

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

working in my favor, and the advantage is time. I was first diagnosed with a retinal condition, really more than 30 years ago now. I was 13 years old. This has been a long, slow process. And although it's generally a spiral that does not end well, I've had the advantage of time to know what I like to do and figure out ways to compensate as the balance in my life has shifted.

When I first started my career, I was that guy, if you remember the Bugs Bunny cartoon, the one where he's playing all the instruments, you know, he even has the Umpa drum on his foot. I was that guy. I shot the video, I edited the video, I wrote the story. It was just really the demands of the job. And as the nature of what makes sense for me to do, in terms of my capabilities as a storyteller has evolved and changed over time, I've found myself wearing different hats and having to delegate those hats to others.

Because really, the kind of storytelling I do, it's a team sport anyway and it should be. There should be a team of professionals, creative professionals, that are working on the same creative vision. So as I've handed over the reins more and more over the years when it comes to who is behind the lens shooting the video, although I still do just enough because I still have some sight left --

Doug: I was going to ask you about that, Michael. Can you go into a little bit more detail about -- I'm trying to imagine as a listener -- can you say how much vision -- ironically, actually, I have an eye exam in a few hours and I know my vision has gone way down because I hit 40 and it just went.

Michael: You want to know what I can see, basically.

Doug: Yeah, what can you see exactly?

Michael: Sure. So what I'd like you to do is imagine, say, the foggiest San Francisco morning you've ever been in, and then take that foggy day and then make it very, very blurry, and that's really where the state of my vision is also, especially if you kind of factor in the fact that sometimes things are a little broken up. It's not exactly like a Picasso painting, but that's how you can kind of get the idea.

This is a very slow degradation. And to get to the root of your question, how do I do what I do, I wear many hats. And photographer's hat is not the one I wear more often. But in terms of how I work with the disability, there are remarkable tools out there that allow me to do my job as a storyteller. So whether we're talking about what a director does to make a project happen or what a producer does to organize the details around a film or you're talking about adaptive technology or assistive technology from screen readers and voice over and JAWS, and I know I'm talking about things that people in the visually impaired community know very well.

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But whether it's those kind of tools or a simple screen magnifier or braille, which I've had to become fluent in, over the last several years. Or whether it's just knowing my way around by years of experience, frankly. I did a TED Talk about a year and a half ago, and it came up. How do you do what you do? And I was trying to communicate that, yes, it can be about using the spatial dimensions or the acoustic aspects of an environment or a set, which I do, or it could be when I'm manning the Go Pro and I'm shooting at four times the resolution, say shooting at 4K to do a 1080 hi-def shot. So I'll have four times the canvas when I'm editing. Or whether it's when I sit down to do some basic color grading, I am really using those Waveforms and Vectorscopes and thinking of not so much color as color temperature and the aspects of laying out the design of a shot by formulas that I know very well, having done this, and knowing to trust my equipment.

There are just a million tools that you learn behind the mechanics of storytelling, that allow you to pursue the art of storytelling.

Doug: Here's another question for you that I'm curious about. Are there any ways in which -- the obvious thought is, how could this be a disadvantage, but the other question I have for you is, do you find ways in which losing your sight -- are there any ways in which you find that it has made your work more interesting or visually different in a way that you think is a positive?

Michael: Yes, and I'm really glad you asked the question. For the film that I'm working on right now, we were in Australia and we were shooting in the outback and we were at a site called Uluru. This is a site that is sacred to the Anangu aborigines who call this part of the country home. And Uluru is this enormous stone monolith. It's 1,100 feet high, it's 5 miles in circumference and it stands out on the horizon. That's a given.

But what I found from experiencing this from my perspective, what stuck out to me was that when you are standing in front of this rock and you're approaching it, it's unlike anything else in the world that I've experienced from traveling the world. People compare it to Colorado and Utah, Arches National Monument or Canyon Lands, et cetera. But I can tell you from having actually put my hand at the base of the rock, it's not the same. You're on sandy terrain and literally an inch farther, you're feeling the base and it goes straight down. There's no grade.

To me, that was remarkable, feeling the environment of the outback itself. I know this sounds like a cliché, but it's a cliché because I've heard so many blind people say it. Feeling what a sunrise or a sunset feels like. And I wouldn't have thought it was true until I experienced it for myself, just feeling the different puffs of wind or the way the environment does get a little change in the humidity during the time of day, that in Australia they call it the pre-glow. And to be able to match what I can still see at this point with what my photographer is shooting, and matching it with those other senses, it really makes things come into place, in a

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way that very few things have. And of course it gives you empathy for what other people are dealing with in their own lives.

Debra: And you know, Michael, as you're explaining that, I'm right there with you. I'm experiencing it. I don't know about you, Doug, but I was right there with him, feeling it, feeling the sand under my feet.

Doug: Absolutely.

Debra: Yeah, so that's incredible.

Michael: I'm so glad. That means I'm doing my job.

Debra: Yeah.

Michael: Thank you. That's a fantastic compliment. I appreciate that.

Debra: Well, and you've already talked about it a little bit, and I know you're working on a documentary called The Palette Project. And so I don't know if that's the documentary you were just referring to, but --

Michael: It is.

Debra: Okay. Tell us more about that.

Michael: Well, when my vision -- it seems strange to be yearning for the glory days when my eyesight was 2400. That's like not even the top line of the eye chart. But I am now. When my eyesight just dropped off a cliff about three years ago and I did not know how I was going to keep this business going, I mean, I'm a creative artist but you're a business person also. There are the same demands as in any business.

I was facing just some very difficult questions, both from my roster of clients and from myself. I was talking to a photographer friend of mine in Virginia actually, and I'm like, I'm not quite sure how this is going to work out. And he said, well, you know -- he said, you have an interesting story here. And I didn't want him to say it, frankly. I fought it tooth and nail because the watch word through really doing this in some form or another for the past several decades, has always been be the storyteller, not the story. And the idea of being the story, visually impaired filmmaker travels the world and sees what he can and experiences what he can, that was just anathema to me. I did not want to do it. And he said, well, turn around it in your head for a little while.

And what evolved from this was, well, yes, I am in an unusual position. I'm a filmmaker and I'm visually impaired, and that's something that does not compute. I should take that and really make it compute, because I am a firm believer that

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there are workarounds to everything, and even when it comes to something like blindness or impending blindness or disability in general, whatever the issue is, it's an inconvenience. It's not an obstacle, it's not a barrier, it's an inconvenience, and inconveniences can be dealt with.

From that, sprang The Palette Project, and this really unbelievable journey that I've been on for the last two years, traveling the world and using my perspective to share the perspectives of people who aren't just like me; this is really standing on the shoulders of giants. These are people I'm meeting around the world who are just doing remarkable things. And mine does spring from the perspective of starting with people who are visually impaired. My goodness, the stories we're finding along the way, blind sailors that are competing in sailboat races, Keelboat races, against all challengers, full sighted and non-sighted, in New Zealand. A fleet of solo sailors all with individual stories and all with their own disabilities that challenge them, crossing the Cook Strait, one of the most dangerous channels of water in the world. One of them blind, one of them with Spina Bifida, one of them with Brittle Bone Syndrome, and they do these incredible tasks in the middle of these challenges.

And going to the Middle East and meeting, say, a visually impaired entrepreneur who's part of a team creating wearable tech that is doing just next-generation optical character recognition and facial recognition, all in an iPhone-sized camera that's clipped to the frame of a non-prescription pair of eyeglasses. I haven't run out of stories yet, and there's still so many to do. As I like to say, one for each color of the painter's palette.

Doug: Well, it brings up the question of what's really holding us back? Is it the "disability" itself or is it the narrative and story we have around it. As you were saying that about whoever heard of a blind filmmaker, well, who ever heard of a deaf musician, right? But Beethoven did it okay.

Michael: Exactly. Yes, and several hundred years ago, so. What's funny is, there's nothing new under the sun. When I started this journey, a friend of mine here in San Francisco said, you know, you should read this biography about a man named James Holman. And he was a member of the British Royal Navy, and he lost his sight and he became a solo traveler around the world. His name is mentioned on some locations on maps, geographical locations around the world. He went to, I want to say, several dozen countries over the course of his life, and this was in the 1800s.

So you know, people have been figuring out these problems based on their passions, for a lot longer than I have. So I'm a big fan of the no-excuses mentality, and there are plenty of people dating back centuries to guide the way.

Debra: Well, and you know, I think Doug and I are psychically linked, because I was going to ask a similar question. One reason why I wanted to do this program was

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there's so much rhetoric right now, and I think of the veterans as an example. Years ago, I was employing people with disabilities in a technology company, and I wanted to include veterans with disabilities in that. And so this was a time when people were coming back injured from a war that the U.S. was having, and we had a lot of service people coming back injured.

And so I was using the term veterans with disabilities, and quickly was told by the community, we don't identify with that. We don't have disabilities. We're wounded. And then the term became popular, wounded warriors. I was really thinking about that and I thought, it's interesting to be trying to support a community where many people don't "want" to be part of this community. My daughter Sara, who's 29 years old with Down Syndrome, she often sees being labeled as a person with a disability as a negative thing.

And so the thing that fascinates me about your beautiful story and the stories that you're telling, Michael, is that -- it's what you said. I'm a doer, I'm going to make a difference, I'm not going to let anything get in my way. But it's that spirit, capturing that spirit. It's the whole reason why we do this podcast. We're trying to show the human spirit between -- it's not about the disability; it's about the human spirit and the work. Yeah, I'm not surprised you're finding amazing stories out there.

Michael: You're so right, and your experience so echoes my experience. And I want to add another layer to that, because I think you've probably seen this, too. There can be a real problem -- I'm all for not identifying primarily with the disability, when you consider the whole pamphlet of skills and emotions and life experience that anyone brings to the table.

That said, when I really began to, with not a lot of choice, really embrace the lifestyle that comes with being visually impaired and dealing with the concept of blindness, I did what most people in my position do. The first thing you say is something along the lines of something I said, when it was, hey, I love to back country hike and I want to join a back country hiking group. But I don't want to join a blind back country hiking group; I just want to be a hiker and do my thing. That has merit and that's important in the idea that it helps you keep your sense of self and sense of identity.

But there's also a flipside to that, and it's the danger of not engaging and foster solidarity with the very people who can advocate with you, from the point of you, of having the experience you have. One of the best things that I did was I joined a visually impaired sailing group here in San Francisco. And we've raced at the international level. And this was something else that I had to come to embrace, because -- I don't know if this is particular to visual impairment, but compared to something like, say, you've probably heard the term deaf culture, and it's a unique movement of solidarity that really embraces the world of hearing impairment and the unique perspective that comes from that.

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I've had a hard time finding the blind culture equivalent, and that's because -- let's be very honest here -- there is still an issue with the idea of being comfortable with blindness and blind people. And I get it. I really do. And I'm not trying to start any arguments here, but blindness can be uncomfortable to be around. It's one of peoples' worst fears, especially as they age, of feeling like there's a lack of independence or a lack of ability. It's a hard thing, to grasp that independence and grasp that ability. And I truly believe that whatever the disability is, there are two issues that need to be handled. One, the sense of self that comes from all aspects of a personality, like we've talked about. And two, recognizing the need for solidarity in advancing the idea that someone with a disability has just as much of a place in any environment, including and especially the workplace. And that's disability-wide.

Debra: Agreed, agreed.

Doug: It's really interesting, Michael, because I think on the one hand, I think of people who say there's no limits, doesn't matter what, there's no limits, the only limits are in your mind. And then of course the other side of that would be your disabled, don't try anything.

Tell me if this is off, but what I hear you saying kind of is that we have to embrace what's actually happening to us in the moment and embrace our communities, but at the same time, not take on, let's say, additional limitations that society might put on us or that we might put on ourselves.

Michael: Yeah, you're right, Doug, and I think it's something that we can all get on board with. Let me start with something that I think the three of us know because we deal with issues around the workplace on a regular basis. And the numbers that I'm going to use specifically apply to visual impairment, but they aren't that different for most disabilities or handicaps.

In the world of visual impairment, the unemployment rate for working age men and women who can and want to work, who are visually impaired, is 70 percent. 7 out of 10 visually impaired people are not full-time, gainfully employed.

Debra: That's crazy.

Michael: Well, I promise you that it is not because 70% of the people who are visually impaired don't want to work.

Debra: Right.

Doug: Right.

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Michael: And so then you have to ask yourself, what is the issue here? Sometimes, the expectations are very low, the perceptions are a little misguided and the idea that there are workarounds just -- that has a hard time breaking through, because a lot of people don't know what that world is like. I'm out in the public every day, and there's probably not -- definitely not two days that goes by, but often once a day someone will see me using my iPhone with the voice over. They'll see, oh, he -- I'm using it strange. I'm double tapping instead of single tapping or I'm using this instead of that. They'll see that after I've found a place to sit down and grab a cup of coffee, and somebody will say something like, "I had no idea people who are visually impaired can use an iPhone."

The iPhone has been around for 10 years this year, and accessibility features have pretty much been baked into the cake from day 1. I don't know what the image is, but it just comes from a lack of knowledge, which again, I understand. There are 330 million people in this country. The number of visually impaired people is very, very small in most communities. The odds are strongly in your favor that you may never actually run into a blind person. So how are you going to know?

So if you want to call them misconceptions, if you want to call them misperceptions, whatever word you want to use, it's just from a lack of exposure. So I see it incumbent upon myself to work with people who have disabilities, to tell stories of people with disabilities and to be a person with a disability who is out there just doing something that I've been doing anyway, just now under difference circumstances, and have the message come across that way.

Debra: And I think that's so powerful. I had a friend of mine who was blind, and he used the same word you did, Michael. Sometimes it's inconvenient. He lived in Washington D.C. and he said, you know, it's inconvenient that I can't drive and there's other inconveniences. He said, but I don't want people to look at me and decide my life is a tragedy. It's not a tragedy. I'm contributing to society, I'm happily married.

So I think that's why your work is so needed. And I think Doug wanted to make another comment, too, so I'm going to turn it over to him.

Doug: Sure, yeah, just before we wrap up, I wanted to say that the irony is not lost on me about how invisible blind people are in our culture and how we may not see them, in a myriad of ways. Which begs the question, who is blind?

Debra: Right.

Michael: You're right, and this does really extend across the entire palette of disability. A friend of mine who runs a new non-profit here in San Francisco, her story's an interesting one, and I'll leave it to her to tell it, but the long and the short if it is, she's familiar with the world of mobility impairment, quadriplegia, et cetera. And sometimes people say, what can I do, what can I do. You know the biggest thing

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you can do? Acknowledge someone with a disability. That is a huge, huge thing, because the world of disability can be a very lonely world. And it's strange for me, who's a very gregarious person. I like interacting with people. And this was new to me, to walk 10 blocks and have nobody say good morning. Or the human contact you get is what I sometimes call the Moses effect. You're walking with a cane and it's just everybody parts. I mean, or you get that little embarrassed, under the breath, oh, sorry.

I have to tell you, this is done out of kindness. That sounds strange to say, but it is because rather than say something that might be the wrong thing to say, the default is to not say anything. And I get that, but whether it is someone in a wheelchair look a person in the wheelchair in the eye, I've heard this so many times from people with mobility impairments, look me in the eye when you're talking to me and not to the person behind me.

As I said in the TED Talk, talk to someone who's visually impaired, or even better, give them a job.

Debra: Even better, yeah.

Michael: But just acknowledge that this is such a diverse world and everybody has a talent and everybody has a passion, and there is a way to make all of it compute.

Debra: Right, right. So Michael, tell our audience how they can find out more about your work.

Michael: Sure. So I'd like to give you two links, and the first one is to the website for the film. My television experience says that I'm teeing this up to tell people, get a pencil or open up a sticky pad and put your fingers on the typewriter because I'm about to give you a web address. But the web address for the film is this. It's TrailHeadProductions.com/Palette, because that's my production company so it's all strung together, like a painter's palette. And that's where you can get all the information about the journey, how it started, where it's at right now, how it's going to end up, or at least how I think it's going to end up.

And the second thing I'm going to say, and this is me taking out my -- this is me saying this is a film that's still in production and this is how we creative types get these things done. I do crowd funding for this, right on the front page of the website, right at TrailHeadProductions.com/Palette. There's a big button. It's a big enough button that even I can see it. That's how big it is. And it says "Support my work on Patreon." Patreon is a crowd funding site, where I post a webisode feed of everything that we're shooting along the way, most of which is going to be in the final documentary, and people can see it now, one, four, five-minute episode at a time.

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And I want you to join not just because I want your one or two dollars per video or your dollar-a-month subscription, although that would be nice, I want you to join because I'm building a community of people that believe that this crazy idea can actually work, and to get your feedback. If we don't do this as a team effort and have engagement and have people say, oh, I saw this story and really like it, or sometimes even better, oh, I saw this story and really didn't like it and here's why. I want to know, and I'd rather know now while I'm still shooting the thing, than when I've got eight countries worth of footage in the can and then find out.

So yeah, please support the work on the Patreon link on the homepage for the film's website, and you can really help make a difference.

Debra: Well, thank you for being on Human Potential at Work, Michael. You are exactly that kind of guest that we like to highlight, and I am looking forward to supporting the film and seeing the film in the movie theaters as well. So thank you, Michael, and thank you, Doug, always, for joining me.

Doug: Thank you, Debra.

Debra: And adding value to the conversation.

Michael: You're very welcome.

Hello, thank you for listening to Human Potential at Work. If you're interested in exploring a conversation about my work, I would love for you to visit me on my website at www.RuhGlobal.com, or you can follow me on most social media platforms at Debra Ruh. I'm available to speak, to provide strategic consulting, and certainly to talk to any brand about the social impact you're having as a brand influencer. Thank you so much for your time and for helping me make a difference in the world.