

Raymie E. McKerrow, 2000 President, National Communication Association

Formative Years

I am a farm boy from Montana. Whatever else I am or have become, I will always remain tied to the land. I was raised with two older sisters on a “dry-land” farm north of Great Falls, MT. What that translates to is this: we prayed for rain to nourish wheat and barley crops and watched the skies for signs of hail as harvest neared. My sisters and I, along with cousins and other neighbor kids, attended a one-room country school—complete with a “teacherage”—the very small house our teacher lived in—plus two outhouses (one for boys and one for girls). When it came time for my oldest sister to attend junior high, we moved into Great Falls.

As a farm kid, I started driving our old fuel wagon from one field to the next while only nine years old. I graduated to driving wheat trucks to our family’s grain elevator and eventually to running combine to harvest wheat and barley. I continued to help my dad with harvest and other tasks until my mid-twenties, when professional duties began to consume more and more of my summers. By then, my dad and I were harvesting more than 700 acres of winter wheat and barley and hauling it to our own elevator late July–early August each year.

I owe my work ethic to those early years on the farm. My parents did not have a college education. As I progressed through high school, college, and graduate school, my appreciation for their native intelligence grew. While my mother only finished eighth grade, she was the most creative seamstress I’ve encountered—she mastered complex instructions for working with plaids when making clothes for my sisters (something my Ph.D. has not equipped me to even begin to understand), and moved on to a knitting machine as she got older. My dad built two elevators, our home, and our shop on the farm, and repaired machinery (and swore at engineers who had designed equipment they never had to fix). He developed a sixth sense regarding the weather—he could read the clouds in the sky and tell when it was time to plant or where hail would fall in the next hour. He also ran machinery “by ear.” The finest compliment I got, as I was leaving the farm, was that I was finally “getting it”—I could tell when a combine’s part was wearing out, or a belt was slipping, by listening to the machine.

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My folks were both involved in Freemasonry, hence my sisters and I were involved in the youth groups—Rainbow Girls and DeMolay. My first experience of speaking before groups was as a member of a “junior toastmasters” group that I and other DeMolay youth became involved with. That experience led me to try out for the speech team when I entered Great Falls High. The coach, Ivan Hunt, was patient with me as I attempted debate, original oratory, and extemporaneous speaking in contests. I recall leaving very early on Saturday mornings for bus rides from Great Falls to Billings, Bozeman, Missoula, Helena, or Havre, participating in contests during the day, and then the long bus ride back home. There were no overnight stays in those days. While I was an average debater, I fared much better with original oratory—winning the state contest as a senior (the person who took second, Douglas Losee, was to become my best friend in college—though neither of us knew it at the time). After graduating from high school, I attended Eastern Montana College in Billings. My initial plan was to start there and get a stronger background in math and science before moving on to Bozeman to specialize in soil science. Given my prior forensics experience, I joined the EMC forensics squad (along with Losee) and began traveling with the team. It didn’t take long to realize I was much better at history, economics, and speech than chemistry! I soon realized that I needed to quit science or quit forensics, as I could not handle both. The decision was fairly easy—grades were important. As I recall, my only D (besides the one credit D in bowling) was in a math class. I was also working three different jobs at the time—I managed the student union pool hall, worked as a “line runner” (taking food out) in the union’s kitchen, and sold tickets for the men’s basketball games.

The best thing that happened while at EMC, besides forming a life-long friendship with Losee (who passed away far too young), was meeting Gayle. She bopped into the pool hall one day looking for a lost purse (we also were the lost and found department—it was a small campus). One thing led to another, and within a year we were engaged and married. The smartest decision we made was to leave EMC and Montana, as it meant we would truly be on our own—at 20 and 19 that seemed a wise thing to do. Since EMC did not have a speech major at the time, I began investigating places to transfer to. One of my professors knew faculty at Southern Illinois University. I had been there the year before for a Pi Kappa Delta tournament; thus, it seemed like a logical thing to apply and I was accepted. Gayle and I left Montana a few days after our wedding, drove through Chillicothe MO to see my relatives (my mom and dad were first cousins—so I had a slew of McKerrows to see), and on to Carbondale. We spent 12 months there. Gayle worked for the Chief of Police, and I took classes and studied; interestingly, my grades improved dramatically. I also participated in forensics. Besides taking courses from A. Craig Baird and Marvin and Marion Kleinau, I developed a special relationship with Tom Pace that lasts to this day.

I went to SIU planning to stay after receiving my undergraduate degree and get a master’s degree. The west beckoned both of us; because Doug Losee was transferring to Colorado State University to major in speech (that was the key term in those days), it made sense to investigate CSU. That is where we ended up—with Gayle working for

a men's store in the mall, and me taking classes, assisting with forensics, and beginning my first teaching experience. The year was 1966. CSU was a vibrant, stimulating place in the mid-to-late 1960s, with Gordon Hostettler, Hal Gulley, Jack Gravlee, and Jim Irvine as my instructors and mentors. I recall Hostettler calling me into the office and informing me that I was dressed far too casually—I needed to “dress up” more on the days I was teaching. I've only recently begun wearing tennis shoes to class—talk about a lasting lesson (or command).

I should note here that the decision to remain in school—to pursue a graduate degree—was not a major item of discussion. I was just going with the flow. I had contemplated law school. I had had several opportunities to remain on the farm; actually, just before I left to start an M.A. at CSU, my dad offered to buy more land that I could farm, but I decided I wasn't really cut out for farming—not enough gray matter oriented toward fixing things. Moving back west, getting together with Losee and his parents (who were moving to Fort Collins for work) and continuing with forensics as a coach were just part of what seemed a natural progression. By the time I finished my master's and sought my first teaching job, however, a plan to pursue a doctorate was underway.

Graduate School

My education at CSU was the foundation for a lifetime's work. I had already been exposed to philosophy through Tom Pace's tutelage (I still have a “poem” I wrote for a class of his comparing general semantics to phenomenology—looking back, it's pretty bad, but not as bad as a paper I would write for Hostettler eviscerating Kenneth Burke as a person who saw through “rose-colored glasses”). My appreciation for classical rhetoric, my initial work in public address, and my sense of the field were developed in those two years—as well as lasting relationships with other graduate students there at the time, especially Michael and Ruth Wallinger.

Before beginning my doctorate, Gayle and I decided it would be worthwhile for me to work—and I was also in the throes of dealing with my draft board. It seemed they, and I, had forgotten that I was classified 1-AW (I was married under what I remember as Kennedy's proclamation that married men would not serve in Vietnam). To cut a long story short, the draft board finally realized I was ineligible, and I went on to be an assistant director of forensics at Kearney State College. We stayed in Kearney nine months. It was not a fulfilling time for us, other than Gayle's working at the Youth Detention Center. I got my first taste of departmental politics, as I was informed via a note in my mail box that, because I had written a letter of resignation as requested, the earlier commitment to summer teaching work was withdrawn. The important lesson I learned from that singular event is to share bad news in person with a colleague. I had already agreed to replace Jim Irvine for a couple of years at CSU, while he was away at Iowa pursuing his doctorate, so we our changed plans and went back to Montana for a summer's work on the farm before heading to Fort Collins.

I went to Fort Collins along with two of my students, who joined me on the forensics squad as graduate assistants (and who are both in the field currently). I

taught there for two years, and then moved to Iowa for a doctorate under one of the last National Defense Education Act fellowships. Our son, Matthew, was also along for the ride, as he had arrived nine months earlier. I remember Donald C. Bryant meeting me for the first time, and remarking that when I'd applied I'd failed to note I was married, and here I was with both Gayle and Matt. Once again, Gayle went to work, this time as a departmental secretary, while I began graduate studies. As I was not a Graduate Assistant, I took more classes than usual and finished my course work within two years. During my second year, I began applying for positions and was hired by the University of Wisconsin. Iowa had furthered my development as a young and aspiring scholar. Writing papers for Douglas Ehninger and Donald Bryant and taking courses from John Waite Bowers and Sam Becker were challenging experiences. Ehninger served as my major advisor—a major lesson learned from him, which I carry to this day, is that one can show respect for another's work by taking it seriously enough to critique its findings. Ehninger had written the major work on Richard Whately at that time; my dissertation focused on Whately's work, and included critiques of my advisor's conclusions. I kept that lesson in mind years later as I received the Douglas Ehninger Distinguished Rhetorical Scholar Award from NCA. Receiving that award means more than I can say.

Professional Experiences

It's been 33 years since we left Iowa. My continuing development as a teacher-scholar has taken my family and me to Wisconsin, Maine (where we spent 19 years), and then to my present position at Ohio University. I've had my share of disappointments and successes over the years and have learned a few lessons along the way; I don't think my experience has been that different from that of a lot of academics. Wisconsin didn't realize it at the time, and neither did I, but Wisconsin taught me never to allow others to define fully who you are, or what you can become. I still remember the brief meeting I had with the then Chair, Ed Black, just before going off to teach a class, and being told that I would have another year at UW, but my contract would not be renewed beyond that time. Apparently, my perceived potential at the time did not measure up to their expectations. In hindsight, it was a blessing in disguise, as we moved on to Maine, raised a son, gained life-long friends both in and outside the academy and prospered beyond our expectations. I also learned that you can do quality research at any institution willing to give you some time and support—and Maine served that need well. We went to Maine fully expecting to move after a few years. After 19 years, with responsibilities as Chair, Associate Dean, and other administrative appointments from time to time, we decided it was time to face new challenges. As I've said often, we looked to move south and west—and we got as far as Ohio. At least it is warmer (with shorter winters and far less snow) than Maine! There are not a lot of opportunities for full professors to move into a teaching position, but Ohio offered that and a lot more. Beyond finding a collegial and collaborative group of colleagues, we've expanded our horizons and worked in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai. Ohio also provided the support that would be

needed to run for NCA President. Gayle and I reflect often on how two country kids from Montana have been so blessed – especially as we sat overlooking the ocean from a cliffside restaurant on the island of Koh Samui off the Thailand coast while celebrating our fortieth anniversary. Hard work pays off.

Life as a Scholar

As retirement looms in the not-so-distant future, I've had the opportunity to re-examine my own research. To say that I started with a clear programmatic outline and filled in the blanks would be wholly out of step with my progress as a scholar. I've been far too responsive to developing interests, and to requests from others to consider specific initiatives, to have kept to such a schedule. From my perspective, I've had three "careers" within the scholarly domain. As I noted earlier, I wrote my dissertation on Richard Whately. After finishing the dissertation and beginning to work on articles derived from it, I realized I needed to continue researching his life. A trip to Oxford University and to Dublin paid enormous dividends: I sat in the Oriel Commons Room that Whately had inhabited, opened a glass cabinet, and pulled out original copies of his letters and other documents. Archival research of this type remains a fascinating enterprise. While I eventually moved away from a focus on modern rhetoric's history and theory, having done this kind of "intellectual history" is something I am proud of. I was fortunate in publishing outside the field (*Church History, Journal of the History of Ideas, Prose Studies: 1800–1900*), as well as in revising and publishing several parts of the original dissertation.

While working in rhetorical history, I also initiated studies in argument theory. I had an abiding interest in contemporary logic as well as in "ordinary language philosophy." I began attending the summer "Alta Conferences" in argumentation during this period, eventually directing the 1993 summer conference. I started with an ill-considered essay on "rhetorical validity"; I dropped that concept as it proved unworkable, and began crafting a series of essays centered on what I called "pragmatic justification." The penultimate essay was published as "The Centrality of Justification: Principles of Warranted Assertability," in David Williams and Michael Hazen's edited volume *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent* in 1990. I've continued to respond to others' work at conferences, but have not devoted a great deal of time to furthering work in this arena. If I were ever to write an argumentation text for undergraduates, I've at least decided on a title: *Reasoning with Publics*.

In the early 1980s, I was asked to consider writing a review essay that dealt with the relationship between rhetoric and ideology. As I began reading in that area, I realized rather quickly that I needed to upgrade my knowledge base. The initial essay, published in 1983, "Marxism and the Rhetorical Conception of Ideology," served as the foundation for two decades of work. I became fascinated by the work of Michel Foucault through my reading on ideology and began working on a 1989 piece, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis." I owe my friend and colleague Michael Calvin McGee more than I can say, as conversations with him pinpointed the key concept—"critical rhetoric" as a reversal of "rhetorical criticism." The theoretical development

in that essay, especially with respect to the “critique of freedom,” has been a mainstay of my more recent effort to “explain myself.” I’ve continued to work out problems embedded in the initial 1989 essay. I realized, for example, that Critical Rhetoric needed some kind of referent point. I developed that in a small essay that focused on “embodied rhetoricity”—incorporating feminist theory in an attempt to suggest that traditional rhetorical theory, ensconced within a Western frame, was incapable of answering the needs of global/transnational or multi-cultural discourses.

In addition to these endeavors, I’ve also been a textbook writer for the past 30 years. Ron Allen and I published three editions of a public speaking text and Jim Benjamin and I co-authored a business and professional text. Since 1982, I’ve also been involved in co-authoring, along with Bruce Gronbeck, *Principles and Types of Speech Communication*. I began on that text as the fourth listed author (although Alan Monroe and Douglas Ehninger were deceased, they remained on the masthead as authors; their work remains to this day a foundational component of the text), and eventually became the first author. We retitled the text *Principles and Types of Public Speaking* for the 15th and more recent 16th edition (quite probably the last).

NCA

I’ve been involved in one way or another in NCA since the early 1970s. Besides service as chair and respondent on numerous panels, I participated as a convention planner on various occasions and also served as a member of the Publication Board. I also gained experience as a member of the Eastern Communication Association and planned their convention in 1984, serving as President in 1985. Thus, when I received a request to consider running for NCA President, I felt I had some qualifications for considering that role. After talking with friends and colleagues, I felt assured that I would have the support to travel as a candidate, and to fulfill my obligations if I were actually to win an election. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and I participated in each regional convention’s program as requested by their respective planners, learning a lot about the needs of the Association as well as sharing our own thoughts and plans. For the first, and so far only, time in our history, the election resulted in a tie. The decision was made to hold a second election, and I was elected. That experience was bittersweet, as the Association would have been equally well-served by Carolyn—and the initial tie suggested that the necessary support was there for either of us.

As the convention planning process began, the first job was to select a convention theme. I recall sitting with close friends at the Chicago Hilton brainstorming possibilities. What became the theme—“Coloring Outside the Lines”—was a result of a friend’s suggestion. The theme reflected my goals—to ask colleagues to consider new, different ways of enacting scholarship and teaching, to break with traditions and explore novel ways of being teacher-scholars. I followed John Daly and Orlando Taylor and worked subsequently with James Applegate and Bill Balthrop on the executive committee. As I think other leaders would attest, the opportunity to work closely with leaders of this caliber in NCA is a priceless gift.

I did not enter the presidential “track” (as Second Vice President, First Vice President and Convention Program Planner, President, and—finally—Past President) with a specific plan or set of goals that I wanted to accomplish. I did enter, however, with a desire to emulate an attitude of openness and inclusiveness. While running for office, I was privileged to become acquainted with leaders of NCA’s Community College division. I valued their presence in the Association and strove while an officer to honor their contribution. Gayle and I hosted their NCA reception in our suite during each of the years we were in that privileged space.

I also sensed a certain “dis-ease” within the Association. This was the impetus for early discussions with NCA’s leadership about the possibility of examining the NCA constitution. There was natural and honest trepidation about that prospect—as reworking the constitution could result in declining membership or support for the convention. We were also considering the move to DC during this time, further heightening revenue concerns. After consulting further with James Gaudino, then Executive Director, I decided while serving as First Vice President to formulate a new task force. My smartest decision was asking Bill Balthrop to serve as its Chair. He had the requisite experience and the temperament to manage the diverse opinions that were floated during several task force meetings. Each task force member took the issues seriously; while there were disagreements along the way, we succeeded, over perhaps a longer time than we initially envisioned, in bringing a revised document to the membership for their consideration. Truth be told, we would not have what I believe is a more inclusive and responsive organization were it not for Balthrop’s leadership.

Colleagues across the discipline have indicated that my role as President was well received and valued by the membership. Doubtless there were some colleagues I did not please; this would only be natural. I felt, however, that while I could have done more for the Association, I was and remain comfortable with the outcome. My most memorable moment was the opportunity to present a “presidential address.” I saw that opportunity as the culmination of what I had attempted to perform as President—and to say some things to colleagues that I sincerely believed needed to be said. I’m sure not all agreed with my take on our collective responsibility to “color outside the lines.” To paraphrase a current Martina McBride song, I did it anyway.

The Present Day

A lot has happened since I had the privilege of leading the Association. I’ve never been one to hang on to a position—hence after leaving office, I did not remain involved. It is not that I’m not interested (I am), but I do not want to be the old guy grousing in the corner about how things were better in my day. I place perhaps an inordinate value on my personal integrity—and wish only to be respected for being professional in dealings with others.

As a direct result of my working relationship with Orlando Taylor, and an interim position as Associate Provost for Graduate Studies, I became interested in trying to bring the McNair program to our campus. This program serves first-generation/

low-income and/or under-represented students in higher education; the goal is to assist undergraduates from this target population to attend graduate school and move on to obtain a doctorate and return to the academy as professional teacher-scholars. After trying to find a grant writer, I ended up serving in that role in responding to the Department of Education's call for grant submissions. Luckily, the grant was approved—we have involved more than 50 OU faculty as mentors and have former McNair scholars attending graduate schools as diverse as McGill, Columbia, Arizona, Carnegie Mellon, and Ohio Universities.

When the grant was approved, I returned to full-time teaching. I've had the privilege of spending three months in Bangkok working with our Bangkok University/OU doctoral program, and co-teaching graduate courses with Bill Rawlins and Greg Shepherd. Being in the same classroom with these first-rate instructors is both challenging and inspiring. I've become a better teacher in their presence.

My most recent involvement with NCA is as the Editor of our online review journal, the *Review of Communication*. I've had the privilege of working with graduate students Daniel Rossi Keen, Rukshana Ahmed, and Eimi Lev, and an undergraduate, Emily Mitchell, on the journal. Without their able advice and assistance, we would not have completed our first volume, nor been able to move forward in filling half of our second volume as of December 2007!

As I enter a new phase—thinking about retirement—writing this has been a journey through the past. It has reconfirmed what I've sometimes overlooked: I've been extremely privileged to do what I love and have the pleasure of working with very good people.