

ON GROWING OLD

by Leslie Phillips

I turned forty in October. I don't feel old, or middle aged, but I don't feel young either. I am a person who counts years. When I see a newspaper article about a new Clinton Administration appointee, or a profile of some suddenly successful actor or businessman, my mind quickly settles on the detail of age -- two years younger than me -- one year older than me -- six years younger than me. Until recently, I thought of myself as young. So it astonishes me to count back and realize that this is my twenty-sixth year in forensics; my fifteenth year in coaching high school debate; my fourteenth Barkley Forum. When St. Augustine sat down to write his *Confessions*, and toted up all his misdeeds, his work in forensics was near the head of the list. He wrote: "From my eighteenth to my twenty-seventh year I was led astray and led others astray in turn. I was a teacher of public speaking. How wicked are the sins of men!"

I have now exceeded Augustine's record of depravity by thirteen and one half years. I have sinned, I continue to sin, and I shall go on sinning. I know who to blame. I blame not my parents for raising me badly, nor the Christian education of my childhood for its inadequacies. I do not blame society for creating an imperfect world. One person did this to me.

I blame Mrs. Charline Burton, of Heritage Hall, Oklahoma.

You may recoil in shock at my bad taste. Blame Charline Burton! Such a wonderful lady. Not even here to defend herself. But listen: Eight years ago this evening it was Mrs. Burton who stabbed the key into my breast and emitted a bloodcurdling exhortation: "Les! Become one of our old warhorses!" This com-

mand has hovered over my life ever since. It has had the effect of a curse or a prophecy in a Greek tragedy. After much consideration of the difficulties of a beast of burden, and with one eye on the glue factory, I'd have to conclude that, indeed, I'm going to be an old warhorse. And I want to share with you this evening my reflections on that decision -- on why I will grow old in debate, and how.

It has not exactly escaped my attention that fewer and fewer people are growing old in this activity -- even as old as I am. This is not new. I had two wonderful high school coaches. The first one got out when she was twenty-eight and never

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looked back. Her successor made it to thirty. Most of the people I coached with in the Northeast ten years ago have gotten out. Fifty women and men have been named Key Coaches of the Barkley Forum in the past fifteen years. Twenty of them have gotten out. Several good coaches my age or younger are hanging on by their thumbs, desperately seeking a successor; they are trying to get out. They are tired. I am tired. Some weeks I am just exhausted. The driving -- farther and farther each year, as New England debate completes its collapse. The practice rounds, sometimes four or five a week. The grading, the fundraising, the talks with parents,

the amateur medical treatments, the photocopying, the adolescent crisis management, the adult crisis management, the tournament-running, the seven years' war against the assistant principal, the state tournament-running, the district-tournament running, the thirty years' war against the custodians, the car washes, the undone laundry, the friends not seen, the letters unanswered, the family neglected, the van which breaks down at 1 a.m. on the Massachusetts Turnpike when the wind chill is thirty below. Inherency asks: Why do good men tolerate evil? Debate coaching asks: Why do sane women and men tolerate this?

But when I asked myself whether I wanted to quit, the answer was always surprisingly clear. No. Will I keep the same pace into middle age? No. I've cut back already. Do I want to travel less? Yes. Do I want to go home earlier? Yes. But I will keep going. And what keeps me going, apart from a compelling need to appease my landlord and pay the Visa bills?

I do love my students. But I could find students to enjoy outside debate. I like arguments, but the fascination I used to have with the design of a debate round is gone. I am not looking for one last championship to crown a career. I have been to enough round robins. I am not sentimental about the value of what I do. And I do not think I am indispensable.

But I will keep on because I think we have a mission. There are special things that we have to do.

First of all, debate must be a force which counters the dilution of secondary education. Now I am very uncomfortable in the role of educational traditionalist. I am not frequently

confused with a conservative of any sort. But I hope I am not the only person who notices that high schools are dumbing down their curricula and expectations. I speak only for myself, but I find that year by year I must pull and push and stretch and goad my freshman debaters harder, longer, more vigorously to get them where they need to be intellectually. Their middle school preparation has simply left them without the social studies context, the reading skills, the notetaking skills, the attention span, or the simple work ethic necessary to do this activity well -- or to do any other serious academic work. I know that academics is not all of secondary education. I truly believe that schools must help build a whole person, and that self-esteem is the key to that whole person. But when schools make self-esteem and challenge mutually exclusive, when they seek to insulate students from difficulty or the possibility of failure, they have betrayed the meaning of self-esteem. No one knows better than the people in this room that self-esteem is built by presenting students with challenges -- goals beyond their reach -- and then preparing them to meet that challenge. When schools allow their expectations to decline to the level of what a fourteen-year-old happens to feel like doing that day -- when schools treat sloth as a "learning style" instead of a deadly sin -- they betray education. Robert Frost once defined education as "hanging around until you've caught on." Robert Frost was wrong. An educator, true to the Latin root of the word, leads the student out of his self-satisfaction to something new. I will go so far as to predict that as the rest of education is watered down, and as it becomes "incorrect" to focus on gifted students, parents will rediscover the value of forensics. I want to be around to see that happen.

The second thing we need to do is make certain that debate continues to be education. There are any number of committees, platforms, and movements afoot to enhance, reform, and expand debate in America. My three predecessors at this pulpit have spoken somewhat programmatically, and I'm not going to try to improve on what they have said. My particular worry is that fewer debaters seem to understand that debate is arguing, not reading; that the best arguments are those you derive, not borrow or purchase; that evidence should come from the library, not the friend who knows someone who was in Cheshier's lab last summer. I worry that actual debate, rather than reading, may be retreating into a small elite corner of the activity. Working on the funda-

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mentals with students is not always interesting. But it is what we on the front line of debate education must do. The summer institute teacher may know the evidence better. She may be the superior strategist. But no one at Dartmouth or Michigan or Northwestern is better equipped to teach thinking better than the people in this room.

None of these good things happen if we all get out.

I can't presume to tell anyone here how to live their lives. Each of your circumstances are different, and I don't know them all. But I know that, as I decided not to get out, I knew that I could not stay in unless I made some changes in the way I did things. And I was able to see how to make those changes precisely because I am getting older. Four years ago my aunt, a person I loved very much, died too young.

Then an uncle, a year later. My mother and father are in good health, but those other deaths forced me to really think about my parents' mortality. They will die. Which means -- you are unequivocally the adult now. Your full maturity is not something that will happen later. You have become what you will be. So if you are a debate teacher, it's time to batten down and prepare for the long haul.

That meant confronting the workaholic martyr in myself. The part that worried that if I admitted that any portion of the work that I did turned out to be dispensable, somebody might come along and get rid of all of me. The part of me that needed to think of the job as huge, impossible, thankless. I had to begin to tame that inner workaholic. I had to start delegating. I had to learn to get in the car and go home at four-thirty. I can assure you that my program has not collapsed as a result. My principal has not hauled me up on charges of negligence. My students have noticed that I stay home once in a while and don't hear quite as many rounds. They have also noticed that I'm a little more approachable, a little more fun to be around, less exhausted. Besides, everyone has noticed that Lexington never wins the final round if Phillips is present at the tournament.

I'm going to work hard for thirty more years doing what I think I do well -- teaching novices, especially, and advanced debaters to be critical, to be subversive in their questioning and thinking. Whether you stay in for another year or another thirty, or more, please do what you do best. Teach the young. Love your work.

And goodnight, Mrs. Burton, wherever you are.

(Les Phillips is the debate teacher at Lexington (MA) HS. Coach of a large squad, and not the star system, Mr Phillips' teams have won most major invitationals.)