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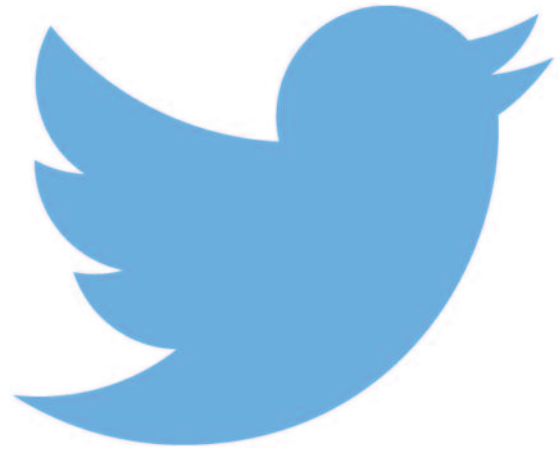
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Eloquentia Perfecta in the Time of Tweets

By Laurie Ann Britt-Smith



Is there anyone who hasn't been affected by the omnipresent anger that fuels the national – and increasingly global – political conversation? So many of us, regardless of party alignment, seem fatigued by the daily barrage of words carelessly hurled in response to every real or perceived offense.

When the art of communication and persuasion is tortured like this on a daily basis, when a culture delivers debate and “argument” through misused data and tweeted insults, lessons drawn from the Jesuit rhetorical tradition can provide guidance that cuts through the digital noise. And teaching our students that the characteristics of *eloquentia perfecta* and *accompaniment* are still assets in speaking and writing is more vital than ever to restoring a civil tone to our cultural conversations.

Every communication shapes and reshapes the relationship among the participants, for better or worse. When *eloquentia perfecta* is the goal, we attend to language so that our words are accurate, graceful while also forceful and, most importantly, beneficial to the speaker or writer *and* the audience. The benefit of the exchange is dependent on those involved. We must be aware that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to any dialogue.

The art is knowing how to size up the situation and respond appropriately. Sometimes that means learning how to observe and listen as well as speak, realizing that a well-timed silence is just as effective as the most well constructed treatise. That does not mean a refusal to engage – to be voiceless and thus powerless – but, rather, it means getting a feel for the

timing of the conversation so your words and your ideas are not wasted. As painful as it can be not to react, eloquence, especially during challenging conversations, often demands silence and discernment before action.

Discernment is at the core of Jesuit practices, and its application can be difficult to explain. Garrison Keillor, who (although not a Jesuit) is quite the observer of human behavior, has a wonderful metaphor that can help:

When the country goes temporarily to the dogs,
cats must learn to be circumspect,
walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith
that all this woofing is not the last word.

Basically, we need to teach ourselves, and our students, to be the smarter cat. There is no point in throwing yourself to the dogs, which are quite capable of tearing you to bits. Although there is a kind of sly joy that comes by knowing your very appearance is enough to drive a pack into a loud but ultimately powerless frenzy, the art is always in the balance. You have to know the audience and be able to beat a hasty retreat if things get out of hand. You also have to know that if you listen carefully, the barking reveals important information.

In the case of President Donald Trump, he likes to bark, some might say brag, and in doing so he also has already told everyone how he views the world: He is a businessman who cannot fathom a communication relationship that is not a negotiation leading

to some fiscal benefit. Thus, we see his insistence that all protesters are being paid – and absolute confusion when confronted by those who genuinely work solely for the benefit of others.

Watch for this confusion. Notice how it throws him off his game, even if only temporarily. That's an opportunity to enter and perhaps redirect the conversation. The roles of victim and perpetrator, us and them, are defined by one's perceptions of a relationship. If we want to diffuse combativeness and anger, we need to understand that we all play the role of the cat *and* the dog at some point in the conversation. It depends on your perception of the relationship and the issue at hand. Recognizing that you can potentially be seen as the antagonist should force you to reconsider your approach to an issue or circumstance.

This is where the Jesuit concept of accompaniment comes into play. The awareness and the willingness to know another person enable us to walk alongside those with whom we agree and disagree. Only our relationship with the other stops us from allowing ourselves to become mindlessly angry, heaving our words like sticks and stones.

We have to have faith that eventually this Trumpian moment will pass. He is not the first – nor will he be the last – to rise to power by tapping into the anger that builds up when our politics pretends to speak for everyone. History is full of those who arrive on the scene with suspect motivations and a

seemingly endless ability to entice others into aligning themselves to their distorted vision of reality.

These speakers twist logic by tying it to the very real emotional distress and pain produced by silencing – regardless of whether we consider it real or perceived. Their success and failure hinges on their ability to prolong a one-sided conversation and that often depends on how long we want to howl and hiss at each other before actually trying to listen and rationally respond to what the other person is saying.

If we want to end this pattern, we must remember this most powerful insight from Jesuit practices: Even when, and perhaps especially when, we are in agreement with the current conversation and policies, we need to be mindful of those who are not and seek to find a way to permit those voices to speak and perceive that they have been heard.

We need to consider our own positions and discern when to use our powerful, educated, mature voices in the most effective and beneficial way. We have to be able to speak wisely to diffuse the anger, to help those caught up in this whirlwind to see their way out of it before they are injured in the vicious back and forth of current events. Our students look to us to model the eloquence they need to advance the mission of our programs and our institutions.

Laurie Ann Britt-Smith is the director of the center for writing at College of the Holy Cross.



Modeling how to observe and listen as well as speak, Fr. Michael Zeps, S.J., communicates with students on campus at Marquette University. Photo by John Nienhuis.