

Rhetoric of reasons and emotions in times of crisis

Retoryka racji i emocji w czasach kryzysu

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REAKCJE / REACTIONS

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In July 2022, my grandmother and I sat in her living room discussing a book by C. S. Lewis that she had recently gifted me. In it, demons deliberate strategies for corrupting the human spirit. “The more often he feels without acting,” one demon notes, “the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.” It was three months after I had presented to my school about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and I thought back on my experience which was meant to illuminate the background and human perspective on the harrowing outbreak of conflict. Had I really taken action? If so, for whose benefit?

In the nights of January 2022, I fell asleep to the BBC evening news podcast in my home in Durham, North Carolina. As winter turned to spring, reports of Russian troop buildup on the border of Ukraine began to move closer to the beginning of each episode, but I still thought little of it. Even throughout the week of 24 February, I only gradually realized the gravity of the situation as I thought of the human loss that any war is destined to bring. Perhaps selfishly, I soon began fearing for the democratic ideals that I hold dear having grown up in the United States.

“If Putin sees Ukraine as a mere step to rebuilding the Soviet Union, the future of freedom is in certain danger,” I thought. Without fully comprehending what was unfolding in Europe as Russia began its invasion, my feelings of loss and fear for global democracy were compounded by a feeling that was far less easy to describe. The feeling was a bad taste that grew in my mouth as I went about my day—practicing soccer, studying for tests, joking around with my friends—knowing that in the exact same moment across the ocean people were dying at the hands of a power-hungry dictatorship.

Sure, my friends and I discussed it but something felt off. It was uncomfortable to see the war go unaddressed by so many faculty at my school; particularly at a school so well engaged in conversation about modern issues. I decided to ask teachers if we could discuss the issue in an upcoming student meeting.

The teachers agreed to let me present, but they didn't provide much guidance. I wasn't really looking to do this by myself, but it was an endeavor I knew I had to

take if I wanted to spark more dialogue. Three very supportive teachers offered to help me refine my research and slideshow.

With the help of some faculty-suggested documentaries, I began to soak up history about the downfall of the Soviet Union, Putin's obsession with self-image, and the role of recent 'color revolutions'—all things that had slipped through the cracks of my textbooks because they were too freshly sown for traditional syllabi.

As I looked to add a human aspect, my dad, a journalism professor who visited Poland in May 2019 as a Fulbright Specialist, put me in contact with some people experiencing the invasion first-hand.

I emailed my contacts—two Polish professors, a Ukrainian professor and refugee mother, as well as a journalist working to spread reliable information in his home country of Belarus (an ally of Russia). I wanted to know about daily life, war response, history, and their predictions for the future.

Of course, I was on leisurely high school time. These brave folks were on war time. No response was quite possible, and that would be okay; they were dealing with things of much higher importance. However, they did respond, often with streams of consciousness and gratitude that someone whose ears were far too distant to hear the daily bombings was still out there caring about those who were amidst the chaos. Two days out from presentation day, I had filled my iPad with notes on geopolitical context, stories of humanity's rawness and survival ingenuity, and a final call to action for my peers. The writing seemed to weave itself together well. I was proud.

Words jammed into my iPad needed their first human audience, so I made my way into my parents' room and stood at the end of the bed. I roughly walked through my speech and received some constructive feedback sprinkled into the obligatory but unhelpful parental compliments.

The next day I waited in front of a restless audience of American teenagers ready to leave the auditorium and begin their week as soon as they sat down. My computer would not connect with the slideshow. I would have to come back another day. My advisors were rightfully mad. I tried to show understanding in a wave of whatever one calls the feeling of a failure to share vital stories because of a malfunctioning USB cable. A few days before my rescheduled presentation, news came from Bucha of the atrocities committed by Russian soldiers on innocent Ukrainian citizens. I scrambled to add to my words a summary of these reports of human devastation. When I finally stood in the hot stage light with my working slideshow behind me, I led with a shaky voice that grew more confident until I finally doled out the call to action that one of my Polish contacts had listed in his email. It was a call to action that echoed the words of C.S. Lewis: "Do not be indifferent, because the essence of democracy is that the majority rules, but democracy is that minority rights *must* be protected."

The compliments from teachers (only one gave honest feedback that my audience engagement was subpar) and peers afterwards made me feel as though I had lived this quote well. I had, at least, not been indifferent. While only five students showed up to the post-presentation discussion, I felt I had sparked some interesting conversation as hoped. I brushed off my hands and went about my life, with the deceptive feeling of satisfaction that comes with thinking that your research and presentation made a positive change in the world.

Academia, journal writings, and conversations all have value in opening the mind, but as the C.S. Lewis quote reveals, there is a very dangerous side to thinking and thinking and thinking without ever doing. Granted, I'll never know the extent of actions carried out by the 300 people I gave my speech to. I had left them with a call to improve their personal philosophies—that's good. But what had I really done to support the objects of my words? Had I done anything to protect the Ukrainian citizens still fighting and fleeing, or had I merely honored unnamed bodies on a street in Bucha—a place I would never walk, never hear, never smell? This realization began shortly after my presentation when I had the opportunity to host a prospective student at my high school. Only one month separated Haiar's flight from Kyiv in a refugee convoy from the sunny day standing together in the quad in Durham, North Carolina. He taught me his love for French philosophy. I realized human interaction could make tangible difference. I also knew that across Ukraine, from farmer to retail worker, there lived citizens much less fortunate than Haiar—the unrecognized with little way to connect to international support systems, or even their own families.

At the suggestion of my mother, I have just started volunteering as an English speaking buddy for Ukrainians through a program called ENGIN. I won't sit here after my first session and write that it was some miraculous, transformative experience. Speaking a new language is awkward and messy. (I know from being on the receiving end of such programs in my quest to learn Spanish.) However, after working through the basics of hobbies and family, my smiling university-aged buddy and I agreed that this journey would be worthwhile as we set off to forge a cultural bond through the power of language. Sure, the war is a matter of global politics, but I could help in this stage of my life by building relationships with the people actually affected by global chess moves. Regarding Ukraine specifically, I began to develop a deeper understanding when I heard from my ENGIN buddies that there are many people in Ukraine who speak Russian, but do not feel Russian. Soon, we three will be able to lead a protection of democracy in all 'foreign' homes, battlefields, classrooms, and podiums. For now, when I open WhatsApp to talk with Vira and Liza, I feel a rush of hope that I can touch two lives and make them each one percent better.

In a generation where social media ‘slacktivism’ often trumps strong protection of human rights; in a generation where staid conferences and conversations seem to be the standard of productivity; in this generation where people still suffer and those doing the true dirty work are rarely noted, let us never forget the call of CS Lewis, or the Polish professor whose words I shared with my classmates. On a recent trip to Canada to repent for the Roman Catholic church's role in abuse of Indigenous people Pope Francis, quoting Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, said it well: “The opposite of love is not hatred, it is indifference.”

In writing, speaking, or presenting, we are often tempted to drone on in an effort to flex our intellect and then throw-in a call to action at the end. This cannot be how we approach words if we really desire change. Taking from my country’s examples of Frederick Douglass and Thomas Jefferson, the call to action needs to be the essence and the principle of our rhetoric, with every word falling in place around it made to support it. Do not allow yourself to be sucked in by the burning match of academia, when academia was only ever meant to be a little spark that, when used well, can start an engulfing flame of actual change. Let us back our words up with some action, because words without action are only one step above indifference.

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