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GEORGE VAILLANT

THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE

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GEORGE VAILLANT

Psychiatrist and Professor at Harvard Medical School

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Interviewed by: John Maggio

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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

George Vaillant

Psychiatrist and Professor, Harvard Medical School

The Grant Study

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

The Grant Study was started by a poor man's— Sam Walton. He had a wonderful 25-cent department store. He made a fair amount of money. He had a favorite patient who happened to be head of the Harvard Health Services. His idea was to fund a study of young men to emphasize what about them was normal. The head of the Health Service, who was basically a 1930's

eugenicist, wanted to study how you created supermen who could function at high altitudes.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

So they tried to select what made a good officer. All they were interested in was body build, mesomorphy, masculine body build, IQ, social class. And it was just what the OCS wanted, and they never thought to follow it up. Fortunately, they did. Or, they didn't, but I did. What will be of interest to the average viewer was it was a warm childhood that made a good officer. And Ben Bradlee did very well in promotion. It's because of World War II and as far as WT Grant, who was the antecedent of Sam Walton, it was to find good department store managers. It never occurred to them that they should be interested in human relationships.

Qualification for participants

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

You had to be in good physical health. You had to be at least a C+ average so they were sure you would graduate. So there was no physical illness, obviously no mental illness, and above average class standing.

Studying Ben Bradlee and JFK

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

The most famous is Ben Bradlee's good friend John Kennedy. But, there—I was asked by the Atlantic, what's the most important thing in life, and it's

warm human relationships. And that would have been totally foreign. I mean in Ben's and every one else's interview going into the study, nobody asked them who their best friend was or who their girlfriend was. They asked them what they thought of Freud's idea of sexuality and masturbation and extramarital affairs, which they all thought were dreadful.

The Grant Study continues to this day

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

The idea was it was gonna go on for 20 to 25 years. It was the fact that I'm a total obsessive compulsive when it comes to long term follow-up that it's gone on now for 75 years and our oldest men are 95 and 96.

Ben Bradlee in his youth

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

This was interesting because you'd mentioned what was Ben like as a young man. Ben, at some point I think, in his autobiography—When I was a late teenager I gave a shit about nothing. And Ben was a conservative, and as a student, really until he finished the Navy, was very ordinary. Clearly, nobody thought he had any troubles, but nobody, as I'm going to reveal, fell desperately in love with him as a totally extraordinary human being.

Ben Bradlee's politics

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GEORGE VAILLANT

When I interviewed him about retirement, he was gonna write a book about people that were radical and became more conservative, but he did admit that he started out conservative. Nobody would have thought he was—at least what I remember, was that he was radical.

Ben Bradlee's optimism and grit

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

This is Ben to a fare-thee-well. This is what I'm going to be talking to you about, is Ben's absolutely implacable optimism. I mean, he got polio, he was paralyzed from the waist down. As far as the world was concerned, he was absolutely never gonna walk again. Ben thought that was a bunch of hooey and made the baseball team by following all of those difficult exercises with extraordinary grit. That's something that characterized him all his life, was his grit. So he just assumed that it was gonna be alright. Years later when he was on the *Post* and he'd lost a multi-million dollar lawsuit, and was absolutely screwed, he gave a party to celebrate the loss of the lawsuit, took it to the Supreme Court and won. That's Ben to a fare-thee-well.

Signing on to the Grant Study

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Well I'd been terribly interested in the power of long-term follow-up, and that you find things out by following people for 20 years or 30 years that you'd never know if you follow them for one year or two years. And I'd done this with schizophrenics in residency and heroin addicts when I was in the public

health service. So, when I arrived at –came back to Harvard from the service, I wanted to study—the Health Service—to study schizophrenics in college who had recovered by their 25th reunion. And they said, "George, we're very sorry, we didn't have a Health Service, um, when the men were in college, but we do have this study of normals." And I thought, "Oh dear, how boring."

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

I signed on and became totally entranced and have been entranced for, I think, 45 years now. I'd been trained as a psychoanalyst, and I knew that relationships were important, and I knew that the early people who were studying the Grant Study, one, had published nothing of interest and that it was a disaster. So I started becoming interested in how do you cope when the going gets tough? How do you adapt to stress? When they first started coming back for their 25th reunion, so it would have been about 64 or 65. And it was 68, long before Ben was famous, but I interviewed him about how he dealt with stress and promptly fell head over heels in love with him.

Interviewing Ben Bradlee for the study

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

At their 25th reunion, I asked each man what they did when the going got tough. How did they do—what did they do to adapt to difficulties? People do this with involuntary mechanisms. So that you have someone like poor old Beethoven, who's just learned he's deaf. He's promised to kill himself when he became deaf. Nobody loves him. He's angry. He sits down and he writes the Ninth Symphony, Ode to Joy. Which a psychoanalyst would say, you know,

he's in serious denial and needs treatment, and the rest of us have been buying his records for 200 years. Okay. That's the good way to do it. And then there's another way of adapting to stress, which is basically Woodrow Wilson's "My face I don't mind it, you see I'm behind it. It's the fellow in front that I jar." These are the paranoids and the hypochondriacs and the people that have temper tantrums and have imaginary friends.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Basically, as far as they're concerned, they're happy as a pig in clover, but in actual fact they're in serious trouble and nobody likes them. It was going through these questions, and it's the interview where I'm tuned into this. You're gonna have to forgive me, cause I'm 82 and I don't remember so good, if I use a teleprompter. Early on in the interview, Ben told me that his sister-in-law had been hideously murdered and that he didn't know what to do. But he first called Paul Moore, the bishop, and then called his two best friends Art Buchwald and a lawyer named Williams. Quotes, "I needed someone to tell me that the world would go on, and sometimes you just want your friends around."

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Now that's, from Grant Study standards, a very unusual response, but I was already clued in that I wasn't interviewing someone who was just ordinary, but someone who was a superstar. None of this was clear before he left the Navy and started working as a journalist. And he then said the next great tragedy in his life was when Kennedy was assassinated. And I said, "Well, how did you deal with that?" And he said, quotes, "I cried a lot." And then he said

he had written a book about it while he was crying. "I wrote it that Friday night. It was the most hope—most helpful to have something to do." And at the same time he told me this story, he handed me the book that he wrote about Kennedy, which is pure poetry from beginning to end. I had the feeling not of an artist pushing his own wares, but of someone giving me an absolutely profound gift.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Of someone sharing with me one facet of an experience that had been important to him. This, again, was Ben's absolutely extraordinary capacity to share with other people. He told me he was an overachiever, and his grades and intelligence at Harvard, you never would've picked out that this was a really smart guy. But he said, "I always operated at 100%." That he possessed no unused talent. I asked him what people criticized him for and, not surprisingly as I guess your previous guest would have said, being a barracuda with the news. I then said, "Well, what do people admire you for?" And he said, "Well, my capacity to work hard, and uh, I'm also admired for my wife and my family." And there again was Ben's extraordinary ability to communicate that it wasn't all about him. I mean, here was an absolute superstar, but it wasn't just him.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

He said his greatest capacity was working at 100% of capacity. Overachieving at things –of his conspicuous use of talent. And then he talked to me in a charming, urbane way. Both in the coffee shop where—I mean, here was a busy man, managing a major newspaper. I mean, he wasn't famous then.

Pentagon Papers and Watergate were still in the future, but he still had his work cut out for him. He met me for breakfast and then we walked over to *The Post*. As we walked together, I felt that my feet were one foot off the ground because of his absolutely contagious charm.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

My notes say, it made me feel bigger than life just to be with him. It stemmed partly from his being completely generous with his own feelings, combined with a social gracefulness that must have been largely habit. But his facial expression conveyed both tenderness and seriousness, while making me laugh. Seriousness and tenderness while making me laugh. I mean, you know, that's absolutely extraordinary. He said many things that were funny, which is a good defense mechanism, but never to lead me off the track from something that was emotionally relevant to him. His use of humor then was not to escape, but simply to enjoy. This again, on a score of personal enjoyment, he was off the charts in the Grant Study.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

He possessed this contagious enthusiasm, and constantly saw the positive aspects. Not because he defended against unpleasant, but because there were so very many things that he really enjoyed. I could easily understand why a president would have picked him as his closest friend. This was the first time I sat with him, and I was absolutely blown away. I mean, this is why, in talking to Sally about this—I mean, we clearly were in love with the same man. I am—slightly impressionable. I do have what they call in psychoanalysis

positive countertransference, but my experience with Ben was absolutely off the charts. And— and It was because of his effect on me.

An analysis of Ben Bradlee

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

He was fun. I mean... His response afterwards was, "I learned to be more honest about myself, and to dig down, and to not pay attention to the first explanation, but to think of what I was contributing." Again, what I said about the difference between mature defenses and narcissistic defenses is that many of our explanations of selves was, "The dog ate my homework" rather than "I screwed up." I think that Ben learned that from his psychotherapy. I didn't go into it with him, but this was my take-away.

Ben Bradlee's emotions

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

You didn't interview 268 men of the Grant Study and realize that it's perfectly true that when women have problems and men who aren't dyed-in-the-wool WASPs have problems, they do find turning to friends comforting. But there probably was nobody else in the Grant Study that said that it quite that simply. One of my questions to the men was, "At two o'clock in the morning, if you had a crisis, who would you turn to?" to try to find out who their best friends were. This isn't—I shouldn't give Ben all the credit, it just meant that he wasn't a WASP like all of the other Grant Study men I was interviewing. It

really isn't that simple. The idea of positive emotions. Love, compassion, joy, are almost four letter words.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Love is a four letter word. Joy, if you are Icarus and can fly, your father says, "Fly too near the son, boy, and you'll crash." And all of our pictures of Icarus are crashing. Rather than, obviously if you have wax wings and you fly higher, the air gets cooler. That simply doesn't occur to people. And this is why Ben's joy—you can sit here as a smart man and say, "Oh. What's surprising about enjoying joy?" Tell it to every person that's ever painted a picture of Icarus falling in flames. Positive emotions make most people feel vulnerable. Most famous, four letter word using, editors of major newspapers don't tell you, "Well how did you deal with the death of Kennedy?" "Well I cried a lot." And that was Ben. Sad movies made him cry and he wasn't ashamed to show it. After the fact, you can say, so what? But it was—I've done 268 interviews and Ben Bradlee was absolutely extraordinary. It wasn't that he had the guts to deal with Watergate and the Pentagon Papers. It was that he had this total ability to make people love him. And he did it from honesty.

Ben Badlee chose his words carefully

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

He used the four letter words of a reporter, but never using them as expletives, and always to be sure they meant just what he intended them to mean. Although he was almost compassionate to a fault, he did it without a trace of sentimentality. He said at dinner parties he took a lot of heat, and he

remembered what W.C. Fields' secretary had advised WC Fields to do, which is, "Give them an evasive answer. Tell them to go fuck themselves."

Ben Bradlee's interest in others

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

His office was filled with human mementos. It was also very neat. It was filled with humorous mementos that had significance to him. There were no signed portraits of presidents. This was a man with great capacity to focus his attention. He was a man who cared about things only to the extent that they related to people, so that his interest in golf stopped as soon as he stopped playing it with his close friend John Kennedy. What he admired most about Kennedy was his ability to love and his gracefulness. I left the interview feeling that I had greater capacity as a human being just from having known him. Now that's hagiography. That's positive transference, but that's the guy that you're doing this program on.

Ben Bradlee's humanity

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

I don't think it was his ability to cross class that impressed me as much as his humanity. So that I think... giving his—the feeling of importance that he gave to other people, it didn't matter that he was at heart a sailor, and was at heart a Boston Brahmin. He absorbed it all. He enjoyed it all. But it was his ability to focus, his capacity to focus his attention that meant that what was important, he noticed. And what was bullshit, he didn't get caught up with. From the way

he dressed and his mannerisms, he remembered ... He reminded me of William Buckley. But he had none of Buckley's snottiness and superiority. It was—Bradlee would bust his ass to rescue one of his newspaper reporters who'd been turned in for drunkenness. That was what was important to him.

Ben Bradlee's married life

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

His—first marriage, I think, was to a fellow WASP who didn't like Paris, which shows terrible judgment on her part. That ended. Both his second marriage and his third marriage were filled with enormous intensity. Ben's—I mean it almost was an achilles heel, that he got so close, but it wasn't. So that I would rate both his second marriage as good and his—and you know, I didn't understand why it broke up. And he explained to me the tragic events in his second wife's marriage that led her to sort of draw into herself and separate. But it wasn't Ben's fault, and it wasn't his wandering eye. Then it took me a long time to forgive Sally as the other woman of my favorite man, and it's clearly that they were desperately in love from the get go, and they stayed that way for decades. I don't think you fault that. When I first was in this business, when Grant Study men would get divorced, I would say that's a personality disorder. Nice men don't get – just what you said to me, how do you square Ben Bradlee with three marriages?

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

My editor, who was smarter and wiser than me said, "George, it's not getting divorced that's bad. It's loving people for long periods of time that's good."

And Ben loved his two wives for long periods of time. I'd score him high. I mean, it's perfectly true that in this kind of thing, children are caught in the mix. But it was his second wife's multiple personal tragedies, not Ben's fickleness that left him available, as it were, for Sally. I am big on good marriages and tough on bad marriages. Staying married for 50 years miserable is no triumph. That, again, is why you do a study for 70 years. Cause nobody but me knows how awful 50th wedding anniversaries can be if they haven't followed the Grant Study men until they're 80 and 90.

Everyone loved Ben Bradlee

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Ben was always very nice to my—I had a famous roommate that used to go to the kinds of parties that Ben and Sally—and Ben was always very nice about asking about George, so that—no, I don't think that Ben was in love with me for one minute. And yes, I think that the people that knew Ben all fell in love with him. But that wasn't Ben's fault. He just gave an enormous amount and did it in a very open way. He trusted people in a way that most people don't.

Ben Bradlee's fame

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Ben face-to-face that was fun, not a busy editor with other things on his mind. I had no recollection—this is interesting. I'd have to go back to his record and thumb through what his answers were during the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. I mean I've read his book cover-to-cover and listened today to

John Dean recite those years. I realize a lot was going on, but... that wasn't part of — The Grant Study wasn't interested in how he became famous, except that he was—I did notice that *The Post* was gaining on *The New York Times* every year. So the fact that he was doing a good job. But what would interest most people about Ben Bradlee wasn't what interested me. I've tried to share with you what to me was—I mean, if you put all the Grant Study men in a row and said, who do I think was most worthy of 75 years of follow-up, it would be Ben Bradlee.

Ben Bradlee's charisma

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

That was one of the things that was extraordinary about him, is that he was warm, he was infectious. It wasn't just charismatic, cause it was giving it away to other people. But he also was terribly comfortable with his own feelings of anger, of being a barracuda with the news... Of giving people evasive answers.

Ben Bradlee as a family man

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

I look at things as coping strategies, all right? And I think when you have someone with the number of difficulties that Quinn had, and you have someone whose own father gave Ben some of the toughness that he had by working with him together in the woods. I wouldn't say pouring himself into Quinn. I think he was desperately in love with both Sally and Quinn. He wasn't pouring himself into Quinn. It was the same way that he could walk

from the breakfast shop to his office and leave me feeling more full and confident without missing a beat. I think that was Ben. That was, if you've got a child who's multiply disabled, who's survived by the grace of God, and you're trying to give him what your dad gave you, and you're Ben Bradlee, you give. And I mean you'd need to check this out with Sally, but I don't think Sally felt deprived in the process.

Ben Bradlee as a father

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

The men of this generation—I mean, my children were raised that they should co-parent. The Grant Study men were raised that no way Jose. I mean, you're good. Clearly, if I was Ben's eldest children, I would feel screwed. If I was Quinn, I would feel enormously grateful. Given that generation—I think your sensitivity on this—if you had Ben on the tube, he would say, huh? I don't quite understand. What are you talking about? I think if you think of what Ben and Sally had to go through with— with Quinn, to make him the sort of person he is today, and I haven't seen him, but I have Sally's word that he is a motivation behind what you're doing... was extraordinary. I think Ben, as I've said again and again, was extraordinary. I don't think—I think with his other marriages and children—I mean I haven't put each child clearly in my mind, but I think they all had a tough go with too many mothers and a busy father. And a father that wasn't socialized to being like my children, who are determined to be a better father than their WASP father.

The relationships between the researchers and participants

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

There is absolutely no question, and this is totally the fact that I stood on the shoulders of giants. The physician ... I've been scornful of Arlie Bock who wanted to treat them like robots and mountaineers. But the physician Clark Heath and the social worker Louise Gregory had charm and concern and love to—so they socialized these men that the Grant Study was a very loving parent. By the time I stepped into it, 13 years younger than these men, they all not only almost called me sir, but totally trusted me, because I knew so much about them. It was like they were friends. It was an intimate relationship, but they did regard me as, a little bit, an Old Testament figure. That whether they'd been naughty or nice was important. Some of them went to much greater lengths than the others to please. But there was that feeling that the Grant Study was a benign father confessor.

The purpose of the Grant Study

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

Idealistically, it was to—I mean, I've got slides that have the quote, which I can't pull up from memory. Just like Marty Seligman in the year 2000, William Grant in 1937 wanted to emphasize what was healthy about people, rather than what was unhealthy, and how people could enjoy their lives better. So he wanted to contribute to well-being rather than study what psychology and psychoanalysis and medicine only wants to look at things that are bad. They then got misled by studying happy lives when the world is just descended into World War II. You want to do your bit for officer candidacy school. They

hired—because what made people happy, it never occurred to them that it was social. So you didn't study sweethearts and best friends. You studied somatotype, because the first book by a physical anthropologist, *Young Man You're Normal*, was basically saying what's important in a person's personality is their body build.

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GEORGE VAILLANT:

That's inconceivable now. And the reason that I was allowed as an outsider to basically take over a goldmine—I can remember lying on my analysts' couch with a key to files and said, "I just got the key to Ft. Knox." I mean, I knew what I had was a goldmine, and as soon as I became involved—200 publications, 5 books, but nothing had come out of it before that was worth—that was where all the Grant Foundation's money came from until I—and this again is in *Triumphs of Experience*, but when I took over, I had a career scientist award that paid my salary but no research money. And I wanted to rehire Louise Gregory, so I wrote to the Grant Foundation and wondered if I could have an \$800 grant to hire Louise Gregory. The head of the Grant Foundation, who'd been a psychiatrist for the Grant Study, and then was dean of Case Western, flew out to see me and patted me on the head and said, "Boy," and handed me a check for \$50,000.

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