Are Dreams Instructive?—What Autoethnographic Research Might Reveal about Trump’s Rhetoric

July 23, 2019

By Richard Cherwitz

Our dreams often are unsettling. Sometimes, however, they also provide a unique picture of and insight into reality, giving us a clearer and more vivid understanding of current events.
Last night I had such a dream—a nightmare—that made me realize in a visceral (as opposed to intellectual) way the danger of Donald Trump’s rhetoric. In the dream I was an autoethnographer. *Autoethnography* is a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Communication scholars like Art Bochner document some of the insights that can be gained from autoethnographic research. It is a self-reflective form of writing used across various disciplines such as communication studies, performance studies, and education. Autoethnography is one of several forms of ethnographic research, which are designed for systematically studying people and cultures.

In this dream, my autoethnographic research project involved going underground and becoming part of the Trump movement, closely following those who attend his rallies. My experience as a rhetorician, when not dreaming, has been spent analyzing Trump’s discourse from a distance. But in my dream, for the first time my understanding of his discourse was intimate, personal and grounded in the lived experiences of his audience.

With each rally, I became increasingly aware of—and subsequently horrified by—the audience’s enormous electricity and Trump’s ability to tap into, exploit and arouse their emotions. What I was witnessing was the archetype of Aristotle’s concept of “pathos”—appeals to the emotions of the audience, eliciting feelings that already reside in them. *Pathos* is a communication technique used most often in rhetoric (in which it is considered one of the three modes of persuasion, alongside ethos and logos) as well as in literature, film, and other narrative art.

Obviously I was not actually engaged in autoethnographic research because I was dreaming, but the dream experience nevertheless gave me a fuller appreciation of Trump’s emotional power and of the potential insights of a more engaged form of research than I normally do.
Moreover, it made even more transparent what I knew intuitively prior to the dream: that the source of Trump’s persuasion is perhaps as much if not more about audience than speaker—more about Trump’s supporters than him.

Needless to say, when I awoke, I was frightened. More than ever, I worried that President Trump will not and perhaps cannot be defeated until we come to grips with what Plato called the “soul of the audience”—their identity, core beliefs, and fundamental values. Until then, we may not have the available means of persuasion to neutralize and counter “the Trump effect.”

Such a psychological revelation might allow those not part of Trump’s base to see the dangerous effects of his political persuasion on audiences and why therefore he must be removed (whether through impeachment or the ballot box). This larger and more serious rhetorical revelation could have a greater capacity to capture the attention of voters than simply continuing the barrage of well-rehearsed arguments with Trump supporters and the daily reminder about his lies, wrongdoing, and harmful policies—efforts to which many now are inoculated and tune out, and as a result seem not to have changed many minds.

This made me wonder as well whether those who are among Trump’s ardent supporters are analogous to a religious cult, as some people already have claimed, and hence, whether they can be deprogrammed. Of course, there are limits to what can be learned from a dream, but the experience can still reveal important questions and opportunities.

In retrospect, my dream makes me believe that this is an opportune time for the media and political pundits to take an ethnographic approaches to the Trump presidency and the rhetorical force of his discourse—to engage in what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description.” Some journalists have already done so, of course, but more work like this is needed.
Thick description will require less time being focused on analyzing and critiquing Trump’s speeches and Tweets, and spending more time attending his rallies and recording what is happening from the perspective of audience members. By getting inside the heads of his supporters, much as do ethnographers, the public at large might get a sharper image of United States’ political culture. And that may change minds and encourage those who are undecided to vote in 2020.

Again, I know my dream was not autoethnographic research per se because I was dreaming, but if nothing else, it suggests that this is an important time for scholars in communication to intensify the excellent ethnographic and autoethnographic research that is already taking place in the field—research that may afford us a more enriched understanding of the rhetorical significance of audiences in the our current political environment.

Dreams indeed may be instructive.

Postscript: Following submission of this op-ed, on July 17 President Trump whipped up the crowd at a North Carolina rally with a racist attack against Representative Ilhan Abdullahi Omar—one of the four House of Representatives members of color he earlier said should “go back to where you come from.” The subsequent audience chant, “Send her back,” provides more compelling evidence of the need to take an ethnographic approach to Trump’s audience.
Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin—a nationally acclaimed cross-disciplinary initiative.

Publications include two books and over one hundred journal articles, chapters, and reviews. Taking rhetoric beyond disciplinary boundaries, Cherwitz is a frequent contributor to professional associations and educational organizations, exploring issues pertaining to academic engagement and public