Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 22: Honoring All Veterans

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. I’m Peter Salovey. Thank you for joining me for Yale Talk.

Today, we are honoring our nation’s veterans. Yale has a rich tradition of service in the United States armed forces—one that goes back all the way to the Revolutionary War. Yalies have served in war and in peacetime, and they continue to serve today. We’re proud of the many students who currently serve in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps on our campus and of the many veterans among our faculty, staff, alumni, and students.

Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with one of Yale’s veterans. Rod Lowe is the senior associate director of major gifts for the Yale Divinity School, and he is a veteran of the U.S. Army. Rod, thank you for joining me on Yale Talk.

**Rod Lowe:** Thank you very much, President Salovey.

**Peter Salovey:** So first, I really should say welcome to Yale. You relocated from Texas to Connecticut and started work at Yale this summer, I believe, right in the middle of COVID. It’s a tough time to be onboarding and to change jobs. What are you looking forward to about your role at Yale and being part of this community?

**Rod Lowe:** Well, I am so excited to be here at Yale. I’ve learned about Yale’s history with veterans as I was preparing to look at institutions that I had an interest in joining and being a part of. But the things that interested me most about Yale that I’m so excited to talk about is the various affinity groups that Yale has: the African-American Affinity Group, which I’m a part of, the Yale LGBTQ Affinity Group, and last but certainly not least, the Yale Veterans Network. I’m really looking to get a lot more involved in these affinity groups and really ultimately make an impact on this community.

**Peter Salovey:** Those affinity groups were set up a number of years ago, really to help people find community. It’s a big place. We want everybody to feel like they belong at Yale as a whole, but also to find community, make friends easily and quickly. They’re really quite wonderful and quite active. Now let’s talk a little bit about what you did before you came to Yale and then what your job is at Yale. Independent of being a veteran, you’ve been in higher education for quite a while, helping colleges and universities raise funds to support their mission. How did you get into this kind of work and where have you done it before and what do you hope to do at Yale?

**Rod Lowe:** That is a great question. I attended Gettysburg College, a small, liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. And when I was there, I was a student worker for the phonathon program, which really gave me an introduction into the annual fund program, soliciting donors and alumni for annual fund dollars. But since then have really done a lot of informational interviews with many development officers at Gettysburg College. Ultimately, I found that this is a really good niche that I have. I really enjoy asking people to support causes that mean so much to me, and certainly education is one of them. I’ve worked at several institutions. And then from there I did one of the boldest things that I’ve ever done, which was to take a pause from higher education and join the military.

**Peter Salovey:** There’s an interesting story there, I have no doubt.

**Rod Lowe:** Absolutely! I’ll be succinct today. I think for me, as an immigrant family that came from Brooklyn, my parents came from Guyana, South America, and came to Brooklyn and we lived there. Being an individual that did not come from means, I’m the first in my family to go to college, I wanted to figure out how am I going to pay for that? Certainly, academically, I did really well, but that was a concern that I had. So I pretty much decided that I should explore the military. In addition to that, I should, apply for grants and so on so that I can afford to go to college. I did apply to about 18 schools. Thankfully, I got into most of them and they provided really robust financial aid, which allowed me to go to college and not have to take out a whole ton of debt. When I was at Gettysburg College, they provided a lot of student aid to me, but the military was something that was in the back of my head as something that I always wanted to do, but didn’t need to do it. So after completing a comprehensive campaign at one of the institutions, really took an opportunity to really pause and really figure out what was it that I always wanted to do. And certainly being part of the military family in a more meaningful way was something that I had an interest in, so I decided to pursue that in the area of military intelligence and field artillery. For me, being in the military taught me a lot of really meaningful experiences about patriotism and selflessness. And those are some of the values that I really espouse. And those are the values that really left quite an impression on me. The individuals, the military personnel, brothers and sisters in arms that I’ve met over the years, have really reinforced the fact that we live in an amazing country where people who decide to go into the military are so selfless.

**Peter Salovey:** Always has impressed me, and meeting the leaders of our ROTC regiment, Air Force and Navy is what we have at Yale, these are career people, and they so impress me with their commitment to service, with their commitment to our country, and selfless. I love that you say you admire selflessness. I do too, and the way in which you have to work as part of a team, the way in which you have to put the bigger goals of that team and the country ahead of your own personal preferences and feelings. That’s a kind of discipline. And I admire it too.

So military intelligence and field artillery. Where were you and what did they actually have you working on?

**Rod Lowe:** So I was down in Washington state at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and I had an opportunity to really be a part of a brigade that really served a portion of the country. The things that I really enjoyed most that resonates mostly with me, as I reflect now on my experience, is military intelligence includes a lot of really neat things that many times you can’t talk about.

**Peter Salovey:** Yeah, I had a feeling that might be true.

**Rod Lowe:** But in addition to that, it’s really taking a lot of data and really analyzing a lot of data and really thinking strategically about how you deploy your assets to really make an impact on the mission that you’re called to do.

**Peter Salovey:** I’m not going to pry into things you can’t talk about, but it sounds like there’s a data science aspect to this, a big focus here at Yale and you’re bringing data to bear on decision-making.

**Rod Lowe:** Absolutely. I found personally for me, some of the skills that I utilized in advancement, in fundraising, really applied also to the job that I was doing because you have to think strategically. Things are very dynamic, and things change, and you have to be nimble. You definitely have to have the data that informs you on what decisions you should make. So a lot of the skill sets in development I found very useful also in the military.

**Peter Salovey:** And probably vice versa, right? Maybe you feel like you’re a better development officer, having had now the military experience?

**Rod Lowe:** That too.

**Peter Salovey:** One of the reasons I’m so proud of ROTC returning to Yale is because I think it’s yet another way for students to learn leadership skills, and Yale is interested in educating leaders for all sectors of society throughout the world, and I think among the ways one can be educated for that kind of leadership is through service. And I’d be interested in your thoughts about the connection between having an experience in the military and the acquisition of leadership skills.

**Rod Lowe:** I think my experience in leadership in the military has really allowed me to hone in on leadership skills. What are the qualities of an effective leader? Some of the things that I came away with and I thought about is, you need to really empower your team to make decisions. I think ensuring that you are communicating effectively. I’ve seen so many examples of this in my daily functions while I was in the military. If a commander is not clear on his intent, that information then trickles down all the way down to the unit level, and if he or she, they’re not clear on what their intent is, it can create a lot of added work because people are then reinterpreting their commands or their orders. And sometimes that is not as effective. They were not the scenarios that I saw in my experience in the military, but effective communication is certainly one of the things that I think the military does a really amazing job at. In addition to that, I saw in my time in the military young people empowered to make a lot of critical decisions because they were trained on how to do that. I’ve seen them operate million-dollar equipment at 18 years old because they were effectively trained. So, not only was training an important part of what I took away from my experience and my observation in the military, but also effective communication and problem-solving, being agile when it comes to that. I think those characteristics are very important for those individuals that are in ROTC to really hone in on. My hope is that others will find those experience to be as meaningful as I have.

**Peter Salovey:** I was talking to one of our ROTC leaders, and he was telling me that students graduate from Yale College and ROTC, and they’re commissioned as a junior officer. And they get an assignment. And some of them, they get on base at their new assignment and a senior officer will say to them, you see those dozens of people standing out there, “Those are your people, lead them.” And it’s figure out what to do, figure out how to be a leader. Where do you get an experience like that at age 22, in any other sector? It’s just not going to happen.

**Rod Lowe:** You’re absolutely correct. Part of the military structure that I found interesting is learning how to follow. Followership is definitely an important part of that. Before you can assume a position of leader, one needs to be a good follower. When you’re at the point in your career where you are now the leader, you understand what it is to follow. When you join the military, you start as a junior officer. You are given a mentor, and you really learn how to lead by observation. Good followers are empathetic to the needs of leaders and the team at large. It’s not just about you, but it’s about the overall team and the needs of that team so empathy, I find, is an important skill set that a follower learns. When there are opportunities for that follower to be a leader, he or she understands the importance of empathy.

**Peter Salovey:** Most work is typically done in teams, and everybody has a role to play, and appreciating the importance of playing that role to the best of your abilities, even in situations where you don’t fully understand the whole. That’s a skill.

**Rod Lowe:** Absolutely. Teamwork is central to any good, effective leadership role, and certainly being a follower is an important part of leadership. I believe it’s interconnected.

**Peter Salovey:** I understand that you have a background in music. I don’t have a background in music, but I love music and I play bass in the Professors of Bluegrass. And so I’d be interested in your musical journey.

**Rod Lowe:** Well, this is an area that I love talking about. Since I grew up in church, I loved music and I loved certainly gospel music because that was the music that I heard in my home every day by my parents. But in addition to that, I love a good Marvin Gaye, and my parents also had a strong affinity to classical music. So, since I lived in New York, I studied at Henry Street Settlement, which is in Lower Manhattan for many years while I was in high school, and I had some amazing vocal coaches that I worked with. I was classically trained, but love gospel music and love pop, R&B, so I love this wide gamut of genres of music. And, what I’ve done at each institution that I’ve been a part of and worked for, is I’ve really taken those skills and really applied it. Either I’ve joined a group, or at Muhlenberg College I started a gospel choir while I was there that really gave me an opportunity to really connect in a meaningful way with the students. And certainly here at YDS, I know that we have a gospel choir here, and once I’ve gotten myself sort of acclimated into my role, I’m certainly looking to be a member of that group because I think music is such an important part. It’s a release that I get from a long day of work. It is definitely an area that I’m very passionate about, and I’m just looking to get more involved, as time permits.

**Peter Salovey:** Sounds fantastic, and you’re right, there are lots of relevant musical groups here on campus that I’m sure would be delighted to have your voice added to them, from the gospel choir and wonderful programming in the Institute for Sacred Music, more classical, of course, and maybe someday, you know, the Professors of Bluegrass. Bluegrass is interesting because it came out of southern Appalachia. A lot of the singing is three- and four-part harmony, which the original musicians learned in church. It’s very natural to them to be able to sing those parts, and a certain amount of the, what would I say? The classical repertoire in bluegrass is gospel, sort of bluegrass gospel. And there’s just a great history there. So someday we’ll find you and see if you would be willing to do a bluegrass gospel song with us. That would fantastic.

**Rod Lowe:** Absolutely! That would be—I would be delighted to do that.

**Peter Salovey:** That is fantastic. So, Rod, I have to thank you for speaking with me today. More than that, I have to thank you for coming to Yale and coming to the Yale Divinity School in your new role. Your background is fascinating, and I know you’re going to add enormously to the Divinity School community and indeed to the Yale University community as a whole. We’re so lucky to have you as part of the Yale family. And I want to thank you for your service today and every day.

And so to all of our veterans, we appreciate your service and your sacrifice. And in gratitude for your leadership, Yale strives to honor and support you. As Rod mentioned, we do this through the Yale Veterans Network, a campus group for students, faculty, and staff, and the Yale Veterans Association, an alumni organization. If you’re not already participating in these groups, I hope you will consider joining them.

To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.