

# Safe spaces and public speaking about climate change

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At my [talk in the Cambridge Climate Lecture Series](#) I referred in the Q and A to a section of the talk which I hadn't had time to include and which took the speeches of Churchill and Martin Luther King as examples of how sufficient safety could be created, when speaking to a large audience, to help people cope with their fear and think reflectively.

Since then a number of people have asked me for more information about this so I have turned my notes into some readable paragraphs which you'll find below. All the other advice about how to create safety still stands – the need to have processed your own distress, to realise the shortcomings of information deficit theory, to understand and empathise with the experience of those listening to you – as does the importance of the model offered by [Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative](#) which I discussed towards the end of the lecture and which has much in common with the features I pick out in the speeches I discuss below.

### The skill of Churchill and Martin Luther King

Some years ago when I was talking about the need to create safe, contained spaces in which the frightening and unpalatable truths of climate change could be properly thought about, I was challenged by a climate scientist: 'How on earth do you create a safe space if you're having to stand up in front of a group of policy-makers, or journalists, or just people you've never met before?' she asked. I had to admit that I had no idea. Although I'd got a lot of ways in which I could translate my therapeutic knowledge into one-to-one and small group situations I wasn't sure I could answer her question. Later I reflected that something could be learned from public leaders who have had, through necessity, to talk about extremely difficult subjects to large numbers of people – about military defeat, setbacks in a political campaign, a national emergency for example. The two people who I focus on below are Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King but a more recent example who is on many people's lips as I write, is [Jacinda Ahern](#) the New Zealand prime minister, rightly praised for her warm, public response to a terrorist atrocity.

The speeches I discuss below are Churchill's '[We shall fight them on the beaches](#)' and '[Finest Hour](#)' speeches (Referred to below as WFB and FH respectively) and Martin Luther King's '[I have a dream](#)' speech.

### Creating a space

King's and Churchill's styles are very different and use different effects but both create a space which offers some degree of safety. I chose Churchill for the ways he creates a space in which an audience can listen to some very difficult truths and King for the way he uses story, metaphor and emotional relatedness to connect with his audience. When talking about climate change you might not use all of these rhetorical techniques and might think some of them inappropriate but I offer them here as an example of how a certain kind of speech can make it possible to hear something very difficult and to believe that you can take action and have an effect, even when the situation feels desperate.

The first of Churchill's speeches was given on 4 June 1940, the last day of the evacuation from Dunkirk, one of the most catastrophic defeats of the British army in history, and the second on 18 June, two weeks later. At this point there was little hope of the United States joining the war and it was very uncertain how long the UK could hold out against Hitler.

King's speech focuses not on a difficult truth but on experiences of oppression and betrayal that are so entrenched that it is hard to imagine them ever changing. Both these situations share something

with climate change: a terrifying truth in one and an entrenched refusal of the powerful to act in the other.

### **Telling the truth**

Churchill doesn't flinch from telling the truth about what has happened. He states baldly that Dunkirk is a catastrophic defeat. "...our thankfulness at the escape of our Army and so many men, whose loved ones have passed through an agonising week, must not blind us to the fact that what has happened in France and Belgium is a colossal military disaster." (WFB) It's true that he emphasises the courage and bravery of the British forces as a means of buoying up morale but he is absolutely clear about the catastrophe.

King too tells an unflinching story. "One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land."

Both Churchill and King offer truths that are stark but which cannot be disputed. This is harder in the modern world, where the claims of experts to truth are frequently challenged but sticking to the indisputable, keeping the information to a minimum and avoiding speculation are all helpful. There is often relief in hearing the truth and in knowing the worst, particularly if you can see some kind of way forward (see below about the 'ask').

### **Appeal to values**

Neither Churchill nor King try to convince through information. Although they offer some facts these are not the bulk of what they say. Churchill appeals to identity, pride, strength. King speaks of identity, dignity and discipline. These are moral and emotional qualities and by invoking them the speaker implies confidence in the audience and their capabilities. Marshall Ganz makes a similar point.

### **Leadership**

Both Churchill and King speak either in the first person or the first person plural – I or We. Both offer themselves as the leader of an inclusive 'we' but the key here is the movement between 'I' and 'We'. With the 'I' the speaker takes responsibility and offers himself to the audience. With the 'We', he gathers the audience in, in solidarity. This is Churchill: "I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government - every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation." (WFB)

King does the same thing and even more effectively than Churchill: "I am happy to join with you today..." "... there is something that I must say to my people" "We cannot walk alone." "We cannot turn back."

Identifying the 'We' you are talking to is a key part of Marshall Ganz's advice too.

### **Emotional connectedness**

Churchill speaks of the pain which people are suffering, first in a generalised way, then in a directly personal way. "I take occasion to express the sympathy of the House to all who have suffered bereavement or who are still anxious. The President of the Board of Trade [Sir Andrew Duncan] is not here today. His son has been killed, and many in the House have felt the pangs of affliction in the sharpest form." (WFB)

This is King: "I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations...You have been the veterans of creative suffering."

## **Story-telling**

Both Churchill and King tell stories and they do so with metaphor, imagery and emotion. They quote poetry and recall myths. Churchill's plot is essentially David and Goliath, the plucky, intelligent, resourceful small nation against the lumbering, stupid enemy. King's plot is the quest, the journey. "Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood."

King is a master of metaphor but Churchill employs metaphor too:

"the German eruption swept like a sharp scythe..."

"...the dull, brute mass of the German army..."

"...the crash and thunder has for the moment died away..."

"Europe...writhing and starving under its cruel heel" (all from WFB).

And this is King again:

"... we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this nation."

Metaphor brings the moment alive and resonates emotionally.

## **Responsibility and blame**

Both Churchill and King are clear about the responsibility for the disaster but refuse to engage in blame. This is Churchill:

"...if we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future."

"I am not reciting these facts for the purpose of recrimination. That I judge to be utterly futile and even harmful." (both from FH)

And this is King apportioning responsibility

"... It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned."

But he then goes on

"In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."

## **Making a proportional demand**

Neither Churchill nor King pretend that the situation they face is easily remediable but both are explicit about what they want people to do. What they ask is proportional to the situation (unlike many of the 'asks' addressed to the public about climate change). The 'ask' is also an important feature of Marshall Ganz's advice. It is important in offering a way forward and crucial in preventing people from sinking into fear, apathy and powerlessness. Offering a way forward is different from offering hope. A way forward doesn't necessarily promise an outcome, just the possibility of there being something worth doing which ought to be done.

## **Finally...**

These features – truth-telling, the appeal to values, leadership, emotional connectedness, story-telling, not blaming and having an explicit 'ask' – are I think essential qualities to aim for. There are many things to avoid as well – demagoguery, manipulation of emotion, mob incitement – but I have no time to discuss that at present!