

15. On the Voices of a University President

The work of a university president is an unusual blend. Some of the work is the familiar work of a professor. Almost all presidents are able to make at least a little time to teach students, read the scholarly writings of colleagues, participate in academic discussions, and write in their areas of expertise. For most presidents, however, those activities are cherished opportunities, all too rare, more often crowded out by the other requirements of the job.

Much more of a president's work resembles that of the chief executive in any large, complex organization. Many hours each day must be devoted to "management"—brief meetings and conversations, often leading to quick decisions, about strategic direction, organizational structure, budgetary priorities, senior administrative appointments, and the like. Additional time is consecrated to representing the university in its interactions with other organizations—governmental bodies, private sector partners, other universities, and the various associations in which universities are members.

A president's most important time goes to what might be called "leadership." If the university is to be more than a collection of schools and constituencies, it must be animated by a shared understanding of its history, traditions, and aspirations. The president bears the responsibility to develop a narrative about the university's past and a vision for its future, in consultation with a broad array of internal and external stakeholders. And the president bears the responsibility for building a broadly shared commitment to realizing that vision.

A university president's job is especially unusual, however, in the extent to which it requires him or her to stand up and "make some remarks" to an audience, large or small. Almost every day entails at least one such occasion. Often they have the tenor of a benediction—a few minutes of pertinent observations to open a conference or a dinner, or a bit of laudatory biography to introduce a guest speaker.

Such speeches involve very little in the way of original, substantive ideas. Almost always the words are drafted for the president by someone else, sometimes seen only moments before they are presented. The president might or might not embellish them, might or might not leaven them with some spontaneous humor.

This kind of speechmaking carries a certain performative satisfaction. Every president learns how to make an emotional and intellectual connection with an audience through such mechanisms as tone, pace, cadence, facial expression, and body language. And it can be gratifying to do so under circumstances when one has had little time to prepare to speak words that are not one's own.

Yet that is a rather tepid gratification.

A gifted speechwriter can imitate—often brilliantly—another person's characteristic modes of speech and persuasion. The speechwriter can hear the outline of an argument and fill it in effectively, with interesting illustrations and deft quotations from others. Make no mistake, a speechwriter can write a very fine speech.

Still, in my experience, reciting even the best such work was never the same as delivering a speech I had the chance to write myself. An important part of the difference, of course, had nothing to do with the audience. Even if the audience was absolutely mesmerized by a ghostwritten speech, it could never mean as much to me. Even if the jokes were hilariously funny, they weren't mine. Even if the insights were profound, they belonged to someone else.

Now you might well be wondering, "Couldn't you just put down your own insights and your own best jokes, give them to a speechwriter, and let them fill in the connective tissue that isn't particularly memorable?" In fact, some presidents do exactly that. But for me, one of the wondrous facts of presidential speechmaking was that almost all my best insights, almost all my best jokes, and absolutely all of my most evocative turns of phrase emerged in the process of writing.

They were not fully developed before I sat down at the computer. They came to me as I struggled with the challenge of thinking about how to express my ideas to a specific audience. The words and the ideas emerged through the process of imagining my listeners, sitting in an auditorium or a stadium, trying to follow along. I imagined them nodding, I imagined them bewildered, I imagined them disagreeing.

It was when I imagined them disagreeing that I gained the most. Those were the moments when I had to extend myself, sharpen my claims, and qualify my exaggerations. And sometimes, in those moments, I would decide to take a risk.

And it is here that I believe there is an almost inevitable difference between a ghostwritten speech and one that is written by the person who delivers it. It is very hard for someone else to decide that I should take a risk. And I do believe that sometimes the risky points—the claims that are not quite provable but still might resonate with the listener—are the points that make a speech memorable.

That is why I chose to write all of my most significant speeches myself. With two exceptions, I wrote all of the speeches in this book from start to finish. The first exception, chapter 13 ("Wisdom"), was never a speech. It reflects ideas that I developed in dialogue with Bob Constable and has its origins in a text that he drafted.

The other exception, chapter 14 ("Sustainability"), was developed in the way that many speakers work with speechwriters. I met with my colleague Connie Kintner and set out the ideas I wanted to convey. We talked about different ways to present them. And she prepared an excellent draft, sensitively capturing the voice that she knew from the other chapters in this volume. I then edited her draft (most notably adding the observations that sustainability should be thought of as a relative, rather than absolute, notion—our goal should be to keep finding relatively more sustainable societies rather than to make a leap to a perfectly sustainable way of life). I decided to include chapter 14 in this volume both because it offers the reader an opportunity to

contrast its voice with my voice in the first 13 chapters, and because it is the only speech I have given on the third of the three themes that I set forth in chapter 7 (“Renewal”).



It is reasonable to wonder how, having committed to write your own speeches, you can avoid the panic of writer’s block. I developed a set of 12 guidelines that helped me to know I could produce a 20–30 minute talk in relatively short order. I did not develop these guidelines in advance—only in writing this chapter have I consciously written them down. But they fairly characterize my *modus operandi*.

These guidelines are most relevant to my addresses to students. Those are the settings in which a president’s voice can ring most clearly. One has more permission to speak as a teacher, rather than as a colleague. But I came to discover that in other contexts many of the same guidelines can serve as well.

The 12 guidelines are these:

1. Make a normative claim that can be expressed in one sentence. In the first chapter, my claim was, “Push yourself to engage in intellectual debate rather than assuming issues to be matters of opinion.” In the second it was, “Revere the craft of writing.” In the third it was, “Resist the temptation to protect your sense of purity by avoiding interactions with those who might be somehow tainted.” In the fourth, “Find ways to remain curious—both inquiring and open.” This is the one thing I usually knew before I sat down to write. Candidates for such themes would occur to me in various settings, and I would store them up in a computer file, to draw on at an appropriate point

2. Discuss one or two works of literature. I am fond of the presidential speech that charts an indirect route to its destination, a route that passes by way of an encounter with great literature. This route provides an unstated argument for the importance of fiction, and in my experience it engages the audience more deeply than a speech that moves back and forth between syllogistic reasoning and snippets of quotation from famous thinkers.

3. Minimize the use of aphoristic quotations. The stock-in-trade of the after-dinner speaker is the apt quotation from a great writer. And with the Internet chock full of such wonderful resources as the Samuel Johnson Sound Bite Page (“Over 1,800 quotes from the great English lexicographer and essayist!”), it is not difficult to project erudition. In my experience, however, brief quotations—even profound and obscure ones—are not very satisfying in a presidential address. Unless they are integrated deeply into the fabric of a talk, I find them to be at worst distractions from the speaker’s point, and at best the equivalent of a nice pun.

4. Connect the text to the central theme and connect the text’s author to the audience. In selecting a text to work with, I usually began by looking for an author whom I knew was connected in some way to my audience, and then looked inside the material for thematic connections. So I chose E.B. White, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison because they were Cornellians. And I chose Copernicus because I saw a copy of *The Revolutions* in Cornell’s rare book collection, a copy that had belonged to Cornell’s first president. The same recommendation applies to movies—for example, my son Jacob introduced me to *The Big Lebowski* and (accurately) predicted that it would give me an easy connection with my audience of newly minted college students.

Less frequently, I worked in the other direction, choosing a book because of its thematic content, and then working backwards to find a connection between author and audience. One example of this approach was my use of Sartre’s *Les Mains Sales* in chapter 3 (“Dirt”). I decided to make use of his text before I knew whether he had any connection to Cornell. It was a stroke of good fortune that his one close encounter with Cornell made him the perfect foil for my argument.

5. Do not be afraid to use the texts metaphorically to advance your argument. *The Big Lebowski* wasn’t really talking about the need for intellectual engagement in debate. Copernicus wasn’t talking about what makes a university revolutionary. It is unlikely that Vonnegut thought Ice-9 would stand