

“Faith Without Works:” Speech as Action for Justice

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Why are we all here?

I don’t mean that in a sweeping, existential way, I promise. Just here, literally, tonight in this theater. Outside it is a mild, “almost spring” evening. You all could be anywhere. Yet you chose to be here, in this room spending this hour listening to seven college students as we sweat into our suits and teeter on our heels, doing our best to convince you that we know how to make society more just. Some of us very well might. Clearly you all think that speech matters. So, since I am among friends and in agreement about this fact, let me make a confession and propose an idea. I do not know what action we need at this moment to change how we live, work, and learn, because I do not think it is action we need at all. Not in the traditional sense. Instead, we need speech. Your speech.

Now, I know we have been taught to think of speech and action as at odds. Politicians who don’t accomplish anything meaningful are “all talk.” “You are your actions, not your words,” we are told. Even the Brethren, who founded this college, might raise an eyebrow at me today. After all, for them “faith without works is dead.”

But speech is action. It is subversive and self-determining. Speech is both a tool for and an end goal of justice. After all, what is more just than a society where everyone has a chance to express their needs, wants, hopes, and desires? I am not talking about just any speech, though. Constructive speech, that which bends our societal arc towards justice, as Martin Luther King Jr. might have put it, must rest on three principles: liberty, inclusivity, and reciprocity. Simply put, we must foster free speech that is extended to all and created together. And this requires courage.

The term “liberal arts” derives from the Latin *liberalis*—“free.” Believe it or not, even with current tuition prices, that is true. A liberal arts education was meant to impart skills worthy of a free person in society, so they could carry out their civic duty. This included speaking in the public forum. Not everyone here tonight attended a liberal arts college, or college at all. But we are all free people in a free society. And with this freedom comes great responsibility. Because people at podiums have rarely

changed anything without support from many in chairs, at lunch counters, or in marches. There is a reason speech comes first in our Bill of Rights. “We the people” are each gifted with a mighty and forceful power—to publish, to protest, to petition. We must always take advantage of these rights. First, find the courage to speak for what you believe in. And then, make sure others’ speech is also free. Whether it is journalists arrested in Egypt and China, or peaceful protestors detained on American streets, threats to speech anywhere are threats to justice everywhere.

And what of the second component, inclusivity?

Paulo Friere, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wrote that to deny people the “primordial right to speak their word” is to exercise “dehumanizing aggression.” When seeking constructive speech, we must always keep in mind the legacy historically oppressed peoples carry. Not just material lack or physical pain, though these scars are real, but something else another scholar, Edward Said, referred to as “colonization of the mind.” Over time, when people are objectified, marginalized, and silenced, they come to see themselves through the oppressor’s eyes. They come to believe themselves worthy of their treatment. We see this today in all facets of our lives, sometimes without realizing it.

According to the American Association of University Women, in 2015 American women earned, on average, 22% less than their male counterparts. Why? Sexist employers are to blame, certainly, but some have posited internalized sexism also plays a large factor. Women are far less likely to negotiate their salaries, to ask for raises, to assert their worth as employees than men. They have been taught not to advocate for themselves. Racism and classism produce even stronger effects on self-perception. Therefore, the second component of constructive speech, inclusivity, calls us to elevate all of those who traditionally could not speak. To remind people that their quiet voices matter as much as our louds ones. To not merely leave a seat open at the negotiating table, but invite people to sit in it. To speak not only on behalf of others, but also to stand allied behind them, as they speak for themselves.

And when others do speak, we must be prepared to listen. Constructive speech is, ultimately, reciprocal. It requires silence, at least briefly, to hear others’ words.

Here in Pennsylvania, we are still without a budget from last year. Partisan gridlock in the Statehouse seems just a reflection of larger, national impasse. Politicians, but also “We, the people,” sometimes forget that free, empowered speech also requires compromise. Listening. “Faith without works is dead,” yes, but speech without concession, without negotiation, is meaningless. Even on campus last semester we experienced the effects of dialogue disintegrating. Without speech, misunderstandings spiraled into campus-wide tension, and on various campuses around the country that same tension conflagrated into bitter conflict. We must have dialogue. Otherwise, I hear presidential candidates calling for walls to be built and refugees turned away. “Speech,” in the traditional sense, but is this what we want?

I see hope for dialogue in Huntingdon. Whether it is at a community dinner, an activist theater performance, or a formally organized oratorical competition, we are encouraged to speak. To engage with others' views. As Aristotle once put it, "it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." Your mere presence today shows that you value entertaining many different thoughts. Maybe my few minutes have helped expand your already-educated minds.

But more importantly, I hope that when you and I leave this theater tonight and walk into that mild, "almost spring" air, we carry with us the courage to speak. To support others in speaking. And finally, to be silent, and listen. Then, together, may we build a more just society.