

## Pigeonhole Episode 35

[bright ambient music]

### Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

[ambient music fades into chill electroacoustic pop]

CHERYL NARRATING: This is an encore presentation and a new, shorter version of an interview from 2015 with Rick Hammond.

Rick was always into artistic things as a kid. He always wanted to be an artist even though....

RICK: I had no artistic skills whatsoever. Of course, I became obsessed with radio, to feed a stereotype.

CHERYL NARRATING: He moved to Kona, Hawaii right after turning 20. His uncle's wife there was hosting a poetry reading one night. He skipped over his angry ex-girlfriend teenage poetry and brought something more personal.

RICK: The audience liked it, kept coming back. We did like a tour around the island. And it wasn't very successful, but it sounds good on paper. And then I just kept sticking with it.

CHERYL: You almost sort of fell into it.

RICK: Almost sorta fell into it, yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah, which I guess would be another stereotype.

### Rick's poetry

CHERYL NARRATING: Rick kept writing poetry. He also worked as a summer counselor at a camp for blind students.

RICK: I was the cooking counselor. And the other year, I was the travel counselor. I was much better at the travel counselor part, but that's a whole nother story.

CHERYL: Uh-huh [laughs]. I'm gonna have a cook-off with you, and we're both gonna lose.

RICK: We're both gonna lose.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHERYL NARRATING: And he noticed something troubling. [electroacoustic pop slowly fades out]

RICK: I saw how the people who got ahead were the people who maybe wrote the nicer things on the reports, right, who said, "This kid is making so much progress," when you could really see the lack of progress. There was this hierarchy of if you say the right things, you'll move forward in this particular sub-genre of society. And I thought wow, we're a part of the disabled

community. We should really be holding these kids accountable, and we've gotta set a good example.

CHERYL NARRATING: He wrote poetry about these feelings. His poem, *Silently Listening*, starts like this:

[recording of Rick reading his poem]

Reflecting is feeding regrets  
Related to silently listening  
As awful strategies and lazy hypocrites inspired applause  
Right after ungrateful commentary  
Described wonderful folks  
Saying nothing or lying felt safe  
In older times, slow snobs chastised my opposition  
I adapted by promoting a dishonest act  
However, I've often neglected the fraudulent approach  
When talking with associates I thought had common sense  
It's foolish, assuming I'm actually bonding  
with magnificent con artists who play supportive to extract information  
I'm positive they daydream of using confessions to torture me later  
Although I usually ignore those worries  
While privately congratulating myself for the selective greed with dissent  
It does seem brilliant....

[recording ends]

RICK: Some people will be able to read through the lines, and if they agree with me, great. And if they don't, go listen to another podcast. [chuckles] Oh, oh! Don't listen to another podcast!

CHERYL: Wait!

RICK: Don't listen to this episode. But go back; listen to the archives, guys.

CHERYL: [laughs]

RICK: Or I could be the person you love to hate, and just keep playing this episode back and forth and back and back and back.

CHERYL NARRATING: And he wrote other poems, like *Psychological Traps*, which warns people to not get too caught up in feeling inspired just by hearing someone talk about hardships in their life. Sometimes there's way more going on beneath the surface than just that they "overcame tragedy." What's shown on the surface isn't the whole story.

RICK: We all wear masks in society. And just because somebody appears to have overcome something doesn't mean that they have.

CHERYL: Yeah.

RICK: The other side of that, just because somebody appears to you, maybe somebody with a disability, that they haven't come over something, because maybe I'm walking down the street,

but my cane's broken—or you know, something to that effect—doesn't mean that they haven't overcome that too. So, I was trying to show both sides.

CHERYL NARRATING: It starts like this.

[recording of Rick reading his poem]

Psychological traps remain dominant  
Life is happier, even though pain hasn't collapsed  
But acknowledging hurt somehow undermines your faith  
in escaping from adversity  
You've met members of each gender with calm, firsthand descriptions  
of worse experiences  
It's confusing listening to survivors verbalize such a healthy attitude  
Emotions you hold only appear juvenile since they're mostly compared  
to narrators who insist they feel amazing  
With zero harsh wishes for harmful villains who forced starvation upon them,  
broke up their families, or caused body parts on your heroes to fail....

[recording ends]

### **Wearing a metaphorical mask in public**

CHERYL: You talked about we all wear masks, and I can easily believe that everybody does.

RICK: Sure.

CHERYL: But what about you?

RICK: I think we all wear a mask in public, everybody. I mean not just people in the disabled community. But there's always the you wanna be the person who has it together. You wanna be the person with the clever joke. Sometimes it can be kinda fun, right? Like sometimes you can wake up in the morning and be like do I wanna be like serious, tortured artist Rick today, and I'm gonna strum my guitar on the street corner and quote Lord Byron?

CHERYL: [laughs]

RICK: Or do I wanna be like the hero figure who goes out and helps somebody? So, it's not necessarily a bad thing. We live in a society that seems very afraid of non-fiction, to me.

CHERYL: Well said. Well, then, from that point, let's only speak in fiction for the rest of this.

RICK: That's right. I love my entire family. I do not feel like [chuckles]....

CHERYL: [laughs]

[weird electropop music]

CHERYL NARRATING: I like thinking about the way Rick talked about masks. I also think a lot about how much fun it can be to cast aside any expectation to do things perfectly and just embrace that some things really can be hard or weird to do with a disability. I picked a few activities that are either hard for blind people and people with TBI to do, or someone for some reason thinks they're hard for us. And I turned it into a competition! Rick was a great sport for

putting up with this because despite all my planning for it, I genuinely screwed up several times and got confused in my own game. I guess I just proved my own point. Thank goodness for gallows humor.

### The Disability Olympics

CHERYL: [cracking up] So, I wanna know if you would like to go to the Disability Olympics with me.

RICK: Absolutely, yes.

CHERYL: OK. The Disability Olympics is different from the Paralympics. And it's also different from the Special Olympics. Because those things are both real competitions!

RICK: Yeah, you actually get exercise. [weird electropop music fades out]

CHERYL: That's another distinct difference. The Disability Olympics refers to this strange competition where everybody tries to be the most oppressed or have it the worst. You try to one-up somebody else by having it worse off. Blind has always been cool.

RICK: Yep.

CHERYL: TBI, no. Not very cool. Not very cool. Very new. We don't really have our footing yet. And also, we're dizzy, and it's hard for us to get our footing. Rick and I today are gonna re-interpret the Disability Olympics by actually doing some events.

RICK: [whispers] Yes.

CHERYL: And I don't know who's on the scheduling crew, but today's events are all blind versus TBI.

RICK: Yes.

CHERYL: So, I guess we'll be in all of the events today. OK. So, [laughing] I'm trying to remember what all the events were!

### Tying your shoes

CHERYL: Oh! The first event, first event in blind versus TBI...is tying your shoes. So, Rick, could you let the listeners know today, are you wearing Velcro shoes?

RICK: I am not wearing— I am wearing Nikes that I got when I was dumpster diving. But I actually took them off because I didn't wanna ruin your floor. So, I'm gonna run and get my shoes.

CHERYL: Oh, OK. Wait. Lemme go get some shoes too. Pause. [panting] All right. So, I'm already out of breath, just getting my shoes.

RICK: I think I'm gonna do well, guys.

CHERYL: OK. No, no. I'm gonna do really well.

RICK: How about ladies first?

CHERYL: OK. So, here's the timer. [timer beeps] TBI, putting on my shoes. I have here four shoes. It's a shoe-tying competition, right?

RICK: Yes.

CHERYL: OK. So, I'm thinking I should pick the shoes that have the ties.

RICK: Probably, yes.

CHERYL: OK. Oh shoot. I just put on the clog. [thumps]

RICK: [laughs]

CHERYL: Wait a minute. OK. Take that off, OK. [thumps] So, what I've got here are [laughing] some Nike high-tops.

RICK: Nice!

CHERYL: OK. I can't see where this lace is. The lace is wrapped around the heel. Wait a minute. It's like going in the same.... OK, the lace was tucked in there. I don't know who laced these shoes up 'cause it's like the part that you tie is all going in the shoe.

RICK: Ew!

CHERYL: I know. It's. Oh, not it wasn't. I just needed to pull them. OK, here we go. One shoe on. [shoe thumps] I'm uh, I don't think I can really keep track. I'm gonna stop here.

RICK: OK.

CHERYL: It was a minute, five [timer beeps], a minute, six. I got one shoe on. It's not tied yet. [thumps] Why don't you go ahead and do your shoes?

RICK: OK.

CHERYL: OK, wait. Lemme set the timer. [timer clicks] Why is this shoe on the table? Oh.

RICK: That's your shoe. [thuds]

CHERYL: OK. [timer clicks] Ready? OK, Rick, blind versus TBI tying your shoes: go! [timer beeps]

RICK: OK guys, so, basically, I have some Nike high-tops here.

CHERYL: Me too!

RICK: Wow! [chuckles] They did not have laces when I got them. So, I had to lace them myself as a blind person. And so, I'm throwing on—

CHERYL: Oh, no, no, no! You gotta comment on what just happened there. [giggles]

RICK: I almost put my [laughs], I almost put my left foot in my right shoe. And I—

CHERYL: Oh my god. He's tying.

RICK: —pull my laces together.

CHERYL: You're doing it exactly the same way I do it!

RICK: Nice.

CHERYL: Except that I didn't tie these. Oh my god!! I did tie them!!! [laughs]

RICK: Oh no!

CHERYL: I don't remember tying these shoes. [timer beeps] You have busted the myth that blind people can't tie their own shoes. I'm gonna have to call that you won. I thought I was gonna win that one. But I totally, you know, these aren't even my shoes.

RICK: [chuckles]

[weird electropop music break]

Glass of water

CHERYL: The next, what was the next event? Oh! Knocking over your glass of water!

RICK: Knocking over your glass of water, yes.

CHERYL: OK. Who can go the longest before they knock over their glass of water?

RICK: Oh, oh, OK.

CHERYL: Yeah. So, and this is inspired by my friend Lavaun, who can knock over a glass of water faster than anyone.

RICK: Mm.

CHERYL: Unless she's looking right at it, it doesn't even exist. It's like the fabric of reality is like— OK, so, now I'm gonna set the timer. [hits timer, anxious tapping] I haven't knocked my glass over.

RICK: You haven't knocked your glass over yet.

CHERYL: No. Oh, my hands are in my lap.

RICK: That might be a—

CHERYL: You're blind. How come you haven't knocked over your water yet?

RICK: I don't know.

CHERYL: Do you know where it is?

RICK: I know it is right here.

CHERYL: OK, well.

RICK: Lemme put it down. Lemme close my eyes and move it around a little bit. [glass scraping on table]

CHERYL: See if you can lose it?

RICK: See if I can lose it.

CHERYL: You kept your hand on the glass the whole time! But you thought you could lose it [laughing] even while you were holding it! You should be on the TBI team.

I think what happens with Lavaun is she does a lot of gesturing with her hands, and then the [glass scraping on table] glass gets.... [swallowing water, then setting down glass] OK, I think I'm gonna have to be disqualified, Rick, because I drank all my water.

CHERYL: Shoot! [hits timer]

RICK: Shoot. Damn it.

CHERYL: You won again.

RICK: Damn it, again.

CHERYL: So, so, far, it's two out of two: blind is better than TBI. OK. All right.

[weird electropop music break]

[Giving directions from your house to the #44 bus stop](#)

CHERYL: Next event: giving directions from your house to the #44 bus stop, directions from your house. [timer clicking] OK. So, blind directions: go! [hits timer and it beeps]

RICK: OK, so, you wanna leave the front door, go down the flight of stairs, go outside the building, turn to your right, go to the end of the parking lot, make another right, keep going. Eventually, you'll run into an intersection. There will be a Burgerville to your left. And if you keep going to your right, there's gonna be a Safeway. You're gonna go a little bit diagonally to your right, go up to Lombard, make a left, cross the street, and you will be at the bus stop for the 44 bus.

CHERYL: [hits timer] The timer was going backwards, so, I don't actually know how long that took you. [laughing] But that was really good! You ready for directions from my house?

RICK: Yes.

CHERYL: So, you go out, and you turn left, and you keep going. And then you're gonna see the house with the fluffy orange cat. But she doesn't really come off the porch to say hi. Like, don't waste your time if she's on the porch. She's more like she'll like walk in circles around you. You could pet her. Oh, I didn't set the timer. [hits timer] OK. You can pet her. But it's more like you just hold your hand there, and she just sort of pets herself against your hand. So, that's like that house. [timer beeps repeatedly] Oh, wrong direction again. OK. So, maybe you pet her, maybe you don't.

RICK: Yes, yes.

CHERYL: But you're trying to get to the bus. So, anyway, so, you're gonna cross the street right there. And that's Inspector Clouseau's house. Usually, I just go right from Tiffany's house to Inspector Clouseau's house. And then you're gonna go past the Clown House. And it's autumn, so the three of them are not gonna be out anyway. So, that will make it go faster.

RICK: OK.

CHERYL: 'Cause when they're out, you just, then you're lying on the sidewalk petting the cats. So, you're gonna cross there, and then go right and then cross that cross street. And then you can't miss it because it's just right there, right there. So, you get to Vancouver, and you cross both ways. I mean like you cross the street and then you cross it the other way too.

RICK: Yeah, yeah.

CHERYL: And the stop is just totally right there. OK.

RICK: Nice.

CHERYL: [hits timer]

RICK: All right.

CHERYL: OK. Who won that round?

RICK: Mm. I mean—

CHERYL: [laughs] I think you probably swept this one, Rick.

RICK: Nice, nice, nice!

CHERYL: I think blind is better than TBI.

RICK: For now. For now, it is, yes.

CHERYL: [laughing] For now! Thank you for participating.

RICK: No worries.

CHERYL: I'm holding up a really amazingly incredible trophy right in front of you. You can't see, right?

RICK: Oh no, no.

CHERYL: OK, excellent.

CHERYL NARRATING: OK, side note: Please don't lie to a blind person and tell them you're holding up an amazingly incredible trophy right in front of them when you're not unless you're friends.

[chill electroacoustic pop]

We're jumping ahead here to skip oh, about 20 minutes of our original conversation. With Rick being a poet and musician, he cares a lot about media, who gets to make it, how it's presented, and who it's for.

### Non-disabled people playing disabled characters in the media

CHERYL: So, what's your take on non-disabled people portraying disabled people in the media? For instance, I was watching the Michael J. Fox show the other day. Michael J. Fox



plays himself, a guy with Parkinson's. And so, there's a lotta Parkinson's jokes that are really hilarious.

RICK: Sure.

CHERYL: Well, they had a blind guy on, played by Jason Jones. He's not blind! Why? Why? Why did you not just hire?

RICK: Could I play the devil's advocate for a moment?

CHERYL: [sadly] Yes.

RICK: Just so both sides are represented. This is a gray area for me, so I am very conflicted about this. Somebody might make the argument that maybe there were no blind actors that went to audition. Maybe the blind actors who came to audition just weren't good actors?

CHERYL: Hmm.

RICK: You know what I mean?

CHERYL: OK, maybe.

RICK: Maybe. To quote the great Tavis Smiley: "Having said that, let me now say this."

CHERYL: [chuckles]

RICK: I would appreciate if people in the media in these positions of power would try to seek out blind actors. There are great disabled actors out there that don't necessarily get the shine that their able-bodied counter—and I don't like the word "able-bodied," but for lack of a better term—their able-bodied counterparts get because it's harder to get noticed. If you were play director, and I come to you. And you say, "Well Rick, we'd really like to hire you, but there's a lotta walking around onstage." My point is you get a lotta discouragement if you're a disabled actor.

CHERYL: Yep, yep.

RICK: And it's harder for you to be noticed. So, I think it would've been a better choice for the producers to try to seek out disabled actors. In this day of Internet, it's not too hard to do.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah.

RICK: Yeah. Well, and think about this: You know that Jason Jones isn't blind because you did your research. But imagine you're a mom, right? You have a blind kid. Horrible tragedy.

CHERYL: I know!

RICK: But imagine that for a second. And because you're a mom, you're busy running around all the time, and you have a blind kid who's maybe a small kid, maybe like six or seven, right? And so, you think oh wow, there's a representation of a blind adult in the media. I can show my kid this. And you know that Michael J. Fox really has Parkinson's. So, maybe this guy really is blind. And so, you teach your kid to sort of look up to somebody who's doing things incorrectly.

CHERYL: Yeah.

RICK: That's why I'm always wary about how disabled people are portrayed in the media. It's not us we have to be concerned about; it's the kids who are coming up now and seeing this. And it's the people who interact with those kids, if you're a teacher of a blind student.

CHERYL: Mmhmm!

RICK: In the blind community, there are these things called kernel books, right? Basically, what it is, it's blind people telling stories of their lives. I went to a training center back when I was six. Long story. But I was reading a story from one of these kernel books, and it was about a lady. And one of the things she was saying is she was a baby when it was discovered that she was blind. And I don't know. Maybe she was three months or six months, but somewhere around that age, and they discovered she was blind. The mom already had other kids. So, it wasn't like this was her only child; not that that makes this any more right. And she said that her mom told her that she almost gave her up for adoption when she found out that she was blind. And the only reason she didn't give her up for adoption was because she knew one blind person who was just like a normal person in society.

CHERYL: Mm!

RICK: Now, imagine this: Imagine that instead of knowing a normal blind person—quote-unquote “normal”—she knew somebody who had no control over their lives, who was basically a shut-in or who always said inappropriate things, like I do.

CHERYL: Mmhmm!

RICK: And then she would've given her daughter up for adoption, her own daughter, based on her daughter not being able to see right.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

RICK: I guess the way it comes around is the portrayal of not just blind people, but the portrayal of all disabled people in the media could have a similar impact, you know?

CHERYL: Yep.

RICK: And it's really, really shocking to think that OK, this story is about 50 years old. But in the course of human history, 50 years ain't nothing.

CHERYL: It's nothing.

RICK: You don't wanna be portrayed as somebody who has superhuman hearing or something, too, because then you're gonna be a disappointment, you know?

CHERYL: No! Well, but don't you have superhuman hearing, as a blind person?

RICK: I do. But the FBI doesn't really want me to talk about that. You know how we do it in the blind community?

CHERYL: No, I don't! I'm just finding it out now.

RICK: Yeah.

CHERYL: This is good 'cause before, I didn't know how I would ever be able to live if I were blind.

RICK: Right.

CHERYL: But now I know how. I would just listen really hard. [giggles]

RICK: Yeah, you listen. You spend all your day listening to audio books and talking about how great it is that you're blind and reading Braille when you're not listening to audio books.

CHERYL: I listen to a lot of audio books. [laughs]

RICK: I actually do listen to a lot of audio books too.

[chill electroacoustic pop plays until the end]

CHERYL NARRATING: And you know, we kinda just kept going from there with sarcastically relishing so many absurd ideas sighted people have about blindness. Not to get all Disability Olympics again, but I feel like even though my peers with TBI and I constantly do ridiculous things, it seems like there's not as much inane public commentary about TBI compared to blindness. So, it just was easier to make more inane commentary ourselves about blindness than TBI. I don't know if that's good or bad. But Rick, you can win that round too!

[bright ambient theme music returns]

Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](http://WhoAmIToStopIt.com), my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

Music in the episode: "[This Little Piggy](#)" by Podington Bear. (Source: FreeMusicArchive.org. Licensed under a [Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 International License](#)) and "[I got 99 broadswords but this one isn't one \(store's theme\)](#)" by Komiku. (Source: FreeMusicArchive.org. Licensed under [a CC0 1.0 Universal License](#).)