

The King's speech: MLK and Tucson

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

January 17, 2011

In his role as prophet to the nation, Martin Luther King, Jr. drew on the ancient wisdom of both the Greeks and Hebrews. From Aristotle he learned that the character of an orator is of prime importance, but not in the ways we moderns might imagine. It wasn't personal morality that was the prized dimension of skillful oratory so much as it was the proper execution of a *persona* ("mask" in Latin). "Person," in this sense—literally, "that which is sounded through" (*per-sonar*)—is not an essence or ego or the irreducible human self. Rather, it's a role one plays.

In his magisterial treatment of [The Preacher King](#), Richard Lischer observes that Martin the seasoned orator understood this: "The hidden *I* exists all right, but it is available only to God. For all others, there are only masks."

This

strikes us—shaped as we are by our culture's therapy-driven rhetoric of "always be yourself"—as not only odd but deeply deceptive. We want our public speakers—politicians and preachers, especially—to be transparent, accessible, down-to-earth, one of us. To claim that they are wearing masks is to suggest that they are perpetrating a fraud, pulling one over on us. Facades in public discourse, we think, reasonably, are precisely the problem.

But

this misses Aristotle's point and King's perceptiveness regarding the role of public speech—namely, that an orator's powers are not tied primarily to his or her own moral character (though character isn't unimportant), but to inhabiting a role that persuades, moves, inspires, and transforms others. As Lischer notes, "orators have more in common with actors than the orators—or the preachers—like to admit."

King

also drew on Israel's prophetic tradition as he himself "adopted a series of biblical personae, masks, that captured the several roles he understood himself to be playing in American life" (Lischer). These persona—much more than King's own personality—authorized and legitimized his work, locating it in broader historical contexts which could speak powerfully and persuasively to the present moment.

As

we commemorate MLK Day, it is instructive to consider these qualities in King's oratory in light of the two very different, highly-publicized speeches given last Wednesday in response to the tragic events in Tucson. Early in the day, Sarah Palin posted a brief video-taped speech on her facebook page in which she denounced "journalists and pundits" for manufacturing "a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn."

Journalists

and pundits of all stripes soon responded, many pointing out the disturbing use of the phrase "blood libel," with its long associations with anti-semitism. (The fact that congresswoman Giffords is Jewish added to the concern). Did Palin (or her speechwriter) borrow the phrase from an earlier *Wall Street Journal* [editorial](#)?

Was she ignorant of its historical roots? Her fans, of course, wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt; her detractors saw it as one more (serious) sign of Palin's alarming lack of preparedness for the national stage.

Later

that evening when President Obama spoke at a memorial event in Tucson, the same journalists and pundits had a field day with his speech, wondering—before it was given—if he would "strike the right notes" or be able to restore some of the lost rhetorical magic that helped get him elected. As with Palin, those predisposed to like the speech liked the speech; others found things to criticize.

But

I suggest that President Obama did indeed strike the right notes and

that Palin missed the mark woefully. Not so much because of the “blood libel” blunder and the strident, defensive tone of the speech itself (though these are not insignificant missteps). Rather, Palin (and her advisors) don’t seem to understand the role of a public orator—that indeed it is a role to be performed, a part to be played, a mask to be worn.

This

lack of understanding is made most plain perhaps in the fact that Sarah Palin stars in a reality TV show. Again, for those who admire Palin, what’s not to love about the attractive ex-governor and her sporty family romping through the gorgeous Alaskan scenery? For her critics, what is the point of filming Sarah Palin and her family romping through the gorgeous Alaskan scenery?

It’s not just a lack of gravitas that is conveyed by the manufactured “reality” of *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*. It’s the fundamental misconstrual of the job of a public figure who attempts to speak to and for a public. Palin thinks we want *her*—in all her colloquial, contrarian folksiness. But President Obama, a worthy heir to the rhetorical artistry of MLK, understands that it’s not about him. When he spoke to the victims’ families, the grieving people of Tucson, and an edgy American public, he was acting a crucial part: giving voice to the sorrow and pain of others, articulating with eloquence the fears and hopes, regrets and aspirations of an unsettled nation. He was adopting a persona fitting for the occasion.

Critics

of Mr. Obama should remember another recent President who practiced this art with effortless, enviable skill: Ronald Reagan. Whatever one thinks of his politics, Reagan was a capable rhetorician not in spite of his acting background but because of it. He knew how to assume a role, command a stage, and move a nation.

What

you get with Sarah Palin is Sarah Palin, who may fascinate in the short term for reasons both intentional and accidental, but hers is not a public presence with staying power; nor does she seem capable of inhabiting the kinds of roles where the self must

disappear so that skilled oratory—delivered truthfully and with humility—can do its transformative work.

Martin

Luther King, Jr. still has no peers in this art but in the aftermath of the shootings in Tucson we can be grateful that something of “the King’s speech” lives on in our President who, like the ancients and our martyred brother Martin, performs the role he’s been given with persuasive, humble grace.

Originally posted at [Intersections](#).