

The Words We Wear[1]: Talking and Walking

A Baccalaureate Address For the Graduating Class of Earlham College[2]

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Good Morning.

When I was growing up my father, someone I suppose we would call a man of few words, would remark about our neighbor Charlie: "That guy likes to hear the sound of his own voice." And it was true, It seemed like whenever we saw Charlie, over the lawn mower, at a neighborhood picnic, at a community meeting, he would be holding forth. Folks around him would seem to be listening, but soon their toes would tap, their eyes would wander and bit by bit they would edge away. And Charlie just kept talking.

Recently I have been thinking a lot about Charlie.

Since I came to Earlham in 1978, I have had many opportunities to talk to large gatherings. Just this past fall I talked my way through three, long, Charles Lectures on the subjects of poetry, talking about trees, and evil deeds. Those lectures became the local cable access station's video filler. So all year long, surfing the channels could result in encountering Caruso, framed by syndicated Dragnet on one station, and The Partridge Family on another. For months Richmond, Indiana echoed, I'm told, with the sound of my voice. I am grateful to live in Ohio.

And now I stand here on graduation day, for the third time in the nineteen years I have been at Earlham. Each time I have been asked to speak I have felt somewhat overwhelmed. You are a formidable group. There are seniors dressed up in clothes none of us have seen for four years. All you family of birth and family of choice members are beaming in various "proud-of-your-graduate" ways. I suspect a part of each of you is wishing we'd get done with all this talking so your graduate can do the walking across the stage you've waited so long to see; and to take pictures of. And then there are members of the board of trustees, alums, distinguished guests and maybe a member or two of the 50th reunion class languishing out there under the trees. Any speaker would have "an audience problem." And I'm no exception.

Even so, it is as clear to me this time as it was on the previous two occasions, that these words are for the seniors who asked me to speak. I'll be pleased if what I say is useful to others but seniors you, and our shared time here are Earlham, are on my mind. I am honored by your invitation to talk. And I have accepted for a third time because I believe that when someone you respect, or someone in your community or family, specifically asks you to speak, then you must do so; unless, of course, you are emotionally or intellectually exhausted: what Paul Lacey calls "Running on Empty." [3] I have an eighth of a tank.

I want to begin this morning, with a brief look at the use of language and education as they turn up in people's talking. In her piece "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," Adrienne Rich says the biggest lie in a relationship comes when, asked point blank to say what you think or to address a question that may lead to a painful conversation, you evade answering. [4] And although this is a day devoted to celebrating your achievements, I know there are serious questions that some of you are asking about your time at Earlham and about your future. I'll try to speak to what I imagine might be some of those concerns and I'll try not to be evasive. I'll try not to "bite my words," [5] Chinua Achebe's language for holding back from saying what you believe to be true, due to social pressure or fear. But that won't be easy. One of the first rules of institutional language use, even at this "speak truth to power" Quaker college, is to write and talk obliquely. And we have *all* been more or less indoctrinated.

Talking is an interesting subject. Or at least I must think so, because every address I have ever offered at Earlham has had something to do with talking and something to do with words. I suppose that's not too strange, given that I am an English teacher, and spend a lot of my time with words, but I must admit it is a little odd to be able to look back on my academic life and discover that it, and what I have to say about it, has standard themes and a ensemble cast of colorful characters. I blame this on my father and a discussion he had with me when I was just about to go off to college. I talked about this in 1983,[6] but since you weren't there, and it's pertinent to my remarks today, it bears repeating.

My experience of education from college forward has been framed by this observation: "A truly educated person can talk with anyone." It has only recently occurred to me that when my father said that, referring to his encounters sitting on the cellar stairs with the friendly professor of Roman languages whose oil burner he serviced, he was actually talking about the two of us: the working class father, and the educated daughter of the future. That early he was worrying about our future, warning me about the power of words to separate people, and instructing me about my ethical responsibility to see, hear and engage with people's humanity and not with some other spurious class distinction. As a consequence, for me, whenever education is in the room, talking and its use and misuse are there too.

Like my father and me, lots of people in the United States worry about the value and affect our talking, so much so that we have an idiomatic vocabulary devoted entirely to it. We speak of people who "talk through their hat" or "talk a good game." We sometimes suggest that "talk is cheap."

And to some degree, all these people are right. Talk can be cheap, it certainly was for Charlie, but it also presents real hazards and we recognize only some of them. Words, or the lack of them, can hurt us, often without us noticing. My father suggested that one way this can happen is by using words to deny some folks full humanity, but there is no shortage of other nasty things language can do, in cahoots with speakers and writers. Take it from an English teacher.

One of the worst things that some talking can do, according to Toni Morrison, is to kill language as a "device for grappling with meaning, providing guidance, or expressing love." [7] In her *Nobel Lecture in Literature*, she draws "on the lore of several cultures" to create the character of an "...old woman. Blind. Wise." "...the daughter of slaves, black, [and] American (9). The character is a griot, or writer, and is clearly the author's self

representation. Morrison also creates a bird in the hands of some young people and has it represent language.

The young people have come to the old woman to ask if the bird is living or dead, and this causes her to worry "...about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes. Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system and partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency, as an act with consequences..."

The old woman "...thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure [and] ... For her a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is [also] unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis." It is "censored and censoring," ruthless in its policing duties..." "And then" there is what Morrison calls official, we might say institutional language," which "sanctions ignorance and preserves privilege, is a suit of armor, polished to a shocking glitter, [is] a husk from which the Knight departed long ago. Yet there it is; dumb, predatory, sentimental. Exciting reverence in schoolchildren, providing shelter for despots, summoning false memories of stability, [and] harmony among the public" (13-14). For Morrison this civil manipulation is the worst possible use of language.

So we know that language can hurt us, that we can kill it, and that talking is not simply a filler between things we do. But there is some truth in the admonitions from popular culture. If not in it self always empty, talking certainly can *represent* an empty gesture; there must be some relationship between talking and doing. If she talks the talk, we ask, does that mean she walks the walk?

Maybe. Sometimes talking itself is walking. Consider these examples: saying the right thing at just the right time to stop an unjust act; not letting a dehumanizing joke go unchallenged; using your own ability to talk to share knowledge with those who want it and will use it well; letting talking be an act of comfort or tenderness when they are needed. Remember, Morrison's old woman writer thinks of language as "a living thing" as "agency" as "an act with consequences." You probably won't be surprised to hear that other writers from everywhere there is, (all of whom I've read, twice), are also clear about the walking power of talk.

In Chinua Achebe's novel, *Arrow of God*, for example, Ezeulu, Ulu's chief priest, reminds his community members that when they come together to determine whether or not to go to war, the old ones in the group neglect their duty if they do not speak, and this can have disastrous consequences. "I told him," Ezeulu says about an elder in the group, "that he should have spoken up against what we were planning" he was, after all, "the adult in the house." But he chose not to speak and so "he put a piece of live coal into the child's hand and asked him to carry it with care" (25).

Great writers understand that talking can be walking. They describe this phenomenon through their character's behavior, and they live this phenomenon in the writing acts of their own lives. Some are exiled or tortured or killed because of the moral and/or political use they make of the art. Talk for them is not cheap; far from it.

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So, O.K. you say, I am convinced. Talking can be walking. But there are still plenty of times when what we talk about and what we do don't exactly go together. You're right.

I think that for me looking backward (but not too far), the hardest thing to deal with is that there is a cavern between what folks say and folks do. And that gap seems to be everywhere: in federal and state governments, within the institutions where I live my life, and most important, in my own behavior. I wonder if this is a place where you and I might reach across our generations and touch each other.

I think your lives in these last four years have provoked some serious questions beyond "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" (Though that's a good one) I want to look at two different parts of life you may be questioning; the first concerns the institution and the second concern your self.

Most of you have had four years to watch and participate in some of the life of this institution. And I wouldn't be surprised if you have been comparing what you thought Earlham would be like to what Earlham says about itself in public documents, and both of those things to what you see the college do. I also suspect that you look back at your own lives over these years and compare what you have said and what you have done. When you do that comparing what do you see? I suspect you notice that neither you nor Earlham have always walked the walk you talked.

How do you and I name the distance between what is said and what is done by ourselves, those around us, and by institutions? The way folks sometimes explain these incongruities is to see them as the absence of integrity that we then name hypocrisy. If a person says one thing in order to simulate virtue, and then does the opposite, he is a hypocrite. What a word! It sounds terrible. But, then, it is terrible. The hypocrite helps construct and then lives in Morrison's world of "dead and unyielding language;" that is, "one ruthless in its policing duties." He lives in a place where the armor which protects privilege is "polished to a shocking glitter" but that armor is a "husk from which the Knight has departed long ago" (15).

I suspect that there are those people and institutions out there, that knowingly and intentionally talk what they don't walk. And if you meet one - leave it! But first be sure you know what you are looking at, because I think there is another animal out there that resembles a hypocritical beast but isn't one. I think I've met that animal; I think I've been that animal.

When I was growing up my father would sometimes make grand pronouncements; "Don't Ever Over Eat!" "Don't yell at fools even if they behave like idiots." Then he would start to laugh a little bit and say: "Daughter, do as I say not as I do." He has said that to me for 47 years.

As people, not hypocrites, we often know what we should do and what we want to do. But knowing and doing, as my father would say, are two different things. As a consequence of that difference, we end up talking the talk but not walking the walk. The name to apply to that behavior, however, the word we get to wear, is not hypocrite but *person*. As people our task is to at least *narrow* the gap between the knowing and doing at every chance we get, even if we can't eliminate it. That's a life's work.

It's probably easier for individuals to narrow the talking and walking gap than it is for institutions. Here's an example.

In one of her last stories, *Ice*, Toni Cade Bambara [8] writes about a little girl and her friend Marcey who came home on the school bus one very cold winter afternoon, to the puppies they saw in the street that morning that are now frozen, dead. They bury the

puppies and Marcey, making a connection, worries that a spooky old woman, Miss Blue, cold and alone in her house, may also freeze. And so even though she doesn't like the cold or Miss Blue, Marcey goes to see her. The narrator, on the other hand, won't go and instead she walks from house to house telling all the adults "about the puppies dying right under their noses." "Her stepdaddy rubbed his forehead a lot like he had a head ache," when she told him, and could not look her in the eye. Eventually she goes to her bed and assembles the events of the day. She thinks about the song her stepdaddy sings about a flooded town rebuilt by good people who see and act on need, and she sees that his talk of the town's good people and his walk with the puppies, don't come together. Then she plans the story she will tell her future children about her day and the puppies and Miss Blue, and then she wonders: "What if my kids notice there's a hole in my story...a hole I will fall right through in the telling? Suppose they ask 'But Mommy, did you go and see about the old lady?' So then I'll tell them," she thinks, "how I put my boots back on...and carry one of Aunt Myrtles casseroles down to Miss Blue." And in Bambara's story that's exactly what she does (77).

As the narrator examines her experience with her stepdaddy and Marcey and measures the actuality of her life against itself and against the way she imagines talking about it, she notices the hole: the gap between the talking and the walking in her own behavior. And since she sees it, she has the opportunity to reduce it. She can go to Miss Blue with the casserole now, even though she's late. She hasn't eliminated the gap between talking and walking, that would have been to go with Marcey in the first place, but she has narrowed it. Morrison says of this piece, that Bambara effortlessly transforms "a story about responsibility into the responsibility of story telling,"[9] and for our purposes, she turns a story about the responsibility of storytelling in to an object lesson about how a person narrows the gap between talking and walking.

But as I said, this sort of personal vigilance is not available to most institutions. In the first place, it's hard to tell what this thing "an institution" is. Some of you have observed this about Earlham. What exactly have you meant when you have evoked the name of the college - or taken it in vain? Is it the sum of all the folk who ever when and worked here? Is it the gaggle of administrators - at least vice presidents and up - at a particular moment in time? Is it the faculty and students? How you shape this thing "institution" has a great impact on how you view its walking and talking.

And then there is the problem of how an institution might come to see itself well enough to notice the gap between its talking and waling. Unlike individuals who are constantly tested by their relationships with other people, institutions spend most of their time gazing at themselves while writing and reading their own talking. This is the nature of the beast. Once established, institutions move and change slowly if at all. And if they are not careful the gap between their walking and talking widens. Most institutions do not have to be hypocritical to have a gap the size of the national debt; all they need to do is be themselves.

And so, those of us associated with institutions, and that's all of us, are faced with a choice: either we help them see the gap and actively help to narrow it or we withdraw. And if we make the latter choice, and withdraw, then we have a gap between our own walking and talking.

So how do we live in relation to an institution, say an intentional community with a 150 year history, in such a way that we can contribute to bringing its walking and talking into reasonable proximity? First we must try to see ourselves as part of the institution - and this first step is hard. But once that is done, we the institution have just a few little things left to accomplish: first, we must stop talking only to ourselves. Then, we must stop believing our own rhetoric about many things, our fairmindedness for example, particularly if it is untested. Finally, we must guard against parochialism. To make these things happen we must promote as much diversity and as little civility as possible.

As I say this, I know I am walking on dangerous ground. I can almost hear my mother saying "watch your mouth!" the way she did when I was a kid about to utter a four letter word. None the less, if I am going to try to answer the questions that are on my mind and I think may be on some of your minds; if I am going to try not to lie by avoiding a painful conversation, then I must not "bite my words," not talk obliquely, not allow myself to speak as one internally colonized. So I say again: to hope to narrow the gap between an institution's talking and walking, we must promote as much diversity and as little civility as possible.

The diversity part is, I think, pretty easy to understand. As an untested idea most folks will embrace it. The more voices there are talking the more points of view, and that sounds good. But it's also true that the more points of view, the greater the difficulty communicating and agreeing. That presents problems but it also avoids the establishment of a monolithic, eventually hegemonic (all controlling) voice separate from the institution's everyday walking. The more difficulty communicating among a diverse collection of peers, the more chance for misunderstandings, but with more misunderstandings and distortions of perceptions, comes the opportunity for new conversations and the creation of language to help the institution's walking. There may be a fair amount of anger stimulated by this process, but if the power stays in the hands of the people within the institution, there will also be change. Audre Lorde puts it this way in her article "The Uses of Anger:" "Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and it's object is change." [10] One doesn't delight in these distortions and the resulting anger, but one makes us of them.

Now I don't mean to be saying that a diverse institution will always run on anger and misunderstanding. But that's likely to happen a lot, particularly in an institution committed to narrowing the gap between it's talking and walking, but which has been busy listening mostly to its own voice for a century or more. Such an institution sees it's experience as normative and that creates a distorted sense of reality. This distortion can only be remedied by embracing the real world. That embrace will be hard, but it will also be dynamic, exciting, like an oxymoron - bitter sweet; jumbo shrimp, fearful joy - where the meaning is made between the points of contrast, stimulates our imagination and encourages our creativity. Diversity makes that kind of an institution: imaginative and creative.

Now on the subject of civility: I don't mean to suggest, by saying we should promote as little civility as possible, that we should start institutional events and meetings with a warning burst from an AK47. I'm not advocating mayhem, or strings of invectives thrown across the benches in meeting houses. I'm also not suggesting that we kill someone for tennis shoes. I still believe in the golden rule: do unto others what you would have them do

unto you. What I am saying, however, is that we should challenge a civility rooted in the power of the dominant, culture defining group. In institutional life civility often functions as a way to maintain current structures and protect the powers that be from dissent and change. In a political arena, a call for civility is often used to sanitize differences, quell conflict, and maintain the status quo. It often asks folks who are being treated unjustly, to be more polite, to wait, to not be too angry, to not disrupt the running of the country or institution.

Martin King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" provides a wonderful description of the hegemony of civility as it was used by southern whites to criticize the civil rights movement. You'll remember that King is responding to a published statement by eight clergymen from Alabama who criticize his participation in direct action as "unwise and untimely." They find his behavior un-civil and take him to task for creating tension in the city. He acknowledges that he is helping to create "tension" in the city and says "there is a type of constructive tension" which comes from direct, un-civil action, "which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for non-violent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men [sic] rise from the dark depths of racism and prejudice..."[11] In his letter, King posits the difference between justice and politeness, finds more compelling, and sees civility as a mask for injustice.

v.

The struggle that King talks about means living a constantly self examined, principled, uncivil life in relation to any institution whose gap between walking and talking is cavernous. It is a hard life's work, and not something all of us, maybe not any of us, can do every day of our lives, even if we say we should.

In my second baccalaureate address,[12] I quoted a poem by Adrienne Rich called, "For Memory." At the end of the poem Rich writes:

Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
of light, the fields of dark--
freedom is daily, prose bound, routine
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections. [13]

Beautiful words, aren't they? I spoke these words in 1991 and talked about how one's life must be about doing the best you can, again and again, under trying circumstances. And I not only thought I was giving good advice, I expected to follow it. Six years later, however, I find it was a whole lot easier to talk about putting those lost worlds together on a daily basis than it has actually been to do it. My experience with this tension has made me wonder how some people, like the ubiquitous and tireless civil rights workers Ella Baker and Anne Braden,[14] managed to do this inventive, hard work, for 50 and more years in a row. How did they and do they manage to talk the talk and walk the walk unendingly and all the time being somewhat outside of any existing institution?

The uncivil person out there in the world of institutions is not welcomed. She or he is

weighted with responsibility and too often with scorn, and she must use her back to do the work, carry the hope, and provide the vehicle for change. In her poem "Voices" Adrienne Rich speaks for that uncivil person.

"That year I began to understand the words *burden of proof*
-how the free market of ideas depended
on certain lives laboring under that burden.
I started feeling in my body
how that burden was bound to our backs
keeping us cramped in old repetitive motions
crouched in the same mineshaft year on year
or like children in school striving to prove
proofs already proven over and over
to get into the next grade
but there is no next grade no movement onward only this... [15]

At the end of one of her last poems, "Women on Trains," Audre Lorde looks back at her own life, one where she walked and talked the principle "Stand and Fight." She also looks at the life of her mother who stood and fought "because that was business as usual." Finally she thinks about the advice she gave to friends in crisis, once again to stand and fight. But as she reflects on the exhaustion in her history and that of her mother, she regrets the advice she has given to others and says:

I counseled you unwisely my sister
to be who I am no longer
willing to be for my living
stopgap hurled into the breach
beyond support beyond change." [16]

As you might have guessed from listening to me this morning, Rich and Lorde are two women whose work I particularly respect. If they cannot see how to continue to go forward, I certainly can't. Yet Ann Braden and Ella Baker did go forward: fifty years walking and talking, magnificently.

vi.

This morning as I look back at these last minutes of talking, checking out the sound of my own voice, I notice that my tone and the things I have to say are serious. But then, for four years we have been engaged in a serious conversation. It seems right that we should end this part of our association in this way. My talking with you like this is an act of faith, in you and in your ability to narrow the gap between the talk we talk and the walk we walk as individuals in a world where the gap houses hungry people and rampaging injustice. And maybe what I have to say is an act of faith in Earlham.

When I look at Earlham on a good day and try to evaluate our score in the talking and walking sweepstakes, I notice that in the 150 years the institution, and by that I mean the teachers and students, has sometimes taken principled stands for justice. Sometimes Earlham has seen the gap between its talking and walking and has worked to narrow it.

I suppose it might be hard for some of you to see this Earlham with only four years of looking. Even with 19 years it sometimes slips away from my sight. I remind us both that I said institutions, like mountains, are slow to move. Yet even if I look at just the past two years I think I see, I want to see, some signs of hope. I remember the day last year when the faculty was having an incredibly painful but thoroughly honorable conversation in the meeting house, and how all around the building students stood holding hands and signs that said "we support our faculty." Such tenderness came through those big meeting house windows that it helped us locate our courage, focus our anger, avoid civility, and touch the truth that could come from the oxymoronic contrasts in our small diversity.

This year we have watched one man, through his patient listening and thoughtful, sometimes tender, comments talk and walk with remarkable congruence. Gene Mills has modeled for us how one might address the gap between walking and talking. He models the humility and humor necessary to pronounce: "do as I say, not as I do." I think it is safe to say that we are grateful, as a collection of individuals and as an institution.

As our president and as an alum, Gene Mills wears the word Earlham. And so do I and so do you, however much a good or uncomfortable fit it is. And we all wear other words to indicate our histories and commitments. Today I have talked of some of mine: daughter, person, English teacher. You have and will need to decide on the words you will wear. It won't always, maybe ever, be easy.

I hope you will learn to accept your own anger and the anger of others; that you will struggle to hear it, express it and use it, because embracing diversity is our only hope of narrowing the gap between talking and walking, and diversity brings conflict. But conflict brings change. I think it will be easier if we all remember my father's understanding that an educated person can talk with anyone.

In the end, I am uncertain about where we'll all get the sustained energy that doing this work requires, but I think for me it comes from the complex construct made by the collision of anger and tenderness I simultaneously feel. When I'm lucky this results in what Adrienne Rich calls "Wild Patience."

For your graduation I wish you some of the same.

Barbara Ann Caruso

Footnotes

[1] Muriel Rukeyser, "The Gates," *Out of Silence: Selected Poems* (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 1992), 155.

[2] With thanks to Phyllis Boanes and Susan Callan for their help with this address.

[3] Paul Lacey, *Running on Empty* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #?).

[4] Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979) 187.

[5] Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 188.

[6] Barbara Caruso, "The Difference Between Poetry and Rhetoric," *Earlhamite: Magazine of Earlham College* (104, 1, Autumn, 1983), 18.

[7] Toni Morrison, *Lecture and Speech of Acceptance, Upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 15.

[8] Toni Cade Bambara, "Ice," *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 67-77.

[9] Toni Morrison, "Preface," *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), ix.

[10] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 129.

[11] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 80.

[12] Barbara Caruso, *On Being Redundant: Freedom is Not Once* (Richmond, Indiana: Earlham College Press, 1991).

[13] Adrienne Rich, "For Memory," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 22.

[14] Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1958).

[15] Adrienne Rich, "Voices," *Dark Fields of the Republic* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 66.

[16] Audre Lorde, "Women on Trains," *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance: Poems 1987-1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 33.