

# ESSAY

“In Praise of Eloquence”

By Musafir



*“Eloquence is a painting of the thoughts.” - (Blaise Pascal)*

The other day, someone asked me what my favorite word of the English language was. I had to think it over since English has so many effulgent and expressive terms. However, when I choose a word, I want to be eloquent about it (I am not necessarily good at it). So, ‘eloquence’ naturally came to mind.

I have had the good fortune to be exposed to eloquent writers and poets since my childhood. To name some of them, Kabir, Rahim, Ghalib, Premchand and Tulsidas (among the Indian men of literature) left profound impressions on my mind. Coming to the English literature, Shakespeare, Maugham, Emerson and the poets of the romantic era such as Keats, Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Blake,

Shelly and Coleridge have always enthralled and fascinated me. By the way, Eloquence in English literature did not arise until well into the sixteenth century. Pre-renaissance writers and poets such as Chaucer (Canterbury Tales) and Bunyan (Pilgrim’s Progress) were scholarly and great thinkers, but lacked eloquence. That’s what I think.

Coming back to the subject, who can forget Mark Antony’s speech after Caesar’s assassination, “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...?” Antony’s speech appealed to the crowd’s emotions, while Brutus’s was clinically logical and direct in explaining why Caesar had to be killed. The Romans were persuaded by Mark Antony’s speech because he spoke eloquently compared to Brutus who was dull and apathetic. In other words, he

lacked eloquence.

Words when spoken eloquently, get etched in people's minds. For me, many of them have become tenets and guides to live my life by.

"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," (from Ecclesiastes) has always encouraged me to fight on in face of adversity.

"To err is human, forgiveness divine," (Alexander Pope) has taught me to be tolerant. No one is infallible. We need to forgive others and move on.

"Brevity is the soul of wit," (Polonius in Shakespeare's Hamlet) has helped develop my wry sense of humor in writing and speaking. (I am not necessarily good at it).

I consider eloquence as a symphony of words that reflects beauty, style, rhythm, pleasure and, overall, creates a lasting impression in one's conscious. Eloquence isn't necessarily about flowery speeches. It's rather about someone who can express the heart of the issue with force and clarity, and appropriate to the audience which is not the same as being

generally articulate, although they tend to go hand in hand most of the time.

When asked to explain his policy to parliament, Winston Churchill responded with these ringing monosyllables: "I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us." Robert Frost observed that "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." And William H. Johnson used 10 two-letter words to explain his secret of success: "If it is to be, it is up to me."

We don't have to be great authors, statesmen or philosophers to tap the eloquence in expression. My

aunt didn't go to school, but she had a knack of getting her message across very efficaciously in her native tongue. I always remember to conserve energy; buy possessions like a rich man (good quality) but maintain it like a poor man (take good care); place things back where I picked them from. Those messages and their resulting behaviors are etched in my mind due to her eloquence.

A word of caution: Like anything else in the world, eloquence can also be used with bad intentions in mind. I remember Senator Lloyd Bentsen saying this to Dan Quayle: "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." That statement labeled Mr. Quayle a tyro in comparison to everyone else for the rest of his political life.

Pat Buchanan's statement, "Bill Clinton's foreign policy experience is pretty much confined to having had breakfast once at the International House of Pancakes," created doubts in people's mind about his diplomatic skills.

Barney Frank said this about George W. Bush:



"People might cite George Bush as proof that you can be totally impervious to the effects of Harvard and Yale education." People still doubt Bush's level of intelligence.

Lyndon Johnson on Gerald Ford: "He's a nice guy, but he played too much football with his helmet off." Our accidental president is still a laughingstock.

My only hope is that we, as a civilization, remain eloquent. We are losing some of it due to instant messaging, texting and impatience with civility in our expressions and other forms of communications. For now we are losing the artful form of our language. Formerly taken for granted, eloquence on the civic

stage is virtually disappearing. At least, it seems that way but let's hope for another renaissance.