



SIXTH BKB-LECTURE

THREE LESSONS IN STORYTELLING

Jon Favreau



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To celebrate our fifteenth anniversary BKB hosted the sixth BKB Lecture on 14 September 2014 in Amsterdam. The lecture was delivered by Jon Favreau, followed by a masterclass by Mitch Stewart (270 strategies).

Foreword

It is with great honour that we present this booklet with the lecture that former Director speechwriting for President Barack Obama Jon Favreau delivered at our 15th anniversary in September 2014.

We at BKB feel a natural connection with Jon Favreau. The way he has contributed to the relevant and beautiful speeches delivered by the President of United States is something we admire and has motivated us in our daily work of storytelling in The Netherlands over the past ten years.

A lot of us at BKB have been inspired by the President of the United States. By his ideas, but also by the way he presents his ideas. The Democratic National Convention in Boston in the summer of 2004 was a defining moment for us. We, just as Jon Favreau, saw Barack Obama give his famous keynote address in the big convention hall and moreover we also heard him speak during a very small fringe meeting.

In a very short encounter they we had with Barack Obama

after that fringe meeting he unfolded one of our now 'famous BKB quotes': *'vote, participate: politics is something you can't afford to ignore'*.

We hope you'll enjoy Jon Favreau's beautiful lecture in which he presents the three most important lessons in storytelling.

*Lennart Booi, Erik van Bruggen, Maarten van Heems,
Alex Klusman, Bianca Pander, Isabelle Rade*

Three lessons in storytelling

By Jon Favreau

Thank you for inviting me here today. I'm here to talk about storytelling, which in my opinion is much easier than organizing and movement-building. I tried community organizing in college and the only people I could get to do anything were my friends, and only when I promised them alcohol. The first time I volunteered on a Senate campaign in New Hampshire, I couldn't count the number of voters who slammed a door in my face or hung up on me. At one point, to prove that the other party was engaged in "trash attacks," the campaign organized an event where I had to walk out from behind a dumpster dressed head to toe in a garbage bag.

Lucky me, it made the nightly news.

After that, I decided I'd point my political career in a different direction. And the truth is, I sort of fell into speechwriting by chance. I always loved writing, but by senior year in college I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. It wasn't until the night before graduation that I got a job offer as an entry-level assistant on John Kerry's presidential campaign.

Joining a presidential campaign seemed more exciting than law school and a lot less expensive, so I quickly said yes.

Campaign life was not glamorous. I shared a tiny basement studio with some rats, which made my mother cry from the moment I moved in until the moment I moved out. I woke up at 430am every morning to send out the day's news stories to the entire campaign. I answered the phones. I got coffees and lunches. Many nights, I slept in my chair.

Then one day, the campaign's Chief Speechwriter moved to the desk next to mine. And I thought he had the greatest job in the world. So of course I bugged him in the way 22 year-old assistants bug people they professionally admire. I asked too many questions. I offered too much help. And one day I finally found the courage to ask him if I could work for him as a deputy speechwriter. And he immediately said no. But then one day after that, when the campaign was almost broke and couldn't afford to hire a real speechwriter, I became the most affordable option available.

A few months later came my second lucky break, though it certainly didn't seem that way at the time. During the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston, I was assigned the task of making sure that all the speakers and speeches reflected the

message of the Kerry campaign, to the extent there was a message of the Kerry campaign. And one day I get a call from the powers-that-be, who told me there was a problem with the draft of the keynote address being given by the young U.S. Senate candidate from Illinois, Barack Obama. Apparently he had written the exact same line in his keynote as John Kerry did in his acceptance speech. And somehow my job was to walk down the hall, interrupt Barack Obama's speech prep, and ask him to change the line.

Lucky me.

So I walk into the room as Obama was practicing his speech for the first time, and I mumbled something about the line, and he clearly took it well because he walked over to within an inch of my face, glared down at me, and said, "Are you telling me I have to change my favorite line in the speech?" So, great first impression with my future boss. The truth is, I figured I'd never talk to Barack Obama again, which was too bad because when I heard his keynote the next night, I thought it represented everything that was missing from politics. It was honest. It was authentic. It didn't sound like language that came from a consultant or a poll.

And most of all, it told a story.

A few months later, Kerry lost the election, and I was crushed. Here I was, 23 years old, already desperately cynical about politics. I wanted to give it up, and at that point I sort of had to because I was also broke – so broke that when I drove home to Boston to move back in with my parents, I didn't have enough money to pay the last toll on the highway, and had no choice but to just speed right through the light.

That was rock bottom.

Then, a couple of weeks later, I received an email that changed my life. Robert Gibbs, who had been one of my bosses during the early months of the Kerry campaign, was now Senator Barack Obama's communications director, and told me that he was looking for a speechwriter. Since he had just written one of the best speeches in recent memory, my first response was "Why?" And Gibbs said, "Well, if there were 48 hours in a day, he could keep writing all his own speeches. But there are only 24 hours, and he's in the national spotlight. He needs help. You interested?"

I sat down for breakfast with Obama during his very first week in the Senate. The interview was surprisingly easy. We talked about our families. We talked about why we got into politics. We talked about the lost art of storytelling in

speeches. But most of all, we didn't talk about the line I made him remove from his convention speech, because he didn't remember that was me. And at the end of the conversation he said something that I'll never forget. He said, "Well, I still don't think I need a speechwriter, but Gibbs keeps telling me I do, and you seem nice enough." And with that, I was hired.

People ask me what working with the President is like, and I always think about the night I left the office to write my very first Obama speech. He yelled after me, "Favs! I know it's your first speech, and I know you're nervous. But I'm a writer too, so I also know that sometimes the muse strikes, and sometimes it doesn't. If you get stuck, just come in tomorrow and we'll talk it through."

And that's how he was for eight years. No matter how much stress or pressure he was under, he never once yelled at me. He never once lost his patience. For each speech, I'd start by getting advice from our political advisors, and then asking our policy experts to help me explain their issue with fewer acronyms and more English. Then I'd sit down with the President, type out every word he said on the topic, offer my thoughts, and then go off and write a draft. When I finished, I'd send the draft to the President, and one of two things would happen: either the speech would come back completely

marked up with edits in black pen, or it would come back with no marks whatsoever and a note that said “Let’s talk”, which did not mean that he wanted to personally congratulate me on how awesome the speech was.

But somehow, the two of us made it work for eight years – and in the process, I learned more than I could have ever imagined about writing, about politics, and about life.

The first and most important lesson I learned is that the story is more important than the words. In politics, we’re constantly asking the question, “How do we break through?” And by that we mean, how do we deliver a message that actually sticks – a message that gets covered by the press and repeated by the public? I’m sure most of you have asked a similar question, no matter where you work or what you’re trying to communicate.

Now, when I first started speechwriting, I would always start by asking myself, “What’s the clever line? What’s the snappy soundbite? What’s the most unique, catchy, memorable thing I can write?”

The President taught me that really, those are the wrong questions to ask, and trying too hard to answer them can

produce writing that sounds forced, artificial, and too cute by half. If you’re only focused on lines and soundbites, you can easily miss the forest for the trees.

The correct first question to ask is, “What’s the story I’m trying to tell?” I’m not talking about the interesting anecdotes we often use to humanize a speech – though those are important too. I’m talking about knowing your central theme and core message. I’m talking about building a speech with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Whether you’re into outlines or not – and I’m not – you should always be able to sum up your entire speech in a few very conversational sentences before you start writing it. And later, if you find yourself adding words that don’t directly build on and support that initial, central summary, go ahead and delete them.

One of the most difficult speeches I worked on with President Obama was the Iowa Jefferson-Jackson Dinner Speech, which took place in November of 2007. This was the last time all six Democratic candidates for president would appear together in front of voters before the Iowa Caucuses. Most of the politicians and reporters in the state and around the country showed up. And each candidate only had 10 minutes to make their case.

The ten minute deadline was enormously helpful for us, because throughout much of the summer and fall, Obama could not stop talking during his stump speech. He had been very affected by the criticism that he was an “empty suit” compared to Hillary Clinton, so he decided to prove everyone wrong by delivering these long, detailed stump speeches about every policy issue under the sun, just to show how knowledgeable he was. He’d go on for 50 minutes to an hour at each campaign stop. But his poll numbers didn’t budge at all.

What was missing was the simple, compelling story of why he was running; the story of why he was the right person to be president at this particular moment in history.

So that’s the story we focused on for the ten minute Jefferson Jackson speech. The Clinton campaign, by contrast, focused on a slogan. And the slogan they came up with was “Turn Up the Heat, Turn America Around,” which I believe is etched into a monument nowhere. But to be totally honest, many people on our campaign were also initially consumed with the hunt for the perfect slogan as well. Fortunately, Barack Obama wasn’t one of them. Instead, we started writing the speech by asking ourselves a simple question and forcing ourselves to come up with a simple reply: Out of all the other

candidates on that stage, what at this moment in history should people elect Barack Obama as President of the United States?

Once we got that answer down to a few sentences, we had the basis for our speech. And the President went on to deliver a stem-winder that marked the beginning of his improbable comeback and ultimate victory in the Democratic primary.

So that’s the first lesson I learned from the President – the importance of telling a short, simple, compelling story about what you want to say.

The second valuable lesson I learned from the President was about the importance of honesty and authenticity in writing and communications.

I remember when the President decided to give a major speech on race after a controversy surfaced over incendiary comments made by his pastor. Initially, our campaign advised him to play it safe, scheduling a round of quick cable interviews that were short enough to avoid getting into any troubling details.

But the President didn't want to play it safe. So, after campaigning until 10pm the next day, he called me to lay out the speech he would give just a few days later. And if you look at that race speech today, I can tell you that the parts I wrote were the sections that any politician could have delivered. The parts that Barack Obama wrote were lines like "I can no more disown Reverend Wright than I can my white grandmother, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but who more than once has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe."

Now, that is not a line any speechwriter or political strategist would have suggested to their boss. And I remember that after the speech was over, the President called and said, "I don't know if this speech will make the problem go away, and I don't know if you can get elected President saying things like this about race. But I also know that I don't deserve to be President if I'm too scared to say what I believe."

Writing honestly and authentically is tremendously important. I'm not just talking about getting all your facts straight – though that's key. I once gave the President a line that read "I believe the nation that invented the automobile cannot walk away from it." It would have been one of my favorites, had I written it for a German chancellor, because

that's the country that actually invented the automobile. Instead, the words were spoken by Barack Obama, and swiftly fact-checked by ABC News.

But when I say it's important to write and tell stories with honesty, what I really mean is that it's important to do so with courage, and character, and grit. Let's be honest: these days, we are fed a lot of spin and B.S. by a lot of different people – politicians, public relations types, press flaks, advertisers, you name it. It's true in politics and it's true in the private sector. A lot of this B.S. isn't necessarily malicious lies – it's just language that's been so sanded-down, sanitized, and focus-grouped that it's become meaningless. And the reason we hear it is because politicians and companies and big organizations are terrified of taking risks. They are scared of saying something – anything – that might be criticized, or taken out of context, or used to attack them.

But here's what I've learned: the greatest enemy of effective storytelling is caution. Caution is what makes you choose language that is acceptable to everyone but excites no one. Caution is what makes you tell stories that are safe and benign but bland and boring. A Barack Obama driven by caution would have never given that speech on race, or many others that helped make him president.

So here's the test: if you'd be embarrassed to recite what you're writing or saying in conversation with a friend because it sounds like something you'd hear from a used car salesman or a politician – try writing it a different way. Give it some edge. Give it some grit. I guarantee people will appreciate the honesty and authenticity.

And this brings me to the final major lesson I learned from the President – storytelling is fundamentally about maintaining your idealism. This is a hard one. I understand that cynicism can seem like a logical response to the daily flood of headlines about problems that can't be solved and people who behave badly – the celebrities and CEOs and politicians who are supposedly driven only by ego and greed and personal gain. It is hardly original to point out that trust in major institutions has declined around the world, as more leaders' mistakes and deficiencies are revealed and reported and endlessly analyzed. But here's the truth: so long as institutions like government, media, business, and faith are created by human beings, with all our faults and imperfections, they will frustrate us. They will disappoint us. They will let us down.

Cynicism is one response to this reality. If you want, you can approach the world with constant distrust and suspicion. You

can be a critic who just throws rocks from the sidelines, which requires very little effort or creativity. Or you can disengage from the public debate altogether, leaving the big decisions about your future and your children's future to somebody else.

But remember: cynicism isn't the only response to humanity's inadequacies and limitations. Cynicism is a choice. It is just as much of a choice as service to others, or commitment to a worthy cause. As my old boss taught me, it is just as much of a choice as hope.

From conflicts to tragedies to outbreaks, there is a lot of bad news out there – especially lately. But despite all the recent turmoil, it is also true that we live in a world where fewer people are dying young, and more people are living longer. It is a world where there are more girls in school, more adults who can read. It is a world with less hunger, less poverty, and less deadly disease than at any time in history. It is a world with fewer nations at war and more democracies protecting more people's basic human rights.

All of these trends are real, and none are the result of vague forces or happy accidents. People made this progress. People chose to make this progress – many people, working many

years. People in governments and non-profits. People with great power and wealth, and people with very little of either. People who, despite all of their flaws and failings and shortcomings, decided to press forward, believing that there must be an upward trajectory to our journey.

I'll be honest: I fight the urge to be cynical every time I turn on the news. But in those moments, I often think about one of the most inspiring things I've experienced during my time in politics.

It was the night of the 2008 election, but it wasn't the moment they called the race for Barack Obama. It was earlier, as I was making edits to that night's speech. The draft ended with a story we found about a woman from Atlanta named Ann Nixon Cooper who had waited in line for three hours that day just her to cast ballot. And what made the story so special was the fact that Ann Nixon Cooper was 106 years old, born at a time when she wasn't allowed to vote for two reasons – because she was a woman, and because she was African-American.

As the election results started looking good, my friend pointed out that we should probably call Ann Nixon Cooper and let her know that she's about to get a bit of a shout out.

So we find her number, and I tell this frail, lovely woman that a man who's about to become the first black President of the United States wants to mention her in his victory speech.

There was a pause on the line, and I began to think about all that Ms. Cooper endured through a century marked by war and depression; brutal prejudice and discrimination; a century where she patiently pressed on as a tutor and a church volunteer and a civil rights activist; as a wife, and a mother, and a grandmother; a century where she somehow lived to see progress she must have only dreamed about as a child: women's rights and voting rights and civil rights for all.

And just then Ann Nixon Cooper interrupted my thoughts with an important question about that night's speech: "Will it be on television?" I told her yes, it would be on television. So she thought about that, paused for awhile longer, and asked, "Which channel will it be on?" And I said "All the channels!" Then she said, "I'm so proud. I'm so happy. Finally." And at that point, she started to cry. And I did too. And right at that moment, they called Ohio, the race was over, everyone started cheering, and I hid under my desk so I could talk to Ann Nixon Cooper for a few more minutes.

Not all the days were that fulfilling. There were just as many downs as ups. The work was hard. The hours were long. And we made plenty of mistakes. But every once in awhile, there are moments that remind us why it is that we do what we do. Recognize those moments, and remember them – because they are the source of constant inspiration, and the stuff of great storytelling.

About Jon Favreau

Jon Favreau (born June 2, 1981) is a former Director of Speechwriting for President Barack Obama. Favreau attended the College of the Holy Cross, graduating as valedictorian. In college, he accumulated a variety of scholastic honors, and took part in and directed numerous community and civic programs. After graduation, he went to work for the John Kerry Presidential campaign in 2004, working to collect talk radio news for the campaign, and eventually was promoted to the role of Deputy Speechwriter.

Favreau was hired as Obama's speechwriter shortly after Obama's election to the United States Senate. Obama and Favreau grew close, and Obama has referred to him as his "mind reader". He went on the campaign trail with Obama during his successful Presidential election campaign. When President Obama assumed office in 2009, Favreau was appointed Assistant to the President and Director of Speechwriting. He left the West Wing in February 2013.

Featured in TIME magazine as one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World" and in GQ's "50 Most

Powerful People in D.C.”, Favreau is also a columnist for The Daily Beast and a public speaker with the Washington Speakers Bureau. He taught a weekly seminar as a Spring 2013 visiting fellow at the University of Chicago Institute of Politics.

Favreau is co-founder of Fenway Strategies, a creative communications and public relations consulting agency.

Previous BKB Lectures

2013

Şafak Pavey (Turkish Member of Parliament for opposition party CHP) | *Between Turkey and Europe: democracy's new clothes...*

Discussant: Marietje Schaake en Frans Timmermans.

2012

John Podesta (former Chief of Staff of President Clinton) | *Building a progressive future; Challenges and opportunities in Europe and America.*

Discussant: Lodewijk Asscher.

2011

Esraa Abdel Fattah (Egyptian internet activist and blogger) | *Eighteen days - A personal account of the Egyptian revolution.*

Discussants: Femke Halsema and Petra Stienen.

2010

Fanie Du Toit (director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (South Africa)) | *Relativism, reconciliation and reality - Ethical politics in divided societies.*

Discussant: Frans Timmermans.

2009

Rob Wijnberg (philosopher and former editor in chief of nrc.next) | *The haste of the Netherlands* (*De haast van Nederland*).

Discussant: Felix Rottenberg.



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