

Politics, Character, and the Socially Mediated Candidate

**Betty S. Flowers, Professor Emeritus,
University of Texas, Austin**

I'm speaking from the perspective of a Jungian-influenced literary critic who agrees with Peter Drucker that "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." First: perhaps a "health warning" should be offered. Listen to what the critics had to say about Trump's 1987 book, *The Art of the Deal*:

"Trump makes one believe for a moment in the American dream again."

[That was the *NY Times* critic.]

"The man has flair . . . It should be read because Trump is one of the Great Characters who help define New York's peculiar urban style."

And I agree with these critiques – not only about the book but about the Trump phenomenon itself. Trump has convinced 40% of Americans to *believe* in him. And “flair” is one way to describe his flamboyant performance of electoral politics.

But there are more colorful cultural critiques than “flair” these days: Hillary has been compared to a witch and Trump to Hitler in spite of the dampening effect of Godwin’s law, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as follows: “A facetious aphorism maintaining that as an online debate increases in length, it becomes inevitable that someone will eventually compare someone or something to Adolf Hitler or the Nazis.”

My former student, Mike Godwin, who originated Godwin’s law, has an addendum for this election. Mike has said, “If you’re thoughtful about it and show some real awareness of history, go ahead and refer to Hitler or Nazis when you talk about Trump. Or any other politician.”

Mike – I’m not going to go there.

Policies

When it comes to policies in this election, pundits are flummoxed:

Trump’s policies – policies?

Millennials moving from Bernie Sanders to Trump.

Religious folk voting for Trump.

Republicans voting for Johnson, a libertarian who’s against almost everything traditional Republicans stand for.

Republicans voting for Trump, a party of one who's against almost everything traditional Republicans stand for.

In every case, these aspects of the election are not so much about the policy difference but the policy *indifference*.

So much for policy. Culture eats policy for breakfast.

The relationship between the American public and personae

Persona is a term popularized by Jung, who defined it as “a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual.”¹



The idea behind the term is not new. As Hamlet said, “. . . one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.” And it’s not the first time that candidates have pointed out what villains their opponents are. In the election of 1800, Jefferson's camp accused President Adams of having a “hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.” In return, Adams' men called Vice President Jefferson “a

¹ *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, 1953.

mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.”²

But although this election is not the first time that candidates have pointed out what villains their opponents are, it’s the first time this has been done in the context of a general public obsession with creating personae, consciously and deliberately, in order to display them and elicit clicks and likes. Some people seem to be working on persona creation 24/7: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, selfies.

This persona obsession marks a significant shift. A young person will typically spend much more time creating his or her persona than consciously trying to shape his or her character. Can you imagine your typical 20 year-old deciding to embark on a course of “moral perfection,” as Benjamin Franklin did? Franklin created a list of four resolutions, including to "speak all the good I know of every body."³ Or can you imagine a 16-year old copying out by hand 110 *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation?* George Washington did. Rule #50: “Be not hasty to believe flying Reports to the Disparagement of any.”

² <http://mentalfloss.com/article/12487/adams-vs-jefferson-birth-negative-campaigning-us> [accessed 11 Oct. 2016]

³ http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/13_wit_self.html [accessed 11 October 2016]



Character is almost an obsolete word, along with *destiny*, *nobility*, *civility*, *temperance*, *fortitude*, *grace*. It refers to our judgment of stable moral qualities. George Washington, for example, was universally believed to have a good character. One reason we have a republic rather than a democracy is that our founders thought that responsible people (male property owners) would elect men they knew to be of good character to represent the ignorant – the uninformed - masses.

Washington is a good example of a politician who built a persona with the qualities of good character. It's as if the public of his time looked at a person to see if he measured up to a universal standard – a set of admirable qualities. George measured up in spite of his wooden false teeth.

But in a culture of persona-making, we don't judge a politician by a universal standard of character but by how closely we think the persona mirrors

the person underneath the mask. We value not character but *authenticity*. This shift – from character to authenticity – is significant in our culture and is crucial to this election.

For example: The last time I looked at Politifact's Truth-o-Meter, Trump outscored Clinton in every negative category: mostly false 18% to Clinton's 15%; False 35 for Trump to 10 for Clinton; and Pants on Fire 18 to Clinton's 2 for a score of 71% on the false side to Clinton's 27%. And yet who is considered the liar? And not just because Trump says so, but because in our persona culture, *Trump is more authentic than Hillary*. If you imagine, for a moment, that they are both liars, then whose persona matches the liar reality? Who says, "I didn't" when everyone can see the YouTube video that says he did? Hillary wears the persona of a competent, righteous truth-teller; Trump shrugs. If character doesn't matter so much, the *authentic* liar is preferred to a *hypocritical* one, no matter what the number of lies might be. *The public wants an authentic persona, not one striving to convey good character.*

All of us are flawed. Any attempt to project perfection will come up against the ability of our fellow humans to sniff out even the slightest incongruity – even one nanobite of persona discontinuity with self will be perceived. In the past, this gap was to our credit. "I may not be perfect, but I'm trying to be." Or, as the poet Robert Browning put it, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?" We might have seen this discontinuity between persona and the person who's trying to be good, but hey – at least he's trying.

Trump isn't trying. He even lies about the lies. We don't perceive any distance between his persona and the self behind the mask. He's *authentic*. We like that because we can *trust* that. What you see is what you get.

This is particularly important to the young people who've grown up with an intimate relationship to the internet. They know that online companies scale their businesses by the non-transparent exploitation of people. It comes with the territory. Politics, by definition, is not a transparent business. We come into contact with it most often at the office – “office politics” is a term we're very familiar with. The dictionary characterizes it as “activities within an organization that are aimed at improving someone's status or position and are typically considered to be devious or divisive.” All politics these days is seen as office politics.

Hillary may be an experienced, astute, hard-working, knowledgeable, smart, and well-intentioned person, who, as a Methodist, would have taken John Wesley's instructions to heart at an early age:

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

She may have followed that injunction all her life. But she's a politician. Trump is not. Who, then, is the more trustworthy? Whose motives are devious?

Performances

What does it take to *create* an authentic persona? And isn't this a contradiction in terms? To *create* authenticity? Here's where a literary critic might have something to offer.

If I am watching a successful play, I experience emotions *as if* what's before me were real. Aristotle says a successful tragedy produces a catharsis: the "purgation of pity and fear." *Catharsis* means *cleansing* in Greek. "A Catharsis is an emotional discharge through which one can achieve a state of moral or spiritual renewal or achieve a state of liberation from anxiety and stress."

An actor creates an emotional state in me – and maybe even a catharsis of my own fear – through using his own vital energy to bring a persona to life. In a really good performance, we don't see the actor behind the character – the actor *is* the character. That's how we experience it.

When I was young, I fell in love with Kirk Douglas. Actually, the character I was really falling in love with was Spartacus, as brought to life by Kirk Douglas. Years later, Kirk Douglas was a member of a seminar I co-moderated, and although he was an intelligent and nice enough man, I'd experienced Spartacus – and people, he was no Spartacus.



It doesn't matter how many lies comes out of Trump's mouth – he *performs* an honest man, one who tells it like it is. And he performs this very, very well. No politically correct hypocrisy from him.

“Whoa,” you might object. “Didn't you just say that Trump's persona is experienced as authentic – that the fact that Trump lies doesn't matter because that's who he is, and we value authenticity over a persona constructed around an unreachable ideal? How can Trump be perceived as an authentic liar and yet be performing honesty? Isn't that a contradiction?”

My response: In this culture, an authentic liar can be performing honesty because we have confused authenticity with truth. If you truly believe you're a good person – and who these days doesn't because after all, “everyone is entitled to their own opinion” – if you truly believe you're a good person and not simply trying to be, I will perceive you as *authentic* because your performance – the fit between your persona and your energy - convinces me, *emotionally*, that you are what you say you are. The objective, judging mind looking to an external basis of truth grounded in facts is missing in action. I'm not looking to see if you fit some ideal of character. I'm not looking to see if you're some George Washington. But are you who you *say* you are? If you say, “I'm not a liar” while it's obvious you're lying, you're actually performing the liar absolutely *authentically*. That is a tight fit between persona and self. That is an honest man. He is performing the truth by telling an obvious lie.

In politics as well as in many other aspects of our collective culture, we are becoming a nation of constructed personae. In the past, we modeled our persona

on an ideal of character; today, we construct our persona and present it as a performance, preferably an entertaining one with visuals.

I was at a conference recently where I heard the following sentence – but to understand it, you need to know that “stack” refers to an aspect of software, something inside the computer that serves a function, that actually does the work.⁴ Here’s the sentence I heard: “Now companies are distinguishing themselves through the interface, not the stack.” In essence, companies are “distinguishing themselves” through the performed presentation – the constructed persona – not the inner workings, not the goods themselves. We are a culture of actors distinguishing ourselves through our interfacebooks.

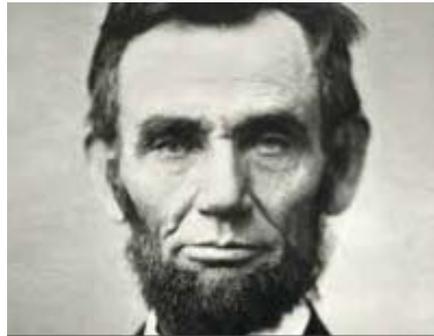
In his *authentic* performance of honesty, Trump has something else going for him that actors know a lot about – energy. We all have what might be called an aura of energy around us. It’s that indescribable something that creates charisma. Now it’s not just energy per se in the sense of stamina – Hillary was absolutely right to say that “as soon as [Trump] travels to 112 countries and negotiates a peace deal, a cease-fire, a release of dissidents, an opening of new opportunities in nations around the world, or even spends 11 hours testifying in front of a congressional committee, he can talk to me about stamina.” It’s not the amount or strength of the energy that counts here, in this election – it’s the *quality*.

⁴ In computer science, a **stack** is an abstract data type that serves as a collection of elements, with two principal operations: push, which adds an element to the collection, and pop, which removes the most recently added element that was not yet removed. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack_\(abstract_data_type\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack_(abstract_data_type)). Accessed 4 Oct. 2016.

The Elizabethan psychologists had a sense of this when they talked about four personality types in terms of humors: the phlegmatic, the melancholic or saturnine, the choleric (associated with the red-headed Mars), and the sanguine. Most of our presidents have been of the sanguine type – FDR, Truman, Ike, Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton. We like that genial sunshine to give us hope.



The only melancholic president I can think of was Abraham Lincoln – and in matching the gravity of the events of his time, with all the death of the Civil War, in retrospect, his melancholia seems a kind of wisdom.



But the spirit of the times now is *angry*. And for that, we want to be matched with a choleric temperament – angry and short-tempered. “You’re fired!” That’s what we want to say to the elites and the politicians and the foreigners and the feminists and the gays and the minorities and everyone else we

can find to blame for the mess we're told we're in. America used to be great. What happened?!!

Trump has another quality of energy that's very helpful to him – the energy of the id. Imagine two actors walking onto the stage: one projects the quality of energy of a parent or superego; the other projects the quality or energy of a child, or id. Which one will rivet our attention? Which one is entertainingly unpredictable? When you go to a playground, do you watch the parents? Of course not. It's the children who are fun to watch. They get the ratings and the likes. Do they have a plan? Of course not. They are in the moment. They are entertaining.

It's no accident that in this culture, leadership classes often take the form of teaching executives improve – being in the moment, being entertaining, responding to your partners and the audience, rolling with the punches, learning – *always* –not to say “yes but” but “yes and.”

In *The Leader's Guide to Lateral Thinking Skills*, Paul Sloane says:

Some people misunderstand improv. . . . It seems that improv is all about being funny. But it is not. Improv is about being spontaneous. It is about being imaginative. It is about taking the unexpected and then doing something unexpected with it. . . . The key is to be open to crazy ideas and building on them. [Building a wall and having Mexico pay for it?] And funnily enough, this is exactly what is needed if we are going to make our enterprises more creative and agile.

I got this quote from an online brochure advertising a course at the UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School called, “Leadership Agility: Using Improv to Build Critical Skills.” The brochure quotes another expert in the field. “Honesty is a key to improv,” notes Bob Kulhan, who has worked with the top business schools and companies in the world. “The focus, concentration and honesty required in improv readily apply to the communication skills required in business,” says Kulhan. And these days, in politics.

According to Tina Fey, there are 4 rules of improv:

- #1: Agree and say “yes.”
- #2. Not only “yes, but “yes and.”
- #3. Make statements.
- #4. There are no mistakes, only opportunities.

She goes on to explain:

As an improviser, I always find it jarring when I meet someone in real life whose first answer is no. “No, we can’t do that.” “No, that’s not in the budget.” “No, I will not hold your hand for a dollar.” [No, you can’t build a wall and expect Mexico to pay for it. – Wait, wait, that wasn’t Tina Fey, that was someone else- Amy Poehler?⁵] What kind of way is that to live?

The second rule of improvisation is not only to say “yes,” but “yes, and.” You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. As Tina Fey says:

⁵ Amy Poehler played Hillary Clinton on SNL.

If I start a scene with “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah...” we’re kind of at a standstill. But if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say “What did you expect? We’re in hell.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here” and you say, “Yes, this can’t be good for the wax figures.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “I told you we shouldn’t have crawled into this dog’s mouth,” now we’re getting somewhere.

See, you never apologize for something – you say “yes and” – and keep going. In improv, that “basket of deplorables” is an opportunity.

John Davidio, Yale psych professor, says psychologists talk about three basic dimensions in the way we perceive people: “warmth, competence, and



activity (agency). His research suggests that politicians do not have to be perceived as competent to be seen as effective at taking action.”⁶

When it comes to energy, I think we’re missing some specific kinds of energy in our politics. To visualize these missing energies, we can think of the energies associated with mythical figures, such as gods and goddesses. We are, for example, missing the practical wisdom associated with Athena.

⁶ NYT 25 Sept. 2016.

And we are missing the twin energies of art and birth, associated with the twins Apollo and Artemis.

I remember the birth of the Voting Rights Act, for example, out of the twin political arts of LBJ and Martin Luther King.



They collaborated, as you can hear for yourself in the telephone recordings of conversations between the two, with King pushing from the outside, and LJB working on the inside. At the end, LBJ stood up before Congress and said, “We shall overcome” – and Martin Luther King wept.

We’re also missing the energy of yearning – Demeter energy, as she searches for her lost daughter.

There’s something about politics that’s so inhospitable to yearning. We have to be so sure of our positions. “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble,” the quip goes.



“It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” In Plato’s *Symposium*, the wise woman Diotima says that no one who is ignorant will yearn for wisdom. “For what’s especially difficult about being ignorant is that you are content with yourself, even though you’re neither beautiful and good nor intelligent. If you

don't think you need anything, of course you won't want what you don't think you need."⁷

And, of course, we're missing the Aphrodite energy of love – which almost never enters the political arena because so many arguments are built out of fear. And love casts out fear.

The theologian Paul Tillich defines love as “the drive towards the unity of the separated” and power as “the drive of everything living to realize itself” – individuation. Both are necessary to human life. And we need both energies to thrive.



If I were to look deeper into the energies of these two candidates in a spirit of generosity, I would see the underlying energy of love – the drive towards the unity of the separated – in Hillary’s campaign theme, “Stronger Together” and the necessary energy of power – the drive to realize the self – in Trump’s theme, “Make America Great Again.” May we have the capacity for both love and individuation and the yearning after wisdom to do together what’s best for our great country.

⁷ Trans. with introduction and notes by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Hackett, 1989) p. 49.

Betty Sue Flowers, PhD is a professor emeritus and former director of the Johnson Presidential Library. She has moderated executive seminars at the Aspen Institute and consulted for NASA, CIA and the US Navy. Her publications include four television tie-in books in collaboration with Bill Moyers, among them, the best-selling *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. In addition to two collections of poetry, her books include *Browning and the Modern Tradition; Presence; Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*; and, as editor, *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems* in the Penguin English Poets series.