

Richard Levick – Unplugged with Michael Caputo



*"How I wish, how I wish you were here
We're just two lost souls
Swimming in a fishbowl
Year after year
Running over the same old ground
What have we found?
The same old fears
Wish you were here"*

– Roger Waters & David Gilmour of Pink Floyd

Almost 40 years ago I was reading a short story by Jerzy Kosiński – the Polish novelist most famous for his novel *Being There* – about a protagonist who is drowning in the opening scene, only to find an island, where he builds a simple but sustainable life by his shipwrecked self. In the final scene, we realize that the only real scene in the story is his drowning and that his safety on the island was his imagination in his final minutes. The power and detail of this last illusion is so extraordinary that I can recall exactly where I was as I finished the story. Some scenes – real or imagined – we never forget.

What if – just as Kosiński's protagonist – we could live a lifetime in the minutes it took to drown? Maybe that is why sleep becomes so elusive as we age, ruminating in the gloaming on the millions of decisions large and small which make up a lifetime. As Shakespeare's Hamlet would soliloquize, "To sleep, perchance to dream."

Isn't that the demarcation of adulthood: the arrival of regrets; the search for forgiveness, redemption, and deliverance? What happens when our lives take a sudden turn? We read the news filled with stories of instant internet billionaires made to appear like Lipton soup. Just add water. An entire generation of entrepreneurs believes, as the National Lottery song goes, "This could be you."

While many of us are fortunate enough to experience varying degrees of success, few enjoy the rocket-like propulsion of instant, glorious and permanent accomplishment that these narratives would have us revere. For most of us, life is a series of pendulums where we swing from success, health and happiness to the evisceration of one or more of these things. What happens when it all disappears at once? When the reality is the drowning and not the dream?

I hadn't thought about that Kosiński story in years until I spoke with Michael Caputo, the former Assistant Secretary of

Public Affairs in the Department of Health and Human Services in the Trump administration. Michael was widely – and often incorrectly – criticized for his communications of the roll out of the federal government’s COVID-19 response. He was, among other things, instrumental in the branding and the communications of Operation Warp Speed. He joined me this week for a two-part interview on *In House Warrior*, the daily podcast I host for the *Corporate Counsel Business Journal*.

Michael has gone almost *incommunicado* – an unusual state for a lifelong professional spokesperson. Since leaving the White House, he has been living in an undisclosed location and has given only one substantive interview – a 7,000 word profile in *Politico* called “**It Nearly Killed Me**” – and now *In House Warrior*. He will do one more broadcast and then go back into isolation. Washington, DC – the town of the long knives – and a vitriolic internet will do that to you.

But it’s worse still. He is in isolation for safety reasons. He was used to some of the violence engaged against him – the media criticism and the public shaming – but soon came death threats, not only against him but against his family. I can tell you, as a recipient of death threats for some of our international work, there is an enormous difference between the idle threats and the ones where you are pretty certain they are watching you...and your family.

He left the Administration in literally an instant, after a doctor sitting in his HHS office noticed, solely by chance, an abnormality in his neck. He went to the hospital immediately and learned that he had a potentially fatal metastatic head and neck cancer originating in his throat. He went through state-of-the-art treatment that was simultaneously lifesaving and nearly medieval, which included a mask over his face bolted down to a gurney so that he could not move during treatment.

It resulted in 45 days in which he could not breathe without

manual assistance every nine minutes. That meant not sleeping for more than nine minutes for six straight weeks, and what little sleep he could get would be interrupted at the nine-minute mark with the panic of choking to death.

He lost nearly 100 pounds in the process and almost gave up until a dream with a white light and a message gave him renewed hope. As Michael says, you “Can’t help not trying to drown when you’re drowning.”

I keep trying to imagine what those six weeks must have been like. The only thing I can think of to give us deeper empathy is a passage in John Matthews’ journal, the late 1780’s surveyor and pioneer in the Northwest Territory. He woke up one morning while on an encampment to two gunshots, one of which found its mark in the bare chest of the man next to him, just arising from his own slumber. “Oh God. I have been killed,” were his crewmate’s last words. Imagine living just long enough to articulate your fate and reliving that moment, every nine minutes, seven days a week for 45 days. That’s 7,200 moments of panic and near-death experiences.

Since recovering, he has deepened his spiritual commitment and decided to remake his life. “Stress gives you cancer,” he says, and he had way too much stress. He is in divinity school now and has chosen neither anger nor denial, but instead a painful but redeeming search for answers.

I don’t recall how I met Michael, though it was after the presidential campaign in which he had worked for Donald Trump and before he would be appointed to his HHS position. I do know in our first few meetings that we discussed our many differences – as an international agency, LEVICK is non-partisan – but I still have my own personal points of view. Michael and I are of different political parties, different faiths and geographies and, with the exception of our mutual admiration for Pink Floyd, even fans of different music. Michael is a Grateful Dead head, having gone to hundreds of

their shows. I went to one in 1974 but left before the final encore and decided that once was enough

Michael and I couldn't be more different.

But from the first meeting, it was also obvious that we liked and respected each other. When Michael got sick, I reached out to offer support and we communicated often. It was then that the relationship deepened. This is why I wrote about Michael, my friend and the human being, not our differences.

We have all changed since 9/11, perhaps never more so than in the past five years. We are even divided about masks and vaccines. It doesn't end well if we keep on that same path. Only the relationships where we cross the aisle, listen, discuss, and become good neighbors hold hope. Maybe this show is a small step in that direction.

We all know how to do this. We've just forgotten.

As the Grateful Dead would say,

*Keep on truckin', baby
I got to keep on truckin'*

Enjoy the listens.

Richard Levick

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Part 2**