

IUAES-AAS-ASAANZ CONFERENCE 2011: After Dinner Speech, July 8, 2011

Is Sex Necessary

by John Gordon

Thank you, Catie, for your generous introduction and the honour of speaking tonight to this esteemed audience. I'd like to begin by congratulating you, Nick, Greg and the other members of the organising committee on this outstanding conference.

When Greg Acciaioli invited me to speak some weeks ago, he indicated that, as an after dinner talk, my remarks could be trenchant but definitely needed to be funny. As a former head of department and then head of school (with almost a decade in each), I knew I could do trenchant, but I don't do funny . . . except unintentionally.

So I went to my wife, Candy, told her about the invitation and said, 'Darlin', I can do trenchant, but I'm much less confident about funny'.

Well, she looked me straight in the eye across the kitchen table and said, 'Is Sex Necessary'.

Frankly, I was caught off guard. I looked at her. She looked back at me. I arched an eyebrow . . . and looked back at her.

In response to my puzzlement, she said, 'You know, *Is Sex Necessary*, the book by James Thurber and E. B. White.'

'Ooooooh, that book', I replied. The only book by James Thurber and E.B. White I've not read.

Now, people, (or should I address you, Stephen Colbert-style, as 'Nation', Anthropology Nation?), I know that few in this room under age 60 will have heard of James Thurber. He is one of America's great humourists. His co-author, E.B. White, everyone should know for his work with William Strunk, *The Elements of Style*, a short book about good writing, the principles for which should be always with us. I'll come back to this.

In 1929 Thurber and White published *Is Sex Necessary* as a spoof on the emerging sex advice industry and in particular the sex psychology manual. These manuals were

appearing with increasing frequency. Thurber and White decided to parody the industry by writing their own how-to sex manual.

Well, my title tonight, 'Is Sex Necessary' is itself a parody, but only a partial one. Because my real topic tonight, anthropology, is much more important than sex. 'Is Anthropology necessary?' is the real question I want to answer.

So that you won't have to wait 20 long minutes for the conclusion, I'll give the answer now:

'No!' Anthropology is not necessary. The world will survive without this discipline that is so dear to us.

But is anthropology useful? 'Yes!'

How do we know? Where is the proof that anthropology is useful? A simple thought exercise provides the proof. I want each of you to think to take 3 seconds to think of the number of new disciplines that have been generated from the methods, techniques and theories of anthropology.

Starting now . . . 1 - 2 - 3. Time's up!

I know that each of you has thought of many. But I don't want to hear them; I've got my own.

Here are three that I instantly came up with:

(1) Management Consulting, the bastard child of the collaboration between anthropologist Lloyd Warner and Australia's own Elton Mayo. A discipline for people who wish to make a lot of money.

(2) Epidemiology, a discipline for medical researchers who want to be anthropologists. Or, as my daughter, Jess, said, a discipline for people who want to get under your skin . . . just like anthropologists.

And of course, (3) Cultural Studies, the evil spawn of our discipline for anthropologists who watch TV and YouTube all day.

Note: Not one of these newer disciplines uses the term anthropology, except perhaps to position themselves in opposition to what we do.

Now, this may be a natural result of the process of creation of newer areas of intellectual endeavour, or it may be, from our perspective, something more sinister. Could it possibly be that anthropology has a bad image? Or just a wrong image? I suspect the latter, and I suspect that part of this wrong image is a result of our failure to communicate in clear and simple language what we do and what value we produce.

Strunk and White in *Elements of Style* give us these guidelines for clear writing:

- Make every word tell
- Omit needless words and write vigorously
- (for) Vigorous writing is concise

I edited *Anthropological Forum* for 12 years, during which time I encountered on a basis too frequent to be amusing the poor writing skills of a good number of the potential authors. Frequently, this was a result of indulgence in the jargon of the day.

Those of you who have been in this caper for some decades will know that one of the easiest things for a postgraduate student to learn is the current lingo. Using the latest buzz words is easy; the hard bit is making real sense of what they mean. As a journal editor I often wondered to myself, why can anthropologists not write with the limpid clarity of the great historians? . . . But I already knew the answer.

Many years earlier, as a young department head, I was engaged in yet another testy conversation with a colleague, who was then head of history at UWA, about who was stealing students from whom. Richard, who always took the moral high ground by purporting to uphold 'quality', at all costs, but whose inflexibility meant that he had trouble adapting in a rapidly changing world, was unhappy that Anthropology enrolments were rising as History's were falling.

In my frustration at his inability to see the plain truth, that anthropology was simply more interesting than history, I said, 'Look here, Richard, history is just anthropology without the theory'.

Richard, a bright guy, immediately changed the topic . . . to sociology, and replied, 'Sociology is history without the facts'.

Well, my point is that while theory is a bedrock of what we do, we often use jargon-filled versions of theory to differentiate the new from the old (in an often misguided attempt to devalue the old) and to close the shop door --- to separate us,

anthropologists, from others. Each of these is unproductive. Theory when used thus becomes the millstone that prevents our communicating more widely.

I want to share with you an especially bad example of jargon-filled language that appeared on AASNet in a comment on the NT Intervention some time ago. The issue under discussion was self-determination. The author of the following comment is an anthropologist with a PhD.

I do not believe he . . . or she, is in the audience tonight. If he . . . or she is, I'm not apologising. This is the first sentence, read as punctuated. Though I do think there is a word missing:

'Self-determination has however always been simultaneously an historically constituted Self-Other determination and the incorporation of the intersubjective accord (in the sense of a concern with the constitution of the other) cannot be presumed to have an immediacy in such a project anymore than the degree to which individuals or social-territorial-political ensembles incarnate (internalise and express) particular boundaries between inner and outer or conventionalized inter human constants or any pre-cognitive awareness of that which is to be constituted as self.'

WTF, Nation! . . . WTF!

That is seven lines on my printed page. It probably has meaning . . . but I don't know what it is.

One of my favorite authors is Bill Bryson, a modern master of the English language, author of two books on the origins of English, [*The Mother Tongue*, 1990, and *Made in America*, 1994] plus a good number of travel books.

I thought of Bryson after reading this AASnet posting. In *Notes from a Small Island*, about his travels around the UK, he comments on the florid language now used for writing menus in even the most unpretentious of restaurants.

Bryson writes, 'Given the nature of the hotel [small, off the beaten track] I'd expected the menu to feature items like brown windsor soup and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, but of course things have moved on in the hotel trade. The menu now was richly endowed with ten-guinea words that you wouldn't have seen on a menu ten years ago - 'noisettes', 'tartare', 'duxelle', 'coulis', 'timbale', - and written in a curious inflated language . . . I had . . . 'Fanned Galia Melon and Cumbrian Air Dried Ham served with Mixed leaf Salad' followed by 'Fillet Steak served with a crushed Black

Peppercorn Sauce flamed in Brandy and finished with Cream', which together were nearly as pleasurable to read as to eat.

'I was greatly taken with this new way of talking and derived considerable pleasure from speaking it to the waiter. I asked for a lustre of water freshly drawn from the house tap and presented au nature in a cylinder of glass, and when he came round with bread rolls I entreated him to present me a tonged rondel of blanched wheat, oven baked and masked in a poppy-seed coating. I was just getting warmed up to this and about to ask for a fanned lap coverlet, freshly laundered and scented with a delicate hint of Omo, to replace the one that had slipped from my lap and now lay recumbent on the horizontal walking surface anterior to my feet when he handed me a card that said 'Sweets Menu' and I realized that we were back in the no-nonsense world of English.

'It's a funny thing about English diners. They'll let you dazzle them with piddly duxelles of this and fussy little noisettes of that . . . but don't fuck with their puddings.

[B. Bryson. *Notes from a Small Island*. 1995 Doubleday. 1996 Black Swan. London. p. 18 (Black swan ed.)]

My serious point is that communication in plain language about what we do, how we do it, and the utility of it is crucial for the survival of anthropology. Words are powerful. But words that few people understand are just confusing.

You may not feel that our discipline is threatened. But as a former head of school, I see threats everywhere. And many of those threats are, in fact, larger than the threat to Anthropology alone. These are threats to all of the Humanities. Entire Arts Faculties are potentially on the chopping block at universities around the world. Some have already disappeared. Can you imagine your own Arts Faculty disappearing? The Humanities being wiped out? That's a difficult thought to absorb.

We all understand budget cuts and loss of staff. These are so normal that we expect each year to deal with some degree of loss. But can our entire way of life disappear?

Yes. It can.

If you were a Swiss master watch-maker living in the early 1960s, you were probably a descendant of a family of master watch makers that stretched back several centuries. Your family history would have encompassed some of the greatest watch-making innovations then known to human-kind. You may even have participated in the annual

competition to certify the most accurate and precisely made mechanical watches as true chronometers, watches capable of keeping very precise time. You probably could not have imagined that your industry, its centuries old methods of work, its astonishing levels of hand-crafted quality, its capacity economically to support entire regions of Switzerland would be destroyed within a decade.

David Landes, Harvard historian, wrote a book, *Revolution in Time*, about the development of clocks.

In one section of that book he describes the growth of the watch makers' Guilds and how they served to restrict competition. Guilds were ' . . . fraternities organized to help one another by defending their "turf" against trespassers. This was not the way the [Guild] masters would have put it. They spoke instead of the quality [like my history department colleague] and reputation of their [product]. To this end, they restricted entry to those who [beginning as apprentices] had spent long years learning the trade . . . Above all, they prohibited the practitioners of other crafts from making and selling [watches] . . . ' (p.208-09).

There were some positive outcomes from this restriction of trade: High quality was assured, but the negative consequences were to become a time-bomb ticking away slowly beneath the industry.

As Landes writes, 'the effort to prevent competition . . . led to technological conservatism and constraints on growth . . . Most guild members were opposed to new things and new ways of making them . . . ' (p.209).

Does this sound familiar? Do you see any of our present-day practices in these words? In this description, substitute professor for master, postgrad for apprentice, and practitioners of other disciplines (such as cultural studies) for practitioners of other crafts, and you've got a description of what most of us do.

People my age know what happened to the Swiss watch industry. With the perfection of the electronic watch, which became the digital watch, the industry, as it had existed, was wiped out. This did not happen overnight, because the first electronic watches were themselves very expensive. But once both the Japanese and the Americans turned to mass production of cheap, phenomenally accurate wristwatches, the Swiss industry was devastated. In fact, Landes describes how quickly the Swiss stopped the annual competitions to measure chronometer accuracy once they realised their expensive watches could not beat the cheap, new watches.

Unwilling to move to electronic production, the elite of Swiss watch-makers shifted ground. Landes tellingly observes that one of the most esteemed makers, Patek Philippe (p.347) shifted its advertising from an emphasis on accuracy as a feature important to people of discrimination and accomplishment (in other words, the rich) to this new line: 'A Patek Philippe doesn't just tell you the time. It tells you something about yourself'.

This is a story about blindness to innovation, but also about rebirth. There is a lesson here for Anthropology. Within a few decades the Swiss industry did begin to comeback. In terms of production of quality watches it was a shadow of its former self. But at the top end of the market the prestige makers, the Patek Philippses, Piagets and Rolexes came back with even more expensive, more exclusive products sold to the elite of the elite. At the other end, the mass consumption side, a Swiss company started buying cheap electronic movements and putting them in colourful, fashionable cases. Thus, the Swatch was born. You could buy a Swatch in any colour of the rainbow and they were cheap enough to buy half a dozen or more to match your wardrobe.

Anthropology was born an elite discipline and suited to the predilections of the elite who could afford the cost of long fieldwork, the cost of learning other languages, the cost of travel, the cost in time to do the advanced degrees. Later, in its golden age, it was supported in these activities by the public purse.

Today this is not sustainable across the mass market of higher education. I do hope that this version of anthropology can continue in some of the well-funded institutions that have the resources to devote to this expensive version of the activity, but for the rest of us, those days are over. If we want to survive we must change the fundamentals of what we do and, above all, we must learn to talk to the masses and to sell ourselves to the public.

Jettison the jargon. Communicate in plain language. Use simple declarative sentences. Make every word count. Write vigorously.

Now, this does not mean a loss of quality. This does not mean dumbing-down.

For Anthropology to survive in the century ahead it must, like the Swiss watch industry, figure out for whom it is producing. This is a radical thought for most academics: consider our utility.

What do we offer? Anthropology speaks to everyone; it is relevant to every aspect of human life. I believe that every single person we meet every day of every week of every year has some curiosity, often untapped or unexpressed, about human life for which

anthropology can provide insights and answers. But we will not be able to do this as long as we continue to talk only to ourselves.

We have a discipline of which we can be proud. But we will lose it if we continue along our path of exclusivity.

As we prepare tonight for the serving of dessert, I conclude by suggesting that anthropology is a rich, rewarding and satisfying nourishment, a dessert, that we must actively and unselfishly share with others.

And so I say to all of you, 'Nation, Don't fuck with the pudding!'