

An Odyssey of Ethos For Public Diplomacy

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It's my pleasure to be in Barcelona, one my favorite cities. My infatuation with the city began in 1982 when I brought students from Emerson College to the Olympic Games. A special thanks to Javier Curtichs, my student at Emerson from Barcelona who suggested this special trip, as well as Prof. Antonio Noguero, who provided us with the historical background of Barcelona, as well as the Olympics. I was awed by the majestic nature of the Olympics on Mt. Juic – and the eternal lessons these magical games still resonate after centuries, that despite our many differences we can and do find global common ground through sport as a communication medium. Yet, my love for Barcelona did not end with the Olympics, which one might say was my first date with this magnificent city.

My visit in 1992 was my first encounter with the city whose roots trace back to the beginning of civilization on the Mediterranean, and whose history has included important chapters in the world's greatest religions of some of the greatest artists – Lull, Gaudi, Miro, Picasso, Dali, Caballe. Artists – or as we call them today – change agents who walked the Ramblas, dialogued together in the Gothic Quarter on inspirational projects that continue to inspire and engage generations to find commonalities amidst our daily conflicts.

Over the years and especially given my many trips to my second Academic home – Blanquerna – this first date in 1992 has developed into a lifelong relationship with Barcelona. Yes, we are *Amics Per Sempre* – friends for life, and what a friend you have been. What began as a summer workshop has evolved into guest lectures, student exchanges, joint conferences, global projects, joint degrees – and with Pres. Pelton, Dean Carbonell, Provost Whelan, VP Pinder, Dean Roberts-Breslin, a formal agreement and memorandum of understanding that provides both schools with a fountainhead of opportunities and activities both in the classroom as well as in immersive academic and professional experiences. This 28-year journey has had a significant impact on me, and has furthered a core value in my life – a fundamental belief that education is a key conduit in building bridges – not walls – especially in such desperate and divisive times as we live in today.

The strongest characteristic of this bridge is Communication – the ability through the gift of language to identify common interests as an impetus for the fruitful exchange of information between individuals, groups, cultures and countries. As rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke postulated, all of our actions – everything in our lives – is a result of our innate effort to find identification with others. According to Burke, language and the symbols we use are our salvation, as well as our damnation. Language itself is amoral according to Burke, yet we make choices and decide how we use such powerful symbols – to come together or to separate. The motive lies within each of us. It is imbedded with our character, and values.

Through our choice we can, as did Martin Luther King Jr., uplift a people with an eternal appeal to dare to dream – through the actions of Mother Teresa – to remind each of us of the power of kindness and being humble, through the pre-Instagram images of Princess Diana touching and comforting AIDS patients, that caring and compassion are values we all should share.

In contrast, rhetoric can be used to aggravate what separates us – through hate speech, fear, stereotypes, and lies that deify the narcissist's own brand, while debasing, ridiculing and nullifying all others.

The power of communication has always fascinated me. As a child on a farm in southern Illinois, I was mesmerized by political communication. I vividly remember watching the 1960 Nixon and Kennedy presidential debates, appreciating the power of the medium in shaping perceptions – that radio listeners judged Nixon as the winner, yet TV watchers were mesmerized by the performance and style of the charismatic Senator from Massachusetts. Later, at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign as a student, I focused on such media dynamics in McLuhan's provocative writings – the medium is the message/the medium is the message.

Prior to college, my politics mirrored that of my family as hard-working Republicans. At the University of Illinois, I was active in the Young Republicans, and eager to debate on the forensics team, as well as discuss politics with my friends and foes. I felt comfortable in my political skin, even though I grew more disenchanted with the U.S. involvement in an endless and hopeless war in southeast Asia.

As a moderate Republican, one memorable night I joined a group of friends who drove to Indiana to see who one right wing friend of mine described as the anti-Christ. Sen. Robert Kennedy was expected to run for president against President Johnson, who despite his 1964 campaign promises to end the war – led the country down a dead-end road in Vietnam.

Prior to that speech, I had a negative view of Kennedy – largely based on myopic and shallow views. Something happened in the course of listening to Robert Kennedy's speech that changed my life. Initially supporting the war, he passionately and honestly confessed his change of heart on the war. I was struck by his character, by his courage to admit his mistakes. This speech seared my soul. I was awed by Kennedy's candor and his charismatic ability to connect, to identify, to build a bridge between his generation and mine.

I vividly remember now, as if it were just yesterday, Kennedy's challenge – that the task of any leader is not to condemn or castigate those involved in protest, but to search out and seek out the reason for such disillusionment and alienation, to try and figure out the rationale of the protest and dissent, and to learn from that. Kennedy also reminded us that change begins within each of us – that each time we stand up, and stand together, we send forth ripples of hope that coming together can change the world. It was a succinct and pithy message – and a major life reset for me – the product and promise of speech in a change agent's tool chest.

There was never a truer moment of the power of rhetoric to unite, to build a needed bridge, than Robert Kennedy's speech later in 1968 to a group of supporters in an Indianapolis intercity. Kennedy had the tragic task of telling the crowd that Martin Luther King Jr. had just been killed. In his spontaneous remarks, Kennedy reminded all of us that violence knows no color nor race – that each of us have a responsibility to move our country forward, and not be consumed by the pain of such tragedies. Indianapolis was one of the few cities in America that had no riots after King's death – again the power of rhetoric for the positive change agent.

As a professor at Occidental College, and as a speech writer for Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, I complemented my academic interest in communication, working with an inspirational politician who epitomized the American dream. Bradley, the grandson of a slave who picked cotton as a child in Texas, achieved an impressive series of firsts. He was the first black athlete to win a scholarship at UCLA; he was the first black Lieut. in the Los Angeles police force. After losing once, and running again, he became the first black City Councilman in the history of Los Angeles. And, after losing again in his first try against an incumbent mayor who focused on Bradley's race, he ran again, redoubled his efforts, and became the first African American and longest-serving mayor in Los Angeles history, serving for 20 years.

In 1982, Bradley launched his California gubernatorial bid to become the nation's first black governor in United States history. Polls predicted a victory on election day, but in the closest election in California history, Bradley was defeated. Post-election analysis reveals that many people who told pollsters they would vote for Bradley – opted not in the privacy of the voting booth not to vote for the black candidate. Another contributing factor was that Bradley, a former policeman, supported a controversial initiative calling for gun registration. Consultants advised Bradley not to take a stand on the issue, but Bradley responded that as a cop he had seen too many innocent people killed, choosing principle over politics. That ethical stand also cost the Mayor votes. The defeat was very difficult for me to accept. It was agonizingly clear to me that one of America's most talented and progressive mayors and leaders was deprived of leading California as governor, solely due to his race and principled decision making. It was one of my life lessons that in crisis – there is also an opportunity.

One day at city hall, Mayor Bradley asked me to come to his office. He explained that while he had accepted the election defeat, it was clear that I had not – He suggested that I take a year off and retool at the Kennedy school at Harvard. Although not terribly keen on the idea I did take the Mayor's advice. My planned one year at Cambridge, has translated in 35 years in Boston, and at home at Emerson College.

Emerson proved to be an ideal home for me. It was the first school of communication in the United States – a foundation which mirrored my own. At Emerson, I have been fortunate to work with incredible colleagues and build bridges with signature programs in America and abroad in political communication, polling, health communication, sports communication, public relations and joint degree programs – including our partnership work with Blanquerna, thanks to President Pelton and Dean Carbonell, and a collaborative team on both sides of the Atlantic.

Emerson has been the petri dish to appreciate the power of communication and its fundamental role in crisis management. This became indelibly clear for me in the wake of 9/11. Three Emersonians were on the first plane that crashed into the World Trade Center. The community in shock quickly came together. Some gathered on the Boston Common and shared stories about those no longer with us as we tried to move forward from this dark and tragic place.

It was during that time that I realized the unparalleled importance of storytelling as a therapeutic pathway – a light out of such darkness. It was an all too close lesson to me that crises can either blind and paralyze – but for the adept and pragmatic leader, crises can present an opportunity to move forward.

My interest in public diplomacy as a bridge builder has included visits to every continent around the globe. It was a direct result of the 9/11 tragedy. In the wake of losing a faculty member, a graduate student and a very dear friend and wife of an Emerson trustee. It was initiated by two students – Faisal Al Saud and Husam Algozaibi from Saudi Arabia – in my crisis class who approached me with a very bold

plan. They explained this heinous act did not represent their country, and asked my assistance in helping them get another message out about their country. They were eager to push back against mediated reality – that all Muslims and all people from Saudi Arabia were terrorist.

My Saudi students recalled one of their favorite case studies in which proactive individuals from the ground up – provided a different mediated reality from that often propagated by the corporate driven media. The students reminded me of my fundamental belief that in each of us – there is a change agent that can address such challenges. Their idea was for Emerson to be on the forefront – to organize the first trip to Saudi Arabia after 9/11, with students so that Emersonians could see first-hand that the Kingdom was different than what was branded by the act of the fifteen hijackers from Saudi.

It was complex and bold and daunting proposal. Yet, Emerson is a creative space – a non- traditional petri dish – and despite the incredible obstacles and push back from a variety of internal as well as external forces, with these students we launched the Saudi American Exchange and made history with a project that earned praise from governments and non-profits and provided the opportunity for academic research and other professional media projects.

Organizing a trip like this after such a horrific event included daunting challenges both internally at Emerson, as well as with the US government. I remember a visit to the State Department and talking with people aligned with US Vice President Cheney. They asked if I was in support of American foreign-policy. I explained to them that I was going to Saudi Arabia as an advocate for American values. That meeting solidified my goal to become more involved as a public diplomat not as an advocate of any foreign policy, but as a spokesperson for values shared by all humans.

Many friends and family questioned the safety, wisdom and purpose of making such a trip. In addition to the aftermath of 9/11, many raised issues about human rights, women's rights, freedom of expression, religion and other important issues. My response was that in order to have any influence, one first had to create a context and find commonalities to begin the needed dialogue. If successful, trust could follow, potentially as well as a relationship from which I could eventually discuss problematic issues. Engaging was not equivalent to endorsing, yet a necessary step in this soft power approach.

This type of direct and immersive experience heightened my interest and passion for public diplomacy. In this first trip, as well as others that followed I was able to see how important it was for my students from the west to dialogue with their peers from Saudi Arabia, as well as other Middle Eastern countries in the effort to find common ground, the first step in establishing a meaningful relationship and the trust needed for further dialogue.

I witnessed firsthand what Prof. Nye from Harvard described as soft power, as it contrasted to the administration's hard power approach in the war on terror, and the use of what Eric Hoffer would describe as devil terms – in stereotyping Muslims and people from the Middle East as terrorists. The effort then, as today, is to short circuit deliberation and critical thinking and opt for fear fabrication.

While others posit public diplomacy as part of traditional statecraft, my perspective is that public diplomacy is best achieved by the non-state actor. As we have witnessed all too vividly in recent days, governmental diplomats are often constrained by the ideology of the president prime minister or whomever is office. This often runs counter to their own beliefs.

As a public diplomat, my responsibility is only tied to my own ethical core and values. For the public diplomats, the first step is to establish a context that invites dialogue and discussion. My immersive experience in a post-9/11 world helped hone my definition of public diplomacy to a simple phrase–

public diplomacy's objective is bridge building based on furthering understanding through communication. Absent from this definition is any expectation of agreement or disagreement on issues, religion and cultures. The major purpose is to initiate a dialogue to advance understanding and invite subsequent communication.

The convergence of public affairs, public diplomacy and public relations as a strategic communication initiative has resulted in bridge building in a variety of global laboratories. Collaborative work in Rosarito Beach, Baja California Mexico over the past 12 years has not just enhanced the image and branding of the community near the world's busiest border; it also provides a global laboratory for students and faculty at Emerson – as well as Blanquerna – and as of now over – 15 universities around the world to have an immersive global experience.

Teaming up with the US State Department and traditional diplomacy projects in 8 countries, as well as workshops at the United Nations and with other governments provides the entrée for a change agents to engage with other cultures – a crucial and needed strategy in a fractured global village.

Such endeavors echo what Robert Kennedy espoused over 50 years ago – that working together with others, we can make a difference at the local level as we forge meaningful relationships that together form tributaries of progress that can sweep down walls of divisive rhetoric, salacious stereotyping, name-calling and the popular reliance of conspiracy theories over cold hard facts.

This direct interpersonal and relational approach to public diplomacy is a bedrock for advocates of critical thinking and thoughtful deliberation – all important tools in the opinionated era in which we live.

The hope at the dawn of the Internet was that such technological advancement would advance political participation and perpetuate the value of democracies worldwide. Today, with each new development, advances in Artificial Intelligence, as well as other additions to our technology tool chest, too often we are awed in to submission by such innovations. From our own direct experience in the past presidential election as well as our current debate about 2020, we overlook cybernetics potential lethal impact on societies that still value fact over opinion, and real news over obfuscative and distractive gas lighting – so intense that it threatens the very fabric of democracies worldwide.

At this juncture evidence does not bode well for those who predicted technology as the means for a more democratic world. Instead we have witnessed attacks on the very democratic principles that we all hold dear. We are bombarded by daily combat where reason, facts and critical thinking skills are ridiculed and replaced by a blind acceptance and approval of any stance of the by a strong charismatic leader – preaching tribalism and nationalism and embracing conspiracy theories. Absent is the needed healthy skepticism, demand for facts in support of rational arguments and verified claims – the essence of any deliberative democracy. Our time is one where many prefer repetition to reason – as we slide further down into the dark abyss of compliance and blind acceptance of enticing rabbit hole rhetoric.

While Americans were alarmed at the incredulity of a president boasting his followers would continue to support him, even if he shot someone on Fifth Avenue – the context of the impeachment inquiry and the Republican reaction suggests, this to be one of the few times the President has actually told the truth.

We live in a time where crimes and deviance have been normalized, facts trivialized, and a vast and large base of people hypnotized. In this era of celebrity and spectacle, we are more impressed with one's bombastic might, than ethics and being right.

In a world where information is transmitted globally in seconds, we are challenged by a failure to communicate.

Today's political snake oil, propagated unchecked in social media, sadly continues to focus the public's eyes on the shiny bouncing ball initiated in 1968 by Richard Nixon who hired the best in PR on Madison Avenue to repackage an outworn image that never played well on TV.

Nixon's victory ushered in an unethical era unrivaled until now as he cast antiwar protestors as unpatriotic bums, rallied his so-called silent majority to support an unjust war, and explained away the tragic killings of students at Kent State and Jackson State who were exercising their first amendment rights with his glib comment, "When dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy." Nixon's own President's Commission described the time as the "most divided time in American since the Civil War." Now as then words matter, and provide as Richard Weaver argued, the behavioral directive for actions that follow.

Being in college at that time, as were many here today, we know the depth of despair of that era – that included the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the resignation of a corrupt vice president, and then a president. Yet, today to many of us – our division is deeper, the threats more sinister, the danger to the core of our democratic values more at stake.

Today's world of bots, bites and bombast, reflect the convergence of politics, public relations and marketing – in a most troublesome time where our elected leaders, like their sophistic counterparts in Ancient Greece – are more concerned with image than substance, obsessed with dominating the countless cable news channels, positive polls and having their popularity at center stage in the incessant inane chatter of ubiquitous talking heads. Conspicuously absent from such blinding bright lights is the engagement, the careful deliberations on potential commonalities required to initiate healthy dialogue, necessary to advance the business of government that advances the global public good.

Yet, despite such historic challenges and threats to much of what we hold dear, we remain resolute, have hope and conviction that we will successfully survive this crisis and, as we have done in the past, be stronger and learn from it.

Our students – those in Boston as well as Barcelona, those in Lisbon as well as LA, our students remain optimistic. In an era, comparable if not worse than Watergate, with attacks on every part of our system, governments, today's youth still reflect a characteristic Aristotle described over 2000 years ago – an idealistic vision beyond what the world is – to what the world could be.

It is this idealism, this optimism that feeds my passion for teaching. Yes, there are new challenges in the classroom with students feeling more vulnerable than generations past. But that is understandable. Yet, we remain impressed with the optimism of young people around the world, many of whom have lost faith and have disdain for the status quo. Nonetheless, they are smart, capable and remain engaged, committed and determined to boldly face problems with a new perspective.

We hear the young voice of Malala Yousafzais advocating for women's rights and educational opportunities at the U.N; the admonishment by Greta Thurnburg of world leaders on the fragile state of the global environment. The passion of Parkland student Emma Gonzalez's stance on gun violence, and Emerson's own Francis Hui's advocacy of free speech in the Pacific Rim.

These are only some of the optimistic voices that join with others around the globe in calling for change. They remind each of us to reflect on how history – how future generations will judge our actions or

inactions to publically repudiate the reprehensible actions we now witness daily. We also must know youth is not about age – but a state of mind.

We face such challenges with a powerful and fundamental tool and foundation of both Blanquerna and Emerson – communication – the ability to inform, to inspire, to persuade, to motivate, to activate.

Working together, we can counter sophistic fear-based rhetoric, with a Phaedrus-based approach of facts, reason and critical thinking – embracing all the parts of what Aristotle identified as our most valued rhetorical characteristic – *Ethos*. In describing the three parts of *Ethos*, the most important component of any message, Aristotle acknowledged the charm of charisma, the dominant characteristic of our celebrity-driven era. Yet, he also focused on credibility, the person's character, as a most important value. Character's bedrock is trustworthiness – a rare trait in today's political mosaic, where so called leaders take courageous stands only when they are politically expedient.

The aim of Communication is establishing commonality. Trust, relationships and learning grow from basic human actions.

What I have shared with you today is my deep and abiding belief in the inherent power of communication to create the greatest good for all people.

The words of Robert Kennedy resonate today more than ever. Speaking to black students in apartheid South Africa in 1966. "Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change the world which yields most painfully to change. I believe that in this generation those with the courage to enter the conflict will find themselves with companions in every corner of the world."

Our task is to embrace the writings and teachings of an ethical rhetoric – and through vivid stories, compelling case studies, and by the way we live our own lives – to communicate the fundamental trait that real leadership is adherence to enduring principles over politics; to embrace values of freedom, tolerance, empathy and respect; to hope not hate; to be an advocate of rhetoric that aims to engage, not enrage; and to embrace public diplomacy and build bridges, not walls.

As C.P. Cavafy said in his inspirational poem on Ithaka, "As you set out for Ithaka hope your road is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery. Keep Ithaka always in your mind arriving there is what you're destined for. But don't hurry the journey at all, better if it lasts for years, so you're old by the time you reach the island, wealthy with all that you gained along the way, not expecting Ithaka to make you rich. Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey. Without her you wouldn't have set out. She has nothing left to give you now.

Thank you for this most valued recognition – None of what I have shared with you today would have been possible without friends and colleagues and especially my dear family, Dad, Zulene and my Sister Janice, and the generosity of people like Helen Rose. We make our life journey only once so let us continue to build a shining legacy of communicating our best ideas, principles, and actions to serve others and may our legacy prevail and serve as Plato's pathway forward in building bridges and not walls as we together create a better world for our future generations.