

# *On Life and Meaning*

MARK PERES

## **Episode 97 – Sonya Pfeiffer – A Life in Full**

### *Partial to the Defense*

And now a personal word,

Long ago I wrote a story about a criminal defense attorney. I wrote it when I was a young attorney imagining myself as someone else. In a scene in the novel the heroine is uncertain about whether she wants to continue to defend violent criminals. She has this exchange with her more seasoned partner:

“Why are we doing this, Tom? We don’t need to represent rapists and murderers.”

“Look.” Tom closed in. “It’s not about the defendant and whether he has blood on his hands.”

“Of course it is—”

“No, you’re wrong. That’s measuring justice by the result. That’s what the public wants. Vengeance. Retribution. Forget trials. Forget appeals. Just string them up and watch them swing. But justice is about process. Making the government prove its case—”

“I know all this—”

“Well, you wanted a reminder; I’m giving you one. When the heavy machinery of government is pointed at an individual and that person is accused of a crime, the defense attorney is the only person standing between that individual and the abuse of power. The only person. When we walk into the courtroom, it’s us against the passions of society. It’s us against the mob. The defendant is beside the point—”

“The defendant is the point—”

“The point is we’re defending everyone in that one defendant, everyone who one day could be charged with a crime. That includes you and me and everyone we care about. Any day the government could point its finger at us. We’re all standing in the shoes of that defendant. We should be damn proud of what we do.”

Brooke returned Tom’s gaze. As many times as she heard him talk about the role of defense attorneys, the same passion, the same catechism, whether on television or when accepting an award, or when inspiring one of the young associates in the office, she had never heard him sound quite as sincere as he just did. And that worried her. She didn’t believe him as much when he sounded so sincere.

That gives away my view of defense attorneys. I get that the courtroom is a crucible, and each side of the case tests the law and facts, each person doing their part in an imperfect scheme of justice, but when it comes to the David and Goliath battle of criminal law, I'm partial to the defense. Law and order are precious things, but civil liberties are more so. The rights of a defendant shield the victim and ensure stability as much as it puts the state to its paces. Our freedom is only as good as due process.

But there is something about the sincerity of the drama. At least at times. There is a degree of performance in all professions, but the act of the well-paid defense attorney in high-profile cases is something to watch. I see too many of them wear the nice suit and drive the exotic car and say what business demands. I see too many of them think more about lining their pockets in contingency cases than doing what is best for their clients. I know that the best criminal attorneys bring all of who they are to their work: their intellect, their work ethic, their competitiveness, and yes, their ability to communicate and perform, to protect ideals embodied in the clients they serve. The best attorneys fight for a cause and, yes, create a life for themselves and those they love.

My experience as a lawyer was mixed. I practiced at a national law firm, a regional one, and a local one. All my cases except one were civil litigation: contractual and tortious disputes. I worked on one criminal case, a death penalty appeal. I wrote briefs arguing prosecutorial misconduct. The case was remanded for a new trial. I could see becoming a civil rights appellate lawyer, but it didn't work out that way.

Sonya Pfeiffer has found her path. She is informed by the law, by a free press, by art and community, by peace and healing. She is drawing on a deep well of moral traditions. We hear it in her voice. We see it in the choices she makes. Her mind is fast and her words precise. She has boundless energy in the way she leans in. But to be with her is to sense a calmness as well. Sonya is purposeful. She cares about people and performance. She is forming a more perfect union of ideals in herself and helping us do the same.

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