

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



## Episode #: 29 Title: Disability and Creativity

**Guest:** Dennis Polumbo

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. Today, our guest is Dennis Palumbo, and Dennis is a former Hollywood screenwriter. Many of you probably know his work, and I'm going to let him tell us all about his work. But I know that you're going to recognize a lot of his work.

He's now a screenwriter turned licensed psychotherapist, which is very interesting. He's written multiple books, and he's going to tell us about his book that he just turned into his publisher. That's going to come out in 2017. And we also want to talk a little bit about some of the things that he's written. He wrote an article in Psychology Today, for Hollywood on the Couch. So I'm really excited to talk about that.

We also have Doug Foresta joining us today. Many of you know Doug as my producer and also a podcast -- he has multiple shows, I should say, including several podcasts that he does.

And so very excited to have you on today, Dennis. Welcome.

Dennis: Well, thank you so much, Debra, and hello, Doug.

Doug: Always good, Dennis. Thank you, Debra, thank you.

Debra: Yes, yes. I always enjoy doing this with Doug, Dennis, because he always asks some really brilliant questions. So now of course he's going to have to think of all these brilliant questions to ask.

But Dennis, do you mind telling us a little bit about your work? You have such an interesting background.

Dennis: Well, I'll give you the two-minute version. I started as a TV and film writer in Hollywood, some years ago. With my writing partner, I wrote the first episode of Love Boat. I always get a big laugh when I say that, but I just got a 13-cent residual check from the Balkans, so who's laughing now?

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But I also was a writer and producer on a show called Welcome Back, Kotter, which I'm sure your viewers are way too young to remember. I also co-wrote a movie with Peter O'Toole, called My Favorite Year, which I was really proud of. I think it turned out pretty well. I worked on about a half dozen television shows and about a half dozen movies.

And then as a result of going into therapy myself as a patient, I fell in love with the process. Over a six-year period, I went back to graduate school and got my license and retired from writing film and television and have been in private practice as a licensed psychotherapist, for about 27 years. I still write, though. I have, as you mentioned, a column in the Psychology Today website, called Hollywood on the Couch. And I have a series of mystery novels that, believe it or not, the protagonist is a therapist. I just turned in the fifth one. There are four books out already, but I just turned in the fifth one.

My practice specializes in creative people: writers, actors, directors, novelists, poets, composers. I've had journalists. And also, many people in other fields, like physicians and lawyers, who still want to explore their creativity through writing or painting or music. So I'm very fortunate to work with motivated patients who are dealing with the kinds of issues that might impede their ability to be creative. You know, like writer's blocks or procrastination or a kind of crippling anxiety or depression. Or even a fear of failure.

And so I'm very familiar with these, because I've struggled with all of them in my professional life as a writer. So I think that's what has made me kind of uniquely qualified to work with these groups of patients.

Doug: Dennis, this is Doug. I was going to ask one of my brilliant questions. We were chatting a little bit before we started, and I'm really curious to get your perspective on I guess what I would call disability and creativity. I never really thought about this before, but really, depression, anxiety, all those things can qualify as disabilities, right? I'll ask sort of a little devil's advocate question. Can we be too disabled to be creative?

Dennis: Not in my opinion. I don't know if you ever saw the film My Left Foot in which Daniel Day-Lewis was someone who was so physically incapacitated, he could only move his left foot. He was able to be quite creative. I've had, over I guess the last 15, 20 years, 2 or 3 people who are pretty severely disabled, and their creativity is not in any way hampered by that. The important thing to remember, certainly as a therapist that's my position, your disability whether it is physiological or psychological, impedes you to the extent to which you allow it to.

In other words, if a person is very anxious and they think that means, well, I can't be creative because I'm too anxious. I'm sure the other successful writers or painters I know are never anxious. You know? And that's just not true. And it's

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the same as the physically disabled patients I've worked with in the past, who have said, well, when people experience me they only see the disability. And yet, when I worked with them and helped them find the tools to manifest their creativity, whether it's in writing or painting, and one of my patients with spina bifida is a director, and he has to move around set on either crutches or a wheelchair. But after giving direction and setting up a couple camera shots, no one thinks about his disability. They're just thinking, gee, what a talented director he is.

So the reality is, we model for people how they should treat us. And if we model that we are both or either psychologically or physiologically incapable, then that's what they will see. If instead we model that we are psychologically or physiological capable regardless of circumstances, then they'll see that, too.

Debra: Oh, that's good, Dennis. That's really good. And I totally agree with that. There are so many different directions that I could go with my question, but I totally agree with that and I like how Doug put the disability and creativity together, because the reality is, first of all, we're people. That's why this podcast is about human potential. And yes, we talk about disability, but we talk about it in an empowering way. I love how you said that, because I think that's a really beautiful way to put it.

Sometimes when I first meet a person, whether they have a disability or maybe they speak a different language and they have a very thick accent that my ear is trying to adjust to, at first I'm struggling just a little bit to adapt to the situation. And then very quickly, as that person tells me who they are, I accept it. I totally accept it. Often, I just don't see the disability; I see the person. I would say always, I don't see the disability, I see the person. I think that's a really, really interesting way that you put it.

I do just want to say one real quick thing. I loved the movie My Favorite Year. It was one of my favorite movies ever. I thought it was a very, very powerful movie. So I did want to just do that little shout out to you. But I think it's so interesting how you've taken your screenwriting and all the success that you had in Hollywood and you've blended into this career as a psychotherapist but continued to write. I've talked to my viewers about this before, but depression is a tough one for me. Sometimes it feels like it's something that's sitting on my shoulders, and I hate it. I hate it, but at the same time, it has forced me to be more authentically myself, and I agree with you, Dennis, when I walk into the room and I show people who I am, I do it because that's who I am. You can accept it or not accept it; that's your call.

But I remember one time, Dennis, I had gotten a job, I had relocated my family, and I was having a really difficult discussion with my boss. And I was sort of doubting myself in a situation and he looked at me and he said, wow, of all the people that I've ever met, certainly anybody that works for me, I would never

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think you would doubt yourself, Debra. And I started thinking, oh my gosh, I doubt myself all the time. But I had put on such a strong persona, that he had totally bought it.

Doug: Well, I want to jump in here just a second, and Dennis, you'll certainly recognize this because it's your words. One of the things, Debra, as you were saying that, it reminds me -- I'd love to get your feedback about this, Dennis. I asked you the question about can we be too disabled to be created. You've written about this pretty extensively, about if only I could get rid of my depression and my anxiety and my self-doubt and my low self-esteem, or whatever it is, then I could write. To which I know, Dennis, you've said -- I'll let you take it from there.

Dennis: Well, I've had so many patients say to me that, you know, if only I could get rid of my anxiety or my self-doubt or my depression and my worry about my inadequacy and will anyone love me. If I could get rid of all that stuff, then I could sit down and write. To which, I usually answer, write about what? Because that's the human condition. What you've just described, what that patient had just described, is what everybody feels to a greater or lesser extent.

Emerson said my absolute favorite quote about writing, and Doug, you'll remember it because I think I haul it out every time you interview me. But it's a wonderful quote by Emerson. He said, "To know that what is true for you in your private heart is true for everyone, that is genius." And one of the things that makes creativity so powerful is it tends to, no matter how particular or idiosyncratic a situation is, it can generalize out to everyone. You didn't have to grow up in poverty in Dublin to understand what Frank McCourt was writing about in Angela's Ashes. You didn't have to have ever been in a boxing ring to know what Rocky Balboa was trying to prove to himself in the first Rocky.

The important thing to remember is you have one story to tell. As Ray Bradbury says, "There's only one story in the world; your story." And what I find so exciting about creativity is only you can tell it. Only you can tell your story in your particular way, and the paradox about writing is the more you make it about you and your particular experience and feelings, the more that generalizes out to everyone and everyone relates to it. It wouldn't be possible for us to enjoy stories, whether they're fantasies or crime stories or love stories or tragedies, we wouldn't be able to enjoy them if we couldn't relate to the characters. And they're often characters who are going through stuff we've never gone through, but we understand their feelings.

One of the things I always believe is that everybody has operatic passions. That guy at the supermarket who bags your groceries every week and you never exchange a word with him, if you went and took him aside for 20 minutes and asked him about his life, you'd hear about families torn apart by alcoholism, psychological or psychiatric issues, theft, sexual abuse, violence. This guy's life

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is a soap opera. Everybody's life is a soap opera. And the only way we know that is through art that reminds us of our common humanity.

And that's why I like what Debra was saying, because behind both psychological and physiological disability or distress, is a human being. And one of the great gifts of creativity is it shows us ourselves, behind our prejudices, behind our psychological differences and behind our physiological disability.

Doug: I'm curious about your perspective, because you do have this unique perspective, of disability in Hollywood and the narrative about disabilities in Hollywood. Certainly, there have been some good movies about people with disabilities. But in your experience, is there a dominant narrative about people with disabilities, or is it harder, do you think, for people with disabilities in the industry?

Dennis: Well, that's a two-prong question. If you mean how people with disabilities are depicted in film and television, they're usually depicted in fairly ennobling ways, which I think is good. Though I often think that their tendency to shy away from some of the physiological and psychological difficulties that go along with those disabilities. One of my favorite Hollywood stories is when the movie Rain Man came out. It was based on a real person. The real person was not invited to the premiere, because the studio said, well, it wouldn't be appropriate having him around. So Hollywood is very good at making stories about people whose phone calls they will never return.

So I'm a little less impressed with how Hollywood depicts disabilities. It's sort of like how I feel about Hollywood movies where the little guy gets the big corporation, since all the Hollywood movies are made by horrible, big corporations. So I have a problem with that, sort of, cognitive dissonance.

In terms of people with disabilities and their success in Hollywood as creators, I think they're still woefully unrepresented, just like I think women are woefully unrepresented and people of color are woefully unrepresented. Funnily enough, the very first staff job I had was as a writer on Welcome Back, Kotter, and one of the producers, Nick Arnold, one of the most talented people I ever knew, had severe muscular dystrophy. It was hard to even understand him when he spoke, let alone the difficulty he had walking and moving around the room. But after 5 or 10 minutes, you could understand everything he said and I couldn't wait to hear his input on a script because I knew it was going to be smarter and funnier than anybody else's.

Debra: Yes, and I think that's very interesting, especially as there's a lot of advocacy going on right now with a lot of minority groups, including the disability minority group, that is saying Hollywood needs to include us. It was very interesting to sit back and watch what was happening with the Academy Awards and is it not enough minorities are getting awards. It was interesting to watch that unfold, because in the first place, what do we even mean when we say disabilities? I

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mean, are we going to whip out the Americans with Disabilities Act and read the description? Because it's very broad.

I understand the need for us to have diversity and to break everybody into different categories, but I think it also gets in the way. I think it really gets in the way. You referenced that wonderful, wonderful movie, My Left Foot. I heard some criticism saying, well, they should have hired an actor with a disability. Well, there are some real complications with that particular film, and Daniel Day-Lewis did an amazing job, but it's interesting sometimes to me because I think people should be able to be who they are, and all of these abilities and disabilities that make us up as individual people, those are our strengths and weaknesses. And of course, we can get strong with our weaknesses. I've always been very, very just fascinated with the human psyche and everything.

And I love this stories, because, Dennis, we haven't heard the story about the gentleman that you're mentioning at Welcome Back, Kotter. And I grew up watching that show. I thought it was really funny. There's so many people. I remember when we lost Robin Williams, which I loved his work, and when we understood, I think a lot of us in society understood what Robin had walked to give us that brilliance, was he less of a human being because he had ADHD or whatever the diagnosis? I really do believe that we can bloom right where we're planted, regardless of our disabilities and abilities. And I understand that that's what you and Doug both do for a living. But finding the humanity in each of us, I think, is a real challenge sometimes for society.

Dennis: Yeah, I absolutely agree. It is a real challenge, but what I like is the debate is way in the light now, whereas 50 years ago it wasn't. It was in the shadows. And so that's really good. It's sort of like how alcoholism was in the shadows until AA, essentially. And so the more people can talk about it, the more they can hear stories of people who their humanity, which I think because of my interests, I think their humanity tends -- their creativity tends to be the vehicle that expresses their humanity. There's other ways to express your humanity, through sports, through good works, through politics, whatever, but because of my specialty, I think a person's authentic self, if they're an artist, is best expressed through their artistry. And that's true, whether you have a disability or not, and whether that disability is psychological or physiological.

Doug: Dennis, one of the things we didn't mention too much, although Debra did touch on it a bit, is that obviously the progression of your career as a successful Hollywood screenwriter, successful psychotherapist in the creative industry, but you also have been writing very successful novels. I'm really excited to hear about your most recent novel. I'm wondering if you can share with our listeners, maybe first what the series is, what you write about, and would love to hear what the most recent book is.

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Dennis: The series is called The Daniel Rinaldi Mysteries, and the lead character is a psychologist. The stories take place in Pittsburg, my hometown, even though I've lived here in Las Angeles for about 40 years. Daniel is a consultant for the Pittsburg police. He's a trauma expert. He specializes in dealing with the victims of violent crimes. People who have been raped or kidnapped or carjacked or been the victims of an assault or a home invasion. And he helps them deal with the traumas associated with it. Mostly, the symptoms we associate with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

But of course, it's a mystery series, so he ends up getting involved in police investigations. And so there are four books out so far, and the first is Mirror Image, the second is Fever Dream, the third is Night Terrors, and the most recent that's come out is called Phantom Limb. The one I just turned in that's going to come out in 2017 is called Head Wounds. And what I'm excited about is, the backstory of Daniel Rinaldi is that he and his wife were mugged many, many years ago, coming out of a restaurant, and during the struggle with the armed mugger, his wife was killed but he survived. And so he spent his life dealing with survivor guilt. What Head Wounds is about is him finding out what actually happened during that mugging and who was responsible.

So it's one of those novels that my readers have demanded over the last four books. They wanted to know what was the story. What actually happened that night? And so Head Wounds deals with what actually happened.

Debra: Wow, sounds very interesting. So Dennis, I know that all a person has to do is Google you and they'll find amazing content. I know the answer to this, but I'm going to make you say it. Tell us about your website. How do people find your books? Tell people how they can find out more about your work.

Dennis: Well, probably the easiest way is to go to my website, which is cleverly named [DennisPalumbo.com](http://DennisPalumbo.com). You can also go to my publisher, Poison Pen Press, and read about my books. Also, you can go to the Psychology Today website and type in my name. I have a column, as you mentioned, that's called Hollywood on the Couch, which addresses creative issues in the Hollywood community. But the way the columns are written, they're pretty much applicable to anyone struggling with creative issues, because I address writer's block, procrastination, anxiety, all the usual suspects.

And so yeah, if you Google me, I've been interviewed all over the place: NPR, CNN, all the major newspapers and magazines. I've written articles for the New York Times, the LA Times. So if you're foolish enough and have enough time on your hands, just type in my name. You'll get much more of me than you ever wanted in the first place.

Debra: Well, I think that the work you do is just really amazing. I followed the work for so many years, and as a writer myself. I want to be a fiction writer. I've always

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written non-fiction, but I am itching to write a couple of fiction novels. I'm going to check out your column in Psychology Today. The reality is, we are all just individuals and we're made up of all these different parts. I've talked about my walk with depression and ADHD, and the reason why I brought it up is just because I am in this field, of making sure that corporations and countries and the United Nations, that we're all really making very progressive steps, to make sure that people with disabilities are more meaningfully included.

But then you have the work that you're doing, Dennis, where it's just part of being a human being. It's very aspect of your work. And I think that really is the story we're telling here. I also love the example you gave of all of our lives are a soap opera and stories worth telling. So thank you so much for being on the show today.

And Doug, I want to allow you to make one more comment or ask Dennis one more question before we close.

Doug: Well, I just want to say, Dennis, thank you so much for joining us. It's been too long. You still have the rein. I've done, I think, 1,000 interviews, but you more than anyone, and thanks for continuing to come back. I'd love to have you back again.

Dennis: Oh, well, thank you. Debra, it was nice meeting you.

Debra: Yes.

Dennis: And Doug, for always thinking of me.

Debra: Dennis, you were really, really fascinating, and I know the listeners are going to really, really enjoy this interview. So thank you, Dennis, thank you, Doug, and thank you to all the listeners for joining us today. Have a great day, bye-bye.

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