

67 'Minutes' about Words, On the Occasion of Nelson Mandela's 94th Birthday

It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact upon the way people live or die.

-Nelson Mandela, 2000

0. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery only as it expresses the willingness to learn a life-changing lesson.
1. The current age is defined by endless sound bites, posts, and twitters, the speed of which enforce a presumption that expression is easy, transparent, and never to be heard or read more than once.
2. The capacity for spoken and written expression is one of the defining features of the human condition.
3. The deprivation of expression is a crime against humanity for which there may be no adequate legal remedy – the unspeakable breaks and haunts precedent.
4. Human beings are thrown into language - the word is a gift and a responsibility that we can neither fully explain nor control.
5. Human beings throw themselves into the world with words; as Hannah Arendt suggested, it is through the work of language that we appear in the world, present ourselves to others, and invent the grounds of understanding.
6. The uncertain origin of language is a source of anxiety – human beings can never fully know what they “mean.”
7. Human beings respond to the anxiety provoked by the question of language in different ways; some hear the question as a call for humility, others hear it as an opportunity for mastery.
8. The desire to master language does violence to language; Vaclav Havel and Paul Muldoon are quite correct – humble respect for the mystery of language is the best antidote for the totalitarian slogans that distort and denigrate expression.
9. Human beings suffer when language is reduced to an instrument and deployed as a tool.
10. Philosophy has yet to atone for its longstanding and scurrilous view that language is simply a conduit, a “device” for putting my idea fully into your head.
11. Popular calls for more and better communication, dialogue, and civic engagement frequently conceal a profound lack of interest in how language works.

12. Language is productive, a production, and a product of collective action.
13. Words perform work; speech acts are woven into the fabric of everyday life - promising, avowing, swearing an oath, advising, issuing a command, apologizing.
14. Naming is an act of creation, a form of expression that aims to define what 'is' and what 'should be'.
15. The name takes control of language, creates a shared referent, and imposes meaning.
16. Naming is necessary.
17. Naming is violent.
18. One history of the world is the story of how human beings have argued and fought over the allocation and exercise of the power to name – this is the history of sovereignty's struggle.
19. Evil may begin when the power to name is set beyond the pale of argument.
20. An argument is composed of a claim ("It is important that the president win a second term.") and evidence ("Incumbents have valuable experience.").
21. A claim may speak to what is, what is good or what should be done.
22. A claim offers a choice – it can be accepted, declined, or questioned.
23. An argument is incomplete if it lacks a warrant, an idea that connects the claim and the evidence ("Now is not the time for something new.").
24. Evidence professes what is true; warrants express the values, feelings, and beliefs that underpin our efforts to arrive at truth.
25. The exchange of arguments is a process called argumentation.
26. The possibility of meaningful argumentation depends on the willingness of participants to change their minds.
27. In the name of avoiding "clash", we are taught from a young age not to "argue".
28. Clash is risky to the extent that our own views may be found lacking.
29. Argumentation turns violent when participants are unable to concede that the goal of clash is not victory.
30. Argumentation opens the possibility of debate.

31. Dialogue and debate are different but closely related forms of expression; very few people have had the opportunity to engage in either one.
32. Debate begins with a disturbance, a controversy in which individuals dispute the integrity of the values on which collective expression and reasoning rest.
33. Controversies signal “language trouble”, a stasis that short-circuits traditional vocabularies and accepted ways of arguing.
34. Controversies demand that we talk about talk; they are a call to discover new vocabularies and invent new forms of expression.
35. The right to “free speech” is underwritten by three myths: a) the capacity to speak is a given; b) calls to attend to language are necessarily a constraint on our freedom; c) speech comes without cost.
36. The work of finding words about words begins by asking how we experience language – alone and with others.
37. Inquiry into the experience of language is difficult and deeply discomfoting; it is a moment in which we must ask after that which seems wholly natural and naturally holy.
38. The question of how to talk about talk is a rhetorical question, which is not to say an inquiry that has gone unasked.
39. Rhetorical questions ask after the words with which we can begin to speak to issues around which there is profound ambiguity and deep division; rhetorical inquiry, in Aristotle’s terms, is addressed to those things that are “in the main contingent.”
40. Rhetorical inquiry is a thinking of the way of speaking in the face of problems for which there are competing and perhaps incommensurable solutions.
41. In seeking to open a way of speaking, rhetoric struggles to discern a path along which the word moves us just as we move the word.
42. Rhetoric’s path leaves us vulnerable, without the certainty of where we have been, what we profess to know, and where we may arrive; here and now, this path sets us at a distance from allegiance if not identity.
43. Theoretical and practical to the point where the difference fades, rhetoric seeks to investigate and express the ways in which language invents and sustains politics, society, and culture.
44. Rhetoric is not something that we like to talk about.
45. Every new political regime professes its “truth” by declaring that the old regime was guilty of “rhetoric”.

46. The media tends to name something “rhetorical” when it wants to signal its irrelevance; the media’s professed objectivity is a rhetorical stance.
47. Very few members of the media have studied rhetoric; very few citizens pressure the media to provide the texts of speeches given on their behalf.
48. Language is impoverished when rhetoric is held out as a synonym for empty words, propaganda, or duplicity.
49. Rhetoric is not about how to use words as a lever to get what one wants; contrary to what the dealers of “public relations” would have us believe, persuasion is not a unilateral force so much as the work of creating meaningful agreement and disagreement.
50. Words create audiences; audiences arbitrate meaning.
51. There are no guarantees that anyone is listening.
52. The truth of rhetoric abides in its capacity to enable the development and articulation of opinions about matters of common concern.
53. The capacity to speak both depends on and creates the material conditions of life.
54. Individuals and institutions that sever the symbolic and the material (or the political and economic) have already decided who should get what.
55. The objection that rhetoric is dedicated to the irrational and biased expression of opinion fails to grasp that it begins in the need to disclose a shared uncertainty about what is true.
56. Doubts about the sincerity of an expression frequently provoke accusations of hypocrisy, almost all of which succumb to the naïve view that our words rest on timeless and stable ground.
57. The false belief that rhetoric trades only in empty style fails to comprehend that style is a substantive concern for the ways in which words enable and prohibit relations with others.
58. Rhetoric can open time and space - for deliberation, action, and collective judgment.
59. As words have power, rhetoric is an art of potential, an art of discerning and enabling the word’s power to open and sustain ethical relationships.
60. The possibility of an ethical relation may appear as the tragic desire to claim control over language gives way to a faith in the work of words that unfolds between human beings.
61. Rhetoric has been used to commit violence, atrocity and evil.

62. The violence wrought by words is rarely overcome by silencing speech, enforcing consensus, or pretending that the connection between the human condition and the power of language is not an open and vitalizing question.

63. In the wake of the unspeakable, Theodor Adorno was adamant: the disavowal of rhetoric is an act of barbarism – an impoverishment of language, a constraint on imagination, and a denigration of life.

64. For enemies: if the war is to end, the resolution of conflict may require listening to those that one cannot bear to hear.

65. The cost of listening to those whose words have inflicted horrific violence is a profound sacrifice, a gesture of vulnerability that may first appear to one's allies as a betrayal of self and one's cause.

66. The gift of hospitality demands becoming a guest of language.

67. To be inspired by words is to glimpse the shared possibility of a world made anew.

-erik doxtader