



# Spectra

Promoting the study, criticism, research, teaching, and application of the principles of communication

January 2008

## Peroration on "A Discipline for All Seasons"

Michael J. Sproule, 2007 NCA President continued the tradition of delivering a presidential address at the NCA Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois. The following is the text from his address.

\* \* \* \*

Vice President Bochner, distinguished NCA award winners, fellow officers and other association leaders, NCA members, guests—and in a phrase that applies to all of you—friends of NCA. It is my pleasure as president of our scholarly community to deliver remarks on the occasion of our annual awards event. I am especially pleased that my wife, Betty, and my sons, John and Kevin, are able to be present.

I take as my title for these remarks, my presidential messages previously given in *Spectra*—work focused on the theme of "A Discipline for All Seasons." Because I have laid out my thesis in some detail—in several thousands of words—what is required of me now is merely to deliver remarks that focus these lines of thought earlier developed. In other words, what yet remains is my **peroration**.

In the days before a speech was seen as an essay standing on legs—



NCA President Michael J. Sproule delivers his Presidential Address in Chicago

or as an effort to give oral captions to things visual—speakers were expected—and were taught—to be orators. And given my own natural gravitation to figures and tropes, I've always considered myself, as a communicator, to have been born 100 years too late. But now I have my moment. Yet thankfully for listeners of the year 2007, my moment comes in the form of relatively brief "remarks" rather than a full oration in the character of 1907.

Before the triumph of the short, business-oriented talk in the 1920s—with its tripartite, essay-like organization into introduction, body and conclusion—before this, orators practiced a seven-part functional pattern of arrangement dating back to Cicero.

Cicero, both in his own works and as refined in Quintilian, would have us organize a speech beginning with an **exordium**. Here the

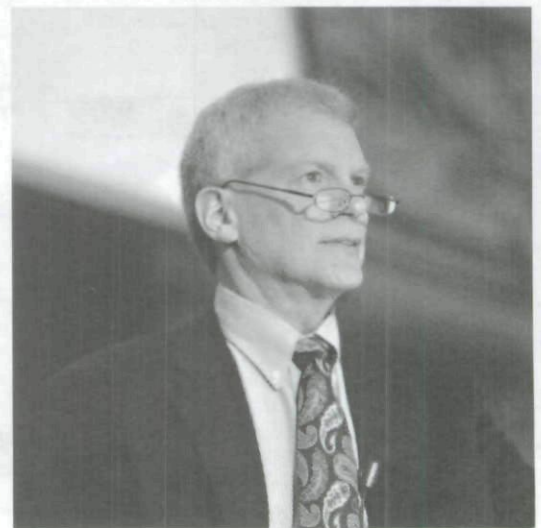
See "Peroration" on page 4

## Record Breaking Attendance at Convention

The 2007 NCA annual convention set record breaking numbers attracting over 6,200 attendees to Chicago for the themed *Communicating Worldviews: Faith—Intellect—Ethics* conference. This is the highest attendance in NCA's 93 year history.

The five day event attracted students, scholars, and teachers from across the nation and around the world. Participants attended sessions, participated in panels, joined in short courses, and explored the graduate school and job fair as well as the exhibit hall.

Several highlighted events attracted many scholars. Bio-ethicist and communication scholar Michael J. Hyde, Wake Forest University, delivered the 2007 Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture entitled



Bio-ethicist and communication scholar Michael J. Hyde, Wake Forest University, delivered the 2007 Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture

See "Attendance" on page 5



## Peroration

from page 1

orator directly would greet listeners in a simple and brief manner—as I already have done.

Next, the orator would put the speech in **narrative** form with a story—as with my meditations on the nature of oratory and Ciceronian organization. So we're 2/7ths complete already.

Although the seven elements of the Ciceronian pattern could be combined in various ways, typically third on the bill was a **partition** wherein the orator indicated what was to follow—as I already have accomplished with my note that these remarks would be perorational on a previously presented theme. Now we have three Ciceronian parts down, four to go.

The answer to the question “where’s the beef?” in a Ciceronian address came most directly in the functional section known as the **confirmation**. And here I refer you to my *Spectra* messages, notably, the first six, where I have laid out a thesis about our discipline’s being uniquely positioned to straddle meaningfully the humanities, social sciences, performance studies, and the professions—with a genuine interest in *both* teaching and research—and with a concern for *all* education, from kindergarten to post-doc.

Now some may object that all I accomplished in the confirmation was to lay out pleasant pluralist pabulum. Oh, no, no, no, my friends. Communication’s pluralisms, to the extent that we accept them, have emerged only after deep and abiding debate. And here let us not forget some more contestable points that I have made. A case in point being my assertion that those who earn their bread professing communication have a *duty* to remain affiliated with NCA—or other kindred national society—and that membership should not be seen as mere *option*.

So as an orator, I would need to respond to the objection of false pluralism, and to other criticisms, with a section that Cicero would call the **refutation**. But because our focus, tonight, is peroration, we will have to make due with McLuhan’s ironic observation that a message not only

represents a *massage*—but that it also reflects a *Mess-Age*.

With confirmation and refutation thus finessed for the moment, we have remaining only two Ciceronian functions—those of **digression** and **peroration**.

In the **digression**, the orator pauses to reflect upon something significant in the moment. This something could relate to the immediate physical context of the speech—for instance, a loud noise emanating from the hallway—or something believed to reside in the minds of listeners—as in the question, “how long will this speech last?” Or “could this guy really be serious that we’re interested in how Cicero would do it?”

So having thus digressed for a moment, we come finally to the promised **peroration**—where, as Quintilian explains, the orator pulls out all the stops in an effort to impress upon the audience the significance of the thesis and theme.

“A discipline for all seasons?” What, indeed, does this mean for us now and in the future?

So here I say, colleagues and friends, that our discipline **is** a discipline—and not a collection of discarded, miscellaneous, or marginal ideas.

No, no, my friends. We profess a discipline that reflects both the eternal need for human expression and the ever present imperative of using discourse to build a just and honorable polity.

Nor is our discipline some kind of party crasher at a table set up by the American Council of Learned Societies.

No, no, my friends. Our mission—long conducted under the banner of “rhetoric”—far antedates most of our ACLS sister societies—and our growth outstrips *all* of them.

But what best reflects what we have been, what we are, and what we aspire to be—what best reflects our work—are the NCA awards and their recipients, tonight.

So as we turn to these recipients—to these colleagues who have made good—to these friends whose work

reflects the eloquence of our calling—let us remember the tie that binds us—the idea of communication.

Communication as idea is our shared commitment to making a better world through symbolism. Here we manifest how symbols respond to human needs and to those even larger purposes that, as Jefferson put it, reflect “nature and nature’s God.”

In this way, both our recipients and we embody what, in last year’s presidential address, Dan O’Hair described as “The Promise of Communication.”

Dan is right, I think, that communication now is far more than mere idea—it is promise. And that promise directs us to apply our insights to communities virtual and physical—and to promote access and transference as we key our work to family, society and the human condition.

Here our intellect will combine with our faith as we offer the transformative power of communication as resource for developing a higher human consciousness.

As our work goes forward, we will have much to say about what the philosopher and paleontologist Fr. Pierre Tielhard de Chardin described as humanity’s forthcoming “Omega Point.”

Chardin’s vision takes us beyond the philosophical audience of Plato or the universal audience of Perelman. Fr. de Chardin bids us to expect that the human race will indeed become one race—one people—unified by a collective consciousness of the most elevated and ethical kind.

But that is then—and we live in now.

We of the twenty-first century seem closer to multivalent malaise than to any Omega Point. But in our moments of despair, we may return to our roots in communication and remind ourselves that meaning always is an elusive goal.

Our goal represents a quest. And so, as our award winners step forward, tonight, they symbolize our own steps in the quest—in the journey to transform human kind. They have already—and we will in the future—make manifest what we offer through our “discipline for all seasons.”