

AS SEEN IN THE
CAPE COD TIMES

Celebrating a new initiative to bring national speakers to Cape Cod

Lawrence Brown, Columnist

A few weeks ago, I had a chance to sit down with Gene Guill, the man behind the Cape Cod Speaker Series (CCSS). David Gergen, the former press secretary for President Reagan and adviser to three other presidents, has a summer place on Cape Cod. Gene and a group of friends were having a dinner conversation when Gergen put a bug in their ears.

Cape Cod should have a speakers series drawing major thinkers from politics, science, education, international affairs and the arts. With a group of interested Cape Codders, Gene and his wife Susan started thinking about how to make this work for us on the Cape. David Gergen probably knows half the people worth listening to, certainly enough to make not only suggestions but contacts with people Cape audiences might like to hear and learn from. He volunteered to help.

Certainly, one can find opportunities in Boston, but that's a long drive for Cape Codders, and the traffic only makes it worse. Hence the Cape Cod Speakers Series, Inc. Cape Cod Speakers is backed by an interesting and dedicated group. They set the program up as a nonprofit, with a portion of any surplus going to support financial aid for students at Cape Cod Community College.

As a business model, the project has to be self-sustaining. Students will be able to buy tickets for \$10 and adults for \$50. For \$100 you will get front row seating and an opportunity to spend some time with the speaker at a reception after the formal program ends. It would be nice if the tickets were cheaper but unfortunately, national-level speakers cost a lot of money. (If you want Bill Clinton for example, be prepared to pony up at least \$200,000.)

Had I known about this early enough, I could have told you about a program that was offered on Aug. 13. The speaker was Jonathan Zittrain, a professor of international law at Harvard Law School, and a professor of engineering and applied sciences. Mindy Todd was the moderator. This was a class act.

Zittrain talked about artificial intelligence (AI). AI has generated algorithms that can outperform most students on graduate school admissions exams, can do homework, draft papers, generate convincing images and videos of things that never happened, find information in a flash and disinformation just as quickly.

If you missed this first program, you can find lectures by Zittrain on YouTube. I suspect what you'll hear will both excite you about this new technology and also scare you to death.

Next up, Steven Levitsky will be speaking on Oct. 17. You might get a head start by finding one of his books: "The Tyranny of the Minority," and "How Democracies Die." Levitsky is in the perfect position to add his insights about what the numerous threats to democracy are and how to find our way back to some kind of sanity.

We have a lot of impressive people already living out here. Why is it important to bring in speakers with a national or even global reputation? Well, it's safe to say that most of them didn't become famous for nothing.

In 1963, I was a junior in high school when someone arranged for Robert Frost to come talk to us. I wanted to know what a certain poem meant. Frost stroked his chin for a minute, then said, "Well, I'm sure I meant something by it at the time — but I forget. What do you think it means?"

My ears turned red and I came out with something, but I forget what it was now. "Yeah," said the great poet. "It could mean that." He let me stand there for a while until I realized nothing further was coming and I sat down. Then he pointed at me and said, "Hey you, boy. Back up on your feet. You're mad at me aren't you... because I didn't answer your question." And that's when the great Robert Frost said something that would not have had anywhere near the impact if it wasn't coming from him.

Now he addressed everyone in the auditorium. "I know what happens," he said. "Don't you ever let some teacher give you a poem as if it was some kind of puzzle that only they can solve. If you write a poem, you can keep it for yourself, but if you publish it, it belongs to the readers, not to you — and not to your teachers."

Why do I remember this story after all these 60 years? Because I had the chance to ask America's greatest living poet, and hear an answer that had not only the experience but the authority that only people like him could offer. No coincidence I grew up to be an English teacher.

Now we have a chance to have people of that caliber speaking to us and our children here on Cape Cod. We should be grateful that somebody is doing it and show up for these opportunities whenever we can.

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