Rhetorical Analysis of Retired United States Navy Admiral William Harry McRaven’s 2014 Commencement Speech for the University of Texas in Austin
Introduction

In 2014 at the University of Texas in Austin, Retired United States Navy Admiral William Harry McRaven gave a commencement speech to the students who were about to graduate and start their future after college. Retired Admiral McRaven talks about how his experiences in Sea, Air, and Land (SEALs) training has impacted his life and how he wants to pass those experiences on to the next generation and the generation after that and so on. He starts off by saying, “if you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day,” and he then explains how accomplishing this simple task will lead to the accomplishment of many others throughout the day (William Harry McRaven, 2014). The way that Ret. Admiral McRaven explains this concept is through ten lessons that he learned while he was in SEAL training. These lessons come from some of the many extreme and difficult tasks he faced during his training. The lessons that Ret. Admiral McRaven included in the speech are:

1) if you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.
2) If you want to change the world, find someone to help you paddle.
3) If you want to change the world, measure a person by the size of their heart, not by the size of their flippers.
4) If you want to change the world, then get over being a sugar cookie and keep charging forward.
5) If you want to change the world, then do not be afraid to be part of the circuses.
6) If you want to change the world, then sometimes you have to slide down the obstacle head-first.
7) If you want to change the world, then at time you must not back down from the sharks.
8) If you want to change the world, then you must remember to be the best, even in the darkest moments.
9) If you want to change the world, then you must sing when you find yourself up to your neck in mud.
10) Finally, if you want to change the world, then don’t ever, ever ring the bell (William Harry McRaven, 2014).

Each of these lessons are learned through accomplishing the tasks he faced and he is willing to
share these to anyone who wants to change the world for the next generation and the generation after that. The goal of his commencement speech is to get each individual to accomplish some type of task that makes the world a better place for future generations and that this process starts with making your bed every morning. In the following text, his speech will be analyzed by looking at it through the Aristotelian appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos, in addition to discussing the context of the speech through the rhetorical fallacy hasty generalization and the concept of metaphor use. The reason why this speech is being analyzed is because it helps the audience better understand the way that Ret. Admiral McRaven is trying to paint a picture and lead the audience through his experiences and how they are relatable to individuals who are not just in SEAL training, but are individuals going through their everyday lives.

Method

By discussing the context of Ret. Admiral McRaven’s speech through the Aristotelian appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, in addition to the rhetorical fallacy hasty generalization and use of metaphor, we will be able to get a better understanding of how he is able to build up to his overall goal of convincing each individual in the audience to change their lives. Throughout the speech the rhetor uses his experiences to explain his credibility through these personal lessons that he has learned, while also showing the audience that he is a living example of how “starting each day with a task completed” really can work for anyone (William Harry McRaven, 2014). This is the rhetor’s use of the Aristotelian appeal called ethos. This can be example of the speaker’s ability to build his credibility with the audience through his explanations of his past and how he comes from a position of high prestige and power (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch). Continuing throughout the speech, Ret. Admiral McRaven uses the Aristotelian appeal pathos, or the rhetor’s ability to provoke emotion in the minds of the audience. He accomplishes this by
telling personal, emotional stories that he can generalize for everyone in the audience to relate to. The last Aristotelian appeal is logos, and this is the logic behind the argument that is being made by the rhetor, or facts used to persuade the audience (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch). This is prevalent in the speech when Ret. Admiral McRaven tells the story about the young army officer who has an instinct to change direction while on patrol and ultimately saved their platoon from stepping on an explosive device, saving their lives. The rhetorical fallacy that is used throughout the speech is called hasty generalization, which is when the rhetor makes a false generalization based on insufficient evidence or knowledge (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch). This is also known as making a false conclusion without understanding all parts of the subject. An example of the fallacy, to better understand it would be: everyone loves bacon, therefore, all people should eat bacon every day. The fallacy lies in the concluding statement that bacon should be eaten by everyone every day. This is false because not every single person loves bacon, and in that case, they do not eat bacon and will not eat bacon every day. This is also false because some individuals are told by their doctor to watch their salt intake and, seeing that bacon contains a high percentage of salt, those individuals do not eat bacon. From the speech, Ret. Admiral McRaven’s hasty generalization is when he explains how just one individual can change the life of ten other individuals, and so on. This is a fallacy because not everyone will have the chance to change the lives of ten other people, and if that doesn’t happen then those ten people won’t change ten other individuals’ lives. A metaphor is tactic that makes an implied or implicit comparison between two things that are not relatable without using the words “like” or “as” in the comparison (Palczewski, Ice, Fritch). An example to better understand this concept is when someone says that they were working in a group project and everyone else in the group was “sitting there like a bump on a log.” This means that everyone else was no help and had nothing to say to contribute
or do anything to benefit the group – comparing them to bump on a log that also can’t contribute. Ret. Admiral McRaven uses metaphors to convey how each experience represents a different lesson and how these experiences are meant to bring out the best in the individuals. These experiences represent more than a task that must be done. These tasks can be broken down into many individual barriers that must be overcome and this is where the lesson is learned. Ret. Admiral McRaven uses pathos to play on the emotions of the audience, and it makes them feel more engaged and allows his experiences to stay with them. He also uses logos and ethos to prove to the audience that he is a prime example of his teachings and that he has credible experiences that those individuals can relate to. Many people may not be able to say that they have the experience of the SEAL training, but they can say that they have been faced with obstacles throughout their life and they have used these lessons before without realizing it. Ret. Admiral McRaven breaks down these lessons so that they are relatable to all individuals by using these concepts and making the lessons stand out to the audience through the Aristotelian appeals. Ret. Admiral McRaven’s point about, “if everyone changed the lives of just 10 people and each one of those folks changed the lives of another 10 people” and on to the point to where 800 million people’s lives have been changed, is a hasty generalization (William Harry McRaven, 2014). This is because not everyone will have the ability to change the lives of the individuals around them and those individuals may not change the lives of others.

Analysis

Throughout Ret. Admiral McRaven’s commencement speech, he breaks it down into ten life lessons that he learned while he was in SEAL training back in the late 70s. Throughout these lessons, he uses the three Aristotelian appeals in the explanation of the lessons, also turning them into metaphors for larger lessons. In his first lesson, he states that by, “making your bed will also
reinforce that the little things in life matter. If you can’t do the little things right, you will never do the big things right” (McRaven, 2014, para. 17). Ret. Admiral McRaven uses pathos here to take a simple action and turn it into an emotional teaching. The lesson then resonates with people because they could believe that they have been doing things right all along, but then realize that they need to break their life down into little actions and thoughts so that they can build a better version of themselves. By completing many small mindless tasks throughout the day, it is possible to sit back at the end of the day and see how all of those small mindless tasks have cultivated into that individual person having a better day than if they never made their bed.

This then leads to the second lesson that Ret. Admiral McRaven expressed: “if you want to change the world, find someone to help you paddle” (McRaven, 2014, para.21). This lesson is brought to life through a metaphor of a team being used to get to the final destination. The rhetor means that at times there will be moments when you need to ask for help, and that having others around you to lean on in tough times is important. He means that getting to the destination is a team effort and it’s a culmination of family, friends, instructors, and even the will of strangers to make achievement possible. This metaphor makes the audience realize that they didn’t get to where they are today all on their own, but it was through the effort of a support group made of family, friends, and university instructors. They will realize that it will take a support group like this if they decide to strive for more achievement in the future. However, when they choose their team or support group, they must measure the members by their effort and heart, not by what they look like.

In the third lesson, he uses the basic metaphor, “don’t judge a book by its cover,” but Ret. Admiral McRaven explains this is a much more interesting context. His explanation is, “if you want to change the world, measure a person by the size of their heart, not the size of their
flippers” (McRaven, 2014, para. 25). Ret. Admiral McRaven’s background to this lesson is that the SEAL training group is broken up into boating crews and there was a group of men that were significantly smaller than the rest of the men. Despite this, they always came out on top when they were faced with a challenge. During the swims they used smaller flippers, and during the boating tests they paddled harder and stronger than all the other boat crews. This lesson is meant to show that just because an individual may appear to be either smaller or weaker does not mean that they are lacking in capability. This teaches the graduates that there is no reason to judge someone based off what they see or hear about someone. It is best to look at them as a whole and that judgement is not necessary and that they may be surprised by the capabilities of the individual they were judging. Ret. Admiral McRaven said he was surprised when the boat crew that was made of the smallest men from all corners of the world was always the first to make it back to the beach or the first to finish the challenges. He also appeals to the audience’s emotion when he says that, “SEAL training was a great equalizer. Nothing mattered but your will to succeed. Not your color, not your ethnic background, not your education and not your social status” (McRaven, 2014, para.24). He learned from this that there is no need for boundaries to exist because all they are are judgement points.

The fourth lesson he discussed was that, “if you want to change the world get over being a sugar cookie and keep moving forward” (McRaven, 2014, para. 30). In the story of the sugar cookie, Ret. Admiral McRaven explains how throughout the week the trainees would have multiple uniform checks. If the instructors found something wrong or out of place then you failed and were told to “run fully clothed into the surfzone and then, wet from head to toe, roll around on the beach until every part of your body was covered with sand” - this was called being a sugar cookie (William Harry McRaven, 2014). In addition to this, the trainees must stay like that all
day, so the others around them would know that they had failed the inspection. The lesson here is that there is no reason to worry and fret over the possibility of failing. That failing is something to learn from and that it helps individuals move forward in life. Learn from mistakes and don’t dwell on the failures. This appeals to the audience’s emotion because they can relate to the thoughts of failing and they can see how, if they weren’t so caught up with worrying about the fact that they have failed, they could have bettered their life from learning from the experience instead.

The fifth lesson the rhetor explains to the audience is that when the standards of the challenges are not met, there are consequences. The lesson is that, “if you want to change the world, don’t be afraid of the circuses” (McRaven, 2014, para. 36). Individuals who didn’t measure up had their names put on a list that was posted at the end of the day. This list meant that those individuals had to participate in a circus. A circus was “two hours of additional calisthenics designed to wear you down, to break your spirit, to force you to quit,” and by being part of a circus meant that the following day was much tougher because they were tired and this typically lead to another circus and that led to another (William Harry McRaven, 2014). The lesson to learn from this is that those who did the extra training became stronger and better. They overcame their failure and built upon it, unlike those who didn’t understand the lesson and ultimately were the ones who dropped out. This appeal to emotion and fact in the lesson explains how difficult the challenges are and how mentally tiring they are but there is no reason to dwell on failure and let it bring you down. In the end of the lesson the rhetor explains that those who fail or those who don’t meet the standards become better because they learn from their mistakes and work harder to prevent them from happening again by striving for achievement of their goal of becoming a Navy SEAL.
The sixth lesson that Ret. Admiral McRaven teaches the graduates is that, “If you want to change the world, sometimes you have to slide down the obstacle head first” (McRaven, 2014, para. 40). Back in the late 1970s, when Ret. Admiral McRaven’s training started, the obstacle course record stood for many years. This course was designed to test the trainees physically, and in some cases, mentally. The most challenging obstacle was the so-called “slide for life” - it was a 200 foot long rope that was suspended between a 30-foot tower and a 10-foot tower. The objective was to hang from the rope and pull yourself across without injury. This process changed when a trainee decided to mount the rope and slide down the rope head first to the end. That trainee completed that obstacle faster than anyone before them and broke the record for completion because they took on the challenge head first. The Admiral’s credibility lies in his explanation of how this new record was achieved while he was there in 1977 to personally witness it. The appeal of logos is that there are facts throughout his story that are true and that he was there to witness the action himself. The lesson explained that sometimes it is beneficial to lead head first and attack the obstacle. The rhetor is trying to tell the audience that sometimes taking the path less traveled or taking risks can be beneficial to the outcome and that being different and thinking outside the box is good.

The seventh lesson that Ret. Admiral McRaven teaches the graduates is that, “if you want to change the world, don’t back down from the sharks” (McRaven, 2014, para.44). Throughout this lesson the rhetor explains the facts and truths about the dangers of the night time swim test in the waters off of San Clemente. The rhetor states that if, “a shark begins to circle your position - stand your ground. Do not swim away. Do not act afraid. And if the shark, hungry for a midnight snack, darts towards you - then summon up all your strength and punch him in the snout, and he will turn and swim away” (McRaven, 2014, para. 42). This is a fact that the instructors were
teaching because the technique was known to work and was practical. While this lesson is filled with logos, it is also a metaphor for standing your ground on a personal position or a subject or a thought and to not let yourself get pushed around by those who don’t agree.

The eighth lesson that was presented was, “if you want to change the world, then you must be your very best in the darkest moment” (McRaven, 2014, para. 49). During one of their tests, the trainees were challenged to an underwater attack on an enemy ship and they were expected to swim underwater for two miles at night with only a depth gauge and a compass for navigation. They must find the enemy ship and then dive to the keel of the ship; this is the deepest and darkest part of the ship. Ret. Admiral McRaven points out that, at this moment, “is the time when you must be calm, composed - when all your tactical skills, your physical power, and all your inner strength must be brought to bear” to overcome the challenge that is presented before them (McRaven, 2014, para. 48). This teaches them the ability to get through the tough times, the ability to see the light at the darkest of times, and the ability to muster up the strength to endure the hardships. Here lies the emotional appeal of breaking down hardship and overcoming it with internal willpower.

The ninth lesson the Admiral paints in the audience's mind is that, “if you want to change the world, start singing when you’re up to your neck in mud” (McRaven, 2014, para. 56). Credibility lies in this lesson that teaches the audience that all it takes is one person to stand and make a difference. As the story progresses, the Admiral tells the audience about his time in the Tijuana mud flats during the final week called “Hell Week.” As a punishment his platoon was commanded into the mud and soon all that was visible were the heads of all the men. They were ordered to stay there until the sun came up the next day. The instructors said that if five men quit then everyone could get out of the mud. They would no longer have to endure the bone-chilling
mud if just five men gave up, but before the men were about to give up, a voice rose in song. The instructors threatened to have them stay longer in the mud if the singing didn’t stop but soon all of the men were singing. Ret. Admiral McRaven said, “somehow, the mud seemed a little warmer, the wind a little tamer, and the dawn not so far away” (McRaven, 2014, para. 54). His lesson is that all it takes is one person to make an impact. He points this out by giving the example of individuals who are defined leaders in history, those of who have made a great change in society. He believes by giving this lesson that he will inspire the graduates to become leaders when times get tough.

The tenth and final lesson that Ret. Admiral McRaven teaches to the graduates is that, “if you ever want to change the world, don’t ever, ever ring the bell” (McRaven, 2014, para. 59). This lesson is a metaphor for never giving up when times get tough. The context of this lesson is that there is a bell in the middle of the training camp that everyone can see and that if you ring that bell then that means that you have given up - that you no longer have to deal with the strict regimen of the SEAL training and that you will never become a Navy SEAL. This metaphor is trying to teach the graduates that no matter how hard something gets, you should never give up and always strive for the best outcome. All ten of these lessons have used all three Aristotelian appeals in the explanation or the context of the lesson and that each metaphor is a lesson that can be used throughout life.

Conclusion

The many lessons that Retired Navy Admiral William Harry McRaven taught to the graduating class and the rest of the audience were lined with the Aristotelian appeals ethos, logos, and pathos. This was to help the context of the speech be factual, credible, logical, and
emotionally stimulating for the audience. These were all used to help have these lessons stick with the graduates throughout their future endeavors. While his lessons did not specifically tell the graduates what to do in their life, they were lessons hidden within metaphors. Metaphors were used to paint a better understanding in each individual's mind in the audience. As Ret. Admiral McRaven expressed he believes that social change can happen only, “if every one of you changed the lives of just 10 people - and each one of those folks changed the lives of another 10 people - just 10 - then in five generations - 125 years - the class of 2014 will have changed the lives of 800 million people” and that these ten lessons are the key to changing those lives (McRaven, 2014, para. 5). His use of these rhetorical strategies helps to ingrain this point into the audience’s minds.
References

