

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



Episode #: 26 Title: Tony Coelho on Sponsoring the ADA

**Guest:** Tony Coelho

**Guest Title:** Senator and ADA Sponsor

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. Today's guest is somebody that I've admired a long time, and he's actually had a powerful impact on my work but also on my family. Many of you know that I have a 29-year-old daughter with Down Syndrome. And so today's guest is the honorable Tony Coelho. Am I pronouncing your last name correctly?

Tony: It's Coelho; you're right.

Debra: Okay, great, great. Tony, you have so many accomplishments and you have done so many things. So much more, I think, than a lot of people thought you were going to do, and so I'm really excited about talking to you about your life, your journey, your efforts with the Americans with Disabilities Act, your efforts to make sure that people with disabilities are meaningfully included in society, and also your efforts with the Hillary Clinton campaign also.

So welcome to the program, Tony.

Tony: Thank you, Debra. Great to be on with you. I in return, admire what you've done and how aggressive you've been to get your voice out. I think that's so important, so thank you.

Debra: Yeah, thank you, Tony. So Tony, I know that I featured you on my Twitter program that I cohost with Antonio Santos and Neil Milliken. And so some of the viewers might already be familiar with your work through that program, or hopefully just from all the good work that you've done.

But tell us about your journey and where your journey began, back in Portugal. Go ahead and tell us more about who you are.

Tony: Thank you, Debra. I was born and raised in California. My grandparents all came from Portugal. So I'm 100 percent Portuguese. We had a dairy farm and I milked cows for many years. One time, I was going down a canal bank on the

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dairy farm, with somebody else driving, they were speeding and we ended up in the canal. In the process, I hit my head. It was not a real problem, I had a headache, but I was fine and went back to milking cows and so everything was okay.

A year later, I was in the barn milking and the next thing I knew, I was in my bed with a doctor, sitting me. A rural part of California, that's the way they practiced medicine. But he was sitting on me because I was convulsing or seizing, however you want to phrase it, and I could hear them but I could not speak. They were discussing my situation, so forth and so on. My parents were both there, my brother was there.

What they didn't tell me is that the doctor had told them that I was having a seizure, meaning I had epilepsy. With the Portuguese culture and a lot of other cultures, not just Portuguese, in the black culture, the Asian culture, a lot of the European cultures, if you have epilepsy it means that you're possessed by the devil. In our family, that meant that God was punishing the family because of something that somebody in the family had done, a very serious sin, and that I was having these seizures so people knew this family had made a mistake.

Well, that's a heck of a burden for my family to carry, but I was the vehicle. And so I went to several doctors and all the doctors said the same thing, but I didn't know that. They kept that away from me. So I didn't know what the doctors were saying.

So then we started going to witch doctors. Went to three witch doctors. They were all trying to drive the evil spirits away. After the third one, because you go into these dark rooms and they start praying and they pour hot oil on your forehead and on your chest and burn candles on your chest and so forth, for a 17-year-old, very, very scary. So after the third one, I said I would not do it anymore. And so that was a confrontation with my family.

My high school superintendent basically said to me one day, you've got to get out of here. You've got to go somewhere else for your college education. So I ended up going to Loyola University in Las Angeles, Loyola Marymount University. And I went there, it was fabulous. The Jesuits were the teachers and I loved it. I continued having my seizures. I considered them passing out spells. I didn't know any better. I'd pass out and after I'd come to, I was tired and would either sleep or rest and go right back, do what I was doing. And so every once in a while I'd have a grand mal seizure, but not very often. And they always generally occurred in the afternoon, the late afternoon. So it was not totally inconvenient, but I didn't know what it was.

And then I went through college and John Kennedy got assassinated, and that really hit me really hard, and I decided after that, that if he could give up his life

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fighting for our country, that I want to do public service. I want to do something to make a difference in peoples' lives. And so I decided I didn't want to be a trial lawyer, which is what I was going for, and what I wanted to do was become a Catholic priest.

So upon graduating, I announced I wanted to go into the Jesuit seminary. I went through a physical, because of these problems I was having, and the doctor said to me after doing all kinds of tests, he said, has anybody ever told you that you have epilepsy? And I said no, I don't even know what the word means. And so he described to me what epilepsy is, and he said, what are your experiences of passing out spells and so forth. I said, I've had a lot of them all these years. I described them, I described the doctors, I described the witch doctors. He said, well, let me tell you what's going on.

So he told me basically, what my family was going through, what I was going through, and said, good news, bad news. Good news is, you can't serve in the military because you're 4F. The bad news is you can't be a Catholic priest because in 400 AD, the church decided that if you had epilepsy or possessed by the devil, you couldn't be a priest. So that was 400 AD, and I was now operating in 1964. So a long way from 400 AD. And so he said, but I'll give you medicine that will be able to control most of your seizures. You may still have some.

So that was at that point, and I'm now 74 and I still have seizures. So it hasn't eliminated my seizures. And for those of us with disabilities, I wake up every morning not knowing when I'm going to have a seizure or where I might have a seizure. So I think that at times, when people see me, I function very well and so forth, but that fear factor of having a seizure when and where is there.

But anyway, I felt good coming out of that doctor's office because I knew, all of a sudden, what my problem was. I could get medication to take care of it. I called my family to say I have some good news, and I told them what was going on. And their reaction was, no son of ours has epilepsy, period. And that affected our relationship for 20 years or more. Did not have a good relationship after that.

I tried to get a job, couldn't get a job. I was outstanding senior student body president and I had all kinds of job offers, but when I went to those offices, I'd fill out the application form. The word epilepsy was on all these forms and I'd check it, and I didn't even get an interview. After a while, I started drinking and I would go to this hill in a park in Las Angeles. And when you're drinking, you think hills are mountains. So I would always think I was on the top of a mountain and getting drunk, and I'd be drunk every day by two or three in the afternoon.

One day, I'm there and I'm drunk and I become suicidal. I decided that nothing in my life really had any meaning anymore. That my family turned against me, my church turned against me, I thought God turned against me. And so all of a

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sudden, a voice came over me and I heard music and I turned and saw a merry-go-round at the bottom of this hill. This voice said to me that you're going to be just like those little kids. You're never going to let anybody or anything ever stop you from doing what you want to do.

And that was it. I have not been depressed, not been suicidal since. A week later, I got an opportunity, as a result of one of my priest friends, got an opportunity to live with the Bob Hope family for a year. Mr. Hope was great to me. I traveled with him, went to meals, lived in the house and so forth, with he and the family. And one day he said to me, he said, you know, your problem is you think you have a ministry and it only can be practiced in a church. A true ministry is practiced in business and entertainment and government and so forth. Where you belong is in politics. That's where you belong. You can make a difference there. You can impact thousands of peoples' lives.

I was fascinated with that; I had never thought about it. Wrote a letter to my congressman who I didn't know, got a job, went to work for him, worked for him for 14 years. He became my father. He was just absolutely fabulous. I had seizures. When I got through with a seizure, he said, okay, it's time to get back to work. He never, ever was negative about my seizures or anything. One time, one of the chief of staffs tried to get me fired because the congressman and I were so close, and he was upset about that relationship. And I had a seizure because of the stress on that, and he'd written a long memo. As a result of that, the congressman fired him and elevated me to the chief of staff role.

Debra: Cool.

Tony: So epilepsy all of a sudden, and my seizures, all of a sudden instead of being negatives, all of a sudden became positives. I became chief of staff. When he retired, I took his place. My opponent tried to use epilepsy against me; it didn't work. I get elected. I started offering amendments in regards to disability issues. Because I decided that what I wanted to do was to take care of my districts' concerns, agriculture and water in central California, but I wanted to be able to make a difference on disabilities. That was my concern.

And so I did. I started offering these amendments, and then I decided it doesn't do any good to have an amendment to a housing bill or whatever, if you don't have your basic civil rights. In 1990, we got the ADA passed. I introduced it in '86. But we got it passed in 1990. Until then, if you were in a wheelchair, a movie theater had a right to kick you out because you could be a fire hazard. If you were blind, you went to a restaurant and you of course couldn't read the menu and you asked, they could kick you out because you were a nuisance. If you went for a job, they could ask about any disability you had and question you about it and so forth, and not let you get the job or fire you if you were there, and say it

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was because of your disability. And that's why I decided we had to have something to get our basic civil rights, and that's what the ADA is all about.

So in my life, I just feel strongly that I can play a role and I have and I love it, and try to make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities, like your daughter, Debra.

Debra: Right. And you know, when you first introduced it in '86, that very important legislation, my daughter wasn't born yet. She was born in 1987. And I was watching people with disabilities fighting for their rights and getting out of their wheelchairs. As a citizen I was watching it, not realizing I was going to be joining the community.

We talk on this program all the time about human potential. We're all human beings, and to me you have such a powerful story because, well, you had demons in you. Well, no, it's epilepsy. Well, it's an embarrassment to the family, maybe there was some bad karma -- it's just amazing the labels that we put on people, sometimes by the people that are supposed to love for us and care for us.

I love how you said that congressman was your father, because he was. He believed in you and he saw the value that you brought. And Bob Hope, that is so cool. I'm old enough to remember Bob Hope very well, and I loved him as an entertainer and I loved how he was always giving back to our service people. He just seemed like a really good guy. I love the story, because the reality is, part of being alive means we're going to have contrast in our lives. Sometimes we're going to have children born with disabilities. Sometimes we're going to have a disability.

I was talking to a gentleman a little while ago, that he was robbed and beaten at gunpoint and actually shot, and he lost his vision. So it doesn't mean that man is throwaway or garbage; he still has things that he wants to contribute to society. And I think, Tony, if somebody wants to contribute to society, why don't we get out of their way and let's see what they can do to make a big difference. So I applaud the efforts that you've made, and I love your positive attitude. I also love that you're not afraid to roll up your sleeves and fight for what you believe in.

So moving from that point, I know, and, Tony, you know this as well, but generally, even though I have a very large following on social media, I don't come out for one candidate over another, typically. I stay away from politics and religion on social media. But this time, after watching how Trump talked about, first of all, women, and then Mexicans, the journalist with disabilities, the recent fiasco.

I have openly come out many, many times for Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton, her 30 years has been all about service. She's not perfect because she's also a

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human being, but I will not vote for any person that attacks another person and a whole segment of society, especially for people with disabilities. So do you mind talking a little bit about why you got involved in the politics of this particular election, between Trump and Hillary Clinton?

Tony: Happy to, Debra. Let me just tell one quick story, though, and that is I want everybody to know that I'm a devout Catholic and that I have not turned against my church because of what I went through. As a matter of fact, when I was a rep in the United States House, I got an opportunity to go to Europe and I wanted to go visit with the Pope, and I took a delegation with me and we visited with Pope John Paul.

During that visit, I was able to say to the Pope, after a very boring preapproved speech, I said, Your Holiness, I couldn't live with myself if I didn't say something personal. When I was a young man, I decided I wanted to become a Catholic priest and I was kicked out of the seminary because I have epilepsy. Cannon law in 400 AD said if you have epilepsy or are possessed by the devil, you can't be a priest. I think that's very un-Christian of our church, and I hope you would look into it.

And that was it. He gave his very boring speech. He didn't talk about what I said at all. We took a bunch of pictures. Then my wife and I at the time, walked him out of the door of the Vatican, and he turned to her, blessed her, turned to me, did not bless me, and said, young man, I heard your comment. I thought I was going straight to Hell because he didn't bless me.

But two years later, Cannon law was changed to permit people with epilepsy to become priests. I don't take credit for that, Debra, because I do not know what went into it. I just know that I did speak up, because that is what I think my role is, to speak out aggressively when people are being discriminated against and so forth, and some action was taken. Why it was taken, I don't know, but I just know it was taken. And that's one of my favorite stories, but I just want people to know, I've never turned against my church. I'm very spiritual and as a good Portuguese person, I'm very devout.

But anyway, let's get to why I'm with Hillary. I was chairman of the Gore campaign and I tried to get disabilities included, but the professionals dismissed disabilities. You don't want to talk about it, blah, blah, blah. So when Hillary asked, I said I'd love to help, but I want to be able to organize the disability community and get the disability community included in the whole process of electing a president, so that other candidates running for president for now on or for governor or for the Senate, know that the disability community is an organized community just like every other community. The women's community, the gay community, the veterans' community, the black community, the Hispanic community and so forth. All these different communities are organized,

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aggressively involved, except for the disability community. And I said I want to do that, and she said fine.

So then what we have, is we now have 220 people with disabilities involved with proposing issues in regards to policy. We have 30 people working on social media. We've raised \$2 million. We are aggressively involved in every possible way now, and get out to vote and so forth. And you know what? People are paying attention. When we had the convention on the platform, we had 35 different references on disabilities in 19 different sections of that platform. And that's never been done before. If we had one mention of disability it'd be exciting. But now we've had 35.

And then every night of the convention, there were four nights, every night at the convention, disability was discussed by Hillary, by Bill Clinton, by Michelle Obama, by Barack Obama, by Tim Kaine. Every principle speaker talked about it. Plus, we had people with disabilities who had speaking roles at the convention. And now, we're very engaged and involved in this process, and I feel good that if Hillary is elected, that our issues, our concerns in the disability community are now at the table and the campaign will be at the table in regards to transition. We'll be at the table when she's president. That's what I wanted to get done. And that then sets the stage for us going forward, which is what's critical.

Debra: I agree, and I am a political nut. So I watched the RNC and I watched the DNC. We watched the entire thing. And I couldn't help it. I just cried when I saw what was happening, because it's so beautiful. These young people with visible disabilities, speaking eloquently, and leaders saying, it's time to really empower people with disabilities. It felt so important.

I remember watching Sarah Palin announce she had a son with Down Syndrome, and one of her earliest speeches she said, you have somebody in the White House that's going to vote for you. Now, most of her politics, pretty much 99.9 percent of the things she says I don't agree with, but that was the first time I'd heard anybody really talk about it. But you compare that with what has happened with this election and what Hillary's done.

And she had a town hall meeting that you were very involved with. Tell us about the town hall meeting. I was just stunned. I was stunned watching it.

Tony: What we had is that we're involved in everything and so forth, and she took some of the stuff that we've come up with and had a speech in Orlando, Florida at a town hall, with an economic agenda, including people with disabilities. Her whole speech was about our community. It was about our abilities and how we needed to be included in the economic portion of what this country does. That we were capable of doing things.

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And she went through her mental health program, her autism program, her Alzheimer's program, and just everything general in disabilities and talked about how we needed to be a part of the economic concerns of this country. You know, that's never been done before.

Debra: I know, I know. It's shocking.

Tony: No candidate for president has ever devoted a whole speech to us, and that was just -- I was there and she gave me a big hug and said, this is a result of what you've been doing. I was crying, because it is so exciting to see how involved and how engaged we are and I'm just optimistic as heck that this is going to be a great time for us, and we're going to be at the decision-making table like every other community. That's exciting.

Debra: Well, and I think what it shows, no matter which candidate you want to vote for, what it shows is one voice does matter. Even one voice that is epileptic. All of our voices matter. We talk about human potential on this program all the time, and I love you, Tony, you know that, for so many reasons, but you had the courage to have your voice be heard. And I think it is going to change everything.

I'm one of those people that every time any candidate, local, national, any candidate spoke, I would wait and see if they would mention disabilities at all. And a lot of times, maybe they would mention the Wounded Warriors or our service people, and I would check that as one. But I would wait. When I started hearing Hillary talk about it and all of the leaders at the DNC and having individuals with visible disabilities talk about this, I stopped counting and I was in awe. I just felt like maybe our world is changing and there's room enough for everybody, and we could look at the talent that people with and without disabilities bring to the table and we could just value each other.

And I know that this has been a horrible, horrible political season and I'm like so many Americans; I can't wait for November 8th, but I'm a little scared of November 8th because I think, please, please, please, everyone, come out and vote. I think if a lot of Americans come out and vote, that we are going to have our first female president. I'm excited about that. I'm afraid of people staying home and getting lazy.

It's interesting, this is a global program. I have a lot of listeners that are not in the United States, but they also are very anxiously looking at this because the United States is an important country, and if we make a decision to go so far back that we would elect somebody that thinks it's okay to grope women because they're famous, or insult people for their religion or because they have disabilities, it's a fearful time for me.

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I had a guest on the other day and he's a psychotherapist, and he was talking about a lot of his patients, celebrity patients, that come in and talk to him now. They're all so depressed and they're heartsick, and he said every single conversation starts with Trump. Every single conversation. And people are really scared.

There was a big article in the Rolling Stones this month about the power of fear and how it's being used and how it's changing people, sometimes for the worst, and how really, our country's never been better and safer, and the jobs and the financial opportunity. So I vote for hope. I'm going to vote for Hillary Clinton. And I just am so grateful for the work that you do and for who you are and that you've stood by your convictions. You're still very proud to be a Catholic, even though early on you felt rejected. You had epilepsy, so obviously you were possessed by demons. But the power of your story, Tony, is that you never let anybody get in your way, including yourself.

So Tony, tell the listeners how they can find out more about your work and how can they help you? Tell them how they can get more engaged in the activities that you're doing.

Tony: Well, Debra, thank you very much for your kind remarks. I don't have an organization. I just do this, because I feel so strongly about it. People can actually send me an email, if they want. It's [Tony@OneWharf.com](mailto:Tony@OneWharf.com), and I'd be glad to respond or glad to help or whatever.

I love the power of individuals, if you get committed. My real concern about Trump, a lot of the things he's done or said, we can get through that, but what I get concerned about is he has made hate okay again. We basically had put hate in the box for a long time, and you didn't talk about people the way he's talking about people. And just what does that do for young people? They say, well, it's okay to say these things. It's okay. If Trump can say it, I can say it, and so forth.

And so all of a sudden now, we are saying things in public that your mom would have slapped you in the face and said, you can't say that. My mom was very tough about accepting all people, and now you can hate. You can openly hate people. And we've got to put that back in the box. It's not going to happen overnight. If Trump loses, it won't go back. If Trump loses, we're going to still have that and it's going to be there for a decade or two. And that's what upsets me the most about Trump, is what he has done and how it's going to hurt so many people, as a result of people feeling it's okay. We've got to get back and say no it's not. It is not okay.

Debra: It isn't.

Tony: And just because he did it or said it, doesn't make it right.

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Debra: I agree, and it's not about being politically correct. It's not okay to treat women like they are pieces of meat. It is not okay to decide that Mexicans are all rapists. It's not okay to openly make fun of a very talented journalist with a disability. It's not okay to hate. It's not.

And I worry about not only what it's doing to this country that I love so much, but also globally, people are looking at the United States and saying, oh, we didn't know you all had so much hate in you. I think it's really damaging us in the eyes of the rest of the world, too. When I speak globally, people are like, what are you all doing over there? And I'm like, I don't know, but all I can do is cast my very, very, very one valuable vote. And my daughter with Down Syndrome, she watches all the debates, we discuss it. She has her opinions, and she votes and my husband votes and my son votes and his girlfriend votes. Oh, we're going to vote. We're going to vote, and I hope everyone else votes, too. If you're eligible to vote in the United States, vote with your conscious, as Ted Cruz said. Vote for who you are. So anyway, I'm passionate about this too, Tony.

Tony, thank you so very much for being on this program. I think that you are just an amazing man and your wisdom and your efforts have changed my family, and I believe I'm partially here because of the work that you've done, and I think you show us what human potential is all about. So thank you so much for being on the show, Tony.

Tony: Thank you, Debra, appreciate it very, very much.

Debra: Thank you again for watching Human Potential at Work With Debra Ruh. If you'd like to know more about my work, you can visit us at [www.RuhGlobal.com](http://www.RuhGlobal.com). I'm available to speak, to do training, to do strategic consulting, and I would really be honored to work with you. You can also visit my speaking website, which is [www.DebraRuh.com](http://www.DebraRuh.com). You can find both of my books on Amazon and other channels. Thank you again for listening, bye-bye.