

Inquiring Minds: *the Importance of Rhetoric*

#44 Sept, 2017 "What makes a man a wise teacher is not his faculty, but his moral purpose."-[Aristotle](#) The Art of Rhetoric

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Ours was the Last Rhet Class to Graduate from the Minor Sem. —the Dying of an Institution?

Fifty years ago I was a “a Rhet,” a college sophomore at St. Joseph’s College, in Mountain View, California. Rhet was short for Rhetorician, which was to be the main emphasis in our course of study as college sophomores. St. Joe’s was a minor seminary in the San Francisco Archdiocese for young men who thought they wanted to become Catholic priests. It was in existence since 1924, and was accepting students at age 14 after their eighth grade graduation.

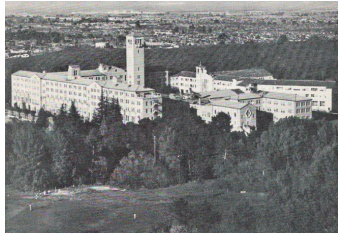


Photo of the Minor Seminary in Mountain View destroyed by '89 Loma Prieta

That institution consisted of six years: four years of high school and two years of college. We would graduate from there as the Rhet Class of 1967, have our class picture on the wall, and move on to the major seminary in Menlo Park. There we would complete the final two years of college (First Philosophy and Second Philosophy) and then move on to four years of post grad work in [t h e o l o g y](#), [homiletics](#), etc.



St.Patrick's Seminary still stands but faces many challenges, lower vocations for years and loss of the Sulpician Fathers who taught there since 1908

It was all very well organized. Every hour of our day planned for us, but the winnowing process was brutal: only 1 in 12 were making it all the way through. It was challenging—[a c a d e m i c a l l y](#),

socially, and spiritually. I enjoyed the experience: studying, socializing, playing sports, and trying to pray; no dating, no cars, no drinking, and other distractions to derail us—until the late 1960’s.

However, the high attrition rate eventually alerted church authorities that most of us were really too young to really know what we wanted when we were so inexperienced and did not know what we were missing. The Church eventually dropped the high school, and soon after the college, and sought out older and wiser men. It was the sixties and seventies, and vocations were on the decline.

Turbulent Times for All in the 1960’s

I went on to complete my college at St. Patrick’s in times as tumultuous as these, rife with Viet Nam, protests, assassinations, impeachment, etc., and dramatic change and confusion in the once sure-footed though dogmatic Catholic Church. With access to television, radio, and cars we were pretty exposed to “the outside world,” even though we lived in the seminary 9 months out of the year. Those were some of the most fun and formative years of my life. Sadly, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed that building (St.Joe’s) which housed so many memories. Fortunately, it had vacated years before. Some time later the college was closed presumably for the same reason: more mature men would be better candidates for the priesthood.

A Sad Footnote: the Death of St.Patrick's?

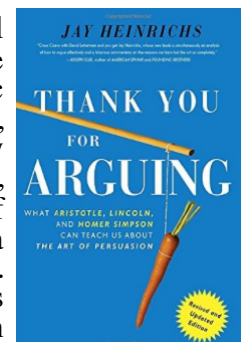
Within the last six months, Archbishop Cordileon of San Francisco, fired the Sulpician President of St. Patrick’s Seminary, and replaced him with a rector of his choosing. Then the Sulpicians, who were a teaching order dedicated to the education of would-be priests for the last 108 years, pulled their faculty from the seminary. San Jose Diocese in turn withdrew its students, reducing the enrollment to 36 or so students, and possibly endangering the very existence of maintaining this particular seminary.

Reflections on the Little Rhetoric I Learned

I do not recall having much formal training in rhetoric in my Rhet year. My most memorable experience was having to teach a 45 minute class to my peers on a topic in Greek Civilization I was to master. I chose the [Elusinian Mysteries](#), and had my first exposure to teaching, which was a good experience.

The Book: *Thank You For Arguing*

When returning a book to our local library, I chanced upon one of the most interesting books on rhetoric I ever read: *Thank You for Arguing*, by David Heinrich. Possibly misnamed to get one’s attention, this book was more about the art of persuasion or striving toward a more inclusive truth than fighting. Fighting (sometimes arguing) is aimed more at winning than

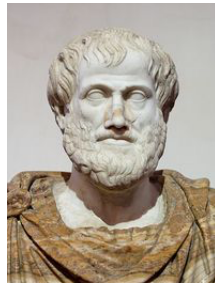


reaching a higher level of understanding, or persuading one to see your point of view. This book calls upon the definitive work of Aristotle himself, complete with the many of the tricks and techniques of rhetoric employed by the ancient Greeks. I wish we studied [Aristotle's Treatise on Rhetoric](#) 50 years before, but I guess he was considered too argumentative for our times of reconciliation and ecumenism without and obedience within.

Aimed at AP English classes or the college student, this is a light-hearted and humorous book citing the technology of the spoken word of the great orators from Aristotle, Cicero, Lincoln, Churchill, Obama, and replete with humorous examples from *The Simpsons* and Eddie Haskell of *Leave It to Beaver*.

JAY HEINRICHS spent 25 years as a journalist and publishing executive before becoming a full time advocate for the lost art of rhetoric. Since then he's taught persuasion to Fortune 500 companies, Ivy League universities, NASA, and the Pentagon.

For me, in these times of hyperbole, altered facts, and outright lying; I found this book a refreshing primer on what makes one able to persuade: *logos*, an appeal to logic, reason, facts; *pathos*, an appeal to emotion, compassion, and feeling; and *ethos*, argument by one's character, how trustworthy a speaker is, how he identifies with your values, etc. "Aristotle calls this (ethos--one's ethic) the most important appeal of all--even more than logos....'A person's life persuades more than his word.'" [Here is a free pdf of the essential parts of the book.](#)



The Philosopher, Aristotle

The author says he devotes more space to humor than to any other emotion, because that's what Cicero did. The book is full of his attempts at wit. Humor relaxes the more fearful and makes one less wary and defensive. Humor has a way of diffusing tense situations, and shows others that we do not take ourselves too seriously. It also shows, maybe feigns, some disinterest in a personal outcome, making one sound more interested in a common goal or solution.

Where is Ethos in *The Art of the Deal*?

Most recently a study shows that with practice, lying becomes easier.

"Whether it's evading taxes, infidelity, doping in sports, making up data in science or financial fraud, deceivers often recall how small acts of dishonesty snowballed over time and they suddenly found themselves committing quite large crimes." [more](#)

Learning from the subtle points in the study of rhetoric helps one see when he/she is being tricked by

all sorts of techniques whether they are intended or not. As stated in his even more famous book DT says:

"I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular." [The Art of the Deal](#)

A Hierarchy of Reaching Agreement: Discussion, Debate, Argument, or Fight

The value of studying Rhetoric and Philosophy through Western civilization starting with the ancient Greeks is that it set up a format of conflict resolution through language, literature, and rational thought.

A good lesson plan between any student able to reason would be to discuss the differences among discussions, debates, arguments, or fights.

To me a *discussion*, like those contained on [Plato's Republic](#) and [Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics](#), seemed the most open-ended without a specific agenda or end in mind; and proceeds wherever the contributors steer it. It seemed the purest search for truth or the best result for the most concerned.

A *debate* has more format, adhering to pre-agreed-upon structure and time limits. Each side would have an agenda or a point of view which it desires to persuade the audience.

An *argument* (in the loose or vulgar form of the term) would be when the discussion decorum and rules of engagement fall apart and other more emotional outbursts take over the proceeding. *Ad hominem*, attacks, rudeness, etc., become the norm.

Fighting, violence, and ultimately war have always been a mystery to me, but I have not been without some access to power to change or adapt. I have not been a minority, poor, or without an education. I have not had my country invaded like so recently recounted in the powerful movie, *The Zookeeper's Wife*, based on a true story of what happened in Warsaw, Poland, in 1939 and following.

Yet, more mysterious to me is the brainwashing of various individuals within the US (as just re-reported by *60 Minutes* tonight) who are successful and educated yet persuaded to kill themselves and innocents in the name of some religious/political cause. Light and darkness share this planet especially on this the eve of our solar eclipse, August 20, 2017.

As our daughter Aimée sang in her eighth grade musical as *Annie* 27 years ago, "The sun will come out tomorrow." Amen to that. —*Best. Joe*