

**What Happens Next – Sunday June 20, 2021**  
**Writing Fiction, Raising a Thief, Internet Stocks**  
**Paul Podolsky**

Larry Bernstein:

I want to comment on something you mentioned in the pregame, which related to how your publishers were worried about publishing your work because of its anti-adoption message. So I wanted drill into that a little bit. What lessons have you learned about adoption? In the book you talk about how you got a video of the child before you met her, you showed the video to some experts locally. They said she looked fine. You did some investigative work when you got to the Russian orphanage, but it was not a problem. What lessons have you learned about who to adopt and that entire process to minimize your risk?

Paul Podolsky:

There's a lot there. So first of all, I've come out of this whole process, even though it was wrenching for us, pro adoption, there's something like 140 million orphans in the world according to the last measure by the UN. And I think, I support the process of bringing them in. I think that the key element is that you want to get as much information about the child as possible. And the adoption process, understandably, is very focused on making sure the adoptive families are safe for the child, given the enormous power differential. I get that, but I also believe that there should be much more work to try to get the adoptive families a lot of information about the kid, and given where we were adopting the kid, not surprisingly, the local medical professionals there, were not used to the type of extreme distress that our child had suffered, starvation.

That wasn't a common problem in Brookline, Massachusetts, which is where we're living. But historically, it's a very common problem. When are there a lot of orphans created? Well, during wars and famine and these massive disruptions. COVID by the way, is for sure orphaning many kids.

And the thing that I think that would be much better in adoption and why I thought this book was worth writing, was to highlight, This is the range of outcomes you can have, and you want to be hypersensitive to the early childhood care that the child you're adopting received. And I think we, my wife and I, and I wrote about this in the book, we would have done many things differently if at the outset we had understood how attachment worked, but a little bit like a disease that happened long ago, it had been forgotten.

Larry Bernstein:

Can you give an example of how you would have behaved differently if you'd known she was under so much stress and had attachment issues?

Paul Podolsky:

Yeah. So we have, as I described the opening remarks, we had one biological son and then her. So my key idea for her coming into the home was, you want to treat the two children the same. And it's an interesting thing. People have asked me this, do you distinguish at all between the kids? I can say, as a father, the minute we adopted her, we didn't. It may sound incredible to anybody who hasn't adopted a kid, but the minute that she was by responsibility, I did not differentiate between her at all, between my son and her.

And we very much focused on doing the types of things we had done for our son. We had a very active social life. So we had people coming in and out of our house all the time, many of them are curious to meet her. She was incredibly independent at a very young age, which is by the way, typical for kids with this disorder, they can have a pathological independence, and what we should have done, as opposed to just sort of going with the flow is, when we brought her home, we probably should have not had as many guests coming to our home, just focus on mom, dad and her brother.

I should have asked for a leave of absence from work. My wife was teaching, she should have done the same thing. It was just really hammering home that this is family, we're safe, we're present. In terms of feeding her, she was very independent, as I said, feeding herself, we should have put her on our knee and gone through the same steps you would have with a much younger child, fed her and done as much as we could have to reinforce, hey, we're here. Trust us.

Larry Bernstein:

Paul, what I thought was interesting was, she kept eating until she threw up. She was so used to starving and having limited food supply that she overdid it. Can you comment a little about that?

Paul Podolsky:

When we initially had her, it was so many things we were observing that was just, we could not make sense of it. And one of the things is exactly what you cite, which is that certain types of foods, she did not have an off switch, a sense of being satiated. And so one time my wife and I were trying to figure out what to do. We said, let's just see what happens if we let her eat until she says she can't eat anymore. And there was no off switch.

She began to eat and eat and eat until she literally vomited. So the point is, is when you get kids like this, a lot of education to parents who are dealing with a kid who has been shaken up, and again, not only from adoption, my wife is now a licensed therapist and she deals with many different families. One of the amazing cases I found was actually military deployment, a parent who was suddenly deployed overseas for protracted period of time, came back home to a kid, not exhibiting symptoms as serious as what we faced, but still exhibiting these symptoms. So I think being aware of the phenomena you're looking at is critical. Just like with a medical issue, the first step is getting an accurate diagnosis, and this phenomena, at least to me, from everything I could find, was well buried when we adopted our daughter.

Larry Bernstein:

How is the reader supposed to think about individual cases? I mean, obviously, in your book, you go into tremendous detail about a single child. But if we were doing some sort of social policy analysis, what I would say is we probably should look at all the children from that Russian orphanage and see the full spectrum of results as compared to an orphanage somewhere else, for example, and so we can make better decision-making. Is there something unique about your child, or is there something unique about that orphanage, or is there something unique about attachment? How can we, as an independent viewer of your life experience, think about it?

Paul Podolsky:

I think that the key thing is to say A, does this phenomenon exist? And then B, to think about the evidence for it and see what are the social implications. So the evidence for it is probably some of the best is from the Bucharest Early Intervention Project which the issue is have a good longitudinal data on kids. What happened to the other kids? And my daughter's orphanage? I don't know. But with the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, which you can google and get the information, they're literally doing CAT scans of kids' heads, brains. And there was clear evidence that literally the longer they stayed in the orphanage, the more parts of their brain literally went dark. So Bowlby's initial theory that this tight connection, which was a hypothesis when he came up with it, has now been proven in terms of neuro research and what happens with this.

Knowing that when it happens, my big takeaway is, if you want to level the playing field in terms of having a meritocracy, you need to recognize the children who have this amount of adversity early in their lives are at a massive disadvantage for succeeding later in life. So I think if you look at prison population or poverty or high school dropout rates, my sense is, and there is evidence to suggest this, that the rates of these attachment disruptions are much higher, which is why, while I don't profess to be an expert, what Geoffrey Canada is doing with the Harlem Children's Zone, I think, is such an interesting model because he's saying here are high-risk kids. If you want kids to be successful in fifth or sixth grade, don't get them tutoring in first grade. Begin speaking with the parents the moment they're pregnant. And that, to me, I think, in this type of situation could have been a massive game changer.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk more about Russian orphanages specifically. There's been some political issues. The Russians tried to reduce the number of orphans who were coming to the United States, making it much more challenging in response to some of US attacks against Russian oligarchs. And I'm just wondering if you were going to advise an adoptive parent, would you say, "You know what, I know there's appeal of these cute Russian kids, but maybe you should reconsider and pick up an American one, even if they're not of the same race. I'm telling you these Russians orphanages are a catastrophe. Stay local."

Paul Podolsky:

Well, the first thing, the first part of your question, you're right that what happened was as a result of the Magnitsky Act, which is the Bill Browder led effort to penalize Putin for murdering his CFO. In response, Putin forbade all American adoption of Russian children, which is so mind-bogglingly self-destructive for those children. It's tragic.

I think that the key thing is that if you are adopting a child, A, getting them early, or B, getting them from cultures where there is a tradition of holding children early on can make a huge difference. And while, listen, I'm an investor, and I'm a dad writing this. I'm not an expert in global adoption. My understanding, though, is particularly in certain cultures, for instance, Africa, if the parents die, somebody else is literally holding the child, carrying the child. That alone, according to the research, can make a huge difference neurologically in how they're treated.

And Russian orphanages, and I've described this in the book, when we walked into the orphanage the first day, there's 15 kids out there, and nobody, nobody is holding them. And that has devastating neurological impact on the child's brain development because it is so much related in the very tiny child to trust. And anybody who's raised a small child, that example I gave in the opening is related to that. I think you could have biological kids with a huge range of impact, but I think that trying to focus on a childhood experience where the gap between the child's being left alone and getting the child to your home as soon as possible is going to improve your odds. But again, I wrote this book not only to be about adoption, but to be about families in general, because there are lots of other things that can disrupt a parent's tie to their child beyond the adoption.

Larry Bernstein:

I was thinking about your other public policy idea about more government intervention in the first year or so of a child. And I think there's this tension. If we remove the child from the home and put them into some other social setting, it's not obvious to me that that a care worker will be as loving and as thoughtful or as attached to the child as the mother. There's a cost-benefit analysis associated with, in the case of where you have a very poor mother and a fantastic caregiver, but there's also consequences where the central case, which is a normal mother and a normal caregiver. Are we better off just in that first year specifically letting the mother drive the interaction and make it a rare caregiver?

Paul Podolsky:

I would say so, but absolutely leave it as close to the parents. But I would also say try to give them as much support as you can. So for instance, if you have lower-income families that have food insecurity or the mom needs to commute crazy hours to the job, I think that investing in a very redistributive way to make those early years have as much consistent contact with Mom and Dad and make them available, to me, it's going to pay off massively in the country in terms of productivity. Because the difference between these kids who later on have all these truancy problems, and in our case, obviously had legal problems, which is not uncommon, is enormous. So I wouldn't say separate the kids from the parents at all. I would say, particularly with poor

families or with families that have some life-changing disruption, that you make very generous social support available to them.

And of course, that could be abused some. I understand that there'd be ways to that, but I'm saying, if you look at the long-term payoff, just structurally, what happens with the neurological makeup, that each year that goes by, the kids become much more resilient. And I gave that example in the book of my wife being kidnapped in Pakistan. It's an unbelievable story. She's kidnapped, which did cause big impacts in her life. It's obviously a very fundamental disruption, but nothing near like what happened to our daughter. And of course, it's not, you can't do a scientific experiment because each of them has different makeup and IQ and resilience, et cetera, et cetera. I get that. But the big thing that my experience was, "Oh my goodness. If a child is disruptive in those first couple of years, no amount of intervention, summer camps, help, blah, blah, blah. It's not going to help. It's already done." And that I think is the insight the Geoffrey Canada had to the poverty that he was seeing in Harlem.

Larry Bernstein:

On our show. I always like to end on a note of optimism. So, Paul, what are you optimistic about?

Paul Podolsky:

The writing down and learning from experiences, I think has been huge. So what I've seen from this experience was, was it very hard for us? Absolutely. But it also changed us markedly for the better, made our marriage better. My wife changed her career, became a licensed therapist, and has now helped hundreds of families through situations like this. And it forced me to write this book, which both got me in the field of something I've wanted to do for a long time, which is write books, but also the reader feedback I've gotten from people all over the world that's read this has been unlike anything I ever experienced in my career as an investor. So all in all, it's been a difficult ride, but boy has it changed our approach to living, and I think for the better.

Larry Bernstein:

What did your daughter think when she read your book?

Paul Podolsky:

She liked it, which people find stunning. And I came up with the title for it before she had the run-in with the law. And actually got asked this question on book talks so much, I recorded a podcast of her that you can hear on Apple and Spotify. It's called Things I Didn't Learn in School. It's the conversation with her? I hadn't heard from her for a couple of years, but I had posted on social media which she tracked, this was coming out. And she reached out to me. And I said, "Listen, I would love you to read this. Everybody else who's in it has read it and I want your thoughts on it. It's very close to publication." She read it. And she said she wept after each chapter, and that reading it really to Scott Turow's point, I thought his thing about, "Listen, if it was a simple story, it wouldn't take 350 pages to tell it. You need to get into the grays."

She said it was the first time she actually understood our perspective as a parent, and it brought us more closely together. So I think even in terms of our relationship with her, it was positive, though it was obviously hard.

Larry Bernstein:

Scott, what note of optimism would you like to end on?

Scott Turow:

Well, this is just an amazing story. And I don't hear Paul saying that this is not something that can, and does in fact, occur with birth families where somehow this fundamental disconnect early in development. And I do have that correct, don't I, Paul?

Paul Podolsky:

It can occur in birth families. And that's what actually what Bowlby was studying, initially. So imagine a family, you have an infant, and the mom is a primary caregiver, and God forbid she gets cancer. And all of a sudden is in the hospital for a protracted period of time. Well, the infant doesn't understand anything. And while the severity of it might not be as intense with our daughter, it can and does occur in biological children, as well.

Scott Turow:

I'm writing a novel now where the mother of the main character was supposed to have been so engrossed with the mourning over her own mother's death that she just never bonded with this child. And that seems psychologically realistic to me. So I guess the optimistic question is, and I will base this on my own experience doing criminal defense work, but how much hope do you have that as your daughter emerges into a mature adulthood, that she may be able to change for the better?

Paul Podolsky:

Very modest. What I've learned to see with her is just trust in the evidence. And it needs to be objective, third-party evidence. In psychological terms, to this day, she's what's called not an accurate reporter. So you can ask her something, and the answer may not be connected to reality. And this is something, Scott, if you're looking for more writing on this, just you do your character development. Bowlby, he passed away, but he's a great writer. And he wrote a three-part series about his life finders, his life's work. And he talks about this with kids. And so it's hard for me to know what's truly going on with my daughter because of the inaccuracy in reporting. But I haven't seen a major shift. It's been very, very moderate, a major shift in the time I've known her, so I don't think that it would be right to be hoping for a significant turn.

The run-in she had with the criminal justice system does seem to have helped straighten her out a little bit, because we had said to her when she was stealing all the time, "Hey, listen. At some point when you're an adult, this is going to have real consequences." And I think she was skeptical. And in her case, it did have real consequences. And that cause-effect linkage, like this

is real, seemed to help some, but obviously I would be elated if she could turn the corner. Elated. But I don't hold out much hope.

Scott Turow:

I'll tell you from experience, it does happen sometimes. So that's the optimistic note that I would offer, Larry.

Paul Podolsky:

I'll take it.