

# The Last Pin

by Aaron A. Trompeter

During the 2006-2007 school year, I took my eleventh-grade students through a unit on rhetoric and writing. It was relatively late in the year, so we had already studied poetics and literary interpretation in its various aspects. We had ripped apart Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, dissected Faulkner's corpse and the dead mind responsible for continued human decay, psychoanalyzed Jim and Huck and their reflections within society, and gone beyond identifying images and into explaining what they mean through different philosophical lenses. Immediately prior to the unit on writing practice and application, we also studied Adlai Stevenson, Douglas MacArthur, Queen Elizabeth, Reverend King, Wilfred Owen, Thomas Jefferson, and many other fine writers and orators. Throughout the unit my students were encouraged to not only identify aspects of rhetoric, but practice using them in timed writings and impromptu speeches meant to motivate their peers or assuage imagined grief for their future woe, etcetera.

Of course, as any seasoned teacher knows, I had the expected questions asked of me: Why do we need to know this? Why is this important? How will this come into play in my future? Since these are relevant questions, I always try to build the big picture for my students, with the intention of selling the image of a possible life of success to young people living in their own myopia. In all my arrogant and omnipotent wisdom given to me through education and life experience, I ask them things such as:

Imagine a day when you are 25 and the winner of a major honor. Will you get up in front of thousands and just say, "Thanks"?

Imagine some day when someone you love dies, and you are asked to speak at the funeral. Will you stand at the front of that grieving crowd who needs you as a fellow human being sharing their suffering, needs you to assuage their grief, and say, "He was a great guy," and then sit down? What if it is your father? Mother? Best friend?

Imagine when you are 50 and all of a sudden put in charge of a major project for your company, perhaps standing in front of a Congressional Committee ready to invest government funding into your invention. Will you expect them to vote in favor of your proposal if you lack the ability to sway them with eloquence and intelligence?

"You will not be children much longer," I tell them, "and the life of an adult lasts a long time. And as an adult, you will need to be gracious if others honor you. You will need to console others who are grieving; you will need to be a source of strength. And you will need to persuade others to give you what you need for some aspect of your own personal survival; and you may just find yourself one day having to deliver a speech, a speech upon which your job depends." By this time, I hope, I at least have the students thinking, staring somewhere in front of them, perhaps imagining who they will be at the advanced (to them) age of 30.

At the time I'm describing, however, I had a secret I had never told them. Do you want to know what it was? At the (advanced) age of 35, despite all my blather, I had never given a speech to a large crowd. In the interest of selling them a dream, I was full of hot air and half-truth. But not for long . . . .

In addition to teaching, I am an Assistant Wrestling Coach as well. During the school year in which the previous narration took place, one of our wrestlers made it to the state competition. This had never happened for our school and, consequently, the Head Coach had to go to that state competition ... on the same night as our own school's Winter Sports Banquet. Because of this, I was handed the task of getting up in front of all the parents, and all the athletes in every winter sport, to (you guessed it) Deliver A Speech. The kicker? Well over half of my students were winter athletes, and now the supposed 'master' of all things rhetorical, poetic and literary had to step up and deliver. Imagine that: those judged will now

judge the omnipotent grade-giver. Those teachers who have taught a while will know that there is a lot riding on such an event. So I wrote as if my very career depended upon it. I wrote this:

(A long pause at the podium brings the crowd to silence.)

Some people don't understand wrestling or wrestlers. They wonder why anybody would want to go into a hot, padded room to sweat and fight and work and bleed for a moment when they will stand alone before a crowd of people, face-to-face with their individual competition. Sometimes this competition is a physical thing—a strong, trained person before you, and sometimes it is a psychological thing begging answers to questions, such as: can I do this? Will I win? Will the crowd clap for me in defeat as well as victory?

Unlike many team sports, with wrestling there is no way for a craven individual to mask who they are and what they *know* about their abilities in a line-up. There is no group with which you can share your identity, nobody to blame when you fail to do your best, nowhere to hide your mistakes and your faults, and nobody who can take the praise from you when you win. It's all and only you. A wrestler stands as one, against one, where only one will win and relish the applause while the defeated finds it abhorrent to his ears and sinking heart when he journeys alone from the mat. And that is the truth for wrestlers: one must win and one must lose, and to face this truth takes courage of heart and pride in one's own self.

Nowhere is this ancient truth more evident than when we hold wrestle-offs for varsity spots. There in the heat and confines of a sweaty room, the team spreads itself out around a white circle separating 'in' from 'out' and combatants from non-combatants. Nobody speaks a word as the contenders step up and toe-the-line; the coach bleats the whistle, and the struggle is on. The wrestlers attack and almost immediately you can hear them breathing hard to fuel their muscles and minds. They weigh the same, they train the same, they have the same coaches, but still only one can win and you can hear that desperate truth fighting to survive in the labored breathing of air as old as the truth itself.

This ancient air we all share now was once in the wrestler's lungs, and in all the lungs of all the great and mighty creatures that died exhaling it. It has been in the lungs of the heroes of ages and wars and conflicts long forgotten in name and reason. The wrestlers in our room breathe the air of Tyrannosaurus Rex and lions and Sitting Bull and soldiers and sailors of yore whose last brave moments were of struggle with a vital truth: him or me, win or lose, live or die for just another breath.

Just another breath.

But still, in the simple circle, one wrestler faces a monumental and complicated opponent forged on the savannas and jungles of the world: the fortitude and strength of another human being. You have to fight with all your guts to overcome such a thing, and in this fight comes the desperate breathing to feed the muscles that scream and ache and rip beneath the flesh to pull the shoulder blades up from the mat. Teeth clench and jaws bind with unrelenting effort to fend off the inevitable end. All the while, those same interchangeable breaths and bones and muscles in the other are pushing with all their might—*every ounce of evolution's best decisions*—to force said shoulders of the other down. This is both victory and defeat before those who sit silently in a simple circle watching a simple truth unfold: one must win; one must lose, and we all must face it. There is no gray zone of blame or interpretation for responsibility to this great and terrible truth.

At this time I ask for my wrestlers to stand up—There they are. Take a look at them. These are our future American Fighting Men, the strong and the proud. Their names are the names of the ages: Dignity, Courage, Honor, Sacrifice, Selfless Service and Personal Fortitude. They are the archetypes of our Heritage and I am ever so thankful to have had the opportunity to work with them.

Put your hands together in applause for these fine young men.

After a pause, I left the podium scared out of my mind ... but also addicted to the rush of public speaking. (Shamelessly, I eagerly await another chance.) And although people were clapping, one still wonders if they are clapping to be polite. I sat in doubt as the rest of the speakers made their appearances, and when the gathering was over, I left. On the way out, my principal pulled me aside and told me to publish my speech. I was flattered by her kind words and put the idea in the back of my head because, hey, where do you publish a speech? In the meantime, I fretted because the next day I would get feedback from my students and my wrestlers, and their approbation of me, and my work, matters.

The most meaningful thing said in class came from a kid named Kory. We were working, and he brought up the night before.

Kory said, “Mr. Trompeter, I have never heard anybody speak like that before.”

Another student asked what he was talking about, and Kory told him all about it, using the proper terminology, bragging about me—in front of me. It was late in the year, and I needed that. And I wanted that - his respect. The second student finally asked Kory the inevitable question: Was it good?

“Yeah,” Kory said, turning to look me in the eye. “It was good.”

It’s a funny thing, isn’t it - this world of education? So many people look at other people’s children and see something not so important. But as teacher, a person who wrestles with some of the strongest minds this nation will see, a person who does not always feel as if his mind is all that strong or his efforts all that valuable or even valid, I have figured out how much the respect of these young people matters to me and how incredibly important it is for me to do my job well and right for my students and their parents.

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