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Articulating good ideas in a speech is not the same as originating them

By Diether Haenicke
June 10, 2009

When we listen to high-placed public officials, Fortune 500 CEOs, college presidents, TV announcers, or well-known politicians, we can safely assume that their formal speeches were not written by themselves.

It has become an accepted fact that most of these people read to us texts that were crafted by persons in their service, namely paid speech writers.

Every time I dedicate a new building on campus, praise the accomplishments of an honored person, or publicly accept a major donation, someone hands me, a day earlier, typed statements that I am to read at the special event.

Mine are typically written by Cheryl Roland, a fine writer and the head of our university relations office, and, quite as typically, I put her good texts aside and address the audience in my own words. I guess it drives Cheryl crazy. She puts much effort into preparing these speeches, and I am grateful to have them as a safeguard, just in case I should run dry and have nothing to say. But that rarely happens, and I simply prefer to speak extemporaneously, off the cuff, and from the heart.

Predictably, my off-the-cuff remarks can't compete with the beautifully crafted texts our staff hands to me. But I have a strong need to sound like myself, stumbling as it may appear sometimes, and I usually connect with audiences much better than if I read speeches prepared by ghostwriters.

I have another problem with ghostwriters. If I hear a public figure comment on a specific issue, I would like to know what that person actually thinks about it and not what someone else may have told him to say. Politicians' speeches in particular have

become so phony to me because I assume, as a matter of course, that not more than 10 words of all speeches have been authored by those who deliver them. CEOs, presidents and public officials have become, in their public announcements, readers of ideas, not their originators. Is a speech that you have not written yourself actually "your" speech?

But the practice is widely accepted, and we don't question it any more. We like to ascribe famous quotes such as, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," and "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" to John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt. But most likely these have flown from someone else's pen and will forever be credited to those who spoke, but not to those who crafted the sentences.

It is reassuring to know that the author of "...that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth" is firmly established. Lincoln indeed did write one of the greatest speeches in American history himself. He knew how to write effectively, and he took the time to do so. That tradition, sadly, is gone.

What goes for speeches, also goes for books. I always knew that Carolyn Keene, the author of the Nancy Drew mystery series, is a pseudonym for a whole slew of ghostwriters who write the popular books. But I did not know that J.F. Kennedy's book "Profiles in Courage," for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, was not penned by him, and that Tim Russert's heartwarming best-selling memoir of his father, "Big Russ and Me," was ghostwritten; as was Hillary Clinton's autobiography; as were the memoirs of Nancy Reagan; as were Donald Trump's several books; and as were those of many other celebrities. I realize that Paris Hilton could not possibly write her own biography, simply because it involves writing, but Tim Russert should not have a ghostwriter pull at our heartstrings.

And I have one last problem. College presidents all over the country step before audiences and read ghostwritten papers and declare them their own. If any student on campus did the same or handed in a paper that was "ghostwritten," he would immediately be brought up on charges of severe academic misconduct. The president might get a pay increase for his visionary ideas. The student would most certainly be dismissed from college. Go figure!

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