

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 71 – Paula Broadwell – Virtual Reality

Ulysses

And now a personal word,

I read an interview with Paula Broadwell published in *Vanity Fair* magazine in December 2016. The interview began with Paula noting that what she has accomplished in her career is not discussed in news articles: her nonprofit work, service to her country, her academic rigor, her courage interviewing terrorists, her military intelligence work in refugee camps and third-world prisons. That was the conversation I wanted to have for this podcast. I wanted to talk with Paula on her terms, about her life and achievements, about what she is working on and her ambitions going forward, about the core values that guide her.

I reached out to Paula three times before this conversation occurred. The first time was in September 2017, shortly after the launch of the podcast. Paula said she was open to being a guest but asked for an outline of my questions. I had seen her on cable news months earlier talking about national security issues. I sent her the broad topic areas I wanted to explore: her thoughts on the current national security posture, the strengths and weaknesses of our intelligence gathering and analysis, what she learned in the last ten years, what book she would write today. She declined that conversation.

Over the following months I would see social media posts of her new ventures. In the spring of 2018, I sent her a note without receiving a response. She was redefining who she was in public. Paula had begun to focus on providing education, training, and content development to advocate for individuals and groups who face systematic social and media discrimination. Her work turned to virtual reality simulations. In November 2018, I saw that Paula was a contributor to the *Vicarious* art exhibit about soldiering and the veteran experience at the Elder Gallery of Contemporary Art. I attended a luncheon at the gallery where Paula presented. She and I sat at the same table, and we talked over lunch. It was the first time we spoke at length in person.

Later that week we talked on the phone about what a recorded conversation might explore. Shortly before Veterans Day, we recorded our conversation at Wheelhouse Media studio. Afterward, Paula invited me to put on an Oculus Go headset to see a virtual reality recording of the Charlotte Opera.

I think about the poem “Ulysses” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. It is the poem Paula quoted in our recorded conversation. The poem is a dramatic monologue in the voice of Ulysses reflecting on his many adventures. Ulysses talks about living life to the fullest. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences. He wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and learning. Here are verses from the poem:

*I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;*

...

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

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