THE MEANING OF TALK

Carey's model of and for the university

This essay explores how Carey exemplified the best elements of academic life because he cared mostly about meaning, not power; about personal, not professional relationships; and about questions, not disciplinary boundaries. It suggests that the best way to honor Carey's legacy is to ignore the securing of academic turf, reputations and legacies, and instead allow the personal and professional to interpenetrate, while finding more and better ways to talk with one another.

Keywords Carey; conversation; legacy; egotism; turf; academic service

Jim Carey never made his peace with university life. To his great credit, he was forever trying to overcome, subvert, or confound academe's worst traits. He put his faith in face-to-face communication, believing universities are first and foremost places for talk, rather than for building careers, staking out turf, or creating clones. All who knew him realize that "conversation" was his métier, his metaphor and his model of and for university life.

As we tell stories about his legacy, Carey's faith in conversation threatens to become so clichéd that it stops telling us anything new. And that, by Carey's reckoning, is the worst of all possible outcomes. So in this essay I connect his faith in _—_ and enactment of — intellectual conversation with his faith in _—_ and enactment of — being part of university life. I focus not on his magnificent public performances in classrooms and speeches (I have tried to commemorate these elsewhere), but on his extraordinary ability to inspire, exemplify and work toward the best possibilities in university life.

Besetting temptation

One of Carey's favorite quotations was from Mary McCarthy (1952), who (in her novel _The Groves of Academe_) warned against "the insidious egotism of the Potter's Hand, the desire to shape and mold the better-than-common clay and
breathe one's own ghostly life into it - the teacher's besetting temptation' (p. 75).

There is of course plenty of insidious egotism in academic life, and graduate students are especially susceptible to being molded. When Carey first quoted me this passage, I could barely get past the phrase 'better-than-common-clay.' But the passage is about teachers, not students, and warns against trying to replicate oneself in pliable - eager to be shaped - students. Carey was adamant that this was no way to proceed. No matter how much of us might have wanted (at that point in our lives) to be shaped into 'Careyites,' he would have none of it.

Nonetheless, some of us were perceived by those around us as 'Carey students,' and therefore politically suspect. I was dismayed when I discovered I was being labeled by some students in the Institute of Communications Research as a Carey student and therefore a non-Marxist 'liberal humanist' and therefore (in one awful discussion) a 'fascist.' When I heard that epithet, I was devastated, and made an appointment with him. Tearfully, I asked him to help me understand (in one awful discussion) a 'fascist.' When I heard that epithet, I was devastated, and made an appointment with him. Tearfully, I asked him to help me understand (in one awful discussion) a 'fascist,' and to give me advice on how to explain myself and fix whatever had gone wrong.

He was angry at the incident but not surprised - at the time the politics in the PhD program were far more brackish than I knew. He told me to ignore the whole thing. My job was to read what I wanted, ask the questions I cared about, and never worry about how I was labeled. Name-calling from others was unavoidable. Just keep reading and writing and taking courses. It would all work out. It was good advice. But I never forgot that university life does not automatically foster lively, engaging 'conversation.' In fact, academic talk can turn unexpectedly ugly, and cause pain.

It would have been so easy for Carey to have 'breathed his own life' into many of us at Illinois. His work opened many scholarly paths, he was charismatic, and he was influential - we all could have used more of his coattails. But that was not how he operated. He did not want acolytes, and he did not think in terms of placing his students at top programs, or presiding over a burgeoning 'American Cultural Studies' even though such an approach would have enhanced each of our professional trajectories. His model of academy was more idiosyncratic and democratic - foraging and exploration in the company of interesting minds wherever they could be found. That is, I now realize, how he himself 'became Carey.' It is also to his credit that he expected the same process to turn us into ourselves, not him.

So even though one of his essays convinced me to throw over science writing and get a PhD in communication, and I almost went to Iowa to study with him, and at Illinois I was both his teaching and his research assistant, and he directed my dissertation, he never introduced me as his student. I was always an Institute student, or someone who he had 'worked with' at Illinois.

This was sometimes confusing if I did not know what to say at conferences: 'whose student are you?' As a newcomer to Virginia, and then at the University of Louisville, I expected, as a 'Carey student,' to receive the implication - I was a Carey student. I got over it - these days being a strong influence on me and my intellectual lineage. But no one who is himself as 'his.' He considered us similar questions, but he never saw us as replicas of himself.

**Question, not positions**

This open, fluid attitude toward idea was when others took credit for his ideas and his work. He did not say, who owns ideas, and that the genre of academic life does not really matter whose name is on the clay of students, he did not seek the name. The conversation metaphor precludes space or making actions possible, rather than turf. When that metaphor is applied to ideas, participation and collaboration are made not mine.

Which does not mean that he ignored testy comments about 'speed readers' who correct misrepresentations of his thoughts to be, many who invoke Carey who understanding. His response was to write an essay, from another essay - I fully understood. He never wrote to take advantage. He wrote to be sure that people did not read.

Carey was always impatient with disciplinary demarcations. He knew that ideas are built through categories - ritual, quantitative, Marxist versus non-Marxist, and that not teach or write that way. Even in "Approach to Communication" he explained perspectives for what they have to te
This was sometimes confusing for me. When I was a graduate student, I did not know what to say at conferences or during job interviews, when asked 'whose student are you?' As a new faculty member at the University of Virginia, and then at the University of Texas, I was indignant when I was expected, as a 'Carey student,' to represent his perspective in the department. I resisted the implication — I was myself, I insisted, my own intellectual creation. I got over it — these days being a 'Carey student' not only honors his strong influence on me and my work, but also locates me in a coherent intellectual lineage. But no one who studied with Carey was expected to define themselves as 'his.' He considered us to be students who asked interesting or similar questions, but he never succumbed to the besetting temptation of turning us into replicas of himself.

**Question, not positions**

This open, fluid attitude toward ideas meant that I was angrier than he ever was when others took credit for his insights. Several figures in the field drew heavily on his work without (to my mind) sufficient acknowledgment, and I found this reprehensible. He did not share my outrage. He pointed out that no one really owns ideas, and that the goal is to have perspectives circulating — it does not really matter whose name is attached. Just as he did not seek to shape the clay of students, he did not seek to mark a corner of the field with his name. The conversation metaphor presumes that, through talk, we are clearing space or making actions possible, rather than building reputations or claiming turf. When that metaphor is applied to intellectual property, it assumes that ideas are participatory and collaborative, not separate and individual — ours, not mine.

Which does not mean that he ignored distortions of his arguments. As his testy comments about 'speed readers' suggest, he made repeated efforts to correct misrepresentations of his thought. There have been, and will continue to be, many who invoke Carey with too much zeal and not enough understanding. His response was to say what he wanted to say again, in another essay, from another angle — hoping that this time he would be more fully understood. He never wrote to clarify a Carey doctrine or ideology or vantage. He wrote to be sure that people grasped what he was trying to say.

Carey was always impatient with static categories, academic jargon, and disciplinary demarcations. He knew that fields, textbooks and student papers are built through categories — ritual versus transmission, qualitative versus quantitative, Marxist versus non-marxist, critical versus cultural — but he did not teach or write that way. Even in his most quoted essay 'A Cultural Approach to Communication' he explores both the transmission and ritual perspectives for what they have to tell us. For him, perspectives illuminate,
crystallize, and clarify, they do not conquer, fix or triumph. Carey resisted when people tried to organize the field and locate him in it. He understood the impulse, but did not support the motive. He saw dichotomies and labels as shutting down rather than opening up opportunities to grasp things aright. What drove him were questions, not positions.

He believed, and lived as if, academic life is about finding better ways to answer better questions. As long as I knew him he avoided being pinned down to sides, stances or doctrines. This made him frustrating to those who longed to enlist him in their camp. By refusing to develop or declare allegiance to particular ideologies, he eluded those who wanted to claim him for their own. And he frequently baffled readers, trained to locate and define particular theorists in fixed compartments. Of the left but not Marxist, pluralist but not relativist, progressive but restive with race, class and gender as categories—where, exactly, did he stand?

I assume that, if he were here to speak for himself, he would lean in, grab an arm, and connect the desire to fix his stance with the historical role of print in codifying and organizing claims. He might suggest that in oral cultures the goal is to get the questions right, and to keep the discussion going. Labels and categories are something that print makes possible, and they are a mixed blessing. The desire of an oral culture is, he might say (implying that of course you could not help but agree, once you heard his take on things) to join with others to tackle the most engaging and intractable problems with as much insight as possible. He might then step back, let go of your arm, and wait expectantly for a rejoinder. And the whole idea of figuring out his 'position' would seem beside the point.

Vexing one another

He loved to talk, and talk flowed from him. He spoke with such eloquence, warmth and energy that his conversational partners mostly listened as if (as I have said elsewhere) he were a jazz musician. But my sense is that he longed for the give and take of argument, and rarely got it. He cherished the student or colleague who brazenly argued back. A conversation is not a monologue, and for all his eloquence, he was not in love with the sound of his own voice. It was the sound of voices that he believed in.

He has a line in one of his essays about increasing the precision with which we vex one other. Carey did not seek, or value, constant agreement. Vexation is a form of engagement, and Carey delighted in recreational rather than aggressive intellectual encounters. His favorite forms of academic discussion were direct, intense, passionate but without animus. Alas, as he would say, such forms are far from common in academic life.

It is easy to sentimentalize those we can learn from the depth and complexity of private man, and his quickness to insight and understanding frustrated and angry. He was in brooding and 'the good man's fall' so as to minimize the damage these aspects of his character did, but it was a lifelong effort. Much of his work was connected with what he saw as the discussion and academic community.

Duplicity and duplicity infuriated him. He believed, perhaps overmuch, in his selflessness and his proclaimed selfless motives in order to let things go, even as he understood personally—not in the sense that it was felt responsible when things went wrong in the university work, for all of us. Because he believed in the power of the truth, he did not persuade people to do what he did. He taught that college or university, he would see additional arguments or devise different methods of argument to get places or institutions could convince others to act with me.

Something was always at stake, from all that can go wrong in departments, pained him to watch people squander trust, make space and time for ideas to draw from the best parts of themselves: the politics—the mistrust, backstabbing, visceral ways. He had his own share of personal politics but the ones I heard about were always connected with particular people having to behave so. Every academic act mattered to Carey never mastered the salutation of academics, protected from, any academic responsibility.
quen, fix or triumph. Carey resisted and locate him in it. He understood the
case, class and gender as categories -

the life is about finding better ways to
him he avoided being pinned down
frustrating to those who longed
to develop or declare allegiance to
wanted to claim him for their own.

work for himself, he would lean in, grab
with the historical role of print
right suggest that in oral cultures the
keep the discussion going. Labels and
res possible, and they are a mixed
he might say (implying that of course
and his take on things) is to join with
intractable problems with as much
ack, let go of your arm, and wait
le idea of figuring out his 'position'

It is easy to sentimentalize those who have died, and thereby diminish what
we can learn from the depth and richness of their character. Carey was a
complex and private man, and his quest to make academic life better often left
him frustrated and angry. He was Irish in many senses, including dark moods,
brooding and 'the good man's failing' - a penchant for drink. He sought to
minimize the damage these aspects of his temperament might inflict on others,
but it was a lifelong effort. Much of what he brooded about, at least with me,
was connected with what he saw as unnecessary impediments to intellectual
discussion and academic community.

Duplicity and cupidity infuriated him. He could not forgive people who
claimed selfless motives in order to do selfish things. It was difficult for him to
let things go, even as he understood the need to do so. He took things
personally - not in the sense that it was 'all about him,' but in the sense that he
felt responsible when things went wrong. He thought it was up to him to make
the university work, for all of us.

Because he believed in the power of face-to-face communication, he
believed, perhaps overmuch, in his own powers of persuasion. When he could
not persuade people to do what he believed was right for the department,
college or university, he would see it as his failure. Surely he could muster
additional arguments or devise different approaches. Rather than chronically
demonize colleagues or institutions, he kept hoping that his own energies
could convince others to act with more decency and generosity of spirit.

Something was always at stake, for Carey, in academic life. Detaching
from all that can go wrong in departments and colleges was not in his nature. It
pained him to watch people squander opportunities to build goodwill, establish
trust, make space and time for ideas. He was forever trying to get people to
draw from the best parts of themselves. The genteel violence of departmental
politics - the mistrust, backstabbing, and resentments - distressed him in
visceral ways. He had his own share of resentments and mistrust, of course,
but the ones I heard about were always mixed with regret - why did these
particular people have to behave so badly?

Every academic act mattered to him, large or small. This meant that he
said yes to a never-ending stream of requests for his time and energy. He was always
behind with book chapters and letters of recommendation, as he
juggled them with site visits, committee reports and panel participation. Even
during his self-described 'age of plaques' (when he was repeatedly honored for
his influence) and as his health failed, he kept commitments that most junior
faculty gunning for tenure would be wise to refuse. He did this - as best I can
tell - out of conviction. He was not trying so show off,' or prove something, or
'get ahead.' He was doing what he thought needed to be done - what all of us
could and should be doing.

Carey never mastered the salutary tricks of feeling superior to, or
protected from, any academic responsibility. In this he was egalitarian to the
core — assuming that every member of the academic community has a responsibility to contribute, every day. We all, he believed, have an equal stake in our common wellbeing. Those who choose NOT to participate and support the enterprise — in a phrase he loved from F. Scott Fitzgerald — are merely ‘warming a seat at the common table.’ This was, to his way of thinking, shameful.

**Legacy**

Once I left Illinois, Carey and I fell into a pattern of having dinner together whenever we were in the same town. Our conversations also fell into a pattern — he would tell me what Bette and each of his sons were doing, and then ask me about my husband and children. I would ask him what he was working on, and he would describe deadlines hanging over his head, and essays promised that were not materializing, and then switch almost immediately into a discussion of what was troubling him most — departmental issues.

I would listen carefully, try to sort out the people and issues in play, and then launch into advice — some version of ‘ignore that person, that program, that battle.’ Let it all go! Focus on teaching and writing, leave all these intractable, insoluble worries alone! He would give me a pained smile, tell me he knew I was right, say that Bette agreed with me, and that he knew these were unwinnable battles but ... and then he would offer yet another angle that might, this time, unlock the knot, calm the waters, move things forward. And we would have the exact same exchange the next time we met, and the time after that.

Why did we keep having the same conversation, year after year? I now realize that I was engaged in my own unwinnable battle — to get him to become someone who marshaled his energies and detached from departmental politics and thereby had far more time to write. What I then took to be distractions were for him, I now realize, essential work. His work in the world was not just writing and teaching, but the creation, maintenance, repair and transformation of university life. And it was through talk (in classrooms, hallways, committee meetings, site visits, cafes and bars) not just in sitting alone writing, that such work was to be accomplished.

He gave me many wonderful essays, I know, but I wanted him to write many, many more. I suppose I wanted to ensure he would leave us a vast legacy of print, swaths of words that would continue to speak — so I could continue to hear him — across time and space. One of the joys of academia is that we converse, sort of, with people like William James, John Dewey, C. Wright Mills and Hannah Arendt. His essays will let readers converse with James W. Carey, sort of, for years to come. But never have the limits of print seemed more poignant to me than being written.

We are left with Carey’s words of commemoration. He himself eating the foods he loved somehow it was comforting. In the chance to write and present worked on a chapter for a book (Jensen 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, in fully, at least for me.

Since Carey’s death I have fiercely — recreating the voracious he did with me, I am using favorite to seek out and read particular fountain pen, and trying to an eloquence. I am also saying yes to myself?) that I am doing more table.’ These may not be wise choosing anything close to his talents or commemorative acts.

For me, Carey’s legacy is both did not protect that distinction in a call for papers for an issue in his memoirs were not appropriate. They to the field of communication, no there is much institutional legue personal and institutional always in only in a world of print, concepiece sound, taste, touch ... and each media of print and photography gi was for Carey the most engaging.

So it seems to me that if we are securing turf or reputations or leg that we can catch the stories that a better, to each other. We do not conversation. That conversation, to began before we were born, and James W. Carey embodied a most engaging form of huma part of academic life through chos and time for talking together about power, on personal not profession.
the academic community has a
all, he believed, have an equal
choose NOT to participate and
from F. Scott Fitzgerald — are
This was, to his way of thinking,

The pattern of having dinner together
conversations also fell into a pattern
his sons were doing, and then ask
ask him what he was working on,
inner his head, and essays promised
itch almost immediately into a
departmental issues.
the people and issues in play, and
more that person, that program,
writing, leave all these
the next time we met, and the

Conversation, year after year? I now
viable battle — to get him to
and detached from departmental
write. What I then took to be
mental work. His work in the world
creation, maintenance, repair and
was through talk (in classrooms,
safes and bars) not just in sitting
accomplished.
now, but I wanted him to write
ensure he would leave us a vast
continue to speak — so I could
One of the joys of academe is
William James, John Dewey, C.
will let readers converse with
But never have the limits of print
seemed more poignant to me than now, when there are no more Carey essays
being written.

We are left with Carey's written words, our memories, and our own
forms of commemoration. When my father died a few years ago, I found
myself eating the foods he loved: an unexpected way to honor him, but
somehow it was comforting. In the months since Jim Carey's death, I have had
the chance to write and present several essays of remembrance, and I've
worked on a chapter for a book in his honor on American cultural studies
(Jensen 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, in preparation. But these acts do not honor him
fully, at least for me.

Since Carey's death I have also found myself reading more widely and
fiercely — recreating the voracious pace that fueled my years at the Illinois. As
he did with me, I am using favorite literary allusions, and encouraging students
to seek out and read particular novels, plays, poems. I am once again using a
fountain pen, and trying to answer my e-mails with more thought and
elegance. I am also saying yes to more things; I suppose I want to show (him?
myself?) that I am doing more than simply 'warming a seat at the common
table.' These may not be wise choices in the long run, because I do not have
anything close to his talents or energy. But for now they feel like appropriate
commemorative acts.

For me, Carey's legacy is both personal and institutional, partly because he
did not protect that distinction in his work or his life. Recently, a journal sent
a call for papers for an issue in honor of Carey that stated emphatically that
memoirs were not appropriate. The issue was to focus on Carey's contributions
to the field of communication, not to those who knew him. That is fine, and
there is much institutional legacy to honor. But Carey taught me that the
personal and institutional always interpenetrate. As he taught, we do not live
only in a world of print, concepts and fields — we live in a world of sight,
sound, taste, touch ... and each other. Death robs us of that connection. The
media of print and photography give us attenuated and distorted access to what
was for Carey the most engaging form of communication — face-to-face.
So it seems to me that if we want to honor Carey's legacy, we do so not by
securing turf or reputations or legacies. We honor him by listening hard, so
that we can catch the stories that are being told, and then tell them again, even
better, to each other. We do not need to defend a turf, but to contribute to a
conversation. That conversation, Carey reminded us (quoting Kenneth Burke)
began before we were born, and will go on long after we are dead.

James W. Carey embodied a way of life based in talk — the least coercive
and most engaging form of human relationship. He showed us all how to be
part of academic life through choosing, in small ways and large, to make space
and time for talking together about ideas. His work centered on meaning, not
power, on personal not professional relationships, and on loyalty to questions,
not disciplines. He imagined universities as humane, civil and generous places. How intoxicating that possibility remains.

References


Although the press is the institution in which ideas were shared and through which he believe he was interested in higher education, that it provides a public sphere (or, sphere) in which multiple conversationalists constitute the present, and imagine a democracy.

I do not wish to imply that as ins paral or greatly similar. Though one of them, so far as I am aware Carey was the most important characteristic that the Carey’s ideas about journalism and education, is that they advocate a spe demorcy.

Carey wrote extensively about journalism and the university and democracy. He did at commencement exercise of the College of Education at Urbana-Champaign over which (dean) speak of public universities an educated, democratic citizenry. Implicitly, the Morrill Act, the name given the Land

At least one college in every State is accessible to all, but especially to science for the practical avocation the higher graces of classical study now so greatly appreciates with agriculture, the foundation of a look for troops of earnest frien