

# *On Life and Meaning*

MARK PERES

## **Episode 6 – Becky Winkler – Diving Talent**

### *You're Electrifying*

And now a personal word,

Becky Winkler reminds me of the eighteenth-century scientists Luigi Galvani and Franz Mesmer, whose work introduced the words “galvanize” and “mesmerize.”

Luigi Galvani was an Italian biologist and surgeon who lived in the late 1700s who became fascinated by the new science of electricity and its possible applications in medicine. One night in 1780, Galvani was dissecting a dead frog, when his scalpel, which had been charged with static electricity, caused a spark in the frog's sciatic nerve. The frog's leg kicked as if it were alive. Galvani soon devoted himself to the relationship between electricity and animation, or what became the field of bioelectricity or electrophysiology, or what I like to call “the currents of life.” To galvanize now means to excite someone into action.

Franz Mesmer was a German physician who also lived and worked in the late eighteenth century. Mesmer theorized that there is a natural transfer of energy between all animate beings and that this energy could be harnessed and directed to restore health and vitality. He also examined the nervous systems of dissected frogs. By placing brass hooks in their spinal columns and leaving them outside in a storm, he studied what he called “animal magnetism.” To mesmerize now means to charm and captivate.

Tales of the work of Galvani and Mesmer inspired a young writer named Mary Godwin. Mary Godwin was an English novelist and dramatist who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century. She grew up in a home filled with ideas and discourse. She was the daughter of the political philosopher William Godwin and feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Godwin later married the poet Percy Shelly.

In the summer of 1816, Mary Godwin and Percy Shelly spent a summer near Lake Geneva with Lord Byron and other writers and luminaries. The friends spent their time writing, boating on the lake, and talking late into the night. The weather in Geneva was particularly bad that summer, filled with dark and stormy nights.

Sitting around a campfire, the writers amused themselves with ghost stories, which prompted Lord Byron to propose that each writer pen their own ghoulish tale for publication. Mary Godwin struggled with what to write. One mid-June evening, the

discussion turned to the very nature of life itself, and Godwin was soon unable to sleep. As the others went to bed, she became possessed with an idea. She wrote furiously in her diary, “Perhaps a corpse could be re-animated ... galvanism had given token to such things.”

We know Mary Godwin today as Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*, a tale of talent brought back to life.

In her consultancy practice today, Becky Winkler brings talent to life. She galvanizes and mesmerizes. She sparks life with a magnetism that inspires.

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