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Telling Stories: Rhetoric and Leadership, a Case Study

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Abstract *Often one hears that leaders lead through action, by example. But more often, and often more effectively, leaders lead through their words, by acts of speech, as it were. They are frequently called upon to speak and write, formally and informally, to convey their vision for their organization to their staff and constituents. In doing so, they are not only announcing that vision, but are engaging in a rhetorical negotiation with their audience, trying out words, phrases, and literary constructions to better and more convincingly communicate their vision of their organization and the direction in which they wish to take it. If their rhetoric fails, or is not wholly successful, they strive to change or modify it. Through such verbal exchanges, leaders communicate the style and substance of their leadership and give form and imaginative life to their vision for the organization. Howard Gardner (1995), the Harvard psychologist, has written that '[L]eaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate'. He calls these stories 'stories of identity', narratives 'that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed' and that such stories 'constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's literary arsenal'. This essay recounts, as a case study, the role of such stories in the turnaround of an organization, the Harvard University Art Museums, and reflects generally on the role of rhetoric in leadership.*

Keywords *change; leadership; narrative; rhetoric*

One of the first things I did as director of the Harvard University Art Museums in 1991 – in fact, I was still director designate at the time, and would be for another two weeks – was to address the committee to visit the Harvard University Art Museums. A skeptical group of museum professionals, faculty at other universities, and longtime Harvard supporters with a special commitment to the Art Museums, the Visiting Committee is appointed by the university's Governing Boards and charged with assessing the condition of the Art Museums in written reports every three years. It was skeptical I suppose not only because it had not yet met me, but also because it had been a most difficult 10 years, watching the Art Museums battle with the university administration and the Art Museums' closest faculty colleagues in the Department of Fine Arts.

The 1980s (I was appointed in 1990) had begun with the Art Museums' director

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stepping down after disagreements with the university administration and the appointment of a faculty/curator as acting director (on the condition that he be joined by a university watchdog; these two led the Art Museums uncomfortably for three years), the division of the Visiting Committee into two (one for the Art Museums and another for the Department of Fine Arts, as if underlying the growing political and ideological distance between the museum and the department), the rough and tumble final stages of a building campaign, the threatened closure of one of the three Art Museums for financial reasons, and the hiring of a new museum director who would stay only five years. The decade ended with the departure of the recently hired director (over disagreements with the university administration), the Art Museums' budget in deficit and projecting additional deficits into the millions, a second building campaign underway which would allow for the salvation of the previously threatened museum, and the appointment of an acting director, who over the course of the coming year would lead the Art Museums through a difficult phase of cost cutting in a desperate attempt to bring its budget into line.

In other words, in just 10 years, the Visiting Committee had seen two directors leave in frustration, two acting directors appointed to deal with financial problems, and the separation of the Art Museums from the Department of Fine Arts (in terms of separate Visiting Committees and with all but one of the faculty members in a new museum building and most of the museum staff, including the director, in the oldest building). It was an unstable period in the midst of downturn in the US economy when the popular managerial buzz words were 'downsizing' and 're-engineering'. The mood of the place was somber at best, pessimistic at worst. Staff had seen staff members depart suddenly. The fights between the Art Museums and the university's administration and Department of Fine Arts were rehearsed daily in hallway conversations. And the future of the Art Museums was by no means assured. The university's president had spent much of the past year writing a new mission statement for the Art Museums entitled 'The Role of the Harvard Art Museums and Their Director', which was more a 'memorandum of understanding' between the president and the director than a conventional mission statement, a document the president would hand the new director as the basis for understanding what would be expected of him or her. It also implied therefore that there had been misunderstandings in the past, and not just between the president and the director but, as the document goes on to address, between the museum and the department, each suspicious of the other, the museum keeping the faculty at arm's length and the faculty denigrating the work of the museum as insufficiently intellectually rigorous.

The president wanted a change and his report purported to represent a consensus of the Art Museums' many constituencies, including museum staff, university faculty, outside museum professionals and academics, and the Art Museums' Visiting Committee. It was printed as an addendum to the *Art Museums' Director's Report 1989–90*, the last report of the director who had been appointed just five years before.

In the following year's *Director's Report*, the acting director emphasized the beginnings of the change, noting that

> in many cases the changes signify the transformation of roles within the Museums' organization and thus the role of the Museums themselves . . . we have been reoriented toward the University community – toward the Department

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> of Fine Arts in particular but, more broadly, toward the needs of education at the high level of research and transmission of knowledge that is the mission of the entire University and the larger world of scholarship that it epitomizes . . . In the life of an institution with a long history like that of the Harvard University Art Museums, one sees not so much a transformation when a new administration brings a different perspective, but rather a rising spiral, with each change of direction building upon the achievements off the last.

In my first meeting with the Visiting Committee in May 1991, I was meant to put language to this latest turn of the spiral and describe what I saw as my mandate and how I saw the Art Museums developing over the coming years.

I began by reporting on the progress of our search for a curator of paintings, a search that had only just begun but which was structured, I emphasized, 'to restore trust in the relations between the Museums and our departmental colleagues . . . this appointment, as every subsequent appointment, will be an opportunity to affirm the Museums' mission statement'. I wanted them to know that I had heard the call for change, for the reaffirmation of the values of a teaching and research museum, and that I was intending as my first task to address the distrust that existed between the Art Museums and our faculty colleagues.

I thought myself able to do this because I was, in effect, only meaning to make of the Art Museums what I knew them to have been when I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student just over a dozen years before. I had come from the University of Oregon, where I had taken a Master's degree in 1978, and I was young, naïve, enthusiastic, and ripe for the powerful pull of the place. At the time, the department was in the Fogg Museum and you made your way to the department office through the museum's art-filled hallways. You never really knew (at least I didn't know) where the museum ended and the department began. In fact, we easily said we were 'studying at the Fogg' rather than at Harvard.

When I left to teach at Vassar College five years later, the troubles were already underway. My mentor had recently stepped down from the museum's directorship and a professor of Japanese art and curator of Oriental art (as Asian art was then called) was appointed acting director and would serve from 1982 to 1985 jointly with the university publisher who had been installed by the university's administration to bring order to the museum's finances (in 1983, he would also become director of the university's office of budgets). The Art Museums would further be overseen by a newly created Executive Committee comprising the president of the university, the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the chairman of the Department of Fine Arts, and the chairman of the Visiting Committee, together with the acting director and the imposed ombudsman.

At the same time, a young English art historian, T. J. Clark, was hired to teach modern art in the department. His appointment was too late for my own course work, but he did become one of my dissertation advisors. Clark was a provocative scholar and charismatic teacher. He wrote what was called a 'social history of art', a way of interpreting works of art within the context of the period in which they were made and first publicly seen. This approach was wrapped into a set of approaches called by some practitioners, rather triumphally, as 'the new art history' (to distinguish it from the other – 'old fashioned' – art history otherwise on offer).

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I didn't understand it at the time, but Clark's appointment was seen by many outside Harvard, and perhaps by some inside Harvard, as an abandonment of all that was good about art history at Harvard. In the lead article in the March 1985 issue of *The New Criterion*, Hilton Kramer (1985) wrote:

> There are times when, owing to its larger ramifications, a single academic appointment at a leading university very quickly acquires the status of an historical event for those alert to its meaning. The appointment of T. J. Clark as professor of art history at Harvard University in 1980 was for some observers an event of this kind. For what it signified was a decisive shift in the way the study of art history . . . would henceforth be pursued as an intellectual discipline at this venerable seat of learning. (p. 1)

Clark's arrival coincided with the pending retirements of a generation of scholars who had been teaching art history at Harvard since the 1950s and 1960s. I had studied with many of them and in particular was inspired by one, Sidney Freedberg, a specialist in 16th-century Italian painting.

Freedberg had been a leading figure in the field for decades and was seen as the heir to Bernard Berenson, the great connoisseur of Italian painting during the first half of the 20th century. For Freedberg, the discreet work of art was the lodestar of the study of art history. He demanded that one look closely at individual works of art, not because they were independent of the social and intellectual forces at play during the period of their making, but because those forces were there in the way the work of art looked and was made. Clark was thought to look beyond the work of art to just those forces in and of themselves. His approach was judged the opposite of Freedberg's. And his arrival coincided with Freedberg's pending retirement and was seen by some as the reason Freedberg retired when he did.

I knew when I rose to speak to the Visiting Committee that I needed to address the Clark/Freedberg issue. For this issue was fundamental to any revitalization of the Art Museums and symbolized their broken condition, even if so many other things had transpired in the previous decade to contribute to the state of suspicion and anxiety they were experiencing. I began slowly. I recalled my coming to study at Harvard, the faculty with whom I studied, the jobs I had in the museum, and what was changed from what I knew of the place when I was a student. The museum and department were no longer together in a single building. Many faculty had retired. A generation of graduate students – and two generations of undergraduates – had come and gone. Neither Sydney Freedberg nor Tim Clark was still teaching at Harvard. And then I got to my point:

> It might seem curious to both Sydney and Tim that I often think of Tim when I read Sydney's words; when, for example, Sydney wrote that '[w]orks of art . . . are mainly mute and need interpretation to give them voice. That is why what is called critical writing must be joined to pure history to fulfill the whole mission of the writer of art history: one is needed to complete and fulfill the other. Moreover', and this is where I hear Tim Clark's words echoing in the sound of Sydney's, 'it is in the critical aspect of the writing of art history, much oftener than in the merely expository prose of historical accounts, that art-historical writing may aspire to the condition of literature'.

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Both Sydney and Tim attended in their teaching and writing to the close inspection of works of art and to the precise and exquisite quality of their prose in characterizing what they saw in order that we might see it too. Both were master wordsmiths. Both were criticized for self-indulgent prose. Both were thought difficult to read. And both possessed minds of the greatest originality. So why were they cast as opposites in a morality play about the state of art history and the Art Museums at Harvard? Because conditions need faces, abstract forces need names, and we have to blame someone or something even when conditions are more complex than a single person or event. As Kramer's remarks make clear: to some, the issue was scholarship itself and the values they embodied – core Western values of objectivity and respect for tradition. Freedberg vs. Clark was cast in terms of the triumph of Sixties radicalism over hard-won traditional values: 'the cultural insurgency of the Sixties had done its work at Harvard', Kramer (1985) fulminated, 'no less than elsewhere in the academic world, and a new administration at the university was obviously prepared to welcome not only radical change but a change in the direction of an avowedly left-wing radicalism'.

I intuited that the best way to address this matter was to personalize it, to make it my story, to stand as a witness before the Visiting Committee and weave the Art Museums' story into my personal narrative of how I came to Harvard young and inexperienced, how Harvard introduced me to the profession and gave me the resources and confidence to pursue a place within it, and how all of this was really the legacy of the Art Museums, the place I first came to as a student and to which I was returning as director. I didn't know then, but I was acting out an aspect of leadership Howard Gardner (1995) holds as central, what he calls 'relating and embodying stories'.

I wouldn't read Gardner's book for six years, after we had restored order, confidence, and ambition within the Art Museums, and relations with the department and the university were re-established on much better terms. I was at a conference of 'leaders' from all professions. And while there I picked up Gardner's *Leading Minds: an Anatomy of Leadership* (1995) that I had wanted to read for some time. Through a series of case studies, Gardner describes and analyzes an 'anatomy of leadership'. And despite the very different people he studied and the different challenges they faced, he found certain common characteristics among them, one of which, perhaps the most important, was their ability to relate and embody stories: 'leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate'. And chief among them are '*stories of identity* – narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed – that constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's literary arsenal' (Gardner, 1995).

This had been my experience at the Art Museums. I had come to realize, even more than I sensed at the start, that what the Art Museums needed most was someone who would relate their story – to themselves as well as to others – as an unfolding narrative of origins. We needed to be reminded of our founders and their vision for the museum as an institution of consequence. And we needed to remind others of this too. We needed to let our faculty colleagues know that we shared a common heritage – that our history was intertwined with theirs – and that the success of both of our futures was based on our co-equal and interdependent status within the university community as teachers, researchers, and pre-professional mentors. We needed to

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remind our museum colleagues of our important contributions to the development of the field and of our ambition to make further contributions, in both training museum professionals and participating in the professional discourse. And we needed to help our donors feel honored in their support of our efforts and as important partners in our developing enterprise. In Gardner's (1995) words: 'the most fundamental stories fashioned by leaders concern issues of personal and group identity; those leaders who presume to bring about major alterations across a significant population must in some way help their audience members think through who they are'.

This was the challenge I sensed I was taking on in May 1991. But it was only when I read Gardner's book that it became clear to me that it was in the nature of leadership to do this. Over the course of my 12-year tenure as director of the Art Museums I took every opportunity to relate the story of the Art Museums and sometimes I succeeded and sometimes I failed.

At the same time, I read Wayne Booth's (1988) *The Vocation of a Teacher*, a book by a long-time teacher of English language and literature that reproduces his many writings and lectures organized around specific 'rhetorical occasions'. That is, 'every writer or speaker addresses an occasion – and hence is a rhetorician' and that 'attention to audience' is characteristic of all of our public utterances. As with a teacher, a museum director is inevitably aware of this and crafts his or her occasional remarks accordingly. We all have specific audiences in mind when we begin to write our papers or lectures. We know if they will be read or heard, and if heard we know under what conditions: whether in an auditorium, grand hall, or staff room, during the afternoon or in the evening after dinner, at the celebration of an opening of a building or an exhibition, on the death of a colleague or the birthday of a friend, at the start of one's tenure or at the end or somewhere in the middle. All of these conditions shape our remarks, and we choose our words and pace them accordingly.

We also know their symbolic value. As leaders of institutions we know that what we say will be heard as the embodiment of our institution. Our words are never incidental. They always contribute to the larger narrative that tells our institution's story and as such are written to include our audiences in that story, to have them, if only in a small way, identify with that story and become a part of it.

Over the course of my nearly 12-year tenure as director of the Harvard Art Museums – and something similar would be true of every leader of every organization – I gave numerous speeches, formal and informal, to both internal and external audiences. I also wrote dozens of articles, essays, and introductions to catalogues published by the Art Museums, as well as hundreds of letters and memoranda to colleagues and supporters. Looking back, I now see that these, when considered together, constitute a profile of the Art Museums as a *particular* institution, the Harvard University Art Museums, and as a *kind* of institution, the academic museum, its purpose and potential. Some of these texts (or narratives) addressed particular moments in the history of the Harvard Art Museums or comprised talks given at important moments in that history, including memorial tributes to past directors and celebrations of a new building and a research center. Others were tributes to special friends of the Art Museums on occasions when they were given awards by other organizations or were feted by us. Still others were letters 'From the Director's Office' that were intended to strengthen the relationship between the Art Museums and our membership by introducing our members to books that I was reading and

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issues bearing on our common interests (as opposed to letters too often received by directors that simply ask for money).

There were texts of introductions made on the opening of our exhibitions, occasions when one celebrates the work of one's colleagues and the collective achievement of the institution; essays, book reviews, and lectures in the area of my particular academic specialty, occasions when one strengthens one's claim of legitimacy as an *academic* museum director; and lectures and essays on topics of special concern to the museum profession: economic and ethical pressures around special exhibitions and fundraising, and the acquisition of antiquities in the face of opposition from our archaeological colleagues, occasions when one strengthens one's claim of legitimacy as an academic *museum director*.

Finally there was a series of letters and statements related to our efforts to build a new museum facility designed by Renzo Piano. Our hopes were to provide for the future growth of the Art Museums, much as our predecessors had provided for us with the museum facilities we now enjoy. This is a task that seems to fall to every museum director today and for a variety of reasons: because growing collections need more space, older facilities need to be modernized, or because building projects manifest the ambition of the museum. The challenge here is to convince the architect to take on the project, encourage the staff to see beyond the temporary but annoying disruptions of relocation and renovation, excite the dedication of the museum's friends and supporters, elicit the cooperation of the neighboring community in which the facility will be built, and ensure the support of the museum's trustees (or in my case, the university's trustees). This is an extraordinary challenge, one that requires all of one's rhetorical skills and one that I felt only partially in control of. In the end we lost our bid to build a separate facility and continue to pursue the renovation and expansion of our current facility.

Throughout the many ups and downs of the five years in which we worked on these projects, the biggest challenge by far was the management of the staff's expectations. One was trying to pace their excitement, overcome their objections, answer the questions, resolve their doubts, and all the while be honest about the difficulties that lay ahead. In many ways, one's authority as a leader is most at risk in such situations. One is asking others to believe in one's vision for the institution, and then one has to deliver on that vision or, as in my case, explain why one cannot. Twelve years after beginning my directorship, I found myself, under a new university administration, having to explain to the Art Museums' staff and supporters that we would not be going forward with our larger museum project but would be pursuing a bold, some even say radical, renovation of our current facilities, while all the while trying to convince the new university administration that a bold renovation scheme was both feasible and programmatically preferable to a lesser scheme; and this at a time when the university administration was considering the revival of our earlier new facility scheme for inclusion (in a modified state) on a new site in the university's development of a whole new campus.

As all of this was happening, I was offered a new position directing the Courtauld Institute of Art, an art history teaching and research institute in London. Having achieved a lot over 12 years as director of the Harvard Art Museums, having led them to this crucial moment when their next stage in their physical and programmatic life would be taken (over a decade or so), and just when my wife's and my two children

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were for the first time in 21 years out of the house, I decided to take the job in London. And then I had to explain this to the Art Museums' staff and supporters. This would require yet more rhetorical skills. And so, as my last communication as director, I wrote to the museums' staff, patrons, and members of the Visiting Committee explaining my decision. Many of the recipients of my letter were in the room 12 years ago when I first addressed the Visiting Committee and gave them my vision for the Art Museums and began to relate what would become very much *our* story.

By the time I came to write that final letter *our* story had become a part of everyone's narrative of the Art Museums and of their personal role in them. It was so because, in great part, it was a story based in fact: it derived from what we were and did best of all. We were an academic museum, dedicated to research and scholarship, engaged equally in the duties and debates of the academy and the responsibilities and concerns of the museum profession. We were a proud and venerable institution, continuing to develop, deepen and strengthen our positions within the two worlds of which we were a part and sensitive to the importance of our history and to the role our predecessors and donors played in that history. For our future depended on all of this and on making the past alive in our minds as we worked to develop our future. Telling stories – *our story* – was critical to all of this. They gave life and form to our institutional identity and provided the proper context for the changes we had to make as we moved forward.

We could not have got past the entrenched, defensive positions in which we and our adversaries were stuck when I arrived at Harvard in 1991, nor the low and nearly stultifying morale problems among the staff, without them. With them, in telling them, we were able to build consensus about our mission and disseminate it broadly. They were the driving force as well as the justification behind much of our success over the next 12 years, a period that saw us double in staff size, re-engage with our university constituency, broaden our international profile, deepen our donor pool, and more than quadruple our endowment. In every way, we were a stronger institution in 2002 than we were in 1991. And telling stories was an important part of this success. In Howard Gardner's (1995) terms, they were 'relating and embodying stories', '*stories of identity* – narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed', stories 'that constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's literary arsenal'.

Post script

After only 18 months in London, I was called back to the US to assume the presidency and directorship of the Art Institute of Chicago. My time in London was far too short. I had only begun to learn the story of the Courtauld, both its origins and more recent past. But I was committed to telling it, and I told it often. On my departure a colleague told me that I had helped my colleagues 'believe in themselves' after a challenging period in which their institutional confidence had been shaken. If indeed I helped them believe in themselves, it was because I was committed to telling their story with the understanding that their story embodied their aspirations.

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James Cuno was Professor and Director of the Harvard University Art Museums from 1991 to 2003. During that time he also served on the Board of the Association of Art Museum Directors, of which he was President in 2000–1. He has served on the Boards of Trustees or Visiting Committees to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, and the art museums at Vassar College, Bowdoin College, and Oberlin College. He received his PhD in History of Art from Harvard in 1995 and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Currently President and Director of The Art Institute of Chicago, he was Professor and Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art from 2003 to 2004.
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