

The Easiest Gig in the World

It may not greatly influence why tuition costs are so outrageous at America's most elite colleges and universities, but discontinuing the troop of high-priced speakers who come to call might improve the bottom line and even the intellectual tone. Perhaps I am an oddball, but I have never understood what audiences get from hearing someone speak. My mind always wanders, even with the best speaker, so, in the end, I never know what I've heard but never felt I missed anything as a result of not knowing. I have never remembered anything anyone said in a lecture or speech unless I took notes, which I rarely do because there is usually nothing worth remembering. And, finally, since authors are invariably the speakers, I have never remotely understood why anyone would admire anyone who writes books! Reading is an overrated activity and writing even more so. It is a skill that exists somewhere between dog walking and pushing paper in a cubicle as a low-level, arrogantly meddlesome bureaucrat. I myself would have given anything in life to have wound up a plumber or a house painter.

There are three types of speakers who usually come to a campus to speak at large: authors who have just published a best-selling book (well-reviewed in the *NY Times*, typically) and feel that they ought to be paid \$20,000 to provide a poor synopsis of it for their admirers; academic, intellectual, and journalistic types who have published books in the past, haven't published any recently, but who are still famous for what they have published and operate in the culture as "pundits" or, worse, public intellectuals, the sort your colleagues are always gushing about by saying "Wouldn't it be great to have so-and-so give a talk?" and who usually, too, want to be paid \$20,000 to give a synopsis of a topic of which they know little but whose ignorance is wonderfully insightful because so-and-so uttered the words; and finally there are those who are famous merely for being famous, celebrities of the grandest sort, to whom you pay \$30,000 or more for the mere privilege of being able to breathe the same air with them for a few hours in which they pontificate and free associate, for they never need bother with an actual address, blabbering idiotically before people who seem, remarkably, to believe that somehow this is edifying.

Recently, at my institution, I heard former New York mayor Rudolph Guiliani give a talk before a packed room, many of whom were ardent fans. Mr. Guiliani, as speakers in my third category always do, did not have a text. Apparently, before he rose to the podium, he did not even have a thought, because the talk seemed, in a sense, to ambush him, and one could see the wheels turning in his head as he stood before us. He gave a bad imitation of the gangsters he prosecuted when he was federal prosecutor as a way of opening with humor (it wasn't funny; his audience seemed perplexed by it), and it went downhill from there. For the next forty-five minutes, Mr. Guiliani stumbled around in search of something to say, not in desperation, for he is far too arrogant and confident a man for that, but with the determined clumsiness of a man who was bored by the occasion but felt that everyone in the room was excited that he was there, which meant that he felt he could say anything, short of obscenities, anything that could remotely pass as public occasion-type talk, and this is what he did. It gushed forth in disconnected streams of platitudes about leadership, personal stories that had no drama, no point, and

no emotional payoff, and a blunt manner that bordered on tastelessness when he spoke of 9/11 firemen and policemen “scoring with their wives.” Checking his watch occasionally, he seemed to be trying to make sure that the non sequiturs and inanities filled just the right amount of time. Interspersed within this oral net of egotistical improvisations were moments of partisan patriotism, as when he reminded his audience about the great leadership of George Bush and the great cause being served by the Iraq war. It was an amazing performance of ineptitude and sheer contempt for his audience. Of course, he talked about 9/11. Indeed, his terms as mayor seemed to be nothing more than this moment. This has become the Guiliani myth: the mayor who held his city together during a major crisis. (I hadn’t expected him to talk about the police brutality cases that occurred during his terms, but he might have served his self-myth-making better if he had.) The audience had come to hear about 9/11 and so he was, in a sense, right to talk about it, right to give the audience what it wanted. The audience, most of it, anyway, probably wanted to be reassured about the war as well, as I suspect that most of the listeners were Republicans. In the end, the speech was so bad that even his admirers could only give it cursory and tepid applause. One of our school’s professors could have given a better talk about 9/11 or about Guiliani or even about the need for the war (there *are* professors who support the war) than Guiliani himself could ever give, and that professor would have been a lot cheaper, too.

More than a year ago I had the distinct pleasure of introducing conservative pundit Ann Coulter to give a lecture. This was among the most asinine things I have ever done in my life, as I am not a fan of Ms. Coulter, not because she is a John Birch–like conservative but because she is just an operator, a hustler of the worst sort, and I think, beneath the right-wing bluster, an opportunistic cynic who seems as if she is trying to make a lot of money in a hurry. (Of course, introducing someone is a professional courtesy and often has little to do with being an admirer of the person.) But I completely misjudged the occasion. Every polemical nut in St. Louis, left and right, was there. I wasn’t facing an audience but two religious lynch mobs—both of whom saw themselves as victims of the lies of the other—who were clearly convinced that reason (or even sanity) had nothing to do with politics. I felt like a totally dishonest idiot doing it, spurred as I was by the liberal piety that all points of view need to be aired and discussed on the campus. (My God, I thought, if I am going to be a race traitor and introduce people like this I should have at least *sold* my integrity instead of giving it away in the form of university service. Good grief, what do I need to do this for; I’m already tenured!) I gave a sort of “two cheers for conservatism” intro and proceeded to watch Ms. Coulter, “the right-wing babe,” as I dubbed her to myself, not give a talk at all or even try to improvise as Guiliani did. She spouted a bunch of terrible one-liners about liberals and Democrats that weren’t funny at all, except to the most ardent conservatives there. All of her performative rant amounted to saying, “The only good lefty is a dead lefty.” She dismissed questions that challenged her views with utter contempt. This “kiss my ass” act was beneath the dignity of a college or a university.

Before I am accused of simply singling out conservative speakers, let me mention that some left-wing speakers are just as bad. Cornel West, Emperor of the Left, just recently visited the school (he comes to St. Louis fairly often) and gave an overly histrionic,

hyper-inflated talk of disconnected left-wing imperatives. He, like nearly all left-wing speakers, decides to work on the middle class guilt of the audience: the students and faculty are what they are and where they are at somebody else's expense, usually someone who is far nobler and smarter than we are. (They must learn this little gimmick about giving guilt-trip jeremiads from the speaker agencies that represent them.) This almost always works with the audiences they talk to, who are filled with a kind of self-righteous yet insecure need to be on the "right side of things" and who, of course, never want to "blame the victim," the worst thing a person can do, and who are somehow for "liberation" and "empowerment." (In this way, members of the audience are encouraged to get to know the victims in brief visits in poverty-stricken schools, where they tutor and never wonder why their interventions make no difference, or poverty-stricken countries, where they "help" in some vague way with no useful skill among people who are indifferent to their presence. This is hardly revolutionary but it may make poverty more tolerable to somebody, which, in the end, for the poor, is probably not doing them any favors.) It is no wonder that mainline liberal Christian churches are empty these days. Their message has been stolen by Cornel West and his ilk, and their congregations are all in ritzy colleges being secular and hating dumb American presidents. At least the students will try to challenge Ann Coulter's nonsense. They listen to West spout a lot of lefty nostrums and clichés and get doe-eyed as if they think any minute he will sprout wings and ascend to a heaven where peasants and sex workers drive the same kind of car he does.

The college speaker business is nothing more than a racket, and that should be obvious to anyone. After all, people who write books are generally frauds. I know I am. Of course you shouldn't listen to me. I'm just jealous that no one will pay me \$20,000 to talk a lot of quackery and nonsense to a lot of naive students and blockhead professors. I really should have been a plumber and, in that way, have successfully staved off temptation.

Gerald Early
2/11/2006