Redigging the Wells of Rhetoric

by James Cain, Dominion Classical Christian Academy

> And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them (Genesis 26:18, KJV).

In Isaac's day, Abraham's wells had not disappeared but had been filled in and forgotten. The water remained, waiting for Isaac to come along with memories and a shovel to release it. Classical education, often called a recovery movement, seeks to train a generation of Isaacs who will be diligent to discover—or rediscover—rich sources of good for the citizens of the city of God.

Rhetoric, the ability "to say what [one] had to say elegantly and persuasively," is one such rich good.[1] Sadly, rhetoric has declined significantly over the past half-decade. Along with grammar and logic, rhetoric is being recovered by classical and Christian schools and their teachers, who understand how the three ways enable the mastery of language. Stopping with grammar or logic makes little sense because rhetoric makes known the knowledge and understanding of the earlier stages through writing or speaking. In other words, rhetoric closes classical education's "language loop." Such skill does not develop overnight, however, or even in four years of schooling. It grows from soil that is carefully cultivated over many years.

How cultivated, exactly? In a post for the *First Things* blog "On the Square," Elizabeth Scalia lamented the current state of rhetoric in America, asking "Is Great Oratory Over and Done?"[2] Most classical Christian educators would agree with her assessment. She suggested that great oratory requires fine structure, powerful imagery, and a voice full of certitude—the first two of which, at least, require a wide-ranging education.

In other words, rhetoric closes classical education's "language loop." Such skill does not develop overnight, however, or even in four years of schooling.

Classical Christian educators would also agree with her observation that "great oratory requires both a love of ideas and the words that bring them forth and make them seem not just plausible but noble, not just noble but unstoppable." In this essay, I suggest that cultivating a love of ideas and a love of words is a key task for classical educators. Our students will need the rules of eloquence, but as St. Augustine wrote, they will acquire eloquence by reading and hearing the words of the eloquent.[3] We must begin that work early, allowing young students to bask in noble ideas and grand words that may help them to become great orators themselves.

A Love for Words and Ideas

Ideas are invisible. How then can we arrange encounters with them for our students? This can be accomplished in written and spoken form, either by hearing or reading the words of great orators. We might thus define **great speech**: *Great speech is that speech that we may return to again and again, deepening our appreciation and understanding each time.* Before students can analyze such speech, they must accumulate some knowledge and appreciation of the ideas and words that make great speech. To that end, they should receive a straightforward and simple diet of great speech, both read and memorized. This activity fills the mind's treasury with words and ideas that will ignite both their imaginations and their own communications.

Take Churchill's "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" speech, for instance, especially its most famous passage. Even younger students will need little help seeing Churchill's noble idea—that Britons would fight the German forces on any ground, in every way, even facing the real and looming possibility of defeat. As Scalia wrote, Churchill makes victory for Britain not just plausible but noble and unstoppable.

Ideas, though, do not achieve nobility on their own. Returning to Churchill's speech, we know (and help our students see) that Churchill might have said, "We won't stop fighting our enemies, and we'll fight them everywhere," and left it at that.

***James Cain** is the headmaster at Dominion Classical Christian Academy in Dacula, GA. Visit http://www.dominionclassical.org/.*

Redigging . . .

But he inspired the beleaguered British with the rhetorical device called *anaphora*, repeating the positive "We shall . . . " again and again, building to "We shall never . . . " Understanding how and why it is used is the work of the rhetoric student. It is enough for the grammar student to hear Churchill speak those words, and to learn to speak them himself.

The power of hearing brings up a related point: While our initial encounter with these speeches may be through reading, we feel their full effect by *hearing* them, experiencing their richness of language as nearly as possible to the original intent. Thus we should certainly allow our students to hear Churchill and Kennedy and others, whose speeches are recorded and readily available. What then are we to do about Demosthenes, Cicero, Shakespeare, or Lincoln?

Quintilian wrote that the works of great men, whose words would not betray us, should be our study. We may reasonably extend Quintilian's advice from reading to memorizing and speaking. No shortage of advice exists on selecting poems and passages for memorization. For the purposes of cultivating great speakers, I make the following few suggestions.

Words to Start By

1. Cast your net wide and deep. Say "speech" and several examples will likely come to mind. If we stick to speeches, however, we miss an opportunity to deepen our students' love for words. We need to broaden our "rich language" categories to include poetry and drama, as well as prose passages, especially those that meet Scalia's "great ideas/words" standard.

• Poetry. Dramatic poems are the low-hanging fruit in this category because they are essentially speeches. Consider the dramatic monologues of Tennyson ("Ulysses") and Browning ("My Last Duchess") for a start, and do not avoid Shelley's "Ozymandias." Shakespeare's sonnets, such as numbers 18 and 116 might also be selected. The Psalms and some passages in the Prophets, especially in the King James Version, also fit this category (Psalm 19 and 24, for example).

• Drama. Great plays generally contain two kinds of speeches: the monologue (spoken to an in-play audience) and the soliloquy (spoken to self or aside to the audience). Shakespeare's great soliloquys ("To be or not to be . . . " and "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . . ") are logical choices, but other Renaissance playwrights (Webster, Marlowe, and Jonson, for example) can also be mined for their jewels. The Greek dramatists, too, excelled at the form, so consider Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and Sophocles's *Antigone*.

• Prose. Though proper speeches fall into this category, I have in mind passages from literature that might impart a love for ideas and language. Here are a few to consider: Pilgrim's last speech from *Pilgrim's Progress*, the first and last paragraphs of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Gandalf's speech to Frodo about pity and mercy. Selections from your class's literature make good sense.

2. It is better to be small, but great, than short and sweet. Begin with shorter pieces for the youngest students, but choose a few rich lines over more simple lines. One way for a young class to hear whole speeches is to have each student in a class memorize a portion, then let the class recite the whole together. Our fourth graders memorized the Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V* this way, and several went on to commit the entire speech to memory.

3. Not "all the world's a stage," but your students need one. Speeches should be heard, and finding venues for this is important. Not only will your students rise to the challenge, but they will plant seeds of interest for future harvest. Last year we held a Crispin's Day competition, encouraging students to memorize and perform the *Henry V* speech on October 25. The students came away from performance day with more interest and passion in speeches.

Conclusion

Many good things—many *great* things—are like Abraham's wells. Great language and ideas are present in many places. Helping our students discover this and become great orators depends not on any magic formula but on handing a student a shovel, pointing to some likely spot, and saying, "Why not dig there?"

Notes:

1. Dorothy Sayers' "The Lost Tools of Learning" can be found at http://www.accsedu.org > School Resources > The Lost Tools of Learning.

2. Elizabeth Scalia, "Is Great Oratory Over and Done?" *First Things*, Jan. 24, 2012, http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2012/01/is-great-oratory-over-and-done.

3. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1959), 119.