

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 121: BJ Novak

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Tim Ferriss: BJ, welcome to the show.

BJ Novak: Thanks for having me here. It's very cool.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, I appreciate it and we are sitting in Venice at my friend's house – Devon and his friend Travis Brewer, who's on "American Ninja Warrior" – so we have this incredible workout facility to the right – to my right, I guess – of the garage. But you do not... You work in Venice but you live an hour away?

BJ Novak: I live over an hour away so I have been getting into podcasts... I actually enjoy – I was telling you on the way in – I enjoy getting to see this other part of town because L.A. is really like several different cities and I have never really known the West Side so it's worth it to me, at least for now to spend that hour. And listening to podcasts on the drive, it's really like an extra hour of reading a day.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have any particular go-to podcasts at the moment?

BJ Novak: I just started getting into yours. What else do I like? I love this podcast called, "The Great Debate." It's a comedy.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: I'm not familiar with that.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: – a comedy debate podcast. It's people really at the top of their intelligence – two Harvard friends of mine who are very well-educated erudite comedy writers – just going at the most trivial and bizarre topics. One topic was, "It would be cool if the Pope had an affair with Maura Tierney." And one of them took the side, "The Catholic Church needs this sort of jolt and rebranding."

And the other person saying, "What's the point of an institution like this...?" So I'd say –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: So it's like debate club?

BJ Novak: Yeah. And then there's one intelligent squared which is the serious debate.

Tim Ferriss: The serious version of that?

BJ Novak: Yeah, the serious version of the comedy version of the serious thing. And that's been really interesting, too.

Tim Ferriss: For those of you wondering what the whining is, it's not BJ – that's Molly, my dog. You mentioned two Harvard friends – or fellow Harvard graduates – I have a question about Harvard.

BJ Novak: And you're a Princeton guy?

Tim Ferriss: I went to the lesser known with the P. But it seems like there is a rich history of people coming to Hollywood from Harvard.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: That you don't associate with, say, Yale – or maybe so but I haven't come across it as much – or other Ivies. Why is that? Because it seems to go back quite a ways.

My family, at one point, knew Henry Beard –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Oh, yeah.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: – who then helped create "National Lampoon's."

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: And it just seems to go way, way back and I'd love to hear why that is. I really don't know.

BJ Novak: The main correlation that I am familiar with is the Harvard Lampoon, which is a really one-of-a-kind comedy magazine that has its own spectacular castle building in the middle of prime real estate in Harvard Square. William Randolph Hearst funded this incredibly bizarre and exciting old building and that has fostered a

lot of intelligent people trying to get into this building/magazine/party house. And those people train each other really, I wouldn't quite say viciously, but really rigorously about comedy. "This joke doesn't progress. This joke is predictable." And it's very rare that you'll get 19 year olds being hard on funny 18 year olds year after year.

And so I think that is a training system that is unlike just about anything else you'd be exposed to at that age. So that has led to a lot of people falling in love with and becoming very good at comedy writing which is a real a building block of entertainment that can be put to use – so a lot of people have traditionally graduated "The Harvard Lampoon" and gone on to write for "The Simpsons" or "Saturday Night Live," or many, many other shows. And I think once you see graduates do that, you think, "Oh, maybe I could do that." But a big advantage, I think, of going to a fancy school or my dad – who did not go to a fancy school but is a writer – a lot of people ask me, "Oh, did you have those advantages?" Yes, of course, to an extent, but I find the biggest advantage is just not thinking that it's a crazy idea to try to be a comedy writer or to try to be a writer.

Many people waste years working as a lawyer, working whatever they do that they think of as a more reasonable choice before they finally get the courage to write. So I think that the huge advantage is, if you have the talent – no matter where you are – if you believe that it's a reasonable choice of action, you're extremely fortunate. And that, I think, is a main advantage of going to Harvard – it doesn't seem crazy.

Tim Ferriss:

Right. You have these historical case studies of people who have done exactly what you might fantasize about doing. And the rigor and the training is very interesting to me because I was the graphics editor at "The Princeton Tiger," so the satire magazine – cartoons, illustrations – that was my department and I wanted that job partially because Jim Lee, who is an iconic hero in the comic book world for me, had that previous post at Princeton.

And I found a bunch of his drawings, actually, that he did when he was shitfaced drunk after going to a party on Nassau Street, but that's a separate story. The approach really was "Do something funny" and there wasn't a lot of structure. There was feedback of something sucked, obviously, or just didn't get any type of laughs, whatsoever, but where did that structure develop? Did people come back from, say, the industry and help instill that in some way or did it just develop organically among the students?

BJ Novak: The career path of it?

Tim Ferriss: No, I mean the being hard on underclassmen and looking at whether something progresses or not, etc.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Well, I imagine that was simply imitative of other rigorous extracurricular at a school like that where the ski club, or rowing, or "The Harvard Crimson" newspaper, or whatever, probably – it's more inherited from that because a lot of people want to do these activities and you limit it to the people that you feel – and it's an incredibly subjective process – but are the most talented at comedy writing.

And so you put them through, "Well, can you do this? Can you do that?" And you have to write a number of pieces in order to get on the staff. So I think that everything at a place like that is very competitive and so this is just that same rigor applied to this very incredibly subjective, and often thought to be trivial field of comedy writing.

Tim Ferriss: Did you –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: And this did not lead to the best comedy writers, by any means. That's just one advantage. And the other advantage is that they believe they can do it. There are also huge disadvantages to coming from "The Harvard Lampoon" which is a lack of life experience, or being in touch with what real people actually find funny, or a sense of cockiness that is very antithetical to comedy. So there are definitely advantages and disadvantages to coming from a place like that.

Tim Ferriss: At what point in your undergrad did you get involved with "The Lampoon?"

BJ Novak: Well, I tried to get on from the very beginning. You "comp" is the term for auditioning for it with your writing so I tried three semesters. So I didn't get on until the middle of my sophomore year but I wanted to be on from Day 1.

Tim Ferriss: What do you think changed between your first attempts and getting accepted? How did you improve or was it just...?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: I have no idea. I probably just improved because I was older and had been doing it longer but it's also incredibly subjective. If I had not gotten on, I had vowed to never try again and then decide those people didn't know what the fuck they were talking about. And then I did get on and, actually, I did keep a healthy sense of, "This is not the be-all, end-all." But it's so subjective.

Tim Ferriss: When you then did writing after college...

Well, actually, let's not hit fast forward although I'm happy to jump around. The next step after graduating – what happened in the year after graduation?

BJ Novak: Well, I have a bizarre course of events. What it has in common with everyone else is that everyone who gets a job in show business, they have a story that's not replicable. That's the one constant, ironically. So what happened was one of my main extracurriculars at Harvard was that I put on a show called "The BJ Show" with another kid named BJ who was a campus celebrity. He was a reality show star before reality because he had stowed away on a plane to visit his family for Thanksgiving – this was before 9/11 so it wasn't quite as bad, but, still, it made the papers. "Harvard Student Stows Away on Plane." He was "the guy from the plane" and so I saw an opportunity, here, to hitch my fame to his and we put on this –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: To get attached to the plane guy?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, exactly. "You know, I have the same name as the guy who was on the plane. Now maybe we should do something together. So we put on this show and I got my comedy friends and we wrote this... It was a variety show in parody of a variety show called "The BJ Show." My senior year, I decided, "Let's invite Bob Saget to perform in this show," because I had heard that he was a really filthy standup comic – which he is – so I knew that would surprise people.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Now what was the timing on this – this was probably...?

BJ Novak: This was 2001.

Tim Ferriss: 2001?

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, so this was before America's Funniest Home Videos?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: No, this is after.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Oh, I'm sorry, after.

BJ Novak: Yeah. So he's well-known as a family friendly guy but I have heard rumors that he's really filthy.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Filthy standup.

BJ Novak: So I think, "Maybe we can book him. Maybe we can honor him at 'The Harvard Lampoon' and, because he'll want the award, he'll come and do the show," – which worked perfectly.

I approached his management – I cold-called his management – and said, "I'm calling from Harvard. We want to give Bob Saget an award and feature him in the show." And this show, the proceeds went to charity. It wasn't a scam for me. I just thought it would be a great show. By the way, that's a great thing – if you don't care about the money, always give the money to charity because then everyone will do it. And, often, you just don't care about the money; you just want to put on something cool. So that's a thing I learned in college that I'll probably use again any time I have some cool scheme. They're like, "Sure. Keep the money. Who cares?" So I cold-called his management. I asked my dad, "How do you think I get in touch with Bob Saget?" He said, "Call CAA." We're from Boston. I don't know how he knows. He says, "Look up 411. Call CAA's number and ask CAA. They'll probably know." I was like, "That's so smart." So I called –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: One of the big agencies in town for...

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah. So I called CAA and I said, "Do you guys represent Bob Saget? The receptionist says, "No." I said, "Do you know who does?" They said, "I think Brillstein and Grey." So I look up Brillstein and Grey, I call Brillstein and Grey.

They do represent Bob Saget. They put me through to a guy. I explain my case. He says, "Send the stuff you're writing for Bob. I'll take a look." This guy later becomes my manager. So the manager, Michael Price, likes the material, recommends that Bob does it. Bob comes out and does the show which is a very highly scripted show. There's a parody of "Full House" called "The Lost Episode of Full House" in which Bob learns about sex from Uncle Jesse – very dirty, very funny. Anyway, so, after the show, Bob – and he had brought his show's creator – he was doing a new show that never really went anywhere but it lasted one season. It was called, "Raising Dad." Oddly, it starred Cat Dennings and Brie Larson who are now very successful people, as well. But they hired me – they were like, "Oh, cool, a young edgy writer from 'Harvard Lampoon,' perfect." They gave me a job on that staff while I was about to graduate. So I am graduating –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: That's a perfect set up.

BJ Novak: Perfect, in a way.

Tim Ferriss: In a way.

BJ Novak: Too good to be true on a career level but, again, I really had these fantasies of being a great artist, a great filmmaker, and a family WB show. I didn't want to move to L.A. I knew that I shouldn't say no to this – and I didn't say no to it. But I actually wanted to be a starving artist. Look, I'm from a suburb. Starving artist means I borrow a little money and live cheap – I have no real illusions. But I had mixed feelings so it was a dream come true in the career moving forward but it was, I don't know...

Tim Ferriss: What type of starving artist did you think you wanted to be when you were a sophomore, junior?

BJ Novak: I had read this book, "Easy Rider's Raging Bulls" about independent film.

Tim Ferriss: Would you recommend it?

BJ Novak: Highly recommend it.

Tim Ferriss: "Easy Rider's Raging Bulls?"

BJ Novak: "Easy Rider's Raging Bulls," about filmmaking in the glory days of the '70s.

And I wanted to be like that. And then there's a sequel about the Miramax – the '90s, Tarantino, Kevin Smith – that was also good. But I wanted to write a screenplay that would blow Hollywood apart – it was so edgy and innovative, etc. – and then demand to direct it and I think anyone who saw "Pulp Fiction" as a teenager, that was their fantasy. So that was very much my fantasy and, in my privileged wannabe artist mind, this was a sellout move. But I knew it would be even more privileged and eye-rolly to turn it down. So it's an interesting paradox – I've noticed this.

When I was young, I thought, "Oh, I'll never be a sellout. If anyone ever offers me something sellout-y, I'll always say no." Then you realize there's a huge integrity pull toward doing the sellout thing because you think, "Who am I to turn down all this money for something that someone else would struggle their whole lives, etc., etc.?"

And you actually feel very guilty into – towards, at least – doing what you would have considered a sellout thing. So it's an interesting paradox that I have observed with a lot of successful people. They get offered a really lame movie for a ton of money and their thought isn't, "Fuck that. I'm an artist." Their thought is, "God, who am I? I'd put my kids through college just to do a Christmas movie? Who am I to say no?" It's very surprising. It makes sense but I'm still –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: It does make sense. It's an incentive of guilt as opposed to an incentive of focus, in a way. It's like "The Christmas Story," where it's like, "There are starving kids in China." And you're like, "Oh, okay, I'll eat this food that you put in front of me."

BJ Novak: Right.

Tim Ferriss: How did you, then, make decisions or what happened after you were offered that gig on the...?

BJ Novak: I took it.

Tim Ferriss: You took it?

BJ Novak: Yeah. I took it. I moved to L.A., started writing for it, and I looked around the room... It's interesting. I kept telling myself, "I'm making so much money," – because, for a kid at that age, it's so much money – but every job I've had since then, I've made more money – on "The Office," for example – and I never thought, "I'm making so much money." So any time I'm telling myself, "I'm making so much money," that's a warning sign that you're doing the wrong thing. So I would tell myself that because I gradually realized, "This isn't the life I want." I'd look around this writer's room and think, "These are not the jobs I want."

And I'm glad I did. I really had these dreams of doing something important, and visible, and exciting. And the only people in the room who I did aspire to be something like were Bob Saget – who would come by now and then in his fancy car and cool sunglasses and tell ten jokes and leave and get to be the star of the show – and Jonathan Katz – who created the show and had previously created "Dr. Katz" on Comedy Central.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, sure.

BJ Novak: A really cool show.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, yeah, I know "Dr. Katz."

BJ Novak: And he also came by now and then, gave some words of wisdom and jokes, and then left, and was also celebrated for his own voice. And I thought, "Well, those are the guys I want to be." And they were both standups. So I had never thought of doing standup before then, but I realized, "Well, how insurmountable is this? Being a standup is writing a joke and then saying the joke and that is what I'm doing in this writers' room. I write a joke and I say it aloud to see if it goes in the script. I guess I could try that and try to be like them." And so, as the show was winding down, I signed up for open mics around L.A. and I would start saying one-liners into a microphone and I was kind of doing standup comedy.

Tim Ferriss: Do you remember any of your early bits when you did it?

BJ Novak: Yeah. Well, the first time was a real disaster and one of my most important pieces of advice to anyone doing standup is if you're really going to try standup, book your whole week of shows – your whole first week – in advance.

Tim Ferriss: So you can't quit?

BJ Novak: So you can't quit because I got up all this courage to do my first show – it was at a youth hostel, the Hollywood Youth Hostel. It was October 10th, 2001 – so less than a month after 9/11 and all my jokes were about 9/11. And I was not a good comic and the crowd didn't speak much English. And I followed a guy who killed. He did an impression of Robert DeNiro taking a dump and, I have to say, it was great. It was a great impression and you didn't need to know English. And it was completely the opposite of what I was doing. So I did this bit – it was horrible – and the host said after me – to try to keep the show going – all he could muster for me was, "It takes a lot of courage to get up on this stage." And, after that, I did not get on stage for three months. I had to work up the courage all over again because it had been such a disaster.

And, that time, I was like, "You know what? Tuesday, I'm going to this coffee shop, and Wednesday, I'm going to this bar..." – all these open mics. And the first night back, I did pretty well. And the second night, I didn't do well. But you can't make each night a referendum on whether or not you should be doing it. You just have to do a bunch.

Tim Ferriss: And how did your approach change between that first bomb and the second collection of attempts?

BJ Novak: It was really... It was exactly that – it was the idea that, "I'm going to really do this, night after night, and I will evolve the act..." And I was really bad for a while but, let's say you do 20 jokes and 3 of them get pity laughs – well, those are the 3 you keep. And then, after a while, 1 of them always does well – well, that's your opener. And now two of them do well – well, you have a closer. And you just sense, "Okay, when I do this kind of joke, it does well." And it evolves that way.

Tim Ferriss: And what did your parents do?

You mentioned your dad wrote. He wrote some memoirs or ghost-wrote some memoirs for some big people.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, that's what he does.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: What are some samples...?

BJ Novak: The biggest one he did was Lee Iococa – the biggest and first one he did. He also did the memoirs of Nancy Reagan, of Tip O'Neil, Magic Johnson – which was very exciting for me. He worked with Tim Russert on two books and George Stephanopoulos – so a lot of political people on both sides of the spectrum – and a lot of just eclectic business leaders. Various people.

Tim Ferriss: What did your mom do?

BJ Novak: My mom is a teacher now. She's done a bunch of things, though. She's had also an eclectic career.

Tim Ferriss: What did they think of your move to start – not startups, that comes a little later – standup? Similar sounding word. How did they feel about that? What were the conversations like?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, I think they thought I wasn't very good. My dad also is the co-editor of a couple humor books that are very good – "The Big Book of Jewish Humor" and "The Big Book of American Humor."

And my family, comedy's a big deal to us. They watch "Seinfeld" every night – "Seinfeld" and "Key and Peele" are the only things my parents watch which I think is very good taste. So I think they definitely supported me writing. I'd studied Literature at Harvard. My dad's a writer. There was nothing... Again, huge advantage for me that my parents thought writing was a good, solid job. And then standup was where they were like, "Eh. Okay. Get it out of your system. This is not you but whatever." They never said this to me but, in retrospect, it's like... It's the same thing onstage when the audience is laughing and then you say something off the cuff and you get a huge laugh and you realize, "Oh, they weren't even laughing before." My parents were supportive, supportive, supportive, and then they really supported something different and you're like, "Okay, so you were not... Okay, you were just being polite. Fair enough."

Tim Ferriss: And that was the sort of...

BJ Novak: But they were slow. They're supportive people. They came around and they supported "The Office" when I was with that.

Tim Ferriss: So what happened between that startup – I really want to say startup –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: It's just two letters.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: This is why I'm taking a break from startups is because I'm just completely brainwashed. From that first standup...

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: You could title this interview, "From Standup to Startup."

Tim Ferriss: I could.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: That could be your memoir.

BJ Novak: That could be. I'll call my dad right now.

Tim Ferriss: From that point to "The Office," – what happened between those?

BJ Novak: From that point to "The Office?" Well, "Raising Dad" got cancelled. I continued doing standup. I ran out of all the money that I had saved on my "big money year" in about a year and a half, two years of doing open mics and gradually getting better to the point of where, at the end of after a year of a half – which is a long time when you are a kid from the suburbs...

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: It is a long time.

BJ Novak: It's a long time but, compared to most standups, I got very lucky, of course.

But it did feel like a very long time because I had been working. After about a year and a half, I got decent at standup and I was

starting to get booked at Respected Alternative Realm, at The Improv. And there are a lot of people in Hollywood that are always looking for anyone half promising to sign or to put on showcases and I was becoming that comic that people would say, "Oh, there's a new guy. He's pretty good." That kind of guy. And, at the end of that two-year stretch, a lot of things happened at once. I got cast on the show "Punk'd."

Tim Ferriss: Sure.

BJ Novak: I replaced Dax Shepard as the new guy – which I thought. Oh, that's what I'll be famous for the rest of my life – I'm the guy from "Punk'd." So I did pranks on Hillary Duff, and Usher, and people like that – incredibly fun. And I got booked on "Conan," I got booked on Comedy Central –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Was the Usher...? I have a vague memory of this. Was this when his brother was set up to steal jewelry?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yup. And then I tell him –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Usher handled it so well.

BJ Novak: He was great. And then I tell Usher, "You know, we can let this go if you record a radio ad for our store and do this rap that I wrote." They wrote a really funny rap and I have to rap this to Usher so I had to keep a straight face. And one of the brilliant touches the writers put in is that, in the rap, Usher refers to himself as "Ice" and then I apologize that we originally wrote this for Vanilla Ice, who passed. So I got to do really funny, clever things. And, around this time, I was on a showcase.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Standup?

BJ Novak: A standup showcase for a network and now I'd booked "Punk'd" and stuff like that. And that's when Greg Daniels, who was creating the American "Office" saw me and thought... He was already looking for people who could write, and act, and my jokes

were very clearly clever writing. They weren't a raw personality or anything.

So he thought, "Oh, maybe you can do..." – and I had had a writing job – "maybe you can be a writer/actor." Which, at the time, it was a very experimental idea on the...

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, I was going to ask you why he was looking for that.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Because he had worked at Saturday Night Live and he had had a good experience where, there, it was a small gang of people who were writing their own things. And, also, the British "Office" had been a small... Ricky Gervais had written so much of it. And he was totally right – "Let's not have a corporate feeling show with the writing staff cast – let's cast funny people who can do it as a little unit."

Tim Ferriss: So what was the very beginning of "The Office" like for you?

BJ Novak: The beginning of "The Office" was very exciting – creatively, especially – because it was not thought to be a show that... Now I got to feel like that starving artist – the actual integrity. This was not considered a show with any chance of success.

It was a very drab – there's no laugh track, there's no color, it's bleak, it's not a pretty cast, the jokes are very slow and dry, and it's a remake of a British show that NBC had a track record of disastrous remakes. So it was a six-episode mid-season order. It was a really... Actually, no, it was just a pilot order and then we squeaked into six episodes. But the people working on it were brilliant. Steve Carrell's improvisations and Greg Daniels' joke pitches and story outlines. And pretty soon, this very lean writing staff of Mindy Kaling and Paul Lieberstein – who played Toby on the show – a bunch of other really... Larry Wilmore who now hosts "The Nightly Show" on Comedy Central – a really lean group. And so, creatively, it was extremely exciting and then it was bizarre when it became successful because we didn't think of it –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: How long did it take?

BJ Novak: – as the show that, for the rest of our lives, we'd meet one or two comedy fans that were like, "That's a classic." That's what we were going for, for "Mr. Show." Cult status.

Tim Ferriss: And when did you feel the tipping point or was there a particular event or moment or time when you were like, "Holy shit. This thing is actually going to be successful."

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah. The beginning of the second season. It was around December, I think. So we'd been out for over a year but only a few episodes. Two things happened – they moved us from Tuesday to Thursday which I felt was very important because... Now, the night you're on doesn't matter so much in the DVR era but, back then, my theory was that you wouldn't want to watch a show about an office at the beginning of your work week.

Tim Ferriss: That's a fair assumption.

BJ Novak: It's not funny on Tuesday.

Tim Ferriss: That's a fair assumption.

BJ Novak: It's funny on Thursday – it's almost over. So there was that and then the big thing was that the Apple iTunes store process began.

Because our cult audience was very young and tech savvy, they made us a very big hit on the iTunes store even though we were not a hit on NBC. And then people were walking around with video iPods with "The Office" on it and they were sending each other links to download it and stuff. And so it was really one of the first shows to be an online hit in that way. And that really was this proto-viral way that the word spread about the show.

Tim Ferriss: And so I have to ask a question that I've always wanted to ask somebody involved with "The Office" because I have no idea how this came to pass – but a fan sent me a link to a clip at one point. "The Four Hour Work Week" came up in an episode of "The Office" where there's this big debate going on amongst everyone and someone says, "What do you mean? I sent you an email," pointing to Darryl.

And Darryl says, "I don't check email until 12:00 noon – Four Hour Work Week." And then it zooms in on his face. Do you have any idea how that happened? It's a very specific question but...

BJ Novak: I was in the room when that was pitched. I don't remember whose it was. I thank you for being part of that joke. Working backwards from what we must have meant, it was just funny. Just every little thing is going wrong for Michael on this episode.

Tim Ferriss: It was really hilarious and really made my week.

BJ Novak: Awesome.

Tim Ferriss: I was very surprised to come across it. So "The Office," What are some lessons learned through your experience at "The Office?" What did you get better at and why?

BJ Novak: Yeah. Lessons learned?

Tim Ferriss: And you could have a particular person in mind if that helps.

BJ Novak: Yeah. Well, one lesson that I learned from that, as well as from standup, was that you really never know how something is going to play until you test it.

Scenes that felt like they were just airtight – that were hilarious scenes in the writer's room – sometimes just would not work on set and you had to learn to not be angry at it for not working. You had to learn to listen to the audience and that's a major, major lesson. There's no one smarter than the audience.

Tim Ferriss: So this is something that was filmed in front of a live audience?

BJ Novak: No, but there's a crew but you just feel it.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: You just feel it. If it's flat, it's flat.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: First, you do a table read of each episode so you have a big room of people laughing or not laughing. And then, when you take it down, if it's a rewrite scene or something, Steve Carrell says it and you're just there – even just you and the cameraman – you're smiling or you're not.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

BJ Novak: Or then you edit it and it works or it doesn't.

And that was, I think, a humbling lesson for someone who thought of himself as a real writer because writing is really... It's just a guess. And there's no penalty for doing your homework. So if you want to test your standup at 1,000 rooms before you do it on TV or if you want to test the stuff that you're writing for "The Office" in as many groups as you can, do it because you're not smarter than the audience. It's for the audience.

Tim Ferriss: Would you test your material that you were working on for "The Office" in other environments?

BJ Novak: In little rooms, yeah. Everyone had their own office so Mindy and I would read scenes out loud and just see if they sounded right.

Tim Ferriss: Right. You either see someone smile or not?

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: What about Steve Carrell? Did you observe anything in particular...?

BJ Novak: Oh, well, I learned something from him which was one time I wrote a bunch of jokes because a scene wasn't working and I was the guy in charge of bringing "alts," as we called them – other versions.

So I'd bring alts to the set and he'd looked at all of them and he said, "I don't know. These just feel like jokes to me." And I was like, "Well, yeah. They're jokes. That's what I do. That's what we do." But, for him, comedy was a byproduct of authenticity. I would compare it to the difference between a kid who knows he's cute and a kid who doesn't. A kid who knows he's cute is not cute. A kid who just says something without realizing he's being cute is hilarious. And that's what he wanted "The Office" to feel like – like these people don't even know how funny they are. So that was important. I'm sure I'll come up with a lot more lesson because I learned more on that than anything.

Tim Ferriss: Well, we can... let me think...

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: I can talk about the writing process that I got lessons from.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: I would love for you to talk about that.

BJ Novak: Well, the way that we would start a season – and I've adapted this to many things I've done since – we'd start with what we would call a "blue sky period" which was my favorite part of every year.

For two, three, four weeks – sometimes, if we had a long time – every single day in the writer's room was just "what if." There's no penalty, there's no "Maybe we can't," there's no, "But this one conflicts with that one." "What if Dwight goes to the moon?" "What if Jim and Pam get divorced?" Just every idea is valid for a while and that was just an amazing period. And then –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: How long would that last?

BJ Novak: That would last... If we didn't have much time – because we had different pre-production schedules – between two weeks and four weeks.

Tim Ferriss: That's a decent stretch of time.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Was there structure to the "what ifs?" Was there somebody on a whiteboard taking down favorites or...?

BJ Novak: Yeah, but it was improvised day to day. The show runner would say, "Okay, we don't have anything for Dwight," or, "How about everyone split up and come up with ten ideas for Ryan," or, "Let's come up with more ensemble stories." There would be a leadership that way. It wasn't just all sitting around but –

Tim Ferriss: What is an ensemble story? I feel like I know what both words mean separately but I don't know...

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Sometimes, the whole cast is involved in one thing rather than A Story, B Story.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: I see.

BJ Novak: So that was incredible and it really was creatively important. And I try to replica that in everything I do – just not shut down any ideas for a period.

Tim Ferriss: Just generate and not edit.

BJ Novak: Yeah. And then the best ideas will fuel you past the problems. After a few weeks of blue sky, we would love some idea so much it would be obvious what the best... Let's say we were going to start with six stories right? It was obvious what the best 15 were and we'd start talking more seriously. And then we'd look at which ones do our love for the story carry us through the inevitable, "Well, how could Dwight be here if he's also there?" – stuff like that. But finding the love first and then letting that carry you through the problem...

Tim Ferriss: Can you explain what you mean by that?

BJ Novak: Yeah. You find what you love about an episode or, in other things I've one, a story idea or a standup bit.

You've got to just indulge, develop what you love about it so that, when you then come up with, "Oh, but then we couldn't show this on TV," or, "It is kind of contrived," or whatever it is, you'll love it so much that you will have the inspiration to fix it.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. So you're developing the piece that you've fallen in love with enough so that you can handle all the inevitable fixer-upper issues.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yup. I do that with my other writing, too. I always start with what I love and, if I'm stuck on a story, and I approach it the next day, I never go to the hard part first. Some writers probably do. I go to what's the one thing I'm proud of in this story?

Tim Ferriss: Could you give an example?

BJ Novak: Not off the top of my head but there might just be a –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Or a hypothetical?

BJ Novak: There might just be a joke, or a phrase, or a beautiful line that I'm proud of that I'm just so certain everyone's going to think I'm brilliant. And so I started that and I get excited and then I want everything else to live up to that rather than start at the problem.

That's a personal thing. I'm very motivated by positive thinking.

Tim Ferriss: Were there any other –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: And ego – positive ego. Use your own ego to fuel yourself rather than be an obstacle.

Tim Ferriss: What other approaches do you take in your work life – or personal life – to maintain positivity or use positivity?

BJ Novak: I consider being in a good mood the most important part of my creative process. So, right or wrong, I personally don't get up early unless I'm awake early – or I have somewhere to be. I've read the book – we talked about "Daily Rituals," which I love.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. Mason Curry. Great book.

BJ Novak: I'm demoralized by how great people start their day very early.

Tim Ferriss: Were you also encouraged or demoralized by how many of them were drug addicts?

BJ Novak: That was encouraging.

Tim Ferriss: It was 90 percent use methamphetamines.
[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Methamphetamines, right. But this venti Starbucks in front of me, who's to say that doesn't have the same stimulation they used back then?

I try to go to bed early and wake up early but if I need to sleep late or take a walk in the morning or whatever, I find that being in a good mood for creative work is worth the hours it takes to get in a good mood. So often, when I was writing my books, someone would check in and send me a text at 11:30 like, "How are you doing? What's up?" and I'd say, "Powering up." I just feel the first few hours are just getting into a good mood until I think, "Alright,

I have an idea that I'm excited about," or, "I have so much self-loathing and caffeine that I'm like, "Got to do something."

Tim Ferriss: The self-loathing plus caffeine is a hell of a thing. One of my friends, Kelly Starrett, who's a very well-known athletic trainer, calls it "the cup of fear." So you take the self-loathing and then you drink a cup of fear.

BJ Novak: Yeah. I'll tell you my No. 1 – while we're on this – my No. 1 creative productivity advice to anyone – anyone if it works for you. I carry around a notebook – and, if I don't have a little notebook, I have my phone – but I really divide my creative work into two distinct phases which is the idea phase and the execution phase and I do not let either interrupt the other. Yeah. That's the best way to say it. So, if I'm taking a walk or I'm having a drink with a friend and just some funny idea comes up – something that makes me smile or some other impulse – I write it down and I never judge, "Well, what would you do with this idea?" or, "How would you end that joke?" Never. I just have this notebook and I feel like the richest man in the world in terms of ideas. I fill it up, feel great, never question it. Then, on a separate day, I sit down at 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. with a big cup of coffee at my desk, go through the notebook, and I do my best with every idea in the book.

So I never am intimidated by things –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: When you say do your best, you're developing each one on a separate piece of paper or something like that?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah. On my computer, usually, or continue an idea on the computer that I left off the previous day. But first, I'll check my notebook, "Oh, do I have any ideas for solutions?" or whatever. So, to me, everything is idea and execution and, if you separate idea and execution, you don't put too much pressure on either of them.

Tim Ferriss: I was reading an article by Isaac Asimov about creativity and groups versus solo creativity and very similar conclusion that he jumped to – just keeping them separate.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yup.

Tim Ferriss: Now, do you have a particular type of notebook, particular type of pen that you like?

BJ Novak: Yeah, I use the moleskin cahier – is that how you say it?

Tim Ferriss: I have no idea. How's it spelled?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: You can buy them... C-A-H-I-E-R. You can go on Amazon and buy these three packs so they're much thinner than the typical moleskin notebook so you can keep them in your pocket easier. And you finish them so you feel more productive.

Tim Ferriss: You feel like you've accomplished something?

BJ Novak: Yeah, you can fill them up in a couple weeks. And then I have a huge box of them but I use that and I use the Uniball Vision pen, generally.

Tim Ferriss: And do you date them? How do you keep track of these notebooks?

BJ Novak: What I do, I order different colors and I mix up the colors that I order and then I buy, on Amazon, these huge batches of shape stickers that teachers use to put on reports and stuff – stars, and circles, and blue rectangles, and stuff – and, every time I start a new notebook, I write my phone number on the first page in case anyone finds it.

Tim Ferriss: Super important, yeah.

BJ Novak: Yup. And then I put a sticker in the top left corner of the book. And that lets me know which one I'm one currently and then I have a yellow – I'm sorry – I have a red box for...

I have a white box for untranscribed notebooks because then I transcribe them on my computer and a red box for transcribed notebooks. And I don't date them. And I always tell myself, "I should date them, this is crazy," because when I go through the white box, I'm jumping around six months ago, four months ago... I'm not going in order. But I guess just I'm not going to question it because something about the creative process I just don't want to date them. I just don't know.

Tim Ferriss: Interesting. Maybe that would create some bias against older material.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: For the same reason that I take dates on my blog posts and I moved them from the top as a small italicized line at the bottom and my traffic jumped 20, 30 percent because people are no longer are biased against older material.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: That's interesting. That's very interesting. That's something on The List App, too, we keep an eye on.

Tim Ferriss: What, and we're going to talk a lot about The List App –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: No trying to rush you.

Tim Ferriss: No, we're going to get there. I love the red box and white box.

When you develop these or do your best with them, as you said, on the computer, are you doing this in a particular app or program or is it limited to whatever your current focus is – say, a book, or a screenplay, or a film?

BJ Novak: I use Microsoft Word – same reason my dad used WordStar – it's just what I learned and got in the habit of. And I use Final Draft for screenplays because everyone does. I would like – I know there's other software out there – I would like something that combines the two because, often, I would like to write a paragraph and then throw in dialogue easily, but it's not worth it to me to investigate and switch.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, there's a tool that I've used for my last few books that I've found extremely helpful. It's not as focused on screenwriting as, say, Final Draft – although people do use it for that – called Scrivener. I don't know if you've ever seen this?

BJ Novak: Yeah, I have heard of it. Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: I've used it for my last two books and I found it extremely helpful for that format.

And I think it's mostly used by playwrights, I want to say, but there are screenwriters who use it. So when you –

BJ Novak: Mike Grosso, I was going to mention, who invented Firefox –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Firefox, yeah.

BJ Novak: He's an investor on The List App and I've been trying to get him for years to develop with me a screenplay writing software because he's actually a terrific writer and he wrote the "Silicon Valley" spec script that he put on Twitter which is such a tech way to get your spec out there. But it was great and I think he would be the guy to crack it because he's the writer and also the software developer. I think he could do it in an afternoon.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Where is he based out of? Is he still in the Bay area or is he...?

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: I need to actually spend some time with him at some point.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Oh, he's the best.

Tim Ferriss: He was very, very kind when – I think it was 2007 – when he gave me a quote for "The Four Hour Work Week," and I feel very indebted to him.

BJ Novak: He's awesome.

Tim Ferriss: So, if you're hearing this, thank you so much. I really owe you a coffee, and dinner, and a bottle of wine, and probably more.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: How do you think of yourself?

I guess it depends on, perhaps what project you're working on but which of these many activities and artistic projects – crafts that you've attempted – do you most identify with?

BJ Novak: Writer.

Tim Ferriss: Writer?

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Any particular type or is it just across the board writer?

BJ Novak: Probably comedy writer, to be honest. For two reasons – one, is just it's the identity that I come from. I think it was Woody Allen so said, "I do these different things but if you woke me up and shook me in the middle of the night and said, 'What are you?' I'd say a writer." I definitely feel like that.

Tim Ferriss: That's a good fact. I should have rephrased my question to mimic Woody Allen's wording.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, you can ask anyone that. "If someone woke you in the middle of the night, and shook you and said, 'What's your job?' what would you say?" Or the simpler way is, "What do you put on your passport or your customs declaration?" I always put writer. But I think that everything that I do is a version of writing, even if I'm acting, I'm writing the way that I think this character would act.

Do you know what I mean?

Tim Ferriss: Of course.

BJ Novak: Or, if I have an idea, I really feel like idea and execution – that, to me, is writing.

Tim Ferriss: If you were teaching a... let's see, freshman seminar at Harvard on comedy writing, what would the curriculum look like?

BJ Novak: Oh, great, great question. Well, P.J. O'Rourke, who was one of the big National Lampoon" editors, said that, if he taught writing –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Is that "The Confederacy of Dunces?" Did he write that? No? Am I making that up?

BJ Novak: No. But he might have written the introduction to it or something.

Tim Ferriss: Alright.

BJ Novak: So he said that, if he ever taught English, he would assign parodies because that's when you really learn something is to parody it. So I would probably assign parodies of literature. I would –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Are there any particular parodies that...

BJ Novak: Just whatever you're studying in your other classes – parody that.

Tim Ferriss: I see.

BJ Novak: And, really, I think it would open you up. I think mischief is just so important in comedy.

It's really... There's just something like, "Am I really allowed to say that?" That's just the cool thing. "Am I really allowed to hear that?" I could pontificate. I know a couple things I feel I have discovered about comedy.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, this is...

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: First of all, the most important thing is it's a physical... It's like sex in that it's about whether the other person is enjoying it or not – or you're enjoying it. You could say, "Do this and that," and then, if neither of you has a good time, you couldn't insist to me, like, "But I had good sex." No, you didn't. I gave you my best advice like, "Touch her here, and take your time, and whisper this." I could do that but you'll know if it's good sex or not. These are just tips. It's the physical reaction that you're going for. So there's that, whatever you teach, it's like, "You'll feel it. You'll feel it or you'll hear it. You'll know."

So do it a lot and probably don't take this class too seriously. One thing I've definitely learned about comedy – and I don't know how it applies to... maybe it applies to editing more than it does to writing or finding what's good comedy – but I believe that a good comedy operates the exact same way a good mystery operates which is the punchline should be something that would be right in front of your face the whole time and you never would have put your finger on it.

Tim Ferriss: It's like the red doorknobs in "The Sixth Sense."

BJ Novak: Oh, the red doorknobs. Yeah, exactly. "Of course, he was dead the whole time. How did I not get that?" That excitement, that elation... or like, "It was the butler. It was the narrator," – whatever it was. That's the best comedy when someone points out something and you're like, "Oh my god, that was so obvious. I never would have gotten it." Another thing is that observations are really the currency of comedy.

Anything you do, if you observe something that touches a chord with somebody that has not been expressed, you can turn that into a movie, you can turn that into a plot, you can turn that into a one-liner. But anytime you observe a good new observation, that's what fuels 99 percent of comedy. And the other 1 percent is just people falling down or whatever.

Tim Ferriss: And are there any particular comics or comedy writers who are very good, in your mind, at the red doorknob effect – so hitting you with punchlines that have been there all along but they do a good job –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Well, Aziz Ansari has a bit about marriage that I find brilliant. I think it was one or two specials ago on Netflix where he's like, "If we invented marriage now – if no one had heard of marriage and you proposed it to a girl, you would freak her out beyond belief.

'I want a vow that will never, ever sleep with anyone else. And I want rings on our fingers to symbolize it. And I want a priest to be there and everyone we've ever met. And there'll be a ceremony. It'll be in the newspaper.'" That is so funny to me because it's completely true and I never would have noticed it. Louis C.K. is brilliant at pointing this stuff out – saying things that is how you felt but you never would have thought of it. But even an abstract one-liner comic like Zach Galifinakas who I tried to see whenever I could when I moved to L.A. – even those are like, "Right, that phrase could mean that," or, "Why'd you – "

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Sure.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Even that is an observation even though it's just about language.

Tim Ferriss: That's true. Right. Like "24-hour banking – who has time for that?"
The Steven Wright approach.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, right. You could look at it that way.

Tim Ferriss: You know who's really, really good at that is – now that I'm getting
a finer feel for what you meant – is...

I suppose perhaps the majority of really good standup comics are
good at this, I don't know – but why am I blanking – Dimitri
Martin.

BJ Novak: Oh, yeah. A great writer.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Dimitri Martin is really good at the word play. So you mentioned
movies, we've mentioned List App a few times and I feel like we
should dig into that because my next question would be related
to... and maybe by means of example we can get into List App. I
was going to ask you for screenwriters, what would your
curriculum look like and you put up a list recently – and maybe
you can explain the app as well – but you put up a list of some of
your favorite movies.

BJ Novak: Right.

Tim Ferriss: So you had "Adaptation," you had "Naked Gun," down towards the
bottom and –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Bottom of the top five.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it's a top five.

BJ Novak: It was "Adaptation," "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," "Pulp Fiction,"
"Casablanca," "The Naked Gun."

This is just personal what... if I were really going to die tomorrow
and they said you could play a couple movies. I'm not trying to
impress anybody – it's not film history, it's just me.

Tim Ferriss: Now would those films correspond to the five screenplays that you would suggest people read if you were assigning them?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Wow. Yeah, probably. Probably the writing is front and center for all them. Now, "Adaptation" is brilliant because it breaks all the rules and comments on all the rules. So maybe I wouldn't teach that first – that's like –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Also, if anyone says, "I want to be a writer," at least, for me, I would say, "Watch that movie."

BJ Novak: Yeah, it'll talk you out of it.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. "I could really use a donut but god, I'm so hungry."

BJ Novak: I know. I guess all of these movies break the form and maybe that's why... "Casablanca" probably – I don't know enough about film history, but it probably broke the form. Now it is the form. So maybe I would... But there are weird things in that. "Pulp Fiction," obviously, completely breaks the form chronologically. "Ferris Bueller," he narrates the movie to camera.

"The Naked Gun" just they'll do anything for a laugh. I guess that's formal, in a way. "Adaptation" completely commenting on itself. So, yeah, maybe, I think, one lesson in all of that is it's not about the rules – it's about you and the audience, anything that you do.

Tim Ferriss: This is maybe out of left field, a little bit – have you seen "Memento?"

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Did you enjoy that movie?

BJ Novak: I thought it was okay.

Tim Ferriss: So, when I saw it, I really enjoyed it but a lot of people hold that up as an example of a movie that broke the rules where it didn't work, or it was trying too hard to break the rules or something like that.

BJ Novak: I think it's a great... If I were him – if I was Nolan and that was my first big movie – I'd be very proud that I got everyone's attention.

It's extremely clever as an idea and, if that's enough to give you pleasure watching it or if that's enough to get your attention to watch it and then you got pleasure watching it, I agree the premise is fantastically clever. I just wasn't personally especially moved watching the story. And he's so big it won't matter if I criticize him but I have a real problem with the Chris Nolan worship in cinema. I think that's a writer I would never teach if I were teaching screenwriting.

Tim Ferriss: Why's that?

BJ Novak: Says the guy who's never written a screenplay. Because a movie should be a pleasurable experience – that is my one sentence answer – and I find his movies cold and formal. And I find his demeanor, as a public director, cold and formal. And please don't make this the headline of your podcast.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: No, it's good.

BJ Novak: If someone listens all the way here, they can see that everyone has opinions. But I find his movies completely un-pleasurable.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Exclusive to TMZ.

BJ Novak: Yeah. And I feel that the formality has conned people into reverence when, in fact, no one was smiling at any of these Batman movies that everyone gave such acclaim to and no one was smiling at "Inception," and no one understood "Interstellar." I am a well-educated guy. I have a real interest in science. I write screen stories for a living and I could not follow this so who is following this? A movie should be entertaining you and inviting you in. So that's a screenwriter I would not teach.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. How did you get into tech and why tech?

BJ Novak: I find tech – and, again, this is the formal rules of anything... First of all, tech is the best field at being the first to tell you that there are no rules. It's about what you make and how people respond to it which I really love.

And I think tech is leading the way for entertainment when you realize, "Oh, everything is about..." Very soon, on the Apple TV, you'll be able to say, "The Mindy Project," and you won't have any idea what network it's on. It's all about whether Mindy Kaling – full disclosure, a good friend of mine – it's all about whether Mindy Kaling has made a good show, gotten the budget, gotten the cast, convinced them to do it – that's a big deal – and made it well – that's a very big deal – and gotten enough publicity for it that you are curious about it but that's it.

And there has been a lot of bullshit in terms of, "What night is it on and what's the competition like and how is it...? And who picked it up and why? And who funded it and how much did they get? And is it going to make syndication?" and that noise has nothing to do with the product and the audience. And I think tech is leading the way in removing that. And I think tech is really – the reason I've always been drawn to it and always pitched every idea I ever had in tech to my friends in tech – is because it seemed like a utopian version of, "You have an idea, and you see if it's a good idea."

Just like with standup, just like with writing scenes for "The Office" – "I think this is a great idea but I won't know until it goes to the set and it succeeds or fails. Or I bring it onstage and no one laughs or everyone does laugh." That, to me, is the biggest pleasure – having an idea and seeing if you're right. And so tech seemed to me you could have a huge idea and it could be right, whereas, in other fields, a huge idea, you need to be at a huge scale to even try it out. So that's why I met Blake Cross, because in 2006 or 2007, I had a friend, Charlie Cheever who worked at Facebook –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Sure.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: And I said, "Can I see Facebook? Can I have a tour?" And I would cultivate these friendships and these guys, to me, that was...

I think that was what a lot of people looked at show business in the world I was in and thought, "That's so creative," I would look at this world and think, "Wow, you can have an idea and then, if it works, it works. That's so beautiful."

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, there is a –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: And, of course, like everything, it turns out to be way more complicated –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: – but, I think, less complicated than other fields.

Tim Ferriss: And less and less complicated from the standpoint of testing ideas, right?

BJ Novak: Correct.

Tim Ferriss: Because you have cheaper and cheaper rentable infrastructure – whether it's services or otherwise. You have global talent market –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Right.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: – where you can use people remotely, or locally, or in some distributed fashion like automatic which I advise. The guys who do wordpress.com, they have 400 plus people who are all distributed. And then you have the Kickstarters and other means of funding that weren't available five, ten years ago.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Right. So if you had an idea for a store 20 years ago, you really put your whole life on hold to pursue that – a compromise of a compromise of that idea for a store. And now, you can make that store.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, you can do it in an afternoon and then see how it goes. So can you describe, then, what it is that you're working on right now?

BJ Novak:

So this is – I've tried to get you on and I know we'll get you on when we have the Android – this is The List App and it's as simple as it sounds. It's li.st is our domain so, eventually, when we have web, we'll probably just want to be known as List. But it's really that simple and we aim to be that universal just a place for lists, socially. So my original idea was that we all have these lists in our phones, in our notebooks, in our minds, of what are the good restaurants in L.A, etc. – I wish I could see those lists on the phones, or whatever, on the phones of the people I care about or, occasionally, a celebrity or a publication that I would turn to for this type of thing. And I wanted a place... It seemed so simple to me, "Why hasn't it been done?" I thought. "A place where you could put these lists and everyone would put them and you could surf them and read them."

And that is, essentially, what we built. So, in this case, yeah, I think I'm right. I'm not saying I'm a genius or anything at all. It seemed like this was something worth testing. And if you do it right and someone shows you an idea and you say, "Oh, not that, but yes, that." Then, like anything else, the most important thing is who you partner with. And so I knew I didn't know this field so I hired a company to make screenshots because everyone I pitched this to treated me the way I would treat them if a tech person pitched me a good idea for a TV show. I'd say, "That sounds like a good idea. I don't think you understand what it takes. Do you have a director? Do you have funding? Do you have a cast? Do you know how to do a rewrite?" "No, no, it's just an idea. Shouldn't someone make..." You know. So that's how they treated me and I thought, "Well, I need to show that I'm serious and that it would be good."

So I asked friend after friend, "Do you know anyone who could make mockups for me?" So I hired this great company called Two Toasters in New York.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss:

Two Toasters?

BJ Novak:

Yup. And, apparently, it's named after, coincidentally, an "Office" reference where Stanley ends up with two toasters because he bought one for Phyllis' wedding. But I didn't even remember the reference when I met them. So I drew up – I'm not a good artist – but I drew very simple... Again, this is not anything innovative. I drew up what a list would look like – very similar to Twitter, to Instagram, to Tumblr – a vertical feed of lists and how you'd

search for them, and how you'd add a suggestion to someone else's, and how you'd compose. And I asked, "Could you make a mockup of each of these main screens?" So I paid them to make them and then I would walk around... When I'd tell people the idea, and they'd say, "Yeah, that sounds good," I'd show them. And they would try to tap and they couldn't because it was just a mockup and that's how I knew, "Okay, they want to be using this. I showed them that I'm serious. They know what it feels like to want to see the next screen."

Then the guy at Two Toasters, Simon, hosts a tech breakfast in New York once a month. I was going to be in town for that tech breakfast so I went to it, talked to everyone. I'd say about 49 percent of the people were way too nice to me because I was a celebrity. About 49 percent of the people were way too hard on me because I was a celebrity and, "What am I doing here?" Then there was one guy who took me seriously, who met me at my level and said, "I like it for these reasons. I think these are my concerns." And his name was Matt Witheiler and he was a VC at Flybridge which doesn't do this kind of thing, generally, but he was interested. So I asked if I could have lunch with him. I almost canceled. I was hung over. I was like, "What am I doing? I'm here to do press for a TV show and why am I pursuing this crazy tech thing?" I'm like, "Everyone wants to do a startup." I almost cancelled but I didn't.

I show up to meet him and he says, "I know the cofounder for you. I don't think you can get him but it's worth a try. I've been trying to convince this guy to leave his job forever but I think he might like this because he's done stuff like this before." And his name was Dev Flaherty. He ran product at Fab. He had previously worked for a map-based travel startup and the original idea for this was that travel lists, of course, would be big. So I said, "Let me try." I was leaving the next day. I emailed Dev. I had dinner with him at the Ace Hotel in New York – the Breslin – and we sat down –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Lots of fatty food.

BJ Novak: Yeah. Right away, I was like, "I'm doing it with this guy or I'm not doing it." We wore the exact same watch – an IWC Pilot so a nice simple watch with great classic design – we ordered a bowl of bourbon – each of us – so we have the same taste. And, just like Matt Witheiler, he was hard on the idea and respected the idea, asking all the right questions.

And he could talk – and his wife was a television writer – and he was interested in what I was interested in, and, tellingly, he was a "Parks and Recreation" fan but not an "Office" fan. So he liked the kinds of things I liked but he was not impressed by my celebrity. He heard I was somebody but he didn't care – he cared about Ron Swanson. So he was adjacent – he was the perfect match. And he said, "Let me think about it." And then his wife kept getting up for jobs in... Halle Grossman, this fantastic writer – I think she's a fantastic writer. She's a fantastic talker, and thinker, and she's on great shows so I assume she's a great writer. So she kept getting more and more attention in L.A. and then she was up for this huge writing job in L.A. on an HBO show and no one was rooting for that job harder than me. I'm praying that Halle gets hired because I know, if Dev moves to L.A., I'm sure he'll do this. And, sure enough, she got the job and he finally committed to doing this.

And he's really been leading the overall... Why I think this is so good is because of Dev. I have a lot to do with the community, I obviously have a lot to do with the conception, and I argue for all my tastes all the time but 90 plus percent of the time, Dev has already arrived there and added more things that I should have thought of.

Tim Ferriss: What are some of the more popular lists that have popped up?

BJ Novak: Well, I can look at the trending lists right now.

Tim Ferriss: And I'll mention one to people just – because I found this actually very, very cool and helpful – which was a list which you put on Twitter or retweeted, I think. It was Sheryl Strayed, writer of "Wild" which was made into a movie, and she put out a list of writing prompts, assignments, or I think they were more sentences or questions that you could use for writing exercises. And what is your Twitter handle?

BJ Novak: @BJNovak.

Tim Ferriss: So very simple, @BJNovak. So download the app and also follow BJ on Twitter because he highlights, also, quite a few different lists. But that list in and of itself...

BJ Novak: Yeah, that was great. And she also did a list that was very moving which is "Objects Found in My Mother's Car at the Time of Her Death" – just a pen, a lipstick, tickets to this play. I don't remember exactly what it was but I remember being just so stunned by the

simplicity of that power in list form. And there are a lot of writers on it so there's a literary thing. But I'm looking here – it's a mix of publications doing lists, celebrities doing lists, and, of course, mostly just regular folks. But trending right now, The Washington Post made a list of "The Things Donald Trump Has Called on America to Boycott." He's called for a lot of boycotts over the years. It's very interesting.

Including the company that makes his clothing line which he didn't realize. Vox made a list "What NASA Picked to Explain Our World to Aliens." So what they put on Voyager 1 and 2 – just cool lists. A girl named Jena Martin I know made a list "Favorite Howard Stern Interviews," and that's an open list so you can make a suggestion on that list and, if she like it, she double taps it.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: What are the top on the Howard Stern list?

BJ Novak: The Howard Stern interviews? Lady Gaga, Bill Hader, Billy Joel – which was a great one, I heard that one – Jonah Hill, Jerry Seinfeld – great interviewer – James Taylor – I did not know that although I've seen him be dark and funny – Chris Martin, apparently. So some of them are very helpful recommendations – a lot of books lists.

Tim Ferriss: And some of them are very funny. Now, correct me if I'm –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Some very –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Correct me if I have faulty memory here but I remember we were chatting on the phone a few months ago and was it Lena Dunham who had "Dead People I'd Have Sex With"?

BJ Novak: Oh, yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Am I making that up?

BJ Novak: Yes, she did and I'm looking right now. Anthony Bourdain made one that I thought was really funny.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, this was... What was it? Was that "Four Spy Novels – Three Written by Spies, One by a Non-Spy"?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, he did that. He's a big reader and writer, obviously. His most recent one is called, "Hotel Slut: That's Me" and it's very much his writing style but the hotels he will made an excuse to go to that town if he can stay in the following hotels including one in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Chateau Marmont here in L.A., the Raleigh in Miami. So his lists are great. He did one –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Anything in New York?

BJ Novak: Let me see what his New York choice is.

Tim Ferriss: I'm heading to New York shortly so maybe I'll try to...

BJ Novak: There are a lot of lists of New York hotels but I... And there's also a list of "If You Ever Stay at the Bowery" – which is my favorite hotel there.

Tim Ferriss: The Bowery's great.

BJ Novak: There are two people, at least, have made lists of "The Best Rooms at the Bowery."

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Cool.

BJ Novak: "1403 has this... and 1401 has that..."

Tim Ferriss: Oh that's very useful.

BJ Novak: Very useful so you –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: I tried to stay at the Bowery. They were sold out for this upcoming trip. It's unfortunate.

BJ Novak: So it's very useful and also very creative. And there are great people behind it.

Tim Ferriss: For someone who downloads the app, what would you suggest to get them a very good taste of the types of content? What would you suggest they do?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah. I would suggest... It's a very quick signup flow. Just sign up and there's a "Recommended Follow" menu and they'll take you to that screen automatically but one of the things you can do is you can hit "Follow All" – it's our top 100 diverse accounts. So I'll read them right now – not all 100 but the first batch. Lena Dunham, Mindy Kaling, "The New York Times," Jimmy Fallon, "The Onion," Anthony Bourdain, "The New Yorker," "CNN," Andy Cohen, "Vogue," Snoop, Sheryl Strayed, Rachel Ray, "People," John Mayer, "Wired," TED Talks. Not everyone's going to like all of these but then just unfollow.

Because it will give you a real assortment. And there are a lot of civilians on there, too, just people that are making crazy personal or advice lists. And so I would just say sign up, hit "Follow All Recommended", and just see what you like.

Tim Ferriss: Very cool. Do you have – as we have a plane zooming overhead – do you have a little bit more time for some rapid fire questions?

BJ Novak: Yeah, sure.

Tim Ferriss: Alright. Cool. So we're going to shift gears just a little bit. Successful – when you hear the word successful, who's the first person who comes to mind and why?

BJ Novak: Shakespeare.

Tim Ferriss: Why?

BJ Novak: Because he made things that were both moving, and permanent, and popular.

Tim Ferriss: What was your –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Ah, both – three things. Shows you how far I am from that.

Tim Ferriss: What was your thesis on? Did you write a senior thesis?

BJ Novak: Whoa, you did your homework. Yeah, mine was on – it's very specific – "In the films of 'Hamlet,' how they treat the line 'To be or not to be.'" Because that line already has a lot of mystery within the play exactly what it means but then you add all the cultural... If you pay to see a movie of "Hamlet," you're waiting for "To be or not to be" the whole time. So how do the cultural expectations affect the interpretation of that line?

Tim Ferriss: Got it. Yeah, the bard. There are a lot of people who make me want to cry into a pillow as a writer who's trying to improve. That's certainly way up at the top of the list.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: What book or books do you give most often as gifts?

BJ Novak: There's a book called "The Oxford Book of Aphorisms" which I love. It's just the most well-edited, brilliant one-liners from history and you can spend hours on a page or you can just flip through it. I give that one a lot.

Tim Ferriss: "The Oxford Book of Aphorisms?"

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: And now I'm going to give "Daily Rituals" – the book we mentioned a lot. To anyone who is creative or ambitious, you take so much solace in seeing all the different processes people just do. What did Charles Dickens do every day? What'd he do every day? What did Darwin do every day? What did Steve Jobs do every day? It's just so reassuring to see, "Eh, everyone's got their own system."

Tim Ferriss: And it also is very reassuring to see how dysfunctional how many of them are.

BJ Novak: Yes. It's depressing, too.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, depressing in some cases. Great book. I actually produced the audiobook for people who want to try the audio. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

BJ Novak: I'd love to be great looking.

Tim Ferriss: You're not a bad looking guy.

BJ Novak: I'm not terrible looking, thank you, but I look at James Franco and he does all the things he does and I'm like, "Man."

Tim Ferriss: But it's James Franco. Well, look at his brother. It's a handsome family.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: No, I'm saying... Look.

Tim, if I could have whatever I wanted, I could lie and say, "Oh, I'd learn to be better at empathy." No, I'd be fucking awesome looking and then I would... If you're James Franco, you could do anything and people are like, "Well, it's pretty interesting." Anything. And I wish I had that extra level. I'm just answering this honestly.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: No, I appreciate the honesty.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: I would be fucking awesome looking.

Tim Ferriss: This is good. Do you have any bad habits that you're currently working on?

BJ Novak: Yeah. Of course. I zone out in any conversation when I'm not holding a microphone. I zone out easily. I just love daydreaming and I think it's so indulgent, in a good way, to the creative process but then you get used to that indulgence when someone else deserves your attention so I try to be better at that.

Tim Ferriss: How do you go about trying to become better at that? It's just a conscious decision not to zone out?

BJ Novak: Good question. I don't have a process yet. I'm just always berating myself for it.

Tim Ferriss: I do the same thing so; if you come up with anything, please let me know. Words or phrases that you overuse?

BJ Novak: Pretty.

Tim Ferriss: That's my one, too.

BJ Novak: Really?

Tim Ferriss: Oh, I hate it. I started trying to fix it by saying –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Do you use it as an adverb or an adjective? How do you use it?

Tim Ferriss: Adverb.

BJ Novak: See, I use it as an adjective.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, okay.

BJ Novak: But I don't mind using it.

Tim Ferriss: Okay. I say, "Oh, that's pretty interesting. Oh, that's pretty..."

BJ Novak: Right.

Tim Ferriss: And I've tried to fix it at one point but forcing myself to say "fucking" afterward so I'd say, "That's pretty fucking interesting. That's pretty fucking smart."

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, that's good. I –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: And, eventually, it short circuited for a while. It's definitely a...

BJ Novak: I overuse "like" which is so embarrassing because it's not a very masculine word to overuse but I do.

Tim Ferriss: Like as a verb? Or like as a...?

BJ Novak: Like as in... I don't even know what it is, it's a stutter, really. Like...

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Oh, I see.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have anything in writing, long form, let's say in a book – one of mine is, for instance, "That having been said," or some...?

BJ Novak: Sure. I overwrite a lot and I need to pare it down.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Got you. Too many revisions?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: I don't have any one phrase but... No, I mean I just do stuff like that because it sounds – I don't know – it gives extra elegance to a stupid idea and then I need to go back and be like, "You know what...?"

Tim Ferriss: Puts a monkey in a suit, right?

BJ Novak: Yeah, it's something I learned on "The Office," too. If a scene should be two pages and it's four pages, it's a bad scene. Because you keep writing when you haven't hit it. So, if it's a great scene, it might just be a two-line exchange. "I love you." "I don't love you." Whoa. That's a scene. But if the scene is like, "So I was thinking, the other day, my feelings..." That's not a scene.

Tim Ferriss: You know it's not working?

BJ Novak: Yeah. So if you overwrite, it's often a sign that you have not hit it and you're still looking for it.

Tim Ferriss: What is the best purchase that you've made in recent memory for less than \$100.00?

BJ Novak: An ice cube tray that has giant ice cubes in it. Anytime I'm at a bar and they have a big ice cube, I feel like, "Oh, this should cost \$100, this is so nice," and then I thought, "Well, wait, the rubber ice cube tray shouldn't be any more expensive. It's just a different shape mold. So I go on Amazon and, sure enough, Tivolo, I think is the company, for \$7, it's six huge ice cubes. And, if anyone comes over and I make them a drink, they have one huge ice cube in their glass and it's like I have a fancy bar. I love it.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have any favorite documentaries?

BJ Novak: Do you mind if I look at The List App?

Tim Ferriss: I don't mind if you look at The List App.

BJ Novak: Let me see if I have my documentaries on The List App. I love documentaries and...

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Just to buy you some time – I'll throw one out. Well, I loved "Man on Wire" when it came out.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Okay. I haven't seen that.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Very uniquely put together.

And the same team made a documentary subsequent to that called, "Project Nim" which was about a chimpanzee – I think this was in the '70s – who was effectively raised as a human child to see if Nim, in this case, could – I think it was Nim Chompzki or something, Nim Chimpsky, they called him – in any case, could acquire language. And it's just a fascinating documentary on human thought, human interaction with this chimp and so on.

BJ Novak: On my list, "Catfish" – it's a cliché but "Catfish" is a brilliant documentary.

Tim Ferriss: I still haven't seen it.

BJ Novak: It's brilliant. It's generation defining and it's just become a term but it earned that term. Brilliant movie. "To Be and to Have" is on my list – a beautiful simple film about a one-room schoolhouse in France and just what happens over the course of a year. This really little story but it really holds your attention and give you the spirit of the place. And, if I choose one more...

Oh, you know what a really cool one is? It's called "The Overnights" and it's about the oil fields in North Dakota. It came out a couple of years ago on this pastor who has a church there. The Bakken oil fields which is probably bigger than the gold rush in the 1800's. It's just now that you can frack, there's so much oil in North Dakota that a whole culture... You can rent a garage in North Dakota for \$250,000. There's so much money there and such a rush to be close to it. That's a really interesting documentary.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: "The Overnighters?"

BJ Novak: Yup.

Tim Ferriss: So I usually ask about morning routines but I want to ask about – and you can feel free to answer that – but I'm so curious to dig a little bit into your powering up.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: So how would you power up to get into the zone?

BJ Novak: I have a venti Pike Place coffee from Starbucks. I find that –

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: How is it made, just black?

BJ Novak: Yup. Black. I find that brewing my own coffee at home is so unpredictable.

It's like getting artisanal Tylenol. I want to know what my dose is. You wouldn't be like, "Oh, I made some Tylenol." No. Give me two Tylenol. So I want a standard dose of caffeine.

Tim Ferriss: You want your standard loading dose of caffeine?

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

BJ Novak: So I have a venti from Starbucks.

Tim Ferriss: Now, when you have it, you mean you purchase it or do you just down the thing like a shot of tequila?

BJ Novak: I either drive to the Starbucks... No, it takes an hour because I will sometimes read the paper – recently, "The Wall Street Journal" which I find really good, especially on weekends – or "The New York Times" – it's my favorite and I usually read that online. And just emails and I turn on music. I usually listen to the "Morning Becomes Eclectic" on KCRW.

Tim Ferriss: "Morning Becomes Eclectic?"

BJ Novak: Yeah. It's this great show from 9:00 to 12:00 every weekday – commercial free, just cool new music. I also have a list the app of music that I work to. And they have a 24-hour station, too.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have another one that you can pull from memory that...?

BJ Novak: Yeah. I will often do Pandora "Of Early Blues."

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Early Blues?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Which I find good to just... So, yeah, I listen to music or Sirius XM 35 is indie music that I like. So you just listen to music – it's just about being in a good mood. I slowly drink that Starbucks. I sometimes take a walk around Runyon Canyon or my neighborhood, text, email. If there's a book I'm reading, I'll read a couple chapters. And then, eventually, I'm just like, "Alright." Either I'm excited by an idea or it's 3:30 and this powering up turned into lunch, turned into a workout and I'm like, "Goddamnit, I cleared out my whole day and it's 3-fucking-30 and I haven't written anything?" And then I just start looking at my files and then I finally get going. So, yeah, the power up can have a happy or a sad ending.

Tim Ferriss: Is there a particular time of day that you find that you tend to do your best writing? For me, it's always been super late night. I don't know why that is – for synthesis. For note-taking, for interviewing, I can do that whenever. But, for synthesis, I've always been a 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. guy for whatever reason.

BJ Novak: Huh. It's hard for me to get myself to work later in the day so probably my most productive time is 11:00 to 2:00 but the creative ideas can come any time. I never know when those are coming.

Tim Ferriss: Let's see here. If people wanted to watch, besides "The Office," one or two TV shows for good comedy writing, any particular recommendations?

BJ Novak: I love this show right now called, "The Grinder" with Rob Lowe and Fred Savage.

Tim Ferriss: Yup.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: That's pretty good writing. Season 4 of "Mr. Show" is brilliant sketch writing.

Tim Ferriss: Could you explain what you mean by sketch? I apologize if I –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Oh, sketch like SNL.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

BJ Novak: Yeah, I'd say... Yeah, those are pretty great ones.

Tim Ferriss: Cool. Just a few more questions.

BJ Novak: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: What historical figure do you most identify with?

BJ Novak: In my hopes, Ben Franklin because he started in comedy and then... I make a joke about this in my standup act. He really took it to the next level. He wrote "Poor Richard's Almanac" and he was known as a comedy writer. And then he ended up discovering electricity and having his face on money. That is really... And he remained a witty guy. So my hope is that I can do some shadow where I can have ambitious positive spirited ideas but it won't be like, "Oh, now he's lost his sense of humor." Ben Franklin always had a sense of humor and he wasn't ashamed to experiment with lightning. That's really cool but, even in my most egotistical, I don't actually identify with him. He's just if I'm psyching myself up...

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Aspirational?

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, aspirational figure.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Aspirational figure.

BJ Novak: So probably someone more... I don't know. Funny and dark and... I don't know.

Tim Ferriss: For someone recognizing that no path is quite the same for people that, certainly, that I've met in entertainment, or comedy, or whatnot – from going from school to the industry – if we can call it an industry – of entertainment, let's just said you had a promising high school senior who's a gifted writer and they think they want to be in comedy writing. What advice would you give them?

BJ Novak: A bunch of things. One piece of advice that I stand by that I've given to a bunch of people is to think of it as two things – you need to get people's attention and you need to be able to back it up. I feel like most people who want to get into comedy, what they want to do these days is get a staff job on a TV comedy show. So, to do that, you need to think like the person hiring you. If you were given your own show, you'd panic. "This is my one big shot. It's got to be hilarious." You'd hire your most loyal financed friends first, and then you'd ask around, "Who worked on my favorite show?" "Who's the best, best person?" and those names would come to you through an agent or something. And then, anyone that you saw or heard or you were at a standup show and this guy was hilarious, or someone sent you this internet video – you just don't know.

Or you'd ask around and someone would send you something. So the first thing is get their attention. That would mean be friends with somebody or have collaborated with somebody. Another thing is you might want to make something. For me, it was standup but I don't know what it is for anyone else. It could be probably some internet video. I feel like that's the best way you can be completely wild and get seen. But make something truly great that could be anything – absolutely anything. Then, once you have someone's attention, they're going to want to be sure that they're not taking a crazy bet on some kid that made some funny video who then gets in a writer's room and doesn't know what to do. So that generally means have a spec script which is a speculative script that could be for a TV show.

So write an episode of "The Office" or "The Simpsons" or whatever just to show that, if you were on that staff, you'd be able to know the voices, you'd know how to format it, you'd know how to craft a story, you can write hard jokes. So have a spec script and

it'll probably take you a few to make a good one but back it up and get their attention. Now that's for anyone starting out. I don't know if I'd advise a high school senior to go right into TV writing. So this advice is probably more for someone who just graduated college or whatever stage in life – they're just ready to start this. So if you're really going to go to college, I'd say stay funny. Be around funny people, come up with funny ideas, and make your friends laugh.

Tim Ferriss: Be mischievous.

BJ Novak: Yeah. Be mischievous.

Tim Ferriss: Now, you are – am I making this up – 30... let me see –

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: 36.

Tim Ferriss: 36. What advice would you give your 30-year-old self and where were you, what were you doing at 30?

BJ Novak: At 30, I was on "The Office."

I wish I had told myself on "The Office" – and this might be specific to me – the whole time I was on "The Office," I thought, "Well, this is my best shot at whatever I'd ever want to do so I'd better not waste a second. I'd better write a screenplay. I'd better make an avant-garde film. I'd better get cast in something. I'd better do my big thing while I'm still on "The Office" because I don't want to be that guy who used to be on "The Office." But I didn't have time. I had two jobs on "The Office." Either one of them should take up your focus.

Tim Ferriss: I was going to say that, at one point, you had three, right? You were a writer/producer/actor?

BJ Novak: Well, producer tends to just be high level writer.

Tim Ferriss: So I'd just take that – that was the same job. But it's important. The writing for the whole show is part of your responsibility. So I wish I could tell... And now people ask me, "What was it like working on "The Office? Was it so much fun? Were you laughing all the time?"

Yeah, but I have to admit that's buried under I was so anxious and always trying to write some extra thing on the side – that I never finished and never had time for – and I really didn't just enjoy this incredible, once-in-a-lifetime thing. And as soon as "The Office" ended, I was talented enough to write a book and I'm proud of the book. And I made the app and I worked really hard and I was able to pull it off. If you can do it, you can do it. You're not really on someone else's schedule, ever.

And you know what I also tell people all the time? If Will Smith isn't in a movie for three years, you're not walking around saying, "Where's Will Smith?" Nobody's paying attention to anyone else at all. You think everyone is but they're not. So take as long as you want if you're talented. You'll get their attention again if you have reason to. And so I do wish I had told myself back then, "This is very, very special – own it, be in it and enjoy it," instead of being so nervous – and all for nothing.

None of the things I tried to do on the side of "The Office" ever got anywhere because I just didn't have time.

Tim Ferriss: I think that's good advice for a lot of people in a lot of places. That was the advice, also, that Stephen King gave to Neil Gaiman, one of my favorite fiction writers.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Really? What was the advice?

Tim Ferriss: Well, he said enjoy it because Neil was sitting at, I think it was a book signing for "Sandman" which was just this incredible canon of work that redefined what was possible in the graphic novel genre.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Yeah, I know of that book.

Tim Ferriss: Just incredible and he's used that, of course, as a stepping stone to write novels that have been turned into movies and so on. But he was sitting there with this huge line of people, as I remember it, and he said, "Enjoy this." And that's my laptop sliding. And he didn't – he had a lot of trouble enjoying it and I think that's a constant battle.

Well, I don't want to take up anymore of your time. This has been a blast.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Oh, it's been great.

Tim Ferriss: It's getting dark and probably time for some food. Where can people find you and what you're up to online? Where are the best places to go?

BJ Novak: I'd think the best place is The List App because that's where I am. So I would say download The List App on the app store or it'll be on android and web, soon. And that's just three words: The List App at l.list. And my profile there is on my favorites, and ideas, and thoughts on this and that. I'm also on Twitter. Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: @BJNovak?

BJ Novak: @BJNovak. And then that's me on List App, too.

Tim Ferriss: Cool. Well, this has been great fun. Maybe we'll do Round 2 sometime and thanks so much, again. I really appreciate it.

[Crosstalk]

BJ Novak: Thanks, man. It's been so cool.

Tim Ferriss: And to everybody listening, you can find the show notes – links to all the books, shows, apps, etc. that were mentioned at fourhourworkweek.com/podcast. Or you can just go to fourhourworkweek.com and click on podcast.

It has show notes for this episode and every other episode. And, as always, until next time, thank you for listening.