

## **Dawn O. Braithwaite, 2010 President, National Communication Association**

“To communicate is the beginning of understanding.” This phrase called out from a 1960s telephone advertisement posted in my suburban Chicago middle school classroom. Likely it was my age plus the times we were in that drew me to these words. That feeling has not changed almost 50 years later.

Past Presidents of NCA are invited to write an essay reflecting on a series of questions related to life influences that shaped who they are as scholars, discipline members, and leaders; how they came to the NCA Presidency; and the goals accomplishments, and challenges they faced as leaders of the association. This essay reflects my own self-reflection with the hope that, while it may serve to preserve association (and by extension, disciplinary) history, it might also serve as encouragement to other NCA members to step forward in disciplinary service and leadership as an important aspect of their career. I contemplated writing this essay for the last several years, but thought it best to get a bit of perspective on my presidency, and, frankly, I needed it. Here in NCA’s Centennial year I am ready to reflect and write.

### **Early Influences**

Past Presidents are asked to reflect on their early influences. I was born in the mid-1950s on the south side of Chicago and adopted as the oldest child of parents who had both served in the Coast Guard in WWII. After the war, they moved to Chicago and my father was trained in electronics and was an early television repairman. He was charming and engaging with people and my earliest memories are of going with him on service calls to people’s homes. My mother worked in our home and from what I can remember she was friendly but shy. I recall helping my mother practice her short speech for a bowling league banquet when I was about ten, as she was very nervous about speaking in front of others. She died on Mother’s Day when I was 12 and we became a stepfamily soon thereafter. The remainder of my family life until I left home at 19 was difficult and often lonely.

I was an outgoing kid who loved school and from early grades on, knew I wanted to be a teacher. I gravitated toward people-oriented activities—friendships, music, clubs, and usually found myself stepping forward, appointed or elected, to leadership positions, serving for example, as a classroom representative, in church groups, and the student council of my junior high school. As a high school freshman, I joined the choir, which continued a life-long love of

music, and something possessed me to attend the first meeting of the debate program. I was off and running. I enjoyed debate for the challenges of speaking and competing and, perhaps more than anything, the close relationships that formed with the coaches and students in the squad room and on van rides to tournaments. Throughout high school I gravitated toward activities that put me around friends and mentors and took me away from very real challenges at home. Through debate, I became interested in politics and figured this was the direction my college education would take. In retrospect, a turning point occurred when a high school class I took included a unit on relationships. Like that poster in my earlier classroom, I was completely fascinated by the topic and this got me thinking about communication in new ways.

The summer before my junior year my family moved to Southern California. To say the least, it was incredibly difficult to leave the support of school and friends and start anew. I was disappointed to learn there was no debate team at my new high school, but there was a small speech team and I went to a few tournaments in impromptu speaking that first year. I also became involved in music, musical theatre, and student government. The vocal music opportunities were quite significant and in my senior year I became president of the concert choir and auditioned successfully for an elite small show choir (a forerunner of “Glee”). John Thompson’s group performed 100 shows in seven months, which was an amazing experience. I always knew I would attend college, but without direction during application season, I followed my friends to Golden West College in Huntington Beach CA in the fall of 1973. I continued on at GWC with music and had an extraordinary experience. GWC had a staff of incredibly talented and highly demanding professional musicians and I worked as an assistant for Vocal Music Director Gerry Schroeder and in the campus library. In my second year at GWC we presented the world premiere of a rock opera that was reviewed in *Variety* and I appeared in musical theatre. Many of my fellow students from this period are highly successful musicians and performers and several have won Grammy Awards and other distinctions. I also became centrally involved in an independent church that provided me with spiritual grounding and a sense of family. I worked on organizing many of the activities of this group, from dinners for 150 people to camping trips

This combination of debate, music, and leadership contributed to my life and career in immeasurable ways. I learned the value of hard work, commitment, and determination. What I lacked in natural talent, for example as a musician, I made up for in organizing and leadership

abilities. My experience as a performer was an immeasurably valuable training ground for my chosen career. And I was incredibly blessed by talented and inspiring teachers all throughout my education.

### **Entering the Discipline**

As I started at GWC, I decided I would be a Speech major (what we were called at that time). The hot new class on campus was a course in interpersonal communication and it was closed. I went to Jon Smedley's class day #1. He told me I could sit in, but there was little chance of a seat opening. I loved the class and made a general pest of myself until Smedley relented and admitted me. I was also very fortunate to take wonderful classes in small group facilitation and general semantics (and in the latter ended up brokering an afternoon visit with S. I. Hayakawa for my class—another valuable life lesson in the value of putting oneself out there).

I transferred to California State University Fullerton in 1977 where I was fortunate to study with outstanding professors in interpersonal communication like Bob Emry and teaching assistant Dan Canary, along with rhetorician Wayne Brockriede, who became a mentor and friend. From this experience, and my subsequent MA program at CSU Long Beach, I was exposed to interpersonal communication (IPC) from a broad and inclusive perspective. IPC was largely post positivist at the time (and still is) but I was encouraged to think about communication in relationships via the lens of symbolic interaction and social construction (see Braithwaite, 2014b).

Another opportunity came my way from my wonderful community college professor, Sheldon Nyman, who generously invited me to co-author a convention paper with him. Sheldon presented that paper at the 1977 Western States Communication Association convention in Phoenix. I had transferred to CSUF the month before and was an unknown among a group of very bright students there. I could not afford to travel to the convention, but when the faculty and graduate students returned from WSCA my stock in had definitely gone up as "I had a paper"--even though I barely understood what that meant. The next year I attended the 1978 WSCA convention in Los Angeles and have only missed two meetings since. This association and its people are important in my life and narrative, in fact, I first saw my spouse Chuck Braithwaite present a paper at WSCA in 1982 and we became engaged at WSCA in 1984. I admired the WSCA Presidents especially and later on this leadership role became an aspiration of mine.

I was fortunate to be admitted to CSU Long Beach for my Master's degree and again was treated extraordinarily well by the faculty there. They had not had teaching assistants for a number of years and I was awarded one of three coveted positions. I loved teaching for the first time, even as I found those early classes somewhat terrifying. After earning my master's degree in 1980, Wayne Brockriede hired me as a lecturer at CSUF. For two years I was a "freeway flyer" and taught classes all of the institutions I had attended. CSUF's Lucy Keele was the Local Host for the 1981 Speech Communication Association (later NCA) convention in Anaheim and I chaired one of the convention committees for her and attended SCA for the first time. This experience began a long and rewarding relationship with the National Office staff that continues to this day. I was also applying for doctoral programs and was fortunate to be admitted to several, choosing the University of Minnesota, as I planned to focus in small group communication with Ernest Bormann.

The University of Minnesota nurtured my disciplinary interests and broad scholarly commitments. My focus turned more squarely to interpersonal communication and I was greatly influenced by Sandra Petronio (and I took her first seminar in privacy). Sandra and Charles Bantz quickly became role models as researchers and discipline members, in addition to becoming good friends. I gained appreciation for Ernest Bormann's case study approach to research, rhetorical approaches to topics of interest, and ethnography of communication. I gained firsthand access to the latter when I met married Chuck Braithwaite in the fall of 1983 and married him on April 1, 1984. Chuck was lecturer at U of M and a University of Washington advisee of Gerry Philipsen. Without realizing how unusual it was at the time, I started studying interpersonal communication using qualitative/interpretive methods. I figured if I had questions, I should talk *with* people about their experiences. So I did. While being a qualitative/interpretive scholar in interpersonal communication has been a challenge at times (see Braithwaite, 2014b; Braithwaite, Moore & Abetz 2014 for more thoughts about this), it has been very rewarding. As I got to my comprehensive exams and dissertation, Ernest Bormann generously served as my advisor.

In sum, I came into the discipline believing that communication is important and that it can change people. Unlike most students who discover the communication major at some point in the college career, I chose my major from the first day and never looked back. Second, I have always studied topics that have personal interest and import for me--communication in

stepfamilies and among voluntary kin, communication and disability--and are directly applicable to people in our communities. Third, I was strongly influenced and schooled to take a broad trans-disciplinary approach to scholarship and teaching. I learned this from my professors and have been attracted to this ideal in my places of employment, especially my present department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Last, my faculty mentors taught me to value the discipline and invest in it and in our associations.

### **Professional Life**

Leaving the University of Minnesota after three years, Chuck Braithwaite and I traveled all of 160 miles to join the faculty of the University of Minnesota Morris where we also completed our dissertations. It should go without saying that being ABD and on the job is not something I'd recommend to any sane person. I became a WSCA interest group secretary while at UMM. We joined the faculty at New Mexico State University in the fall of 1989. During this time I became graduate director at NMSU, Chair of the Interpersonal Communication Interest Group at WSCA, and Peter Andersen invited me to become a member of the *Western Journal of Communication* Editorial Board as he was committed to adding women to the board. I was hooked and ran for the WSCA Executive Council and later Second Vice President after starting work at Arizona State University West in the fall of 1992. I loved serving on the WSCA Executive Council. I was interested in, and invigorated by the issues we worked on and appreciated the thoughtfulness and dedication of the EC members. I saw very clearly that professional associations made a difference for people in our discipline, giving them opportunities that could come from nowhere else.

At some point I started thinking about running for WSCA First Vice President. I felt too young, but conferred with several former presidents who all encouraged me and I came to realize I was no younger than they were with they served. One real plus for me was the existence of a strong group of women presidents around that time, and in fact women have continued as extraordinary strong WSCA leaders. The "Western Women" (Betsy Bach, Leslie Baxter, Sandra Petronio, Jolene Koester, Connie Bullis and select men we admire) have been a source of support, inspiration, and great friendship to me, through my leadership in WSCA and NCA as well.

I planned the 1999 WSCA convention in Sacramento just as I arrived to join the faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the fall of 1998. Doctoral students Nancy Brule (later

CSCA President and Executive Director), Paul Turman, and I built the convention program on the walls of a spare room in my home in Lincoln. It was a big responsibility, exhausting, and rather nerve-wracking at times, but I took to heart WSCA's "Work Hard, Play Hard" mantra and mentality, viewing convention planning as putting on a giant party for valued friends. I became Graduate Director at Nebraska and immediately had a full docket of doctoral advisees in a job I loved (and still do). I was so busy I did not think about what the future would hold when my WSCA commitments were completed. However, as I was planning my convention, NCA President Raymie McKerrow invited me to join NCA's constitutional revision task force and this was my transition into NCA service. Soon thereafter I chaired the Interpersonal Division at NCA.

### **NCA Service**

As my WSCA officer years wound down, I knew I wanted to keep making a disciplinary contribution. I put my name in the hat for a NCA board and was recommended to apply for the Research Board. I was pleased to be appointed and enjoyed the experience immensely, especially working with RB Director Scott Poole. During my five years as a Research Board member and later its Director, we engaged in outreach at the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health and educational associations along with Betsy Bach who was Director of the Educational Policies Board and NCA Associate Director Sherry Morreale. RB proposed and designed the prototype for what later became *Communication Currents*. We worked on early formats of experts and grants databases for NCA (and under the leadership of Nancy Kidd the NCA National Office later designed and enacted these and an expanded docket of member services). I valued the broad composition of the RB as the board worked to weave threads across different areas of the discipline (e.g., Buzzanell & Carbaugh's 2009 book, *Distinctive Qualities in Communication Research*) and the work appealed to my personal commitments of appreciating and advancing the breadth of the discipline's research and focusing on translational aspects of scholarship.

As Research Board Director I held a seat on the NCA Executive Committee (EC). I was greatly benefitted by my WSCA officer experience, although the scope and complexity of NCA became immediately apparent. In addition to the regular work of the EC, I had a hand in many different projects, for example, I chaired two different subcommittees that undertook an overhaul of the NCA nominations and election processes, drafted a policy on conference submissions, co-

wrote a policy on preregistration for the annual conference, and worked with the Distinguished Scholars on nominations and elections processes (a committee that, perhaps not surprisingly, met with resistance among some of the scholars). I decided to run for NCA Second Vice President in 2007. I considered taking a break before running, but this seemed like a good point in my life and career. I had recently passed my fiftieth birthday and figured this is when I would have the greatest amount of energy to take on this leadership commitment if elected. I had been a full professor and graduate director at Nebraska for several years. My research was going well and I was named a Willa Cather Professor. My Department Chair, Bill Seiler, was very supportive. I was inspired by the dedication of many of those in leadership and appreciated their values about the association and discipline. I perceived NCA to be at a crossroads in many different ways and I wanted to help see the association through what I believed would be some critical changes.

### **NCA Officer**

When the Nominating Committee announced the slate, I was running against Diana Carlin, then Graduate Dean at University of Kansas. Women running for NCA office against women was still novel. I knew Diana in passing; she was a graduate of my department before I joined the faculty and she had recently been President of CSCA. I found it troublesome to be running against one of Nebraska's valued graduates. Diana and I talked explicitly about treating each other respectfully and agreed the winner would find service opportunities for the other. We kept to these commitments and became friends. She is a lovely and wise woman.

Diana and I would be the last NCA candidates who campaigned at the four regional conventions. While attending four regional meetings was a commitment in terms of time and out of pocket expenses (which was one impetus for the change in election timing), I came to appreciate the unique character of each association and its members. It was an excellent opportunity to get to know more people and glean their ideas and concerns for our national association and discipline.

In many ways the transition into being an NCA officer was rather seamless, as I had been serving on the Executive Committee for three years prior and had worked closely with Dan O'Hair, Art Bochner and Betsy Bach, the presidents who preceded me, and several others. Betsy and I had become close friends over the years. I respected her judgment, even when we did not agree, and enjoyed working with her.

Before I joined the EC, James Gaudino left NCA after being Executive Director for 15 years. There was interim staff leadership team in the National Office and my observation was that the officers took on a very active role in National Office affairs, which made some sense, but also concerned me at times. I joined the EC as the association transitioned to a new Executive Director, Roger Smither. My own perspective on these years was that the association was in a transition phase. NCA had purchased the building on “N” Street in Washington DC some years prior with the goal of becoming a more central part of association life in DC. Membership was growing, the financial picture and management was becoming more complex, the number of journals was expanding and professionalizing with the move to Taylor & Francis, and the needs of the association to serve members at all stages of the career and advance the discipline were all expanding exponentially. This presented opportunities and challenges to the NCA National Office and Executive Committee. NCA had a complex governance system and figuring out best ways to coordinate efforts between the ever-expanding NCA interest groups, boards, Executive Committee, Legislative Assembly, and National Office was increasingly challenging. The division of labor and lines of authority were not always clear. Coordinating the workload of all of the different constituencies was a challenge and the EC brought in different consultants to advise us on structure and governance.

For some NCA members, the association was becoming too large and impersonal. This was a theme I heard as I campaigned and it bubbled up (and continues to) in different venues. This did not come as any big surprise to me, as membership had grown to about 7500 when I took office, and conventions had grown exponentially. NCA’s size and breadth has never been a major concern of mine as I had long considered NCA as the “keeper of the discipline,” a phrase I coined to describe NCA’s many roles and responsibilities to meet the comprehensive needs of teachers, researchers, and students. My sense was that ICA and the smaller focused associations could center most of their efforts on research as NCA offered the breadth of services to members, for example, a board dedicated to communication instruction and pedagogy, services supporting the interests of K-12 teachers, community college instructors, undergraduate students (via Lambda pi Eta), graduate students, up through retired and emeritus professors. Delivering all of these various member services seemed increasingly challenging for NCA.

Requests for new NCA interest groups continued to come before the EC as members pushed out into new research and teaching interests. The EC voted to put a moratorium on the



approval of new interest groups. I had mixed feelings about this, as my conviction has always been that the association belongs to the members and I worried about cutting off their avenue to establishing interest groups to meet their needs. At the same time, I shared concerns over fracturing the association, and by extension, the discipline, into smaller bits that were loosely coupled at best. Over the next several years the EC struggled with how to best address NCA's breadth and other management and structural governance-related issues.

Around this same time, I began studying discipline and association history, which had not been much of a focus in my education. I found Herman Cohen's (2009) treatise on the association from 1914-1945 and NCA's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary volumes, among other resources, to be very helpful. As I later spoke about in my Presidential Address and in a follow up SPECTRA essay for the centennial edition (Braithwaite, 2014a), understanding NCA's history helped shape my work as an officer, as a scholar, and eventually as a department chair of the program at Nebraska. I reflected on the upcoming 1914 Centennial in my 2009 First Vice President and convention-planning year and into my presidency. I came to see our disciplinary roots and challenges as a way to help us understand the discipline's present and to become our best into the future.

### **NCA Leadership**

Challenges in the association were coming to a head on several fronts. The struggles surrounding 2008 convention in San Diego were particularly painful for NCA members and the association. The owner of the convention hotel had made a significant donation to efforts in California to defeat the move toward marriage equality. Understandably, many members were upset and this grew more heated as labor issues joined the fray. Some members called to move the convention to another location. Associations like NCA book conventions five to seven years in advance and there is no practical or responsible way to relocate a convention of our size without harming members and creating serious financial problems. The convention planners, led by First Vice President Betsy Bach and President Art Bochner, and the National Office worked hard to coordinate with members who did not want to enter the convention hotel. Ultimately some programming was moved off site, which was the best solution at the time.

The complex governance and management issues escalated and the officers and EC had concerns about the best ways to carry out the important work of the association. One of the initiatives I started working on as an officer was on "data informed decisions" as I was wanted to

see that the EC would have sufficient data with which to address policy decisions. NCA officers and the EC were working very closely with the National Office to provide the smoothest delivery of member services as transitions were happening in DC. Associate Director for Research Initiatives Nancy Kidd was named Acting Executive Director in 2009 and, given the excellent job she was doing, the EC appointed her as Executive Director soon thereafter.

Planning the 2009 convention in Chicago was one of the highlights of my work with NCA and of my career. My convention theme was “Discourses of Stability and Change” and I was mindful that we would next return to Chicago for the Centennial in 2014. We held the first meeting of the Centennial Committee, which I was honored to co-chair, and this wonderful group of people worked together until the 2014 convention. I enjoyed thinking creatively about the 2009 convention and developed a convention initiative wherein NCA units were invited to submit programs exploring being “Five Years Out” from NCA’s 100th. Forty-two FYI programs were presented in Chicago and Routledge, Taylor & Francis provided funding for a number of these programs to be videotaped and archived (see: <http://www.natcom.org/fiveyearsout/>).

Being mindful of member concerns about large conventions and wanting to personalize the experience for members, I began the Scholars’ Office Hours and the Roundtables on Research in Progress programs for that 2009 conference. Both were designed to provide more opportunities for members to interact over scholarship and ideas in small groups and one-on-one. I had some trepidation about the office hours—I had over 70 senior scholars lined up to meet with young scholars and students. What if no one came? We publicized the event very heavily. As the scholars arrived to take their places, we heard commotion outside the meeting hall. I cracked open the door and was delighted to see a large number of young faces. We estimated that 400 people attended event that year. I know the newer members appreciated getting to talk with the senior scholars, but the scholars were equally delighted and glowing after the session. I am gratified to see that both the office hours and the roundtables are going strong six years later as I write this. Thanks to the dedication and work of the many interest group planners, the National Office, and the participation of members, we had a wonderful 2009 convention.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

I became President on January 1, 2010, ten years after serving as WSCA President. I had a great level of confidence in the leadership in the National Office and I was so impressed with what the staff was doing together in DC after weathering many changes. I was concerned about

some of the ongoing governance issues in the association and the officers had started talking about the need to clarify questions related to the constitution. To me this was not a critique of the earlier leadership and work, but rather part of natural organizational change and development. While there were challenges to navigate, which go with any leadership position, I looked forward to the year, anticipating good things to come. And many good things were happening. For example, we faced hotel labor issues for the 2010 San Francisco convention. I had confidence that First VP Lynn Turner, Executive Director Nancy Kidd, Convention Manager Michelle Randall and the officers would be able to work with members and navigate the situation successfully. In fact, NCA's approach and materials from that year became a model for other associations navigating these difficult waters.

In early February a situation arose that created a great deal of stress and storm. I have thought long and hard about what I want to say about it. In the end, I see no good in trying to rehash the details. I thought then, and still do, that appropriate decisions were made with the best interests of the association in mind. I believe members of the EC had an opportunity and responsibility to pull together to best manage some sincere differences of opinion and divergent understanding of roles and responsibilities. At times that happened and at other times it did not. It was the single most difficult time in my career and it took a toll on my family, the NCA staff, NCA leadership, and on some members. The greatest disappointment for me was not that there was disagreement or conflict, but that there was a rush to judgment and lack of civility surrounding the situation that escalated its impact. Through it all, though, I am grateful that there were leaders who worked together for the good of the association and members, despite challenges and difficulties of doing so at times.

While I would never want to repeat that time, I do try and see silver linings in life. I received a great deal of support from friends, colleagues, and many NCA members—some who I did not yet know--who contacted me privately or approached me at the regional conferences I attended. I sought and received outstanding advice from a number of former NCA Presidents and EC members, the Western Women, from colleagues at Nebraska, and from discipline colleagues in university leadership roles. I am especially grateful to Past President Judith Trent in particular, who became a great support and friend. I was a beneficiary of the deep wisdom and encouragement I received from so many and so was our association in the end.

The association's leadership, members, and National Office staff pushed forward as they always do. As I indicated earlier in the essay, I was not alone in believing the association was already at a crossroads in terms of many questions surrounding governance and division of responsibilities. I asked David Zarefsky to chair a task force on governance and the EC and I were incredibly grateful that he agreed. That task force conferred very broadly and did a masterful job of taking stock of the association. They presented their findings in 2011, and that coincided with the EC moving ahead with training on best practices for nonprofit organizations. President Lynn Turner, who worked hard to move the association forward, appointed a committee to study the NCA constitution in light of what had been learned. That good work continues.

I believe we have every reason to have a high degree of confidence in the association's leadership under our current Executive Committee and Executive Director. As I write this essay here in NCA's Centennial year, I am continually impressed with, and appreciative of, our staff in DC and for many volunteers who give so generously to the discipline via NCA and in other associations, in service to journals, and in taking on various leadership roles. Leadership at all levels has its risks. There is no way to predict with certainty what will happen under one's watch. All any of us can do is our best to meet challenges that present themselves. Yet, I believe the effort and risk are worth it and I encourage persons with a heart for the discipline and for service to step forward.

I remain grateful for the many opportunities I have had to serve our discipline as a scholar, teacher, mentor, disciplinary contributor, and leader. Serving as NCA President remains a singular honor. I believe the discipline and the National Communication Association are strong. Our communication major is robust across campuses because we teach a subject that is critically important in relational, organizational, and civic lives. Through the efforts of our national association and the many other associations to which our members belong, communication scholarship is being more widely disseminated than ever and scholars and students with a heart for the subject matter of the discipline are increasingly taking that scholarship into our communities. Our graduate programs are thriving and our doctoral students are finding employment. The educational academy is changing in multiple ways and we have opportunities and challenges here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am convinced we are strongest when we embrace discourses of stability and change, commit ourselves to the discipline of

communication, and to one another. I continue to believe the future of NCA and the discipline is indeed bright.

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