduction**

## *A Conceptual Map of the Rhetorical Personality*

His ability to talk, to empathize, to understand; his willingness to fall behind schedule, to infuriate his staff, merely because some stray citizen on a rope line had a problem or a story that needed to be heard—will doubtless stand as his most memorable qualities. Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota . . . once told me a story about a friend of his, a schoolteacher named Dennis Wadley, who was dying of cancer in 1994. “Dennis was a political junkie,” Wellstone recalled, “and I arranged for him to meet the President just before he died. We met at the end of a day, at a local television station in Minneapolis. Clinton came right over to us and he immediately sized up the situation—Dennis didn’t want to talk about his disease, he wanted to have a policy discussion. And the President stood there, for forty-five minutes, and gave Dennis the gift of taking him seriously, listening to him, responding intelligently. He never mentioned the illness. It was an incredibly gracious act, entirely natural.”<sup>1</sup>

—Joe Klein

A critical threshold in the evolution of the communicative individual is the transition from “I” to “we.” Infants enter the world focused on their needs. For those lucky to be raised in relative comfort and security, it will be a steady but prolonged journey from the narcissism of self-reference to a life that makes room for others.<sup>2</sup> Even the advantages of affluence and age may not always be sufficient to set loose the requisite curiosity. It is difficult enough for many to weather the storms and transitions of existence. Keeping a fix on the frequencies of others requires more energy than many will ever possess.

The language of social interaction is full of synonyms for the acts and processes of other-awareness. We come to know what is expected of us in diverse situations, and many of these expectations carry the proviso that we will give

others their due. We talk of empathy, other-direction, socially appropriate behavior, fellow-feeling, adaptability, and generosity—an accumulating set of norms that reward high levels of self-monitoring and role-taking.<sup>3</sup>

In this book I will argue that for a minority in American life, this is more than a proscribed etiquette of social blending. I am interested in those features of an individual's temperament—manifest in rhetorical action and illustrated by the opening example of Bill Clinton—that produce mastery in the ability to “read” and react to social settings. For people with these capacities the perceived needs of others are generative of discourse. Who has not been impressed by the apparent enthusiasm of a rhetorical agent to fully engage with a group of individuals, and to do it mostly on *their* terms? No single sentence can capture the layers of action and reaction put in play in such moments. But John Durham Peters makes a good start in describing communication as “bearing oneself in such a way that one is open to hearing the other's otherness.”<sup>4</sup>

Consider another illustration involving the former president. David Maraniss writes that when Clinton was a student at Oxford, he had “a fascination with how other people lived.”

Curiosity about the people around him was one of his strongest traits, the main intersection of his gregarious, empathetic personality and his political ambition. Some people watched Clinton in action and marveled at his big heart. Paul Parish could see it “any time you were with him and you met a third person, a friend of yours that Bill did not know. That friend would end up telling Bill things about himself. The kinds of things Bill brought out in people were the kinds of things you wanted to be around. People's souls shined in their faces when they were talking to Bill.”<sup>5</sup>

Clinton's need for approval from others drew people to him—a feature of his character that we will consider in more detail in the final chapter. While the motives of those who need others are not necessarily selfless, they are usually inclusive in ways that complement the processes of communication.

Pliable, accommodating, and conscious of the trail of impressions they leave, rhetorical personalities are intrepid explorers even in potentially hostile social settings. Their lives gain purpose in deeds executed through interactions with others. They seem permanently situated in a kind of southern exposure, drawing energy from their surroundings and giving it back even when others have cooled.

To be sure, any attempt to define a character type raises vexing issues. Are we looking at a unique type of person? If there is an identifiable outward-looking personality, what are its critical components? What separates simple normative courtesy from a deeper impulse to communicate and persuade?

Are such extensions into apparent selflessness mere adaptive devices concealing the desire to advance personal goals? Or do they represent something more generous?

The idea of a distinct rhetorical personality is admittedly a convenient simplification in several ways. Personality as a formal construct usually encompasses the total self, measured partly in internal states not always detected on the surface of one's own rhetoric. The "big five" variables of traditional personality modeling include "neuroticism," "extraversion," "openness," "agreeableness," and "conscientiousness."<sup>6</sup> These have obvious applications. But I am interested in a narrower set of responses measured in conscious *relational* behavior: a character type displayed in *verbal responses to others* rather than inventories of attitudes or feelings. To borrow from an old distinction between sociology and psychology, this is more a study of "minds in cooperation" than "minds in isolation."<sup>7</sup> The idea is perhaps better understood as a performative impulse created by layers of perceived obligations rather than a core feature of personality. And it is derived more from one's rhetoric than from a taxonomy of traits inferred from self reports. To be sure, the language and practices in the border regions that join psychology and communication are helpful, especially in cross-disciplinary work on the attributes of individuals identified as high "self monitors" and "other directed." This study, however, is not primarily an extension of the categories of academic psychology, which—among other things—usually casts a rather harsh eye on the kinds of adaptive performances that typically showcase rhetorical skills.<sup>8</sup>

The mapping project here treats its core idea as arising from a family of traits rather than a static collection of fixed personality markers. Following Daniel Levitin's interpretation of category analysis suggested by Eleanor Rosch and others,<sup>9</sup> we won't obsess over whether individuals fully "fit" the scheme described in this chapter, but rather we will see whether they have a *family resemblance* to some of its key features. Description by definition is rigid and arbitrary, far less useful than what is required in the more nuanced task of illuminating human nature with reference to settled categories.

In this chapter the four key features of this map are introduced in what is a first pass over ideas that will be developed more thoroughly in later pages. They include the capacities for other-direction, high self-monitoring, identification, and the inclination to engage. Each represents a capacity and critical feature of the kind of communicator we wish to explore. This introduction also sketches four broad rhetorical outcomes induced by these traits. These function as markers of people who have these basic capacities, and they include a heightened sense of audience, an increased sense of agency, comfort in discrepant roles, and the motivation to seek rhetorical transcendence. These are presented as *patterns of response* evident in individuals energized



by the possibilities of communication. They are offered in summary form here, but they will occupy most of the remaining pages of this project in different combinations. In later chapters we will revisit aspects of the rhetorical personality from a variety of different perspectives, ranging from the impulse to use narration to perfect sociability, to explorations about the nature of interactive competence as seen through the experiences of individuals with certain cognitive “disorders.” Every chapter is a different kind of window for exploring the nature of fluency.

## THE CONSTITUENTS OF THE RHETORICAL PERSONALITY

We begin with an overview of key traits of character—special aptitudes and capacities—that offer the greatest chance to predict effective engagement over a number of settings. Each fills in part of the picture of interpersonal and psychological social processes that enhance communication, although our simple map is only a rudimentary guide to the complex terrain that we will need to explore later in more detail.

### Other Direction

The enduring value of David Riesman’s landmark 1950 study of “the changing American character” in *The Lonely Crowd* is arguably its heuristic power.<sup>10</sup> His comparison of adaptable “other-directed” Americans, with older generations governed more by “tradition” and “inner-direction,” made intuitive sense then as it does now. Rarely had a public intellectual offered a picture of the essence of the American national character with so clear a set of evocative labels. Much of the original population-based data used to arrive at his scheme confused readers, and Riesman eventually abandoned most of it.<sup>11</sup> But there was something prescient in his observation that postwar America fostered new generations of Americans who understood that their success depended on being more responsive to the needs of others and the institutions to which they were tied. Other scholarship at the time had already added to a sense that something in the American character was changing.<sup>12</sup> For example, individualist social and economic entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century who created much of the nation’s wealth and infrastructure seemed to be giving way to a population of utilitarian adapters and opportunists.<sup>13</sup> The older captains of industry were often irascible, self-absorbed, and hard on even their admirers. The younger Americans who eventually inherited their assets nurtured them in an atmosphere of far greater diffidence. The difference is reflected in the contrast between the staid John D. Rockefeller and his more

socially aware grandsons, David and Nelson. The senior oil tycoon was taciturn and famous for keeping his own counsel. The grandsons, by contrast, were students of their surroundings, and known for weaving their lives into the networks of banking and politics in New York and Washington. They seemed far more attuned to their times than did their grandfather.<sup>14</sup>

Riesman argued that the rise of modern consumerism and the growth of a more mobile society had left Americans with an increased openness to suggestion. If the life of early American crusaders and business owners had been governed by the impervious “gyroscope” of inner direction, the rising tide of other-directed Americans was increasingly tuned to finding and holding its place *within* organizations and institutions. Commercial activity increasingly took Americans away from the anchor of their communities. Work was more frequently in the context of the office, with its imperatives for “fitting in” and shared decision making. Schools, churches, and other community-centered bodies were bureaucratized into larger structures with their own administrative layers. And the newer mediums of radio and television played a role in creating pervasive if thin national norms of accommodation. Even the powerful new networks were constantly looking over their shoulders. Their programming was controlled by advertisers, and advertisers paid attention to what attracted audiences.<sup>15</sup>

The goals of the other-directed person, noted Riesman, needed to shift easily from setting to setting. “This mode of keeping in touch with others permits a close behavioral conformity, not through drill and behavior itself, as in the tradition-directed character, but rather through an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others.”<sup>16</sup> Freed from lives of basic subsistence, other-directedness became a condition for success in a more interconnected world defined by new opportunities.

This was essentially Bill Clinton’s story. Coming from a family of modest means in Arkansas, Clinton benefited from his mother’s expanding income to blossom into a person with the time and capabilities to pursue a public career. As Joe Klein observed, the times matched his talents. He “was strangely malleable, a creature of his audience, besotted with his ability to charm, constantly trying to please.”<sup>17</sup>

In the next two chapters we will explore what communication proceeding from other-awareness looks like. In a preliminary sense, we can note that the difference between speaking *to* someone and *with* them is a mirror image of the difference between a monologue and dialogue, or between a celluloid performance projected on a screen and a live performance in front of an audience. Only stage performers and fully engaged interlocutors have the opportunity to seed their ideas with the feelings and attitudes of others. In the early moments of contact with others we begin to sense the difference. Am I acknowledged?

Are they registering my feelings or needs? Are they sufficiently secure in themselves to be open to another? Writer Terry Castle recalls running into a prickly old colleague long known for her self-absorption and for whom the answer to each question would be a resounding *no*. “What had been true all along, I now saw, was still true: that she was thoroughly dissociated. Lost in herself. Not available. Never had been. The smile was charming; the eye contact warm and intense; the alienation absolute.”<sup>18</sup>

### High Self-Monitoring

Comedian and writer Steve Martin writes that his most persistent memory of performing is “of my mouth being in the present and my mind being in the future: the mouth speaking the line, the body delivering the gesture, while the mind looks back, observing, analyzing, judging, worrying, and then deciding when and what to say next.”<sup>19</sup> The high self-monitor cannot do otherwise. The impulse to engage in the constant surveillance of self defines a somewhat elusive but essential feature of the rhetorical personality. This crucial variable focuses on the extent to which individuals feel compelled by their social circumstances to censor their own verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Over the last century George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, and others laid the groundwork for a sociology of “impression management,” with its amplification of “fronts,” “audiences,” and “performances” in everyday settings.<sup>20</sup> Others such as Hugh Dalziel Duncan have reminded us of how much we learn from even the small dramas of violated expectations.<sup>21</sup> A comic’s disclosure of personal embarrassments is in another way a simple catalogue of social norms neglected at one’s peril.

Every individual draws the line in a different place regarding what can and cannot be allowed in social situations. A compulsion to make tight distinctions could be described as “high” self-monitoring, a feature reflected in Mark Snyder’s inventory of statements typical for such individuals. Samples include:

I would probably make a good actor.

I’m not always the person I appear to be.

I may deceive people by being friendly when I really dislike them.

In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons.<sup>22</sup>

Any such scheme for assessing self-monitoring shows limitations when applied cross-culturally.<sup>23</sup> But it would be difficult to *not* have a conceptual frame that emphasizes the degrees to which others feel compelled by their

communicative circumstances to adjust their language, ideas and behavior. This concept is deeply embedded in the everyday lexicon of first impressions, with its implicit rewards for the advocate who successfully “reads” and “adapts” to the audience, is “respectful” of their experience, “finds the right words,” and “plays the role” others expect. It makes sense that a schoolmaster would remember a gifted student in such terms. One of his teachers recalls that former Prime Minister Tony Blair retained many of the characteristics he had growing up in Durham. He “has always been conscious of how he appears to other people. The façade is always there. He is very intelligent and calculating. Don’t forget that he was a superb actor.”<sup>24</sup> Blair represents a complex case of adaptation and resistance to whom we will also return in the last chapter.

The risks of low self-monitoring are so perilous that we frequently play them for laughs, welcoming stories of crass insensitivity as cautionary markers of social devolution. James L. Brooks’ 1997 film *As Good As It Gets* invites us to be appalled by the hopelessly misogynistic rhetoric of its lead character, Melvin (Jack Nicholson), who is later redeemed by a satisfying (if not quite plausible) third-act transformation. Lynne Truss’ best-selling lament on modern manners, *Talk to the Hand*, does much the same. By focusing on the excesses of individuals who can’t leave their bad habits and cell phones at home, she offers a whimsical primer on what she sees as a kind of rampant “social autism.”<sup>25</sup>

It is hard to underestimate the disastrous effects of this incapacity to monitor harmful communication. As we shall see in Chapter 4, it amounts to a shutdown of autoimmune protections that ought to save persons from the perils of everyday give and take. It invites catastrophe by failing to subdue words and attitudes that are toxic to others.

## Disposition for Identification

Identification is the transient experience of recognizing a part of ourselves in others. Sometimes we seek to produce alignment with ourselves or proxies in others. More commonly, we are the recipients of its effects. The capacity for identification resides in all humans. What is variable is our willingness to find what actors call the “sense memory” of parallel experience. Imagination and motivation seem to be crucial to the search for connections to others. By contrast, self absorption, inner direction, egotism, and the inability to empathize seem to doom it.

Elsewhere I’ve described the rhetorical effect of identification as “the conscious alignment of oneself with the experiences, ideas, and expressions of others: a heightened awareness that a message or gesture is revisiting a

feeling or state of mind we already know.”<sup>26</sup> Empathic persons listen, sympathize, support, and console. They are curious about others and are willing to invest the necessary energy to find pieces of themselves in others. The sum of these interactions represents an acquired and precious capacity: the motivation and the experience to convert communication into the communion of souls.

For Kenneth Burke, the idea of “identification” is nothing less than a new and valid substitution for rhetoric’s traditional emphasis on the older term *persuasion*. He assumes that rhetoric in most forms is the search for common ground, for a language of transcendence that will make others comfortable with a set of ideas or propositions. While Burke meant many things by the term, his description of the “simplest case of persuasion” is now a classic summation of the principle:

You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language in speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his. Persuasion by flattery is but a special case of persuasion in general.<sup>27</sup>

The potential for identification is not easy to measure. If we look at studies of the related idea of *empathy*, it tends to be negatively correlated with narcissism, antisocial behavior, and inflated self-image.<sup>28</sup> In short, it has a recognizable signature in personality theory, even as it springs from regions of biography and experience that are infinitely variable and personal. People interested in tracing the power of discourse to move others need to assess the skill of the communicator to create resonances that are likely to draw others in. Writer Anne Lamott advises novices that nothing is more important in creating fiction than getting the dialogue right. “The better you know the characters,” she cautions, “the more you’ll see things from their point of view. You need to trust that you’ve got it in you to listen to people, watch them, and notice what they wear and how they move, to capture a sense of how they speak.” Then, “as you learn who your characters are, compassion for them will grow. There shouldn’t be just a single important character in your work for whom you have compassion. You need to feel it even for the villain.”<sup>29</sup>

The verisimilitude Lamott wishes for her writers is but one species in the continual process of finding ourselves in others. A dialogue that intensifies rather than diminishes meaning is not simply a string of sentences spliced together end to end, but a verbal trail that keeps circling back in a continual quest for common meaning. The individual adept at marking out these paths is potentially as valuable to the reader as anyone who claims to offer transformative knowledge.

## THE INCLINATION TO ENGAGE

The fourth contributing trait of our model deals with the willingness to place oneself in the presence of others. Traditional descriptors of extraversion in the psychological literature include “sociable,” “active,” “talkative,” “person-oriented,” “optimistic,” “fun loving,” and “affectionate.”<sup>30</sup> These attributes parallel conventional wisdom about the “natural communicator,” the kind of person who tends to find satisfaction in the company of others. Without the energy source that an audience supplies to the rhetorical personality, none of its other features would mean very much.

Differences are obvious in comparing the communication styles of former Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. We have mentioned Clinton’s pleasure in being in the company of others. He “hated to be alone,” notes David Maraniss, who described the future President’s year at Oxford University as one long spectacle of extended loquaciousness. Clinton was always “lingering at the long table in the [eating] hall, surrounded by undergraduates long after the noontime meal is finished, chatting away.”

The younger students, a close friend recalls, “were in constant fascination with Bill and he with them. They were verbally facile. It was expected that you would not just eat and run but eat and talk and debate the great issues of the day until you were thrown out of the dining hall.”<sup>31</sup>

Even the ostensibly “retired” former President was not to be defeated by solitude. Residents of the New York suburb where he took up residence after leaving the White House note that he “became famous for hanging around Chappaqua’s tiny downtown, looking for someone to talk to.”<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, Bush was far more likely to leave to others the business of communicating the policies and views of his Presidency. By all accounts, Bush is not a recluse. But as a friend notes, “He doesn’t want to hear from anyone who doubts him.”<sup>33</sup> Columnist David Brooks revealingly called him “the most inner directed man on the globe.”<sup>34</sup> For most of his presidency he felt no special urgency to explain himself, and showed little curiosity about others. Through his first term he held only 11 formal meetings with the press—far less than Ronald Reagan’s 21 or his own father’s 71 for the same period.<sup>35</sup> And compared with British war ally Tony Blair, Bush was far less willing to make the essential case to the American people about the necessity of the long and costly war, even when it became the defining event of his administration.<sup>36</sup> Much more isolated than Clinton, Bush pulled back after assuming the presidency, showing an inclination to close off dissenters and to leave unpopular choices underexplained and undefended.

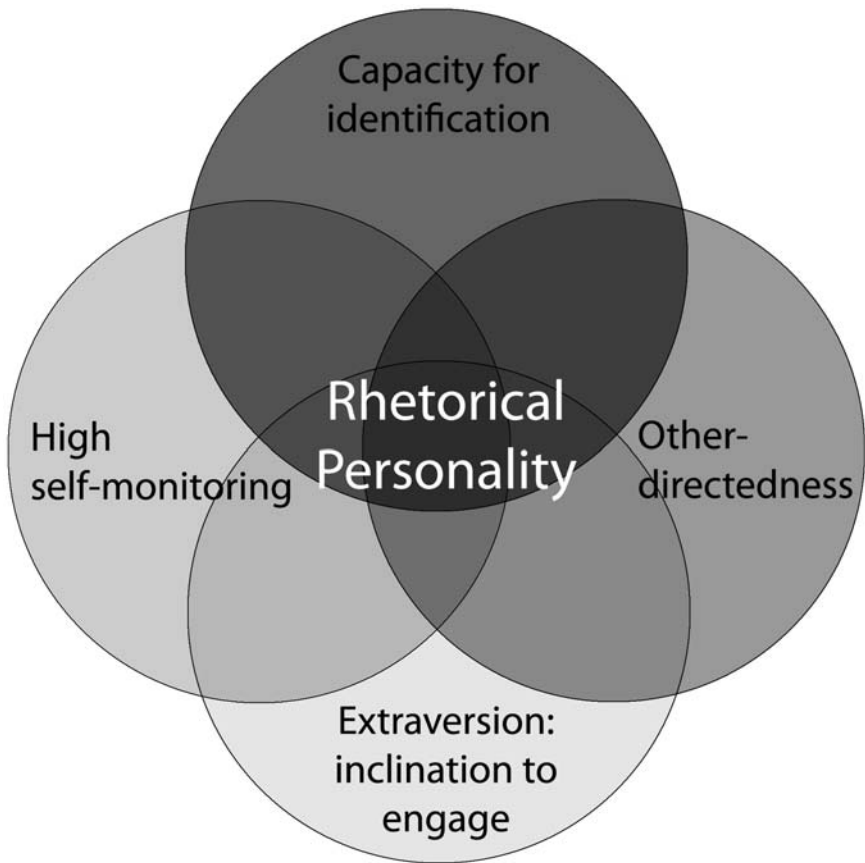


Figure 1.1.

As we note in Chapter 3, the inclination to engage is perhaps dominant to all other features of the willing communicator. However, it takes other-direction, the capacity for identification, and consistent self-monitoring to make an individual able to seize the opportunity to influence others. The point of convergence for these traits represents the aptitude we have in mind: an individual whose heightened capacities are motivated by the synergies of overlapping attributes.

All of these are features are *tendencies* rather than invariable absolutes. But even at this early stage we can venture some tentative conclusions. Rhetorical personalities thrive in the presence of others, particularly vocations predicated on conciliation and consensus rather than the “top-down” hierarchies common in business or military organizations. Fewer leaders in the latter arenas seem to arrive at the top with the souls of empathizers. As *private* individuals

rhetorical personalities are often the best organizers, motivators, and caregivers. They are more likely to be grade-school teachers than university professors, and mayors rather than judges. Indeed, mayors are especially models of tireless engagement, a point we will also explore in Chapter 3. Overall, they may also gravitate to the helping professions, though perhaps more to social work and psychotherapy than clinical research or surgical medicine. Indeed, the Rogerian idea of “client-centered therapy” is still the norm in most forms of talk-based healing,<sup>37</sup> as well as a fitting parallel to the kind of nonjudgmental openness that matches the rhetorical temperament.

More ironically, perhaps, rhetorical personalities seem *less* likely to be the heroes of contemporary storytelling. If Hollywood is no longer so predictably the center of the inner-directed hero (as displayed in the celluloid personas of John Wayne, Henry Fonda, Harrison Ford, or their more recent counterparts), neither has it evolved to favor stories that align the sympathies of audiences with compliant figures responding to the needs of others. One exception to the rule includes the work of writer/director James L. Brooks. To cite one example, his surprising decision to cast Adam Sandler in *Spanglish* was a stretch for both the story and the actor, who had built his career playing young men frozen in adolescence. In this family story, he was given both the traditional caregiver role *and* the burden of carrying the film as its moral center. Normally, we expect male characters in mainstream films to be the *agents* of action rather than conciliation. They are not meant to worry about the effects of their behavior on others.

## RHETORICAL SIGNATURES OF MOTIVATED COMMUNICATORS

If the capacities of rhetorical personalities make them unique and well-suited to the varied tasks of engaging others, what are the more overt rhetorical markers of this uniqueness? What sensitivities are they likely to possess that set them apart from others? Like other conclusions in this overview, our list here is preliminary. It offers four consequential tendencies that generally enhance the prospects for achieving the promise of effective communication. We will see evidence of these again and again in the figures profiled in the rest of this study.

### A Heightened Sense of Audience

Kenneth Burke described rhetoric as *always addressed*.<sup>38</sup> Within the individuals we have in mind, communication is understood as partly *for* someone else. While most adults can understand the logic of audience-based appeals, fewer



are well-suited to make an external audience essentially the energy force of their own persuasion. The subjects of this book are typically not visionaries or intuitive thinkers. Instead, their rhetoric tends to have more immediate applications to the events, feelings, and experiences that loom large for others. The results may not always be what a community needs, as when the legal team led by Johnny Cochran converted the trial of O. J. Simpson into a referendum on the racism of the Los Angeles Police.<sup>39</sup> The spectacle of police malfeasance became its own distracting sideshow for many who were ready to see it. But the effects of such coactive rhetoric are often transformative, at least for those who discover that someone else has given form and fluency to their ideas.

Any list of exemplars is subject to the natural limitations posed by different audiences. But evidence of profound sensitivities to external audiences can be found in the rhetorical work of a very diverse range of figures: veteran broadcasters Tavis Smiley and Phil Donahue; politicians such as Ed Rendell and Hubert Humphrey; performers like Meryl Streep and Marian Seldes; and writers like Anna Quindlen. All seem to have thrived by uncovering pathways into the experiences of audiences that others might never have found. For Streep these features have surfaced in a career defined by the transformation of generally underwritten film roles into gems of careful and sympathetic observation. When she gave life to Anna Quindlen's "Kate" in the film based on her book, *One True Thing* (1998), the resulting other-directed character was a formidable presence.<sup>40</sup> Audiences cared for her because she cared for others.

Within the realms of theater, broadcasting, and politics, it is easy to find individuals who seem to be especially alive to the possibilities of the moment as they take the stage. Watch the former broadcaster Phil Donahue or the veteran Broadway actress Marian Seldes enter a room full of people. Catch the quick glimpses into the corners of the room from former mayor and governor Ed Rendell as he begins another speech of welcome or congratulations. All have their antenna up and scanning to find the optimal level of energy that will work for the audience and its setting. The performance that commences is a search for lines and pauses, cadences and inflections that will find their mark and get a response. Such gifted communicators primed by the potentialities of an encounter are mostly incapable of shutting down their quest until they get some sort of affirming response. For them and their counterparts in more private settings, the pleasure of being in the company of an audience surpasses the satisfaction of communicating particular sets of attitudes or facts.

When it is otherwise, it can be a painful thing to watch. Over a lifetime in academia I've seen many reluctant students and more than a few professionals who have approached the podium as if it were their own upended coffin.

Eyes are cast down or inward. The sparks they are capable of giving off in private have been smothered under a shroud of dread. For them the audience represents a threat rather than an opportunity.

## A Heightened Sense of Agency

The idea that an individual advocate can make a difference is at best a fragile hope. But the rhetorical personality is rarely defeated by the challenge of a lost cause or hostile audience. Like all rhetorically inclined agents, many of the most gifted politicians see endless possibilities in talk that is adaptive and self-aware.

Along with President Clinton, it is possible to identify an array of modern advocates (including old stalwarts of the political right, like Pat Buchanan and Newt Gingrich, and newer members of the left like Newark, New Jersey, Mayor Cory Booker) who act on the faith that they *can* find useful connections with just about any audience. Barack Obama has noted that “My experience being able to walk into a public housing development and turn around and walk into a corporate boardroom and communicate effectively in either venue means that I’m more likely to be able to build the kinds of coalitions and craft the sort of message that appeals to a broad range of people.”<sup>41</sup> Political campaigners must officially act on this view, even if their energies flag and polls indicate that they are headed for defeat. The difference between them and the genuine article is that the rhetorical personality seems hard-wired to act on the promise of communication as a collective experience. Former Czech President Vaclav Havel displays this tendency in his summation of an effective leader’s art. Good politics, he notes,

is essentially a matter of form: Knowing how long to speak, when to begin and when to finish, how to say something politely that your opposite number might not want to hear, how to say, always, what is most essential in a given moment . . . how to insist on your own position without offending, how to create the kind of friendly atmosphere that makes complex negotiations easier . . . when to be open and when reticent, and to what degree. But more than that, it means having a certain instinct for the time, the atmosphere of the time, the mood of the people, the nature of their worries, their frame of mind. . . . Qualities like fellow-feeling, the ability to talk to others, insight, the capacity to grasp quickly not only problems but also human character, the ability to make contact, a sense of moderation; all these are immensely more important in politics.<sup>42</sup>

There is a threshold in every individual that, depending on the circumstances and challenges faced, encourages caution or acquiescence rather than rhetorical exertion. For many of us the realm of quiescence is large. We accept

the “definitions of situation” offered by others, rarely passing the threshold where we seek to reshape events by the will of our own words. The conservative side of audaciousness is certainly not a flaw of character, but partly a calculation of the possible returns for energy expended in full engagement. The rhetorical personality seems to have a much higher threshold for engagement and is usually more optimistic about the benefits of championing a cause. Hence, the cultural stereotype of the “tireless advocate.”

### **Comfort Even in Marginally Discrepant Roles**

Most theorists of interaction place heavy emphasis on role-playing as a vital life skill. We may enjoy lampooning this process when it devolves into mindless pandering, as Mark Twain did in his famous send-up of funeral etiquette where emotional displays are graded by a person’s hereditary proximity to the deceased.<sup>43</sup> But we still understand the stakes. As Erving Goffman observed, we acquire an increasingly broad repertoire of roles that can be enacted as needed: as parent, friend, leader, follower, and so on.<sup>44</sup> Our identity resides in these roles, and our place in various communities is contingent on our ability to enact them. The difference for engaged and other-directed individuals is perhaps an unusual degree of comfort even in discrepant roles: an ability to respond and adjust to settings far from those associated with our core identity. How easily does one convert from doctor to patient, teacher to student, or child to caregiver of an aging parent? Any description of these complex conversions will miss essential differences. But it seems possible that the mastery of role performances over a lifetime can make the individual more tolerant of apparent role conflicts and reversals. Nonperformance of a required but perhaps unwelcome role is, for the rhetorical personality, a potential discourtesy to others—and a challenge to the enlarged capacity for situational change that energizes them. Clinton was famous “for being able to argue an opponent’s position better than the opponent did.”<sup>45</sup> More commonly, people working in sales or service-sector jobs must “front” for organizations, turning up their enthusiasm for sometimes suspect products and services. Trial lawyers commit wholeheartedly to their roles as advocates for sometimes guilty clients. Discrepant roles test the capacities in all of us to risk failure and loss of credibility.

The labels given to those who can master communication that is ostensibly out of their natural range can be harsh, as implied in words like “devil’s advocate,” “provocateur,” “poseur,” “imposter,” or “chameleon.” But what we see as inauthenticity perhaps sets us up to miss a genuine capacity for imagination. Composers and actors execute transformative left or right turns on a dime: actors because it is their job to inhabit new roles, and composers

because new forms represent different possibilities. But because individual rhetoric cuts closer to the bone of identity, we shift out of its familiar grooves more reluctantly. The risks are apparent, for example, if “serious” newsmakers venture into the funhouse landscape of television’s *Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report*. The challenge is to be a good sport while keeping most of a carefully constructed persona intact. As any viewer knows, some guests do better than others in bending to questions that implicitly eat at the margins of their solemnity. Rhetorical personalities would seem especially suited to weathering the effects of these potential transformations.

And then there are the venues and vocations of *acting*: the literal generative context for the ideal of “role.” Someone who can “be” the philandering surgeon in an afternoon soap opera and Macbeth the same evening has probably mastered the jarring transformations that come from turning one’s self into many others. Actors hardly notice the discrepancies of their accumulated performances, a fact aided by their audience’s tacit suspension of disbelief. But the performative function of communication clearly goes beyond the stage. That other mortals are less able to venture into settings that might force them to shed a carefully nurtured persona does not change the necessity. For example, voters in the presidential campaign of 1952 got two contenders—a beloved war general and a circumspect reformer and governor—who simply became *more of who they already were* even when faced with the new medium of television. Aides and ad agency executives who guided Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson through the mechanics of using the camera asked them—without much success—to loosen up for their debuts. Even in its early days, producers for television understood the more intimate nature of the camera and the home viewing experience. It is little wonder that the campaign ads from that year show Eisenhower and Stevenson posed uncomfortably as 30-second hucksters. They were used to giving set speeches in large halls. It would take years to produce a different kind of malleable politician equally game in roles ranging from a statesman to “straight man” for a late night comedian.

As Joshua Meyrowitz has noted, the advent of broadcasting especially did its part to “destabilize” the relationship of the public person to his or her audiences.<sup>46</sup> Television and its internet siblings now invade previously private spaces, allowing unintended audiences access to the routine non sequiturs of every life that undermine carefully nurtured personas. Television lets us into “back regions” that were usually off limits in prior eras. In this environment it is mostly the adapters and performers—the emotional quick-change artists—who survive or even want to play the game. According to Chris Matthews, former House Speaker Tip O’Neill disliked the “new breed of guys” in Congress who were “always forming new coalitions” and constantly

“worrying about their image and how to position themselves” rather than how to support their party.<sup>47</sup> For a retired and bitter Lyndon Johnson there was a similar disdain for the “freelancers” and “pretty boys” that arose in the age of television. He complained to a CBS television producer that the problem was “all you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you. You’ve broken all the machines and the ties between us in Congress and the city machines. You’ve given us a new kind of people. Teddy [Kennedy], [John] Tunney. They’re your creations, your puppets. No machine could ever create a Teddy Kennedy. Only you guys. They’re all yours. Your product.”<sup>48</sup>

Of course, the question of what makes some more comfortable than others in novel settings and new roles can be a psychological enigma. We get only so far in tallying the behavioral dimensions of “extroversion” or “openness.” Indeed, one analyst of “role reversals” and “image trouble”—sociologist Orrin Klapp—has suggested that the best determinants of success may be as much contextual as psychological. In his view, public figures are thrust into settings that naturally carry unintended consequences. The outcome of any single challenge to a carefully nurtured persona is largely the luck of the draw. Individuals may ride out unexpected role reversals in some realms better than in others. Klapp points out how Vice President Richard Nixon rose to the provocation of a spontaneous browbeating from the blustery Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev during a 1959 tour of an American exhibit of a “typical” American home in Moscow.<sup>49</sup> Though hardly the embodiment of the rhetorical personality, during the famous “kitchen debate” Nixon easily handled the sudden role shift from “host” to “defender of the American way of life.” The far more consequential Watergate affair years later played out far less well when he was forced to declare to the nation that he was “not a crook.” Nixon’s suspicious and secretive nature got him into the kind of political and legal trouble for which there was perhaps no rhetorical solution.

### **Motivated to Seek Rhetorical Transcendence**

In public and political discourse we seem drawn to labels that segregate rather than integrate. In the toxic environment of American national politics, the advantage seems to go to those who can emphasize differences. The reliable old binaries are always tempting shortcuts for sorting out the world and are regularly on view in the vituperative blather of bloggers, demagogues, and talk show firebrands. “We are different from them,” “I have facts; they have opinions,” and so on. Arising from the two-tailed logics built into most western languages, such topoi of difference offer false assurances of certainty and clarity.<sup>50</sup>

However, the impulse of the rhetorical personality is to favor more inclusive forms of expression. In the helpful language of Kenneth Burke, one seeks a “terministic bridge whereby one realm is transcended by being viewed in terms of a realm ‘beyond’ it.”<sup>51</sup> With an instinct to find the larger unifier rather than two sides separated by a yawning gulf, one can achieve what Burke found in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. At one level the transcendentalist was all about *not* making conventional distinctions. He looked for unity where others saw contrasts, noting that “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.”<sup>52</sup> As Burke observes, Emerson “was idealistically able . . . to look upon traveling salesmen and see a band of angels.”<sup>53</sup>

In a case of form following function, the American presidency often requires the search for transcendence from occupants who have a lifetime of experience excoriating enemies and opposing ideologies. It is perhaps a just reward for the political heathen who has spent a lifetime thinking in binaries. In countless addresses, some do better than others finding an umbrella of values that will almost cover everybody. For others this impulse comes more easily, as in Bill Clinton’s 1993 attempt to assuage the scars left by deep divisions surrounding the Vietnam War. Most of his audience on the lawn in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was well aware of his maneuvers as a student to avoid military service in its last years. Many tried to shout him down. But Clinton went to work to find common ground that would put them all on the same side:

No one has come here today to disagree about the heroism of those whom we honor. But the only way we can really honor their memory is to resolve to live and serve today and tomorrow as best we can and to make America the best that she can be. Surely that is what we owe to all those whose names are etched in this beautiful memorial.

As we all resolve to keep the finest military in the world, let us remember some of the lessons that all agree on. If the day should come when our service men and women must again go into combat, let us all resolve they will go with the training, the equipment, the support necessary to win, and, most important of all, with a clear mission to win.<sup>54</sup>

As Burke notes, unification is “compensatory” to division. If motivated, we can use our rhetorical skills to find shared interests. “Transcendence upwards” leads to “mergers,”<sup>55</sup> as when the lines of separation at the base of a pyramid finally come together at the top.

Of course, the rhetoric of transcendence can itself be renamed downward as the skill of “glossing over differences”—a phrase that suggests

an opportunistic device to conceal what should perhaps be separated. Fair enough. “Communism” as an accepted and unitary “cancer” was certainly a corrosive presence in American political history for 50 years. The tendency to merge all communist societies into a committed whole undoubtedly fed American paranoia through the Vietnam and Cold War eras.<sup>56</sup>

The invitation to find levels of shared interest may not always flow from an altruistic view of the unity of experience. But this process can also be a gift to a world that frequently treats ideas and individuals as islands. We tend to use language as an instrument of excluded possibilities, whether it is identifying the “axis of evil” or the right answer on a multiple-choice exam. The impulse to do otherwise is a pathway through difficult terrain that often needs to be penetrated—a process we will need to return to again.

### SUMMING UP

The human condition is too rich and variable to submit easily to a simple scheme of behavioral and rhetorical classification. Any effort to map out of attributes of character is bound to leave some loose ends; some individuals fit into families of traits better than others. Even so, the effort seems worth the challenge if we are able to add clarity to our understanding of the interconnected features of character and fluency. This analysis proposes that there are features of temperament as well as learned capacities that contribute to a rhetorical personality well suited to embrace, shape and identify with the attitudes of others. The inclination to engage with others, the compulsion to “read” settings for their exigencies, and the astute other-awareness of rhetorical personalities partly accounts for their adaptive fluency.

Physicists describe the state of “superconductivity” as the point at which some materials essentially let current pass through them unimpeded. At very cold temperatures, electrons move with ease through materials like tin and aluminum. The transfer of energy is nearly total and comes without the resistance and heat common when these materials are at room temperature. While humans are clearly not solid and passive elements simply to be acted upon, the comparison still applies. Like certain kinds of materials, some people are better than others at facilitating the transfer of energy. Some create resistance. Others naturally shed it. And like all matter, humans are susceptible to external variables that can undermine their characteristic features. The challenge of this analysis is to explore the family resemblances of communicators for whom resistance from others is no obstacle to their willingness to engage.

## NOTES

1. Joe Klein, *The Natural* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 195–196.
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3. For a discussion of the central role of communication in making room for “the other,” see John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1–31.
4. Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 16.
5. David Maraniss, *First in His Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone, 1995), 144.
6. Laurence Pervin, Daniel Cervone, and Oliver John, *Personality: Theory and Research, Ninth Edition* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 254–257.
7. John Durham Peters, “Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research,” *Communication Research*, October, 1996, 533.
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9. Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 141–146.
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11. Todd Gitlin, “How Our Crowd Got Lonely,” *New York Times on the Web*, January 9, 2000, [www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/09/bookend/bookend.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/09/bookend/bookend.html?_r=1&oref=slogin), (11 Jan, 2010).
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16. Riesman, Glazer and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd*, 21–22.
17. Joe Klein, *The Natural*, 10.
18. Terry Castle, *The Professor and Other Writings* (New York: Harper, 2010), 334.
19. Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up: A Comic’s Life* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 1.
20. See Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 253, and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor books, 1959), 1–76.



21. Hugh D. Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 406–416.
22. Mark Snyder, *Public Appearances, Private Realities: The Psychology of Self Monitoring* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1987), 18–19.
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28. Kelli Jean Asada, Eunsoon Lee, Timothy Levine, and Merissa Ferrara, “Narcissism and Empathy as Predictors of Obsessive Relational Intrusion,” *Communication Research Reports* 21, No. 4 (Fall 2004): 379–390.
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37. For an overview of this perspective which values “self-direction” of the client and other-direction of the therapist, see Carl Rogers, *Client Centered Therapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 19–64.
38. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 38.
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43. Mark Twain, "At the Funeral," in *Letters from the Earth*, ed. by Bernard DeVoto (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1942), 152.

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52. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" in *Essays: First and Second Series, Apollo Edition* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1961), 89–190.

53. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 189.

54. Transcript of Clinton Speech at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, *New York Times*, June 1, 1993. [query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9FOCE3DA123CF932A35755C0A965958260](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9FOCE3DA123CF932A35755C0A965958260), (24 Jan, 2008).

55. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 106.

56. See, for example, Robert McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crown, 1995), 30–33.

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## Chapter 2

# Empathy

## *Finding Ourselves in Others*

The highest capacity of man is his ability “to take the role of the other.”<sup>1</sup>

—Hugh Dalziel Duncan

Yet taught by time, my heart has learn'd to glow for other's good, and melt at others' woe.<sup>2</sup>

—Homer

Of the many winsome cinematic figures James L. Brooks has created over the years, a teenager named Bernice stands out as a sensitive soul in a family of overachievers. Her warmth and impulse to please binds her to a spirited grandmother and to John, her affectionate father. But in *SpanGLISH*, she must also defend her fragile self-esteem against aspersions about her weight from an overwrought mother. Deborah has made Bernice her project. And while the razor-thin compulsive has mastered the outward rituals of everyday conversation, Deborah substitutes empty talk and hours of jogging for true intimacy.

She is the provocateur in this conventional Brooks setup of an upwardly mobile Los Angeles family. Connection and affirmation are put at risk by a character who is not so much malevolent as clumsy in understanding the fundamentals of social intercourse. Even when Deborah returns from a shopping trip with new clothes for Bernice, we sense that her ostensibly thoughtful act will have a painful denouement.

The scene opens with John helping Bernice complete her history homework, making a game out of a quiz question asking for the name of the famous World War II President who was not a “ruse.” What does the word mean?

Bernice asks. A “Phony,” he notes. “So this president was not a ruse. . . . He was the real thing.”<sup>3</sup> When Deborah returns with bags of new clothes, Bernice is at first delighted by her apparent thoughtfulness. But when she tries on the gifts of a coat and sweater, they are clearly too tight. A quick look at the tags of all the other new garments confirms that Deborah has deliberately bought everything one size too small. This is her idea of an inducement for her daughter to lose some weight, and it unfolds as a slow-motion humiliation in front of John and other members of the household. The moment snuffs out the excitement that was just seconds old, leaving Bernice to find a way to resurface with some of her dignity intact. Brooks wrote that this young woman with her special “style, wit and grace should not have to deflect such trauma.”<sup>4</sup> But she recovers, fighting back tears. There is no big outburst, just a few rueful words said more in regret than anger. “Thanks Mom. . . . I’m glad you didn’t get here a little earlier or else I wouldn’t be able to tell you that your gift is a ruse. Please excuse me.” And she exits.

There is agony in this small but emblematic moment where, as Brooks observes, Deborah feels “the futility of anyone understanding her point even as she makes it.”<sup>5</sup> Those are his script directions to actress Tea Leoni who inhabits Deborah. She isn’t connecting with members of her family; this is something she senses but is powerless to remedy. She is tone deaf to her daughter’s needs. And somehow her ideals for success and a perfect waistline have also made her blind to the charms of her own family.

Brooks’ story may be loaded to keep us from aligning with Leoni’s character, but Deborah’s awareness of disconnection is a universal experience that gives the film its dramatic veracity. In his film and television work he notices how our indifference wounds the people that we least want to harm. *How* he has established a unique film legacy by writing authentic moments of foundering communication is explored later in Chapter 6. Our goal here is to pick up on the pivotal moment of one character missing the opportunity to estimate and respond to the consciousness of another.

This is the essence of empathy. And, as we noted at the outset of this study, in spite of its place as an essential feature of the fluent communicator, it seems unevenly distributed in virtually any adult population. Why is this capacity so abundant in some and absent in others? And what role does it play in facilitating meaningful communication?

The easy answer is that empathy is a bond created by recognition of oneself in someone else’s experience. Or, as Martin Hoffman ingeniously describes it, empathy is “an affective response more appropriate to someone else’s situation than to one’s own.”<sup>6</sup> When it forms in our own awareness, it is a magical process that takes us beyond the rudimentary sociality that usually comes when we occupy the same informational space. It simultaneously

acknowledges the authenticity of another's feelings and suggests the momentary creation of a more personal shared experience. It is a reminder that we are not alone, even though, as John Peters notes, estrangement is more or less a "permanent kink in the human condition."<sup>7</sup> We may be able to communicate simple information or engage in ritual conversations that signify our engagement, but we are continually challenged to imagine the inner lives of others.

Everyday expressions frequently stand in as surrogates for this form of imagination: "I can begin to understand what that must have been like," "It must have been difficult for you," "I know how you feel," "I see what you mean," and so on. At first glance, these responses look like emblems of selfless reflection—the opposite of narcissistic communication stuck in the well-worn grooves of one's own world. But it is not quite so simple. As we shall see, empathy has its origins in the ways we think about ourselves *through* others. It also has roots in context-rich forms of performance, narrative, and role-playing. In the first part of this chapter we explore these unique features; in the second, the kind of rhetoric that is likely to produce empathy. Our point is that those who can create what I think of as shared "para-histories" of personal recollection are likely to benefit from very receptive audiences.

## A CONVERGENCE OF PERSPECTIVES

At its most basic, we seem hardwired for simple forms of empathetic responses. Daniel Goleman describes an unlearned "primal empathy" that flows from simple contact with others.<sup>8</sup> We and other primates are naturally inclined to "read" facial and physical expressions, converting them into tentative understandings about what others may be experiencing. Consciousness theorists similarly define the first glimmers of this interaction in the simple act of self-recognition. The threshold of awareness can be measured at the margins, as when a primate or infant is able to recognize itself (as opposed to an unknown or threatening alien) on a reflective surface. The "mirror test" involves smearing a color on the head of an animal, then observing if the animal sees itself and notices the imperfection. In the avian world, cardinals are known for their tendency to attack windows and auto mirrors because they mistake themselves as *intruders*. In terms of the high-order capabilities we are talking about, they aren't that smart. But they wouldn't be the only creatures to be at war with themselves. Brighter animals nearer the threshold of higher consciousness can actually recognize themselves. And to know that one is seeing oneself is the critical first step in constructing a conscious of The Other. This begins a sequence of consciousness that includes thinking *as if* they were the other.<sup>9</sup> In complex mammals this seems to happen by degrees.

As Frans de Waal notes, “At one end of the spectrum, rhesus infants get upset and seek contact with another as soon as one of them screams.”<sup>10</sup> At a higher level, humans can respond with extended forms of “other-involved” assessments of what other people are thinking, often with surprisingly accurate recapitulations of it.<sup>11</sup> “I know how you feel” may be a cliché for the ages, but it reasonably describes what we take to be relatively faithful inferences made in limitless ranges of situations.

Even in these higher realms of potential empathy there are no guarantees. Sometimes the more we know about another person, the less of a connection we feel, as was the case with biographer Nell Painter. She started her own study of Sojourner Truth feeling like she and her subject would “get along just fine.” But perhaps like a relative who overstayed her visit, she notes that the more she got to know her subject, the more “her closeness to me receded.”<sup>12</sup>

Single-focus studies of empathy today tend to be dominated by clinicians and experimentalists, with sometimes ingenious methodologies. One study subjected men to electric shocks while their wives looked on and an MRI scanner tracked their brain activity.<sup>13</sup> A cynic might conclude that this was an unintended form of female entertainment. Not so. Every time the husband was about to be shocked, the wives responded as if they themselves had received the electric current. As David Servan-Schreiber notes, “The other person’s pain became their own. Their brains took possession of it. It was as if the membrane separating ‘me’ from ‘you’ had been breached.”<sup>14</sup> In the framework of clinical psychology this form of empathy is often viewed as an “affective reaction” to another,<sup>15</sup> and is frequently studied as a developmental trait that blossoms unevenly in adulthood.<sup>16</sup> Women seem to express it more, but it isn’t altogether clear whether or not they are innately more empathetic.<sup>17</sup>

Neurologists have a view with similarities and some differences. They describe the prefrontal cortex of the brain as the segment that “maps out the minds of others.” “Mirror neurons” fire in sympathy to the intentional events of others, notes Daniel Siegel. And the firing is sometimes “automatic—they do not require consciousness or effort.”<sup>18</sup> This would explain the spontaneous emotional contagion of the rhesus infants mentioned above, as well as the reactions of the wives to their husband’s participation in the shock experiment. At other times, he concedes that “our awareness of another person’s state of mind depends on how well we know our own.”<sup>19</sup> In any case it seems unlikely that any plan to track the origins of empathy by identifying its neural pathways is going to fall short. In communication, the measure that always matters is *meaning*. What we know, think, or feel requires inferences about the myriad associations held by *minds* in a particular cultural landscape.

Maps of cranial blood flow and electrical activity tell us more about where the brain is activated, but less about why.

In clinical settings focusing on mental health, empathy functions as a core value in client-centered therapy.<sup>20</sup> The idea of talk therapy without a supportive and accurate listener is almost unthinkable. If quick and critical judgment is the poison of too many troubled relationships, empathy and full consciousness of how each party is feeling is a necessary antidote. This therapy is predicated on the suspension of judgment long enough to understand another. It is also a central element in the development of “social intelligence,” or the ability to function well in the presence of others.<sup>21</sup> In mental health diagnostics, a *lack* of sympathetic understanding runs through clinical descriptions of various disorders, including paranoia, narcissism, and the antisocial personality.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, we even interpret the intolerance of governments in parallel terms. Literature professor Azar Nafisi notes of Iran in the 1980s that “Lack of empathy was to my mind the central sin of the regime, from which all the others flowed.”<sup>23</sup> The regime tolerated various official and unofficial guardians of literary and personal taste. Conversely, President Barack Obama was widely criticized by members of the Republican Party for suggesting that any new nominee to the United States Supreme Court should have this quality. Among the concerned was Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, who feared that a compassionate judge’s “feelings might take the place of being impartial and deciding cases based on the law.”<sup>24</sup>

Surprisingly, the term itself was not the invention of academic psychology, but grew from German aesthetic theory at the beginning of the twentieth century. Robert Vischer was looking for a way to express the idea of projecting oneself into another object (*Einfühlung*).<sup>25</sup> His immediate concern was in finding a vocabulary that would help in the analysis of the individual’s response to the visual arts. Had he not discovered so fitting a term, others would have surely had to invent it. It is virtually impossible to think of the effects of most forms of complex discourse—from film to talk therapies—without addressing the capacities of key agents to acquire understandings that privilege compassion over judgment.

Before turning our attention to the sources and resources of empathy, a final preliminary observation about this key benchmark is in order. Empathy is perhaps most easily and quickly observed in responses observed in *listeners*. Of course, empathy can be triggered by all sorts of media. It does not always arrive through the ear. But accurate and open-minded listening is perhaps the single clearest analogue we have within the communication lexicon for what it means to let another person into our lives. Unfortunately, even as an ostensibly common behavior, it is more a mirage than a fixed objective: more



form than fact. In everyday encounters most of us are not very good at truly hearing the layered meanings and feelings of others. We honor the clichés of attentive listening more than the demands it makes on our attention. In just the field of medicine, the consequences of miscommunication between health providers and clients can be deadly, and are far more widespread than is usually reported. National assessment agencies such as the powerful Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Health Care Organizations have acknowledged as much.<sup>26</sup> What frequently passes for hearing another in our over-communicated world is a ritualized performance of proximate facial cues that conceal the narcissism of waiting our turn to speak.<sup>27</sup> As our discussion of talk therapies implies, listening for understanding is hard work, and a significant part of the communication reciprocity that we have idealized in the rhetorical personality.

## EMPATHY AND THE REFLECTED SELF

George Herbert Mead has famously argued that the very concept of self is the product of contact with others. In his view, the attitudes of “significant” and “generalized” others work their ways into a developing person’s consciousness, and eventually function as “elements in the structure or constitution of his self.”<sup>28</sup> This capability of “taking the attitude of the other” lies at the core of our social nature. We are not independent agents in the construction of ourselves; rather, we are collections of attitudes reconstituted from elements of discourse and interaction with others.

The idea of role-playing is central in understanding this dialogical process. In drama as in life, we learn repertoires of responses by inhabiting behaviors positively associated with certain settings. Following the pioneering sociologist Erving Goffman, this perspective can be illuminated with reference to the language and obligations of the theater.<sup>29</sup> But rather than isolating the reciprocal obligations of performers and audiences to the stage, we take the experience of the theater to be but a special case of the continual drama of human communication. Our behavior at a given moment can be accurately labeled as part of a role because we inhabit it *to fit* the settings in which we find ourselves. A role is a set of responses that can be reasonably used *within* the constraints of any given situation. We “act” and react to control the impressions we make on others.

For example, how might an Orthodox Jew act at the Catholic wedding mass of a friend? There are many possibilities for negotiating the differences one might encounter. It is easy to imagine that a person might settle on a role fashioned from prior experience and gleaned from understandings of

what they think others will expect. The challenge for the visitor is to find the right balance between perceived requirements of the setting and the essence of one's constructed self. Perhaps the Jewish friend calculates to stand with others while certain hymns are sung, to bow his head as others pray, and to make supportive comments at the reception. All the while, he may suppress any expressions of discomfort and check for signs from others that he has managed his part adequately. Films have given us a rich catalogue of nuptial miscues, and we are mindful of the sometimes hilarious situations that can arise.<sup>30</sup> We "do our part" in the setting as we understand it to exist, knowing that *what* exists is not so much a physical place as a set of expectations that we share with others. Building on Mead, Hugh Duncan elucidates the connection:

The means by which we become objects to ourselves, thus becoming not only conscious but self-conscious and thus human, is through acting together in forms similar to the way actions on a stage mount a drama. As the child strikes a pose or as the adult "takes an attitude" they are like actors on a stage playing before an audience. Actors do not know how a gesture will "go over" before they strike it. They learn from the responses of other actors and the audience the meaning of what they have just done.

In the end, "the actor is always bound by his audience, just as the audience is always bound to the actor, to discover what roles mean."<sup>31</sup> He becomes the playwright's advocate by finding comprehensible reasons for a character's motivations. If the actor is accomplished, the audience will perceive the character's acts as plausible and perhaps sympathetic in the world constructed within the play. This happens even if we have misgivings about the character. Thus, we do not envy Tony Soprano in the iconic HBO television series. But his characterization by actor James Gandolfini gave him an enduring presence and the opportunity to understand his actions. The mobster was not an alien, but sometimes an uncomfortably familiar version of us. In the theater of everyday life we "know" a role—or at least its outward forms—because we have absorbed its elements over time. Having already acquired a sense of its essence from various versions, we can combine it with what we perceive to be pieces of our authentic selves. What we thus inhabit is a projection of oneself into proximate stock characters such as teacher, father, friend, and so on. We do this because we are social—and because we are uncomfortable *without* the pretense of apportioned roles.<sup>32</sup>

If familiarity with common and recurring roles primes us to "know" what others may be experiencing, it is far more difficult to define precisely the content of those insights. Since empathy is a subjective experience, it is easier to observe its basic impulse than to accurately map its affective meanings. We

can strive for objective measures of it,<sup>33</sup> but its sources are always bound in alignments and understandings unique to the individual.

Thus the great paradox of communication is also the paradox of empathy: we live in the isolation of a unique, private consciousness,<sup>34</sup> even while the quest for certain understandings pulls us out of ourselves and toward others. Unlike mathematics or digital information exchange between machines, human communication is implicitly a continuous search for approximations: symbolic or linguistic portraiture that will inevitably be more and less than what others exposed to the “same” experience may also “know.”

This is also a conundrum that should temper the efforts of neuroscience and social science to put meaning into crude lockboxes. But it doesn’t always. For example, some research on the strangely conceived idea of “empathic accuracy” attempts to measure the precision of listeners by asking them and the communicators to whom they were listening to verify that they were thinking the same thing. This method supposedly measures “one’s ability to infer another person’s unspoken thoughts and feelings.”<sup>35</sup>

But the whole enterprise seems like a fool’s errand. The problem with such attempts to operationalize meaning is that they treat the most ephemeral and fragile element of consciousness as a finite and knowable artifact for measurement. Empathy is thereby reduced to simple, sometimes haphazard verbalization. It is converted into something that is alien to its essence. Imagine if one were asked to quickly say what a poem or short story “means” to them. Most respondents would be severely challenged to produce on short notice a summary of the rich tangle of associations they may have experienced. Perhaps this challenge of unknowability is what the poet John Keats meant in his oft-quoted letter to his brother in 1817. He admired Shakespeare, he wrote, for his “negative capability,” meaning that The Bard was “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”<sup>36</sup> Literature and other structures of narrative are perhaps their own methodologies, unknowable except in the mysterious ways they create associations within us.

## EMPATHY AS A RHETORICAL EFFECT

Rhetorically speaking, empathy follows three pathways in what ultimately becomes a circular sequence. The process starts with an *inducement of* responses in others—the almost universal quest to create support and agreement out of the common denominators of experience and attitude. We frequently ask ourselves certain predictable questions: “Will they relate to what I am saying?” “Will they identify with these examples?” “How can I show

them I care?” “Does my assertion of ‘the ways things are’ strike them as plausible?”

Second, this triggers in the observer a momentary process of *living through* the other. There is a sense of emotional congruence within the person who had previously been outside the other’s experience. Much of what we have said so far speaks to the unique capacity of crossing over from the self to the other. Even schools have discovered the value of explicitly asking more role-taking from its sometimes identity-dominated students. Apparently in one affluent community north of New York City, it is common for kids to pass out sweatshirts at parties that date the event and list all who attended. When these are later worn to school, they advertise to all the clique-exclusivity that often defines the crushing social boundaries of middle-school life. The goal of one program for creating more sensitivity is to involve both the popular and the shunned in discussions of how it feels to be excluded.<sup>37</sup>

And finally, this mostly internal process may spill over into verbal *responses of recognition* from the empathizer. This is the visible contrail of a mostly invisible process. At this stage it may take the form of an acknowledgement, such as Bill Clinton offering his reflexive “I feel your pain” response to an emotional voter. Stand-up comics often mocked the former president for this phrase, which was read as a marker of his alleged inauthenticity. So public and bold an expression of compassion seemed too outsized and calculating to reflect genuine feelings. But I did not doubt him. Clinton thrives in the presence of others. And, in truth, no one can occupy a significant place in another person’s life without the use of some version of this trope.

Studies of empathy usually start and end by focusing on its *effects* on receivers. Yet, the rhetorical personality is not only capable of finding her or himself *in* others, but also of creating the conditions in which others can do the same. The individual who engages others has mastered the capability of reversing the arrows of communication. If everyday discourse is assumed to be driven by the informational capabilities or expressive needs of the source, we need to understand the more difficult challenges of transforming it into a form that succeeds in being at least partly “about” the feelings of the receiver. The difference is between, say, a standard medical presentation about the biology of strokes and a very different kind of presentation from a survivor of a cerebral hemorrhage that asks us to imagine the actual sensations of a partial shutdown of the brain.<sup>38</sup> The first lecture would probably discuss chemical and biological “processes,” while the second would include intimate impressions of an altered consciousness expressed by someone who experienced it. The latter report is far more likely to be an inducement to respond not just to the observed sensations, but also to the feelings of the observer as well.

## EMPATHY AS PARA-HISTORY

A *history* is an account of prior events, usually with its own narrative arc. It may be useful to invent the idea of a *para-history* to designate a fragment of shared consciousness left over from prior experience: a feeling, a cluster of emotions, or a particular attitude. It floats in the consciousness more or less free from a defining event, ready to be applied anew to someone else's circumstance. Like a magnet, it easily attaches to another object with the right composition.

For example, a friend brings out an old photo album passed on to him after the death of his aunt, who had been the unofficial family historian. The album contains a trove of faded photos providing glimpses into the family life of four generations. While the faces of his relatives and great grandparents were obviously unfamiliar, their dress, poses, and the settings of front porches and backyards strike chords of recognition. If our lives haven't run in perfectly parallel tracks, it's still a natural impulse to see in his family my own as well, and to use my experience to understand his. He offers the images and narratives, and I respond with associations, creating a para-history. One snapshot revealed the Nebraska pride of the relative's grandparents while standing in front of a 1950 Nash Airflyte, its rounded shape now defiantly dowdy. Another older picture showed his adolescent brother and sister standing in their Ohio backyard, the tall wood fence sagging from neglect behind a sidewalk of uneven slabs. The dirty car in the foreground and lone aunt in the corner of the frame confirm a story of lean times and hint at the absence of the father in the Pacific theater waiting for the war to end.

Such artifacts sometimes tax viewers to find slivers of personal relevance, but they can also establish strong associations of surprising complexity: images that create the sense-memory of a place and its people that meld into near perfect alignment with one's own past. With my relative's immediate family, as with mine, it appeared that every photo was meant to record a transition, or at least the confirmation of one's own existence. The faces usually hint at the contents of our own feelings. Here, a photo of a solemn boy ill-at-ease in a miniature three-piece suit is a reminder of our own family ritual of after-church photos in the front yard. I think I detect in the image of him what I remember about myself: the impatience to escape the formality and to join kids in the neighborhood who have already escaped their morning rituals. And there, another picture of his grandparents at the overlook on the edge of a high mountain road, their formal poses and pinched faces a reminder that a photograph was meant to document their arrival to a somewhere that we should want to see.

The faded images in the family album recreate both literal moments in time as well as sets of cognitive coordinates. If two people cannot be said

to have occupied the same time and place, empathy allows them to at least acknowledge the same fragments of consciousness. We may be engaged with them more by circumstance than by design. But what can we learn when we add the intention of rhetorical agents to maximize these effects? And if simple photographic artifacts of one person's life can replace anonymity with a partial sense of familiarity, how can this effect be enhanced by a master rhetorician?

### COAXING THE RESPONSE OF EMPATHY

The disk jockey and musicologist Jonathan Schwartz recalls a lifetime of travails with girlfriends and wives over his insistence on playing music from his vast record collection at volume levels to catch all of its clamorous glory. "Are you doing this to make me angry?" a girl friend asks. Quite the contrary, he noted. "I was wooing, working, waiting. I was presenting myself in the music. That is who I am. I am those songs, those string quartets. I am Nelson Riddle's muted trumpet."<sup>39</sup>

Memoirs, music, films and other forms of organized narrative have an implicit function of finding those responsive chords. Their creators as well as their advocates (like Schwartz) may not always acknowledge this imperative. But it is what separates the jumble of life from its reconstruction in carefully nuanced portraiture. Art functions to make more visible what is essentially unnoticed in the clutter of ordinary life. One can prepare an audience for empathy just as one can calculate to produce any other kind of communication effect.

There is an interesting musical parallel in the percussionist's art. To the listener it may seem that a Chinese gong is something a player hits with a mallet at the exact moment called for in a musical score. But it is not so simple. Hitting a large gong with just one massive strike will result in a delayed and ugly sound—far short of the thunder it is supposed to add to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or the suggestion of a dark abyss at the end of Rachmaninoff's *First Symphony*. The percussionist has the responsibility of making a piece of inanimate metal produce a natural and musical sound. He or she must find a technique for producing the kind of timbre that fulfills the composer's intention and probably satisfies a few laws of physics. The trick is to first coax the gong into sympathetic vibration. Prior to its entrance on cue, the massive disk must be set in a state of "standby" vibration, usually with a series of light and intentionally inaudible taps. Only then is it capable of exploding in the instant shower of sound that is its own music.

Empathy coaxed from others can be similarly engineered. The fluent rhetorician can find different kinds of resonances in audiences—in a sense,

they are ready to be played. If we were to strive for a simple expression to capture what the rhetor seeks *in the receiver*, we might render it in the form of an equation:

$$\text{Empathy} = \text{Memory}^2 + \text{Identification} - \text{Egocentricity}$$

The subtraction of focus on the self at the end of this chain is the easy part to explain (although a challenge to those who find themselves irresistibly fascinating). As we have seen, empathy surely comes from associations and experiences already in us. But it cannot surface if it is smothered by narcissism. Making the rest of the formula work requires not perfect recall on the part of the receiver, but reconstructed memories that can be amplified (squared in our equation) through the “triggering” rhetoric of an effective source. We have perhaps never been fired from a job or jilted by a lover, but we can use memory and imagination to construct an approximation of parallel feelings such as humiliation and worry.<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly, Tennessee Williams called his domestic drama *The Glass Menagerie* a “memory play,” clearly because of similarities to some of the oppressive circumstances of Williams’ own life. “Memory,” he wrote, “takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart.”<sup>41</sup> Even just the outermost layer of meaning represented by the controlling Amanda and her reclusive daughter speaks to universal experience. When we watch daughter Laura’s descent into a life of illusion and isolation, one that will never quite yield to the third act’s promise of a “gentleman caller,” most of us can recognize the crushing sensation of opportunities lost.

We also add in identification, even though a weaker form of empathy is probably possible without it.<sup>42</sup> That is, we are sometimes capable of putting ourselves in the psychic landscape of others even if we don’t fully identify with them or their condition.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Williams’ plays endure in a more affluent and outward looking era. Or, in a different context, we can perhaps imagine the wealthy in the comfort of their cars maybe capturing a glimpse of their connection to immigrant families or kitchen workers too poor to own automobiles and left to walk the hostile margins of a highway. What identification adds is some degree of *alignment* with a person or group: a sense that we are not only intellectually familiar with the emotional environment of “their” lives, but that it approximates memories of our own experiences. As playwright Adam Rapp notes in the words of one of his characters in *The Metal Children*, “As a reader you construct the world of the book with the author. You’re in essence a performer. A creationist.”<sup>44</sup>

Narrative is obviously the primary way to pull into consciousness parallel para-histories of our own pasts. Playwrights, memoirists, and novelists give

concrete form to synchronous feelings and settings, succeeding or failing depending on finding their natural audiences, and using details of action and attitude as platforms for exploring potential concurrent experience. This personalization partly explains why we live in a culture driven by narrative. Narratives place their agents at the center of interrelational settings that they must master. And all implicitly ask the listener, reader, or viewer to recognize the triumphs and traumas of those who have been acted upon. Thus in his memoir we read Barack Obama's saga of a peripatetic life as a young man in and out of the United States, and a move to Manhattan where for his first night he sleeps on a Harlem street.<sup>45</sup> The story of his transnational roots and their challenges to American conventions is obviously much bigger than incidents like this. But this kind of self-report has much more empathic power than any policy overview he might give. Most of us can similarly recall a film or novel in which the finely drawn characters become place-markers for ourselves. Anna Quindlen recalls lying on a beach reading Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, when she is hit by "the claustrophobia of small-town life, particularly for women, so acutely that the shiver runs all through me that's said in superstitions to be a ghost walking on my grave." Why, she asks, would anyone aspire to be anyone else if they could write like Lewis?<sup>46</sup>

Her question is a reminder that successful memoir writing is perhaps a perfect instrument for reliving our own interior lives. The rhetoric of memoirists Bill Bryson and Annie Dillard, for example, explicates a certain kind of childhood that was common in middle-class families in postwar America. Dillard recreates a time familiar in its description of outsized enthusiasms for the simple and prosaic. "Walking was my project before reading. The text I read was the town. The book I made up was the map."<sup>47</sup>

My mother had given me the freedom of the streets as soon as I could say our telephone number. I walked and memorized the neighborhood. I made a mental map and located myself upon it. At night in bed I rehearsed the small world's scheme and set challenges: Find the store using backyards only. Imagine a route from the school to my friend's house. I mastered chunks of town in one direction only; I ignored the other direction, toward the Catholic Church.

On a bicycle I traveled over the known world's edge, and the ground held. I was seven. I had fallen in love with a red-haired fourth-grade boy name Walter Milligan. He was tough, Catholic, from an iffy neighborhood. Two blocks beyond our school was a field—Miss Frick's field, behind Henry Clay Frick's mansion—where boys played football. I parked my bike on the sidelines and watched Walter Milligan play. As he ran up and down the length of the field, following the football, I ran up and down the sidelines, following him. After the game I rode my bike home, delirious. It was the closest we had been, and the farthest I had traveled from home.<sup>48</sup>



At about the same time, Bryson was seeking the thrills of his own small universe in Des Moines. His recollection of vast open spaces of time in a world largely devoid of *screens* (televisions, computers, games, and cell phones) is not only a reminder of how much has changed in the last 50 years,<sup>49</sup> but also how easy it is to like the plucky children he invites us to see.

Hours of weekend time needed to be devoted to picking burrs off socks, taking corks out of bottle caps, peeling frozen wrappers off Popsicles, prying apart Oreo cookies without breaking either chocolate disk half or disturbing the integrity of the filling, and carefully picking labels off jars and bottles for absolutely no reason.

In such a world, injuries and other physical setbacks were actually welcomed. If you got a splinter you could pass an afternoon, and attract a small devoted audience, seeing how far you could insert a needle under your skin—how close you could get to actual surgery. If you got sunburned you looked forward to the moment when you could peel off a sheet of translucent epidermis that was essentially the size of your body. Scabs in Kid World were cultivated the way older people cultivate orchids. I had knee scabs that I kept for up to four years, that were an inch and three-quarters thick and into which you could press thumbtacks without rousing my attention. Nosebleeds were much admired, needless to say, and anyone with a nosebleed was treated like a celebrity for as long as it ran.<sup>50</sup>

Anyone raised in the comfortable middle regions of American life would notice particular features in these parallel memoirs of “ordinary” childhoods. Their familiarity creates empathy. Writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I want to notice that these children—like my remembered self—once made their lives in the neighborhood by doing things that could only matter to someone not dominated by the manufactured entertainments of our time. I respond not because I did all of these all things, but because they are a bridge to a similarly recollected childhood out of the house and contentedly free to roam relational environments more or less of one’s own creation.<sup>51</sup> What emerges in the sentimentality of these stories is a memory of reconstituted events combined with political and moral judgments about what is lost when children become targeted audiences addressed by commercial giants. And, of course, all of these associations are easy, because childhood invites the objectification of innocence—and with it, the strong desire to protect its rightful heirs.

One could argue that I am selectively remembering, and probably ignoring my own love of television, movies, and their commercial ephemera. That is perhaps true, and a reminder of the potency of subjective meaning triggered by seasoned writers. But their stories are no less valid and endearing as memories: a fact reflected in the subtle shift in the use of pronouns that merge

Bryson and Dillard's stories into my own. They become "like me." Their story is also "our" story. The transfer of shared meaning and the resultant alignment with these writers is the tangible product of the memoirist's attention to recognizable attitudes and details.

Stretch into lives much closer to the margins, and the effects are much the same. We can sometimes find empathic bonds in circumstances not very much like our own, if they still fed into the universality of emotional experience. In her fascinating memoir, *Them*, Francine Du Plessix Gray describes experiences in the 1940s so unlike most Americans that it would seem her stories could only hold fascination based on their exotic differences. She was born in France before the end of World War II, but barely escaped with her family to Spain before immigrating to the United States with her Russian mother and Russian Jewish stepfather. Through a combination of guile and charm her parents largely succeeded in conquering New York's inner fashion elite: he as *Vogue's* art director, and she as a clothing designer and an inveterate partygiver. But the turmoil of moves and resettlement takes a toll on Francine. She grows up in a world of extended stays with distant relatives, and eventually wins the consent of her parents to actually live in *their* house in Manhattan, only to be abandoned on most evenings.

Gray's world was conventionally more glamorous than Bryson's or Dillard's. After all, her mother's best friend was Marlene Dietrich, a constant visitor to the household who sometimes delighted in cooking a dinner for the family. Even so, Gray succeeds in opening up the jumbled feelings of her younger self, which are accessible in spite of her rarified circumstances.

We did have some good times, Mother and I. The best moments we shared were on those days when I was on a school vacation from Spence and picked her up at Saks to go to lunch at the Hamburger Heaven on Fifty-first Street between Madison and Fifth, across from St. Patrick's Cathedral. "Thirty-five minutes!" she would proclaim, looking at the clock as we once more rushed from her workroom down the gray service stairs. We sat on the childlike high chairs and winked at each other conspiratorially as the waitresses snapped the little trays over our knees. . . . I won my victories by trying to be interesting, forcing Mother to stretch out our time to forty, forty-five minutes. . . . We never discussed school, for she always feared that such talk would reveal her profound ignorance of all educational matters. . . . Yet admixed with my awe and dread of her, the sense of *chosenness* I enjoyed during those times together—Mother is giving me thirty-five minutes of her precious time!—gave me the greatest happiness I knew in my adolescence. Indeed, those moments we shared were all the more luminous because they were rare and hard-won, because she imbued them with her own special radiance of warmth and wit. They made me strive all the harder for Mother's love and led me to overlook, rather breezily, her busyness and occasional negligence.<sup>52</sup>

Empathy means that we know that even children of a distinct pedigree need to seek the company and approval of their parents.

## EMPATHY AND THE TRIGGERS OF FORM

We recognize in the particular what we know from prior experience. Somewhat like our ability to comprehend music as it conforms to accepted tonal and relational rules, so we can enter into new contexts with a degree of reliance on repertoires of relational expectations. Artful dramatists or rhetoricians apply these prior forms to the needs of those they address. The process can easily be burlesqued if these forms have become stale. Hence, we find humor in Garrison Keillor's send-up of how to "behave" around a celebrity—"Don't gush, don't babble, don't grovel or fawn"<sup>53</sup>—or Mark Twain's mock-Victorian advice on how young men and women should respond at news of a fire in their dwelling. "Should she accept, the young gentleman should offer his arm—bowing and observing 'Permit me'—and so escort her to the fire escape."<sup>54</sup> The formulaic requirements for the rhetorical production of empathy are surprisingly consistent, although infinitely variable. All have their own catalogues appropriate to the drama of relational discourse. To cite a few examples, analysts of group behavior have long described "positive" roles in the decision-making process in terms of showing "solidarity," finding ways to "diffuse tension," and "showing agreement."<sup>55</sup> Others have focused on familiar rhetorical genres, including the jeremiad, statements of praise or blame, the apologia, and so on, which can have the effect of confirming widely accepted definitions of situations.<sup>56</sup> And more than a few critics have been savvy in defining the ways hierarchical patterns produce predictable rhetorics that protect the dominant and often burden subordinates.<sup>57</sup> When drama allows us to sense these burdens—as in stories of the crucifixion or the Holocaust—our understandings and sympathies are set.

What these diverse catalogues share are recurring patterns of role-determined communication rules that make implicit demands on individuals in a given scene.<sup>58</sup> Form creates familiarity. We track the communication of others by noting its conformity to the social and emotional demands of a situation. Consider, for example, this opening in a representative exchange between two work colleagues:

A: *How are you?*

B: *Not so good. And you?*

A: *... ?*

This is perhaps the most widely used case for doing standard conversational analysis. “B’s” response “Not so good” is a small but important break with the protocol of a ritual greeting. How could “A” respond? Obviously, one conversational rule that applies here calls for an empathetic comment *from* “A.” The problem mentioned by “B” is an invitation for “A” to break out of his or her own perspective and agenda.<sup>59</sup> Communication always holds out the promise of acknowledgement of the other—and is in fact precisely for that. In this form it becomes circular rather than linear. Even with significant normative differences in cultures, we assume that a receiver will not be psychologically closed to the other and show at least some empathy.

If “A” engages in the petty crime of “bypassing”—ignoring meanings and feelings that have been expressed—the gambit finishes more or less like this:

A: *How are you?*

B: *Not so good. And you?*

A: *I’m pretty good, but I sure have a lot to do. Let’s catch up later . . .*

In the realm of human relations, “A’s” refusal to acknowledge “B” is a denial of the invitation to be *consubstantial*. In an idealized world of shared empathy, “A” and “B” would be rhetorically *of the same being*.<sup>60</sup> For example:

A: How are you?

B: Not so good. And you?

A: I’m OK. But what’s wrong? What’s going on with you?

Here, the arrows of concern will reverse as the conversation unfolds: a reminder that even simple exchanges are much more than the process of taking turns to speak.

## SUMMING UP

Empathy is the affirmative answer to an implicit request to be considered on one’s own terms. It resides in the most capable of rhetorical agents: speakers, memoirists, and writers of narrative fiction. At the same time it is their challenge to find ways to transfer its effects to others. The plea for understanding that goes unheard, the pain or joy that fails to register, the disclosive statement that raises no curiosity: all of these represent malignancies of self-absorption that cheat communication of its richness. And they define by opposites a key feature of the rhetorical personality, who remains alive to the possibilities of engaging an audience on the terrain of their interior lives. We opened this chapter noting James L. Brooks’s stage directions for his

character “Deborah,” who seems even sadder in retrospect. He writes that she senses “the futility of anyone understanding her point even as she makes it.” She lacks what her affluence and the luck of a wonderful family cannot provide. It’s a fitting description for someone with a chronic inability to connect. And it’s a pattern we will revisit in Chapter 5 in the form of the autistic adult, who can lack what one victim of the disorder describes with envy as the “the factory installed” impulse for empathy.<sup>61</sup>

## NOTES

1. Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 92.
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3. James L. Brooks, *Spanglish: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket, 2004), 36–37.
4. Brooks, *Spanglish*, 37.
5. Brooks, *Spanglish*, 37.
6. Martin Hoffman, “Empathy: Justice and Moral Judgment,” in *Empathy and Its Development*, ed. by Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 48.
7. John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 29.
8. Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 2006), 84–88.
9. Evan Thompson, “Empathy and Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, No. 5-7 (2001): 4–6.
10. Quoted in Thompson, “Empathy and Consciousness,” 6.
11. We revisit this point, sometimes called “theory of mind,” in Chapter 5.
12. The book is *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1997). See “Nell Irvin Painter” in Brian Lamb, *Booknotes: America’s Finest Authors on Reading, Writing, and the Power of Ideas* (New York: Times Books, 1997), 140.
13. David Servan-Schreiber, “I’m Feeling Your Pain—Really,” *Ode Magazine* September (2008): 54.
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17. Lennon and Eisenberg, “Gender and Age Differences in Empathy and Sympathy,” 195–204.
18. Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight* (New York: Bantam, 2010), 60–61.
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21. Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 58–62.

22. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 629–673.

23. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Iran, Reissue Edition* (New York: Random House, 2008), 224.

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25. See Lauren Wispé, “History of the Concept of Empathy,” in Eisenberg and Strayer, *Empathy and Its Development*, 18.

26. Janis Davis, Amy Foley, Nancy Crigger, and Michael Brannigan, “Healthcare and Listening: A Relationship for Caring,” *International Journal of Listening* 22, Issue 2 (2008): 168–175.

27. See, for example, Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 9–22.

28. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 158.

29. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor, 1959), 1–16.

30. See, for example, *Father of the Bride* (1950), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).

31. Duncan, *Communication and Social Order*, 79–80.

32. Michael Tomasello, “How Are Humans Unique?” *New York Times Magazine*, May 25, 2008, 15.

33. Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach*, 56–57.

34. Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 1–31.

35. Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 88–89.

36. Quoted in Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1979), 41.

37. Winnie Hu, “Gossip Girls and Boys Get Lessons in Empathy,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/education/05empathy.html?emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/education/05empathy.html?emc=eta1) (accessed April 6, 2009).

38. I’m thinking of the remarkable 18-minute presentation by Jill Bolte Taylor that was viewed by millions on the internet. See “My Stroke of Insight,” *Ted Talks*, February, 2008, <http://www.ted.com/talks/view/id/229>, (5 June, 2009).

39. Jonathan Schwartz, *All in Good Time* (New York: Random House, 2005), 106.

40. In the context of the constructed associations that can produce empathy, memory is a variation on meaning. It is inexact, and absolutely the opposite of the implied and widespread wish for communication that could match the “nothing added–nothing lost” transfer of data seen in digital media.

41. Tennessee Williams, "The Glass Menagerie," in *Plays 1937–1955* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 399.

42. For an interesting overview of empathy that conflates it with identification, see Charles Edward Gauss, "Empathy," in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Electronic Text Center, The University of Virginia Library, [etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv2-09](http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv2-09) (accessed June 22, 2008).

43. For a more extensive discussion of identification, see Gary Woodward, *The Idea of Identification* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

44. Charles Isherwood, "How Much Trouble Can One Novel Cause?" *New York Times*, May 20, 2010, C4. Italics added for emphasis.

45. Barack Obama, *Dreams From my Father* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 113–118.

46. Anna Quindlen, *How Reading Changed My Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 57.

47. Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 44.

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49. The average American child now spends close to seven and a half hours a day in front of these various screens. See Tamar Lewin, "If Your Children Are Awake, Then They're Probably Online," *New York Times* January 20, 2010, A1, A3.

50. Bill Bryson, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 32.

51. For another example of this genre of ordinary life elevated by empathic writing, see Jeffrey Hammond, *Ohio States: A Twentieth-Century Midwestern* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002).

52. Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Them* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 369–370.

53. Garrison Keillor, *We Are Still Married* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1989), 297.

54. Mark Twain, *Letters From the Earth* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1962), 153.

55. These are key elements of the standard scheme for Interaction Process Analysis developed by Robert Bales. See B. Aubrey Fisher, *Small Group Decision Making, Second Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), 137.

56. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, ed. by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, n.d.), 9–25.

57. See, for example, Duncan, *Communication and Social Order*, 271–301.

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59. See Brant Burleson and Erina MacGeorge, "Supportive Communication," in the *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication, Third Edition*, ed. by Mark Knapp and John Daly (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 474–424.

60. For a similar analysis, see Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 20–21.

61. David Finch, "Somewhere Inside, a Path to Empathy," *New York Times*, May 17, 2009, Styles, 6.

## *Chapter 3*

# **Saving the World One Person at a Time**

## *The Inclination to Engage*

I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard.<sup>1</sup>

—William Lloyd Garrison

Historians and filmmakers like to retell the story of Eleanor Roosevelt, well into her seventies, preparing to make a trip into the mountains of Tennessee to give a lecture on the unfulfilled promise of racial equality. This sojourn was part of the first lady's extended second career as a political visionary and keeper of the flame for the New Deal—a vocation that continued for decades until her death in 1962. Using her hundreds of daily newspaper columns, she pressed for reforms in housing, international justice, civil liberties, and a host of progressive causes. Roosevelt toured factories and towns that prosperity had passed over, urging audiences to act against the inertia of a complacent Eisenhower administration.

The short side trip in June 1958 was itself a small moment, but it speaks to her tenacity for seeking out others. She was to address a group at the Highlander Folk School deep in the woods of Monteagle, an island of social activism in an ocean of southern intransigence. Having heard from an informer that the Ku Klux Klan had placed a bounty on her capture, the FBI discouraged the former first lady from making the trip. But Roosevelt would not be deterred. After arriving by plane in Nashville, she and another woman got into a car, put a handgun on the seat between them, and drove off into the night for the long drive to the school.<sup>2</sup> Not only was the Klan incensed by her intrusion into their world, aided by a county sheriff who made it known that he would be elsewhere if they attacked, but a local paper also seemed to welcome trouble by reminding readers that the school was a “clique of left-wing do gooders” prone to “agitation of racial issues.”<sup>3</sup>



Superficially like her uncle Teddy, it was Eleanor's nature to seek a wide variety of forums to make her case for change in a society mostly contented with itself. Her countenance was deceiving. She had been painfully shy as a young woman, and tended to dress in the matronly garb of someone's older aunt. The unfailingly courtesy and benign smile could also be misread as signs that she was just an interloper riding on her husband's coattails.

But by 1948 she demonstrated how greatly her detractors had underestimated her political will. Her relentless drive for the creation and adoption of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights established for the first time a comprehensive statement of freedoms from which to judge a nation's treatment of its own citizens. The Declaration has also become a major influence for leveraging states to alter sometimes draconian restrictions on privacy and self-expression. She was also a key supporter of twice-presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, and as an occasional scold to younger officeholders like John Kennedy, who she thought was too cautious. By 1952 she was a force to be reckoned with and a formidable obstacle to incrementalists everywhere. As political biographer Allida Black notes, "Senator Bilbo and Representative Fish wanted her deported as a traitor. Dwight Eisenhower refused to invite her to the White House and Republicans often made her an issue in state and national elections." And "her refusal to be cowed by her critics often made consensus Democrats uncomfortable."<sup>4</sup>

Roosevelt made the most of her opportunities. As the leading woman in her party she pushed its members to accept the mantle of progressivism and to adopt the emerging civil rights and human rights movements as their own. At the same time she was years ahead of her natural allies in opposing the tide of communist witch hunts that distracted the nation from its more trenchant problems.

What makes one person seek out the chance to be an influence on others? Why are some—like the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, whose quotation opens this chapter—compelled to communicate with others on matters of action or choice even against the risks of probable rejection? What kind of person can bear the psychological strains of putting oneself in possible opposition to others? These questions are at the heart of this chapter, because they represent certain kinds of rhetorical agents who are sometimes fearless in trying to reach out to others.

A clue to their essence has been suggested in our earlier description of Bill Clinton as a man who sometimes cannot help himself. As a near-perfect exemplar of the rhetorical personality, he seems compelled by his nature to seek an audience of others, even though some might occasionally welcome his absence. Political scientist James David Barber could have been talking about leaders like Clinton when he described "active-positive" presidents as

a unique type. Against their “passive-negative” opposites, including Calvin Coolidge and Dwight Eisenhower, “active-positives” appear “to have fun in the vigorous exercise of Presidential power. They seek out—even create—opportunities for action, rather than waiting for action to come to them.”<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, not all who have this tendency fit this larger picture. Describing his propensity for controversy, one observer of Teddy Roosevelt has written, “He created it, he fell into it, and he searched it out.”<sup>6</sup> Issuing jeremiads to anyone who would listen was Roosevelt’s signature rhetorical feature. He loved to lecture and argue, and he was usually pretty sure of the path that others should follow. But an inclination toward combativeness and verbosity is not quite what we mean. In Chapter 7 we explore the outwardly similar (but actually different) rhetorical form of the hortatory style. Our focus here is on interlocutors who are compelled even against the odds to reach out to others, but seek to do so by using communication dialogically rather than as an instrument of imposition.

## LOQUACIOUS EXTROVERSION

While it is easy to identify the willing and eager contributor—the communication participant who seeks an audience and acts on their responses—it is far less simple to deconstruct the nature of this capacity. He or she may be described as “gregarious,” “sociable,” “approachable,” “extroverted,” “uninhibited,” or “forthcoming.” We may see them as “committed,” “passionate,” “dedicated,” “zealous,” “single-minded,” and “engaged.” And while it is clear that their presence spreads across the population equally through the famous and unsung, they are easiest to see in the lives of many of the nation’s reformers and activists. In their inclination to engage even their critics, we can identify many hues of stalwarts ranging from the conservative publisher William F. Buckley<sup>7</sup> to the likable Harvey Milk, whose tragic saga as the first openly gay elected official in the United States is now a legend retold in books and films.<sup>8</sup> Add as well the adaptable and durable suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Senator Edward Kennedy, both of whom seemed to take a special pleasure in showing up at settings where they were not entirely welcome.<sup>9</sup> The easy part is identifying advocates that have mixed tenacity with a willingness to hear out the responses of others. The larger challenge is nailing down significant markers of rhetorical extroversion with any kind of precision. To do so would be the equivalent to “explaining” with certainty why Vincent Van Gogh became a painter rather than a preacher. Though many may try, the full consequences of genetic dispositions, social influences, and personal choices can never be fully knowable. Psychologist Robert Gifford

concedes this problem of finding ways to operationalize the “subtle” nature of “sociability,” noting that behaviors rarely “replicate” in the same way twice.<sup>10</sup> The mysteries of personality clearly tend to resist broad conclusions.

Even so, we must use the tools that we have. And extroversion as one of the “big five” cornerstones of traditional personality theory is an invaluable idea. It is typically measured in self-report questionnaires that define high scorers as sociable, active, talkative, person-oriented, optimistic, fun-loving, and affectionate.<sup>11</sup> Others have explored communication styles that fine tune extroversion by measuring assertiveness, attentiveness, and “proclivity to act in face-sensitive ways.”<sup>12</sup> The most useful outcomes of much of this research are in the word-clusters that put meat on the bones of this core idea. For example, research on what James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond have called the “willingness to communicate,”<sup>13</sup> and what C. David Mortensen and his colleagues have called a “predisposition toward verbal behavior,”<sup>14</sup> offer tentative first steps where the questions are perhaps better than the experimental results. Is rhetorical extroversion stable across different settings? “Mostly,” they report.<sup>15</sup> Is it related to self-assessment of one’s own competence as a communicator? It probably is.<sup>16</sup> But we are left to find our way to more revealing features of the family of rhetorical responses by considering specific cases that can illuminate what the seasoned actor Alan Alda has observed about his own life. Somehow, he notes, his busy schedule of speeches and performances has made him feel “more alive” by “knowing that there are real lives at the other end of your ministrations, or your art, or your talk.”<sup>17</sup>

Alda’s primary career as an actor is always a tempting species for the analysis of self-presentation. We’re half way there with the dramatic nomenclature we’ve already adopted in these pages (see Chapter 2). But we can identify simpler spheres of activity that also benefit from the extroversion of their practitioners. These can include teaching, counseling, sales, social services, leading a religious community, and many other vocations that are rich in complex and reciprocal interactions. Among the many possibilities, the requirements of managing the affairs of a city offer many rewards to those with a gregarious nature.

## LEARNING FROM MAYORS, REAL AND IMAGINED

There is no level of public office quite as consequential to the domestic lives of urban Americans as the office of mayor. The leaders of cities stand apart as particularly accessible, adaptable elected officials. Legislators, in contrast, dramatize and deliberate, making policy rather than delivering services.

Legislating is measured in increments that would seem pathetically unproductive to mayors who must meet payrolls, collect taxes, and carry on the myriad life-sustaining operations of a city. And while presidents plainly carry the heavier burden of executive leadership, the presidency is now so “imperial” as to be cut off from contact with the lives of most constituents. Indeed, the rhetorically challenged George W. Bush rarely moved beyond the White House unless encased in a bubble that limited access and assured he would not be burdened by the visage of a disenfranchised constituent.<sup>18</sup>

Mayors must function in a different political world that is far closer to what the ancients in Greece and Sicily had in mind as the model for a democratic life.<sup>19</sup> They are never very far from their voters and their problems, and their leadership more directly affects the quality of life of their constituents. Mayors are expected to be on the ground and engaged, dealing with a staggeringly long and well-known list of challenges: finding money for schools, garbage collection, snow removal, sewer and water repair, health care, police and fire protection, social services, and roads and public transportation. To achieve a level of coverage for these basic needs they must run a human gauntlet that seems to always include virulent city council members, local businesses ready to flee to less expensive locales, and—in the unluckier of the nation’s cities—members of the press who add to the challenges of governance by treating municipal politics as a shooting gallery. Mayors must also have the staying power to tackle endless community meetings, defiant unions, indifferent state legislatures, disproportionate numbers of the nation’s poor, and drop-everything visits to heartbreaking scenes of urban mayhem. Their budgets require that they do more with less as tax bases erode, and as suburb-dominated legislatures back away from funding the essentials of city life.

Perhaps the difficult political challenges of the cities are why many academics and journalists ostensibly interested in governance focus on the *presidency*. There is an allure to the Oval Office and the journalistic stars that cover it. The Washington-based mass-media “communitariate” has many of the same inducements that feed the parallel world of Hollywood journalism. Events in these datelines happen in nicer settings. Everyone involved is better dressed and convinced they are dealing with great ideas rather than a broken and distracted polity. And like the celebrity watchers who live near the glitter of northwest Los Angeles, those safely at home northwest of the National Mall can pretend not to notice the paradox of urban disintegration amid a city of ostensible leaders.

An emphasis on the political glitter of Washington, DC, is unfortunate, since there is a more vital political culture on display in the nation’s city halls. Many mayors are unusually good matches for the colorful gadflies attracted to neighborhood politics. Effective municipal leaders seem born to the challenge of engaging the weak and the powerful alike. Biographer Carl

Solberg described the “prairie progressive” Hubert Humphrey as “possessed and effective.” His description of the one-time mayor of Minneapolis could have been applied to other leaders of cities that were once the engines of the nation’s wealth and identity. “He couldn’t shake enough hands, join enough lodges, send enough Christmas cards,” Solberg recalls. “He was forever late on the [campaign] trail because of his desire to please his last audience—end all their doubts, answer all their questions, convert them totally to him. Wanting to be loved, he was unable to be cruel.”<sup>20</sup>

So let’s call it a “theory of mayors” and admit its exceptions up front. Not all succeed. A few are a poor fit for the forced optimism the job demands. And many of the best move on to the Senate, industry, or the nation’s statehouses. But it is instructive that, while we may be lucky to get one good president in a generation, a replenished cadre of rhetorically gifted civic leaders always seem attracted to the messy front lines of American political life. A list of some of the leaders—past and present—who were clearly ready for the communication demands of municipal leadership should include Humphrey in Minneapolis, Gavin Newsom in San Francisco, Cory Booker in Newark, Ed Rendell in Philadelphia, Harold Washington in Chicago, Shirley Franklin of Atlanta, and more than a few in New York City.

New York is a special case, not only because it citizens imagine themselves to be at the center of the universe, but also because its density and role as a media center guarantees that the rest of the world will see key moments of mayoral governance. The 1996 film *City Hall* honors the city’s aura by giving it an outsized Greek American mayor played by an equally outsized Al Pacino. Something of a mixture of former New York Governor Mario Cuomo and Philadelphia’s Rendell, the character of John Pappas embodies the requirement to do whatever it takes to use one’s presence and words to keep faith with the city’s residents.

Big cities require epic passions that find expression in the spiritualization of the social contract. This trope suggests that there is something unique and special about citizens sharing the same boundaries and connected to interwoven communities. A pivotal scene in the 1996 film *City Hall* involves the mayor’s appearance at the funeral of a child shot in a street battle between a city policeman and a mafia runner. Members of the black community have asked the mayor to stay away. As they see it, it was *his* policeman who cost the child his life, even if the true nature of his culpability is yet to be discovered. But actor Al Pacino’s Pappas refuses to be deterred.

I was warned not to come here. I was warned. They warned me, “Don’t stand behind that coffin.” But why should I heed such a warning when a heartbeat is silent and a child lies dead? “Don’t stand behind” this coffin. That boy was as

pure and as innocent as the driven snow. But I must stand here, because I have not given you what you should have. Until we can walk abroad and recreate ourselves, until we can stroll along the streets like boulevards, congregate in parks free from fear, our families mingling, our children laughing, our hearts joined—until that day we have no city. You can label me a failure until that day. . . . We'll rebuild on the soul of this little warrior. We will pick up his standard and raise it high! Carry it forward until this city—your city—our city—his city—is a palace of God! Is a palace of God! [Standing over the small coffin] I am with you, little James. I am you.<sup>21</sup>

In true Hollywood fashion, the speech partially heals the rift between the mayor and the community. It softens the congregation's anger. It also reflects a rhetoric of quiescence familiar to the residents of any big city. We think of Rudolph Giuliani's calm leadership in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, or Michael Bloomberg's cool-headed response to a massive Gotham power blackout two years later.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the classic New York rhetorician was Ed Koch, who some years earlier gave us a glimpse of verbal street fighter with a family resemblance to the rhetorical personality, minus the tact. The pugnacious Koch would debate anyone anywhere at nearly any time.

There are so many funny and revealing Koch stories. Here are two. In his last years in Congress before becoming mayor, he decided to campaign on foot with the more austere and soft-spoken Robert Morgenthau, running for district attorney. If Morgenthau was more at home in a plush Fifth Avenue club, Koch seemed energized by face to face contact with citizens on the streets and in their neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> Together as unlikely campaign partners, they were their own version of *Beauty and the Beast*. As the two approached Bloomingdales at 59th Street, the future district attorney quietly shook hands and politely asked passersby for their support. But Koch caught sight of a noisy group of demonstrators from the Progressive Labor Party across the street. This being New York, when the radicals saw their representative, they pulled out their bull horn and placards, shouting out to anyone who cared to listen "Here they come, the two war criminals." Morgenthau would have certainly let the moment pass without turning it into the East Side equivalent of a brawl between the Jets and the Sharks. But Koch relished his chance. No campaign on the tight sidewalks of the city would be complete without two red-faced warriors shouting down each other bullhorn to bullhorn. With suitable amplification and the sense that no slight should go unreturned, Koch bellowed into his own microphone, telling his interlocutors—and to those who by happenstance were leaving the elegant department store—to "Fuck off!"<sup>24</sup>

Among the mayor's many rhetorical duties were his regular visits with local community groups in all of the five boroughs. It leads to our second

story. The city is divided into districts. One of the nearly 130 appearances he made in these forums was at a District 6 meeting in a church on the south-eastern edge of Manhattan. Anyone can ask a question at these public gatherings which, in the Koch years, tended to resemble a quarrelsome family in a Woody Allen movie. On this night, a perceived drop in municipal services triggered questions about giving tax breaks to wealthy corporations to stay in the city. “Why is it,” a questioner asked, “when there is development, when there is ‘progress’ in quotation marks, there is a decline in services?”<sup>25</sup> Koch offered a detailed reply, weighing the costs of tax abatements against the loss of jobs when companies move elsewhere:

We have to compete. And I think we have competed quite successfully. Let’s take NBC. NBC was offered all kinds of tax incentives to move to New Jersey. All kinds. The rent is cheaper; I think they were offered something for somewhere between 15 to 18 dollars a square foot. Now in New York City they’re paying—I don’t know exactly what they are paying—but you pay anywhere from 40 to 50 dollars a square foot. And they can move and get new studios, and we ultimately kept them here. And I’ll tell you what it cost. It’s no secret. It cost us in lost taxes three and a half million dollars a year for 30 years: roughly a hundred million dollars. . . . Is it worth it? Was it worth it?

A chorus of “No’s” followed.

Well, then, that’s *so* foolish! If you don’t think that it’s worth keeping NBC here at a cost of three and a half million dollars less in taxes—they pay taxes, but three and a half million less—then I’m sorry. We can’t have a rational discussion. Do you know what it would have meant to this city of NBC had left? And then CBS went, and then all of the other channels? You know what it means not only in jobs, in taxes, but in prestige. So when that person—I heard one voice, maybe two—said, “No, it wasn’t worth it.” I can’t argue with you, because you’re *wrong*, simply *wrong*.

If it was never more than an overworked cliché, it was still true that Koch’s confrontational style—a little bit of a lament sandwiched between layers of defiance—played well to what we believed about the graffiti-strewn city of the 1980s. Like its residents, the mayor was not shy about challenging the views of others, even while he welcomed almost any opportunity to explain himself and his administration. “I have never feared speaking to any group,” he noted. “I love the combat of the street in politics.”<sup>26</sup> If he has since been replaced by the more cautious Giuliani and silkier Bloomberg, he remains a fitting example of a politician willing to engage.

Ed Rendell was also a product of New York. Born and raised on the upper West Side to a family in the garment business, he moved to Philadelphia

to attend college, eventually taking a job in the district attorney's office. He became the city's mayor in 1992, serving two terms before eventually moving on to chair the Democratic National Committee. Although Rendell also went on to become Pennsylvania's governor in 2002, most observers of Pennsylvania politics note that no job was a better match with his talents than his heroic advocacy for Philadelphia.<sup>27</sup> A large and affable man with a husky voice to match, Rendell was arguably a near-perfect choice for the challenge of engineering the resurgence of a racially polarized metropolis in rapid decline. A favorable profile in the *New York Times* magazine described him as being a little like Koch, but "without the sneer," and helped burnish his image as "America's Mayor." "His first year in office he was everywhere—doing cannonball dives into city swimming pools, stopping in at three, four or five events during a single lunch hour" and willing to "appear before virtually any group."<sup>28</sup>

Rendell seems equally comfortable with the national press or a delegation of scouts, although he has to work hard to keep his frustrations with local politicians from fouling the smooth surface of his earnestness. His prime gift is his knack for extemporizing on any topic, with an accurate sense of what will work for a given audience. Never one to take himself too seriously, he uses the informal conversational style that makes him approachable and effectively softens warnings and criticism. The smile is disarming, and the urge to respond is rarely checked by a need for introspection. Survey the dozens of clips of Rendell responding, cajoling, and speechmaking on YouTube—ranging from a sparkling off-the-cuff tribute to Public Broadcasting's beloved Fred Rogers, to fulsome praise for the community building efforts of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam—and you find a durable winter soldier ready to do what is necessary for the city or state. "The things I will do for \$5,000," he once lamented, after donning a chef's hat to celebrate a hot dog maker's meager contribution to the city's recreation department.<sup>29</sup> "He hated the tag of supersalesman," Buzz Bissinger noted in a book-length tribute to Rendell's quest to stanch the city's decline. Nor would he accept the idea that he was "some amalgam of Deepak Chopra and Lou Costello, the big city mayor who never saw a pool opening or a groundbreaking he could resist. He liked to think of himself as sober and serious, a statesman with maybe a few stranger moments here and there. But he never stopped pumping on behalf of the city."<sup>30</sup>

For example, in March 1994 he presented a White House forum attended by the president and vice president on the need for more federal aid to the cities. Part of his plan was to induce the Feds to consider relocating offices and operations to blighted urban areas. He impressed most who heard him, including Bill Clinton and Al Gore. But in a follow-up session with journalists at



the National Press Club, Rendell was asked by a reporter—who didn't see the bait in his question—how he could expect the government to show “favoritism” to the nation's cities. The presumption was that the wealthier rings of suburbs that now surround our cities would take offense. The response was vintage Rendell:

I can show you study after study that if cities slide down the tubes, suburban areas go right down with them. So it does make a difference. . . . What you just said is the problem in this country today. I mean, isn't it a little embarrassing when a foreign correspondent comes to America and you have to take them to maybe a few designated areas and try to keep them away from the rest of the city? You can walk 10 minutes from the Capitol and see disgraces. *And see disgraces*. So it is a matter of national policy, and—I'm not blaming you—what you've expressed is one of the reasons we're here, because people don't understand.<sup>31</sup>

Rendell's instincts are usually to find whatever slivers of common ground that might exist between warring factions and try to plant everyone's feet safely on it. As mayor and governor he tried to find the common center on gun control legislation that might take assault guns off the street and still respect Second Amendment rights dear to rural legislators. He worked well with Republicans in Washington and his own state, and could communicate across the divides that separated the city's residents on race and taxes, and on the tensions between the city's core and its more distant neighborhoods. He even liked to talk to Fox News, delighting them with criticism of the press coverage of supposedly “liberal” news organizations such as MSNBC. And after working tirelessly with Hillary Clinton in her unsuccessful 2008 bid for the Democratic nomination, he was predictably one of the first to acknowledge the victory of her opponent and to urge Bill Clinton to “get over” his wife's loss.<sup>32</sup>

We also know that in the course of a still-unfolding political career there are clearly two Rendells. As the Mayor of Philadelphia his public rhetoric was almost always optimistic about the city's future. But in private he was more doubtful about whether it could ever function as a Manhattan of economic opportunities. After the urban meltdowns of the 1960s, after the riots in Harlem, Watts, Detroit, and Newark, and the budget cuts of the Reagan years, the dreams of enlightened urbanism never seemed more remote and unattainable. When his first term began in 1992, most of the city's industries had long since departed for the non-union south. Many of its children had abandoned schools for the streets. The port was failing as a potential mid-Atlantic transportation hub. In addition, the navy closed a landmark shipyard that had provided generations of jobs for families in the

adjoining neighborhoods of South Philadelphia. Rendell would acknowledge the intransigent problems these changes created. But he also came to believe that cities are governed partly by attitude. In what is a distinct rhetorical frame of reference, he noted that the communication of defiant optimism was part of his mandate as a leader. “Cities are run by the *perception* about them and the *mood* people have and the *feel* people have.” These matter, he said, “almost more than the substance.”<sup>33</sup> He was savvy enough to know that perceptions do not directly create tax revenues or guarantee federal grants. But he understood that sometimes his words were also his most effective deeds. Arguably no politician had a grander stage than the nation’s historic first city from which to model the familiar trope of triumph over adversity.

## HINTS OF CULTURAL VARIABILITY

T. R. Reid recounts his five years in Japan as a reporter for the *Washington Post* with a keen eye for subtle cultural differences. He recalls that upon meeting a neighbor or stranger, they would always introduce themselves by attaching an affiliative reference to their greeting:

It’s never just “Hello, I’m Matsuada.” That sentence would be considered wholly inadequate—and rude to boot—because it doesn’t convey the essential information. It was always “I’m Matsuada, of Tanigawa Sekiyu, Inc.” or “I’m Matsuada, of the Construction Supplies Section,” or “I’m Matsuada, of the class of 1923.”

Reid recalls that he resisted this kind of greeting. “I wore my American individualism on my sleeve. I wanted people to know—or maybe I wanted to convince myself—that I was strong enough to stand on my own, with no need for my company or my university or my subsection of Shibuya Ward to prop me up.”<sup>34</sup> To declare one’s name, he thought, ought to be enough. But in a suitably indirect way, a neighbor finally offered an explanation of why an acknowledgement of your attachments was important. They defined your place in a larger community. It took the mystery and strangeness out of a new encounter. To do otherwise, the neighbor noted, was self-centered and somehow inconsiderate of others who expect you to see yourself as part of *their* community.

Ultimately, Reid got the point. It was both a matter of social harmony—*Wa*, in Japanese—and part of their social contract that obliges you to share in the successes and mortifications of the groups to which you are casually or

intimately attached. He began to understand why formal apologies are so much more a part of Japanese organizational and corporate life:

Let's say, for example, that you are employed at Tanaka Enterprises, and you and your family live in Apartment 102 of Building 3 of the firm's employee housing complex. And let's say that some mechanic in the truck garage at Tanaka, a fellow who lives in apartment 756 of Building 9 of the same housing complex, gets caught shoplifting at the local 7-Eleven. You may not know this mechanic. You may have never met the guy. But he has seriously wronged you. He has brought shame on your company and on your housing complex. He has besmirched the reputation of the entire group. This is a major-league *meiwaku*.<sup>35</sup>

The Asian preference for understanding another person in terms of their significant affiliations contrasts sharply with the North American preference to emphasize the independent agent. In films and other fantasies we love stories of man against machine, or the maverick who stands out from the organization or bureaucracy. One could not account for the film careers of actors ranging from Gary Cooper to Robin Williams without reference to their various personas as defiant individualists. The idea of the lone outsider in pursuit of their own goals is mostly an American myth, but a myth with consequences because it dramatizes the preferred communication style of aggressive extroversion. The fear that one is dithering if locked within the ranks of the organization is so firmly set in American life as to be self-evident. It is little wonder that the Asians tend to score lower on personality measures of extroversion than their Western counterparts,<sup>36</sup> or that profiles of Western companies measure the star power of CEOs and wannabes in terms of their muscular extroversion.<sup>37</sup> Such is the difference when our own high flyers in commerce and politics will dramatize their leadership in initiatives that "reach out" to others. Pushing the headstrong self on to others, with its implied right for the primacy of one's own views, is out of sync in a culture that honors the collective.

Sweden offers its own variations, serving as a reminder that differences in putting oneself forward do not always break along a clean line between East and West. William Gudykunst notes that Sweden is an individualistic culture like the United States. They "place high value on equality and freedom." But they "do not try to stand out from others."<sup>38</sup> Travel on a swift intercity train in Scandinavia or eat in a fashionable restaurant in Stockholm, and the loudest voices you are likely to hear will probably be Americans.

Reid's distinctions between East and West remind us again of the dominance of the idea of the individual in Western thinking—and its natural communication correlate.<sup>39</sup> Overt engagement and forceful advocacy is a talisman of leadership. To seek out audiences for one's own ideas is expected.

As Gudykunst notes, “Members of individualistic cultures are motivated to interpersonally communicate to achieve affection, pleasure, and inclusion more than members of collectivistic cultures.”<sup>40</sup> I remember having a Japanese student in a college course a few years ago entitled “Debate and Advocacy.” Most others in the class took easily to a format that required tenacious identification with one’s own case and forceful separation from the positions of the opposing team. But my hapless exchange student struggled to feel comfortable in the role of an “opponent” free-lancing arguments and refutations against others. The binary world that separated friends and foes within the classroom was not part of her cultural DNA.

### LABELING THE ENGINE OF ENGAGEMENT: OTHER DIRECTION

As noted in Chapter 1, perhaps the most trenchant language for assessing emerging aspects of the American character after World War II appeared in small academic book called *The Lonely Crowd*. In the preface to a later edition, lead author David Riesman expressed surprise that the book sold more than the few thousand copies that he anticipated would end up being read in a few university courses. But something about his broad distinctions between inner-, tradition-, and other-directed Americans clicked with American readers. The book turned into a best seller and a touchstone for a tectonic social shift in search of a name. In one of the roundabout routes that only academics seem to be able to invent, Riesman had captured the circular interconnectedness of postwar shifts in work and social relations. In a word, he penned the perfect shorthand to describe an America that had drifted away from the natural introversion of the self and family—represented in older occupations like farming and various trades—to a rapidly growing population much more willing to let the winds of social change and white-collar aspirations take them into new lives. Success in the office didn’t depend so much on personal judgment as it did on the customs, culture, and attitudes within the office. The point is especially relevant here because Riesman’s idea of other-direction usually includes individuals whose success and broader social experiences naturally require extroversion—a searching outward—essential for the advancement of social and professional goals.

What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is “internalized” in the sense that dependence on it for

guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shifts with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life.<sup>41</sup>

There is, of course, much more to Riesman's analysis. But part of the virtues of this work is in the evocative simplicity of his language. It is applicable to so many settings beyond his original intention to track the wide shift toward greater attention to the interdependencies of our intensely interconnected lives. With little imagination we can fit the label to *Seinfeld's* George Costanza, who observes in a particular episode that one of his few good traits is that he remains "perceptive." "I always know when someone's uncomfortable at a party," he says.<sup>42</sup> And he seems proud that his antenna is that well tuned to the vibes of others. It is also the open question mark of actor Robert Webber's face in his portrayal of Juror 12, an advertising man, in the iconic film *Twelve Angry Men* (1956). As his fellow jurors weigh the evidence in a murder case, his professional penchant for measuring ideas by their acceptance seeps into his *sotto voce* caution: "Let's run this one up the flagpole and see if anybody salutes." He vacillates until he senses the emerging consensus. Like many of the rest of us, he holds back until there is a clearer sense of the investments and preferences of others in the room.

Riesman was careful to note the risks of generalizing about character traits. He called his distinctions "shadowy" and noted that no individual fits neatly into just one category.<sup>43</sup> Others wondered if other-direction represented a true shift in the American character, and—if so—if Riesman had identified its likely causes.<sup>44</sup> But scores of analysts and academics were hooked by the new lexicon. It was as if Riesman had anticipated the idea of open-source software by proposing an inventive and transparent rubric that could be used and extended at will. In that spirit, and even after all these years, we take his scheme as a significant aid in the analysis of the motivation to communicate.

Riesman intended other-direction to be, in part, a recognition of the shift in the calculus that weighs our own interests against the advantages of acting on the interests of others. Individuals who choose to make their way through life on their skills as an advocate will find their challenges easier if their audiences are at least partly *the generative sources of the advocate's appeals*. The individuals that fall under this rubric are neither more nor less altruistic than others. It is simply in their nature to cultivate relationships with others by remaining open to their needs and attitudes. We already know the lines from scripts of solitude. And let's assume for the moment that they are offered without guile or irony: "How can I express this to them in ways

they will understand, and with the respect they are due?” “Tell me about yourself; I want to know more.” “How does this make you feel?” “Let’s see if we can find some basis for agreement.” “Let me try to summarize what you seem to be saying.” “I still don’t think I understand; tell me more.” Familiar statements like these flow from some of the elements of empathy we discussed in Chapter 2, while also reflecting an awareness of the landscape of feelings and expectations specific to interlocutors and their settings. If the expressions sound a bit sappy as we read them, it is because the language of other-direction is the essential script of intimate face-to-face communication. This is partly what Virginia Richmond and Matthew Martin had in mind in describing responsiveness (sensitivity to others) as one of three critical variables (along with assertiveness and versatility) in assessing the “sociocommunicative orientation” of “effective communicators.”<sup>45</sup> Others have more simply described responsiveness as empathetic, animated, compassionate, and helpful.<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, there is a level at which this whole idea is perhaps a tautology. As Emmanuel Levinas notes, an individual cannot help but be responsive to a world of others:

I am defined as a subjectivity, as a particular person, as an “I” precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual “I.” . . . I can never escape the fact that the other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand.<sup>47</sup>

But Riesman was thinking more strategically than philosophically. For him, other direction was partly a calculation to the challenges of getting ahead in an increasingly hierarchical world. It is not the exclusive territory of saints and social workers. For example, he includes the variant of the not so laudable “inside dopester” who “tends to know a great deal about what other people are doing and thinking” because he cherishes the status of an insider. He is driven not so much by the need to change others, “but to resemble them.”<sup>48</sup> And Riesman’s ambivalence about this character type is evident. The old joke that a politician’s favorite color is usually plaid speaks to our unease with people who perhaps too easily substitute the views of others for their own.

There is also Riesman’s apparent discomfort with the decline of an earlier population of individualists: American inventors, builders and workers who needed no assurances from others that they were accepted and loved. And we could add the Eve Harringtons or Tom Ripleys of the world as additional dark “tributes” to other-direction as the companion of crass opportunism.

Harrington is Joseph L. Mankiewicz's acolyte who engineered the professional demise of her theatrical mentor in the film *All About Eve* (1950). Ripley is Patricia Highsmith's chameleon who notes that his specialty is "telling lies, forging signatures and impersonating almost anybody."<sup>49</sup> These figures are offered initially as the very models of apparent sensitivity and consideration. Only gradually do we see that their insinuating ways are completely fraudulent.

### THE SURVIVAL OF INNER-DIRECTION

By definition the inner-directed person sees less urgency to build a bridge over a chasm of differences. Riesman suggested the self-stabilizing gyroscope as a metaphor for an individual's capacity for perseverance in the face of a landscape of alien values.<sup>50</sup> Internalized beliefs keep inner-directed people "on course," even without supportive feedback from others.

This metaphor of the gyroscope, like any other, must not be taken literally. It would be a mistake to see the inner-directed man as incapable of learning from experience or as insensitive to public opinion in matters of external conformity. He can receive and utilize certain signals from the outside, provided that they can be reconciled with the limited maneuverability that the gyroscope permits him. His pilot is not quite automatic.<sup>51</sup>

We understand inner-direction best by comparing the shift in emphasis to the social that defines the difference with other-direction.

While the inner-directed person could be "at home abroad" by virtue of his relative insensitivity to others, the other-directed person is, in a sense, at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy.<sup>52</sup>

We frequently sentimentalize inner-direction by turning it into stories of determination against all odds. No one could "read" the heroes of iconic American films without finding comfort in their defiant loners. Among the American Film Institute's "100 years of Heroes" is a broad collection of nonconformists and misanthropes, including Indiana Jones, James Bond, T. E. Lawrence, Han Solo, and Butch Cassidy.<sup>53</sup> Such a group with so little patience or interest in the needs of others could keep a battalion of therapists busy for decades. At one point in his saga as a renegade, Cassidy observes that "I have a vision," but "the rest of the world wears bifocals."<sup>54</sup> We tend to romanticize figures who seem to need no help from others to navigate their own paths.

Sociologist Todd Gitlin has recently made the point that younger Americans hardly see inner-direction as a real type. He has been using *The Lonely Crowd* again in some of his classes, and guesses that they have become so accustomed to responding to the cues of peers and media that they can't envision the relative immunity to social influences that Riesman described.<sup>55</sup> But inner-direction is still an observable feature of character, revealed at least in small ways in visible resistance to prevalent attitudes and norms. While verbal reports of attitudes can be unreliable, we often hear inner-direction in comments such as "I don't care what others think," "My mind is made up," and "My attitudes on this aren't negotiable." A defiant stance is at least a presumptive marker of a person who may be less open to new or emerging attitudes.<sup>56</sup> For example, George W. Bush liked to call himself "the decider" and famously had little patience for dissenting views of critics and aides on the wisdom of invading Iraq. Even the apparent absence of weapons of mass destruction—the ostensible reason for ordering the 2001 invasion—were not enough to alter his unwavering opinion about his chosen course of action.<sup>57</sup> In Chapter 7 we will link this way of *thinking* with a certain way of *talking* in the form of the hortatory style. In simple terms, the style features reasoning sequences that begin with non-negotiable "principles" rather than context-dependent evidence.

Of course, culture ultimately has its way with all of us. Though we may temporarily perform a script of single-minded independence, as Levinas observed, attitudes and values do not emerge just from the inside. But in the shorter term, some individuals seem remarkably able to repel the views of others in favor their own.

## OTHER-DIRECTION AS A DIFFERING VIEW OF SELF

Earlier in this chapter we cited the funeral address of New York's fictitious Mayor Pappas. He closes his remarks of mourning over a slain child by noting, "I am with you, little James. *I am you.*" Rhetorically collapsing the distinction between oneself and another is a familiar rhetorical device. It is intended to transcend social differences. It emphasizes family over the individual, functioning as a salute to our interconnectedness. Search the internet for a similar phrase of transcendence such as "We are one," and some of the 726,000,000 "hits" feature lyrics from gospel music, tributes to the victims of 9/11, political speeches, and scores of similar expressions of solidarity. If sentiments like these are the cultural equivalents of so many happy faces plastered on an ad, they also give expression to the urge to emphasize unity over division. In the case of the rhetorical Pappas, it is clearly intended to dramatize the erasure of differences that threaten his success as a leader. It is partly what Kenneth



Burke means when he describes political discourse as a form of “secular prayer.”<sup>58</sup> Prayer directed outward is inclusive. By ignoring deep seated social, cultural, or economic distinctions, we hope to find pathways to agreement.

What attributes of character and attitude urge some people toward rhetorical transcendence? We are left with educated guesses, but they are essential to understanding motives for engagement. It is clear that other-directed persons are more inclined to ignore the moats of separation that keep others at a distance. The usual identity overlay in public settings reaches for markers of difference in race, gender, age, or other forms of division. It’s “we” and “them,” and not infrequently “we” versus “them.” As the *Washington Post*’s Joel Achenback has aptly expressed it, for our times “all of the passion in American politics is oppositional.”<sup>59</sup> People are often energized by threats—real or perceived—that are converted into rage. What makes the rhetorical personality different is perhaps an eagerness to see audiences with relatively unbordered identities. He or she constructs a place in a culture of overlapping rings rather than “we-they” boxes. From this frame of reference The Other is, in some sense, an extension of the self rather than an outsider of labeled differences.

The social constructivist Kenneth Gergen also offers some help by pointing out that relational discourse produces its own kind of experience that can “subvert the traditional self/other binaries.” In a sense, rhetorical personalities may seek to reconstruct meaning because they are uniquely susceptible to the idea of closing the circle of the dialogical process through discursive transcendence. Gergen quotes the African American scholar Henry Louis Gates to illustrate the point. “Blackness is ‘not a material object, an absolute, or an event,’ but only ‘a trope.’”<sup>60</sup> This view emphasizes connectedness rather than difference. Race is more “constructed” than biological: a real and significant residue of our national experience, but nonetheless a frail signifier. Where the racist seeks exclusion, the impulse for transcendence emphasizes inclusion. Other-direction feeds a disposition to cut through such exclusionary identities, to avoid what Todd Gitlin describes as the American penchant for divisive “purification crusades.”<sup>61</sup> *And it gives pragmatic and altruistic reasons for the motive to engage.* We participate because we need the affirmation of others; we wish to be *in* the world rather than *of* it. For some, it may take the form of functioning like a Fred Rogers of wonder and inclusion. For others, a sense of connectedness may explain the paths of their professional lives. While the nature of the talk will change from person to person, they will inevitably define their identity *through* their relations with others in ways that parallel this hypothetical summation:

There are still many things about myself that have probably escaped my notice. But when it comes to my friends and others in the larger world who should matter in my life, there are a few things I know for sure. I know I need the contact

and affirmation of others. I want to engage their worlds, just as I hope they would engage mine. I also know their approval and acceptance means a great deal to me. On those occasions when we cannot agree or understand each other, I will want to find out why. And I must be ready to change if doing so makes sense. Where disagreement or estrangement remains, I will search to see if there is some common ground that can minimize our differences. I have to work at it. I know that finding the patience to really hear what other people are saying is the hardest work of all.

The conscious decision to keep oneself open to the influence of others is a special communicative attribute. It partly duplicates the therapeutic processes of those who, by training or inclination, can set aside a narrowing focus on self. In spite of its many critics and current lack of fashion,<sup>62</sup> communication as a therapeutic kind of *communion* speaks to all of the features that make other-direction so beneficial. It functions as a curb on selfish narcissism. It instills a process for engaging others in the pluralist terrain of *their* lives. And it promises marginally wider channels that can defeat so many of the known ills of communication: estrangement, suspicion, and the unjustified comfort of the incurious.

### SUMMING UP: THE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT FOR OBAMA AND SOME PREDECESSORS

In the twenty-first Century there is irony in describing the eagerness to be a force in the lives of others. Social observers continue to tally the countervailing effects of newer media that put us at a greater physical and psychic distance. The much-discussed shifts are familiar. Mediated and fragmented computer and phone communication increasingly occurs in a din of distraction and noise, leaving less time for richer and more direct forms of interpersonal contact. In 2005 the average American spent nearly nine hours a week just in front of a home computer.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, even while remaining residents of specific communities, we seem to act less like citizens and more like consumers,<sup>64</sup> disengaging from traditional organizations in favor of the diluted “friendship” of wired and “virtual” communities.<sup>65</sup>

But, of course, the essence of character is that it can override the constraints of particular settings. One of the most visible artifacts of our social nature is the impulse to seek out and connect with others. We are never more attractive as a species than when we work to take the strangeness out of a first encounter. These new “others” loom large as we calculate the right response. They are an audience, to be sure. But they are also something more for the rhetorical personality. In the best of circumstances, they are

the energy supply for the encounter. Not only receiving his or her message, they seek to shape it as well. When the beloved former Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, was asked why he didn't go quietly into retirement, the infectiously affable Desmond Tutu remarked, "I wish I could shut up, but I can't, and I won't."<sup>66</sup>

The challenges of assessing a figure's ability for transformative engagement are not always easy. Barack Obama is typical of the kinds of public figures whose rhetorical temperaments are trickier to read. As pointed out elsewhere in these pages, he is extremely adaptable to nearly any kind of audience. And he is unusual as a president in the range of experiences and aspirations he can genuinely claim as his own. Mirroring his style in the campaign of 2008, the official White House Web site describes a man for all seasons, managing to touch almost every corner of the fractured political landscape:

With a father from Kenya and a mother from Kansas, President Obama was born in Hawaii on August 4, 1961. He was raised with help from his grandfather, who served in Patton's army, and his grandmother, who worked her way up from the secretarial pool to middle management at a bank. After working his way through college with the help of scholarships and student loans, President Obama moved to Chicago, where he worked with a group of churches to help rebuild communities devastated by the closure of local steel plants. He went on to attend law school, where he became the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Upon graduation, he returned to Chicago to help lead a voter registration drive, teach constitutional law at the University of Chicago, and remain active in his community.<sup>67</sup>

Rhetorically, Obama uses this biography to telegraph to audiences that, at some point, his own life story has intersected with theirs. He is also a gifted writer and a trenchant thinker. And although he must address structural changes in the economy and the fragmenting nature of threats to security, he strives to explain as well as advocate. Combined with the downward inflections of certainty from his steady baritone, the overall effect is of a figure of enormous fluency and rhetorical confidence.<sup>68</sup>

And yet there is also the famous detachment, described by many as a persistent "coolness" that falls well short of the Clintonian affectation of a person who couldn't be happier to be sharing the same room with an audience. Historian Garry Wills describes Obama as "the perpetual outsider who wins acceptance in whatever new company he joins."<sup>69</sup> He is comfortable with others, but shows more caution than those who often seek engagement for its own sake. The *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd reflected a common

complaint about Obama after his subdued response to a failed attack by a Pakistani-American on a Detroit-bound airliner. The President was issuing bulletins, she noted, when he should have “juiced up the empathy quotient” with a more heartfelt response.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps Obama’s preference to use a teleprompter for even the most casual statement is a significant indicator of his caution. The television device projects a speech text onto a mirror in front of a camera lens. His extensive use of it represents a level of message discipline that surpasses even what is usually customary in the heavily scripted White House. Teleprompters turn a prepared text into a presentation that has the appearance of extemporaneity, reducing the risk that a stray comment will get a leader in trouble.<sup>71</sup> They also tend to lock the reader into a set manuscript that is difficult to momentarily discard in favor of freer riffs. With Obama these hardly seem to be a crutch. Used by so gifted a public speaker, a teleprompter’s presence at most presidential appearances seems to indicate a desire to restrain initial responses. He is effective, funny, and a quick study in the large gatherings of legislators or citizens used to focus attention on White House initiatives.<sup>72</sup> But he may be uncomfortable with the possibility of being caught in an off-message discrepancy.

By contrast, the most passionate among those who fit the archetype we’ve described here are compelled by an ineffable combination of duty and desire to make their case to whoever will listen. One tracks the grim march toward defeat of presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey with the sadness that comes from witnessing the crushing power of inevitability over instinct. In 1968 Humphrey could not unite a Democratic Party or a nation bitterly divided by the war in Vietnam, and shaken by the urban bloodshed that followed the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Campaign stops were, as Theodore White observed, “a public humiliation” of shouts and jeers.<sup>73</sup> With funds drying up and the press writing him off, Humphrey vowed to plow on, noting that he would continue even if it meant refusing further money and campaigning with his wife from a rented station wagon. It was an echo of a similar inevitability in President Woodrow Wilson, who went on a 21-day nonstop speaking tour in 1919, determined to win backing from a hostile Senate for the new League of Nations. Distrustful of the press, and with radio still in the future, he felt he had little choice but to make his case directly to audiences of ordinary Americans.<sup>74</sup> The President’s body finally gave out after an address in Pueblo, Colorado. Partially paralyzed from a stroke, he returned to Washington and never regained his strength. Wilson’s political life ended just like Humphrey’s would many years later: on the evanescent hope for the rhetorical transformation of a reluctant public.

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## Chapter 4

# Confirming Our Acceptability

## *The Impulse for Self-Monitoring*

He was a man of a certain style. His hero was William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, whom he admired for his way of doing things; he used to say that he respected Pitt for presenting himself as “as a picture, as an act,” as if he were always conscious of the persona he presented and the effect it had on others.<sup>1</sup>

—Jonathan Yardley

I remember an older family relative whose occasional trips to our home on the opposite coast inevitably created more tension than pleasure. Though she was generous and upbeat, everyone knew that hatches would need to be battened down and equipment lashed to the cleats to ride out the rough seas of her prolonged stays. The problem was not any calculated malice on her part, but a near-total indifference to the feelings and needs of others. She was the grandmaster of the unintended insult. What she offered as advice or observation was usually understood by most others as a put-down, not unlike the effect of depth charges falling off a Navy destroyer. In her wake, family members stood by to salve the wounds of the survivors.

Every family seems to have been issued at least one such relative. And ours happened to be in town when our 13-year-old daughter’s classmate showed up to work on a class project. We knew from attending several school plays that Maggie dreamed of being an actress. She spent most of her weekends in New York at various dance studios, occasionally auditioning for parts in plays and television commercials. Not surprisingly, this budding performer took care in how she appeared to others, as if preparing for a younger version of the Junior League. Unfailingly polite, her hair was always perfectly combed to flow under a headband and down her back. And she was usually

in a color-matched summer outfit: in manner and dress a nearly perfect copy of her affluent parents.

Like most children her age, hormones tricked out of dormancy gave Maggie an early spring crop of dreaded facial acne. No one she met could have been any kinder than to have simply not have noticed. But when we introduced her to our relative we should have been more prepared for a response beyond the expected greeting. In the split second before the family member spoke, we sensed that the sensitivities of our young friend would be challenged. But even then it was too late, and our relative's words came in a rush. "Have you tried to do anything about your face?" she drawled. "I'll bet some of these new creams they advertise would help."

We were stunned into silence. There was no time to recover and no chance of returning the words to its sender. Except for the mortification of my daughter, I have forgotten all else except the retreat of the girls to another part of the house, and the regret that a sentient person could utter such toxic words.

Consider another case of apparent indifference to the feelings of another. The great architect Frank Lloyd Wright was notoriously prickly in his relations with his clients. If his beautiful prairie-style homes were studies of simple elegance designed to complement their environments, Wright himself had no comparable capacity to read a social landscape. Hurting someone's feelings with an insensitive comment was simply not in the top tier of his concerns. Brendan Gill's biography includes the recollections of Carleton Smith, who was present when the visionary designer first met President Franklin Roosevelt in the Oval Office. Smith had brought the famed architect to the President in the hope that he might get a commission to design much-needed housing for workers at the new Oak Ridge atomic energy plant in Tennessee. But, as Gill notes, Wright "often misread the nature of an occasion and alienated people with whom he had intended to make a light-hearted connection."<sup>2</sup> If Smith's memory is to be believed, this encounter would be no different:

So I took him (Wright) to Washington and he wore a cloak over his shoulders and had a big cane and never took his hat off when he came into the Oval Room and he stopped at the door with great drama and said, so the President could hear, "You know, Carleton, I've always told you I would rather be Wright than President." And then he wheeled around and came up to the President's desk and shook hands with him and he said—and I will never know whether he thought this out in advance or whether it came naturally—he said, "Franklin," or "Frank," he called him, "Frank," he said, "You ought to get up out of that chair and look around at what they're doing to your city here, miles and miles of Ionic and Corinthian columns!"<sup>3</sup>

It was a complete catalogue of slights. The schoolyard pun was bad enough, and an act of inflated self-importance monumentally inappropriate in the presence of the beloved war leader. And no one *ever* addressed FDR. as “Frank.” To do so would have been the equivalent of addressing Britain’s royals as “Liz” and “Phil.” One would have had to physically restrain Sara Roosevelt and probably most of the nation had the diminutive form of her son’s name ever been spoken in their presence. Then there was the cavalier suggestion that the paralyzed president should “get out of his chair” to check the aesthetic shortcomings of various Federal buildings. It was an open secret that moving the President beyond his wheelchair was a laborious process that sometimes required that he be carried in the demeaning mode of a bride lifted over a threshold. Understood even from the less courtly standards of our time, Wright’s comments suggest an almost pathological indifference to the feelings of the President.

When someone’s words are annoying to another, we know that those on the receiving end would wish for a bit more awareness on the part of the miscreant. This is the dynamic of rudeness, which P. M. Forni defines as a form of “disregard.” And it is easily the most recognizable effect of low self-monitoring. “Through rudeness,” he notes, “we show off, dominate, intimidate, coerce, threaten, humiliate, dissuade, and dismiss. Rudeness is control through invalidation.”<sup>4</sup> He offers a predictable range of responses that can answer the boorish behavior of others, such as discrete requests for due consideration from noisy coworkers in the next office cubicle, or from diners in a restaurant who have decided to settle their differences in earshot of everyone else in the room. But insensitivity rarely seems like a momentary lapse. Offenders are often clueless to the reasons for their social blindness. And tales of insensitivity are ubiquitous: the central currency behind most of our attempts to put a value on another’s character. Few moments in our social lives stand out as clearly as those where we sense that another has shown insufficient regard for the effects of our presence. We are all collectors of these slights, passing them on to others in tacit acknowledgement of the fragility of human relations.

This chapter considers the nature of the process that saves or exposes us to the effects of insufficient regard. “Low self-monitoring” is a commonly used label to describe the thoughtlessness of rhetorical injury. And it is the antithesis of what we would expect to see in the rhetorical personality. We will explore the idea of monitoring from three perspectives. The first is a dramatic one. Self-monitoring is the process of adjusting oneself to the needs and expectations of audiences. Audience awareness is its critical first step. The second is more therapeutic. Checking the effects of one’s presence and words, I will argue, is a way to serve the needs of another more than oneself.

And finally, we will note that while this is a universal process, there are significant divergences across cultures.

### SELF MONITORING, THEATER, AND THE NATURE OF SOCIAL ACUITY

A person looks into a mirror, and what do they perceive? The obvious answer is an exact reflection or their physical selves. But we comprehend more than our shell. If we imagine the “interior” dialogue occurring at the same moment the person takes in their visage, layers of questions are asked that suggest a conscious processing of *what we think others may see*. Will they think my hair is too big? Does this outfit make me look heavy? Will they notice the red spot on my cheek? And on it goes. The mirror is an obvious kind of trigger for the arrows of concern that *ought* to bounce around inside: what Janet Metcalfe and Hedy Kober describe as the “projectable self.”<sup>55</sup> What they mean, of course, is that getting along in life is about *mirroring*—acting on the anticipated effects that our actions and words will have on others. Just as any object reflects its own form on a polished surface, so it is with the rituals of human contact, where we think we know what it is of ourselves that others will see.

Narrative is the social form of the mirror. It invites us to take the measure of another’s actions. Because moments of life are bigger and essentialized in narrative reconstructions, we see what a writer wants us to notice about the highs and lows of relational conduct. The simple case of the classic novel and film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) lets us see—among other things—Atticus’ decency in his cautions to young Scout to think about the feelings of others before she speaks. Harper Lee’s story maps familiar territory explored as well by Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, and other Southern writers. They allow us to peer through the transparent scrim that separates the decorous and genteel from the torments of insularity just on the other side. Shakespeare’s plays give us similar competing impulses, mostly in the form of countless soliloquies of irresolution between personal need and public duty. At what point must leaders or lovers give themselves over to the social codes of the world they inhabit? In *Coriolanus* Shakespeare offers the challenge of a hero who scorns leadership constrained by the forces of public opinion. Even among approving patricians of Rome, the military leader cannot find the will to play the part he has been assigned. The soldier senses the alien ways of political courtship and notes, “I had rather be their servant in my way, than sway them in theirs.”<sup>56</sup>

The modern shift from the *portrayal* of social manners to the systematic *observation* of self-presentation brings us back to the pioneering work of

sociologist Erving Goffman, who used the language of drama to lay the groundwork for the systematic study of performance in everyday life. His interest, he noted, was with the individual's "dramaturgical problems" of presenting any activity in the presence of others:

I assume that when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation. . . . The issues dealt with by stagecraft and stage management are sometimes trivial but they are quite general; they seem to occur everywhere in social life, providing a clear-cut dimension for formal sociological analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Among the key challenges is the "maintenance of expressive control"—the capacity to satisfy an audience's expectations about what a given scene demands. "Unmeant gestures," he notes, have at least three origins:

First, a performer may accidentally convey incapacity, impropriety, or disrespect by momentarily losing muscular control of himself. He may trip, stumble, fall; he may belch, yawn, make a slip of the tongue. . . . Secondly, the performer may act in such a way as to give the impression that he is too much or too little concerned with the interaction. He may stutter, forget his lines, appear nervous, or guilty, or self-conscious; he may give way to inappropriate outbursts of laughter, anger, or other kinds of affect which momentarily incapacitate him as an interactant. . . . Thirdly, the performer may allow his presentation to suffer from inadequate dramaturgical direction. The setting may not have been put in order, or may have become readied for the wrong performance, or may become deranged during the performance.<sup>8</sup>

Goffman illustrated these general conclusions with observations drawn from sources as diverse as etiquette books and ethnographic studies. But a favorite from his landmark *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is a short quote from George Orwell recounting an ordinary scene in a Paris restaurant. It effectively captures the natural transience of role-specific behavior:

It is an instructive sight to see a waiter going into hotel dining-room. As he passes the door a sudden change comes over him. The set of his shoulders alters; all the dirt and hurry and irritation have dropped off in an instant. He glides over the carpet, with a solemn priest-like air. I remember our assistant maitre d'hotel, a fiery Italian, pausing at the dining-room door to address his apprentice who had broken a bottle of wine. Shaking his fist above his head he yelled (luckily the door was more or less soundproof):

"*Tu me fats*—Do you call yourself a waiter, you young bastard? You a waiter! You're not fit to scrub floors in the brothel your mother came from." . . . Then he entered the dining-room and sailed across it dish in hand, graceful as a swan. Ten seconds later he was bowing reverently to a customer.<sup>9</sup>

Goffman's emphasis reflects what is so evident in the idea of self-monitoring: that most of verbal conduct is adaptation. It requires an awareness of audience and a sensitivity to the effects one can have on it.

Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic" nomenclature anticipated the use of this framework by decades, with its emphasis on scenes, agents, and acts, and the expectation-confirming ratios (scene/act, scene/agent, agent/act, and so on) that can be used to predict behaviors that belong to certain people or settings.<sup>10</sup> Does a given act fit a particular agent? Is this place the right scene for this action? He gave more meaning to those famous lines from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players:  
 They have their exits and their entrances;  
 And one man in his time plays many parts.<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to miss just how descriptive of our behavioral choices the dramatic nomenclature really is. Historian Gary Wills notes that Barack Obama, for example, is a chameleon—a "shape shifter." His description of his unlikely rise to the political apex is really about the multiple roles he has mastered:

Accused of not being black enough, he could show that he has more direct ties to Africa than most African-Americans have. Suspected of not being American enough, he appealed to his mother's Midwest origins and accent. Touring conservative little towns in southern Illinois, he could speak the language of the Kansan grandparents who raised him.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly not all communication is so self-regulating. Hit your finger by mistake when hammering a nail and the first sounds you utter are not likely to be intended for others. Nor are many of the thoughts that reach consciousness but for good reasons remain suppressed. But most of the communication that spills out from us encompasses the parts of our sentient life that we deem fit for display. Performance predicated on the idea of an audience is a governing force in our social lives. It makes us both dramatists and rhetorical agents. And it makes life in close proximity with others possible.

Its rich and descriptive methodology notwithstanding, the social sciences have mostly abandoned the dramatic frame as a dominant paradigm. It is now common to conceptualize self monitoring as an *internal* disposition more than an explicit response to specific audiences or the constraints of certain social settings.<sup>13</sup> We see this in Mark Snyder's influential work over the years, which has led to the development of paper-and-pencil inventories of

self-monitoring. His assumption is that self-monitoring is a disposition that can be studied as a trait rather than a dramatic and strategic process.

His original 24-item measure for children in “middle childhood” includes some of the following assertions, coded here in the direction of high self monitoring:

Even if I am not having a good time, I often act like I am. (Y)

When I am not sure how to act I watch others to see what to do. (Y)

I usually do what I want and not just what my friends think I should do. (N)

I like to know how my classmates expect me to act. (Y)

I can make people think I’m happy even if I’m not happy. (Y)

I can be nice to people I don’t like. (Y)<sup>14</sup>

With refinements of this and other similar inventories have come scores of correlational studies that have found that adult “high” self-monitors have many of the same traits. Counterintuitively, they seem to have less intimate romantic relationships and a greater interest in finding a conventionally attractive partner. They also have a predictable interest in careers that call upon presentation skills.<sup>15</sup> Inventories of personality-revealing attitudes found that “high” self-monitors also tended to score high on scales measuring extroversion and other-direction, leading to recurring criticisms that the concept itself is not a discrete trait.<sup>16</sup> But how could it be otherwise? These aspects of self are naturally complementary and equally useful as names for nuanced responses to real-world settings.

The deeper problem is the abandonment of *contextual analysis* in favor of noncontextual *inventories* of attitudes. In the current fashion of constructing personality from generic lists of attitudes about which a subject must agree or disagree, the variable nature of a person’s adaptive capacity is likely to be missed. Like all actors, we are by experience or disposition better suited to certain roles than to others—a condition these inventories are not likely to pick up. It is instructive that Goffman takes pains to point out that the word “person” derives from the Latin *persona*, or “mask.” The interchangeability of these terms is a reminder that it is in our nature to be rhetorical. The question isn’t really *if* we have the root impulse for context-dependent adaptation. Instead it is, as Goffman noted, *how well* an individual handles his or her “dramaturgical problems” in certain scenes.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, the setting as much as the person looms large as an indicator of success. This is why it seems perfectly reasonable to hear someone express their fear of giving a speech, even while they look forward to attending a party that includes many people they have never met. Both settings will require adaptation and the meeting of expectations. But there is no reason to assume a person’s comfort in one venue will necessarily extend to another.



A final challenge in the assessment of self-monitoring is a tendency by most researchers to see it in terms of strategic calculation based on self interest. For example, the leading researchers in this area note that “high-self monitors can be likened to consummate social pragmatists, willing and able to project images designed to impress others.”<sup>18</sup> They are often defined in terms of a Darwinian survival skill. We adapt as a way to “get ahead” or “become indispensable.” There is no shortage of professions—real estate and car sales, to cite just two—for whom a strategic insinuation of another’s norms is the defining marker of their communication.

In general terms, it is hard to fault the idea of ingratiation as an important engine of self-preservation. “To get along, you have to go along” is a familiar cultural bromide. But is the effort of “getting along” always done simply to secure some sort of personal advantage? Any descriptive account of adaptive monitoring needs to make room for behavior undertaken more *for the benefit of others* than oneself.

### SELF-MONITORING AS DEFENSE, AND OTHER-AFFIRMATION

We started this chapter by noting the low self-monitoring of the inconsiderate—a result that happens when one is able but not willing to care for the feelings of others. But consider a case that may also take us beyond the bad manners of insensitivity. A classical music concert comes with its own set of more or less prescribed rules. Cell phones should be off. The discussion of unresolved domestic disputes must be deferred. And feet should be on the floor. Potential miscreants need to abstain from talking, sleeping, checking for urgent missives on a cell phone, unwrapping candy, or anything else that would bring attention to themselves. Violation of these rules is all the more apparent in places with nearly perfect sightlines and acoustics. In Philadelphia’s acoustically lively Verizon Hall, even an unrestrained cough or sneeze can have the percussive force of a rim shot. And like so many new and similar concert halls, it is possible to double the possibilities for annoyance by doing any of these things while sitting in plain view *behind* the orchestra. Most of Verizon’s 2500 seats have perfect sight of not only the stage, but also the 250 concert goers seated near and slightly above the last row of the orchestra. First-time attendees taking their seats in this location are usually surprised to discover that they will be on display, and bathed in the same pool of light as the performers. Under such unwanted scrutiny, can an audience member respond to the need to scratch? Can he doze off? Worse yet, what if nature calls and requires a quick departure and the required ballet between the feet of neighboring seatmates?

This setting requires *defensive self-monitoring*. We routinely act in ways to avoid the stigma of unwanted attention. Most of the discussion in this book and many others that treat communication as an act of “self-presentation” speaks to the strong need to be *in* a scene without making a scene. The task of satisfying the expectations of others is so central to our understanding of the rules defined by social settings; it takes the flamboyant display of their neglect—from the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera* (1935) to *Mr. Bean’s Holiday* (2007)—to be reminded of the risks of social deviance. To be sure, we also need to pretend we are not slaves to the dictates of scene. The American composer Elliot Carter famously noted that he decided “for once to write a work very interesting to myself” and “to hell with the public and with the performers too.”<sup>19</sup> A bit rude, perhaps. But even such small acts of rebellion ultimately confirm our larger stake in finding ways to fit in.

Self-monitoring can also move beyond protection, especially when we sense that the needs of someone else need to take precedence over our own. If there is an aspect of altruism in our relations with others, this is perhaps one of its key manifestations. Self monitoring sometimes pays the courtesy of giving to others what we think they need from us. It takes the form of other-affirmation.

Consider the selfless difference implied in Richard Lewis’ description of meeting a Japanese University colleague while he was living in Japan. Lewis wanted to be a good guest in his new environment, so played his part to avoid embarrassing his host.

Three of us had invited Mr. Suzuki out to dinner and we arranged to meet him at eight o’clock in the Common Room Bar. Knowing he was rather formal, we had all put suits on. Entering the bar, we saw him at a distance in casual shirt and slacks. We quickly exited before he saw us and went back to our rooms to change into casual attire. We rushed back to the bar, where Mr Suzuki stood awaiting us in his best blue suit (he had caught a glimpse of us).<sup>20</sup>

Each ill-fated attempt in this exercise in cross-cultural adjustment was undertaken simply to make the other more comfortable. It is not so different from writer Mary Cantwell’s memory of suppressing her frustration with a crusty tour guide while on a visit to Turkey. Even with her mild displeasure at him, she also felt the need to show due consideration to the local resident in his world.

My escort from the Tourist Board, was a plump, curly-haired man in his thirties who called me “Mees Mary” and ended sentences with “et cetera, et cetera, et cetera,” like the king in *The King and I*. As oily and ingratiating as a seal, he was also anti-Semitic. “What can you expect? They’re Jews,” he said when the

noise from an adjoining table drowned our conversation. I bit my tongue, knowing that I of all people—the ex wife of a Jew, the mother of two half-Jewish children—should snap back at him. But courtesy, as always, made a coward of me, courtesy and the one habit, apart from liking to polish silver, that I inherited from my mother. We were too much given to making excuses for others, too willing to overlook the unspeakable.<sup>21</sup>

Both are instances of consideration. Their intent is primarily to preserve the comfort of others.

Compare them to Teddy's Roosevelt's familiar stance of resolute self-reference. Historian David McCullough writes that "Once, when the old family friend Louisa Schuyler asked how he 'felt the pulse' of the country, his response was: 'I don't know the way the people *do* feel. . . . I only know how they *ought* to feel.'"<sup>22</sup> The line between confidence and hard-shelled self-involvement is inexact. But it seems clear that Roosevelt's indifference is the reverse of communication as other-affirmation. The old Bull Moose was far more likely to give advice than receive it. Why didn't he care? Why wasn't he curious about what others thought? It is perhaps not accidental that we associate him with the idea of "the bully pulpit:" a platform literally and figuratively above others where one feels justified to issue Jeremiads to those who have lost their way.

### **"RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY" AND THE GENERATIVE SOURCES OF SELF MONITORING**

The rhetorical personality is by definition someone moved to verbal action by a problem or "situation." The response is characteristically appropriate to the circumstances. In its essence, it engages the audience in a way that acknowledges or enfranchises them. In his classic essay on the nature of the "rhetorical situation," Lloyd Bitzer notes that "discourse is rhetorical insofar as it functions (or seeks to function) as a fitting response to a situation which needs and invites it." An "exigency" arises. It is "a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be."<sup>23</sup> It invites a suitable answer. The rhetorician senses the confluence of events and the need for discourse as an appropriate intermediate or final solution.

Bitzer tended to focus on moments of great national peril: Winston Churchill's addresses to the beleaguered British during the Second World War, William Lloyd Garrison's impassioned pleas to end slavery in pre-civil war America, and so on. But we can extend this imperative out into many directions, including even the missed exigencies of an authoritarian Russian president.

In 2000, the nuclear submarine *Kursk* sank in shallow waters after an apparent explosion in one of its forward compartments. A quicker response from the Russian Navy and the president might have saved its crew of 118, but authorities initially suppressed news of the event.<sup>24</sup> President Putin was reluctant to return from a vacation to lead management of the crisis and comfort the sailors' families, leading to charges of indifference and callousness from the normally subdued population. The fury from the sailors' widows that his government faced when it finally owned up to its responsibilities was a national embarrassment. It was a lesson in failing to be at the right place at the right time, and of not understanding the perils of leading a nation learning to expect a certain degree of candor from its leaders.

The same dynamic of an answered need exists even in the microexigencies of everyday life—for example, in the reasonable expectation that a person will acknowledge the courtesy of another who has held open a door, or who has paused to assist another in collecting items from a broken shopping bag. The recipients of these acts of consideration are in their own ways as obliged to communicate acknowledgment of the situation as a president in the first few hours of a national disaster. Such is the universality of the requirement for a rhetorical response. To be rhetorical is to be aware and responsive to the shifting landscape of events and their witnesses.

Beginning in the 1970s, other rhetoricians began to extend this idea of rhetorical obligation by attempting to locate the varied dimensions of “rhetorical sensitivity” which could make “effective social interaction manifestly possible.”<sup>25</sup> Most notably, Rod Hart and his colleagues developed a massive correlational study of attitudes within individuals that might motivate them to weigh the effects of communication options on others. In their work, rhetorical sensitivity was essentially a synonym for the impulse to read the needs of others and monitor one's own rhetoric accordingly.<sup>26</sup>

The goal of the project was to develop an inventory of attitudes—known as the RHETSEN scale—to test the idea that “*rhetorical sensitivity* is a function of three forces: how one views the self during communication, how one views the other, and how willing one is to adapt self to the other.”<sup>27</sup> Worded where agreement affirms these forms of sensitivity, some of the items on the inventory included the following:

One should keep quiet rather than say something which will alienate others.  
It is best to hide one's true feelings in order to avoid hurting others.

When angry, a person should say nothing rather than say something he or she will be sorry for later.

The first thing that comes to mind is [not always] the best thing to say.

When talking to your friends, you should adjust your remarks to suit them.

A person who speaks his or her gut feelings is [not always] to be admired. We should have a kind word for the people we meet in life.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, such statements seem close to the mark as nearly perfect manifestations of self-monitoring.

Not unexpectedly, the *absence* of agreement with these statements defines a very different kind of impulse. Building on the earlier work of Donald Darnell and Wayne Brockriede,<sup>29</sup> the authors of the RHETSEN scale described the special case of situational *nonconformity*—or noncompliance with expected norms—using the term *the Noble Self*. Noble selves are persons who “see any variation from their personal norms as hypocritical, as a denial of integrity, as a cardinal sin.”<sup>30</sup> These individuals were seen as not especially interested in narrowing the separation between themselves and others, making them roughly equivalent to what we described earlier in Chapter 2 using Riesman’s idea of “inner direction.” In addition to disagreement with the above statements, additional RHETSEN statements were included to specially find markers of what is more or less the opposite of rhetorical sensitivity. In this case, agreement with a statement confirms the “loner” tendency.

Saying what you think is a sign of friendship.

When you’re sure you’re right, you should press your point until you win the argument.

It is better to speak your gut feelings than beat around the bush.

A friend who has bad breath should be told about it.<sup>31</sup>

Overall, the most helpful result in the detailed RHETSEN study is perhaps in its acknowledgement that there is much to prize in a person’s appreciation for the situational complexities of communication. The questionnaire items meant to flag rhetorical sensitivity make intuitive sense.<sup>32</sup> And they are helpful in helping to nail down a useful vocabulary of names for fluency. Yet, as we have seen, such inventories have their problems because the details that are nearly always essential to “reading” the appropriateness of a response are necessarily absent. Bitzer’s point is ours as well. The nature of the rhetorical situation is always in the details. He writes: “I want to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse: How should they be described? What are their characteristics? Why and how do they result in the creation of rhetoric?”<sup>33</sup> Behaviors reduced to scaled numbers on an inventory can only get us so far. The answers to these questions must finally take the student of self-monitoring into the realms of narrative or comprehensive case studies. They alone can deliver us to truths that remain obscured in the measurement of “catch all” attitudes.

## A UNIVERSAL IMPULSE WITH DIVERGENT NORMS

Our insistence on context raises intriguing questions about the variability of self-monitoring across cultures. How universal is this impulse? Even in the increasingly “flat” world of global trade and seamless international communication, are there still wide variations in adaptive blending? The short answer is that such monitoring is relatively stable from culture to culture, but to no one’s surprise cultural norms that trigger violated expectations vary widely. For example, Richard Lewis reminds business travelers that they will offend an Arab man by inquiring about the health of his wife, or crossing legs in a way that reveals the bottom of a shoe. In Malaysia, if a person needs to point to something, it is best done with a thumb rather than an index finger. And Scandinavians think it crude to ostentatiously display one’s possessions.<sup>34</sup> Cultural scripts are clearly different, but the expectation of adherence to their rules is not.

Over the years there have been many attempts to catalogue self-monitoring sensitivities in distinct societies. Most begin with the assumption that cultures can be initially classified as either individualistic or collectivistic, building on cultural histories that either emphasize the primacy of the individual or compliance with the norms of a community. Though most researchers admit to wide overlaps within societies, American and northern European cultures are thought to be more “individualistic,” meaning that persons in many settings will more comfortably stand out as unique or different, as one might see these days in the range of clothing worn by patrons at an upscale restaurant. By contrast, in collectivistic cultures such as Japan, China, or Korea, there is still greater emphasis on blending in.

The irony of this research is the counterintuitive conclusion that the most individualistic cultures produce *higher* levels of self monitoring.<sup>35</sup> One might initially think that pressures for conformity would show up in people who by cultural tradition do not want to stand out. But the higher levels found in the West—at least as judged by Snyder’s inventory mentioned earlier in this chapter—are predicted because “members of individualistic cultures are motivated to interpersonally communicate to achieve affection, pleasure, and inclusion more than members of collectivistic cultures.”<sup>36</sup> In short, in a culture of individualism you have to work harder to find pathways to validation or acceptance. A person will invest more energy in considering and adjusting to the norms of the groups to which they aspire. In one study, American respondents were more likely to express attitudes associated with higher levels of self-monitoring than their demographically similar counterparts in Japan and Korea.<sup>37</sup>

Even so, as some of these same researchers have also pointed out, comparing so broad an impulse as self monitoring using a uniquely American

instrument of measurement (a version of the Snyder Scale) undermines the findings. As William Gudykunst and his colleagues note, “Members of collectivist cultures *do* engage in a significant amount of self-monitoring, *but the self monitoring in which they engage is not tapped by Snyder’s measure.*”<sup>38</sup> Self-monitoring as purposely “controlled self presentation”<sup>39</sup> is specific to a culture’s unique situation, and to distinct habits of expression and deference.

A more detailed look at the Japanese suggests some of the challenges of doing cross-cultural comparisons. For example, a friend relates a story told to her by a Japanese couple who a few weeks earlier had dropped their son off at a university to begin his freshman year. The couple noted that when they arrived at the dormitory room that would be his home for the next two semesters, it was clear from the paraphernalia already in place that his roommate had arrived. Since he was not there at the time, the couple reported that they quickly got pen and paper out and copied down the names and models of the roommate’s electronic equipment including the television, computer, and music system. Then they went on a shopping trip to search for duplicates of these same items for their son’s side of the room. They laughed as they told the story, presumably because they were aware of how strange this might sound to my American friend. They were also aware that the roommate might indeed be puzzled by the unusual coincidence of duplicate dorm equipment. But this was their way of helping their son fit in, and—more revealing—a way to offer a compliment to the person who would be sharing his space with their son. If the American roommate might have wished to make a statement through the uniqueness of his own stuff, the Japanese family needed something else: a way to affirm their son’s place by paying the compliment of near perfect replication.

What is interesting about the example is that it contains within it *both* the supposed Asian norm of obeisance to a community, and at the same time an ostensibly more western idea of considered deference to another. In the language of cross-cultural studies, the “self construal” of interdependence that is common in Asian societies emphasizes the individual as an *extension* of a group.<sup>40</sup> So a gesture that duplicates what others think, do, or possess is a positive act of harmonization. By contrast, a self construal of independence focuses more on “one’s own repertoire of thoughts, feelings and actions, rather than reference to the actions of others.”<sup>41</sup> In the above example, these are truly blended.

Likewise, Japan at the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century is not the nation of even two decades ago. Contemporary observers notice a crisis of the traditionally tight family structure. And recent economic downturns have made a breadwinner’s employer less reliable as a marker of identity

than was the case even a few years ago.<sup>42</sup> Even so, the Confucian need for obeisance still seems to endure.

We mentioned the observations of the *Washington Post's* T. R. Reid in the previous chapter. He recalls (from when he was based in Tokyo) the striking contrast with the American vernacular that makes it more difficult to be out of sync with another.

I used to get up early enough some mornings to see the young woman on the bicycle bringing our morning paper; she would say to me, in a perfectly easy and natural tone, "Good morning, honorable customer! Thank you, thank you for your reading our humble paper in the midst of your busy schedule. Now please excuse my terrible rudeness, but I'm afraid I must move on to the next house." I would put the newspaper under my arm and stroll down the narrow streets of Subsection 3 to the subway station. While waiting on the platform for the train, I'd hear the greeting from the stationmaster over the PA system. I liked it so much, I wrote it down verbatim in my diary: "Thank you, honorable passengers, for taking time from your busy day to ride our humble train. The next train will be here shortly; we're terribly sorry to keep you waiting."<sup>43</sup>

Reid notes that a shop owner even apologized for the natural disaster of an earthquake, posting a hand scribbled sign expressing regret for the "terrible inconvenience" of the total collapse of their store.

*Wa*, or the seeking of outward forms of social harmony, tends to trump any effort to shift burdens of responsibility to others. Western-style scapegoating is less common in Asian societies than our own. We are still only too happy to shift to others responsibility for failures uncomfortably close to own efforts and choices. In 2000, for example, the Japanese presidents of separate car and tire companies apologized for their failed efforts to guarantee the safety of their products. In front of a Senate panel Masatoshi Ono, chairman of the tire maker Bridgestone/Firestone, said he took "full and personal" responsibility for tire-related accidents that had been linked to 88 fatalities.<sup>44</sup> Such is the tradition in Japan, with countless news clips showing executives on their knees in full contrition.

Rituals of courtesy have their own rhythms in any culture, and usually mean more in their predictability than the literal meaning of their combined words. Cross immediately in front of another person in the United States and you might say "Excuse me," intending something less than a full blown request for forgiveness, but still communicating a *mindfulness of the other*. These rituals make it possible to pass through the lives of others with an acknowledgement of their existence.

The related idea of "face," which is frequently associated with Chinese and Asian life, has important applications as a benchmark of high self-monitoring.



Building on Stella Ting-Toomey's definition as "an individual's claimed sense of positive image,"<sup>45</sup> observers note that it has applications well beyond Asian cultures. As John Oetzel and his colleagues note, every culture has some version of the face-saving ritual as a buffer to soften the tensions of conflict.<sup>46</sup> They note that "self face" involves the protection of one's own image, as when an individual is slow to admit an error. "Other face" is a concern for another's image, such as when we decide to not correct someone else's mistaken statement out of respect for their need to claim special expertise. "Mutual face" is the desire of all within a communication transaction to preserve the image of both parties in conflict.<sup>47</sup> Rhetorically, "face" may be preserved by the strategic use of silence, omission, euphemism, or explanation. Any news consumer is familiar with the elaborate euphemism ritual that accompanies decisions to separate high-status leaders from their organizations. The words "terminated" or "fired" are almost never used by the parties involved. Softer explanations that assuage responsibility are used instead. A cabinet officer or corporate CEO typically announces his or her decision to leave in order to "explore new opportunities" or "spend more time with his family." Such announcements usually note that the decision was "made jointly," with executive and other organizational spokespersons expressing respect for the goals and achievements of all concerned.

Less frequent in the West—but important in Japan—is concern for "other face," where the potential "winner" in a transaction monitors his or her words out of concern for the "loser's" loss of self-respect. This is, of course, the function of those ubiquitous expressions of regret cited earlier. In American terms, one may be on the losing end of an encounter by being denied a request. But that denial will be adorned beyond recognition in verbal flowers of deference.

The maintenance of "other face" in Japanese culture is also assisted by a language that structures thought in ways very different from the binaries of western language. Japanese phrases tend to buffer harsh judgments or decisions by rendering ideas in more circumspect rhetoric. For example, the idea of "no" hardly exists in the discourse of everyday life. To utter the negative is a block to another person's objective, and perhaps a risk to their right for dignified treatment. T. R. Reid, for example, recalls his efforts to purchase tickets for a performance in Tokyo. "I would like five tickets to tonight's concert," he asked the ticket agent in a booth adjoining an arena. But he was not going to get a "clear" answer. "Please excuse me, but that may be a little difficult," the agent responded. After several rounds of the same request were followed by an opaque evasion, Reid learned that the tickets he sought had been sold out for some time, but it "would have been unspeakably rude for the ticket lady to come right out and tell me that."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in business

negotiations, an American may ask for government assurances that certain markets will be open to American products. The answer is usually some form of the affirmative. But, as Reid notes, “that does not mean that money will be forthcoming or that government policies are about to change. What it actually means is that “we will give your request careful thought,” or “I will give your proposal positive consideration in the future.”<sup>49</sup> Such is the power of “face” in day-to-day negotiations that the only way some business leaders know if a deal has been made is if their Japanese negotiating partners show up for the next scheduled meeting.

The English language and Western individualism combine to make it easier to affirm or deny, or to isolate ideas and people in clear and distinct groups. It is an American rhetorical art to put one’s enemies in a distant camp of fools far removed from others.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, naming in vernacular English often acts like a scalpel that presumes to cut away truth from falsity, what we will and won’t do, and where we agree or disagree. Though rich and expressive, it is also a ruthless instrument of exclusion and blunt certitude. Against these blunt instruments, the grey ambiguities of real life hardly have a chance.

### SUMMING UP: FINDING THE COMFORT ZONE FOR ONESELF AND OTHERS

The idea of “face” is an additional dimension to what we described in Chapter 1 as the rhetorical personality’s relative comfort even when required to function in *discrepant roles*. Roles out of our normal comfort range challenge our ability to maintain a positive and often carefully managed image. The questions raised by any foray into the unfamiliar speak to the impulse for vigilant self-monitoring. *Can I be who I want others to believe I am if I take on this new role? Will I lose respect for doing this?* The higher the compulsion for defensive self-monitoring, the greater the chance to not be “caught out” in uncomfortable discrepancies.

In her memoirs, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recalls that it was ironically sometimes the Japanese who asked for more than the Americans were comfortable to give. She remembers that in formal meetings with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations it was not unusual for the her hosts to expect all national delegations—including their very cautious and dignified foreign ministers—to engage in the diplomatic equivalent of a businessman’s night of obligatory drinking in a local karaoke bar. Albright writes that the Japanese expected that every delegation would put on a skit during the last evening in a round of diplomatic talks. This would typically involve performing a song and dance routine featuring

each country's foreign minister in a prominent role. As she deadpans in her book, "American secretaries of state had been extremely reluctant participants. My initial reaction to the Asian tradition was 'They must be out of their minds.'"<sup>51</sup> One can only picture a solemn Dean Acheson or austere Warren Christopher taking their turns crooning the words of Pat Boone or the Bee Gees while others, including their Russian counterparts, looked on. So much for keeping one's carefully honed dignity intact. Apparently even the vaunted protectors of "face" and personal honor had their cultural blind spots.

But there is an unexpected twist to the story. In fact, several years later in Manila the Russians and Americans actually did team up in a skit about two competing gangs based on the film version of *West Side Story*. This unlikely routine featured a mock conflict between the "Russkies" and the "Yankees," with Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov in a too-tight sailor's uniform singing lyrics to the song "Maria." A coy Madeleine Albright completed the duet in the Natalie Wood role as the love struck ingénue.<sup>52</sup> As unlikely as it seems, Albright has pictures to prove it.

The juggernaut of cultural blending can force us to see sensitivities that otherwise may go unnoticed. But, as we have argued, the impulse to check one's own behavior against expectations of appropriateness—while variable—is characteristically human. Self-monitoring is what we do to make ourselves fit to be in the company of others. It can be an *act* of self-preservation, or a courtesy extended to others.

"Act" is exactly the right word. We perform moments of our social lives with an awareness of what is required to "manage" the impressions we give off. Persons who have a particular deftness for reading the requirements of settings may be called "rhetorically sensitive," "more courteous than rude," "other-face aware," responsive to "the rhetorical situation," or "rhetorical personalities." These labels all point to the same general capability of emphasizing behavior that confirms what we believe others expect. In all ways other than the defensive, they also reflect a willingness to make room in one's consciousness for more than the calculations of selfhood. Imagination for what others know or need, curiosity about them, and empathy for them all play a part.

To be sure, there are more questions about the constructed self that are not addressed here. What is the normative range of the responsive adaptivity of self-monitoring? What does it look like at the margins? How high a price must be paid for the stigma of rhetorical nonresponsiveness? Some answers are reserved for the next chapter, with a consideration of the nature of sociality and the consequential naming of its clinical "impairments" in the forms of Autism and the Williams Syndrome.

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50. The anonymous and often venomous comments radio pundits and respondents to online content provide examples of such dualistic thinking.

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## Chapter 5

# Autism, the Williams Syndrome, and the Rhetoric of Sociality

If you sense distance, you're not mistaken; it's real. Welcome to *my* world.<sup>1</sup>

—Donna Williams

As a child, I was like an animal that had no instincts to guide me; I just had to learn by trial and error. I was always observing, trying to work out the best way to behave, but I never fit in.<sup>2</sup>

—Temple Grandin

Cognitive psychologists sometimes use the phrase “theory of mind” to describe the acquired capability of individuals to infer—more or less—the mental states of others: their intentions, attitudes, concerns and beliefs. It’s a perfect phrase, suggesting both the impulse to estimate a person’s feelings at a given time and the idea that those inferences will be used to predict how the person will respond to words enacted in their presence. Because it captures such a central element of social awareness, other fields have their own versions of this impulse to “read” another. Communication theorists sometimes interpret the probable effects of one source on an audience in terms of a related concept known as “attribution theory.” The theory posits that communication will be processed by a receiver with a calculation of the likely intentions of the source.<sup>3</sup> A mix of knowledge about the communicator and the nature of his or her immediate circumstances contribute to a sorting out of probable motives. This is also what psychologist Daniel Goleman seems to mean when he uses the word “mindset.” He sees it as the ability to peer “into the mind of a person to sense their feelings and deduce their



thoughts.”<sup>4</sup> There is even a parallel in the literary theory of Kenneth Burke, who notes that inferences about intentions lie at the core of the “dramatic” impulse to understand the world through narrative. Action without motivation is mere movement, he points out. And while movement is good enough for billiard balls or falling snow, neither can be said to have an intention. By contrast, humans “act” for reasons.<sup>5</sup> However we name them, any description of communication as a process of social connection must always take into account motives implied in the words and actions of others. We use these estimates of intention to give coherence to narratives. For our purposes it matters little whether they are accurately assigned—even assuming that we could ever fully know—but it matters a great deal that we seem hardwired to search them out.

Robert Pirsig’s ever-popular travel memoir back into the landscape of his past provides a representative case. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, he and his 11-year-old son have been crossing the country on an aging Henderson. It’s a long excursion that gives the introspective Pirsig a chance to sort out their unsettled relationship. Chris is distant and hard to reach. Is it his age and a phase he is going through? Or is his son showing the same mental instabilities that afflicted the author? These themes play out in a soliloquy that gives theory of mind a specific form as well as a suggestion of its limits:

I wish I knew what to say to him. Or what to ask. He seems so close at times, and yet the closeness has nothing to do with what is asked or said. Then at other times he seems very far away and sort of watching me from some vantage point I don’t see. And then sometimes he’s just childish and there’s no relation at all. Sometimes, when thinking about this, I thought that the idea that one person’s mind is accessible to another’s is just a conversational illusion, just a figure of speech, an assumption that makes some kind of exchange between basically alien creatures seem plausible, and that really the relationship of one person to another is ultimately unknowable. The effort of fathoming what is in another’s mind creates a distortion of what is seen. I’m trying, I suppose, for some situation in which whatever it is emerges undistorted.<sup>6</sup>

We can easily recognize the doubt. Some people seem opaque and unknowable except on the most superficial terms.

Burke noted that the unquenchable search for motive makes us all critics and interpreters.<sup>7</sup> The very idea of an “accident” is an affront to the narrative formulas that shape our cognitive life. Even what is ostensibly a *natural* disaster like Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is framed in the actions of the *human* agents who responded (or didn’t) when the Louisiana Gulf Coast disappeared under water. What might have once been interpreted as “an act of God” was turned into an object lesson about presidential dithering.

The compulsive search for assumed mental states is so embedded in all forms of interaction that we can all tell stories of our own miscues. Mine involves a brief and failed attempt as a high school actor. In the small mountain community where I grew up, the senior class needed pretty much everybody for its annual play. Our director chose *Harvey*, a leaden attempt at whimsy by Mary Chase about a man who befriends a human-sized rabbit. I was not good enough to have the lead. And though my limited acting talents might have led a more perverse director to suggest that I play the rodent who exists only in Elwood P. Dowd's imagination, I was given the smaller and unfortunately visible role of Dr. Chumley. My job was pretty much just to get on and off stage without incident, after reciting lines that would help my more able classmates lurch toward the third act denouement.

But even this task offered challenges, if also a crystal-clear demonstration of the compulsion to "read" intention. The problem was that I found it difficult to remain still while others said their lines. Even in my late teens I had the restlessness of an eight-year-old that worked against the orderly "blocking" of the play. In the theater, actors must be at particular stage locations at specific points in the action. For example, "say your line and then sit down," might be a perfectly reasonable blocking suggestion from a director. It makes perfect sense because action naturally punctuates dialogue. But what can a director do with a hapless actor who moves with seeming randomness while *others* are passing on key pieces of information or unburdening their feelings to each other? Random roaming was a habit I hardly noticed in myself, even while it sent our director into uncharacteristic despair.

"Gary, you can't move while others are saying their lines."

"Why not?" I replied.

(This patient woman tried to not notice that she had been challenged for saying the obvious).

*"You are upstaging them. And we want the audience's attention on their dialogue, not on somebody who is aimlessly moving in the background. If you move around, people will wonder why."*

But, of course. The light went on—at least dimly. "People will wonder why" is another way of saying that action *is* intention. It's not only a cornerstone of good dramaturgy, but for all the theater of human relationships as well.

Our interest here is the nature of sociality from the perspective of those challenged by this key norm. So broad a goal could deliver us to many settings, but our choice is to take a nonclinical look at conditions defined by neurologists and mental health clinicians mostly in terms of "social deficits."

Descriptions of people afflicted with what are broadly described as “pervasive development disorders” often include words like “nonempathetic,” “inappropriate,” or “remote” to dramatize behaviors that suggest impairment. In short, those so labeled seem to struggle to connect in social settings because they may lack sufficient “theory of mind.”

But let us pause for a minute, because psychiatric paradigms for assessing communication competence offer their own challenges, notwithstanding the sometimes impressive advances in understanding the mechanics of cognition.<sup>8</sup> The key problem is that we label behavior deemed out of the norm with more certitude than accuracy. The wide variability of human activity does not easily submit to rigid labels. Because health care in the United States remains more a business than a service, we trade in these categories as if they had a fixed and universal rate of exchange. Diagnostic names are the necessary passwords if healthcare providers want to get insurance company reimbursements. The arbiters of value include the newest editions of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), with categories validated by professionals and insurers who require a common lexicon of diagnoses.<sup>9</sup>

To cite just one example, the number of American children diagnosed with ADHD—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—became a virtual epidemic in the early 1990s, with an astounding 700 percent increase in prescriptions to active children for the powerful psychotropic drug Ritalin.<sup>10</sup> More than a few observers noted that what had changed in that short period was less a pandemic of juvenile hyperactivity than the visibility of a named diagnosis in the DSM.<sup>11</sup> A behavior *pattern* had been turned into a clinical *condition*, essentially medicalized for schools and parents who were sometimes all too ready to live with more subdued children.

Our specific concern for most of the remainder of this chapter is for a related but broader clinical assessment of behavioral deviance first identified in 1944 by the Viennese physician Hans Asperger. The syndrome that carries his name is now characterized as a lesser form of autism that can still allow for “high functioning” adults. Those diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) seem to struggle to “read” and react appropriately to others. Notwithstanding the problem of overdeterministic labeling and diagnosis, clinical diagnoses of “unconventional” behavior such as that found in AS have certain advantages in probing the nature of sociality. From our perspective it is only of secondary interest if such mental health conditions are thought to be genetic, developmental, or environmental. Our questions are intended to focus on communication traits revealed through differences. For example, what does the Asperger’s-autism spectrum tell us about learned or instinctive sources of social connection? Do they have their own rhetorical signatures

and characteristic responses? And how do individuals so labeled cope with the fundamental imperative to “read” social settings in order to find “appropriate responses?” We will also consider whether the communication styles of AS children and adults might actually represent a kind of expressive purity that is perhaps sacrificed in “normal” other-focused exchanges of everyday life.

The chapter closes with a brief look at an intriguing and contrasting diagnosis. Among the features associated with the very different Williams Syndrome is a surprising affability. In many ways it offers a reverse image of communication patterns common to autism. It is a neurological difference that endows many of those who carry its traits with a kind of hardwired extroversion. This rare condition also raises related questions about what these children and adults can tell us about our more cautious selves.

### **ASPERGER'S SYNDROME AND THE CHALLENGES OF “READING” THE OTHER**

Clinicians classify AS as the milder end of a range of “autism spectrum disorders” represented mostly by “impaired” social interactions.<sup>12</sup> By some estimates, 1 in 150 children show some symptoms of autism, with attributes in the AS range that include the following:

- Lack of empathy
- Naïve, inappropriate, one-sided interaction
- Little ability to form and sustain friendships
- Pedantic, repetitive speech
- Poor nonverbal communication
- Intense interest in certain subjects
- Clumsy and ill-coordinated movements and odd posture<sup>13</sup>

These features are more evident in boys more than girls. But no two cases seem to be exactly the same.<sup>14</sup> Children diagnosed with “moderate” levels of autism are typically less willing to seek out others, including playmates, potential friends, and even some family members. Most will still form significant bonds with parents and others who are regularly a part of their lives. But even higher-functioning AS children stand out from their age peers in their relative disinclination to affiliate with others. They often do not initiate the kinds of everyday interactions we recognize in young school age children who have begun to move beyond relatively isolating patterns of “parallel” play toward more integrative interaction. And they will often struggle to identify any other child as a friend or a person they like to be around.

The challenges of relating to another are on display in Barry Levinson's still popular film, *Rain Man* (1988), perhaps still the most public representation of autism. Actor Tom Cruise's Charlie Babbitt provides the perfect set up for a sentimental story about the bonding of two brothers. He is a luxury car importer with interests that barely extend beyond the shaky finances that keep his business afloat. The fun of the film comes from watching the self-involved Charlie try to breach the wall of literalness put up by Dustin Hoffman's autistic Raymond. Raymond's reference points for life are stable and fixed, dominated by a schedule of mealtimes, television shows, and mantras repeated in moments of duress. He lacks the spark for interpersonal intimacy that would put his substantial intellect to work on the project of finding significance in another person's life. And like some with autism, he does not like to be touched or embraced. Even his eyes are averted from those talking to him. Their cross-country car trip from Cincinnati to Los Angeles—Raymond won't fly—forces Charlie to come to terms with these limitations.

The film has its awkward moments. Viewers may accept Hoffman's inward-looking Raymond, or they may not. But there are times when the dialogue effectively captures the asymmetric rhythms and unacknowledged feelings of a person still in an autistic shell. Charlie's time with Raymond represents an aspiration Levinson wants to represent as nearly universal: the emotional arcadia of entering the unpredictable geography of another's cognitive life. Although by the end of the film Raymond will return to the group home still repeating the phrases and limited routines in his life, the once-callow Charlie has been transformed. Shallow he may be, but he has the resources of feeling to understand and accept his brother's needs.

While some neuroscientists see what they consider to be unusual patterns of brain activity in autistic people,<sup>15</sup> the causes and symptoms are not always accepted as representing a distinct mental "deficit." There are no definitive indications that "deletions" of genetic material causes autism.<sup>16</sup> And evidence in favor of possible environmental causes is mixed.<sup>17</sup> This murky etymology, along with the wide spectrum of behavioral effects, has led some to question whether the milder form is really a separate condition. As Harvey Molloy and Latika Vasil conclude, "we question whether AS constitutes an actual impairment as opposed to a neurological difference."<sup>18</sup>

Those favoring the view of a "difference" over "deficit" might feel vindicated in examining the work of Temple Grandin, the well-known Professor of Animal Sciences at Colorado State University who is also a successful consultant and a popular interpreter of AS from the vantage point of her own social limitations. Almost half of all the livestock-holding facilities around the country have been designed by Grandin, who professes a special affinity for cattle. But she is best known through her self-aware books and lectures,

most of which serve as a reminder that while autistic children and adults think differently and sometimes adapt poorly, the label of “disability” is still a social construction of limited value.

Grandin has provided numerous accounts of her life isolated at the margins of acceptance in school and through early adulthood.<sup>19</sup> Slow to acquire language and any interest in others as a child, she was predictably teased and often ignored by her classmates. They seemed to be complete strangers to her: impossible to predict and difficult to understand. She therefore took special pleasure in isolating activities—for example, drawing or daydreaming—that could be repeated again and again with the same level of pleasure. She writes:

As a child, I found picking up social cues impossible. When my parents were thinking about getting divorced, my sister felt the tension, but I felt nothing, because the signs were subtle. My parents never had big fights in front of us. The signs of emotional friction were stressful to my sister, but I didn’t even see them. Since my parents were not showing obvious, overt anger toward each other, I just did not comprehend.<sup>20</sup>

The challenges continued in her professional work. Over time she acquired the skill to act the scene that was required: to assume feelings or attitudes that a given social setting might demand. But she notes that offering the appropriate response was akin to learning the lines of a play. Her empathy towards others was more constructed than intuited. Not surprisingly, perhaps, she found refuge in the telephone, which limits the feedback she must receive or give.

I have to learn by trial and error what certain gestures and facial expressions mean. When I started my career, I often made initial contacts on the telephone, which was easier because I did not have to deal with complex social signals. This helped me get my foot through the front door. After the initial call, I would send the client a project proposal and a brochure showing pictures of previous jobs. The call enabled me to show my qualifications without showing my nerdy self—until I was hired to design the project. I was also good at selling advertising for the Arizona Cattle Feeders’ Association annual magazine on the telephone. I just called up a big company and asked for its advertising department. I had no fear of anyone’s rank or social position. Other people with autism have also found that becoming friends with somebody on the phone is easier than building a face-to-face relationship, because there are fewer social cues to deal with.<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, while she notes that she still cannot “read” others well, she is still self-aware. She can see herself in a social space, even while she finds the motivations and feelings of others a mystery. “Using my visualization ability,” she writes, “I observe myself from a distance. I call this my little scientist in the corner, as if I’m a little bird watching my own behavior from up high.”<sup>22</sup>

Physician and writer Oliver Sacks took the title of his 1995 book about people with unusual mental capabilities from Grandin, noting that she could have spoken for many in feeling that she was sometimes as socially isolated as “an anthropologist on Mars.”<sup>23</sup> In an extended visit with her over several days he came to admire her successes as an animal science researcher, but he also witnessed the challenges faced by even high-functioning AS individuals. He recalls that their first meeting confirmed the challenges she faced performing even the small courtesies that acquaintances and friends would expect. There was no acknowledgement from her that he had made a special effort, even after a long plane flight to Denver and the additional effort to drive north to Fort Collins to meet her. “She sat me down with little ceremony, no preliminaries, no social niceties, no small talk about my trip or how I liked Colorado.” And yet in the next few days she would freely answer his questions and give him a tour of her life, showing total candor in identifying the scope of her own cognitive and interpersonal limitations. Perhaps because she had become a regular on the lecture circuit and had worked out her views, she had a clear sense of her deficits and strengths. “Temple told me she has been able to enjoy spending time with two or three friends.” Sacks recalled. “But achieving genuine friendship, appreciating other people for their otherness, for their own minds, may be the most difficult of all achievements for an autistic person.”<sup>24</sup>

He asked her what it is that goes on between normal people from which she feels herself excluded. She didn’t hesitate.

It has to do, she inferred, with an implicit knowledge of social conventions and codes, of cultural presuppositions of every sort. This implicit knowledge, which every normal person accumulated and generates through life on the basis of experience and encounters with others, Temple seems to be largely devoid of. Lacking it, she has instead to “compute” others’ intentions and states of mind, to try to make algorithmic, explicit, what for the rest of us is second nature. She herself, she infers, may never have had the normal social experiences from which a normal social knowledge is constructed.<sup>25</sup>

Generally speaking, Grandin’s conversational rhetoric fits the general pattern for AS individuals: stating assertions more than asking questions, giving preference to the mechanical and logical over the poetic, and thinking with a kind of fixity of thought that suggests declamations rather than dialogues. She analogizes the patterns of her perceptions in terms of machines such as tape recorders and computers. Not surprisingly, Grandin notes that she identifies with *Star Trek’s* “Data,” the coolly analytical and humanlike robot.<sup>26</sup> So when she is asked by a puzzled questioner to amplify or develop an idea, rather than taking an approach that would take in to account the perceived interests or circumstances of the questioner, she tends to fall back on the

same instrumental language and detail of the first attempt. A second pass at the same question tends to get the same response, a sign that the ability to conceptualize what another interlocutor needs can be in short supply.

Autism is also associated with a rhetoric of stipulated meanings largely devoid of open-ended subtexts. Meaning is literal rather than figurative. The use of irony, metaphor, and the more slippery associations that go with expressions of feelings are less common, though not necessarily beyond an autistic's communication range. As Grandin notes, she thinks in pictures. And text that allows an easy visual conversion makes more sense than words laced together into an abstract thought. For example, growing up and attending church with her family, she recalls that the "Amen" at the conclusion of a prayer was always a linguistic puzzle. Thinking literally about "a man at the end made no sense." But it *was* possible to see the prayer's scowling God, a kind of uber-Moses with lightning bolt in hand and all the rest.<sup>27</sup>

What does it mean to have a diminished capacity to "read" and react to the feelings of others? Setting aside our doubts for a moment about the pitfalls of diagnostic language, the most immediate effect is to weaken the capacity for empathy that allows one person to step into another's world. Autism spectrum disorders tend to reduce the chances of sharing the highs and lows of someone's emotional life: the life-changing possibility of moving beyond oneself to see in others the basis of one's own transformation. It is potentially a huge deficit, because empathy makes the existential self possible. Our thoughts may be ours alone. But we can break free of the island of the self by finding confirmations of feelings in our networks of associations. We grow and change and risk by crossing over the parallel lines that mark out the space of our own life path. Empathy lets us verge into the lives of others. In this process we identify with others, building on the associations and emotional connections that come from our social past. Against the inevitable eccentricities of self, empathy allows us—in John Durham Peters's apt phrase—to bear ourselves in such a way that we are "open to hearing the other's otherness."<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, the communication settings that consume so much of the emotional energy of many—music, contact with children, time with friends and colleagues, intimate relationships—mean less to Grandin.<sup>29</sup>

## OBLIVIOUS TO THE DANCE OF MUTUAL PRETENSE

Traits usually associated with autism—a focus on the interior self, the inability to act on the expressive communication of others—are a reminder of the high threshold that exists for people who yearn to engage with others. This book means to celebrate the reverse: the rhetorical attributes of individuals



who are particularly good at the adaptive and other-centered processes of social intercourse. Even so, to encounter another adult without guile—someone freed from the subterfuges and fake assurances of like-mindedness—is to sometimes experience a refreshing form of directness. We noted in the last chapter that our rhetoric typically functions like a mirror, partly reflecting back what we think others need. But mirrors can beget more mirrors until there is what appears to be a virtual funhouse of otherworldly pretense. We may sometimes wonder if there is an authentic person anywhere near all the scattered refractions. The play of mutual deceits in what passes for civility is what Oscar Wilde seemed to have in mind in his most famous comedy of deceptions. One of his droll Victorians puts others on notice that it is “painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind.”<sup>30</sup>

Autism produces what is perhaps the reverse image of the artfully constructed persona. Its paradoxical combination of unadorned directness and insularity serves as a reminder of how much our layered and calculated interactions depend on reciprocated pretense. If the conventional wisdom has it that great thinkers and writers strive for truths that others have missed, the rest of us engaged in the negotiated interactions of everyday life are mostly in the business of speaking in amendments. Our social rhetoric reflects judgments held in reserve and shaped for easy acceptance.

Again, Pirsig offers a small but representative case. He spent part of his career as a writer and editor of technical manuals, to the skepticism of his former university colleagues. He remembers that at a summertime reunion with one of them—an artist—he is shown a set of instructions for assembling an outdoor barbecue. The guide for assembly of its metal parts has left his host perplexed and frustrated: feelings he senses he is supposed to confirm.

He’s spent a whole afternoon trying to get the thing together and he wants to see these instructions totally damned. But as I read them they look like ordinary instructions to me and I’m at a loss to find anything wrong with them. *I don’t want to say this, of course, so I hunt hard for something to pick on.*<sup>31</sup>

Pirsig finally does the expected. He stays close to the script of the courteous guest and struggles to find fault. He’s learned the social benefits of easy agreement, and can read the map of expectations to be followed. We “know,” but frequently hold back conclusions that might offend. We sometimes work to express interest in what bores us, or accept without protest the more alien first principles of others. All of these equivocations are perhaps as they should be. And I can’t imagine living any other way. But at what price?

In her groundbreaking meditation on the nature of autism, Uta Frith notes that Hans Asperger used the term “autistic intelligence” to suggest positive attributes of mind that can come from unconventional learning and an absence of cunning.<sup>32</sup> Her examples include people or fictional characters who are accomplished, but not very good at everyday forms of communication. Among her examples is the obsessive Pin-Ball wizard from the rock opera *Tommy* and Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. The famous sleuth had no interest in the details of conventional small talk, but took special interest in all aspects of just *one* thing, such as his “little monograph on the ashes of 140 different varieties of pipe, cigar and cigarette tobacco.”<sup>33</sup> And, of course, there are the rare savants like Dustin Hoffman’s Raymond, who is invited by the management to leave a Las Vegas casino after proving to be a little too good at counting cards.

In all of these cases, as in Grandin’s remarkable life story, there is a trenchant intent to live in the world as it is found, rather than as we want it to be. Communication minus the rhetorical strategizing, minus the suppression of the truth in the name of graciousness, can end up as something that keeps a listener—in a manner of speaking—close to the ground. These are clearly not the traits of the rhetorical personality. But facts and perceptions *unfiltered* though an intersubjective screen have their own veracity. One is not likely to be spared the hard truth by persons with AS. They sometimes seem better equipped to express what they want and need from life. Grandin told Sacks that “There are no files in my memory that are repressed.” None are “so painful that they’re blocked. There are no secrets, no locked doors—nothing is hidden.”<sup>34</sup> As one would predict, Sacks—the student of the mind—had his doubts. After all, the psychological profession without the idea of repression is hardly conceivable, like owning a car without wheels. But he did concede that Grandin was refreshingly clear about her fears and needs, and generally unconcerned about how her disclosive communications would be judged. He recalls one of their last conversations, when she spoke through tears about finding significance in her life:

I’ve read that libraries are where immortality lies. . . . I don’t want my thoughts to die with me. . . . I want to have done something. . . . I’m not interested in power, or piles of money. I want to leave something behind. I want to make a positive contribution—know that my life has meaning. Right now I’m talking about things at the very core of my existence.<sup>35</sup>

Sacks was “stunned” by her passion. After all, adults with her condition were supposedly unable to mine such deep feelings and bring them to the surface. He responded as perhaps only an empathetic listener would. He gave her a hug—but of course only after getting her permission.

## THE WILLIAMS SYNDROME: PRIMED FOR SOCIABILITY

In recent years researchers and journalists alike have been captivated by the unusually friendly children they have met who share a condition defined by the omission of a dozen or more genes in the location of Chromosome 7. Carriers of the Williams Syndrome are identified by both their affability and the well-understood “microdeletion” of key “patterning genes” that control embryonic development. Study of this condition has created its own trajectory of neurological research. But our concern here is what science journalist David Dobbs calls the “exuberant gregariousness” and “infectious affability” of children and adults who exhibit typical Williams traits.<sup>36</sup> If, as recent research suggests, this DNA anomaly has allowed the social part of the brain to prosper and dominate over the analytical, how does this translate into what we mean about sociality and our comfort even with strangers?

Usually, narratives about children with genetic or neurological “defects” tend to carry familiar refrains of adversity and loss. But Dobbs tells a somewhat different story typified by two boys in their late teens with the Williams Syndrome. It is a narrative that explains the thrall this syndrome has on researchers and laymen alike.

Their mother recalls answering the door and finding a motorcycle rider (a complete stranger), bike parked at the front curb, asking for her sons. As she must have known, people are never strangers for long around Williams children.

The boys had made the biker’s acquaintance via C.B. radio and invited him to come by, but they forgot to tell Mom. The biker visited for a spell. Fascinated with how the twins talked about their condition, the biker asked them to speak at his motorcycle club’s next meeting. They did. They told the group of the genetic accident underlying Williams, the heart and vascular problems that eventually kill many who have it, their intense enjoyment of talk, music and story, their frustration in trying to make friends, the slights and cruelties they suffered growing up, their difficulty understanding the world. When they finished, most of the bikers were in tears.<sup>37</sup>

A researcher at the Salk Institute in La Jolla who happens to be deaf tells a similar story of this unusual “hypersociability.” Working with Ursula Bellugi—who pioneered early studies of young Williams subjects—she recalls the contrast between Williams kids and the deaf youngsters she usually works with. The children who could not hear were naturally reticent, coming up to touch items on her desk, but leaving without communicating, even through signs. In contrast, most of the Williams kids thrived on contact.

[They] typically come right up close to me, look me in the face, smile broadly at me, and talk to me even though I sign to them that I can't hear or speak. They seem to be fascinated, continuing to smile and talk to me, all the time looking right into my face while they try to imitate my signs.<sup>38</sup>

Varied catalogues of traits are associated with the syndrome. Some are unique, such as an acute sense of hearing and easy facility in playing and responding to music.<sup>39</sup> Others carry more serious risks of medical or social/adaptive problems. These include decreased height and slightly elongated faces, dental problems, difficulties related to heart and vascular development, and challenges in processing abstract ideas.

Neurologists note that the front and bottom portions of the brain responsible for language and the social drive seem far better developed in these individuals than segments at the top and back, which tend to do more of the work of processing spatial and abstract information.<sup>40</sup> These conditions carry special and sometimes worrisome responsibilities for the parents of these children who, in Dobbs's perfect phrase, "know no strangers but can claim few friends."<sup>41</sup> But most observers are charmed by the Williams child's sheer aptitude for sociability: their affability and comfort with strangers, their consideration of the feelings of their interlocutors, and their impulse to thrive in the simple activity of everyday conversation.

Adjectives used by many parents suggest an absence of the social inhibitions likely to be found in "normal" children. Williams kids are described as unusually kind, friendly, charming, sensitive, caring, and joyful.<sup>42</sup> In some ways their friendliness more closely resembles the insistent congeniality of a seasoned politician than a typical American adolescent. "He will go right up to a stranger," notes a parent, "get eye contact, and say 'hi' again and again until that person says 'hi' back." Another observes that her daughter is always "very happy to meet [a stranger.] And she "asks many questions about them, their family, pets, language, nationality and number of children."<sup>43</sup> As one teacher noted after spending a year with a young man in her classroom, he "has the best personality of any kid—'special' or 'normal' that I have ever met."<sup>44</sup>

The forms of these conversational gambits vary from person to person. But most higher-functioning children and adults exhibit the kind of icebreaking conversational skills that introverts would envy. Again, parents offer samples of what they hear when their child has wandered into a group of strangers:

"What's your favorite singer?"

"Where were you born?"

“How long have you lived in California?”

“Are you married?”

“I have a dog. Do you have a dog?”<sup>45</sup>

Stories of such unexpected gregariousness are almost always a part of the literature on Williams. Ever the thoughtful tourist of different patterns of thinking, Sacks recalls waiting in his hotel room for a visit from a Williams child and her family, only to discover that his young charge had disappeared into a wedding reception just off the lobby. Intent on joining the celebration, she surprised everyone by congratulating the mother of the bride on what she assumed was *her* nuptials.<sup>46</sup>

Adults with Williams seem to retain many of the same features. Howard Lenhoff notes that his adult daughter Gloria can’t make change, or walk across the street alone, but she “could charm a *Los Angeles Times* reporter with girl talk.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Gloria Lenhoff remains the center of a great deal of attention as an exemplar of the usual gifts and deficits of Williams subjects. In Arlene Alda’s 1988 Documentary *Bravo Gloria*, we see her pursue a singing career and mastering the foreign language librettos of many classical operas. At the same time she struggles to make sense of even the simplest of abstract ideas. It was only after the documentary aired on PBS that Lenhoff learned about Williams Syndrome at a meeting with other parents of children with special needs. The traits of early childhood that the Williams parents recalled were all too familiar to Lenhoff:

Miserable babies. Slow to walk, Slow to talk. Prone to heart troubles, digestion troubles, sight troubles, teeth troubles. . . . Great sensitivity to others’ feelings. Has a good memory for birthdays and obscure trivia. Poor problem-solving skills. Never forgets a face. Fascinated by foreign languages. Can’t draw or do math. . . .

He recalls that “it was as if Gloria’s life was being recited by complete and total strangers.”<sup>48</sup>

The easy facility with language is the central paradox of Williams, since it also produces individuals with relatively low IQ scores. We expect linguistic skill and the drive to affiliate with others to be key indicators of intelligence. The mismatch here is perhaps both an indicator of the risks of viewing any supposed “deficit” too deterministically, and a reminder that intelligence is—at best—a measure of dubious value. Consider, for example, the results of an invitation to a Williams teen to interpret pictures of a boy and his dog looking at a frog. Ursula Bellugi notes that most young children give brief and truncated responses, far different than the detailed and rich story this particular teen improvised:

Once upon a time when it was dark at night the boy had a frog. The boy was looking at the frog, sitting on the chair, on the table, and the dog was looking through, looking up to the frog in the jar. That night he slept and slept for a long time, the dog did. But the frog was not gonna go to sleep. The frog when out from the jar. And when the frog went out, the boy and the dog were still sleeping. Next morning it was beautiful in the morning. It was bright, and the sun was nice and warm. Then suddenly when he opened his eyes, he looked at the jar and then suddenly the frog was not there. The jar was empty. There was no frog to be found.<sup>49</sup>

This boy's IQ was listed as 50, but the richness of the storytelling—with its scene setting and detail—suggests a much greater level of social intelligence.

Revealingly, as we noted earlier, the averted gaze is a common pattern in *autistic* children and adults. It can be hard to make or hold eye contact with them. We typically take this cue as representative of the social distance they wish to maintain from others. But eye contact between a Williams child and even a complete stranger is nearly total. These children seem to be looking in to the faces of others for acknowledgment, more or less the opposite of the many others who walk through our lives lost in their own internal thoughts and preoccupations.

Other distinctions between autism and Williams offer stark contrasts. Williams children and adults are greeters. They notice people and seek them out. They are also curious, and often thrive on questions and information to those they have engaged in conversation. New information leads to more questions as the cycle of give and take repeats itself, sometimes beyond what outsiders to the condition might find useful. None of these high-order traits of sociality would typically be associated with even mild autism, even though autistic people tend to score higher on conventional intelligence tests.

The same is true regarding the critical capacity to “read” the feelings of others. Williams subjects excel in the display of empathy. As Eleanor Semel and Sue Rosner point out in their own meta-analysis of Williams research, acquaintances close to people with the syndrome “are often amazed by their incredible sensitivity and compassion for the mood, feeling, and concern of others. . . . Sometimes, they seem almost psychic with their uncanny knowledge and responsiveness to the feelings and circumstances of others.” As one sibling notes, “She is always so sympathetic [and] knows when to give a great big hug or great big kiss.”<sup>50</sup> More surprising, perhaps, is that they are also reasonably good at inferring what others are thinking: a conclusion that came as a surprise to Semel and Rosner, who were prepared to confirm known challenges in abstract thinking that Williams children and adults typically face. They thought the inability to think abstractly would defeat their capacities to

make accurate inferences. An important clue was in the words children with this genetic difference chose. The other-centeredness of true dialogic communication was often on display in their subjects, with frequent references to words like “thinking,” “understanding,” “believing,” and “wishing.”<sup>51</sup> All are terms of inference about what is going on in another person.

Ironically, for many people who work with Williams children, the greater challenge is a fear that they are “overfriendly:”<sup>52</sup> the very trait that we have praised in others elsewhere in this study. Researchers caution that many are all too willing to engage strangers, initiate conversations, and generally override the social inhibitions that are common in the general population. Indeed, adolescents “are significantly more likely to say they would be willing to approach and strike up a conversation with an unfamiliar individual” than “normal” persons in comparable control groups.<sup>53</sup>

Such research on “overfriendliness” and all of its corollaries—“no fear of strangers,” “overaffectionate,” “inappropriately happy or elated,” “socially disinhibited”<sup>54</sup>—is perhaps an inadvertent reminder of our own bias for a certain degree of introversion in the presence of relative strangers. The language of the researchers here betrays a presupposition against presenting a “face” of complete comfort and familiarity to those we do not know. But short of the obvious need for the safety of children in a world that is not always benign, where does one draw the line against social “disinhibition?” And can one really be “inappropriately happy?” Williams individuals force us to confront our sometimes more dour, suspicious, and constrained selves. Their apparently hardwired presumption of approachability allows us to see the communicative distance that now passes as a norm of everyday life.

### **SUMMING UP: THE VARIEGATED NATURE OF REACHING OTHERS**

What do challenges posed by cognitive or neurological differences tell us about the nature of sociality? Broad generalizations are risky, but—from a mostly rhetorical perspective—several conclusions seem justified. First, as we have medicalized differences into “deficits,” we have also perhaps inadvertently defined away the natural variability of cognitive talents. It is worth noting that autism’s isolation and Asperger’s social awkwardness are relatively new disorders. One reason for their relatively recent “discovery” is surely better research into the nature of communication reticence. But there is also now a broader mandate to take a melioristic approach to anomalies of inhibited interaction. Eccentricities that were

once accepted—sometimes with compassion and at other times with isolation—are now subject to “treatment” or “therapy.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps we didn’t seek names for these conditions in the past because we generally did not have what are now increasing expectations for childhoods predicated on hyperengagement. Extensive other-direction has been “normed” into American life, especially among more educated and more affluent families who believe they understand the social intricacies of “getting ahead.”<sup>56</sup> We often assume the worst for children left in unstructured play to their own resources, a far cry from the rich childhoods described in Chapter 2 of this study by memoirists Annie Dillard and Bill Bryson. Grandin must remind us of what creative individuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries knew: that time alone can be productive and fulfilling.<sup>57</sup> To be sure, children now labeled severely autistic would have usually received “care” of a sort in homes and facilities for the “feebleminded” or “schizophrenic,” often with unhappy results.<sup>58</sup> But a higher-performing child with AS who might have once functioned with autonomy in a more inward looking time is now likely to be identified as someone with “special needs.”<sup>59</sup> It is easy to sympathize with Liane Willey, who notes in her book, *Pretending to be Normal*, “I do not wish for a cure to Asperger’s Syndrome. What I wish for, is for a cure for the common ill that pervades too many lives; the ill that makes people compare themselves to a normal that is measured in terms of perfect and absolute standards.”<sup>60</sup>

Second, there is now much more of an emphasis on communicative *activity* as a critical index of a fulfilling existence. For example, newer clinical definitions of personality disorders now set the threshold at “failure to develop effective interpersonal functioning.”<sup>61</sup> The isolate has never been more out of favor as a social type, *even while true communicative reciprocity seems to be in decline*. One measure of this shift is offered by Robert Putnam, who famously worried a decade ago about the transformation of American life into patterns of relatively impermanent and unstable contacts.<sup>62</sup> In his terms, the kind of “bonding social capital” that helps build bridges to others is in increasingly short supply.<sup>63</sup> Our relationships with members of the community are now less permanent and more unstable. He follows a long line of thinkers who have noted our increasing inclination to engage in all forms of spectatorship that fall short of becoming fully reciprocal relationships.<sup>64</sup>

There is also Lynn Truss’ description of the “social autism” of a clueless and obnoxious cell phone obsessive.<sup>65</sup> The phrase is clearly unfair to those who face autism’s real challenges, but it is also suggestive of a new kind of inwardness fed by a wealth of new gadgets and services that have sprung up in the digital revolution. Though ostensibly for connecting with others, text and phone devices are increasingly used at *our* convenience, with intrusions



of private talk into the public realm. With an increasing emphasis on always being connected, we may find little time left over for *connecting*: for living in the moment.

Finally, in an era where there is an increasing thirst for find biological and chemical bases for behavior, it's important to remember that DNA is not destiny. While Williams Syndrome would seem to suggest the reverse, it is actually an exception that proves a much more durable rule. A deletion or alteration of some genes can clearly affect the way portions of the brain develop. In the Williams case, as we have already noted, it diminishes growth in parts of the brain that handle spatial and abstract reasoning, but gives preference to portions devoted to language and the desire to engage others. Likewise, as neuropsychologist Stephen Pinker notes with regard to the parallel genetic origins of Huntington's disease, "Everyone with the defective gene who lives long enough will develop the condition."<sup>66</sup> But even such examples of apparent genetic determinism do not allow us to make reliable predictions about the population as a whole. Short of an unusual detour off the usual course of early cell growth, the "normal" brain seems to foster motivations coming from serendipitous, social, and cultural origins. Pinker holds out hope that we might one day find versions of genes that might "change the odds" of becoming a "sad sack or a blithe spirit."<sup>67</sup> But he notes that the odds are long.

The self is a byzantine bureaucracy, and no gene can push the buttons of behavior by itself. You can attribute the ability to defy our genotypes to free will, whatever that means, but you can also attribute it to the fact that in a hundred-trillion-synapse human brain, any single influence can be outweighed by the product of all of the others.<sup>68</sup>

In the end, autism and Williams Syndrome are useful proxies to remind us of how fragile and pliable the generative sources of interaction are, and also how frail our rules can be for deciding what constitutes "normal." Because we take companionability to be the preeminent benchmark of adaptive success in this world, we find it difficult to resist narratives that end in the triumph of connection. We look for its emerging signs in deeply withdrawn autistic children, usually preferring the capacity of "theory of mind" to play its role in triggering strategic adaptation. And, of course, we admire the communicative joy in many Williams children and adults, sometimes minimizing the cognitive tradeoffs that their unique affability represents. Those with the syndrome represent a special case. Given our goal to find the complex sources of sociality, it seems right to acknowledge what may be their purer impulse to engage with others and find so much pleasure in that simple result.

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26. Oliver Sacks, "Forward," in Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 15.
27. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, p. 33.
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45. Quoted in Jones et al., "Hypersociability in Williams Syndrome," 36.
46. Quoted in Dobbs, "The Gregarious Brain."

47. Teri Sforza, *The Strangest Song* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 85.

48. Sforza, *The Strangest Song*, 77.

49. Bellugi Quoted in Sforza, *The Strangest Song*, 82.

50. Semel and Rosner, *Understanding Williams Syndrome*, 202–203.

51. Semel and Rosner, *Understanding Williams Syndrome*, 205.

52. Semel and Rosner, *Understanding Williams Syndrome*, 190.

53. Semel and Rosner, *Understanding Williams Syndrome*, 190.

54. Semel and Rosner, *Understanding Williams Syndrome*, 191.

55. For arguments against common mental health labels, see Thomas Szasz, "Autonomy," in *Thomas Szasz, Primary Values and Major Contentions*, eds. Richard Vatz and Lee Weinberg (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1983), 23–40.

56. See, for example, Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise, *The Over Scheduled Child* (New York: St. Martins, 2000), 1–47.

57. Temple Grandin, Sean Barron, and Veronica Zysk, *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships* (Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2005), 374.

58. Harold Kaplan, Benjamin Sadock, and Jack Grebb, *Synopsis of Psychiatry, Seventh Edition* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1994), 1052.

59. This is all the more ironic if, as autism expert Simon Baron-Cohen asserts, no less than Albert Einstein and Sir Isaac Newton had many of the signs of AS. It is notoriously risky to diagnose from historical and biographical data. Even so, the gifts of these men included powers of intense and sustained concentration: perhaps a fair tradeoff for whatever introversion they might have had. See Hazel Muir, "Did Einstein and Newton Have Autism?" *New Scientist*, May 3 (2003), Ebsco Academic Search Premier, [web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=8&hid=8&sid=d78d4a72-d4af-4860-8429-dbf6f5e7aa1b%40sessionmgr7&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=9837877#db=aph&AN=9837877](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=8&hid=8&sid=d78d4a72-d4af-4860-8429-dbf6f5e7aa1b%40sessionmgr7&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=9837877#db=aph&AN=9837877) (accessed January 6, 2008).

60. Liane Willey, *Pretending to be Normal* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999), 121.

61. Benedict Carey, "Revising Book on Disorders of the Mind," *New York Times*, February 10, 2010, A17.

62. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 93–115.

63. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22–23.

64. See, for example, Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 1–15; and Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 115–125.

65. Lynne Truss, *Talk to the Hand* (New York: Gotham Books: 2005), 36.

66. Steven Pinker, "My Genome, My Self," *New York Times Magazine*, January 11, 2009, 27.

67. Pinker, "My Genome, My Self," 27.

68. Pinker, "My Genome, My Self," 50.

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## Chapter 6

# Finding a Way Through *The Films of James L. Brooks*

Brooks's feature films are utterly personal. He writes them alone, he draws characters from his own drives and insecurities, he creates stories for himself that he hopes audiences will like. The films are intimate sagas, chamber epics, where a life and a movie can pirouette on the subtlest default of principle.<sup>1</sup>

—Richard Corliss

You look at someone long enough, you discover their humanity.<sup>2</sup>

—Simon Bishop in *As Good As It Gets*

Q: “You know how they’re always telling screenwriting students that a character should never be saying what they actually think, because it releases tension from a scene. But my experience of your dialogue is that your characters are desperately trying to say, very explicitly, exactly what they’re feeling and thinking. . . . They’re all very verbal, you have a lot of dialogue.”

A: “They’re verbal, yeah. There are a lot of words.”<sup>3</sup>

—James L. Brooks responding to Rob Feld

“Go ahead, make my day.” Even if we have never had the urge to mimic the Clint Eastwood character who delivers that famous little piece of male bravado, we at least recognize the satisfaction of an exchange that offers the ideal response. Drama *perfects* conversation. A film or novel provides the chance to see recognizable and pivotal moments of life replayed in a language of focused directness. Usually for good reasons, this is the kind of dialogue that never gets spoken in the make-do temporizing of ordinary

conversation. Few of us would want to live in a world where every exchange ends in a terse retort that assaults the reasons for our justified caution. But from the safe distance of a theater seat these conversations have their attractions. We want to hear dialogue that distills attitudes. We want to feel the full weight of choices laid out in perfectly chosen words undiluted by inattention. And so we all experience the post facto regret for not having the presence of mind to have issued so perfect a rejoinder.

It is unlikely James L. Brooks would have written Eastwood's line, which comes when Joseph Stinson's character "Dirty Harry" aims a gun at the head of a robber who is holding a woman hostage.<sup>4</sup> Brooks doesn't do revenge melodramas. The line also lacks the doubt and self-awareness that is the most appealing trait of his characters.<sup>5</sup> He is the rare case of a "commercial" Hollywood writer-director who constructs observant stories that turn on conversations rather than the externals of the supernatural, the coincidental, or some other *dues ex machina*. The only special effect one is likely to encounter in a Brooks film is unusual dialogical clarity: the rare chance to hear plausible conversations that also function as key plot points.

Within their own middle-class frame of reference, Brooks's primary characters seek many of the capabilities we have defined in the rhetorical personality. His films offer self-aware people who discuss, empathize, sympathize, monitor their own behavior, and seek agreements. These are men and women who believe words matter, and act on the assumption that understanding derived from their deliberate use is an important achievement. Others are often conversational cripples, painfully unable to find the medium of exchange that can adequately acknowledge their own feelings. And his villains have a softer edge. They are always redeemable, even though they often share the kind of inner-directed certainty that can draw a curtain against the light of more open communication. Given the rounded edges of these character types, it is no surprise that his heroes stand out not as idealists, but as savvy and self-aware ironists. They see the gaps between who they are and might still be. If they are not always thirsty listeners, they are charged with enough energy to communicate the consequences of hard choices they must make.

And therein lies the source of our fascination. Brooks's characters seem to act on the presumption that in work, as in life, there is a mandate for self-awareness, and for finding within communication a way through the impasses of unfulfilled dreams. It is a path that many of us also walk. Although his stories are not exactly our own, like the products of any effective filmmaker, their interpersonal details function in a dialectic with similar experiences we already know<sup>6</sup>—more so if we are by vocation or temperament the kind of person with a consciousness saturated with the possibilities of communication.

## A BODY OF WORK THAT IS ITS OWN GENRE

Entering his 70s and resembling a mensch in an Edward Koren cartoon, the affable Brooks remains a virtual one-man Hollywood industry with a shelf full of Oscars. His producing and writing credits span most of television's history (including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*, and *The Simpsons*, among others) and nearly 10 feature films, including the recent *Everything You've Got* (2010). Through his own production company he has fostered the work of a number of younger writer/directors, including Cameron Crowe (*Jerry Maguire*, 1996), Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson (*Bottle Rocket*, 1996) and Gary Ross (*Big*, 1988). His faith in the integrity of the single author makes him unusual in a town where everyone remembers Jack Warner's famous dismissal of writers as "schmucks with Underwoods," and where the norm is still to endlessly rewrite other people's work.<sup>7</sup> The iconic *Gone with the Wind* (1939) famously had at least 15 writers editing and undoing each other's efforts.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Crowe's script for *Jerry Maguire* took years, with Brooks pushing Crowe into a ceaseless round of rewrites.<sup>9</sup> Yet his final version is a masterwork of Hollywood polish, with the additional Brooks trademark of a character struggling to do the right thing.

But it is his own writing that is our concern here, including three original story/screenplays: *Broadcast News* (1987), *I'll do Anything* (1994), and *SpanGLISH* (2004). In the shorthand of commercial moviemaking, all three could be called workplace comedies, hardly surprising given Brooks groundbreaking television series in the 1970s, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Taxi*. In addition, he has adapted and directed the works of others into three additional screenplays loosely structured around broken relationships: *Starting Over* (1979), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), and—with Mark Andrus—*As Good as It Gets* (1997). There are many other projects for film and television, but these six films deliver a heightened appreciation for the power of words to get right what the muddle of human relationships so easily obscures.

Though he has a history in documentary and news work, no one would describe Brooks's stories as simple slices of life. Their drama and attractive characters combine to be sunnier than the darker films of newer writers half his age, such as Charlie Kaufman (*Synecdoche, New York*, 2008) or Noah Baumbach (*The Squid and the Whale*, 2005). Even so, as another young Hollywood writer has noted, his films function as a genre unto themselves.<sup>10</sup> While they are perceptive and funny, they also acknowledge—as he notes—that "life is painful and people go through tough times."<sup>11</sup> His scripts make visible the frailties of our constructed worlds. Anchored in challenging relationships that are more complex than is the usual Hollywood norm, Brooks tends to focus on people who are often caught in life circumstances that are



still miles away from their aspirations. And though he cannot resist turning a good thought into a funny line, his dialogue makes audible the kinds of universal doubts that often remain unspoken. For example, when Deborah in *Spanglish* launches into an extended monologue of self-pity after she reveals to her mother that she has cheated on her husband, she can hardly be prepared for the reply. “Lately,” the suddenly clear-eyed Evelyn notes, “your low self-esteem is just good common sense.”<sup>12</sup>

Actor/writer Albert Brooks (no relation) well understands why the director wants to explore our feet of clay. The character actor was cast in two films where he played men at opposite ends of a spectrum of self-awareness. In *Broadcast News* he is an approximation to James Brooks himself, an observant and reflective journalist. And in *I’ll Do Anything* he is the cynical brick wall of a film executive, Burke Adler. Even with their differences, both characters retained an awareness of doubts forever churning under a calmer surface, something the actor sees as a constant in Brooks’s writing:

I talk to people in Los Angeles, and they’re all petrified about [a recent] earthquake. I say something funny and, in between laughter, they’re wondering if they’re going to die. That’s the sort of thing Jim tries to capture. The embarrassing, human, ignoble things we’re really thinking underneath.<sup>13</sup>

In the following sections we will explore three narrative devices that Brooks uses to reveal the discursive strengths and shortcomings of key characters, including the mechanism of self-reflection prompted by the negotiation of differences with others, the mechanism of self-disclosure, and the rhetorical device of forcing one character to take another’s voice. In the varied contexts of his films each contrivance offers opportunities to see individuals aware of the possibilities of transformative interaction.

## COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE REFLECTIVE SELF

A distinct advantage Brooks gives to key characters in his stories is an unusual sensitivity to what they think *others already know*. We could call this kind of stretched awareness the “reflected self.” And it is a style of storytelling that models to its audiences the kind of consciousness of others that is a prime feature of the rhetorical personality. Not surprising, the inevitable third act denouement must come from levels of *dialogically derived insight*.

A dominant theme in Brooks’s work is the narrative of negotiated differences. Reflecting a pattern more common in smaller independent films, people talk through their differences. In more traditional Hollywood fare, plot

developments are often laid *upon* the characters (an accident, an illness, the reappearance of an interloper). Out of context surprises and freakish coincidences move things along. But in most of Brooks's stories the task of carrying the narrative happens *within* the conversations that unfold between three or four characters. The transformative action of a film is not events that happen, but what characters say. We see this focus of bringing feelings to the surface in the triangle of Aurora Greenway, her daughter Emma, and Garrett Breedlove in *Terms of Endearment*; the evolving relationships between Melvin Udall, Carol Connelly, and Simon Bishop in *As Good as It Gets*; and the especially awkward workplace *ménage à trois* of Jane Craig, Tom Grunick, and Aaron Altman in Brooks's masterpiece of subtle observation, *Broadcast News*.

The three-sided tensions of *Terms of Endearment* are famously created and controlled by the formidable Aurora. Larry McMurtry's original novel is homage to a particular kind of Texas woman: willful, opinionated, and certain of her own mind. He thought enough of this acerbic character to make her the center of a second novel.<sup>14</sup> Long ago transplanted from the East coast to the leafy River Oaks section of Houston, the widowed Aurora is free with opinions that a more circumspect person might leave unsaid. Actress Shirley MacLaine's starchy matron is constantly at odds with her down-to-earth daughter, and—in the Brooks's addition to McMurtry's story—a middle aged NASA retiree next door whose casual temperament is her direct opposite. Though she cultivates the attention of others, Aurora is quick to judge and correct—the kind of person her daughter's friends prefer to avoid. When Emma announces that she will marry a ne'er-do-well academic who will give her more children than security, Aurora typically warns her daughter that she is “not special enough to overcome a bad marriage.”<sup>15</sup> It's an ungenerous cut to a generous soul, and exhibits the same rectitude that is still apparent at the end of the film when she informs the son-in-law after Emma's death that he will be out of his league as a single parent with a large family. “Raising three children and working full time and running after women requires a lot more energy than you have,” she notes. “You've always had a knowledge of your own weakness—don't lose that quality now that you need it most.”<sup>16</sup>

Uttered by most mortals, these comments would have no charm. But good actors have a way of making unpleasant people more attractive than they might otherwise be. And, as Brooks has noted, Aurora not only believes she is right, she often is. That makes her something of a hero for him and actress MacLaine, who noted that she “loved Aurora's honesty, her directness, her lack of censorship.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet in the framework of the empathetic communication honored in this study, it is actually Emma in *Terms of Endearment* who will have to do the work of

sustaining the relationship. She is mostly free of the willful certainty that has made Aurora apparently so wary of the choices others have made. Brooks noted that he loved Debra Winger's character because she is not judgmental.<sup>18</sup> She is capable of moving on even when Aurora's righteousness approaches cruelty, such as not showing up at Emma's wedding. Emma also survives the mistaken assumption that her brittle mother will come to embrace her growing family. Aurora initially reacts with horror at the news that she will be a grandmother—a rejection few daughters would absorb with such equanimity.

The other side of the triangle is as equally unsettled. Jack Nicholson's alarmingly indiscrete astronaut neighbor is initially an unwelcome invader of Aurora's carefully groomed garden retreat. They are a canyon apart in their differences. But there is in this matchup of Aurora and Jack Nicholson's gone-to-seed playboy what the *New York Times*'s Janet Maslin has called their "magnificent repulsiveness."<sup>19</sup> Each knows who they are. The vinegar of Aurora's personality is as much an acquired taste as Garrett Breedlove's beer-and-shots idea of romance.

Telling stories that force characters to react to the alien impulses of others is hardly unique. It is a feature of nearly every Brooks story to offer up at least one interpersonal misfit for a ritual transformation by conversation. The reflected self is set to grow as the story progresses. After a cooling of their relationship, and after Emma's death, the astronaut shows up to comfort Aurora and her grandchildren. He's surprisingly good at it. Both acquire the resources of unexpected conversational discreetness that will move them beyond their inert lives.

Another three-way transformation of a foundering individual is also vehicle for Nicholson in *As Good as It Gets*. Brooks gave him the person of Melvin Udall: a "horror of a human being," according to one of the film's characters, and an apparently successful writer of pulp fiction. The descriptive adjectives that fit the middle-aged author read like a primer in psychological disfunctionality: obsessive-compulsive, agoraphobic, impatient, self obsessed, and quick to judge anybody based on the markers of race and gender. He is the rhetorical personality turned inside out. And he is at least initially almost beyond the pale as a complete social misfit. But this is a Brooks film, so Nicholson's misanthrope says the thoughtless in sometimes hilarious ways. Consider his response to an admiring receptionist in his publisher's office. She pauses before finding the courage to express a fan's thrall for the incongruous love stories he cranks out. As with most Brooks scripts, adding a beat or two after any punctuation usually captures the right cadence:

YOUNG FEMALE RECEPTIONIST: How do you write women so well?

MELVIN: I think of a man, and I take away reason and accountability.<sup>20</sup>

Living as a near recluse in a comfortable and pristine Manhattan apartment, the early scenes of the film show Udall functioning in direct proportion to his ability to avoid contact with other people. Early run-ins with artist Simon Bishop who has an apartment across the hall are conducted near the safety of Melvin's front door. It seems that Simon's dog gets loose and sometimes has accidents. If Melvin can do it without being caught, he's not beyond giving the white fur ball with sad eyes an unceremonious ride to the basement via the hallway garbage chute. On the carefully planned occasions when he actually gets past his front door fortress to venture forth, it is with steps taken to avoid the cracks in the sidewalk, and just long enough to visit a therapist who must know that he has a lifetime client. On those occasions when Melvin eats out, it is at the same local restaurant at the same table, using his own plastic utensils.

It is the last location that provides the encounter that will foretell his eventual reintroduction back into the land of the living. Helen Hunt's waitress, Carol, is single mother with a surfeit of feminine empathy. Even though he is a virtual Superfund site of toxic neuroses, she sees Melvin as less a freak than the casualty of some unknown trauma. As the film opens she must continually run interference between Melvin and the restaurant's patrons who are often left aghast at his primitive manners. "Do you have any control over how creepy you allow yourself to get?" she asks him after diffusing a potential dustup with another customer.<sup>21</sup> At some level he knows when he has crossed the line, and accepts Carol's reminders that he will have to behave or leave. At this stage in the film, to say Melvin "self-monitors" would be like describing a tornado's effect on a house as "redecorating."

Simon's agent has the same reactions to Melvin when he retrieves the dog from the basement dumpster. Cuba Gooding's not-easily-intimidated gallery owner is pretty sure he knows how the mutt ended up there. So when Simon lands in the hospital after an assault, he knows exactly who should take care of the dog while he convalesces. This induced act of charity has the effect of planting the seed of some uncharacteristic caregiving deep into Melvin's seemingly barren soil. Eventually its roots will push even deeper when he discovers that Carol's son has his own medical issues.

These setups are variations on an old trope as durable as the stories of Dickens: the redemption of a sour isolate from his own insularity. And given what we now know about the intransigence of individuals inflicted with lifelong personality disorders, they may be about as creaky. But it clearly serves Brooks's purpose to give audiences a human specimen with catastrophic social skills. He gave the same kind of role to Aurora in *Terms of Endearment*, and to a bratty child actor and an insensitive producer in *I'll Do*

*Anything*. In addition, as we noted in chapter 3, he also resurrected a more variegated version of communication ineptitude in *Spanglish's* Deborah Clasky. In each case a character is crippled by narcissism, an uncultivated sense of the appropriate, and an inability to see the reflected self. These afflictions set up a miraculous third-act regeneration of social sensitivities that we would have otherwise presumed too dormant to bloom.

The tipping point in *As Good As It Gets* comes when Melvin uncharacteristically gives the gift of a doctor's house call to Carol's asthmatic son. She is overwhelmed by the offer of the services she could never afford and her insurer would never cover. But while she accepts it, she makes a trip across town specifically to inform Melvin that it cannot be a *quid pro quo*. She is insistent that he understand that she will never sleep with him. Even so, when they meet for dinner at a waterside restaurant several days later, there is a sense that they have embarked on something like a date. Carol still sees Melvin as . . . well, a little deranged. In the perfected deadpan of a Brooks comedy she tells him that when he "first entered the restaurant, I thought you were handsome . . . and then, of course, you spoke." But she is softening. The new sportcoat he has purchased for the occasion looks good. Amid the soft lighting and the intimacy of couples at other tables, the talk hovers awkwardly between the formality of near strangers and the warmer words of people who have reached the outer rings of a closer relationship. It's meant to be a slightly uncomfortable scene because each character is verging into new terrain. Brooks uses it to show Melvin's halting efforts at some kind of self-realization. He has created this broken human being. Now he wants Melvin to acknowledge how macabre he can be. As Melvin leans in closer to Carol, the first sips of a drink making him more comfortable than he has a right to be, the gruff assertiveness is still there. But it is now in counterpoint to something else that has perhaps not surfaced for years. He cares for her, and he wants to express it.

MELVIN: I've got a really great compliment for you, and it's true.

CAROL: I'm so afraid you're about to say something awful.

MELVIN: Don't be pessimistic; it's not your style. Okay, here I go: Clearly, a mistake. I've got this, what—ailment? My doctor, a shrink that I used to go to all the time, he says that in 50 or 60 percent of the cases, a pill really helps. I hate pills, very dangerous thing, pills. Hate. I'm using the word "hate" here, about pills. Hate.

My compliment is, that night when you came over and told me that you would never . . . well, you were there, you know what you said. Well, my compliment to you is, the next morning, I started taking the pills.

CAROL: I don't quite get how that's a compliment for me.

MELVIN: (after several beats) *You make me want to be a better man.*<sup>22</sup>

The line is meant to signal his transformation. And the powerful moment is punctuated by Carol's momentary awe. "That's maybe the best compliment of my life," she says. She wants to believe that there is indeed a different person inside. There's the usual affirmation through denial to get a few laughs and to perhaps soften the disclosive power of his words. "Maybe I overshot a little," he notes. But Nicholson is good at walking the thin line between neutrality and mawkish sincerity. His confession of yearning isn't maudlin. We want to believe in his awakening to the feelings of others. And it rings true that in this place he has glimpsed a role for himself that makes room for another. Carol and perhaps the new medications have at least momentarily kept his demons at bay. We later see that he is even prepared to make room in his apartment for the newly destitute Simon, released from the hospital but evicted from his apartment. They now share the common experience of the dog that Melvin has become attached to, and their different but complementary affection for Carol.

Brooks calls the relationship between Melvin and Carol "a love story."<sup>23</sup> To the extent he believes it is, he reveals his stated preference for erring on the side of the sentimental possibility<sup>24</sup> and—by implication—the power of empathic conversation to make things right. It is hard to imagine how the soluble compassion so evident in Carol can mix with the inert interiority of a Melvin Udall. That is the kind of chemistry that perhaps only happens in a Hollywood film or a very optimistic outlook about life's possibilities. But this should be the last place to dismiss the power of an empathic person to work their magic on another lost to their obsessions.

No such leaps of faith are required in Brooks's other brilliant story of the reflected self. At one level, *Broadcast News* is an awkward love story, and at another, a critique of the woes of television journalism, circa 1987. The story evolves from the multisided professional and personal tensions between its enormously likable characters, even while it educates its audience in the structural reasons for the decline of television news.

In its day the film was prescient. It was the rare piece of mainstream entertainment that laid bare some of the fault lines shaking apart this key late-twentieth century institution. Indeed, most of the issues that are touched on still remain in the new century: the ethics of *creating* rather than *covering* news, a focus on "emotional moments" over more urgent policy, the takeover of news divisions by accountants rather than journalists, and the unsavory attention to showbiz appearance rather than accurate reporting.<sup>25</sup> *Broadcast News* plays like light comedy while it delivers surprisingly heavy blows. I remember that when the film was released in the late 80s, the *Today Show's* Bryant Gumbel felt its heat enough to offer his own rebuke. Are anchors only as good as the questions fed to them through an earpiece by an off-camera producer? The image was simple and misleading, Gumbel suggested. But the

implication of news anchors as empty as desert rain barrels stung. Brooks had spent time as a writer at CBS News. He had done his homework and was clearly onto something.

It was the director's unlikely last-minute casting decision of actress Holly Hunter to play the Jane Craig that was a surprise. Could the diminutive actress portray a driven news producer constantly worrying about stories that "crossed the line" from journalism to "staged" events? Craig is the moral center of the film, and exudes the kind of professional competence that has made Brooks a recognized writer of strong female leads. But she is also the most visible part of the triangle that includes journalist Aaron Altman, who is in love with her, and an undertalented reporter to whom she is attracted. The latter character of Tom Grunick, played by William Hurt, is being groomed to be a network anchor, even while more able journalists like Altman wait for airtime that will never come. Brooks need not have worried about Hunter's ability to play the part. Her Jane Craig is convincing as the professional equal of news executives twice her age.

Hunter's character was partly suggested by the career of real-life CBS producer Susan Zirinsky, who also gets a producing credit in the film. She is a beacon of integrity ironically drawn to Grunick, who tries to learn on the fly after a stint in a small market as a studio-based sports reader. He has little understanding of what journalism is about, and the uneasy knowledge that the forceful delivery of his anchoring is mostly a charade.<sup>26</sup> When he asks Jane for tips in getting up to speed to meet the network's expectations, he fails her most basic questions. College? Less than a year. Journalism beyond local sports? Not much. Writing experience? Nearly none, even though he acknowledges that he "is making a fortune" and good at "selling" a story on the air. Jane finally stops in exasperation. "It's hard for me to advise you," she concludes, "since you personify something I truly think is dangerous. . . . Just what do you want from me, anyway? Permission to be a fake? Stop whining and do something about it."<sup>27</sup>

Jane's professional equal is really general assignment reporter Altman, played by Albert Brooks, who is constantly reminded that his considerable skill as a journalist is not enough to be a network star. He doesn't have the "look" of an anchorman, and the injury to his ego is compounded by the knowledge that Jane is attracted to Tom. That doubles his reasons to point out that Tom is the personification of the disease of television. His affable inexperience represents everything about her business she dislikes.

AARON: I know you care about him. I've never seen you like this about anyone, so please don't take it wrong when I tell you that I believe that Tom, while a very nice guy, is the Devil.

JANE: This isn't friendship. You're crazy. You know that?

AARON: What do you think the Devil is going to look like if he's around? Nobody is going to be taken in if he has a long, red, pointy tail. No. I'm semi-serious here. He will look attractive and he will be nice and helpful and he will get a job where he influences a great God-fearing nation and he will never do an evil thing . . . he will just bit by little bit lower standards where they are important. Just coax along flash over substance. . . . Just a tiny bit. And he will talk about all of us really being salesmen. And he'll get all the great women.<sup>28</sup>

When an American military base in Italy is attacked by a Libyan jet, the brass assign Tom rather than Altman for a prestigious network special, even though Altman has actually reported from Libya and interviewed President Gaddafi. It falls to Jane to talk the inexperienced Grunick through a series of live on-air interviews by feeding questions to him through his earpiece. While the special goes well, she discovers soon after that he faked a reaction in an earlier piece while doing a single camera interview of a rape survivor. When only one camera is available, shots of the attentive interviewer must be spliced into the final story *after* the interview is finished, when the camera can be turned around. She objected to Tom's decision to recreate after-the-fact tears in these cutaway shots inserted in the final piece. That offended her sense of journalistic ethics.

All of these plot turns flow seamlessly from Brooks's energy not just as a storyteller, but as a writer who can make issues of work and ethics the substance of compelling relationships. Tom is not a fool, but is out of his depth as a journalist. For all of his shortcomings, he is self-aware and comfortable enough to acknowledge that when the network anchoring position is inevitably offered, he will ask someone else to be the managing editor of his show. For their parts, Jane and Aaron are willing to test their actions against the best counterarguments each can offer the other. Brooks has given these remarkable characters professional values and the fluency to not only question each other's decisions, but the sometimes dubious assumptions of the industry that consumes them.

In the last few minutes of the film we learn that Aaron has left the network, married, and joined a news-conscious television station in Oregon. There will be no resolution of his unrequited love for Jane. And what looked like a generic Hollywood love triangle can now be seen as something unusual in film, namely, a story of how three careerists tried to fulfill their *professional* goals within a faltering industry. As Roger Ebert wrote in his review of *Broadcast News*, "Brooks, almost alone among major Hollywood filmmakers, knows that some people have higher priorities than love, and deeper fears."<sup>29</sup>

In all of these examples the decision to create narratives of three-way or even four-way interaction adds complexity and more closely represents the



natural communication landscape off the screen. A strong dyad at the center of a story is a simple route to dramatic tension and dependence. And we often think in terms of the popular cinema's early and innovative pairings of Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn or William Powell and Myrna Loy. But the lines of communication become much more diverse and varied in settings that break down two-character melodramas. In a dyad, the arrows of communication follow one path in just two directions. In a triad there is an increase to three paths with six directions, and with four primary characters, six paths and twelve directions. Each new character offers the chance for an enlarged algorithm of reflections back to the self. This is perhaps why Brooks seemed attracted to large ensemble casts in his early television work. To this day he wants even a self-contained two-hour story to be populated by a variety of individuals passing through each other's orbits.

### TRUTH IN THE DISCLOSIVE SELF

A Brooks script is predictably dense with conversation. His stories get their energy from figures who are expressive to a fault. As Rob Feld notes in a quote at the beginning of this chapter, it is frequently an axiom of screenwriting to open up space between what someone says and what seems to lie at their core. The wider the gap, the more evocative the reasons to watch. Transgressive acts and suppressed impulses define the human condition even more clearly than the earnestness of self-confession. We see this suppression of self especially in Brooks's entertaining fable about corruptible Hollywood, *I'll Do Anything*. Nick Nolte's out-of-work actor, Matt Hobbs, is a study in quiet frustration. He is continually faced with the challenge of functioning in a business where callow underlings in film production offices spread across Los Angeles control his fate. Hobbs is a key figure for Brooks that we will revisit in the next section. The interesting point here is that the writer/director more often works the other way. Most stories feature disclosive characters. And with them, he seems to be inviting audiences to consider the advantages of moving interiority to the outside. He writes leads who are alive to the possibilities of communication, or who *need* to be. Whether the hero is Carol Connelly in *As Good as It Gets*, Aaron Altman in *Broadcast News*, or superchef John Clasky in *Spanglish*, the focus is on people who believe in the power of persuasion and explanation.

Among others, Aurora Greenway and Melvin Udall also rarely hold back, even if their compulsive honesty sometimes borders on the cruel. No one would confuse these people with the cryptic brooders in a David Mamet play. Even the family maid in *Spanglish* notices "that the macho meter" is failing to

register in her boss. He suffers not in the stoic silence that is often the alleged male norm, but with what she sees as the tears and bitter rebukes she would expect from a Mexican woman.<sup>30</sup>

A notable example of Brooks's faith in richly disclosive dialogue shows up in the character of Phil Potter, the leading figure in Brooks's first feature, *Starting Over*. Burt Reynold's newly divorced writer is initially reticent and slow to react. He is still in love with his ex-wife and moves through his early post-divorce days in state of somnolence. In a plot line that infrequently gets its day on the screen, *he* is left to cope with the effects of his wife's abandonment. And Brooks wants us to notice how Potter's divorce has led to a descent deep into himself. He can't make decisions. He's noncommittal. Brooks even medicalizes the problem by giving Potter a panic attack in a department store. He carries the baggage of his dead relationship like an aging Sherpa.

It falls to Jill Clayburgh's Marilyn Holmberg to propel the narrative of a shaky romance that will eventually lead to Potter's reclamation. His brother introduces him to Holmberg, a nursery-school teacher with the verbal acuity of someone who knows that silence is not an option. She is loving and demonstrative, but wary of being the victim of a man who was so recently on the front lines of divorce. Her ability to register her feelings exists in sharp contrast to Potter's male support group at a local church, where eight more of the walking wounded stare at the floor, waiting for wisdom to rise out of the silence.

The themes of empathy and therapy are part of the landscape of the film. And while they are frequently played for laughs, it is apparent that Phil's awakening will come from the clarity of affirming what he wants for his changed life. Phil's brother is a psychiatrist, and his sister-in-law is a purveyor of insistent compassion. Together they are a nonstop festival of hugs and sympathy. And they were responsible for pushing him into the men's group, which makes way for the women's counterpart in the same church basement promptly at 9:00 p.m. The silent relinquishing of the room from one group to the other occurs with the formal rigidity of an exchange of prisoners at the Korean border.

The rituals of mourning and consolation are the sources of Brooks's humor, but not his deprecation. Phil's recovery from the panic attack in the middle of Bloomingdale's furniture department is where the writer plays out his hand. Immobilized by fear and unable to breathe, his brother is called, swiftly identifies the problem, and talks Burt Reynold's character through the crisis. When the psychiatrist asks the gathered crowd if anyone has a sedative, it seems that everyone has their own supply. Along with support group scenes of fragile men and women, the image of a horde of shoppers reaching for the own allotments of instant sedation is a talisman of our emotional vulnerability.

The quintessential communicator in Brooks's collective work is the journalist he created for *Broadcast News* played by Albert Brooks. He is reflexively reflective and disclosive. In conversations with others, Aaron Altman always seems to have a consciousness that is both in and outside himself. He sees one event from his own point of view and perhaps one or two angles where things may look differently. His comments are not just personal reports, but assessments of the irony, misery or joy that lies just outside the audible range of conventional conversation. He is the embodiment of other-consciousness, sometimes providing the monitoring of someone else's actions when they seem not up to the challenge themselves.

In the awkward triangle of the film, Altman is in love with his producer, Jane, who is infatuated with an emerging network star, Tom Grunick, who lacks the chops to be a great journalist. It's an old story in a business where appearance is almost everything. And Aaron is the self-aware soul made insecure and a little sad by the knowledge that his talent exceeds his looks.

The task of bringing this kind of interiority to the surface is not easy. How can a screenwriter make audible what a character is thinking but perhaps cannot say? Good acting helps, of course. Close ups and reaction shots in film and television are intended as monitors of faces that reveal the betrayals of their own words. Accomplished actors can let us see in their faces what their words deny. And if that is too subtle, there is always the decision to use a voice-over narration. The device is usually frowned upon by most screenwriters, at least until previews expose audience confusion. But it is used by no less a writer/director than Woody Allen. In his mid-career films such as *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Annie Hall* (1977, with Marshall Brickman), Allen gives his audiences a variety of interior monologues—private thoughts heard only by the audience that typically play against an individual's constructed self. Perhaps this is the best narrative device to reveal self-involved figures. It also fits with his history as a stand-up comedian in need of material about the reflected self.

Brooks rarely uses the voice-over. His solution to the portrayal of interiority is to make characters naturally the kinds of people who cannot help but verbalize their fears. As he has said, he likes verbal people. So we see the bond between Jane and Aaron predicated in part on their willingness to give voice to doubts that in others might well remain hidden. In an early scene, for example, we eavesdrop on what appears to be an almost nightly phone call between the two that acknowledges what is apparently a ritual of confessing career dreams and fears. Each takes their turn. Jane is attending a professional conference, and begins by noting that she met Grunick for the first time. He came back to her hotel room, but only to spurn her feeble romantic

advances in favor of picking her brain about finding success in the news business. To Aaron she notes that “I have passed some line someplace. I am beginning to repel people I’m trying to seduce.” Their attention then turns to Aaron. “Okay. Let’s do me. . . . I feel like I’m slipping but do people who are actually slipping feel that way or is it always the really good people who are moving up who invariably think they’re slipping because their standards are so high?” “This conversation is not worthy of you,” responds Jane. And while Aaron acknowledges the compliment, he goes on to reveal how low his own self-esteem has sunk. It’s a line about communicating vulnerability that could be the epigraph for most Brooks films: “Wouldn’t this be a great world if insecurity and desperation made us more attractive? If needy were a turn-on?”<sup>31</sup>

## COMMUNICATING IN THE OTHER’S VOICE

If we are forever isolates of a consciousness that can never be made fully transparent to another, we are at least capable of “trying on” another’s experience by putting ourselves in their place. This is part of what happens in a common technique used in couples counseling called “mirroring.”<sup>32</sup> Participants are asked to repeat with accuracy what their partner has just said. Assessing or interpreting these feelings is out of bounds. The goal is strictly hearing another by capturing and restating their thoughts. Each side typically struggles to recreate the other’s “voice,” and in doing so, momentarily takes on the rhetorical forms and perhaps some empathy for the other.

Theater also presents a similar challenge in a more literal and all-encompassing way.<sup>33</sup> The same kind of merging of voices lies at the very core of the actor’s art. Acting obviously requires taking on the demeanors and words of others as if they were one’s own. We want to see the author’s character, hopefully without noticing seams that divide the created persona from the actor’s own self.

Brooks sometimes doubles this effect by creating scenarios where a character must accurately voice the feelings of another. He uses mirroring as a way to heighten our sense of a character’s indebtedness to another. It is easiest to see in his two stories about the news and film industries. In both, success depends upon saying someone else’s lines as if they are your own. When the inexperienced Grunick debuts by anchoring the live network update of American military action in Libya, for example, Brooks reminds us that his anchor depends on the informational help of others who are feeding him questions and talking points via an invisible earpiece. At one point Altman, watching at home, thinks of a relevant fact for Grunick to mention on the air,

and calls Jane Craig in the control room in downtown Washington. He tells her the fact—in this case, a detail about the features of a particular American fighter plane. And she relays it to Grunick instantly. Putting down his phone in his apartment, Aaron hears the anchor seamlessly insert this bit of information in the running narrative, as if it had been Grunick's all the time. Altman laughs at the illusion of authority this TV news sleight-of-hand allows, and says to no one in particular, "I say it here—it comes out there."<sup>34</sup>

With regard to the film business, Brooks shows an ample regard for how actors can fulfill and surpass his intentions. Alfred Hitchcock famously noted that the fun was over when the screenplay was finished.<sup>35</sup> He apparently was not all that fond of working with actors. But in *I'll Do Anything*, Brooks's hero, the usually unemployed actor Matt Hobbs (Nick Nolte), is the very image of sanity in a business populated by venal producers and rudderless acolytes. He takes seriously the idea that an actor is the writer's advocate. With the character of Hobbs, it is clear that Brooks means to suggest that there is something honorable about the strange business of getting into another's skin.

Most insider stories about the film business tell a different story. Films spanning from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) to *State and Main* (2000) delight in offering shallow or deluded performers. But Hobbs approaches auditions as a seasoned professional with a challenging problem to solve. Never mind that he can't land a part, and that he must pay his bills by chauffeuring around the head of a production company who makes schlock films. *He* is the student of an honorable craft who must try to survive by working with producers who clearly don't know what they are doing. Brooks saves most of his wrath for these executives and their minions: the legions of Hollywood script readers and producers who cover their fears with delusions of self-importance.

Perhaps the best cinematic monologue in any of his films is Matt's eruption to one of these pretenders, a young male "script consultant" at Popcorn Pictures who begins to explain to another why a list of award-winning actors is unacceptable for the company's latest exercise in visual mayhem. There is unusual bite to the scene as the fool trashes the names of real performers who are also legends: F. Murray Abraham, Ed Harris, John Malkovich, Christopher Walken, Willem Dafoe, and others. The nobody with an ego of a mogul dismisses all of them without missing a beat. This one is too short, that one is growing bald, another has facial pock marks, and so on.

Matt has overheard this dismissal of men he regards at the peak of their craft and begins to seethe. He doesn't have a short fuse. But he cannot sit for long as a witness to yet another example of the corruptibility of an enterprise he still believes can be noble. More in regret than anger, he finally interrupts:

Where did they find you? . . . You know, I always thought people in your job had to have *some* qualifications. I mean, forget common decency for a minute. You don't even know that some of these people you are talking about are some of the best guys around. . . . You know I always had a firm idea about acting . . . you know [mimicking an acting coach], "if you just shut up and act . . ." and I always believed that you forget all the crap that you can't control. But, my God, man . . . I mean *where did they find you?* Ok. Ok. Ok. I know, it's a business. Nobody ever put a gun to anybody's head. . . . You know, nobody put it up there and said, "Ok now, you've got to act." *But doesn't somebody in your job still have to have at least at least some dull feeling of respect for people who really do know what they're doing?* I mean, don't you have to know something besides how to pose for this picture of you that no one is snapping?

"Why don't you mind your own business?" the clearly intimidated young man responds. Matt boils up in the perfect response. "Well, because, man. . . . Because *you're* minding my business. And that's the problem!"<sup>36</sup>

Finally, *voicing for another* is also a story device in aligning estranged characters in *Spanglish*. The wealthy Claskys have hired a beautiful Mexican woman for various household chores. Flor is a hard worker, and the mother of a bright and outgoing 12-year-old-daughter, Cristina. When the two are required to take up residence in a summer house in Malibu, Deborah and John decide to make the irresistible Cristina their project. She is treated as part of the family, setting up resentments in the proud Flor (Paz Vega), which are compounded by her inability to match the fluent English of her daughter. As the lines of parental rights get crossed, Flor is forced to express her frustrations to John *through* Cristina. The daughter must become her mother's voice.

From her standpoint, the Claskys have given her daughter too much money in a family game that involves finding colored stones on the beach. And to make matters worse, Deborah has done the nearly unforgiveable again by taking Cristina on a shopping trip without Flor's permission.

All of this feeds into Brooks's sociology of stolen identity. Though condemned by some reviewers,<sup>37</sup> the film positions Flor as struggling for the soul of her daughter against a tide of material blandishments. To salvage a degree of self-respect, she fights the misguided intentions of her employers to slow the Americanization of Cristina. And how better to suggest the natural alignment between mother and daughter than by laying out the plot device of requiring the latter to translate for the former? In his research, Brooks found it common that children were often the gatekeepers to the culture for their monolingual parents.<sup>38</sup> The additional twist here is that the young Cristina is put in the awkward position of having to communicate her mother's displeasure to the very people she has come to love. And there is the added challenge

of mirroring her mom's frustrations not just in accurate English, but with a promise to replicate Flor's emphatic intensity.

Print can only suggest what the screen fully delivers. The young actress Shelbie Bruce's earnestness in trying to capture her mother's frustration is funny and touching: all the more since it means she will have to give back a wad of money she "earned" in the game John Clasky set up for her and his children. Brooks is typically meticulous in his stage direction. John will quietly defend his innocence. But he senses Flor's resolve as the conflicted Cristina struggles to recreate it.

CRISTINA AS FLOR: Did you give this money to my daughter?

JOHN: I made this little deal . . . with all the kids to . . .

CRISTINA AS FLOR: (interrupting) Please . . .

(Flor advances on him past her daughter so Cristina now translates from the background.)

CRISTINA AS FLOR: You don't tell or ask the mother when you give a child a fortune for looking on the beach for stones? . . . what is the word for this . . .

JOHN: Sea glass?

(On hearing the translation of "sea glass," an exasperated Flor turns so that her back is to John as Cristina admonishes him.)

CRISTINA AS FLOR: No . . . not a name for the stones . . . a name for the act. . . . What you did . . .

(Camera on Flor as she spits out the word to her daughter.)

FLOR: Engreído.

(Camera on John as his eyes shift to Cristina fearing the word he will hear.)

JOHN: Oh, no . . . engreído's going to be rough.

(Camera on Cristina reluctantly taking the emotional stance of her mother to deliver the word.)

CHRISTINA: (briefly being herself) It's hard to translate.

(She takes half a beat . . . finds the word and now spits it out.)

CRISTINA AS FLOR: Smug.<sup>39</sup>

We hear Flor's dual struggle for her own identity and her daughter's allegiance. At the same time we witness Cristina's awakening to the world she will inherit as the child of an illegal immigrant living in the United States. She has grown up in an American culture that is alien to a mother still deeply imbued with Mexican sensibilities. In the final minutes of the film Flor has politely quit the Claskys and taken Cristina out of the private school they had arranged for her. The devastated daughter is again tied to the fates she cannot

control. And in a stretch that is perhaps more hope than probability, we hear a now older Cristina's narration in the form of lines from her admissions essay to an Ivy League university. It's a tribute that ends with a complete rhetorical alignment. "My identity rests firmly and happily on one fact," she writes. "I am my mother's daughter."<sup>40</sup>

Brooks is certainly not alone in creating narratives that feature characters that are conversationally transparent. Any history of the cinema would include a share of dreamers ready to imagine the perfected dialogue.<sup>41</sup> Even if we grant that the future of cinema as the most sensual of media probably lies with the heirs of *visual* storytellers like Steven Spielberg or Poland's Krzysztof Kieslowski,<sup>42</sup> there is still an important place for chroniclers of an individual's rhetorical metamorphosis. It probably helps that Brooks began in television, with its preference for cost-efficient dialogue over expensive special effects. Consider that Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage* (1973) and the more recent HBO television series *In Treatment* (2008) were also made for the small screen. In these examples centered on domestic relationships, the interaction is so personal and rich in meaning that each side in a conversation sometimes functions as a rhetorical analyst of the other. Each shows how we mean and demean, how we deceive ourselves, and how we can use the words of others to thrive. Though Brooks is both more and less than a Bergman with wisecracks, his films share the same hope: that conversation is the currency of civility, and that energy vested in the search for agreement should not be in vain.

## NOTES

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41. Paddy Chayefsky’s *Americanization of Emily* (1964) and Spaniard Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Sea Inside* (2004) come to mind.

42. For example, Spielberg wrote and directed the inventive *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Kieslowski wrote and directed the *Three Colors* trilogy, *Red, Blue, and White* (1993–1994).

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## Chapter 7

# Lessons from the Political Stage

## *The Role of the Other in the Rhetorical and Hortatory Styles*

It seems right to assume that a much surer index to a man's political philosophy is his characteristic way of thinking, inevitably expressed in the type of argument he prefers.<sup>1</sup>

—Richard Weaver

But politics is not always about high matters. Sometimes it is about the ugly business of making friends, keeping friends, being liked.<sup>2</sup>

—Attributed to Peter Mandelson in the political docudrama, *The Deal*

About a year after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Attorney General John Ashcroft appeared before a legal group in New York City to defend a range of stepped-up security measures put in place by the Bush administration. The choices offered by the husky Missourian were stark. We could “either succumb to fanatics who seek to extinguish political and religious freedom, fanatics who would enslave women, corrupt education and kill Americans wherever and whenever they can; or we had the option to fight in defense of lives and liberties. . . .”<sup>3</sup> In the same message he also noted that “those who criticize our actions [in the Justice Department] would have us respond to the terrorism by doing nothing: no detention of aliens, no screening of visitors, no war powers, no internet searches, no cooperation between law enforcement agencies, no modernization of surveillance tools.”<sup>4</sup> It was that simple. The “war” on terrorism had fired in many a fantasy of the U.S. under siege. Those like Ashcroft who had moved to the front of the barricades thought that their political foes would barely lift a finger. He would do everything, even when his options apparently intruded on the civil liberties that he was supposed to uphold.<sup>5</sup>

Those who knew John Ashcroft when he was head of the Justice Department never doubted his sincerity. The man you saw was the man you got. His strong religious views were more than political decoration. And his perspective of a world with stark choices between the expedient and the good informed almost everything he did. His was a language of censorious first principles issued through parsed lips. Most were key tropes associated with the evangelical right: life carries a set of responsibilities as well as freedoms; we should honor the past; success comes from hard work; and the judgment of God matters more than the judgments of others. Their correlates were ideographs with special resonance in conservative circles—"nobility," "honor," "God's presence," "natural order," "choices," "instant gratification," "disrespect," "evil," and so on.<sup>6</sup> Reworked continuously into a series of Jeremiads, they said a lot about Ashcroft's binary frame of mind, and even more about the sense of violated boundaries that often motivates Americans ready to push back against a changing world.

In the former Attorney General's national vision, there was little room for the joys of uncertainty, the acceptance of difference, or the subjectivity of judgment. His religious self needed answers more than it loved questions—a pattern reflected in his own sideline as a composer of patriotic hymns.<sup>7</sup> What the newly declared war on terrorism did was simplify rather than contextualize a complicated world. It sanctioned its own kind of fervent jihad. "I don't particularly care if I do what's right in the sight of men," he noted. "The important thing is for me to do right in God's sight."<sup>8</sup> In *On My Honor* he wrote about being the dutiful son who has held on to the timeless virtues enacted by his Pentecostal father. With words like "indulgence," "nobility," and "eternity," he used moral absolutism to distance himself from a secular world grown too tolerant of alien views.<sup>9</sup> They celebrated timeless virtues against the modernist preference for inclusion and accommodation. Warnings against being judged in this time and place appear on almost every page:

"Life is a series of choices between noble aspirations and selfish indulgence."<sup>10</sup>

"For every crucifixion, there is a resurrection."<sup>11</sup>

"The verdict of history is inconsequential; the verdict of eternity is what counts."<sup>12</sup>

The Attorney General was no Vaclav Havel. Times may have been tough, but in his view they did not force us into difficult choices. He was not someone who could admit a vexation with the crosscurrents and ironies of living through extraordinary times. In that sense he was a perfect fit for the supremely confident Bush administration. Free from doubts about jeopardizing evolved

human rights, he could act as a “defender of the faith” against alien infidels, matching their fundamentalist certainty with his own.

This logic mirrors a pattern Richard Hofstadter described in his Pulitzer-winning study, “Anti-Intellectualism in American life.” Among others he wrote about the “one-hundred percenter” mentality of well-known preacher Billy Sunday. There is a kind of mind, he notes, that will “tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations.”<sup>13</sup> Hofstadter’s analysis is a reminder that for every American in love with the purity of such thinking, there are others disturbed by its simplemindedness.

The goal of this chapter is to compare the more dialogical features of the rhetorical personality against its proximate opposites represented in figures like Ashcroft. We take as a starting point the work of the seminal rhetorical theorist Richard Weaver, who observed that “style in speech always causes one to be a marked man.”<sup>14</sup> *How* we choose to represent the world leaves a unique rhetorical signature. Through a series of profiles of five additional public figures, we will look at contrasting modes of address that correspond to what I will argue are the relatively open tendencies of the rhetorical personality against a tendency to use the more fixed principles reflected in the hortatory style.

Ashcroft revealed himself to be a throwback to an earlier era of inner-directed leaders and antimodernists. He wore his inner-directedness as a badge of honor. There was a similar aversion to accommodation in the rhetoric of George W. Bush as well, generally the stylistic opposite of what is typically on display in the public rhetoric of former President Bill Clinton and Harvard economist Elizabeth Warren. These last three are figures are profiled briefly in the following pages, with Warren perhaps the least known. Even before the disastrous economic meltdown in 2007, she cultivated a second career as a relentless critic of the lending practices of the nation’s largest banks. She sought out media leaders to engage on this issue. As this is written, she also serves as Chair of the Congressional Oversight Panel established by Congress to monitor the unprecedented 2008 federal bailout of some of the nation’s largest banks.

We close with assessments of two additional figures, President Jimmy Carter and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, noting a *blended* pattern of leadership that mixes populist and a priori patterns of reasoning. Blair and Carter are reminders that the generative sources of rhetoric within some can originate from competing motivations, often with dire political consequences.

All of these cases will demonstrate Richard Weaver’s observation that *how* we typically construct our thoughts reveals significant details about how we understand the world. We will develop an argument congruent with Weaver’s assertion that in our civil discourse, acts of rhetorical accommodation are more characteristically “liberal,” and those anchored in unchallengeable first principles are probable (if imperfect) indicators of a “conservative cast.”<sup>15</sup>

In this model, which is the focus of the next section, Ashcroft's certainties are as indicative of his own patterns of thought as Bill Clinton's impulses to measure political value in terms of the material effects of policy on the day-to-day lives of ordinary people. We expect to see evidence of audience-centered *accommodation* and identification in the rhetorical personality, and more psychological certainty in those who use the hortatory style. Where the latter emphasizes convictions and core beliefs that need not be defended, the former is more cautious, tentative, and dialogical.

One irony in this analysis is that it challenges the common judgment that a potent declamatory style is the very epitome of communication mastery. The thunder of righteous certitude may be a cliché. But its historic and contemporary practitioners still dominate our anthologies of great speakers. Even when it is alien to their nature, every President or aspirant to national leadership finds durable commonplaces—expressions of cultural universals—that cover more personal goals and ambitions. But they often come at the high price of sacrificing communication's potential gifts of discovery and imagination. The conventional view, for example, is that President Ronald Reagan was "the great communicator" not because he was didactic and subtle, but because he used the nation's most cherished canons as a durable and predictable catechism.

Our ideal lies elsewhere. As the evidence in most of the rest of this book suggests, the model of principled action as the formulaic corollary of political legitimacy needs modification. If there can be a general model of excellence in public communication, it resides in individuals who can make discourse a genuine collaboration with interlocutors, as well as an acknowledgement of their needs.

To be sure, these are broad ideas with their own risks, including the same kind of deterministic analysis and dualistic thinking that feeds the simplifications we decry in the former Attorney General. Even so, the heuristic opportunities are worth the gamble. Our public rhetoric is an important signature of how we have come to terms with the world. Embedded within it are cues that reveal our dependencies on invariant ideologies, or—more hopefully—our willingness to reconcile self to others.

## HORTATORY STYLE AND CERTAINTIES OF MIND

Though some specific details vary, analysts mention a number of common features of the hortatory style. Rod Hart cites three measures developed in conjunction with his message analysis program *DICTION*. In this context, the style is characterized by words of certainty and allness, common use of

various forms of the verb form “to be,” and repeated dependence on patriotic and religious words.<sup>16</sup> It also has its own characteristic form of argument. As exhortation, it presents itself in views that have been mostly worked out prior to contact with an audience. It commands, urges, and declaims. Its jeremiads often come as warnings or complete definitions of a situation. And its authors often seem to exhibit a high degree of certitude. Andrew Robertson notes that “Old Man Eloquent” William Gladstone fit the bill. The Victorian Prime Minister “inspired—and antagonized—voters with his moralistic appeals,”<sup>17</sup> in ways not unlike the old-style preaching that James Maguire mentions as a surviving norm in the pulpit. As a way of expressing religious conviction the hortatory style is frequently “dogmatic” and “insensitive” to “the social forces intruding into the lives of his audience.”<sup>18</sup> In a room of communicators with such inclinations, there may seem to be more lips than ears.

Religion scholar James Davison Hunter has similarly described men and women like Ashcroft who have fought on what he calls the “traditionalist” side of America’s ongoing “culture wars.” He notes that the orthodox camp celebrates “natural law” over human law, moral authority over secular values, and personal responsibility over social obligation.<sup>19</sup> Arguments from first principles easily shift to the often dubious ground of natural law, often sweeping entire groups to the wrong side of what is “right” or “moral.” “God doesn’t make people that way. Don’t blame God for that,” declared a Pomona, California, minister supporting a statewide ban that would have prohibited gays from working in public schools.<sup>20</sup> A gay lifestyle was deemed to offend the first principles of scripture and nature, defining in one sentence who gets to be counted within the American canon.

The contrasting idea of “invitational rhetoric” offers a convenient opposite that is far closer to the ideal we have in mind. Jennifer Bone and her collaborators have asked if we are missing alternatives for civility that emphasize communicating *with* rather than *at* someone. Invitational rhetoric offers participants “an environment where growth and change can occur but where changing others is neither the ultimate goal nor the criterion for success in the interaction.”<sup>21</sup> Such a communicator may still have strong ideas, but suspend them long enough to allow contacts with others to unfold in a dialogical process rather than the hortatory mode, avoiding the latter’s emphasis on affirmations, certainty, and the foreclosure of possibilities for doubt. As Bone and her colleagues note, Jimmy Carter caught the tone of this kind of public communication in his July 1979 speech to the nation about its “confidence crisis.” “You can help me develop a national agenda for the 1980s,” he noted. “I will listen; and I will act. We will act together.”<sup>22</sup>

What Weaver had in mind is a distinction that conceptually fits with Bone’s view, even though he favors the other side. He sees a crucial difference in



thinking between those who typically respond to events by focusing on surrounding circumstances, versus those who understand events by reference to relevant a priori definitions. “The type of argument a man chooses,” he notes, “gives us the profoundest look we get at his principle of integration.”<sup>23</sup> His point is that “argument from definition” is a classic conservative stance. “The true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences, of which the phenomenology of the world is a sort of continuing approximation.”<sup>24</sup> These definitions are typically core values given priority over the messy and more ambiguous conditions of everyday life. One of his examples is Abraham Lincoln’s own description of the writers of the Declaration of Independence:

They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Weaver means to elevate argument from definition or principle against its opposite: the “expediency” and pragmatism evident in “arguments from circumstance.” The latter form, he notes, “merely reads the circumstances—the ‘facts standing around’—and accepts them as coercive, or allows them to dictate the decision.”<sup>26</sup> His primary example is Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century British statesman who pleaded the cause of greater freedom for Catholics in Ireland. He points out how Burke used evidence of the sheer number of disenfranchised Catholics as a reason for changing their status under British rule.<sup>27</sup> This sense of context and situation is “philosophically appropriate to the liberal,” though generally lacking in force because it does not have the philosophical foundations that the best debates in the public realm need.<sup>28</sup>

Weaver is dismissive of this kind of argument, which for his taste pays too much attention to one thing rather than how it fits into the larger scheme of things. It’s perhaps the same distinction that pits “strict constructionists” on the Supreme Court who—as Barack Obama notes—“would stick to the original meaning of the founders’ words” rather than reconsider the law in light of modern circumstances.<sup>29</sup> One view sees the constitution as inviolate. The other asks that the law be honored but interpreted with reference to contemporary contexts.

Of course, ignoring “the facts standing around” sometimes comes at a huge price. It limits having to deal with the hard realities of the empirical world, sometimes making the argument from principle a refuge from the unpleasant truths of systematic research and investigation. From this point of view, material social conditions are usually not going to be persuasive enough to

undermine a comfortable axiom that must be honored. But at what cost? For example, the pervasiveness of gun deaths in the United States makes some feel that we are more burdened by the Second Amendment to the Constitution than we are protected by what others consider a venerable guarantee of freedom. Even as a sacred principle, the amendment may seem no longer inviolable to some who are seized by the horrible fact that over 10 years, guns have been the instrument of death for 29,000 American *children*.<sup>30</sup> The same preference for holding to principle regardless of what may arise may explain why Ronald Reagan remained silent in the face of a rising AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s.<sup>31</sup> That many of its first victims were gays who, he seemed to believe, had violated God's law perhaps meant more than the cumulative tragedy of illness and death spreading through gay communities around the United States.

To be sure, not all users of any identifiable style will fit easily under even a very wide ideological umbrella. Hortatory certainty always has at least the short-term advantage in angry times. We use righteous certainty as a trump card against explanations with more subtlety. In addition, it is frequently a feature of the language of reform. Martin Luther King's most memorable speeches—notably, "I have a Dream"—functioned in this mode, reminding the nation of cherished first principles violated by the abominations of slavery and Jim Crow.<sup>32</sup> King was in the business of challenging the nation to honor its founding principles. Weaver might have welcomed him as the perfect heir to what he had in mind in the idea of the conservative's preferred argument from invariant first principles.

In addition, there are also times when even those who would define themselves as "liberal" or "progressive" seem more at home arguing inviolate principles than cases. This is sometimes a clear affliction of the "chattering classes" that feed never-ending cycles of news. A key recent instance was the passage of the landmark healthcare reform bill in March of 2010 that brought stiff political resistance from many progressives. It was far less than many hoped. The bill that finally survived the meat grinder of the legislative process nonetheless offered the hope of medical insurance to 30 million uninsured Americans. It also tightened rules on providers prohibiting, among other things, the use of exclusions to applicants with preexisting medical conditions. Interestingly, progressive representatives such as Dennis Kucinich reluctantly came around to supporting the bill. President Obama's effects-centered arguments seemed to carry the day. But some "liberal" pundits and journalists remained steadfast in their arguments from definition, asserting that no bill at all was better than what finally passed. As *The Progressive's* editor Matthew Rothschild put it, "Even though Kucinich now gives this bill his blessing, that doesn't mean that all progressive citizens need to follow

suit.” Rothschild used a principle expressed by the liberal historian Howard Zinn to make his point. “When a social movement adopts the compromises of legislators, it has forgotten its role.”<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, political labels are a slippery business. Even so, the implication that sticking to principle is better than accepting improvements in material social conditions seems at least broadly “conservative” in style, if sometimes not in full alignment with the political landscape on any given day. The advantage in this scheme is partly in its heuristics. It gives us a helpful label for the rhetorical instinct to find comfort on the high ground of ideology rather than the earthquake-prone geography of individual lives.

In the five short case studies in the remainder of this extended chapter, we revisit key features of the rhetorical personality and its opposite in five leaders. Among them there are three Presidents, a recent British Prime Minister, and an academic who seized the chance to convert conventional university research into public policy advocacy. Each offers the chance to observe contrasting patterns of open-ended engagement and rhetorical certainty at a specific moment in time. And in the case of our last two—Tony Blair and Jimmy Carter—we see both styles compete in an uneasy truce within the same person.

### CLINTON: TEMPTING THE FATES AND THE MILLIONAIRES OF BASEBALL

As we noted at the beginning of this book, Bill Clinton is the nearly perfect embodiment of the rhetorical personality. There is, of course, the man himself as a “force of nature” and “charismatic” figure. Political observers still describe him as the most interesting person in the room, a teller of great stories, and an avid talker.<sup>34</sup> And there is the figure of enormous appetites. Clinton has been described as a man who in various cycles of his life has been consumed by curiosity, ambition, lust, work, and the search for a cause to champion. He is famously remembered as the President who relished the challenge of a great national crisis.<sup>35</sup> In a full-length psychological study of Clinton, John Gartner proposes a clinical name for people like him who can never be doing enough. He calls them “hypomanic personalities.” He argues that they are endowed with “immense energy, confidence, visionary creativity, infectious enthusiasm, and a sense of personal destiny.”

They are gifted evangelists and sales people who win converts to their vision. Their mood is exuberant, sunny, elated, and that mood is infectious, energizing those around them. They are charismatic, persuasive and attractive. They are

charming, witty, gregarious, and good at making people laugh. They like to be the center of attention, want to be the boss, and seek to be the alpha male or female in any group, and thus come into conflict with authority. They are pushy, meddlesome, and don't take no for an answer.<sup>36</sup>

Putting public figures on the couch often produces overly deterministic results. But we can be sure of one thing. Clinton thrives on his ability to turn a goal such as an election or (more recently) various programs of humanitarian relief into effective onslaughts of persuasive communication. He likes the challenge. It's not just that he needs a cause; he seems to thrive when he is working with other people, especially if he can be the engine of another's transformation.

In her assessment of the first months of his administration after the 1992 election, Elizabeth Drew described a perpetually exhausted President complaining to aides about too many formal commitments on the agenda and not enough time to be with other people. She noted that staffers tried to adjust his workday so that he could spend his afternoons in the kind of political work that he liked.

Good days would be when he could meet or talk to people he wanted to hear from, such as David Pryor, whom he could brainstorm with; black ministers (an aide said, "He's always felt he got good advice from black ministers"); someone who'd written a book he admired; members of the Cabinet who'd held elective office and whom he especially respected; . . . political contacts he wanted to stay in touch with (especially from states that he'd won or almost won). . . .<sup>37</sup>

The difference with other Presidents is probably more in degree than kind. But it is another reminder of Clinton's complete comfort in placing himself in a steady flow of ideas from others. In his administration there would be no rush to wrap up the Presidential workday at 4:00 or 5:00 p.m.—as Reagan had done—in order to retreat to the family quarters for dinner in front of a television set.<sup>38</sup> More than most, and frequently to his detriment, Clinton ran the White House as if he were still in the final months of a general election campaign. Friends and supplicants filed in at will to feed his boundless appetite for ideas. He welcomed discussion and dissent. And he especially liked the challenge of finding a way past the resistance of a visitor who saw things differently. Even after his two terms in the White House, notes journalist Peter Baker, he still "focuses his considerable charms on seducing the person in the room he finds the most resistant."<sup>39</sup>

With this appetite for contact and the desire to remove any of obstacles of human reluctance, Clinton in his first term allowed himself to be drawn into a dispute that rivaled the intransience of ancient tribal feud. To the surprise and

concern of some staffers, he took the bait of rhetorical opportunity in an attempt to settle a prolonged and noisy strike of major league baseball players.

Members of all the teams walked off the job in 1994, arguing that a salary cap the team owners wanted to impose would place undue restrictions on what were in many cases multimillion dollar contracts. The strike lasted 234 days, resulting in the cancellation of the World Series and part of the spring season the following year.<sup>40</sup> It eventually ended in April 1995 when then-federal judge Sonia Sotomayor issued an injunction against the owners. Only then were they forced to resume the new season under the conditions of the expired players contract.

The republic was probably safe even with the momentary absence of professional baseball. But the long strike came with its own chorus of fans and writers who continued to fret over darkened stadiums and shrunken sports pages. It was easy to tap into the overworked mythology of the American pastime and draw the conclusion that Congress and the President should—for once—tackle a problem that truly mattered. Led by House leader Newt Gingrich, Congress held hearings and pondered what it could do, which turned out to be very little, given the special monopoly status granted baseball franchises years earlier. The sport is one of the few businesses in American life given an antitrust exemption that protects owners from more open competition.<sup>41</sup> For his part, Clinton soon appointed master negotiator William Utery to find a way out of the contract impasse. Few meetings with the press did not include a question to the President about doing even more to try to end the strike. Nearly every American had formed an opinion about the “greedy” players and their dour union head, Donald Fehr. But the owners often did no better, especially New York Yankees’ president George Steinbrenner. He was widely resented outside of Gotham for trying to buy a World Series with bloated player contracts.

The fretting continued through the fall and early winter. And in February, the President decided to put the prestige of the White House on the line. Robert Reich, then the administration’s labor secretary, recalls Clinton’s eagerness to get involved. As a general rule, Presidents avoid getting in the middle of labor disputes. It is difficult to satisfy both sides, and there is also the strong possibility of failure. With the exception of work stoppages that “create a national emergency,” Presidents cannot force strikers back to their jobs. Writing his own contemporary account of Clinton’s involvement, Reich wrote that “He smells a deal. He’d like to be savior of the national pastime. He has heard that the two sides are at this moment in Washington. ‘Why don’t we just call them over to the White House and see how far we can get?’”<sup>42</sup>

By 6:00 p.m. on February 7, the key actors were all in place. Reich, White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, and Vice President Gore met with Fehr

and owners' representative Bud Selig. There were also other owners and players invited to the West Wing, and a growing cadre of journalists near the Roosevelt Room who sensed that the President was about to give back to Americans their favorite summer sport.

Reich understood what was motivating Clinton. His notes from that day observe that the President "is an eternal optimist, convinced that there's always a deal lying out there *somewhere*. That's what makes him a super-salesman: He is absolutely certain that every single person he meets—Newt Gingrich, Yasir Arafat, whoever—wants to find common ground. It's simply a matter of discovering where it is."<sup>43</sup>

Rhetorically, this concept carries its own architecture of transcendence. Perhaps as much as any single trait, such confidence in the presence of others defines the rhetorical personality. As we noted in chapter 3, agreement is possible because of a faith in the existence of common beliefs that we all hold. They simply need to be found and verbalized in a dialectic that moves upward toward shared values and interests that can dull the alienating effect of sharp differences. Think of the typical ladder that has parallel rails that never join. In persons with Clinton's style of other-directedness, the ladder is different. It is a tool with slightly angled side rails that eventually meet at the top. You simply have to find the higher rungs of common values where separation gives way to connection.<sup>44</sup> When a public figure talks about appealing to "the angels of our better nature" or "beliefs we all hold dear," he or she is searching upward to find that point of transcendence where seemingly different interests converge in ultimate terms and core principles. Find and affirm these, notes the rhetorical personality, and the disagreements that divide may hardly seem to matter. And while this appears to be searching in the conservative's backyard for safe tropes of certainty, it is done here more as a strategic objective than the assertion of a nonnegotiable principle.

But it can be difficult to find common ground between two factions accustomed to getting so much and giving so little. Gore's approach was to recapitulate what each side wanted in a settlement and split the difference. Salary caps would help the owners, especially in smaller markets, and work as a hedge against the runaway salary offers that characterizes the search for major league talent. For their part, players wanted to make as much money as the market would allow, knowing that careers can sometimes be cut short. But the Vice President's approach did not seem to be working. When the warring parties were in the same room, the rancor was palpable, with each side taking turns apparently offering schoolboy retorts as their opposites spoke.<sup>45</sup> The animosity was so great that representatives of the two groups were sent off to separate spaces, with Gore and Clinton shuttling back and forth between them.

Meeting with Selig in Panetta's office, Reich recalls that Clinton tried to turn on the charm:

Look Bud, You guys can make millions. *Millions*. We'll have a b-i-g sendoff for the season. I'll help you. We'll all help. I'll get [Robert] Dole to go to Kansas, Gingrich to Atlanta. I'll have every major figure in America out there for the start. Can't you just see it? . . . This will be the biggest season *ever* in the *history* of the game. Now . . . *all* you need to do . . . is agree to have this thing arbitrated. It's in your interest, Bud. . . . And it's also in the interest of America.<sup>46</sup>

For a moment the pitch seemed to work. Selig appeared to be genuinely moved, and ready to recommend the deal to the owners. He needed a few minutes to make some phone calls, he noted, leaving Clinton with the feeling that he had finally broken through. But a half hour later Selig returned looking sheepish. His colleagues were not buying the Clinton plan. There would be no acceptance of an independent arbitrator.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the deal was rejected by both sides in such bitterness that the White House staff ordered separate vans to take the two factions back to their hotel.<sup>48</sup>

The former President devotes only one paragraph of his nearly 1000-page memoir to the subject.<sup>49</sup> The effort clearly failed, and the press predictably linked it to administration problems in passing health care reform and a host of other weightier initiatives. Questions began to pop up at the first press conference after the meeting:

"Mr. President, why did you invite the players and owners to the White House in the first place?"

"If you can't even get these parties to agree, what hope do you have in Bosnia?"

"Does this mark the nadir of this administration's influence?"<sup>50</sup>

The *New York Time's* George Vescey caught the flavor of disappointment the next day:

Only one week away from the grubby spectacle of [replacement player] Oil Can Boyd's comeback, we want action. Instead, we're getting a civics lesson: The Impotence of the Executive Branch. The President as Helpless Giant. Against our own cynical better judgment, we still harbored the hope of the baseball owners and the baseball players being hauled off to the Ultimate Principal's Office.<sup>51</sup>

The pundits were skeptical about the President's chances. And Clinton apparently had his own later doubts about having made the effort.<sup>52</sup> But if his critics were jaded, his act of involvement in the strike was not. A commitment

to the ideas of reason and communication in human affairs is a signal virtue in any person. It would have been safer to do nothing. Though Clinton was partially drawn by the political gain of solving an intractable dispute, it is to his credit that he was willing to put the reputation of his office to work in service of finding a solution. Currently the extremely visible head of an ambitious foundation that sometimes reaches further than it can grasp, the former President is still aware that his outsized ambitions cannot always be fulfilled. “You know, I’m a Baptist,” he told a reporter in 2009. “We don’t give up on anybody. We believe in deathbed conversions.”<sup>53</sup>

### GEORGE W. BUSH: ABOVE THE CROWD

The writer Ring Lardner, Jr., once offered a reasonable facsimile of the rhetorical personality. He noted that “at rare intervals, there appears among us a person whose virtues are so manifest to all, who has such a capacity for relating to every sort of human being, who so subordinates his own ego drive to the concerns of others, who lives his whole life in such harmony with the surrounding community that he is revered and loved by everyone with whom he comes in contact.” At the time Lardner was giving the eulogy for his friend and similarly accomplished scribe, Dalton Trumbo. The writerly twist, of course, was his final observation that—even with all of his gifts and political courage—“Trumbo was not such a man.”<sup>54</sup>

And so it has been with assessments of George W. Bush. Few Presidents left so many puzzled listeners in his wake, or offered so many ambiguous signals of character. Even to his admirers Bush could seem opaque, hide-bound, and slow to see the requirements of rhetorical obligation. “I interview politicians for a living,” wrote the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. “And every time I brush against Bush I’m reminded that this guy is different. There’s none of that hunger for approval that is common to the breed.”<sup>55</sup> Journalist Ron Susskind similarly described him as a bundle of inward looking traits, including “a disdain for contemplation or deliberation, an embrace of decisiveness, a retreat from empiricism, a sometimes bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questioners.”<sup>56</sup>

And there is the enigmatic smile. What did it mean to hear of the necessities for harsh interrogation of war prisoners passing through a face that registered a kind of Mona Lisa smirk? As we shall see, when he did explain himself and the sometimes momentous decisions of what he saw as a wartime presidency, he did so in the staccato cadences of stock reassurance. He continually undercut his own opportunities to explain his administration, reciting simple assertions of right rather than developed arguments in support of far-reaching



domestic and foreign policies.<sup>57</sup> His own press secretary defined the Bush White House as a place based on a culture of defense rather than explanation. Pressed for details and the sources of his conclusions, he would fall back on the same first principles. In short, the forty-third President's rhetorical style represents the inverse of patterns associated with the rhetorical personality.

Hart identified three cornerstones of Bush's style in his second term, including locutions reflecting a high degree of certainty, patriotic words, and similar "tokens of Americanism," and a reliance on Judeo-Christian terminology and constructs.<sup>58</sup> Nearly every address seemed to default to the same kind of innate commonplaces that cannot easily be denied, as in these familiar truths from the Second Inaugural:

- The maximization of freedom should be the goal of all political decisions: "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."
- The exceptionalist role of the United States: "In a world moving toward liberty, we are determined to show the meaning and promise of liberty."
- The guiding hand of God on the actions United States: "God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul."<sup>59</sup>

Most Presidents have used similar inclusive touchstones in their ceremonial rhetoric. But when inviolate maxims filter into everyday responses to questions and defenses of policy, they have the effect of unnaturally cleansing life of exemptions, indecision, or uncertainty. They set a course that seems to have the advantage of moral clarity, creating a defensive shield of unshakable conviction.

Revealingly, just after he sat down for one of his interviews with Brooks, Bush made a preemptory strike before the columnist could ask anything. The Iraqi occupation was unfolding with far greater casualties and problems than anyone in the administration had predicted. Given that reality, he said "Let me just first tell you that I've never been more convinced that the decisions I made are the right decisions."<sup>60</sup> The comment was clearly intended to frame everything else that might follow. This small rhetorical inoculation seemed intended to ward off questions that might undermine decisions he believed would stand the test of time. Such defensive certitude perhaps said more than Bush intended. It was true to Bush's rhetorical style, playing off the sturdy old saw that doubt communicates vulnerability. And it was perhaps the only way that foreign policies heavily dependent on military intervention could be sustained. Place oneself in the flow of day-to-day intelligence about the human costs of occupying cities or unleashing deadly airstrikes, and perhaps

no one but the committed rhetorical conservative could find sufficient comfort in a covering principle.<sup>61</sup>

To be sure, restatements of the American canon often served Bush and the nation reasonably well in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>62</sup> The audacity and scale of the devastation called for the kind of terse resolve that he seemed especially capable of producing.<sup>63</sup> But the slow-motion devastation of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina was another matter. The rhetorical and physical distance he maintained in the early days of the crisis would come at significant political cost.

The 2005 storm that battered the Gulf Coast and submerged New Orleans called for a leader who was deft at sensing and interpreting a national crisis. The glare of the constant television coverage required the rhetorical will to comfort victims and promise immediate renewal. The video spectacle of a drowning American city was the weather equivalent of the London blitz. It needed a Churchillian sensitivity to the misery of the stranded and displaced. It also needed to acknowledge the increasing embarrassment of Americans who looked on with the rest of the world while their government dithered. Perhaps no President could have fully prevented the wave of national frustration in the immediate aftermath of the storm. But more than any other moment of his presidency, recalled Kenneth Walsh, Bush's "failure to act while thousands of desperate people . . . were appealing for help on national television erased his image as an effective decision maker."<sup>64</sup> He may have claimed for himself the title of "the decider." What he was not was an effective explainer.

It was not the case that Bush made himself unavailable to the press. He averaged a little over 25 press conferences a year, about the same number as Bill Clinton, Lyndon Johnson, and John Kennedy, and far more than Ronald Reagan or Jimmy Carter.<sup>65</sup> He also gave addresses and remarks in roughly the same ratio of his immediate predecessors: about 500 in a 12-month cycle.<sup>66</sup> The rhetorical shift from Clinton to Bush was due to something else, a preference to make news rather than respond to it, and an indifference to the belief shared by many Americans that government is responsible for the well-being of the most vulnerable among us.

"Natural disasters are widely viewed as tests of presidential leadership," notes former Bush press secretary Scott McClellan. "The press and the people want to see their president behaving assertively and authoritatively in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. They also expect to see him visiting the affected area as quickly as possible."<sup>67</sup> And therein lay the problem. The President was on vacation in Crawford, Texas, at the time, and was slow to respond. There was no question that the White House had done the preliminaries. The administration knew that the category 3 hurricane would do serious damage.

Days before the hurricane struck it cleared the way for financial support for rebuilding by granting the Gulf States advance disaster relief loans. But the President delayed changing travel plans to adjust to the new realities.

At its height, the storm covered an area as wide as the distance between Boston and Washington, DC. On August 29th, millions watched on television as tens of thousands of citizens in New Orleans became stranded as dikes holding back canals fed by the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain began to fail. Twenty-six thousand people fled to the chaotic shelter of the Superdome downtown, turning it into an island from which there was no easy exit. Thousands more were stranded on the upper floors of homes in the city's low-lying parishes. In the days that would follow, more than 1500 would die along the Gulf Coast, with more than 250,000 homes destroyed or rendered uninhabitable.<sup>68</sup> Those with the resources to leave—many from middle-class and white neighborhoods—abandoned New Orleans, Biloxi, and other cities in neighboring Mississippi. Smaller towns with distinctly southern names—Pass Christian, Bay St. Louis, Jackson, and others—were left without electricity, or an effective governmental response. Local agencies were quickly overwhelmed and understaffed. Their infrastructure for emergencies was simply not up to the task.<sup>69</sup>

It was four days before President Bush visited the scene, and five before a significant number of national guard units could begin to help evacuate the displaced. Through these early days, television news networks used ground and helicopter-based units to give the rest of the nation hours of crisis coverage, absent any apparent federal or state attempts at coordinated rescue. Americans raised on television melodramas of heroic search and rescue had to get used to the harsher reality of watching the poor languish on rooftops unassisted, or wading through the foul waters that had turned New Orleans into a bayou of distress. To some it resembled another Third World diaspora. And yet it was on *our* shores, and in a storied city that millions had visited.

The federal government's slowness was represented by the administration's decision to merely have the President fly over the devastation on Air Force One. Bush had to return to Washington, DC, from Crawford. So the seeming concession of a small and convenient detour added to the impression of a President disengaged from the crisis. McClellan quotes other journalists who saw the pictures of Bush passively peering out the window "detached and powerless, unable even to comprehend how he might use the government to help his own people."<sup>70</sup> He can only muster a lukewarm characterization of his boss's delay in doing anything beyond the perfunctory expressions of concern. "Bush fully grasped Katrina's destructiveness," he notes. But even on his first trip to the area four days later, "he didn't meet those in New Orleans who'd suffered the most."<sup>71</sup>

Why was the White House response so plodding? Presidential scholar Martha Kumar's explanation is, at once, more charitable and also more damning. The President had not really witnessed the unfolding crisis in ways most other Americans had. Lyndon Johnson famously kept a large console of three television sets in the Oval Office, frequently watching the news coverage of his administration on the broadcast networks. He usually didn't like the coverage. Nonetheless, he understood the loop of *perception and response* that he was tied to.<sup>72</sup> But—as McClellan noted—“President Bush often made a point of describing himself as someone who neither read newspapers nor watched television.”

Because he was traveling during those first days of the hurricane, he saw little more than snippets of television coverage. When an article in *Newsweek* reported that communications adviser Dan Bartlett had made a DVD of news broadcasts to show the president as he traveled to the Gulf for the first time, the impression of an out-of-touch president was cemented.<sup>73</sup>

Nor would the press secretary's job get any easier in the days that followed. Many remembered Bush's public words of consolation to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, who lost a *vacation* home to the storm in Pascagoula, Mississippi, or his support in the same news conference for the hapless Michael Brown. “Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job,”<sup>74</sup> he told his Federal Emergency Management (FEMA) director in front of the cameras, just a few days before replacing him. Brown was to be a key sacrificial goat. The inexperienced political appointee and his agency were under steady attack for being unable to implement a coordinated plan to shelter the newly homeless.

FEMA was indeed an easy target, but the administration was the real culprit. Under Bush the once model emergency agency had been gutted of funds. A key administration leader had earlier called it an “oversized entitlement program,” scaling back its Clinton-era readiness nurtured under the skillful leadership of James Dewitt.<sup>75</sup> The tepid response of a weakened FEMA, along with a delay in national guard and military responses were magnified as well by the inadequate planning of city and state leaders, especially in Louisiana.

The White House did eventually fulfill the required Presidential script for the crisis. The need to repair the wounds created by Katrina would force Bush to move away from the generalities he liked to evoke. He would make a prime-time address in the empty and darkened city. And he would at last make a verbal commitment of vast sums of federal money to rebuild.

In what are perhaps the most bizarre surroundings ever chosen for a modern Presidential appearance, White House technicians flew in electric

generators and an advance team to set up lights and cameras in the deserted Jackson Square on the edge of the French Quarter, and directly across from the levee that normally kept the Mississippi River in its banks. The square is normally a central hub for tourists crowding in for concerts, art shows, and its lush tropical gardens set against some of the city's most appealing old buildings. The front of St. Louis Cathedral was lit like a ghostly stage set, empty of any apparent life except the shirt-sleeved President. Alone against the black sky, and seemingly the only survivor of an Armageddon, Bush spoke over the eerie silence of the square, finally promising a full effort to restore what had been lost.

As a presentation without a visible audience, it was an odd form of Presidential theater. Presidents do not usually go outdoors to speak to an abandoned city. The effect was to echo perceptions of his isolation. By contrast, the apparent absence of people for an Oval Office address doesn't test our sense of its veracity. It's a majestic but limited space. We understand the audience is at the other end of an electronic link. But speaking in a deserted square in the first modern American city ever officially abandoned must have struck many Americans as unusual. Perhaps this was his way of keeping faith with the American public. Yet Presidents out in the world thrive on visible contact with others. Most cities—and especially this one—are defined by their hyperkinetic conviviality. Was the camera shot of the President against the cathedral worth the concurrent and eerie feeling of isolation? Perhaps it did not seem so out of character for a White House that preferred audiences prescreened and handpicked.<sup>76</sup> But it is easy to imagine that another leader thrust into the same circumstances would have sensed the awkwardness of the moment.

He came, he said, “to offer this pledge of the American people:”

Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes; we will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.<sup>77</sup>

He went on to detail various relief and incentive programs that would seed the rebuilding effort, cautioning that tougher standards for construction and zoning would need to be enforced. He also acknowledged the growing sense fed by images of Katrina's victims that America was becoming a bipolar society of the poor against the more affluent. It was a moment of uncharacteristic recognition that American wealth had not been spread as evenly to its citizens as many would like to believe. Few events in the American past had made so many of its citizens feel the chill that comes with civil abandonment.

As all of us saw on television, there is also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. And that poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality.

There was a certain irony that the devastation of the homeland Bush so feared and warned about nearly every day would come not from destitute jihadists halfway around the world, but in an Atlantic storm nearly as predictable as the change of seasons. There was no immediate villain for this scenario. But as a species we seem to be at a loss to tell our stories without assigning motives to outcomes. And so it became easy to question how the vast homeland security apparatus failed to deliver more responsive help. Bush needed to catch up to what most of the country already knew. At the same time, he had to acknowledge a need for governmental activism that was alien to his beliefs.

I also want to know all the facts about the Government response to Hurricane Katrina. The storm involved a massive flood, a major supply and security operation, and an evacuation order affecting more than a million people. It was not a normal hurricane, and the normal disaster relief system was not equal to it. Many of the men and women of the Coast Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the United States military, the National Guard, Homeland Security, and State and local governments performed skillfully under the worst conditions. Yet the system, at every level of government, was not well-coordinated and was overwhelmed in the first few days. It is now clear that a challenge on this scale requires greater Federal authority and a broader role for the Armed Forces, the institution of our Government most capable of massive logistical operations on a moment's notice. . . . I know that when you sit on the steps of a porch where a home once stood or sleep on a cot in a crowded shelter, it is hard to imagine a bright future. But that future will come. The streets of Biloxi and Gulfport will again be filled with lovely homes and the sound of children playing. The churches of Alabama will have their broken steeples mended and their congregations whole. And here in New Orleans, the streetcars will once again rumble down St. Charles, and the passionate soul of a great city will return.

If it "was not the president's most stirring speech," noted a *New York Times* reporter, it at least "conveyed a sense of command far more than his off-key efforts in the days immediately after the storm, when he often seemed more interested in bucking up government officials than in addressing the dire situation confronting hundreds of thousands of displaced and desperate people."<sup>78</sup> It also did not play to what he must have sensed were his own strengths as a

self-styled “wartime leader.”<sup>79</sup> He thrived on defiant affirmation rather than reaction or concession. He liked to describe himself as a “doer,” “decider,” “provoker,” or “charger.”<sup>80</sup> But this disaster could not be answered on some alien battlefield. Nor could anyone be made to pay the price by facing the “shock and awe” military power that an American leader can unleash. Without question, any President would have been challenged to coordinate so massive a relief operation. But Bush seemed especially ill-prepared to match the accumulated misery of New Orleans with an instant and equal passion to guarantee its immediate rescue.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina remains an example of human misery better understood in its particulars than through the narrow frame of grand principle. The city has since regained at least three-quarters of its original population. Outlying areas near the coast have been slower to rebuild.<sup>81</sup> And much of the \$100 billion in damage throughout the Gulf Coast is unlikely to be fully reconstructed, even with commitments of \$10.5 billion passed by Congress and signed by the President. At the time, local leaders seemed to have the will but not the means to salvage the ruined lives of their constituents. Bush’s situation was inverted. His familiar litany of faith in free choice could not mitigate the evident dependency of those who had survived the ordeal. It was perhaps easier after 9/11, when the threat was partly unknown, and Americans held out hope that aggression could be successfully answered by force. It would prove more difficult when the threat was from no fantasized villain, but from a sluggish government slow to assert control.

### **ELIZABETH WARREN: SEIZING THE CHANCE FOR INFLUENCE**

It’s the perfect feel-good story for our times. A New Jersey mother with an infant and a failing marriage decides to abandon her speech therapy career to attend law school at night, eventually transforming herself into a professor with a national platform to influence the President and challenge the inviolability of the nation’s financial titans. The powerful Chair of the Congressional Oversight Panel on the bailout of the American banking industry is nothing if not tenacious.

By her own account, a transformative moment in Elizabeth Warren’s career as a professor of law came in the early 1980s when she undertook a study of families in ruinous debt. She was pretty sure bankruptcy was mostly a hole that the profligate had dug for themselves. And she recalls that she and two other research colleagues initially “set out to prove they were all a bunch of cheaters.” Her goal as a relatively unknown academic working in quiet vineyards

of her own research was to “expose these people who were taking advantage of the rest of us.”<sup>82</sup> But as is the case with anyone who is willing to let facts dissolve hard certainties, Warren’s work led her to different conclusions.

I did the research and the data just took me to a totally different place. These were hardworking middle-class families who by and large had lost jobs, gotten sick, had family breakups, and that’s what was driving them over the edge financially. Most of them were in complete economic collapse when they filed for bankruptcy. There was no option to bankruptcy except to just stay deep in debt for the rest of your life; they would never pay these debts off.<sup>83</sup>

If the resulting book did not immediately make Warren a public policy heavyweight, it began to create some heat for a later explosion of public anger over the way banks exploit consumer debt.<sup>84</sup> Bankruptcy is not a sign of profligacy, she discovered. Families were too often victimized by the predatory lending practices of banks and credit card firms. And she had the research to prove it.

It took me far beyond bankruptcy and much more into questions about what’s happening to the middle class. Often, in trying to explain to other people the narrow part, it was other people who would ask me the big questions. “So, why are families in so much debt?” “So, who are these people who are filing for bankruptcy?” Or sometimes it would simply be their allegations of fact. “Well, we know it’s just the poor and the profligate.”<sup>85</sup>

In fact, she saw a massive transfer of wealth from American families to the credit industry. And matters were made worse by a Congress that thought the 1.5 million American families going into bankruptcy every year were getting a free ride. When legislators more or less accepted the punitive wording of a bankruptcy law mostly written by the banks, Warren got angry.

When she was asked to serve on a low-level congressional commission examining trends and policies governing bankruptcy, she reluctantly agreed, not fully realizing that her perseverance and low-key Oklahoma roots would be almost as much of an asset as her timely scholarship. The committee experience set in motion what has become a continuous refrain she is willing to offer to anyone who will listen. She wrote a widely admired op-ed article for the *New York Times*, began to give speeches and interviews, and became convinced that Americans did not understand the traps hidden in the fine print of most loan applications.<sup>86</sup> The academic that had begun with a traditional focus on writing and speaking to other academics began to change.

After an appearance on a television program featuring couples deeply in debt, she realized her simple warning to one family about to make the



mistake of taking out a second mortgage had perhaps more impact than the 20 years of writing she had done up to that moment. And she wondered, “What do you do now? Is it all about writing more academic articles, or is it about making a difference for the families you study. I made a decision right then: It was for the families not the self aggrandizement of scholarship.”<sup>87</sup> Add in a history of college debating, and an unmovable conviction in the family as the essential linchpin of community life, and the pieces began to fall in place for a career of advocacy against what she saw as the enslavement of Americans induced into ruinous debt. Along with many others, she has pointed out that no one can understand the typical loan contract. And “if you can’t explain it so the person on the other side can understand it, then you shouldn’t sell it to them.”<sup>88</sup>

Now in her early 60s, the soft spoken Leo Gottlieb Professor of Law from Harvard has become a political force as well as the *bête noir* of bankers, credit card companies, and most of the major players within the sprawling securities industry. It’s as if the brainy cheerleader with short blond hair that you knew in high school had acquired the argumentative tenacity to take on the Federal Reserve and its corporate constituents.

Warren’s prominence was enhanced by a second book in 2003 written with her daughter. *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers are Going Broke* gave her the forum of an endless round of talk shows—from *Dr. Phil* to the *Daily Show*’s John Stewart—explaining the counter-intuitive thesis that families seemingly wealthier than their parents are actually in worse shape.<sup>89</sup>

Why are so many households near the edge of insolvency? The book cites many reasons. There is the especially American desire to purchase more than we need, including bigger homes and expensive educations. But Warren and her daughter mostly argue that faltering support services have put families at a huge disadvantage. Parents—and especially women—want good school districts that come with expensive neighborhoods. Single-earner males no longer have the safety net of high-paying manufacturing jobs. Health care insurance is less affordable to those working in low-wage jobs. And divorce is now common. All of these factors combine to make a gloomy analysis. “Our study showed that married couples with children are more than twice as likely to file for bankruptcy as their childless counterparts. A divorced woman raising a youngster is nearly three times more likely to file for bankruptcy than her single friend who never had children.” Indeed, “bankruptcy has become deeply entrenched in American life. This year [2002], more people will end up bankrupt than will suffer a heart attack. More adults will file for bankruptcy than will be diagnosed with cancer. More people will file for bankruptcy than will graduate from college.”<sup>90</sup>

Warren's alarm bells went off well before the economic meltdown of 2007. But the deep recession it produced provided a key window of opportunity. Though not its only cause, the largest single factor in the contraction of the economy occurred when an ever larger bubble of house prices and speculation finally burst, leaving millions of Americans with mortgages rendered nearly meaningless by the disappearing equity that had supported them. Rates of home foreclosures shot up. And many who carried huge mortgages discovered that they now owed banks more than their homes were worth. "I believe now in guerilla warfare," she said as the full effects of the recession hit. "I'll go anywhere, I'll do anything to talk about these issues, and it's a lot more than bankruptcy. It's about the economics of the family."<sup>91</sup>

Many opinion leaders thought they saw the future in her predictions. Stories in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and other publications followed. And in 2009, *Time* had named her to their list of the 100 most influential Americans.<sup>92</sup> This flurry of attention made it easy for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to appoint her to chair the oversight panel.

Officially, the panel's task was to oversee the use of the billions of federal dollars committed in 2008 to the Troubled Asset Relief Program, known by its acronym TARP. Never attempted on so large a scale, the program was initially intended to buy up the "toxic assets" banks held as collateral for the many low-interest loans made during the dramatic rise in real estate values. Americans swallowed hard when the treasury opened its vaults to the tune of \$600 billion to shore up failing banks and to cleanse their ledgers of the nearly worthless assets they pretended were golden. Implementation of this huge program started during the final months of the Bush administration and continued under Obama. The committee would really have no power other than its own skill at creating publicity in its hearings. But it was a forum well suited to Warren. Her quiet countenance played well in counterpoint to an institution fueled on testosterone and bluster. To be sure, she asked tough questions. She pointed out inconsistencies and small hypocrisies. But she did so *nicely*, much like a favorite aunt who reminds you to leave your muddy shoes outside. Rarely in recent years had a nonelected "civilian" been given so wide and dramatic a congressional platform. The role also gave her more power to lobby members of the Obama administration to establish a federal consumer credit agency.<sup>93</sup>

Warren managed hearings of the committee with more than the usual interest in how the money—which had been allocated with virtually no strings—would be spent. She came without the usual collection of corporate patrons. And in many appearances she played up the David and Goliath inequities of American families facing foreclosure while financial institutions received barely countable sums from the public treasury. This made her good copy

for journalists, and a target of private contempt within the deeply entrenched consumer credit industry. Headlines on popular news and internet sites began to reflect her outsider's status:

“How a Cheery Harvard Professor became Wall Street's Worst Nightmare”<sup>94</sup>

“Wall Street Critic Inspired New Consumer-Protection Agency”<sup>95</sup>

“Middle Class Moms versus the Banks”<sup>96</sup>

“Warren: ‘The Middle Class Became the Turkey at the Thanksgiving Dinner’”<sup>97</sup>

“Elizabeth Warren: Wake Up, Wall Street, the World Has Changed”<sup>98</sup>

One of her first targets as Chair of the Oversight Panel was Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner. The former president of the New York Federal Reserve Bank had been appointed to the post by President Obama. But he had a reputation as a regulator closely aligned with many of the financial institutions in New York that contributed to the speculative bubble. Young and intense—like the somber Robert Stack from the old TV series *The Untouchables*—Geithner had made the New York Federal Reserve a supportive ally to all but the worst excesses of Wall Street.<sup>99</sup> Most Americans first became aware of him months earlier as he scrambled with former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson to save some of the nation's largest banks, mortgage firms, and investment houses from default. The first to collapse was the huge investment house Bear Sterns, which he and Paulson arranged to be folded into J. P. Morgan-Chase. And then in a rapid succession of insolvencies, he was pivotal in using Treasury funds (\$185 billion) to bail out the American International Group (AIG), which was rapidly sinking because it could no longer insure the “no-money-down,” “no verification” mortgages that had been bundled with other securities and sold to clueless investors. He also stepped in to prop up Citigroup and other teetering banks to the tune of \$340 billion. All had similarly bought into a virtual Ponzi scheme of investments and mortgage-backed securities that had been sold and resold like so many timeshares on a disappearing island. With Geithner thrust to the center of the greatest collapse of American finance since the great depression, many Americans weren't sure if he was the savior of the economy, or an agent of their own financial victimage.<sup>100</sup>

The Secretary had repeatedly set aside Warren's requests to appear before the committee. When asked about his frequent demurrals, Warren allowed that he was perhaps “staggeringly busy.” But she also offered the less generous interpretation that they “were not on the best terms.”<sup>101</sup>

On a Tuesday morning in April 2009, he finally relented. In Room 628 of the Dirksen Building, he submitted to two hours of statements and questions

from Warren and other members of the Oversight panel. For the Chair, especially, there was a feeling that Geithner's kind of leadership—if not the man himself—had contributed to the financial meltdown. And like many Americans, she remained aghast at renewed efforts just days before to preserve more failing financial institutions while doing apparently so little to address the dislocations caused by the crisis on individuals and families. The session also came with its own set of protesters. A number of women behind the Secretary and in clear view of the pool camera feeding the networks held up signs saying “Give us our \$\$\$\$ back” and “Where's our money?” Warren made no attempt to have them removed. Fighting a cold, her voice was even more like butter, soft and without the vinegar common to the men on the committee. But like the seasoned chair of any hearing who has finally stage-managed a meeting with one of the engineers of a broken policy, she lost little time using her opening remarks to lecture the Secretary on the policies of his bank-friendly agency:

When the financial meltdown began, there was a strong sense of fear and uncertainty among the American people, and who can blame them? Every month since October more than half a million jobs have been lost. The net worth of American families has plummeted more than 20 percent in 18 months. The sense of fear and uncertainty has not gone away, but it has been joined by a new sense of anger and frustration. People are angry that even if they have consistently paid their bills on time and never missed a payment, their TARP-assisted banks are unilaterally raising their interest rates or slashing their credit lines. People are angry that small businesses are threatened with closure because they can't get financing from their TARP-assisted banks. People are angry that when they read the headlines of record foreclosures, even if they aren't personally affected, they see their own property worth less, and they see their communities declining as a result of the foreclosures around them. People are angry because they are paying for programs that haven't been fully explained and have no apparent benefit for their families or for the economy as a whole, but that seem to leave enough cash in the system for lavish bonuses or golf outings. None of this seems fair. . . . People want to see action described in terms that makes sense to them. They want to see that taxpayer funds aren't being used to shield financial institutions from the consequences of their own behavior. They want to see that money, taxpayer money, is used to advance the public interest and not just the interests of Wall Street.<sup>102</sup>

If Geithner was not quite one of the bankers rescued from default, he was a good enough surrogate. “People are angry,” she repeated. And her first question continued with the same trope of unfairness:

The auto industry has received taxpayer money, but it has been linked to changes in management, changes in business practices, breaking labor contracts, and causing bondholders to take losses at a minimum. The banks have

received 10 times more money than the auto industry, and yet they seem to be receiving very different treatment. So the question I have is why the different treatment, and in particular, do you think the banks are better managed than the auto companies were?

The question was its own answer. The Secretary predictably declined to make any blanket judgment about the managements of those newly humbled firms. He noted instead that each business carries its own unique problems, and that the primary task of the massive TARP program was to stabilize the financial sector, which must be functioning in order for the rest of the economy to work. He also declined to directly answer Warren's question—reflecting her much-stated hope<sup>103</sup>—that the Fed would use its new leverage as an owner to clean out the leadership at the top of most of the banks. “If he answered it,” she later noted, “I didn't catch it.”<sup>104</sup>

Again, the question of fairness came up. Warren wanted to point out the unseemliness of banks receiving federal funds and pressing homeowners into foreclosure:

In the last few weeks, banks have been announcing—a few banks—that they have quarterly profits. But there has also been a renewed acceleration of home mortgage foreclosures and now examples of raising fees on customers who have met all of their contract terms and raising interest rates, even for consumers paying on time. So I want to ask, do you think that banks receiving TARP funds should be engaging in these practices?<sup>105</sup>

People *are* getting relief, he replied. He reminded Warren that the Obama administration was taking a number of steps to give more homeowners time to find ways to refinance to interest and payment rates they could handle. She seemed assured, but later noted that with so many “under water”—they owed more to banks in their loans than their homes were now worth—some form of redress would be needed. Geithner said there was another program to address this issue, but it would “not solve all of these problems.”<sup>106</sup>

Other panelists had similar questions. And while a few privately complained that Warren was adding a second “families” agenda to her charge to watch over the federal bailout,<sup>107</sup> she viewed them as all of a piece.

Throughout this period she understood the theater she had created, and the attractive narrative of a consumer backlash against the well-paid executives of institutions that now seemed more predatory than helpful in strengthening the American economy. And like every good dramatist, she had her patrons—individuals and organizations prepared to give her time and space to repeat her basic plea for modest reform in the ways Americans are offered loans and other financial inducements. The list of venues open to repeated visits

still remains formidable: the widely read online journal, *The Huffington Post*; political journalists and analysts at MSNBC, PBS, and the *New York Times*; editors at *The Daily Beast* and elsewhere, and cadres of journalists who sensed news in Warren's implicit challenge to the old-boy networks typified by Geithner's banker-dominated datebook.<sup>108</sup>

Even before the TARP assignment, Warren told an interviewer that "My role is to care. And to speak out. I believe in the middle class."<sup>109</sup> At one level there could not be three more common clichés. What is remarkable is that these verities actually seem to be the authentic motives of a research technocrat suddenly given a much wider platform. If she has made it work, it is through her own talents as an outsider given the temporary imprimatur of an institution often dominated by the forces it seeks to change.

### BLAIR AND CARTER: PART-TIME POPULISTS

One of the defining features of tragedy is that characters are at war with their deeper natures. They understand who they *are* while circumstances push them toward who they *must be*. The characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *Coriolanus* must agonize over the extent to which they have been pressed into settings that ask for what they cannot give. The great playwright understood the universal appeal of lives that have been pushed out of the range of their natural orbits.

We close by acknowledging the high probability that many of us have complicated temperaments that can never fully mix into a homogenous whole. If we have reasonable certainty about Bill Clinton's comfort as a rhetorical personality—and George W. Bush's comparative discomfort—we can equally find other recent leaders and reach no similar sense of a unified temperament. While this is not necessarily the stuff of tragedy, it is complexity that often comes with its own sets of integrative problems.

Our central argument is that if the hortatory style is the natural vernacular for exercising power—that is, broad assertions of principle are conventionally emblematic of mastery and control—this older style now exists against a countervailing impulse to stand *with* rather than *for* others. There can be no question that leaders of all types still aspire to the rhetoric of commitment politicians who are remembered for their tenacity and ideological purity. It's perhaps no coincidence that George Bush kept a bust of Winston Churchill in the Oval Office, or that Tony Blair admitted to a certain admiration for Margaret Thatcher's toughness.<sup>110</sup> The two Tory icons could have been what Hugo Young had in mind when he identified "people with the brains to be inventive and the guts to be unpopular."<sup>111</sup> Their hortatory style remains as the

grammatical and rhetorical signature of strong leadership. Even so, unilateral declarations now frequently sound too remote and imperious for an age that requires leaders who can also register the life circumstances of others. With its presumptions of frequent availability, the vicissitudes of the 24/7 news cycle foster a different kind of person.<sup>112</sup> As Richard Reeves notes, western politicians now “trade less on their differences with the rest of us than their similarities.”<sup>113</sup> Those that rise to the top must either have the temperament of the rhetorical personality, or must fake a credible yearning for connection in ways acceptable to wary voters.

In this final section we turn to two examples of leaders with rhetorical styles reflecting these mixed forms. The lives of former President Jimmy Carter and British Prime Minister Tony Blair have fortunately not fallen to the depths of Shakespearian tragedy. On their best days, both could master the ambiguous physics of being *within* and also *above* their constituents. But the need for each to straddle the gap between the confines of belief and the urge for public supplication did take its toll. Each man strained to hold onto a public mandate in their final years in office.

It is no easy feat to be both extraordinary and ordinary at the same time. Because the wheels of dramatic inconsistency inevitably turn to produce their own painful moments of public approbation, it was perhaps predictable that neither man would end his administration under circumstances of his own design. For Blair, the disconnect came in part because of his unwillingness to reflect British unease with the aggressive American “war on terror.” However unfairly, he seemed too compliant in following American Iraqi policy. Carter faced different challenges. After just one term, he was deposed by Ronald Reagan in a fog of jingoistic reassurance. In the Presidential campaign of 1980 the affable Californian convinced enough Americans that Carter was asking too much and feeding their outsized aspirations too little.

In both Blair and Carter we can see the challenges of acting from the well-springs of certainty while also trying to be what others need. It is a central paradox of living in a civil society. And it makes our rhetoric like a mosaic that inevitably breaks a single plane of light into uneven patches of reflection and absorption.

It might seem that Blair should be paired with Bill Clinton. After all, Blair and his eventual successor in 2007, Gordon Brown, became avid students of the new President after the transformational 1992 campaign. For better or worse, Blair’s ideas for “New Labour” took a page from Clinton’s efforts to “triangulate” a “third way” between “old” Democrats and the disappearing middle of the Republican Party.<sup>114</sup> In the brief overlap of their terms the two established a personal friendship that was arguably far broader and deeper than the famed amity between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.<sup>115</sup>

Clinton and Blair shared remarkable gifts of lucidity and expressiveness. Listening to Blair offer and receive hostile interrogations from his Tory opposites amounted to watching the Olympic finals of a nimble sprinter who rarely lost. Too glib by half, some claimed.<sup>116</sup> Yet he retained the same facility as Clinton to make an effective case to others with terms and reasons that would often seem incisive.<sup>117</sup>

The man who would become Prime Minister for 10 years beginning in 1997 had demonstrated a remarkably good understanding of how to win and hold a crowd. Blair had what Labour Party operative Peter Mandelson described as the ability to “play” well “at the box office.”<sup>118</sup> It also helped that after a decade of periodic public scoldings by the righteous Thatcher, Britain was ready for someone younger and with at least a rhetorical commitment to the idea of a caring society.<sup>119</sup> On schools, medical care, and crime, Blair rekindled faith in an activist government that would extend and improve social services while also fulfilling a persistent national desire to be the dominant player in a less U.S.-centric Europe. The excitement over Blair and the possibilities of a New Labour agenda inevitably faded. But in the first years after Thatcher, it was as if someone had found a way to lift the North Sea gloom that usually dominates British weather.

Blair’s populist instincts were famously put to use in a small but representative instance of the perfectly calibrated gesture. After the death of Princess Diana in a traffic accident in Paris, it was the Prime Minister who had to nudge the royal family toward a suitable public response to her death. He had already taken on the Presidential-style task of interpreting the meaning of the accident with a note-perfect expression of regret and sadness. In the first hours it was enough to say “I feel like everyone else in this country today. I am utterly devastated.” If she was no longer a part of the royal family, she was still “the people’s princess.”<sup>120</sup> The challenge remained to get the inward-looking royal family to at least make some overt acknowledgement of the loss of an icon of unsurpassed celebrity and vulnerability.<sup>121</sup>

But Blair was (and remains) a different kind of person than Clinton: more circumspect, more private, less inclined to take rhetorical and political risks, and—aside from the Wednesday free-for-alls of Question Time in the House of Commons—less inclined to preside over a room full of people with their own ideas. The thrall among Labour voters faded as he turned into something less than the anti-Thatcher. By European norms he was more overtly religious, a matter that might have made little difference had there not been a growing sense among many Britons that a similar kind of piety fed Bush’s unilateralism. Blair was also cautious about aligning his version of Labour politics to older forms endorsed by party stalwarts like John Prescott and Michael Foot. The mantra used against the long-dominant conservatives was



that Blair would do to the nation what he had partly done in his own party. He billed himself as a “modernizer,” and clearly seemed more attuned to generations younger than those who struggled to put their lives together after the end of World War II. If he was not the same as Thatcher’s driven ideologue of unfettered private initiative, he was also not quite the Oxford radical—the follower of communitarian philosopher John Macmurry—that a first round of enthusiastic biographers had rhapsodized about. He clung to many of the ideas common to European democratic socialism, but also seemed at times the kind of moral absolutist working *within* government that Macmurry most distrusted.<sup>122</sup> Blair put more faith in his own compass, which included none of the usual Labour forbearance for the “anti-social behavior” that occasionally spilled out of the neighborhoods of the unmotivated and underemployed. By tradition, these people were also the constituents of old Labour, and mostly the victims of redundancies created by the postwar collapse of British industry and mining.<sup>123</sup> His distance from them was sometimes perceived as breaking faith with the party’s working-class roots.

All of this eventually vexed his supporters. As biographer Philip Stevens points out, Blair had almost as many sides as a disco ball:

First was the good-mannered—even sweet-natured—husband who craved more time with his children and enjoyed nothing more than playing tennis or strumming his guitar. Next came the politician whose charm and persuasiveness had never been matched by any previous occupant of 10 Downing Street. Alongside him stood the nineteenth-century public servant, who talked of duty to one’s country. Yet another Tony Blair was born to the lights, the brilliant mimic and actor who could turn in an award-winning performance at scarcely a moment’s notice. Next to him stood the conviction politician, the brave leader and genuinely pious man whose self-belief and ethics reflected a deep personal commitment to the Christian faith. Then again there was the leader who always shied away from personal confrontations. He had a habit of telling visitors what they wanted to hear, even when that meant saying different things to different people. . . . Each of these people was real. And Tony Blair was all of them.<sup>124</sup>

But even a pragmatist has his limits. There is a point in many of us where the motive to accommodate to changing circumstances begins to retreat. We sense it when we latch onto a defensible commonplace that we will not allow to be challenged. It may be that simple. Or perhaps too many miles of hortatory track has been laid to notice an easier route that might have been taken. We cannot change because it means that a piece of who we were must be abandoned. We assert standards or moral imperatives that cannot be sacrificed for the momentary advantages of getting along.

For these or perhaps other reasons, an invariable stance of support for Bush administration policies on Iraq emerged at Downing Street. After 2003, the British became the United States' most dependable ally in Iraq, even as the evidentiary supports for Saddam Hussein's alleged plans on using "weapons of mass destruction" began to fall away. At the start of the year, the United States and Britain were blanketed with debates about how reliable intelligence estimates ostensibly describing these weapons actually were. Each passing month added further doubts and disconfirmations, followed by a string of empty-handed searches even after a relatively quick occupation of Iraq.

The seed laid by these doubts was quickly fertilized by the dramatic failure of civil life after the fall of the Hussein government. Basic services such as water and electricity disappeared, and an insurgency began to spread into a bloody civil war. But none of this weakened Blair's resolve. Hussein and his Baathists simply had to go, he reminded opponents, which began to include restless members of his own party. Blair's arguments from definition about the essential removal of Hussein were becoming more acceptable to the Tory opposition than his own political base. "I have high regard for the Prime Minister," noted key Labour sage Roy Jenkins in the early stages of the occupation. "I have been repelled by attempts to portray him as a vacuous man with an artificial smile and no convictions. . . . [But] My view is that the Prime Minister, far from lacking conviction, has almost too much, particularly when dealing the world beyond Britain. He is a little too Manichean for my perhaps now jaded taste, seeing matters in stark terms of good and evil, black and white, contending with each other, and [believing that] if evil is cast down good will inevitably follow."<sup>125</sup>

For his part, Blair claimed an invariable set of first principles to defend continuing British participation in the occupation. In an address to Congress he noted that "ours are not Western values, they are the universal values of the human spirit. And anywhere . . . the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny, democracy, not dictatorship; the rule of law, not the rule of the secret police."<sup>126</sup> The war and its evaporating weapons-of-mass-destruction rationale would not cause him to change his initial position to link these values to the Iraqi mission.

But support in Britain quickly began to fade. Department of International Development Minister Clair Short resigned from his cabinet in 2003 because of British-American opposition to finding a wider role in the conflict for the United Nations. More bitterly, other members of Blair's cabinet freelanced a wider variety of opinions about the wisdom of rushed action toward invasion. Even so, "For all the hardships and challenges in the past few years," he noted in May of 2006, "I shall always think that it was a cause worth fighting for."<sup>127</sup>

It is simplistic to say that homegrown resistance to Iraqi involvement broke the spell of the Blair magic. But it would be mostly accurate. As David Brooks noted, “he risked his political career on a single moral proposition; that it was right to use U.S. and British strength to *liberate* Iraq.”<sup>128</sup> From the current vantage point of nearly eight years later, there is a different consensus that the policy was more hubris than effective calculation.<sup>129</sup> His dogged support for it remains as a prime example of a leader with otherwise perfect pitch who could not bend principle to contrary circumstances of increasing clarity.

Some 30 years earlier, Americans had seen a similar kind of mixed rhetorical temperament in the leadership of Jimmy Carter. If he is not quite a bundle of contradictions, Carter remains the supreme example of an American leader alternately induced to cling to decisions based on first principles, but instinctively dialogical in his relations with others. He liked to describe his time in office—1977 to 1981—as a “listening presidency.”<sup>130</sup> And it is an apt phrase. The nation’s thirty-ninth President had the instincts to take others seriously—to act on the words and perceived attitudes of the public. He liked to try to characterize what Americans were thinking, rhetorically holding up a mirror to their expanded feelings of unease. Perhaps the most overtly religious of any modern executive, he was actually the *least* inclined to sermonize from a set of a priori beliefs.

Viewed from the present, the canted angle that foreshortens our recent history makes it seem like Carter was the unlucky heir to a diminished presidency. In the two decades following John Kennedy’s death, the rise of news and entertainment television aligned with a leveling off of what had been an almost continuous upward line of American confidence. The optimism and growth of the postwar years could not be sustained. And television—ubiquitous, flush with money, and gaining stature as nearly everyone’s window into the sunny and sometimes darker corners of the culture—would play its part.<sup>131</sup> Great issues and consequential figures were about to be made smaller by its presence, feeding a state of national disquiet that no amount of official optimism could fully vanquish.

This discomfort began in the mid-60s, when there was a gradual widening of the gap between who we thought we were and who we wished to be. A costly standoff in Vietnam combined with an emerging range of physical and emotional dislocations: the retreat of segments of the middle class from the cities, intensifying civil rights strife playing out in front of news cameras,<sup>132</sup> and a culture increasingly drawn to the dissonant music of postmodernism. Among its effects was the rise of the antihero in film and increasing disenchantment with the usual hagiography of “great leader” biographies.<sup>133</sup> Never had the mainstream media been more inclined to

peer into the abyss separating our intentions from our morally ambiguous motives.<sup>134</sup> Intrusive and emboldened news organizations increasingly insinuated themselves into the back regions of institutional culture—seen in seamy tell-alls of figures as diverse as Richard Nixon and Marilyn Monroe,<sup>135</sup> as well as the Prague-like bloodletting in the streets of Chicago near the 1968 Democratic National Convention.<sup>136</sup> Expanding appetites for narratives of dysfunctionality on the small screen made it harder to ignore the fault lines running through the culture, or the disintegrating lives of its once-reliable icons.

This period spanned the administrations of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford. And it contributed to a presidency remade in ways that would eventually leave it neither “imperial” nor fully competent. The low points included an exhausted and defeated President Johnson, who quit in 1968, unable to end or accept the Vietnam stalemate. Richard Nixon’s successor regime—initially effective at legislating and shaping national opinion—would finally feed a growing proclivity for narratives of institutional paranoia. The break-in at the Democratic Party national office by low-level Republican operatives was the trigger. Oval Office tapes of a vindictive man trying to conceal it was the result. Revelations on the tapes prematurely ended his second term,<sup>137</sup> caught by Hollywood in the emblematic silhouette of “Deep Throat.” The anonymous insider whispering White House secrets to a reporter in the shadows of an underground garage captured a growing national feeling of disillusionment.<sup>138</sup> Like wary Europeans, Americans seemed less optimistic that their own political culture existed for higher reasons than to simply perpetuate itself.

The interregnum of Gerald Ford momentarily quelled the impression of a national unraveling, but the accidental President labored against his own modesty and a premature pardon of Nixon. Tellingly, he was also among the first chief executives to encounter the wildcard of entertainment television, with its random wounds inflicted by—among others—a one-note impersonator on late night television named Chevy Chase.<sup>139</sup>

Carter inherited all of this newly disheveled political culture, leaving the earnest Georgian exposed to the deconstructionists even as his first term began. From the vantage point of the new century, he seemed a lone figure of self-reflection squeezed between two outsized bookends. On one side, the end of the Nixon years and the defeat of Ford closed out a sour period of Presidential impeachment and modest restoration. And on the other side, the election of Ronald Reagan produced a pied piper ready to endlessly replay a beguiling and fraudulent song of American exceptionalism. In between these eras of excess, Georgia’s most famous citizen would face a faltering economy that combined high inflation with a national scarcity

of gasoline—the very blood of the peripatetic American way of life. And then there was the seemingly irresolvable crisis of Americans held hostage in Iran.

The latter challenge, more than the others, would dog Carter to the final hours of his first and only term. American powerlessness to free 53 Americans taken hostage by militants during the Iranian revolution that set up its current theocracy came with its own potent form of humiliation. For 15 months the drumbeat of daily television updates about the hostages was another unwelcome reminder of the folly of presuming the dominance of American power over noncompliant states.<sup>140</sup> After an elaborate sea-based plan to rescue the Americans in April 1980 self-destructed in a plane crash, the President seemed even more impotent. But honoring the communication transparency of his administration, Carter gave a full public accounting of the failure on nationwide television a day later. The insult was doubled by the irony that the President who was psychologically most capable of negotiating with others as full partners would not see Americans released *until* a new and less sympathetic administration was sworn in. The Iranian captors seemed blind to Reagan's commitment to the idea of American entitlement, a view they supposedly abhorred.

Carter had spent the previous two years getting used to thinking in terms of crises. After using marathon Camp David meetings in March of 1979 to salvage talks between Israel and Egypt, he was faced with a completely different kind of disaster: the first potential meltdown of a nuclear power plant in the United States. The Three Mile Island emergency shutdown in central Pennsylvania was far from the catastrophe that would hit the Ukraine's Chernobyl seven years later, but the emergency so clearly fed fantasies of a nuclear Armageddon that the President—who had spent his days in the navy as an engineer on a nuclear submarine—was compelled to travel to the plant and its control room. Many Americans had just seen a Hollywood film about a similar kind of reactor failure.<sup>141</sup> Some needed reassurance that leaks of radiation from the real thing had not turned the countryside along the Susquehanna into a dead zone.<sup>142</sup>

Even so, in his single term Carter also pulled off some notable diplomatic and domestic successes, among them: a SALT II treaty reducing nuclear weapons with the Soviet Union, the breakthrough Camp David Accords, and amnesties in the form of a loan bailout for the Chrysler Corporation and a promise not to prosecute Americans who fled the country to avoid service in Vietnam. The tone of the presidency changed as well. His rhetorical campaign for universal human rights that built on aspirations of American racial equality began to replace some of the knee-jerk anticommunism that was always the most common Presidential boilerplate.<sup>143</sup>

Carter's brand of small-town populism also left him noticeably indifferent to long-established networks of political elites, including trade groups, think tanks, and assorted power brokers who tend to remain in Washington after leaving governmental posts.<sup>144</sup> He held on to many things that politicians clawing toward the heights of the presidency might be all too willing to shed, including the desire to continue teaching Sunday school in the Georgia church where he grew up. All of this fed consternation over the absence of the Carters from the social circuit and the "Style" sections of the *Washington Post*.<sup>145</sup>

In ways that we are perhaps only beginning to appreciate, he was not shy about violating the customary role of giving even the worst problems a gloss of Presidential assurance. As historian Kevin Mattson notes in his own recent reassessment, Carter's candor was welcomed by Americans who had a "growing distrust over the rhetoric of the political class."<sup>146</sup>

Preceding but also predicting Blair, his religious faith with its anchors in home and family fed a belief in a people as sharing a common covenant. Americans were placed on earth, Carter believed, to do well by their neighbors. If individuals or nations needed an honest broker, it was one's obligation to fulfill that role. And if others lived beyond their means or abandoned the memory of their roots, it was the responsibility of even the most powerful to set an example. Columnists mostly scoffed when thermostats were turned down in the White House and the President set an example by appearing frequently in sweaters. But, of course, we now call Carter prescient for preaching conservation and installing solar panels on the roof of the White House. The long shelf of books published by the former President represents a virtual catalogue of communitarian thought emphasizing integration over separation, and the virtues of shared sacrifice over standing apart from others. We now understand who Carter *was* by seeing the broader written record of his mind. *Negotiation: The Alternative to Hostility* (1984), *Sharing Good Times* (2004), and *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope* (2008) are representative titles that communicate an inclusionary ethic that is enhanced rather than narrowed by Carter's own piety. They suggest how deep the idea of a social covenant probably was during his White House years. The controversial *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid* (2006) especially carries the distinct DNA of the former Nobel Peace Prize winner. In it he dares to suggest a moral equivalence between Israel and its foes based on reciprocal obligations to accept the other.<sup>147</sup> And it fits comfortably with the social gospel long associated with Carter to "speak for those who have no adequate spokesman."<sup>148</sup> Even in his graceful account of his own childhood, *An Hour before Daylight*, he is characteristically aware of the cruelties and injuries that are part of the simplest moments in small-town high school. It is

not that his stories are unique. It's that he *notices* the stains in the social fabric created by the destructive impulse to separate:

I'm still embarrassed to recall our social order based to a great degree on the economic status of our parents. Within a fairly broad range, all the students were accepted as approximate equals, but there were always a few who were different. Their dresses and shirts were made of washed guano-sacks, and their odor, hair, teeth, and complexion showed that their families were not accustomed to washcloths, soap, or toothbrushes. I don't recall abusing them myself, but neither do I remember being their champion when others refused to sit near them or made disparaging remarks about bad odors, lice, or itch. These relative outcasts could either shed quiet tears or endure, or quietly drop out of school.<sup>149</sup>

Whether between individuals or states, Carter believes that justice comes by tempering the impulses of individuals against the collective good of the entire society. He often quotes Cain's famous question from Genesis: "Am I my brother's keeper?"<sup>150</sup> To this "New Covenant" Baptist set on leveraging even his own church to a more inclusive social gospel, the answer is self-evidently "yes."

This desire to awaken a consciousness of connectedness played out most dramatically a little more than two years into his presidency. The issue was a national shortage of gasoline. The year had started well for the President when he salvaged failing talks between Egypt and Israel to produce a historic set of accords. But by July, a new round of price increases by OPEC, the cartel of oil producers, reduced quantities of gasoline available in the United States. California was the first to see gas lines and rationing. As shortages spread eastward, full-scale "gas riots" broke out in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, pitting angry drivers against each other and provoking truckers into road blockades to protest higher diesel costs.<sup>151</sup> Lines of motorists stretched around city blocks, sometimes pushing their empty 14-miles-to-a-gallon hulks toward depleted gas pumps.

The nation was witnessing the early effects of an unsustainable race between its own hubris and a rising sense of national victimage. As a forgotten wag who was perhaps thinking about OPEC put it at the time, "How did all of *our* oil end up under *their* countries?"

Carter saw a confused and reactive nation that seemed to respond more to symptoms than to core causes of problems. Perhaps it was his navy training as a nuclear engineer. Or he might have sensed that even his staff was slow to internalize the kind of long-range thinking that he often preached on the stump. But he ordered a long review of national priorities and some sort of comprehensive response to what he would call "a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will." The challenge was "the growing

doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.”<sup>152</sup> Sometimes called the “malaise speech”—though he never used the word—Carter’s “crisis of confidence” address of July 15, 1979, tried to come to terms with a lack of national will to make essential changes. Then, as now, the country was coping with changes it could barely acknowledge, let alone control. The United States might entice or threaten oil-rich nations to secure favorable trading terms, but it could no longer own them. Perhaps 30 years from maximum peak oil production, it was true even at the end of the 1970s that demand could be created from far beyond America’s borders.

The speech is especially interesting for being one of the earliest of few efforts by a sitting president to ask Americans to grasp the consequences of living beyond their collective means. Carter saw a future in which scarcities of energy would increasingly dominate relations between states. He had already given four earlier speeches on energy—all, in his view, “increasingly ignored.”<sup>153</sup> He wanted to use the speech to preach conservation and rekindle a collective spirit of sacrifice.

He began by asking, “Why have we not been able to get together as a nation to resolve our serious energy problem?” The answers he heard from others varied. But Carter was clear on what he considered to be the primary causes:

Our people are losing that faith, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy. As a people we know our past and we are proud of it. Our progress has been part of the living history of America, even the world. We always believed that we were part of a great movement of humanity itself called democracy, involved in the search for freedom; and that belief has always strengthened us in our purpose. But just as we are losing our confidence in the future, we are also beginning to close the door on our past.

He noted that he gathered a range of opinions from experts and ordinary Americans. Enacting a “listening presidency” in an unusual way, he went on to read comments sent or spoken to him in various forums:

I invited to Camp David people from almost every segment of our society—business and labor, teachers and preachers, governors, mayors, and private citizens. And then I left Camp David to listen to other Americans, men and women like you.

It has been an extraordinary ten days, and I want to share with you what I’ve heard. First of all, I got a lot of personal advice. Let me quote a few of the typical comments that I wrote down.

This from a southern governor: “Mr. President, you are not leading this nation—you’re just managing the government.”

“You don’t see the people enough anymore.”



“Some of your Cabinet members don’t seem loyal. There is not enough discipline among your disciples.”

“Don’t talk to us about politics or the mechanics of government, but about an understanding of our common good.”

“Mr. President, we’re in trouble. Talk to us about blood and sweat and tears.”

“If you lead, Mr. President, we will follow.”

Many people talked about themselves and about the condition of our nation.

This from a young woman in Pennsylvania: “I feel so far from government. I feel like ordinary people are excluded from political power.”

And this from a young Chicano: “Some of us have suffered from recession all our lives.”

Though he warned that the United States would have to change its attitudes toward energy, his primary concern was that comments like these showed “a crisis of confidence.”

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us. For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years. Two-thirds of our people do not even vote. The productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world. . . . This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning.

Carter eventually turned to a list of specifics. If there was action to be taken, it was to happen with a sense of the sacrifice, a pitch rarely heard since World War II:

I ask Congress to give me authority for mandatory conservation and for standby gasoline rationing. To further conserve energy, I’m proposing tonight an extra ten billion dollars over the next decade to strengthen our public transportation systems. And I’m asking you for your good and for your nation’s security to take no unnecessary trips, to use carpools or public transportation whenever you can, to park your car one extra day per week, to obey the speed limit, and to set your thermostats to save fuel. Every act of energy conservation like this is more than just common sense, I tell you it is an act of patriotism. We can manage the short-term shortages more effectively, and we will; but there are no short-term solutions to our long-range problems. There is simply no way to avoid sacrifice.

While the speech seems preachy and carries the ideological language of a sermon, it actually doesn't pivot on an invariant principle or doctrine. Rather, it asks for awareness and sacrifice. It reads more like a wartime speech than a policy address. And it moves beyond the usual presidential canon by looking inward rather than outward for external scapegoats. It asks for acknowledgment of conditions the United States had partly created itself. There is the familiar complaint about "growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions." But there is also a distinct indictment of American overconsumption. And though he never fully bridged this theme with his second idea of a nation in spiritual stagnation, he nonetheless used the appeal of a social covenant as the glue to hold them together:

So, the solution of our energy crisis can also help us to conquer the crisis of the spirit in our country. It can rekindle our sense of unity, our confidence in the future, and give our nation and all of us individually a new sense of purpose.

Carter called it "one of my best speeches," and estimates that it was seen or heard by 100 million.<sup>154</sup> Polls taken immediately after the address suggested wide agreement with his claims, especially the broad assertion that the nation was "in a moral and spiritual crisis."<sup>155</sup> Even so, they were less sure that Carter's repeated emphasis on conservation was completely warranted.<sup>156</sup> And they were ready for the sunnier Ronald Reagan, who subsequently ran his campaign as the Carter antidote, often using the slogan that "America's best days are ahead."<sup>157</sup> Even if this line of reassurance contained little more than a greeting card sense of hope, Reagan's fantasies of an America of destiny would prove easier to accept. "Carter spoke of limits, of lowered goals and well as thermostats, of accommodation with the Russians and other unpleasant realities," notes Gary Wills. "That is not only demoralizing in a country that defines itself in terms of growth; it stirs a subtle panic, a claustrophobia, that has haunted the American consciousness all through this century."<sup>158</sup>

Whatever momentary success the President had in urging a degree of national soul-searching, it was short-lived. He squandered the moment by almost immediately following the address with a request for the resignation of his entire cabinet, a process he concedes he badly mismanaged.<sup>159</sup> In the parlance of public relations, he "stepped on his own story." The move had been in the works for some time. But the clumsy and artless mass firings drove away any lingering national attention on how to live well with less. It was great political theater, but it fed continuing perceptions that managing people was not one of the President's strengths.

The moment was another demonstration of the mixed temperaments that were sometimes at war within Carter. He had the will and inclination to

engage others and to hear them out. The speech itself was a trenchant example of the President's desire to broker the wounded feelings of a fragmented nation. But he also exhibited the psychological certainty of a fixed compass that could steer him toward shoals others might have avoided.

\* \* \*

If there is a core process that defines the human experience, it is perhaps found in our wary acceptance of the necessity in all organisms for *adaptation*. We acknowledge it as the critical variable that sustains the future of a species over millennia, just as it rewards athletes who can find victory in milliseconds of reaction time. Adaptation sustains relationships and makes us suitable company for others. It is this thread of communication as a *responsive* dialogue that ties together the different settings in this study.

What is surprising is that we so often act as if it should be otherwise. We prefer permanence over flux, certainty over constant adjustment. We warm more slowly to a *process* than a fixed principle or familiar axiom. No one likes what they see when politicians horse-trade favors in advance of a legislative vote. No one builds monuments to the generative power of temporal change.

We also respond more easily to the hope of certain knowledge, seizing its promise of solidity like a climber looking for dependable footing. Even as we concede the utility of adaptability in biological or interpersonal renewal, the blur of adjustment as one body yields to another is not so easy to love.

Approaches to the study of communication suffer from these same biases. Even against evidence for the rewards of pliancy cited in these pages, there is still an urge to see fluency in terms of static and fixed principles. We know them well and can reel them off as a professional catechism. It is important that words mean more or less the same thing to others as to us. Measures of fluency such as in the durable rules of public speaking are taught with supreme confidence and then later forced into settings where they may or may not fit. And, of course, hortatory declarations of first principles and ethical benchmarks are evoked with suitable nods of approval. Ronald Reagan was nothing if not a dependably genial presence ready with a familiar list of pieties. Many thought him a "great communicator;" others, a leader somewhat mute to the needs of his times.

In the end, all the a priori theorizing and conceptualizing that a discipline constructs for itself can sometimes overwhelm the fragile and temporal nature of its subject, like trying to capture smoke in a bottle. Communication born anew requires that we constantly prod ourselves to see with fresh eyes. The responsiveness attributed to the people we have identified as rhetorical

personalities is the product of *their* moment, their capacity to find the answer to their own situations.

The chief virtue of the theatrical language that has been used throughout this study is that it assumes communication not for the ages or all people, but for those in a particular place and time. It's predicated on audience needs and expectations as much as a priori measures. And it explains our heavy reliance on memoirs, case studies, and other ways to recapture moments of connection with others. Theater as a model and an analogy for all communication thrives on its immediacy and subtle differences of circumstance. Somehow the reclamation of communication from its growing museum of ideas must begin by finding a similar wonder in the perfect response.

## NOTES

1. Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), 112.
2. *The Deal*, Granada Television (United Kingdom), Miriam Collection DVD, 2008. Communications director Peter Mandelson was explaining to Gordon Brown why he was backing Tony Blair as the new leader of the British Labour Party. For more background see James Naughtie, *The Rivals* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), 61–63.
3. Remarks of the attorney general at U.S. Attorneys Conference, New York City, October 1, 2002, *Federation of American Scientists*, [fas.org/irp/news/2002/10/ag100102.html](http://fas.org/irp/news/2002/10/ag100102.html) (accessed July 20, 2009).
4. Remarks of the attorney general.
5. Detention of suspects without trial was one of the most serious infractions of traditional civil liberties. See for example, Rebecca Boone, "Appeals court rules against Ashcroft in 9/11 case," *Associated Press*, September 4, 2009, [www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hRh2OMc1xO2GJ2\\_AXd8y0PJ6iuHAD9AGR3SG0](http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hRh2OMc1xO2GJ2_AXd8y0PJ6iuHAD9AGR3SG0) (accessed September 5, 2009).
6. All come from John Ashcroft, *On My Honor* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998). For more discussion of the ideograph, see Michael McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (February 1980): 1–16.
7. Among the lyrics of "Let the Eagle Soar:"  
 This country's too young to die.  
 We've still got a lot of climbing to do.  
 And we can make it if we try.  
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23. Weaver, *Ethics*, 112.
24. Weaver, *Ethics*, 112.
25. Lincoln quoted in Weaver, *Ethics*, 112–113.
26. Weaver, *Ethics*, 57.
27. Weaver, *Ethics*, 58–59.
28. Weaver, *Ethics*, 57–58.
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30. This rate is 12 times higher than most other industrialized nations, and the second most common cause of death for this age group. For a broad summary of gun deaths in American life, see Ed Pilkington, “Young Guns,” *The Guardian* (UK), November 28, 2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/nov/28/gun-lobby-children-us](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/nov/28/gun-lobby-children-us) (accessed December 19, 2009). Specific data on gun deaths by year for children of any age can be calculated at The Centers for Disease Control, “Injury Prevention & Control: Data & Statistics,” [www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html) (accessed April 5, 2010).
31. Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On, 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: St. Martins/Griffin, 2007), 492–493.
32. Text and video of the address is available at “Martin Luther King, Jr., I have a Dream,” American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches, [www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm). In King’s more typical mode, as in the days leading up to the first of three 1965 marches in Selma, Alabama, he usually argued from the

specific circumstances and racial offenses of the moment. See Taylor Branch, *America in the King Years: 1963–65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 552–560.

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53. Baker, “It’s Not about Bill,” 46.

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56. Ron Susskind, “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, [www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=susskind,%20faith,%20certainty&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=susskind,%20faith,%20certainty&st=cse) (accessed July 24, 2009).

57. For a comparison of answers by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the president to the same question about Iraqi sanctions, see Gary Woodward, *Center Stage: Media and the Performance of American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2007), 94–95.

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59. All statements are from George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005, in *American Rhetoric*, Online Speech Bank, [www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbushsecondinaugural.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbushsecondinaugural.htm) (accessed December 1, 2009).

60. Brooks, “Ends Without Means.”

61. By all accounts, Bush did not shirk his duties to comfort the wounded. He was a faithful visitor of troops wounded from combat in what many have seen as an unnecessary Iraq conflict. He was clearly shaken by these encounters. But if he has since had doubts about the wisdom of an arguably “elective” war, they have not been expressed. Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 225–226.

62. See, for example, his address to a joint session of Congress, September 20, 2001, in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, [frwebgate5.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/TEXTgate.cgi?WAISdocID=542602473687+22+1+0&WAISaction=retrieve](http://frwebgate5.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/TEXTgate.cgi?WAISdocID=542602473687+22+1+0&WAISaction=retrieve) (accessed November 5, 2009).

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70. Wayne Slater and James Moore quoted in McClellan, *What Happened*, 282.

71. Wayne Slater and James Moore quoted in McClellan, *What Happened*, 282.

72. See, for example, David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 430.

73. Kumar, *Managing the President’s Message*, 296

74. George W. Bush, Remarks on the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Mobile, Alabama, September 2, 2005, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, week ending September 2, 2005, [frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2005\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd05se05\\_txt-17](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2005_presidential_documents&docid=pd05se05_txt-17) (accessed November 3, 2009).

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117. Here is Blair, just before assuming power in 1997, grilling Prime Minister John Major about his own view that it was "unrealistic" that the Maastricht Treaty establishing the European Union would inevitably produce a "federal Europe." Major had apparently said as much earlier, and Blair characteristically fired his arrows neatly around his hapless victim. "Can the Prime Minister agree with that? I can; can he? I find it odd that he cannot agree with his Chancellor, I find it strange that he cannot agree with his Secretary of State for Employment and I find it unbelievable that he cannot agree with himself." Quoted in Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, 463.
118. Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, 357.
119. In 1987 interview, Thatcher famously asked, "And who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first." Quoted in Dominic Lawson: "There is no such thing as society, so be wary when politicians enlist it to their cause," *The Independent* (UK), September 29, 2006, [www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/dominic-lawson/dominic-lawson-there-is-no-such-thing-as-society-so-be-wary-when-politicians-enlist-it-to-their-cause-417970.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/dominic-lawson/dominic-lawson-there-is-no-such-thing-as-society-so-be-wary-when-politicians-enlist-it-to-their-cause-417970.html) (accessed January 11, 2010).
120. Quoted in Stephens, *Tony Blair*, 7.
121. Steven Frears' film, *The Queen* (2008), effectively presents the initial resistance of Elizabeth, Philip, and the Queen Mother to anything more than a minimal gesture of mourning.
122. Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, 44–45.
123. One irony is that Blair's wife, Cherie, is the daughter of Tony Booth, an actor best known for playing just such a down-and-out in the BBC's long-running *Til Death Us Do Part*.

124. Stephens, *Tony Blair*, 94.
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126. Quoted in Anthony Seldon, *Blair Unbound* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 199.
127. Quoted in Anthony Seldon, *Blair Unbound*, 438.
128. David Brooks, "The Transformer," *Atlantic Monthly* (July/August 2003): 29. Emphasis added.
129. See, for example, Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco, The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
130. Kevin Mattson, *What the Heck Are You Up to Mr. President?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 134.
131. Before being largely dismembered in the mid-80s, CBS in particular seemed initially willing to invest in television news and documentaries that carried some of the editorial inventiveness and independence of "serious" print journalism. For an example of what it had and struggled to maintain, see producer Fred Friendly's contemporary account in *Due to Circumstances beyond Our Control* (New York: Vintage, 1968).
132. Todd Gitlin offers a panoramic survey of this civic flux in *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993), Parts III and IV.
133. A representative case of the older style is Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965). Similarly, after leaving office in 1960, Dwight Eisenhower was the subject of a series of affirming documentaries and interviews on most of the networks. CBS, for example, did a three-part documentary entitled "Eisenhower on the Presidency," mostly allowing the President to fulfill his preferred role as a sage. Craig Allen, *Eisenhower and the Mass Media* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 192.
134. One snapshot of this pattern is evident in Arthur Hiller's affecting 1964 film, *The Americanization of Emily*. Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay made for MGM offers a war coward as a hero. Lieutenant Commander Charlie Madison will accept none of the usual talk about the nobility of sacrifice in times of conflict. "It's not greed or ambition that makes war," he lectures his English girlfriend, "it's goodness. Wars are always fought for the best of reasons: for liberation or manifest destiny. Always against tyranny and always in the interest of humanity. So far in this war, we've managed to butcher some ten million humans in the interest of humanity. Next war it seems we'll have to destroy all of man in order to preserve his damn dignity. It's not war that's unnatural to us, it's virtue. As long as valor remains a virtue, we shall have soldiers. So, I preach cowardice. Through cowardice, we shall all be saved."
- "Memorable Quotes from *The Americanization of Emily*," Internet Movie Database, [amazon.imdb.com/title/tt0057840/quotes](http://amazon.imdb.com/title/tt0057840/quotes) (accessed January 11, 2010).
135. For example, top sellers in 1974 and 1975 included behind-the-scenes accounts of the Nixon administration in Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *All the President's Men* (New York: Warner, 1974) and Theodore White's *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Atheneum, 1975). Monroe's story of public adoration and private strife is the subject of some 200 books that began to roll off the

presses after her death in 1962. See S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 30–34.

136. For a clear account of the convention, see Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968* (New York: Viking, 1969), 503–604.

137. Portions of the tapes can be accessed online from the Moffitt Library at the University of California Library at Berkeley, [www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/watergate.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/watergate.html) (accessed November 11, 2009).

138. See Woodward and Bernstein, *All the President's Men*, 65–66. Alan Pakula's film version was released in 1976.

139. Presidents have always been subject to a certain amount of caricature, some of it noticeably dark—especially at the end of the Nixon years. But most American satire of presidential style was loosely related to their politics. For Ford it was different. He encountered the surprising effects of an upstart late-night television show populated mostly from actors from Chicago's Second City comedy troop. The audience for *Saturday Night Live* reached younger and mostly apolitical viewers. And Chase's take on Ford was especially cruel and personal. It was based on a false conceit. The idea was that the president—a former football player and accomplished skier—was actually clumsy. See, for example, Ron Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 163.

140. It useful to remember that ABC's nightly news program, *Nightline*, was begun specifically to cover the Iran hostage crisis.

141. *The China Syndrome* was released by on March 16 by MGM.

142. For a concise and compelling account of news coverage of the crisis see Dan Nimmo and James Combs, *Nightly Horrors, Crisis Coverage in Television Network News* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 60–86.

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