2015 Keynote Speaker

#King Lear
Shakespeare's Most Contemporary Play

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Introduction

You all remember Tolstoy's famous opening line of *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Why are we perennially fascinated with unhappiness? An eminent critic once wrote of *Paradise Lost*, "John Milton may have been interested in Heaven, but his readers troop to Hell for entertainment."

Perhaps we take grim delight in miserable families because they look so . . . familiar, and nowhere in Shakespeare do they look more familiar than in *King Lear*. In case you hadn't already noticed, in *Lear*, Shakespeare opened your closets and pawed through your drawers to portray your father, or sister, your partner, brother, caretaker, boss, minister, teacher, therapist, and—yes, you. I'm in the same boat: I can rename most of the characters in this play for people in my own life.

I titled this keynote *#King Lear*: I, who have never used Facebook, Twitter, Flikr, Flitter, blogs, droids or whatever. But I wanted to suggest how contemporary this play is. As I have already implied, part of its contemporaneity derives from its portrayal of a thoroughly dysfunctional family. In Shakespeare's interconnected world, this dysfunction spreads outward, infecting many aspects of the play—on the political plane, family disorder goes global; in psychological terms, individual identities fracture; and, in terms of world-view, dysfunction ultimately eradicates the possibility of any

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coherence. On every level, *King Lear* ends in fragments—not even in the certainty of classical causality, but a quantized world much like contemporary physics. Welcome to the 21st century.

Background

As you know, Shakespeare explored problematical families in many of his earlier plays. Think of Coriolanus (and his mother); Hamlet (and his mother, and father, and uncle, and girlfriend). The Montagues and Capulets, a.k.a. the Hatfields and McCoys, weren't exactly model families, like Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth with a marriage almost literally made in hell. Titus Andronicus set a new bar for the family bloodbath. Shylock, of course, was a terrifying father, underscored by the comic sub-plot with Launcelot Gobbo saying to his blind father, "It's a wise father who knows his own child." As happily as *The Tempest* or *Winter's Tale* end, their plots are still propelled by controlling fathers, vicious brothers, and unmotivated rage.

But Shakespeare never staged heartbreaking and horrifying family dynamics so vividly and so centrally as he did in *King Lear*. His most epic and inclusive play is at heart about the most universal, and therefore most contemporary theme of all—the family unit.

Definitions

The term *du jour* for families like Lear's is "dysfunctional," but what, exactly, does that mean? Simply performing below average, like a C-? Or *really* below average, like F-? My friend, who is a psychiatrist, tells me that, however widely used, this term is not yet in the bible of psychotherapy, the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). The accepted short definition of "a dysfunctional family" is one in which conflict, misbehavior, and often child neglect or abuse occur continually, leading other members to accommodate such actions. Children often grow up in such families assuming that such an arrangement is normal.

I grew up with a schizophrenic mother, and it seldom occurred to me or my brother that our family was even unusual, let alone clinical. I have since learned that happens because the operative reality in your family is established by its most non-functioning or "weakest" member, in my case, my mother's. Consider your own family, nuclear or extended, and the member around whom you must walk on eggshells. "Don't make Dad mad. Just agree with

Mom. Don't get your brother started. Don't rock the boat. Be a doormat." In other words, erase yourself.

Of course, we don't need any formal definitions to see that the Lear family long ago obliterated the boundaries of normal, let alone viable, interpersonal relationships. At least one-third of the main characters exhibit various clinical disorders: sadism, Asperger's Syndrome, bipolarity, abuse in several varieties, denial with a capital "D," and the Ground Zero of it all—sudden anger syndrome, now called Intermittent Explosive Disorder (with the painfully appropriate acronym of IED).

The calmest version of this in your life is probably road rage, but you might be lucky enough to be know someone who becomes violently angry over something even more trivial: the soup is cold, the window sticks, I broke my shoelace. They blow up and then they are over it. But you aren't. And that's the problem. Their rage filters through your psyche and lays down deposits in your personality that accumulate and harden over the years.

Traits of Dysfunctional Families

Before we look at specific moments in the play, I want to share with you a selected list of traits of dysfunctional families; as I do so, consider Lear, Gloucester and their five children in contemporary psychological terms.

Dysfunctional Parents.

1. An unpredictable emotional state (due to personality disorders, untreated mental illness or dementia)
2. Emotional intolerance (family members not allowed to express the "wrong" emotions and other forms of conditional love)
3. Ruling by fear and loyalty manipulation (no one is allowed to dissent or question authority)
4. Unfair treatment of certain family members (due to birth order, gender, age, etc.)
5. Denial of abusive behavior
6. Lack of empathy
7. Abnormal sexual behavior such as adultery or promiscuity
8. Judgmental statements or demonization ("You're stupid. You're fat.")

*Children in Dysfunctional Families***.**

1. Myriad forms of accommodation, often morphing as fast as viruses to fit the intensifying problems

2. Low self-esteem or a poor self-image (with resultant difficulty expressing emotions)
3. Moderate to severe mental health issues (depression, anxiety, violence)
4. Bullying or harassing others
5. Difficulty forming healthy relationships
6. Finding an abusive partner, perpetuating dysfunctional behaviors in other relationships
7. Rebelling against parental authority
8. Auto-destructive or self-damaging behaviors (sometimes suicidal)

As I was doing this research, I kept wondering if I were reading psychology or literary criticism about *King Lear*.

Examples of dysfunction in the play

Now I want to go through the play quickly to point out selected examples, and then discuss how this central idea, the dysfunctional family, informs other aspects of the play—political, psychological, and philosophical—helping to make it the most "contemporary" play Shakespeare wrote.

Act 1. The play starts with a dirty joke: in front of Kent, Gloucester jokes about Edmund and calls him his "whoreson"—the son of a whore. This obviously manifests adultery, demonization and denial; and we are only twenty-four lines into the play.

Lear divides the kingdom, but not really. He wants to divest himself of "rule, interest of territory, and cares of state," but he wants to keep "the name, and all the addition to a king," in other words, all the trappings and appearances of power. One critic considers this a dividing of himself, a splitting of his own identity.

In this scene, Lear plays the "show me how much you love me" game with his daughters, clearly quantifying love. Goneril and Regan have developed adaptive behaviors to survive and succeed in this family: Play along to get along—and to get your share. But Cordelia rebels, in effect saying, "I refuse to say my lines in your melodrama, to be part of your power trip, Dad. I *act* what I feel. I *do* instead of say." Then follows their famous and catastrophic exchange, ending with Lear's ironic line, "Nothing will come of nothing."

Lear explodes uncontrollably in his first IED, echoing Shylock and his daughter Jessica, shouting, "Better thou / Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better." Obviously, Lear has always been emotionally unstable: Goneril calls it his "long

engrafted condition," and Regan agrees that their father lacks any self-knowledge, having "ever but slenderly known himself." They get it. Lear's reality is skewed by egocentrism and narcissism, and it is the operative reality for the family. Ultimately, it becomes the operative reality for the entire kingdom.

Edmund's soliloquy about bastards reveals how the illegitimate son, exhibiting understandable low self-esteem, has adapted to his father's unequal treatment and will exact revenge. At the same time, Gloucester, like Lear, denies personal responsibility, laying his "goatish disposition to the charge of a star." Edmund understands his father perfectly, exactly like Goneril and Regan.

As early as act I, Shakespeare introduces what contemporary psychology terms "interventions," through Kent in disguise and the Fool—in other words, the friend and the psychiatrist. Through the brilliant riddle of the egg and the crown, the Fool begins trying to teach Lear that the old man is the source of his own problems and that he has essentially destroyed his own identity: "You are an O without a figure."

Lear characteristically reacts by demonizing Goneril and cursing her with sterility, but he has a glimmer of self-knowledge about "letting folly in and judgment out." Concerning Cordelia, he quietly suspects that he "did her wrong," which the Fool underscores with the pitiful and profound statement, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."

Act 2. Early in act 2, Lear's family dysfunction spreads to rumors of war between Albany and Cornwall, the first evidence of the impossibility of containing chaos. In the same vein, Gloucester immediately believes Edmund's lies and denounces his loyal and legitimate son. Except for the dramatic parallel with Lear and Cordelia, the audience must ask *why.* Does it merely result from Gloucester's unpredictable emotional state? Or his unconscious guilt regarding his bastard son? In any case, it will have disastrous consequences for everyone concerned.

The motif of Lear's fractured identity now spreads to Kent, notably in his insults to Oswald, which culminate in "Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter!" Such a remarkable metaphor resonates like the scene in Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, where the characters are reduced to hurling vowels at each other: "A! E! I! O! U!"

As Lear's daughters begin to toss Dad back and forth, they sound like contemporary women trying to cajole an old parent

into a rest home; he should "be ruled and led" by those who understand his situation better than he does. Understandably, Lear again explodes, still thinking that he is king and still quantifying love, this time regarding the number of knights in his retinue. He sarcastically asks forgiveness for being old, but he truly fears that he is going mad. Typical of children raised in dysfunctional families, Goneril and Regan say that their father deserves what he gets and the only way he will learn is through suffering. Unfortunately, in Lear's case, they are right.

Act 3. In the storm on the heath, dysfunction now permeates nature as well, causing Lear to call for the destruction of the entire world: "Blow winds and crack your cheeks." The Fool tries to "outjest [Lear's] heart-struck injuries" by insisting that Lear himself has turned the world upside down; "the codpiece that will house before the head has any . . . makes his toe what his heart should make."

Lear has some self-recognition but is still engulfed in self-pity, still in denial, describing himself as "more sinned against than sinning." However, when he realizes that the Fool is cold, he shows empathy for the first time, in most productions, covering the Fool with his own cloak. His empathy increases as he meets Tom o' Bedlam, realizing that he should "expose himself to feel what wretches feel." More important, Lear encounters raw existence, what Jean Paul Sartre calls the *ensoi,* and concludes that "unaccommodated man is such a poor, bare, forked animal."

On the heath, Lear, Tom and the Fool conduct a mock trial, embodying the only "justice" available to help Lear, if not to cure him. Lear himself now asks, "What causes these hard hearts?"—in effect asking what causes dysfunctional families in the first place. Of course, no one can answer this question, so vital to the world-view of the play. By now, the world is so insane, so broken and hopeless that the Fool cannot jest it back to health; and he leaves, never to return. Kent, ever the realist, counsels rest for his friend and king.

Then, in one of the most horrifying scenes in all of theater, just as Gloucester pronounces his faith in divine justice, Cornwall tortures and blinds him. The violence is gratuitous, the characters are sadistic and the effect is random evil, like a terrorist shooting into a crowd of innocent people.

Act 4. From the horror and his own pain, Gloucester does learn that he "stumbled when he saw," and, like Lear, must recognize that one cannot see if he does not feel. Nonetheless, he understandably concludes with some of the play's most famous lines, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport." Looking at the old man's bloody eye sockets, no one can disagree.

In one of the more baffling scenes of the play, Edgar, still disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, stages a mock suicide, theoretically to cure Gloucester of his despair. In contemporary terms, he is using exposure therapy, often employed to alleviate symptoms of PTSD, in which victims relive traumatic or near-death experiences to address their avoidance and to get past the memories. Edgar's action also shares elements with CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) to force victims to think differently about their trauma and to cope in the present.

Meanwhile, dysfunction is rapidly spreading across the kingdom. Goneril openly expresses adulterous desire for Edmund, causing Albany to express his disbelief and disgust with an image of cannibalism: "Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep." In other words, big fish eat smaller ones, and Goneril has guaranteed her place on a dangerous and implacable food chain.

Lear, now half-mad and accompanied by the blind Gloucester, suddenly realizes his daughters' adaptive behavior and its consequences. "They flattered me like a dog . . . and [said] 'ay' and 'no' to everything that I said 'ay' and 'no' to." Of course, as a dysfunctional father, he believed them when they told him he was everything. "Tis a lie," he now sees; "I am not ague-proof."

In the play's second mock trial, Lear upbraids Gloucester for pleading blindness, since "a man may see how this world goes with no eyes." He tells Gloucester to consider a standard trial of a robber: "Change places and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?" In a world where causality does not even operate, what hope is there for anything as abstract as justice?

The act closes with the reunion of Lear and Cordelia. Lear can finally admit that he is a "very foolish, fond old man" and, more important, asks for his daughter's forgiveness. Early in the next act, his fantasy of their singing together in prison like caged birds, of their gossiping about court news like "God's spies," is as tender as it will prove impossible.

Act 5. In act 5, what began as family dysfunction goes global. The domestic war in the Lear family quickly develops into sexual war between Goneril and Regan over Edmund, which in turn becomes civil war in England, and finally international war with France.

Edgar, now disguised as a knight, challenges Edmund essentially to reclaim his identity, as well as to regenerate the Gloucester family. Edgar may believe that the "gods are just and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us," but the ending of the play belies his faith. Goneril poisons Regan and commits suicide—a type of "justice" at work—but Cordelia cannot be saved, nor can Lear. At least, the old king accepts some responsibility, although too late: "I might have saved her," he moans, implying more than saving her from hanging in prison.

Kent leaves, probably to commit suicide, and Albany and Edgar are left to inherit the kingdom. But what does winning, or even survival, mean in this context?

Effects of family dysfunction in the larger world—"war" on all levels

By now, we have seen, in perfect Shakespearean fashion, how disrupting the Great Chain of Being on any level necessarily disrupts it on all levels: the rapid spread of chaos from the family to international politics. In the Elizabethan world-view, all people, events and creatures are intimately related in a strict hierarchy: from the King to the slave, eagle to the sparrow, lion to the housecat. If anyone—especially a king—inverts the order of things, everyone and everything feels the effects.

In the 21st century, if we have learned nothing else, surely we now understand that no political act occurs in isolation. No president, no king, no dictator, no madman, no charismatic religious leader, no terrorist acts in isolation. We are all connected: what happens to China or to Russia, to African rebels or to Syrian refugees, happens to all of us. We can ignore that only at our peril.

As dysfunction spreads throughout the larger society of *Lear*, the play increasingly articulates its disastrous effects. Shakespeare's descriptions of his England are painfully descriptive of our contemporary world.

- Gloucester says to Edmund, "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and

father. . . . We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves." How many people do you know who feel that way?

- When Edgar assumes his disguise as Tom o' Bedlam, he describes street people we have all seen: "With nakedness [I'll] outface / The winds and persecutions of the sky. / The country gives me proof and precedent / Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices, / Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms / Pins, wooden pricks, nails . . ."
- In similar terms, Lear describes homeless people to Kent: "Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, / How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, / Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you / From seasons such as these?"
- Increasingly the wider world sounds more and more desperate, dismal—and contemporary. Taken out of today's headlines is Lear's lamentation to Gloucester: "A dog's obeyed in office. / Thou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand; / Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back / Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind / For which thou whipp'st her. . . . Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks." Hello, Supreme Court; hello, Wall Street; hello, the eternal battle between the haves and have-nots.

Individual's Psychological Journey

In such a world (i.e., ours), how can any individual (i.e., you) possibly maintain your identity, let alone gain insight or wisdom or regeneration? On the individual psychological level, the spreading chaos in *Lear* undermines any progress, spiritual, intellectual or philosophical, any progress toward self-knowledge, self-actualization or existential authenticity.

I am talking now about your personal journey as a contemporary human being.

Shakespeare returns time and again to the idea of identity, to which I've alluded several times. In many of his plays, he uses disguises as an inherently theatrical metaphor but also for lying, for comedy, for testing others, for self-protection, and the like. In *Lear*, however, very few people are what they seem—loving daughters, loyal sons, friends, fools, kings.

When Edgar disguises as the mad Tom o' Bedlam, he says, significantly, *not* "I will no longer be Edgar," but "Edgar I nothing

am." Total erasure. When he challenges Edmund at the end, he clearly wants to reclaim his something-ness, his selfhood. In the meantime, he confronts his "foul fiend." What is that "foul fiend"? What is *your* foul fiend? What keeps you up at night? Your conscience? Your unconscious? People with the "glib and oily art" might answer the Prince of Darkness, but who or what is your Prince of Darkness?

Lear cannot simply reclaim his identity: he's given away half of it, and the other half he has destroyed. Yet to create a viable self is Lear's greatest problem and only potential "salvation." And ours. In terms of existentialism, Lear, like the rest of us, must try to live authentically for what little time he has left. In the terms of Jean-Paul Sartre, authenticity begins with recognizing that we made choices from free will and therefore must accept responsibility and guilt for our actions. You cannot blame anyone else. Lear makes some progress when he intuits that he did Cordelia wrong, when he recognizes raw existence (the *ensoi*) on the heath, and when he learns a limited kind of empathy from the Fool and mad Tom. But his progress toward an authentic life, as in everything else, is truncated with his own death—making the ending of the play even more tragic.

Essentially, no one can help you on this most important and difficult journey, although we all have some kind of "support groups." Who or what helps you stay on a healthy path to selfhood? A good friend? A psychologist? Group therapy? Drugs? The NFL? The shooting range? Motorcycles? Shakespeare gives Lear, Kent, the Fool, mad Tom, Cordelia—the best of friends, the best psychiatrist, the best advisor, and the best truth-teller—and he, as an integrated and authentic human being, still cannot survive.

World-View

Why not?

What do we finally take away from Lear—years after our first viewing or reading? A senile old man makes a tragically serious mistake, and not only does his own life and that of his family fall apart, but he also takes his country and all he holds dear down with him. In today's terms, is this the Domino Effect? Butterfly Effect? Chaos Theory? Collapse Theory?

Whatever we call it, we are left with a post-apocalyptic scenario, a world which has burned all of its fuel, running on empty. Whether Edgar or Albany is left to resuscitate it hardly

matters. What, exactly, is left to rule, or even put into order?

To me, the overwhelmingly contemporary effect of all the dysfunction in *Lear* has less to do with individuals than with the world they inhabit and inherit. This play is not simply dark or even ominous; it is much scarier. Utterly random. The shooter in the elementary school at Sandy Hook. Or in the Colorado theater. On the streets of Los Angeles or the subway in London or the train in Amsterdam.

As king, Lear is the top of the human power structure, in Elizabethan terms God's symbolic representative on earth. Then we must surmise that Lear's state of mind echoes God's: the old Great Chain of Being, the symbiotic macrocosm-microcosm. Not a pretty thought: God has dementia. *Very* 21st century. *Very* Beckett. *Very Waiting for Godot*.

When Gloucester cries out, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport," he sounds hopeless. But in the world of Albert Camus and existentialists like him, even a careless or malicious or prankster god is preferable to none at all. To Camus, man's existence consists of his passionate longing for meaning and the fact there is none. If we didn't want meaning or if there were meaning, everything would be fine. But we are caught between our longing and the lack of meaning, and this makes us what Camus terms Absurd.

One could ask if Gloucester's conclusion is the "definitive" world-view in the play. After all, who are the "wanton boys" in here? Who is torturing, hanging, blinding and killing people for their sport? Cornwall, Regan, Edmund, anonymous murderers. If there is a god or gods compelling them at all, it might be the God of Bastards, or the God of Ingrates or of Disintegration, or of Madness, or of Bad Timing.

But the play doesn't even offer that "consolation." Lear lives in a 21st-century world which functions less on causality than on probability, on contingency. This is a universe in which the gods, like King Lear, have not simply broken down. The universe has exploded into bits and fragments: quantized individuals, quantized families, quantized society. Bits and pieces: like so much contemporary visual art, contemporary music, contemporary literature—Duchamps' Dada, John Cage's chance music, Absurdist theatre.

Consider for a moment the endings of Shakespeare's other

great tragedies—the "justice" of Othello's death, the "justice" of Macbeth's death, even the "justice" of Hamlet's death. As we all know, Lear could so easily have ended happily, a fairy tale come true, a slightly different *Winter's Tale*. It came within a hair's width of another *Tempest*—only without the magician and the fairies. It could have ended if not with hope, at least with some minimal order.

Not possible. By this time in his life, Shakespeare knew too much. He had spent too long in despair.

The theme of "nothing" and "nothingness" hammers throughout the play, beginning with Cordelia's and Lear's early exchange of "Nothing." "Nothing?" "Nothing." "Nothing will come of nothing." Quickly following is Edgar's dissolution of his own identity, expressed as "Edgar I nothing am."

One of the Fool's early riddles warns Lear to "Have more than thou showest, / Speak less than thou knowest / . . . Learn more than thou trowest . . ." Lear responds characteristically, "This is nothing, Fool." Of course, he could not be more wrong, and the Fool can only joke, "Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer, you gave me nothing for it." But too much is at stake, and the Fool asks again, "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" At this point, Lear is capable only of his knee-jerk response, "Nothing can be made out of nothing."

Is all this nothingness nihilism? Possibly. *Lear* ends like Mahler's Ninth Symphony with cataclysmic slowness and darkness and, finally, silence. Many people have tried to find some glint of hope or renewal in Mahler's ending, as they have in *Lear*. But most finally agree with Lewis Thomas: this is not simply the end of the work of art. This is the end of the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, regardless of your religious convictions, secular philosophy, persuasions as a literary critic, or experience in the theater, *Lear* holds your face in its hands and forces you to look. This is who you are. This is how you act. This is what will happen as a result of your blindness, your lack of self-knowledge, your failure at empathy, your abuse of privilege and power. Not only are we all in Lear's family photo, we are using our own cell phones to snap the selfie.