Richard Lloyd-Jones

WHAT WE *WILL* BE

Editor's Note: *This is the inaugural address of Richard Lloyd-Jones, University of Iowa, when he assumed the presidency of the National Council of Teachers of English in November 1985. Professor Lloyd-Jones spoke to a huge audience of elementary, secondary, and college teachers and administrators. His remarks, directed to that diverse audience, do not mention basic writings specifically, but the issues raised are universals that inform English studies at all levels. We are honored that Professor Lloyd-Jones accepted our invitation to put his speech on record in the pages of the* Journal of Basic Writing.

"What We Will Be" is deliberately ambiguous. In a limited way it calls for predictions of the immediate future. Trustworthy and sensible administration requires a careful analysis of what has to be done soon. Prudence demands lesson plans for the week. At least some of our time must be devoted to what we will do on Monday morning.

"What We WILL Be," however, is another matter. An act of will requires a conscious decision to BE something in particular: it is not an accident of trends or an object of survival. Not passive to events but active in valuing what is essentially human, we chart a course to define ourselves.

As teachers of English or Language Arts we are defined by our preoccupation with language, most particularly the language of this nation. If you believe, as I do, that language is what makes us human, you probably believe that sharing a language defines a community. For the most part our memories depend on language, our eyes focus on what our vocabulary isolates, and our world is structured according to the rules of our syntax. So, too, we break through the lonely barriers of bodily sensation to share our lives by means of language. We know we CAN know our companions when "we talk the same language." When we become teachers of our language, we claim a place in the absolute middle of things, but many of us still feel isolated, unappreciated.

Richard Lloyd-Jones, director of the School of Letters, University of Iowa, was for nine years chair of its Department of English. He is co-designer of Primary Trait Scoring of essays and has written on testing, discourse theory, and educational policy. He was 1977 chair of CCCC and is 1986 president of NCTE.

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1986.5.2.02

Is it that we define our tasks, as teachers often have, merely as filling the empty jug of the human head with information? The undraped form of an idea without some tangible substance perhaps suits abstract thinkers, but most of us come to abstractions only after a long apprenticeship among grubby details. How often have we put in some margin a request for evidence, for facts, for something concrete we could hit our heads against?

To be sure, we spend much of our time offering knowledge, the solid materials of experience. We have to supply or require information because no one can train an empty mind. What is the first graders' trip to the fire station but an effort to research the facts? Why do we tell the children to ask their grandparents—or someone's grandparents—what it was like to be a child so long ago? Why do we send people to the library? No one can expect to write or speak well without information. Because information is acquired by listening and reading, we can exhibit our devotion to language by testing our students on how much knowledge they acquire.

But however great the need for knowledge may be, still we are gorged on inert fact, we are buried under piles of data yet uninterpreted. Games of trivia while away the time on our way to the grave, but they don't necessarily get at the heart of the matter we claim to reveal in language. Facts are necessary, but not sufficient.

Do we instead assert that we teach people to think, that language is the tool of logic, and that writing and speaking are exercises in reasoning? We can affirm more formulas for sound discourse than our oversized classes have fingers. We will make intellectual order for the young people who never clean up their rooms. Most of us probably can, at least somewhat, but are we really ready to BE logicians?

Perhaps we should talk about how people are defined by language. I find myself for a moment sympathizing with the censors of literature, the bowdlerizers. At least, they believe that words matter. So, too, I have an odd sympathy for those who want to guarantee English legal status as a national treasure. They too believe that language and society are inextricably mixed even though they may confuse cause and effect. Hamlet was right to tell Gertrude to assume a virtue even if she had it not, for the symbolic acts and sounds of virtue would make her virtuous by experience. The enactment of laws, a verbal move, alters behavior, and changed behavior creates new language and beliefs. The makers of language govern society.

Writing and speaking are properly identified as rhetoric, words addressed to an evident audience. In speaking we can hardly avoid the audience, although we often misassess it, but in writing we frequently address some fragment of our private selves—or worse, several fragments, erratically, without much awareness. We leave our readers to fend for themselves.

Sometimes ignoring the reader merely means that we are inexperienced. A child writing for an executive is writing blind because a child

rarely has a chance to know what it means to be an executive. Imagining that form of otherness is quite impossible. Fortunately, executives are occasionally able to remember being children and are willing to interpret, but the skill of the reader is no excuse for the writer's not worrying about an audience. How are we as teachers of language to express the implied concern for others represented in discussions about audience? How are we to make sure that the concern is more than crass self-interest? How do we make clear that an act in language requires both a speaker and a listener, a writer and a reader?

Take the matter of punctuation or spelling or any of the myriad customs contributing to a standard manuscript. In a broad sense the customs of script represent our agreements on how to make sounds visible, and the graphic system (like the other systems of language) is redundant. A paper full of errors can still be understood, and may reflect powerful thought, but unexpected forms distract readers and suggest a kind of indifference to their convenience. Errors are discourteous.

The fuss we often make about mechanics is social in a different sense. We sometimes insist on conformity for its own sake. Probably children learn polite forms of social behavior and discourse without quite knowing why, except that it gives joy to parents and teachers. But some compulsive formalists manage to remove all joy and purpose from polite acts. In the end we are concerned that humans respect one another, and scribal conformity is one sign of respect, albeit a modest one.

We accept the momentary confusion caused by oddity if the whole expression still implies social respect. Even more, we become excited when we recognize the systematic differences of aliens of any sort, because we know their variations are grounded in their own experience and identity, and their willingness to address us offers hope that strangers can meet. We know ourselves better when we discover others. How do we teachers of English shed our image as morbid guardians of surface correctness without seeming to suggest that any rudeness is quite acceptable? How do we rouse delight in variations without sponsoring anarchy? How do we help students perceive the difference between variations that represent insulting indifference and those that represent the voice of the stranger?

Take the particular issue of dialect. Allow that complaining about dialect is like complaining about the tides. Both exist, no doubt, as laws of the physical or social worlds, but some members of the public, at least, think it is our patriotic duty to minimize dialects. They believe that one nation under God should talk one way. We might argue that as a nation we have not yet melted into a pond of identical droplets, that we are a mosaic of peoples fashioned into a design of a great nation. Others might even agree with me and still claim that dialects emphasize allegiance to the subgroup at the expense of loyalty to the nation.

Whatever image fits your political tastes, we still have dialect groups, and we have the underlying communities of spirit delineated by the use of the dialects. In a huge population probably most of us need to iden-

tify with some group whose scope we can comprehend. Dialect tells us who our friends are. As officers of public education (even if we teach in private schools), how do we balance private need against public expectation? As practical teachers how do we show our personal sympathy and support for students who cling to their dialect community for strength while we encourage them to explore a new and sometimes hostile world?

Sometimes one must deal with strangers. We have to decide how idiosyncratic we dare be in expressing our identity and allegiances. We sometimes have to say to our students, "Be yourself, speak in your own way, write in your own way." We must say on another day, "Blend into the mass, write in a standard way, create no unnecessary waves of individuality." Perhaps to some older students we say, "You are an engineer, for this technical report you are but a part of a person, and you must play your role well by writing like an engineer." The teacher of English then has to know the verbal dress of each group living in some subset of our language and thus becomes an arbiter of linguistic fashions. If teachers of English generally are obliged to be so wise, we need to have as members of our own community many of those who also live in other subcommunities. We cannot afford to let the standardization of tests or the insularity or indifference of people in dominant social groups or even the testiness of "outsiders" deprive us of the strength and knowledge of teachers who are also identified with minority groups.

It is harder even than that. If one speaks a language or a dialect, one will soon come to be what it requires, and if one denies a language, one will be something else, but the world community—even the national community—has many mansions. We cannot all live in the same room even if we are consigned to the same house. How do we talk through the walls? How do we teach people to read through linguistic variation, not overreacting to the signs of separateness? When we start worrying about the social effects of language, we are caught in a web of politics and psychotherapy. Once we talk of rhetoric, the door leading to our responsibilities for the future is open just as wide as when we talk of logic. Even wider.

But our search for the identity of the teacher of English is not over. What do we do with literature? In recent years teachers of English have been unsure of how to defend their interest in literature as requiring time in school. When we learn the stories and poems of a people, we discover the laws by which they are really governed, the behavior they think is rational. In literature a society defines its sense of reality.

When we teach literary texts rather than methods of reading, we are expositors of the past. Even "modern" literature is usually several decades old. Inevitably we are conservators presenting established values. Practically, that means we teach a canon of works expressing the status quo understood by the generation just past—or perhaps of a subgroup of that generation. Obvious problems arise. The status changes more rapidly than the canon does. The values of the society we quietly inferred to justify our selections of major works change subtly. Subgroups resent our claims

of what is "major." This nation of romanticists has generally favored minor rebellions, even though it gets upset about social eruptions, so we are authorized or even urged to tamper with the canon just a little. Creation, an act of challenging the past, is identified by our romanticists as the highest goal of our craft as teachers, so we like to think of ourselves as always trying to tell the society in a mild way what it now believes—or ought to believe—as we concoct new reading lists.

We are thus vulnerable from two directions, at least. We occasionally teach works which are no longer relevant. We can perhaps agree generally that we err in saving chestnuts even if we don't agree on which works should be eased out. We also teach the faddish or the simpleminded or the subversive. Well, at least some of the time we probably are victims of fashion, and we choose simple works so that some of our pupils will at least read something, and any piece of literature offering a solid point subverts someone's sense of truth.

Any literature, good or bad, represents someone's sense of the world, and if you get other people to see through your eyes, you alter their perception forever. Most of us believe that wisdom comes with understanding many different visions; some believe that innocence requires protection from ugly sights. Perhaps we all agree that confronting some visions and some experiences requires maturity, prior experience with many other views. But whatever notion of responsible selection you accept, you recognize that I am talking about how the teacher of English is defined by the duty of identifying the tales and songs the nation lives by. Others contribute their tastes, too, but we are the primary choosers. How do we say what represents or suitably challenges current values?

We perhaps should pay more attention to our attachment to literary works as blends of fact and truth, of passion and judgment, of individual vision and collective experience. These works represent the complexity of life for ourselves as well as for our students. It is hard to imagine anything more basic to our definition of ourselves as people who love language.

Yet, somehow we become so defensive of our own fragment of the academic world that we forget the inclusiveness of language. The dialects within our own profession seem to mark how we value instead extreme competence developed by small and isolated groups. We lose sight of the common interests which justify our claiming to be English teachers. We have probably aped the specialization of the sciences too much, and we waste a lot of spirit imagining snubs from one another. We take our virtues for granted and offer our wares diffidently, and we wonder why we are viewed as dilettantes.

We suffer but a minor malaise, though. We need to tidy up our sense of what we do, to create an agenda for our future. I believe in muddling through, especially in hard times, but I don't think we have to settle for that. We have plenty of questions worth asking, just as we have a mountain of information worth giving to students and colleagues. What We WILL Be depends on whether we have the courage to use our knowledge of language to help people live more amicably, to learn with more feeling.