

How rhetorical leadership shapes our nation, culture

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Professor emeritus from Indiana University, Dr. James R. Andrews recently gave a public lecture on rhetorical leadership and ethical decision making on the UWM campus.

Andrews focused the majority of his speech on the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and former President Woodrow Wilson, using them as prime examples of rhetorical leadership.

The UWM graduate certificate/concentration program states that "rhetoric is an academic specialty that focuses on making, evaluating and improving arguments in practical, decision making situations."

On Thursday, Feb. 24 Andrews stressed that rhetorical leadership and ethical decision making were the main reasons for the state of our history, and the current state of our culture and our nation.

Andrews began by describing a personal experience when he was a student at Penn State in 1963. In August of that year, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech as part of the "March on Washington." Andrews attended the speech, but said he was so far back that you wouldn't be able to find him in any of the pictures of the speech.

Andrews recalled that King's call for unity was a wonderful, moving moment, and remembers it as a "marvelous experience."

"This is one of the roles of rhetorical leadership," Andrews said "It can confront us, comfort us, move us back and move us forward."

"History, tradition, [and] experiences come together in ceremonial moments in such a way that shape our culture," he added.

When we talk about our history and describe our experiences they then become part of our culture, Andrews mentioned. Experience is not a law. It's explained, he added.

Along with our nation's battle of unity, Andrews said we are also constantly fighting battles over the meaning of our texts specifically over our Constitution and the Declaration of Independence because "our tests are negotiated rhetorically."

Andrews continued with his speech discussing former president, Woodrow Wilson as an example of presidential rhetoric.

"Wilson's aim was restoration--restoring values, going back to values," Andrews said.

A crucial role of a president, Andrews said, is to interpret history--that is, "what we're doing and where we're going as [a nation] is consistent with the past." President Wilson stressed justice, and had a record of social justice, said Andrews. Wilson focused on downplaying race and focused on unity. He was also a significant figure in trying to untie north and south, Andrews added.

King and Wilson are elevated examples to aspire to, Andrews said, but in order to apply ethical decision making and rhetorical leadership into our own lives, we have to ask ourselves: "What are [the] values to which I want us to adhere? How do those values match up against my personal values? [And] How do those values match up to our national values?"

Whatever context we're placed in, we are always testing ethics and our values as a nation or as individuals. "The role of rhetorical leadership is to bring together those values," Andrews said. Andrews mentioned that situations are dynamic--our strategies and our behavior change.

As a way to grow individually and as a nation we should try to "understand what [the] problems are, find ways to solve [those] problems and have others look at those problems in a different way...[and] anchor them with a series of ethical values--That I believe is an important goal," Andrews said.