



**Stories of freedom**

**Their protagonists and soundscapes**

**This is Las Raras Podcast**

**Catalina:** Do you think that journalism and activism are like cousins, in a way?

**Michael:** Yeah, I think they are cousins. I think that is a good way to put it.

**C:** So when you are working on an investigation, do you think about the impact or, I don't know, the effects that it's gonna have?

**M:** Yes, you wanna make change, you wanna have an impact. You want the system to change based on your work. Yeah. Sure.

**C:** The American journalist Michael Rezendes made public the documents that revealed how the catholic church covered up the pedophile priests. It was in 2002, in an investigation he conducted together with his mates of the Spotlight team of The Boston Globe newspaper. This led to this type of scandals to start being uncovered throughout the world; including Chile. Rezendes won a Pulitzer for this work and became a respected, but still pretty anonymous journalist.

That changed this year, when the film entitled *Spotlight* showing that work won the Oscar for best picture (*audio Oscars*). And Rezendes became a star. So much so, that even Barak Obama mentioned him during the speech that he gave in his last White House correspondents' dinner (*audio Obama*).

Rezendes uses this unexpected fame to talk insistently, in his talks and interviews, on the importance of the work to which he has devoted his life: investigative journalism; which he has defined, far from the discourse of the information purists, as his weapon to change the world (*audio at the Excellence in Journalism Awards Ceremony UAH*).

About his own story, until now he had not told anything. Walking around Santiago's noisy streets and Quinta Normal Park, he shares it with us for the first time.

This is Las Raras, stories of freedom.

**C:** To prepare his role playing Michael Rezendes in the film *Spotlight (audio film)*, the actor Mark Ruffalo spent a lot of time with the journalist, trying to know him and really understand him. He watched him at work, accompanied him in his home, asked his friends about him, got into all his things. Until one day, by way of conclusion, he told him: "You live like a monk." Rezendes was surprised.

**M:** I don't know, it made me feel just strange, I guess. Somebody said what did you learn hanging out with Mike Rezendes? And he said "I learnt what it costs to do this". I've never really thought about it. It made me... I don't know...

**C:** Rezendes got into journalism through literature. He thought that he wanted to be a writer. But since the first book he read without being able to stop, journalism was already hovering. It happened when he was a teenager and had to spend a good time in bed, sick. During the boredom of those days, he started to think that he had never received anything by mail. He decided to enroll in a book club, so that he would be sent books. He received *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. This novel –the most important one of this Nobel Prize winner– was based on seven features that the author published on the summer of 1936 in The San Francisco News, for which he won a Pulitzer. The book blew Rezendes' head off.

**M:** I was completely gripped by the story. And the story that John Steinbeck tells of the migration of the farmers who were devastated by the drought in western America and their migration to California. I thought it was a very beautifully dramatic story.

**C:** Mike does not like to tell his age (it is not even in his biography on Wikipedia), but he explains that this happened more or less at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. At that time the streets of New Haven, on the northeast of the United States, where he grew up, boiled over with social protests: antiwar of Vietnam, for the civil rights of the colored people, for women's rights, etc...

**M:** It was a time of political protest, it was also a time of intense idealism and a lot of activism. I mean, people everywhere wanted to change the world, people talked about having a revolution. So that is the environment in which I grew up, and I think it had a great impact on me and the kind of person I became.

**C:** Mike recognizes that another of the influences of that time is that of catholicism. His father's family arrived to the United States from the Azores Islands, which belonged to Portugal, escaping poverty. And the catholic church is very strong in that part of the world. His mother's family, on the other hand, is French-Canadian and also very catholic. So he went to mass every Sunday.

**M:** We were still in the era of Vatican II, when there was a great movement within the church for change. The agenda for the catholic church in the US was not centered on fighting

contraception and abortion, as it was for many years. At that time the agenda of church leaders in the US was fighting poverty, organizing against the death penalty...

**C:** That was the environment in which Rezendes grew up. After reading Steinbeck, he read Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, William Faulkner and never stopped. He was writing plays and poetry when he started studying English at Boston University. At that time he began to write a novel.

**M:** It was a novel about someone who lives in a rural area, comes to the big city, tries to make a different life and ultimately does not succeed. It's a story that's been written many times, you know.

**C:** But time went by and Mike was not able to finish it.

**M:** In hindsight I wasn't ready to write that novel, I just didn't have enough experience, I didn't have enough maturity. I think I had an idea that was bigger than I was.

**C:** Looking for those experiences he didn't have, he started driving a taxi, saved money, interrupted his university studies and travelled by train to Mexico. His objective was learning Spanish at a study center that the Austrian anarchist priest, Ivan Illich, had in Cuernavaca.

**M:** So I went to Cuernavaca, I took Spanish lessons there. It was great. I met a lot of good people there. So, I meet a guy there from Germany, a guy who'd been in the German navy. He had the same sort of ideas that I did, he just wanted to go to Mexico and have an adventure, you know. So he had this notion that he wanted to walk across Mexico. So we... ha ha...one day just started walking across Mexico.

**C:** Literally?

**M:** Yeah, literally. Eventually we didn't walk all the way but we jumped on a train, we went to Veracruz, Palenque, San Cristóbal de las Casas and hiked all over southern Mexico. We did this until I ran out of money. And it was while I was in Mexico that I decided that maybe journalism would be a good thing to do.

**C:** Why journalism in that setting?

**M:** I don't know, I needed to make a living. I was trying to think about a way to make a living that would be satisfying and that would also be practical. I was having trouble writing a novel, but I was a voracious reader of the newspapers. I really liked to read the papers and I would just think, well, I can do this, you know, this I can do.

**C:** When he returned to Boston to finish university, Mike took two journalism courses: Writing for magazines and Introduction to reporting and newspaper writing. It was in the latter that he was asked to volunteer in a newspaper and publish a piece of news. He approached the East Boston Community News, a small newspaper in a poor neighborhood in Boston in which the only person being paid a salary was the editor.

**M:** So, anyway, I got introduced to this newspaper and it was sort of love at first sight because it felt very much like home. These people were more political activists than they were journalists. The editor was a journalist, a true journalist. He taught me how to write a news story.

**C:** He spent two years as a volunteer there and from the beginning he took his job very seriously. For example, he wrote a series of feature stories that revealed the maneuvers of a group of bullies of the Scientology Church that had established in the neighborhood, who even warned him to stop investigating them. But Rezendes insisted until he discovered that they were operating a rehabilitation clinic without permissions in a residential neighborhood.

**M:** That was finally the story that got them put out of business. So I saw my story have a very big impact. They had to shut down and move out. They set fire to the place (*no way!*) and left.

**C:** At that point he had already assumed that he would not finish his novel (*"I got lost in the middle of it"*). He became the editor of that newspaper instead. But after two years he felt like writing in a larger newspaper because he wanted his work to have greater impact. So he became an independent journalist and published in all the media that he could: The Boston Globe, The Boston Herald and The Boston Phoenix, where he worked with Susan Orlean, the author of the book *The Orchid Thief*.

**M:** We worked for different parts of the paper. I was covering Politics and she was working for what we called the Lifestyle section.

**C:** Was it a really good team?

**M:** It was great, we didn't know how good it was, we didn't know how talented we were. But eventually everyone who was working at that paper went to do something important in journalism.

**C:** But Mike urgently needed to work in an even more influential newspaper. So a friend helped him to get a job in the San Jose Mercury News and went to California. But he hated the place and missed his friends and his girlfriend. He stayed there two years and returned to Boston to work independently again. Thus he began to publish in The Washington Post, one of the most important American newspapers, where he was finally hired. So he went to Washington.

**M:** I got homesick again and I moved back to Boston again, ha ha.

**C:** He then applied to work with the team of investigative journalists of The Boston Globe, the Spotlight team. But they said no. They hired him to cover politics instead, which he did for ten years.

**M:** But I always wanted to work for the Spotlight team; that was the ultimate.

**C:** Until finally, in 2001 he was offered the yearned post in the Spotlight. His second job there was the series on the pedophile priests and the concealment by the catholic church which won

a Pulitzer Prize in the category of public service, the most important prize for journalism in the world.

**M:** Well, it was a great honor, yeah, a tremendous honor. Very gratifying, but still it was really...for instance, there was a woman who was a friend of mine at the Globe; she was the book critic. And we were in the newsroom when the Pulitzer price was announced and she said to me, "You've come a long way since the East Boston Community News." And I said "Well not really. I'm doing the same thing now that I was then, the only difference is it's for a bigger paper and I have someone who's gonna pay a lawyer if I get sued."

**C:** Do you think that journalism and activism are like, cousins in a way?

**M:** Yeah, I think they are cousins. I think that is a good way to put it.

**C:** So when you are working on an investigation, do you think about the impact or, I don't know, the effects that it's gonna have?

**M:** Yes, you wanna make a change, you wanna have an impact. You want the system to change based on your work. Yeah. Sure.

**C:** When Mark Ruffalo watched him to interpret him in the film *Spotlight*, and when he made the comment about the "monk of journalism", Rezendes was working on some reports on three schizophrenics who were killed by the guards of a hospital in Massachusetts, where they were kept. The people in charge of the place, which in fact was a prison, for years concealed what had happened. But the stories revealed what had occurred and they finally were dismissed and the guards are going to be judged.

**M:** So that was very satisfying. I would like there to be more reforms of the system, which have not taken place yet. But the stories did have a big impact. The family of this kid who was killed by the guards, they feel they had some justice and they also had a big financial settlement as a result. You know, that was very rewarding, very satisfying. And that all happened just before the movie came out.

**C:** ¿Why did Mark Ruffalo compare you with a monk?

**M:** I have what I call the "work hard play hard" ethic (*OK, what does it mean?*). In other words, work very, very hard but also have fun in life. I go out with my friends, we go out to dinner, we have our drinks, we go to the movies, we go hiking... I mean, I find time for all those things. My girlfriend says I'm pro fun. That's why I was taken aback when Mark said I lived like a monk. I don't know, it sounded sad to me. It sounded sad and I don't feel like a sad person. But I think there is truth in his observation, his observation was very valid, but it just surprised me because I do enjoy life very much. Yeah, I mean, you can't have everything in life, no one can. So, you make your choices and I guess I've made mine.

**C:** Which have been those choices?

**M:** I don't live life like other people. I mean, I'm not married. I do live alone. I forgot to have kids, yeah. You know, I don't have as much money as some of my friends who went into other professions. But I'm not complaining. I mean, I live in a very nice condominium, I live near the beach in a pretty spot and I like my life that I have very much. I wouldn't change anything. I mean, I wouldn't mind having a little more money, ha ha (*yeah, definitely, of course*), who wouldn't, you know. So that's the only thing that I would change: to be able to make a little more money. But otherwise I don't think I'd change anything really.

**C:** In 2014, Mike Rezendes, together with the entire team of The Boston Globe, won another Pulitzer for the coverage of the bombing during the Boston Marathon. He was participating in that race, which allowed him to be one of the first reporters on the place.

The film *Spotlight* also won the Oscar for best screenplay, and Mark Ruffalo was nominated for an Oscar as best supporting actor for his interpretation of Michael Rezendes.