
STERLING KEYNOTE

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FA LA LA

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I turn on my radio as I drive to school in the morning, and what do I hear but a Public Service Announcement brought to us by the Department of the Navy? They want to communicate a word of advice to all Middle School students. Their message is: The future is STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. I pick up my newspaper and what do I read? One example is a recent article from *USA Today* headlined “White House pushes for early STEM.” Pictured is President Obama listening to two young sisters explaining their science project. The article elaborates on the theme by reporting that some groups are pushing to teach science and technology to children as young as three or four. Watching the television news in Phoenix, I see a piece about the abysmal state of teacher salaries in the state of Arizona, some of the worst in the nation. The commentator remarks that students who graduate in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (and though he doesn’t call it STEM, the message is clear) often get jobs at starting salaries higher than their teachers. It is everywhere –the radio, the newspaper, television. So what do I say to this push for STEM --- the ubiquitous drumbeat of Stem – Stem –Stem. My response is (sing it) Fa la la la la, la,la,la,la. STEM may be important, but this country doesn’t have the brightest future without **FA LA LA**.

Fine Arts –Liberal Arts – Language Arts

Remember --- You can’t think outside the box if they put you in the box.

We here in the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association are training the teachers and citizens of the future with skills every bit as important if not more important than S T E M. Where shall I begin?

Maybe I should start with analyzing exactly what it is we are teaching. I don’t know about you, but every course I teach, from the Neo Classical Satirists to Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, is a course in critical thinking. Once upon a time, after a particularly heated discussion about an issue of interpretation, a student opined “We’re entitled to our own opinions.” At that

point, heretic that I am, I responded, “No, you are not.” A gasp. I explained that in this class, you are only entitled to any opinion you can support with textual evidence. It didn’t have to agree with my reading, but it had to have a rational basis, one supported by the text. Not by feeling or emotion. Textual evidence can, of course, provide a large number of differing opinions as any reader of the critics can attest. Would that our citizens and our leaders would reason from facts rather than emotion or political expediency.

Let me turn for a moment to an area with which I am less familiar but still passionate—the Language Arts, and by that I mean Languages and Linguistics. My dear Colleagues: we are a language-impooverished nation. In a shrinking global village most of our citizens are monolingual. Certainly the condition should be covered by the ADA – Americans with Disabilities Act. Shall we call it “linguistically challenged”? I always have to use here the example of my father. He had what in Europe was the equivalent of a high school education: Gymnasium. Yet, being schooled in Poland, he had to learn not only Polish, but also the languages of the countries that were likely to invade or conquer them. Thus, he was also taught German, Russian, and Ukraine. These four languages were augmented in “gymnasium” by Latin—requisite for all scholars. Then, being Jewish, he learned Hebrew and Yiddish. Subsequently, as the storm clouds of Fascism began to darken the European horizons, he and my mother took the most expedient way out of Poland and landed in Nicaragua. (As a sidelight, this explains my being multi-cultural all by myself—conceived in Poland; born in Nicaragua; raised in Texas—) Anyway, back to my parents—knowing no one nor the language, they quickly learned Spanish. It was the expectation for most Europeans, that is quick language acquisition. When the Visa to the United States came, we boarded a banana boat and landed in New Orleans. Here, my father then learned the ninth of his languages. Surely, my dear friends, we should insist that all students graduate with at least two languages and Ph.D. students with four. There was a time in this country when high school students at least got a smattering of Latin.

We cannot stress enough how important it is, given how technology has shrunk the globe and the omnipresence of international markets, that our population become more multi-lingual. Thus, another area where language arts are key to the future is in the development of able translators. Sensitivity to the nuance of idiom and other linguistic niceties is crucial in areas such as the translation of technical communications. As many of you

know, words, images, and culture are often not only language, but area specific. I'll use an example from my experience in how Spanish is different in different Spanish-speaking countries. I had a hard time making myself understood when talking about grass, which we call *sacate* in El Paso. In Venezuela, my friends called it *césped*, and in Spain they told me it was *hierba*. We in the areas of language arts must help our colleagues in the STEM areas create technologies that have diverse users. One example: a Health App was created with information about calories and carbohydrate values of various foods. Unfortunately, the creators, not being sensitive to cultural niceties, did not reference some of the foods that Latinos are used to eating.

But, this FA LA LA begins with FA – the Fine Arts. The alliance between the fine arts and the Liberal and Language arts is strong. Look at our program here at this conference. What are the topics we professors of Languages and Literature explore? Of course, there is a strong emphasis on Literature, and there are also some sessions on Film, one of the newest additions to the pantheon of the arts. It is truly wondrous – the breadth and scope of this alliance of reason (criticism) and art (literature). Let me see, I think just a quick glance at the program illustrates that Literatures from the Northern and Southern hemisphere as well as the Eastern and the Western is represented. There are numerous sessions on Chinese Literature and Film. There are explorations of topics as diverse as “Wandering the Pampas” and an Austrian 19th century Female Quixote Figure. (For my British friends, I'll pronounce that Quick zote). There are even, for those who are a bit STEM influenced, a number of papers on Literature and science, eco-criticism in particular. Speaking of Literature and the Environment, My scientist son and I once published a paper that demonstrated that a generation before conservationists and environmentalists popularized their ideas, John Steinbeck's literary works foretold the articulation of their scientific concepts. He published the Log from the Sea of Cortez in 1940. Rachel Carson did not publish *Silent Spring* till 1962.

Literature covers a wide variety of the arts: Poetry—and here we celebrate that in this ocean of language deficiency—we will have the privilege and opportunity to hear our RMMLA poets speak their creations in Spanish, German, and English.

And what are the life lessons one can learn from Literature? Some works are called classics because by definition Classics are applicable to all times and places. We can't say that about many scientific theories. For exam-

ple, once upon a time I was told not to eat eggs—they were considered unhealthy—cholesterol producing. Now I am told to eat eggs—protein is good for you. Once upon a time I was diagnosed with a bleeding ulcer. The cure was to drink milk and end all stress-producing activities. Now they tell me that it is a bacteria in the stomach and treat it with anti-biotics. What you eat is insignificant. Once upon a time the inexactness of what is called science led to great literary figures being killed by the so-called “scientific” doctors who were supposed to help them. I am thinking of poor Byron, dehydrated and weak as he fought for Greek liberty. And the renowned doctors, top men in their time, sent to minister to him, decide to bleed him. Or closer to our time, a depressed and weakened Hemingway, a son of a suicide father, taken to the Mayo Clinic, one of medicine’s great institutions, where he was given shock treatments, something doctors now say has a side-effect of provoking suicide. Now don’t get me wrong—I am a great admirer of the Mayo Clinic, and modern medicine has benefitted us in numerous ways, but it is not infallible. While the truths of medicine have changed, many of the truths of the arts have a permanence that is inspiring.

The reasons are many and varied for how and why I became a Steinbeck scholar, but one thing I know for sure is that the lesson of one of his best known novels has become an over-riding principle in my life, and I am sure in many of yours too. Don’t we all know that “the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley and leave us naught but pain for promise joy.” Yes, yes, I know it was a Robert Burns line first. Or today it has become the commonplace “Man plans and G-d laughs.” Another of my favorites is from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching G-d*. After all her many experiences, Janie tells her friend that she has learned “You got to go there to know there.” I often think of this when people expect that they can learn from other people’s experiences.

And speaking of Literature—the raw material of the majority of our studies—let me suggest its significance in comparison to a product of STEM. Now don’t get me wrong, I am a great fan of the New York skyline, and the Eiffel tower causes my heart to beat faster, but let’s face it, while wonderful, those products of the genius of engineering and architecture are limited in comparison to the wonders of literature. Each is one thing, unchanging, limited to one space. Now let us take, for example, Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Here is a tale, first published in English (I hope my French colleagues will forgive this limitation) in 1485 and during the 531 years of its

existence it has inspired a multiplicity of creative endeavor across hundreds of years. Poems have been written – one outstanding example is Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Novels have been published – just to mention a few – T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King* and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Besides French and the various English versions, it has been presented in Welsh, Dutch, Norse, German, and there is even a 13th Century Hebrew version. John Steinbeck was working on his translation to contemporary English when he died. He attributes his early interest in literature to a copy of Malory’s book that his aunt gave him and many of his stories use the Arthur and his knight’s archetype. This story has inspired comic books, movies, cartoons. It is a continual inspiration for creative endeavors: Musicals such as *Camelot*; Animation—*The Sword in the Stone*; Parodies—the wondrously laugh-provoking *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. There have been TV miniseries. Marion Zimmer Bradley even wrote a Feminist version--*The Mists of Avalon*. How marvelous!

We must not forget the power of literature to inspire not only creative efforts, but also human resistance. During World War II John Steinbeck wrote a novel, a novel which by the way did not find favor with the critics. Be that as it may, it was of inspiration to those in Norway who were fighting the Nazis. *The Moon Is Down* was cited by Norway’s King when he awarded John Steinbeck the Haakon Liberty Cross. Previous to this, the medal had only been awarded to heroes of the Norwegian resistance. While he was in Norway, Steinbeck was feted by many of those who had fought in the underground. They asked him how he knew about the tricks they had played on the Germans. They thought it had all been secret. And here I stress the power of creative writing because Steinbeck had NOT known about any of their activities. His response to that question was: “I guessed. I just put myself in your place and that what I would do.” Such is the power of literature.

John Steinbeck is not the only literary figure to influence the course, and curse, of history. According to legend, when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, he addressed her as “the little lady who started this big war.” Whatever the truth of that story may be, it still underlines how significant Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was in influencing public opinion of the time.

Wondrous and worldwide is the scope of our studies. While my examples derive from my specialty, I am sure that many in the audience have numerous examples to add in support of my hypothesis. FA LA LA is as

important as STEM. Hold on! I can hear many of you saying—doesn't she know about STEAM? Indeed I do. This makeshift attempt to mollify the arts is hardly satisfactory. Adding ARTS in the middle of STEM makes it sort of an “also ran,” instead of developing its own gravitas.

English majors do remarkably well on the LSAT. Why? Could it be that what we are teaching them to do when they write an essay or term paper is exactly what lawyers do when they prepare a case? A lawyer goes to the law books to look for precedents for the case he is arguing. A Liberal Arts student goes to the journals and books (the internet in these days) to see what the precedents are for the issue he or she will be exploring. Who has written what about it? Then the lawyer makes his/her argument with the thesis of “Not Guilty” and in his summation to the jury tries to make them see the case his/her way. By the way, another skill in my FA LA LA pantheon, the Fine Arts--Theatre in particular—is also very handy in the courtroom. My best friend, who graduated with a theatre degree before going to law school has assured me that Theatre was a great training for law, especially in the courtroom.

Speaking of training—I once had a bank president tell me that he would rather hire Liberal Arts majors who can write and reason than Banking majors. He explained, “I want them to be able to think and communicate—I'll teach them my methods and systems in banking which may be quite different from what they learned in college.” Which brings me to a recent study by Payscale. They queried managers in a variety of professions. The “hard” skill they found most lacking in new graduates was “writing proficiency.” In the area identified as “soft” skills, it was “critical thinking/problem solving” followed closely by “attention to detail” and “communication.”

Now don't get me wrong. I am not anti-scientist. My beloved sister is one and we often joke that one of us is left brain and the other right brain, so it takes the two of us to have a whole brain. Yes, I think technology is wonderful, but it also has its problematic side. I am not sure how many have ever seen the UTEP campus. It is an enchanting place. The buildings look like you have landed in Bhutan. Our President has maintained walking and green areas; there is a beautiful Bhutanese temple, donated by the people of Bhutan that sits in a park area in the middle of campus. All of this is surrounded by blue skies (El Paso has some 361 days of sunshine a year) and a stunning mountain range the divides the city; the tail end of the Rockies.

It is called El Paso because it served as a pass in the mountain range

so that the Conquistadores could travel from Mexico City to Santa Fe. So, what do our students do when they walk out of the classroom into all this grandeur? You got it – they look down at the phone in their hand.

OK, you say. So what do you suggest?

I suggest we create our own STEM.

S is for SEE. *Get out from behind that computer; take your eyes off of your smart phone. It is a wondrous world out there. Look at it. Take it in.*

T is for THINK. *Let reason rule, not emotions. Figure things out. Research. Use your brain.*

E is for ENJOY. *There is a world of both nature and technology that gives great pleasure.*

M is for MEMORIZE. *Somewhere along the way, memorization fell into disrepute. Our students need to regain knowledge of the times tables (a calculator may not be available). All would benefit from knowledge about countries and their capitals, significant paintings and their painters. . .*

And above all ---Don't forget **FA LA LA.**