

5-23-2014

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### Recommended Citation

Favreau, Jonathan Edward, "2014 Commencement Address: Jon Favreau '03" (2014). *Commencement Addresses*. 18.  
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# 2014 Commencement Address - Jon Favreau '03

May 23, 2014



President Boroughs, Members of the Board of Trustees, honored guests, faculty, family, friends, and the Class of 2014:

I'm so grateful and honored for the chance to share this day with you. Jeff, you gave an outstanding valedictory address. And unlike the speech I delivered in 2003, you managed to finish without describing people who solve problems as "Boo-Boo Fixers." Yeah, that's the kind of thing that follows you around for life. Really, my friends made t-shirts.

Since then, I've marginally improved my use of metaphor, and spent the last decade working as a speechwriter, which means that not a spring has passed where I haven't helped with somebody else's commencement address. I say this less as a point of pride than a friendly warning: I have now trafficked in every cliché and life lesson known to man.

I am like a human search engine of sentimental quotes and anecdotes. And if there are times today when I sound a bit too much like a middle-aged black man from Chicago, all I can say is that old habits die hard.

Of course, this commencement is very different for me – and very special. Eleven years later, I still have vivid memories of what it felt like to sit where you are right now. I especially recall the feeling I had after this ceremony was over, when my roommates and I took a long, rainy walk down Southbridge St. to the three-story tenement we called home. Actually, we called it the Crackhouse, a name we convinced our parents came from a large crack in the foundation. Honestly, the house didn't even have a foundation. It barely had walls.

For the rest of that afternoon, as the twelve of us packed up our rooms for the last time, we barely spoke – and that's because none of us had answers to the questions on everyone's mind: What now? Where do we go from here? How are we supposed to figure out what to do with our lives? And how will anything top the experience we just had together?

Now, some of you might be sitting here today with a very detailed plan and no anxiety whatsoever. I want you to know that I find you annoying, but wish you the best of luck. For the rest of you, I come bearing three quick pieces of advice – advice I offer as someone who has safely and happily made it to the other side of thirty with everything I could've hoped for except the grandchildren my mother keeps asking for. I can actually see her nodding her head from here.

My first piece of advice is about your career. A mentor of mine once told me there are two kinds of people: people who want to be something, and people who want to do something. For a long time, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer.

I didn't love studying law, and it wasn't really my strong suit, but lawyers seemed important, impressive, and successful – three things I also wanted to be.

Law school was my plan until about twelve hours before Holy Cross graduation, when I received an offer to be the press office assistant on John Kerry's presidential campaign for a salary of \$20,000 a year. Now, I didn't really want to be anyone's assistant, nor did I want to be someone who made \$20,000 a year. But the job involved writing, and writing was something I loved to do. It also involved campaigning, which was something I wanted to do. So two weeks later, I moved into a dingy basement apartment on Capitol Hill in a city where I had only one friend. It was the best decision of my life.

Plenty of considerations go into choosing a job, and sometimes the most important is simply the fact that you receive an offer and a salary that will pay off your loans.

But the chase to be something – to be rich, famous, powerful, praised – that is a race without a finish line, because there will always be more money to make, or a fancier title to pursue, or a higher accolade to achieve. In my experience, you are far more likely to find lasting fulfillment if these fleeting pleasures are the byproduct of a decision to do something – something that interests you; something you're good at; something your gut is just begging you to try.

Now, this advice comes with an important disclaimer: just because a career is fulfilling doesn't mean it will always be fun. I may never again be blessed with a job that brings me as much satisfaction as the one I had writing speeches for President Obama. I may also never have a job that I complain about as much. And long before I was hanging around the Oval Office, I was taking lunch orders in a press office, changing the batteries in people's Blackberries, and compiling news clippings at 4am.

Once, as part of a campaign stunt to protest "Republican trash attacks," I had to walk out from behind a dumpster wearing a giant garbage bag, which made for an enjoyable segment on the news that night. Don't bother trying to find the footage – my friends have been looking for years.

The point is, don't let this fancy new degree fool you into thinking you're somehow above the very menial and tedious work that the most rewarding careers often require – especially when you first start out. Older people who think they know better have labeled this generation entitled. Do us all a favor and prove them wrong.

My second piece of advice is about the people in your life. One of the most beautiful stories you'll ever read is the interview the *Telegram & Gazette* did with Celtics legend and fellow Crusader Bob Cousy, shortly after his wife of 63 years passed away.

Looking back on his younger, busier days, The Cooz said "I thought putting a ball in a hole was important...I was always working. So Missie and I had the best and romantic part of our marriage at the end. We literally held hands for the last twenty years."

After a decade on the campaign trail and in the White House, the biggest regrets I have aren't professional. I don't stay up at night thinking about the bad speech reviews, or the time I put an awful joke about spilled milk in the State of the Union. What I regret is missing my buddy's wedding right before the election. What I regret is not getting on the first plane out of DC the time my dad was really sick. I regret when I forgot to call home or catch up with an old friend. And while I'm pretty happy about today's honor, I'm even happier it gave so many people I love and miss an excuse to get together again.

In a world on permanent hyperdrive, the pressure to succeed in your career will come from everywhere.

The pressure to succeed in your friendships and relationships has to come from you. YOU have to return the calls and the emails and schedule the visits. YOU have to put away the distractions and be present in the lives of the people you love. And the older you get, the more you realize that this is the best, most important work you'll ever do.

My final piece of advice is about the world you're going to change. A few weeks ago, I was proud to see the "NBC Nightly News" profile the students who've taken part in Working for Worcester, a project that has helped rebuild lives and neighborhoods throughout this city. I was also reminded how painfully rare it is to come across a news story about the selfless devotion that quietly motivates so many people in so many places around the globe.

Never forget that such devotion exists. Never lose the palpable faith in human progress that is the greatest gift of a Jesuit education from Holy Cross.

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 of both parties 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, as more of their 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 faith in God. It is just as much of a choice as love – love that bears all things, believes all things, endures all things, hopes all things.

My wish today is that you choose to hope – hard and risky as it may be. My wish is that you choose to give others the same presumption of good faith that you want to be given. My wish is that despite all the sound and logical reasons not to, you choose to try.

The world beyond these gates is marked by too much suffering and need; it is challenged by too much inequality, and violence, and degradation. But it is also a world where fewer people are dying young, and more people are living longer. 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.

It is a world where there are more girls in school, more adults who can read, more Americans graduating from high school, and yes, more of our citizens with health care.

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 with determination and honest effort, believing that there must be an upward trajectory to our divine and humble journey.

Life is a wonderful struggle. And the downside of getting advice from a 32-year-old is that I haven't come close to figuring it out. There are days when I feel like I'm still standing in the Crackhouse, surrounded by boxes. I still wonder if I'm focused on what I want to do instead of what I want to be. I still wonder if I'm making enough time for the people I love.

And every time I turn on the news, I fight the urge to be cynical. But in those moments, I often think about one of the most inspiring things I've experienced since leaving these gates.

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.

Life is a wonderful struggle. And we are all very lucky that this special place on a hill has prepared us to live it well – with grace, love, patience, and above all, hope.

Congratulations to the Class of 2014, and may you be blessed with all the happiness and success the world has to offer.

Thank you.