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WRIT105R

Rhetoric in Action: The Use of Rhetoric in Mary Fisher's "A Whisper of AIDS"

The year is 1992 and you are in attendance of the Republican National Convention. You are most likely wealthy, white, straight, and male (lucky you!) and you're eager to hear from the voices of your esteemed party on "traditional family values" and the popular black-and-white moral idealism they've come to be known for recently. Things like "capitalism is good" and "drug users are bad"—the sort of reductionist dogma that bears the burden of thinking critically about social issues so you can focus on things you enjoy, like fishing or having a second, secret family. Then, up to the stage walks Mary Fisher. Young, pretty, and well-spoken, she could be your daughter, your sister, or your wife (either one). Mary is HIV positive and has come to speak today in hopes of lifting the shroud surrounding a deadly epidemic that had been largely ignored because it affected people almost exactly not like her.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s was one of the largest public health crises in contemporary American History. It began with a single infection—as all epidemics do—and was allowed to spread through the country because of the initial perception that the people who contracted the disease were somehow deserving of it, and that people who were not deserving of it would not contract the disease. Not only was this logic entirely untrue, but would inevitably lead to a larger number of infections within the United States as a result of inaction throughout the 1980s, a trend which continued until the disease spread beyond these communities and began to affect less persecuted social groups.

In order to understand the social perception of the AIDS epidemic, it is necessary to first observe the demographics which were most heavily affected in the early years of the epidemic—namely gay men who contracted the virus from unprotected sex and drug users who contracted the virus from sharing needles. With these demographics in hand, the popular "sinners plague" idea seemed like a convenient justification for why this disease happened to infect and rapidly spread through these communities. America was within the throes of its War on Drugs, and gay men were still heavily stigmatized and discriminated against, so HIV seemed to tick at least two of the boxes in support of this asinine idea. After

all, it was easy to ignore an epidemic that supposedly only affected gay men and drug users if you were heterosexual and not into heroin. Additionally, individuals infected by HIV were heavily stigmatized either from the perception that they must be homosexuals to have contracted the disease, or purely from fear of the disease itself. For years, this epidemic silently grew. People were content to turn a blind eye towards an issue they believed would not affect them, causing the infection rate to reach a peak of 130,000 infections per year (cdc.gov). This is where Mary Fisher enters the narrative surrounding this crisis, armed with her speech “A Whisper of AIDS” and the rhetorical devices used within it to bring about change in a time of desperate need.

Fisher walks up to the podium, looks out at the crowd before her, and begins:

> “Less than three months ago at platform hearings in Salt Lake City, I asked the Republican Party to lift the shroud of silence which has been draped over the issue of HIV and AIDS. I have come tonight to bring our silence to an end. I bear a message of challenge, not self congratulation. I want your attention, not your applause.”

As an introductory statement, Fisher’s opening accomplishes several rhetorical purposes. First, it demonstrates the opportune timing, kairos, of her message by referencing her recent call for the “shroud of silence” surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic to be lifted. This recent act by Fisher demonstrates her initiative in addressing this issue, showing she has consistently been taking action on this issue, lending credibility to her character as someone with a genuine interest in seeing positive change on the subject. Fisher makes another argument in favor of her character in this selection when she says, “I want your attention, not your applause.” This demonstrates that her delivery of this speech is not a self-serving or performative act, and further builds her credibility as a person is looking for change, not fame. This is one of her many appeals to ethos throughout the speech, and—as the first—it establishes her altruistic and benevolent motivations for delivering her message to this audience.

> “I would never have asked to be HIV positive, but I believe that in all things there is a purpose; and I stand before you and before the nation gladly. The reality of AIDS is brutally clear. Two hundred thousand Americans are dead or dying. A million more are infected. Worldwide, forty million, sixty million, or a hundred million infections will be counted in the coming few years. But despite science and research, White House meetings, and congressional hearings, despite good intentions and bold initiatives, campaign slogans, and hopeful promises, it is, despite it all, the epidemic which is winning tonight.”

This paragraph begins with Fisher’s statement of her diagnosis. This is another appeal to ethos, as it gives credibility to her perspective on the epidemic, since she is one of the individuals who has been

affected by it, and is thus a primary source for information about it. Fisher's claim that she believes "that in all things there is a purpose" is another appeal to ethos, but this time focuses on her faith as a Christian. The idea that "everything happens for a reason" is a common refrain in religious rhetoric, and in repeating her belief in this idea, Fisher appeals to the largely religious audience that constitutes members of the Republican party. To other religious members of the party, Fisher's refrain establishes a faith-based credibility with other religious members of her audience. She is establishing to these audience members that she is pious like them, that they can trust what she says because she is a member of their faith. Fisher then follows this with an appeal to logos by reciting statistics on the progress of the epidemic within the United States. This appeal lends weight to her assertion that something must be done through the "brutal reality" presented through the numbers of the infected. Fisher closes this paragraph with a commendation of the efforts of her party in stopping the epidemic thus far, despite the fact that the epidemic had been largely ignored in the years leading up to this speech. Fisher's choice to commend the "good intentions and bold initiatives" of her party, rather than more realistically acknowledge her party's idle actions, builds a character rapport between her and the audience, who share the party as common ground.

"Tonight, I represent an AIDS community whose members have been reluctantly drafted from every segment of American society. Though I am white and a mother, I am one with a black infant struggling with tubes in a Philadelphia hospital. Though I am female and contracted this disease in marriage and enjoy the warm support of my family, I am one with the lonely gay man sheltering a flickering candle from the cold wind of his family's rejection."

In this later paragraph, Fisher begins her powerful appeals to emotion that constitute a large part of the later parts of her speech. Fisher uses militaristic language like "reluctantly drafted" to associate HIV patients with American soldiers and personify the disease as an enemy to be defeated. This is an appeal to the patriotism that defined the Republican party at the time and stresses the unwillingness of HIV members to have contracted the disease. With the wildly unpopular draft still a recent memory in the minds of middle-aged citizens in the United States, this association also appeals to the emotions of fear and unfairness many felt towards the U.S. conscription system. Fisher also utilizes additional appeals to emotion in this section, describing herself as one with a struggling black infant and a lonely gay man afflicted with the same disease, but without her social support network. These examples aim to elicit

sympathy from the members of the audience through the descriptions of the helpless and abandoned who are struggling unseen. Interestingly enough, this is only one of three times gays are mentioned in this address, despite having made up the majority of HIV cases. This, too, is a deliberate decision to shift focus away from the gay victims of this disease, since they were still widely rejected by members of the Republican party. Instead of telling members of her party to care about the lives of gay people, Fischer uses this moment to substitute themselves in their place. In saying she is "one" with these victims, Fisher uses her status and privilege as a white woman who contracted this disease in marriage to garner empathy towards demographics which would otherwise be met with none. Also hidden within this quotation is another appeal to ethos when Fisher clarifies she "contracted this disease in marriage." This is an affirmation of her character to conservatives who would consider extramarital sex unethical—Fisher is reaffirming that she is a good Christian woman, just like the people listening to her.

"We may take refuge in our stereotypes, but we cannot hide there long, because HIV asks only one thing of those it attacks. Are you human? And this is the right question. Are you human? Because people with HIV have not entered some alien state of being. They are human. They have not earned cruelty, and they do not deserve meanness. They don't benefit from being isolated or treated as outcasts. Each of them is exactly what God made: a person; not evil, deserving of our judgment; not victims, longing for our pity people, ready for support and worthy of compassion."

Fisher's argument in this section begins with an appeal to logos, reminding her audience of the nonspecificity with which this disease "attacks" its victims, once again personifying HIV as an enemy to be defeated through national militaristic action. Fisher's repetition of the question "are you human?" serves dual purposes in this context—being both rhetorically asked by the virus to its victims and by Fisher to her audience. As a question from the virus to its victims, "are you human?" stresses the equalization of all Americans in terms of their vulnerability to HIV infection. Additionally, "are you human?" is a direct question from Fisher to the members of her audience—she is asking them for their humanity and compassion towards the infected. Furthering this call for sympathy, Fisher again reminds her audience that people with HIV are still people made by God, and by that simple virtue they are worthy of support and compassion. This, again, is an appeal to ethos in the form of the compassion espoused by

Christianity, and is a reminder to religious members of her audience that they carry an ethical responsibility to confront people with HIV not with judgement and pity, but compassion and support.

"My call to the nation is a plea for awareness. If you believe you are safe, you are in danger. Because I was not hemophiliac, I was not at risk. Because I was not gay, I was not at risk. Because I did not inject drugs, I was not at risk."

This section, along with the following paragraph, stresses the danger posed to those who are not members of high-risk groups for HIV. Fisher appeals to logos in this quotation by pointing out that she is not part of high-risk groups for HIV, and contracted the virus anyway. This quotation also borrows structure from Martin Niemöller's famous poem "First they came…" which reflects upon the apathy and cowardice of German intellectuals that enabled the Holocaust. This lends credibility to the importance of Fisher's call for awareness through the use of the words and ideas of a highly regarded poem. This allusion also creates an emotional connection between the neglect of HIV in America and the tragedy of the Holocaust.

"The lesson history teaches is this: If you believe you are safe, you are at risk. If you do not see this killer stalking your children, look again. There is no family or community, no race or religion, no place left in America that is safe. Until we genuinely embrace this message, we are a nation at risk."

This passage also focuses on an appeal to emotion but, as opposed to her previous appeals for the empathy of her audience, this appeals to the rampant fear that was widely felt regarding the spread of HIV. Fisher tells her audience they are in immediate danger—that their children are being *stalked by a killer*—to elicit the visceral emotional response of a parent whose child is in danger. The imagery used here is clearly tailored to her audience, as a large number of adults tuning into the RNC are likely parents who will be greatly moved by the statement that their children are in danger. This appeal to pathos also fits well with the party's platform at the time, which strongly promoted "traditional family values" and the importance of the nuclear family unit in American society (Peters). Fisher's claim that "we are a nation at risk" also continues the militaristic treatment of the fight against HIV and unifies her audience behind a banner of patriotic nationalism to defeat what she is portraying as an external threat to the American way of life that the party stands for.

"Tonight, HIV marches resolutely towards AIDS in more than a million American homes, littering its pathway with the bodies of the young men, young women, young parents, and young children. One of the families is mine. If it is true that HIV inevitably turns to AIDS, then my children will inevitably turn to orphans."

In this section, Fisher begins to continue the personification of HIV as an external enemy, describing it as "marching resolutely" to conjure images of advancing armies in the minds of her audience. This, along with her other metaphorical representations of HIV as a foreign enemy, built upon American cultural ideas stemming from the Cold War, which had ended just a year prior. In describing HIV as a foreign army, Fisher is able to concisely and urgently convey the importance that something be done about it by weaponizing the not-completely-dissolved jingoism previously directed towards the Soviet Union. Then, following this is one of the most powerful emotional appeals made in this address: Fisher says "If it is true that HIV inevitably turns to AIDS, then my children will inevitably turn to orphans." This leverages the emotions associated with bereavement to evoke emotional responses from members of the audience who have lived through the death of a parent. Even listeners who have never lived through such an experience are likely to feel an emotional response solely from the pain audible in Fisher's voice when she speaks of this all-but-guaranteed tragedy awaiting her family. The tragic circumstances Fisher demonstrates are a result of the spread of HIV serve as a compelling argument to the audience to take action against the disease, lest such a tragedy come to affect them or a loved one.

"To all within the sound of my voice, I appeal: Learn with me the lessons of history and of grace, so my children will not be afraid to say the word "AIDS" when I am gone. Then, their children and yours may not need to whisper it at all."

In closing, Fisher speaks again of her children, appealing once more to the strong parent-child emotional connections felt by many in her audience. She asks her audience to learn from what she has said so that the world may become a better place for their children who will inherit it. This last call to leave the world a better place for the children is Fisher's final appeal to the desires of parents to make the world a better place for their loved ones.

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