

Ron Gula: [00:00:04] Hi there. This is Ron and Cyndi Gula with another episode of the Gula tech cyber fiction show. Cindy, how are you?

Cyndi Gula: [00:00:10] I'm doing great, Ron. How are you doing?

Ron Gula: [00:00:11] Doing very well because today our guest is Richard Thieme. Cindy and I have known Richard for a long time. I think long time becomes more of an insult or something like that after a while. But ages, right? Richard how are you doing?

Richard Thieme: [00:00:24] I'm doing great. And yeah, it's been decades. not years.

Ron Gula: [00:00:27] That's right. That's right. So today we are gonna talk about Richard Thieme's background, which is as a 25 time Def Con speaker, author of multiple books, including works of fiction and works of science fiction and works of nonfiction [

Richard Thieme: [00:00:42] laughs]

Ron Gula: [00:00:42] Which is good stuff. Let's start off with Def Con and Black Hat. Richard, this is the first year you're not there in person. How has Def Con changed? over the years?

Richard Thieme: [00:00:50] Just about the first. I didn't go last time, but I did go to HOPE, which was a reasonable facsimile thereof. Yeah, it's been 25 years of Def Con. How has it changed? I prerecorded the talk this year and sent it to them because I just couldn't risk Vegas for four days for a variety of reasons. Def Con the first time I went was thanks to Jeff Moss. He has a genius for creating the desire to participate in his agenda because all those goons can't wait to sign up, to pay their way. We're not well compensated to speak at Def con, but we wouldn't miss it for the world. My first one was 1996, Def Con 4. 375 people in total. I called them "the kids," they were young, they were real hackers. They could still get away with everything and no, they wouldn't be prosecuted because they weren't 21. But they could get a slap on the wrist. They couldn't get online as easily and cheaply as we can today. They couldn't store stuff as easily and cheaply as we can today. To get on the internet, you had to go through one of your servers at school or something, nobody could afford it. And now it's cheap and ubiquitous and you know the story, but they had to be good at figuring it out. And once they found the play space they played, they made it a big toy and it became the big toy for better or worse for all of us. So Jeff put a notice out on the internet, which was relatively new and said, I need somebody to keynote Def Con. So I said, oh, I've been speaking for three years about technology. I could do that. And as I say, his genius was okay, let's try you. And the way he does it is if it works come back and if it doesn't thank you. So I went and keynoted Def Con, and what Kim Zetter said to me - she's a really solid journalist - the first time she heard me there was that people got that I respected and knew who they were. I knew who I was and how I could link to that emotionally. We were all in a way lost boys, Peter Pan style. And it became clear over time that having brought my previous history as a clergyman to that, but without religiosity if you will, it helped to create bonds and availability. And people needed someone to talk to and we became very close, a lot of them. And that's also where I met for the first time many people from NSA and CIA who were there sometimes undercover, sometimes not. We became very close friends and colleagues because we were all older. I was early 50s when I did that.

Ron Gula: [00:03:24] How do you feel about going from spot the fed to invite the fed to keynote?

Richard Thieme: [00:03:28] It's one of the major arcs of the thing. I could name the different moments along the way when for example all of a sudden Microsoft and everybody showed up, handing out

business cards and instead of being hackers, suddenly the kids realized, oh my God, there's big money in this. A lot of people figured that out. With a little sense of humor - it's like being a change agent. If you're in cybersecurity you've got a lifetime job. Because as one of my friends said, he looked at the whole panoply of vendors and said, every single one is selling something they can't deliver, which is complete security. And they have tendency to exaggerate about what you're buying. So as it's a multi-billion dollar industry and it's not going to go away. And I said in that very first Def Con talk, you are going to be the thought leaders in the 21st century. And then two years ago, when I saw all of the Lopht up on stage there they all were, a lot of them are, thought leaders and sometimes implicitly so by virtue of creating the space in which everybody in the world now lives and moves and has their being to quote an old prayer without often knowing it. And that was something I saw early on, that they were creating a context that was going to transform every aspect of life. And so now, that 375in attendance then, what is it now? 30,000, 40,000 a couple years ago? Who knows how to count, how many people are there crowded into three, four hotels. Whereas before it used to be one hotel, and Jeff said to me, early on, we chose Vegas because it was the only city building hotels faster than we could use them up because in those days they were never invited back. Once you put concrete in the toilet and a fake bomb under a car and take over the code on the elevators and make it always stop at seven, no matter where you want to go, and take over the security wireless network and move people back and forth across the hotel lobby and laugh. It should make us smile was the old hacker mentality, but now it's not that. And it grew into Black Hat. And yeah, the first year I was there, they were talking about, we should do something for others and I advanced that notion we should make what's available in your expertise for people who need to learn it. And the next year was the first Black Hat and I keynoted that Black Hat and another Black Hat and I was always in the hacker court and the last Black Hat I spoke at I did a talk called Staring into the Abyss, the dark side of security and intelligence work. And I guess the best comment was somebody said, people were really accepting of that talk, considering that you told them that they were all full of shit

Cyndi Gula: [00:06:08] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:06:08] and that's an exaggeration on his part, but I can tell you, it was the only time I was having dinner with Kim Zetter and Simple Nomad at Caesars and the waiter came over and he said that gentlemen over there is buying your dinner. And I didn't know who it was. And he said he just wanted to thank you for that talk," Because the clarity with which I articulated the larger context of the economic structures of the world and how hacking and security played into them was clear. It was also the last time I spoke Black Hat because Jeff sold it and then it became a mini RSA. Once the vendors are running the show, their agenda is a lot different than, can we find somebody who transcends what we're selling in order to build a big picture for people? No, that's a no, that's not what they want.

Ron Gula: [00:06:56] Do you think your experience as a clergyman sort of selling religion, telling people all about religion, was it, you were able to pivot from that to talking about cybersecurity?

Richard Thieme: [00:07:05] It's what being in the religious business gives you if you're doing it right, first of all, there's a part of it that's genuine or you wouldn't get into it. I had a life-changing experience many years ago in England which reformed or transformed my understanding of who I was - forget the explicit content of the religion - in relationship to the ground of being itself. I belonged to the world and the universe in a different way. And once that happens, it's what I call a hierarchical restructuring of the psyche A lot of things can trigger it. And once it happens, I think we're all hardwired to have that experience. But once you have it, then what a religion does is provide a narrative that purports to make sense of what you experienced in terms of their narrative. And that's why there are diverse narratives.

And if they get you quickly and love bomb you and bring you into the fold, it is very difficult to separate that narrative from the transformational process itself. But I had that gift. I could do that, I could see the difference clearly, and I did ministry in three different cultures, Hawaii, Utah, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and each one required you to see the meta-culture in order to relate to people out of who they genuinely were and what they were presenting. You had to do anthropology to do ministry. So to go to cybersecurity, it sounds crazy, but it was an easy pivot because hackers were people living on the edges as I had lived on the edges all my life. And when you live on the edges and I was a minority in six different ways, which is unusual for a guy who looks like me, right. And all minorities, whatever the content of their minority status, which is always designated by the dominant culture - nobody calls themselves a minority - all minorities learn to live and be effective on the edge because it's worth your life sometimes to see clearly what people in the dominant culture really mean by what they do, not by what they say. And that was my whole life, I was a religious, racial, and cultural minority in different ways. I found out when I moved to Milwaukee and I was mistaken for someone who belonged to the dominant culture that I had thrived on the edges, because it was so natural, being raised as a Jew in Chicago, being a Gentile in Utah, being a Haole in Hawaii - that was all natural. And when people started treating me as if I belonged, it was a huge aha as to how the dominant culture so totally treats its members differently in all sorts of spoken and unspoken ways and opens all sorts of doors. Women know this from the ground floor up, Jews know it, blacks know it, people of color know it, gays know it.

Cyndi Gula: [00:09:42] yeah, that's really interesting from the point of view of being on the edges and here you have Def Con and hackers who thrive on the edges, and then all of a sudden they're embraced by the dominant technology and tried to be put into a box.

Richard Thieme: [00:10:02] Yeah.

Cyndi Gula: [00:10:03] And it's just the dynamic of the way some people like fit and other people completely shunned the idea, but it overtook 'em anyway.

Richard Thieme: [00:10:14] They couldn't stop the tide. First the pioneers and then the merchants. The pioneers settled the territory. And then in the stage coach with plush seats here come the tradespeople and pretty soon they're buying up ranches and so on and so forth. It's just the way of the world. It's how things work. So some adjusted to that. And some didn't so well, some had to continue to be outlaws and outliers, if you will. And I know people who did that, they couldn't stand making a lot of money in a wonderful industry that was just like other industries in America, because somehow that so ground against the grain of who they thought they were. And I understand that completely because I've lived like that I've reinvented myself three different times and each one required that I create a persona that was good enough to present, to facilitate information and energy flowing between me and other people and bringing the ministry to it, that involved the kind of empathy and compassion that took me into the ministry and made me successful. When I left, I was being offered Bishop and the biggest churches in the Episcopal church. And I realized I would suffocate to death if I took them for exactly the reasons you're saying. All the details are flooding my mind ...

Ron Gula: [00:11:31] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:11:31] ... of what it took at the age of 49 to say when the biggest Episcopal church in our country came for an interview and called up and said, we don't understand. He said, you have everything we want in a, we call it a rector. He said, except one thing keeps nagging us. And I said, what's that? He said, we keep getting the feeling that you don't want us.

[Ron Gula: [00:11:51] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:11:51] And I said, bingo, I'm out. Take my name off of the list. And I called the Bishop's selection group that was coming from Connecticut and said take my name off the list, I'm out of here, because to allow myself to be assimilated at that level of success on the east coast in an east coast elitist church would have prevented me from doing the kind of exploring on the edges that has been the driving dynamic of my life and which I love.

Cyndi Gula: [00:12:18] Yeah. We hear that a lot. Especially with recruiting more people into cybersecurity and more specifically directly the hackers. It's always just that love of exploring the unknown or that thing that you shouldn't, you'd been told you shouldn't do. And That's the first thing that's an invitation to do.

Richard Thieme: [00:12:37] That rush. I dare not presume your histories, but some people know the rush. I remember way back when you could just get on the internet for the first time, and I found, do you remember Usenet groups? And one said, if you take your scanner and take the back off and find this capacitor and clip it, you will be able to listen to all the cell phones and cordless phone calls in your area. And I clipped it, I called it reality radio. That's in Mobius too, the young guy who who does that, but there's a part of you that just loves listening in, right? And my wife didn't like it. She said, I don't want to know that - he smiles. He cuts his grass. He waves. He says, how are you? I don't want to know he's a rabid racist or anti-Semite or a Yahoo. I said it's better to know what's real because then you can deal with reality

Cyndi Gula: [00:13:31] Yeah.

Richard Thieme: [00:13:31] ...instead of having to spend so much time and effort to walk from here to reality, just to begin the conversation,

[Cyndi Gula: [00:13:36] laughs]

Ron Gula: [00:13:36] How have you seen the culture change, we're talking about hackers, becoming business leaders, coders, becoming team leaders, with that, with the backdrop that cyber now can really impact people's lives. Right? We had SolarWinds, we had colonial pipeline. We've had some major things impact our economy and country.

Richard Thieme: [00:13:54] Oh, it's huge.

Ron Gula: [00:13:55] it got real.

Richard Thieme: [00:13:56] Yeah, and I was just reading, you talked to Peter Singer --

Ron Gula: [00:13:59] Peter Singer. Absolutely.

Richard Thieme: [00:14:00] Yeah. Yeah. So that sparked me to read all of his books and in Likewars there's a chapter in Likewars which does an incredibly good job of bodying forth for people to understand that what war is now is different. And as I say, I've met a lot of people and I worked with them in different ways. I wrote a paper for an unnamed agency in the '90s illuminating how the very nature of intelligence was changed as the borders around nation states and identity changed. A lot of my work is identity one way or another, even my novels and my whole life, as I said, has been fashioning

identities. And yes, cyber has what we call cyber in the aggregate, is a huge sea change for the culture. And we haven't got our heads around it. Some know how to exploit it. I could give you all the examples - you know what they are - we don't have a system of governance for a digital society. We're still operating out of industrial society governance. It doesn't fit. And that's one of the reasons our political discourse is so at odds with our experience in reality, because people are still speaking in 20th century frames and those frames don't fit. And we know the most egregious examples. I remember somebody went to a subcommittee in the Senate to try to show a senator what a little of this was like. He set up a MacBook and the Senator stood there and looked at it and said, hello, hello. Clueless. How to ramp up from that level of cluelessness to grasping what this is really doing - liberating society - and there are going to be winners and losers?. The United States could very well be a loser. But that's a whole other conversation. If we don't do this, right?

Cyndi Gula: [00:15:48] Yeah. I'm always surprised. And it's people who are not in cyber and they say, Hey, what about this? Last hack or, Colonial pipeline. I said you know, what the dirty little secret in cybersecurity is we applaud those when they happen, because that gets your attention. And it's just, the vast majority of people who are just not paying attention, it's not like we cheer them on or want to see them, but it really does take a negative impact to somebody's personal life in order to get them -

Richard Thieme: [00:16:17] That's right.

Cyndi Gula: [00:16:18] ... to pay attention.

Richard Thieme: [00:16:18] That's right. a conservative is a liberal who was mugged, right?

Cyndi Gula: [00:16:21] [laughs]

Ron Gula: [00:16:22] [laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:16:22] That's the way it is. But also we've contributed to all, we play all the sides and Mobius is real clear on that. And I'm real clear on that, that nation states as the sole arbiter of your identity is just not true anymore. And there is a whole other world like Lando Calrissian's cloud city or whatever it was floating above this world and it has different rules not different laws 'cause they don't have laws, but there are different rules. And they've created an alternative society for the economy and for laundering money. And for all sorts of what we call illicit activity. and yet a Senate hearing that I like to quote showed that if all of the money was taken out of the American economy, that is, from the illicit drug trade, the illicit weapons trade, and trafficking, the economy would tank overnight. And that's part of what my Staring into the Abyss talk back then was about: be real. Who are these banks? Who's doing money laundering on whose behalf? Just be real about the gray world. That's the key thing. And hackers are great at seeing gray everywhere because it's just not black and white. And to go back to your reference to religion, those that think it's black and white are captive in a rigidity that is life-denying and inauthentic because reality is not black and white. It's gray. And I remember years ago, one of those first Def Cons when a young hacker told me he had found an exploit and he got a call from someone at one of the agencies who said, please don't reveal that because we find that so useful in our work. We know a lot of people listening to this, know how that works. Didn't need Snowden to tell us what was going on. We know what's going on. And so you, you don't have the luxury of a moral high ground. And so the religion world is not what people think when you start out, if you have any judgmental qualities, if you really listen to the person in the chair who comes to talk to you and you don't wind up with compassion, and an understanding that if you had been them with the same inputs

into their life, into your life, that they had, that you would do exactly the same thing. You have no moral high ground, compassion and empathy is the name of the game, and then

[Ron Gula: [00:18:39] crosstalk 00:21:26]

Richard Thieme: [00:18:39] ...pull it into my work all over the world. As to speaking, it's learning. Every time I go into one of the conferences I learn more than everybody else because I'm dumber than everybody else, I know less going in. And so I listen and all that wonderful wisdom and knowledge comes downhill to me. And it's just are my arms big enough to catch it all. And take it home and above all to get it integrated, synthesize it, and then articulate that synthesis in a way that's meaningful and powerful for people. And that's where all these years of 28 years of speaking, 16 years in ministry, and before that five years teaching literature at the university of Illinois taught me to talk.

[Ron Gula: [00:19:25] one of the things you're good at is you've organized the things you talk about. And one of the things that Cyndi and I wanted to talk to you about is this concept of what does it mean to be an expert? Because so many people want to get into cybersecurity, but they really don't know what that means. And there's tons and tons of experts out there with all sorts of bad advice on how, why their career field is the right thing for them, regardless if it's as a woman a minority, whatever. So where are you with experts in cyber these days?

Richard Thieme: [00:19:53] When anything becomes this big, you can sell snake oil. You know that, and there's a lot of snake oil in any industry that people don't understand, but some is bound up with their fear and people think they need something. We're seeing that across the political spectrum now. So there are real experts and a lot of people who say they are experts. But one thing I learned in speaking is if you don't know something, don't go there, know what, you know, know what you do not know. And don't try to pretend that you know what you don't know, and that's where the authenticity comes from. But it does take close listening to what people are telling you on both an emotional, if you will, and spiritual level, what are their real questions? What do they really need? I grew up in Chicago working for the Daley machine to get through Northwestern and I learned an awful lot and Daley would have people attack him all the time. And he'd say, come on in the office and he'd say, what do you need? And after a while, he'd say, yeah, okay. But what do you really need? And when they got what they really needed, they turned into Democrats. they loved Mayor Daley, they came out for a photo op with their arms around each other. And I learned, don't buy the moralizing and moralizing in cybersecurity is the proclamation of things that people should know better about, that "experts" do not know how to do and cannot promise. For vendors: Know the limits of what you do. You created a terrific product that is still extolled far and wide in the world, but you never pretended it could do everything, you said clearly what it could do and why it had value.

Ron Gula: [00:21:34] Yeah, it's funny. When people pitch us companies, we had to come up with five rules of pitching us, right? Tell us a problem you solve, tell us how you solve it all the way to, what does success look like for you? Because a lot of times, people who are even asking for money and funding don't know how to answer those kinda questions. But maybe Richard, when people come to you after a conference and they say, Hey, I want to get into cybersecurity. What do you tell 'em?

Richard Thieme: [00:21:57] Okay. [I don't think people say that. I'm trying to think of a single time Either they're either already in it or they just want to know about it and how it impacts their life, but it never occurred to them that they could get into it. As a career, people are drawn to it for all sorts of reasons. And you say with the big arc where Def Con has come down now with all the alphabet certifications that people are amassing and everybody knows they can be helpful, but they don't take

you where you need to go. And, you mentioned to me earlier a talk I do - Computers, Breaking the Rules and Huckleberry Finn - I allude to that because I looked at what expert systems early on tried to do. And the naive approach was to codify the wisdom of experts into heuristics and then provide them in a whole set of if this, then that rules that a non-expert could use to arrive at expert conclusions. And they discovered that there were certain domains, like mining, looking for ore. medical diagnoses where people could use that kind of template, but they found real experts could not articulate heuristics like that. Beginners need black and white rules. Experts don't. Beginners are told, just don't break the rules. Just stay with it until you get a body of knowledge and experience where you can say I know the rule is, but I'm not sure. And then when they looked at the domains where eliciting heuristics just didn't apply at all, it was because real experts break the rules all the time. And the difference is they know when to break the rules. So I concluded there's only one rule, which is, if you don't know when to break the rules, don't break the rules. In other words, remain on the sliding scale, stay back down toward a black and white understanding of what works until you develop the intuitive knowledge, which we're calling expertise, that enables you. And it is intuitive because if you're asked for heuristics that they can encode with your wisdom, you can't say them.

Ron Gula: [00:23:54] How do you think that bodes for this? The same thing being done with AI?

Richard Thieme: [00:23:58] Oh AI. is [laughs]. Yeah. We we mentioned the Terminator in one of our exchanges and it's really no joke. Right? This is where I say, what do I know? But on the basis of who I talk to, what I read, the Chinese are still not quite up to us or ahead of us in AI, but boy are they trying hard? And they knew what they were doing. They knew where they wanted to go. I remember reading the Chinese colonels decades ago, and they said, this is where we want to be in 50 years. And then they execute, even though the political vagaries may cause a zig and zag they're pretty much doing it. And people who saw what the Chinese were going to build in terms of military prowess and ability, I think undersea is one area where they're not quite where we are and that's what Singer's Ghost Fleet was about. But they're trying very hard to catch up with that. But people who did this analysis, where the Chinese were headed, said they took it to military planners and said, this is what you need to be worried about. One was a China expert at CIA for 35 years and he was told, look, I've got two wars to fight right now. Don't tell me what I'm gonna to be fighting in 10 years. I haven't got time for it. But the Chinese have the long view and AI, as, as I suspect you know, is absolutely going to transform how we relate to our machine masters. Because we already ask our machine masters to make decisions for us. And you can think of all the different ways the appliances we use do that. It will be invisible. And I knew the internet was disappearing when no one used the word anymore, it's like I plug in a toaster, I don't say to my wife, I'm going on the power grid. now. I say, I'm going to toast this bread. Now once you have appliances that are named in relationship to the task they perform the background context that enables them to exist like the power grid disappears. I saw that happening with the internet. So I said, the kids are going to be socialized by and assimilated into the internet. This was a while ago, socialized by the world that is coming to be and they aren't going to talk about the internet. And they don't because they're always on the internet. The internet is everywhere. They don't say I'm going on the internet, but it wasn't long ago that old people like you guys and me, we said I'm gonna go online. I'm getting on the internet. A lot of young people don't know any kind of life that's off the internet and they don't see what's going on behind the scenes. They don't see the code. They don't see the manipulation.

Cyndi Gula: [00:26:31] And the code and the manipulation and the language that we all use again, cyber, what is cyber? And then, cybersecurity. So even when we say cybersecurity to kids, I think that I don't think they have an idea of what in totality we're talking about or why it's important because we don't say the why.

Richard Thieme: [00:26:54] I think you're right. And part of that is values have fundamentally shifted. I remember being asked by college professors in Milwaukee, all in their fifties professors, who were upset about plagiarism. And I said, don't you understand? There's no plagiarism, there's cut and paste.

Ron Gula: [00:27:09] [laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:27:09] Plagiarism is when documented material is falsified as if it's your own, but when it's flowing in and out of your brain all the time and there's no documentation, I know people are trying, but part of the problem we're having with meme warfare, memetic warfare is people can't distinguish between something that's viral and something that's true.

Cyndi Gula: [00:27:32] Yeah.

Richard Thieme: [00:27:32] I had professors tell me that their students don't know. And in terms of literature, some young people think a novel is a book. They don't know it's a work of fiction and that there is a category called nonfiction,

[Ron Gula: [00:27:47] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:27:47] And this is mind-boggling for an old man. And yet I go back to the first Islands in the Clickstream column that I wrote is in response to a professional engineer magazine in Wisconsin. And they said, people are asking us about cyberspace. They want to know what is this thing called cyberspace. So I wrote that column. They said, oh, they loved that. Do another. Pretty soon those columns became my first book and it was published when I was 60 years old and here at 77, I just published my seventh book. So the lesson there is the world is still a playground and you have no idea what's coming. If you just don't ever quit and manifest hacker mentality, radical curiosity, a refusal to let somebody who builds the machine encapsulate you in it, look at the machine and say, all right, this is what they want it to do. But look at what I can make it do." That's fun. And all the boundaries have gone down, geopolitical structures all the way down to individuals and I did a talk called when privacy goes poof, why it's gone and never coming back. The notion of privacy makes you an individual, and that was an 18th century term, people don't realize that individual rights didn't exist. Individuals didn't exist. You look at Shakespeare's plays. He used the word Individual, but it meant a unitary thing. It didn't mean a person. It was only after the Renaissance and the reformation and the printing press objectified text, and therefore psyches that could be projected out there as if they had an external reality that individuals came to mean what we think of when I say you're an individual. That's gone because other people using even data mining and AI now know you better than you can ever know yourself, because they see the depth of your activity, the complexity of your patterns, things that you don't even imagine. That's why you're back here, seeing yourself in your head as if you're a 20th century self. And that died in the 20th century, You're an aggregate of a whole bunch of behaviors and identity is a function therefore not of assertion, who you say you are, but observation - let's watch people and see what they do. And that's how we know who or what they are.

Cyndi Gula: [00:30:02] [crosstalk 00:34:04]

Richard Thieme: [00:30:03] AI is gonna take that to the moon.

Cyndi Gula: [00:30:05] Yeah

[Richard Thieme: [00:30:05] crosstalk 00:34:08] The Chinese are already on the dark side.

[Cyndi Gula: [00:30:07] laughs] and that gets down to the data. At the end of the day, if we can get people to understand it's about the data and not this spooky cyberspace and that type of thing, and we can get people to care about their data and a data care kinda mentality. And we start speaking to the right level and making it personal. I think that's when we will actually capture their imaginations and get them to realize they're not outside the game, they are the game. '

Richard Thieme: [00:30:32] it takes as you said being gored yourself. More and more people I know say, oh, I don't know who that email is from, I don't click on it. I don't click on that link. And somebody who's an expert like yourself can say why don't you look at the headers? Why don't you look at the metadata? Because there is somebody for whom that spam, that you're deleting, is intended. And when they get it, they can go to the other data buried in the steganography or whatever and get the message that is meant for them. Somebody was just telling me about a real piece of work. They identified spammers in relationship to terrorism, which the spammers were serving. And it's a terrific story, really, but I can't go into all the details, but at the end, somebody said, is this group, that you located in Vegas in some storefront. are they still doing this? And my friend said, no, they're not because they're all dead. And he said, I don't miss one wink of sleep, knowing that. So this is where it comes home to roost for people who play this game at a higher level. It's not just a game. there are people actively trying to bring us down and we have to fight fire with fire. And that's where the grayness comes in. You have to use the tools and techniques available to Mobius. Ron, finish Mobius.

Cyndi Gula: [00:32:05] [laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:32:05] Mobius is as true as can be

Ron Gula: [00:32:08] Just for our viewers. I'm about halfway through it and it's excellent, but this is a good segue. So you, one of the things you like to talk about is that the only way to tell truth is in fiction, dynamics of life and the national security state, and I think that was really your impetus to write Mobius, right? Tell the least false thing.

Richard Thieme: [00:32:25] Yeah.

Ron Gula: [00:32:25] ... in, in the story. So what happened there? How did that come to be?

Richard Thieme: [00:32:27] That's a good question. the phrase, the least untruthful thing, came out of Clapper. Clapper was before Congress and said, I told them the least untruthful thing I could say. I said, normal people think that's what we call a lie. That is you told something that wasn't true. He said, no, it was the least..." claiming that there are gradations of truth. The bottom line is really a simple arc and a simple trajectory. I became very close to a lot of people. We shared our understanding of what it was that we were mutually doing. Some of the work was for different agencies. Some said to me, there's something you could do. and I always gladly did it because I'm a good patriot. [laughs]. But also it was just very interesting. And in one case I was invited after 9/11 to co-lead a conversation about how ethics had been transformed by an executive order EO 12333. Things that were illegal are no longer illegal, things that were unconstitutional, were no longer unconstitutional, rewrite the laws, get the courts to approve the new understanding of them. And one of my friends said, if you were in the director's office, when they read that executive order, the silence was so thick you could cut it with a knife, because we said, we're senior people. We can't do that. And the director said, when we get an order from the commander-in-chief we salute, that's what we do. And it's not just Bush who issued that order. Obama is more Bush than Bush. It's the dynamics inevitably determined by the nature of cyber

itself. This is. what we have to do so, is there a way to frame an ethical stance? if the word ethical means anything at all? and a group of senior people decided to meet to discuss that and generate a report that would go into one of the agencies that hopefully would do some good. And it took a couple years to do that, and I was invited to co-lead that group. So at one point a senior person said to me, you can't ever discuss what we talk about in here, unless you start writing fiction, fiction is now the only way you can tell the truth. That was true on a number of levels. For one thing, as a student and teacher of literature. I think literature is the truest way you can say anything, because it does justice to the complexity and depth of our experience and the subtlety of it. But also he was right on a different score. I'm not going to betray my friends. You, don't right? the closer you get to a cadre of people, the more you excuse whatever devious, evil things they do, because, oh, that's my friend, and he's a good guy. Yeah, he killed somebody, but you had to know the circumstances.

[Ron Gula: [00:35:07] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:35:07] So it became true, but I also discovered that it was true, that fiction was the only way to tell the truth given the nature of blowback and the way information transited from place to place, which was why boundaries were going down, because they couldn't keep out information and information is the sea in which we we all swim now. So fiction has become the way society tells the truth to itself. And the talk of that name uses plenty of examples. And Professor Timothy Melley wrote a great book on this subject to show that it's now normative for our society to use fiction, for example, Justice Scalia justifying torture by invoking the TV show 24, saying nobody's gonna come back on that guy for kneecapping a terrorist if he's gonna stop a bomb. There's no bomb. There never is gonna be a bomb, but people use that to justify torture. And that's what Ollie North said, do you think anybody's gonna wanna prosecute me? Where's the next microphone so I can do a talk show.

Ron Gula: [00:36:08] That's great. So there's a lotta stuff that's been, that you kinda wove into Mobius. So you've got a couple different things we can riff on here. So one is co-opting of the media, [crosstalk 00:41:20]

Richard Thieme: [00:36:17] Yep.

Ron Gula: [00:36:17] ...people in the media suppress stories or enhance stories. Just this cost of layers and layers of deception.

Richard Thieme: [00:36:23] True.

Ron Gula: [00:36:23] There's a scene where an airline pilot, I don't wanna give 'em all away, but an airline pilot sees like a facility being built in a mountain and then the next flight over. It's not there. So, these are things I'm guessing you didn't make up.

Richard Thieme: [00:36:35] Nothing,

Ron Gula: [00:36:36] Yep.

Richard Thieme: [00:36:37] nothing. Almost nothing I should say because it's fiction, close to damn near nothing is made up in Mobius. That came from an airline pilot. He was trying to figure out why he flew down along the front and saw them building a road into the mountain out in the middle of nowhere. And next time he came back, you couldn't see it. And then somebody else, see - 28 years of doing this, I have keynoted security conferences in 15 countries, I have lots of wonderful friends,

colleagues and comrades and 28 years of conversation - so when somebody else told me that they were part of the Glomar Explorer operation to try to retrieve the Soviet submarine that sank in the Pacific and they created a cover story of we're looking for manganese nodules, then I said, tell me about that, and he said, I was the head of this part of the thing, and we would get on a plane with blacked out windows and fly to a place and get into an elevator and went down down, and then we had our meetings and they're, just as Mobius says, very nice facilities, Coke machines, and then we came up and everybody went back to where they came from, and we're told not to look at anybody else and the meeting never happened. And there were no notes or minutes and there never are. So you don't even need to classify it. A lot of important things are just said. And omerta is the guideline, So my friend had to leave the program shortly before the culmination of it and he went to someone on his team and said, what were you able to do? And the other guy said, I'm sorry, you're not read in anymore. But I headed the goddamn team. Other guy says, doesn't matter. You'll have to wait for declassification like everybody else.

Ron Gula: [00:38:20] Do you think the compartmentalization, that's such a great tool for keeping secrets...

Richard Thieme: [00:38:25] Yep.

Ron Gula: [00:38:25] I don't think civilian industry has really adopted that yet. but as civilian's we're not there, but that also is one of the contributors of stress, right? Not knowing what happened, not knowing the outcomes, not being able to share with other humans.

Richard Thieme: [00:38:39] Absolutely. And even people in the game, you sound like in Goodfellas. You say, Hey, you know that guy? Who, that guy? No not that guy. The other guy, you know, the guy. Oh, that guy. Yeah. I know that guy. You learn a coded way of conversation. But everybody ultimately knows in the conversation what you're talking about if you share the connotation or the denotation you're using to try to talk about it, but it creates cognitive dissonance. It really does. You have to live with a high level of dissonance and handle ambiguity and complexity at a level that most people don't want. And that's why often people get up in one of my speeches, and say, I don't wanna know that, I don't wanna live in your world. I say you live in it, whether you wanna know about it or not, this is the world. When Ellsberg was briefing Henry Kissinger on higher clearances, he was gonna get SCI clearances, Ellsberg said, Henry, you need to know that the trauma that is gonna come once you get clearances, is that nothing you have believed is true. You have read the New York Times and the Washington Post the Wall Street Journal, and they don't know. They can't know. And they don't know. And you're gonna find out that you interacted with an awful lot of people who knew and never told you. And for a long time, you're not gonna think it's worthwhile to talk to anybody without clearances, but that's a dead end because in a few years, you'll find out you're excluding a vast ocean of information. And now I think it's becoming a truism, that open source intelligence, given the abilities we all have to be investigative journalist, spies, whatever, open source intelligence and AI to mine it, is generating so much intelligence, so much actionable intelligence and real understanding of people, which as you said before, is what we want out of intelligence. You don't just want to know stuff. You wanna know the intention of the person you're trying to map and you are trying to map everybody, and that's a true story in Mobius too. When a liaison with the Brits said in the director's office we oughta take special care with the Brits. They're our friends and our allies and the deputy director of SIGINT said, excuse me, we have no friends. We have no allies. We only have targets. It's all we have. The French and the Germans will squeal and say, oh God, you hacked our premier... Duh, everybody is doing that to everybody, spy versus spy.

Cyndi Gula: [00:41:07] And then it takes a look back at a time and information becomes revealed that was hidden before, that really starts solidifying and opening our eyes. And specifically, one of the things that I love talking to you about is all the history and activity of the UFO and the government. And, here we were part of a conversation and somebody said, it's no problem to realize that the government lied to us about UFOs back in the 40s and 50s. But, to think that the government is lying to us today about the pandemic or COVID or politics seems still to be a barrier by certain people. So it's an interesting dynamic.

Richard Thieme: [00:41:48] Yeah.

Cyndi Gula: [00:41:49] ...that people are so easy on one side to believe that we don't know the truth yet on the other we're only being told. the truth.

Richard Thieme: [00:41:58] And one of the things where I just kinda get my brain caught in the gears, and then it just spins is when I say I think these people are crazy, how can they be so stupid as to distrust the government? I gotta look at what I've written and what I speak about. And if you're not distrusting the government, you're crazy. So you have to live with both worlds at the same time simultaneously and hold them both in your head at the same time. I'm doing a sequel to Mobius. The full title of the current book we're discussing, for those who are listening, is Mobius: a Memoir. It's the story of an intelligence professional looking back at his career and how it took him where he didn't think he would go. And I'm proud to say that people from behind a number of fences have just been over the top in the kind of reviews they're giving this for it's verisimilitude. And now I'm doing a sequel to Mobius And it's going to explore corporate corruption. I live in Minneapolis, which happens to be the headquarters of a large medical device manufacturer. Start looking at them and look at how the government, all the governments globally, which I'm getting quite familiar with, give passes or buys to stuff that's killing people.

Ron Gula: [00:43:12] there's some really good comments on reviews for the book. This is Richard Thieme's best work to date. This book is intense. Read it. If you wanna learn the inner thoughts of a spy, Richard Thieme's Mobius is written on at least three levels of rhetoric, it's just really good comments. but one of the things that comes outta Mobius is the fact that there is no one government. So if we're talking about trusting the government, ...people always feel like how come they didn't know, I called my local state police? How does the NSA not know?

Richard Thieme: [00:43:35] Crosstalk 00:49:29] a lot of people don't know and don't know that they don't know or what they don't know. And it's really uncomfortable to not know but know that you don't know. And so you make it up. And here you have conspiracy theories because we wanna connect the dots. And we see a very few dots. and we say, oh, it's a bear in the sky. No, it might be a lion. might be a goat or a sheep. Whatever it is, we prematurely connect the dots. Cause our pattern matching, pattern making minds want to connect dots and understand what we're seeing. And I talked to a wonderful profiler at CIA once who gave me a complete description of how she has to prevent herself from reaching conclusions too soon. And what kind of safeguards she has to constantly build in because your brain will leap to conclusions that are very often incorrect, premature at any rate. And she really knew what she was talking about. She was given a great award medal in the director's office at CIA. He came in the office, he gave it to her and said, this was really a good job. She said, thank you. And then he took it back. So she can't tell anybody [laughs] why she got the medal or keep the medal but there was a moment of medal touching. And a lot of us have moments of medal touching, right? And that's a lot of what my work has been about. But after 25 years of listening to people I confronted not only what it did to professionals but what it was doing to me. And that goes all the way back to when I was learning

about the torture we were doing. I was trying to get medical experts to look at what we were doing because it violated an awful lot of things. including laws. Nobody would touch it. I went to the chief ethicist at the AMA, who I knew at the time in Chicago and he said, that's not our problem. We don't bother with that. So I went to a woman who headed a committee at the medical college and she said, you really need to read these books on trauma. So I did. And next time I saw her she said, do you know why I told you to read them? And I said, sure. Cause I'm talking to people who both tortured and were tortured, who were traumatized and it wasn't in the news yet. And she said, yeah, can you think of another reason I wanted you to read it? And I said, no, 'cause denial is our best friend. And if we knew we were in denial, we wouldn't be in denial 'cause we'd know that about which we were in denial. and we don't. So she said, you're traumatized. You're showing all the symptoms of secondary trauma by having these conversations with people. So the narrative that poured out into Mobius took only four months to write the first draft. Then I did a lot of editing 'cause I wanted it just right. but it just poured out, 25 years of assimilating emotions, some profoundly impactful. The phone rings at 10:00 at night, just like in the ministry. And somebody says, you got a minute and an hour later, he says, what should I do? And I said, you know what to do, but my job is not to tell you what to do. All I can do is illuminate the options. And you've gotta make the choice about what you're gonna do. It was a life and death decision he'd been asked to do on behalf of a particular group. Then I get off the phone and my wife says, you look like you've seen a ghost. What was that about? And I say, oh, nothing. Just like everybody in the trade learns to say, no, it's no big deal, It's..." but it has an impact over time. So Mobius c'est moi as Flaubert said of Madame Bovary. Madame Bovary c'est moi, Mobius is me. It's my psyche. And it's spliced with a million points of data that friends and colleagues have shared with me over the last quarter century. And I hope I did justice to the complexity of the situation in which people find themselves because the truth is, Mobius arrives at a certain point, but he loves his work and he loves the elite status. He said there's no high, like secrets

Ron Gula: [00:47:38] So when is Mobius Two going to be available.

Richard Thieme: [00:47:41] I just started, it'll be a while. I dunno. What a creative person does is start hearing the voices in their head from other rooms. You thought you shut off that room in the mansion, but suddenly if you don't pay attention to those voices, they become haunted and pretty soon at night, they're scratching at the window and they're in the basement. And you're waking up in the middle of the night.

Cyndi Gula: [00:48:02] Maybe you should just write shorter poetry. It sounds like you've got an Edgar Allan Poe streak going there with the scratching and the other things, maybe just short little poetry.

Richard Thieme: [00:48:11] That's my life.

[Cyndi Gula: [00:48:12] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:48:13] That's my psyche.

Ron Gula: [00:48:15] Anybody offered to buy the book rights yet.

Richard Thieme: [00:48:18] Pardon me?

Ron Gula: [00:48:19] Anybody offered to buy the book rights for Mobius yet?

Richard Thieme: [00:48:21] Oh, you mean the movie rights?

Ron Gula: [00:48:22] Yeah,

Cyndi Gula: [00:48:22] Movie.

Richard Thieme: [00:48:23] that's a whole other story. Few know what it takes to get published when a publisher will not speak to you and an agent will not speak to you and then you're disparaged for quote self-publishing, it's not a vanity press, no publisher will speak to an author period. They'll only speak to agents and the agents, I was able to contact maybe 10% of the couple of hundred I could locate, young women straight from an MFA. Very well-intentioned, who say, I'm just building a list. Truthfully Ron, they didn't know what the hell Mobius was about. It's way beyond their pay grade of understanding of life. But they never got that far. They just didn't know what to do with it. It's like when Barnes and Noble said you could do a reading for us, what's your niche for the book? And I said it's for people who like to think deeply about things. No. they said, is it for young males, 18 to 25? for soccer moms? I said it's for young males who like to think deeply about things. It's for soccer moms who like to think deeply about things.

[Ron Gula: [00:49:30] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:49:31] They said, we don't have a category for thinking deeply about things. We don't have that demographic on our spreadsheet. And so somebody like me who has always been true to his vision and worked in accordance with it from the inside out and noticed and paid attention to what other people were saying but didn't let it determine my life, is on my own. The evidence is in. I've been a, self-actualizing kinda human for 77 years and I hope I don't stop for another 77. If we can get to work on telomeres, and stop my telomeres from shortening.

Ron Gula: [00:50:06] I believe you, when you say that Mobius is not you, but the person on the cover, I'm sure if I got a picture of you from maybe, I dunno, your 20s or 30s it would look a little bit like that person. on the cover.

Richard Thieme: [00:50:17] Yeah, a dear friend came out of the woodwork to make this book look as good as it did. That was my friend Harvey Tillis who's a photographer. We met in sixth grade and we've been friends ever since. And I said, you got anything I could use for a cover?" we worked and worked on it. I said, this guy is perfect. So we found a rainy corner in Chicago and we found that guy. And then he put in those eyes, Which are obviously my eyes,

[Ron Gula: [00:50:42] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:50:42] ...because Mobius is always confronting people with that question. There are several people who have known me for years who wondered afterward, who are you?

[Cyndi Gula: [00:50:51] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:50:51] What have you been doing? Of course, nobody knows what anybody else has been doing.

Cyndi Gula: [00:50:55] So on that too, other people have been writing science fiction and this is a cyber fiction show.

Richard Thieme: [00:51:01] Yeah.

Cyndi Gula: [00:51:01] What other science fiction things have been influential?

Ron Gula: [00:51:05] What kinda things influence you?

Richard Thieme: [00:51:06] It's usually not science fiction. I was on a podcast the other day, Pop Locke, and they're well into popular culture. And I said, look, the movies opening at the AMC across the street a're all cartoons and comic books. And they're offended, cause they're not comic books they're graphic novels .They're not cartoons they're anime. But really,. it's cartoons and comic books. There's not a movie there for a mature adult. Like the great '70s movies that they wouldn't make. That podcast is about The Conversation, the movie, The Conversation, and they wouldn't make it today. They wouldn't make Chinatown, they wouldn't make The Parallax View. They wouldn't touch that stuff now. So I find what's on the shelf. Under science fiction is mostly fantasy. It's serialized because those who make Kindles found that as soon as you finish one segment, you click and buy the next. And that's why you're getting so many three, four, five, six episode novelizations cranked out. I used to read science fiction all the time when I was a kid, Clifford D Simak, Heinlein, Asimov, people like that. But a lot of young people don't even know who those people are, they're reading Game of Thrones and George rR. R.Martin stuff . Even good technology novels splice two things. They have really good, is it Suarez who writes those great novels - the technology in them is really informative, but then they're trying to write a novel and they don't know how to write a novel. They don't know how to create real people. So the literature part, the prose part and the vehicle for disseminating data about technology are separate. And so I usually skip through the dialogues which are wooden to get the technology that they're trying to impart. I read great deal of diverse subjects. Because of UFOs I've been exploring that we haven't talked about much, I read a lot in cosmology and astronomy. I do an awful lot of reading in physics, but it's physics without the math, there's some people who are really good at explaining to people like me who can't do the math - and who can, who can do quantum physics at that level? Very few people. And then they can't talk to the rest of us.

[Ron Gula: [00:53:25] laughs]

Richard Thieme: [00:53:25] So I read an extraordinary diversity of stuff. Like Peter Singer, after I found him, I read everything he wrote. I do that with a lotta people and I have guilty pleasures like James Lee, Burke. I think his prose and invocation of Louisiana is the best, some of the best I've seen, but it's formulaic and he just keeps kinda repeating, but I've read all 27 of his novels because some of it is so beautiful. And I go back again and again to things I loved that I taught in literature that nobody reads. I reread Ulysses I read Scott Fitzgerald I even read some Hemingway short stories like Big Two-Hearted River, I read Robert Frost, I love good old poetry like Wordsworth or Eliot's Four Quartets or Yeats, things that were foundational for me in thinking, this is how these works are to be written. and a lotta people don't know who these old dead white guys are anymore.

Ron Gula: [00:54:17] Before they're all banned at least. Right.

Richard Thieme: [00:54:19] Yeah. Yeah.

[Ron Gula: [00:54:20] laughs]

Cyndi Gula: [00:54:20] [crosstalk 01:01:34]

Richard Thieme: [00:54:21] I would love to have Mobius attacked.

Ron Gula: [00:54:24] Maybe We can make that happen. We'll see. [laughs].

Richard Thieme: [00:54:26] Yeah, Do something controversial with Mobius.

Cyndi Gula: [00:54:28] Our camera just went off.

Richard Thieme: [00:54:30] did you just disappear on me?

Cyndi Gula: [00:54:31] Yeah. Our camera, for some reason just went off.

Richard Thieme: [00:54:34] I see we're probably at the time where we probably you want to end.

Ron Gula: [00:54:36] Here we go.

Cyndi Gula: [00:54:36] [laughs] I think there are other powers that have been telling us.

Ron Gula: [00:54:38] We're gonna do plan B here.

Cyndi Gula: [00:54:40] ... perhaps we should [crosstalk 01:01:57]

Richard Thieme: [00:54:41] they didn't want me to tell.

Cyndi Gula: [00:54:43] [laughs]

Ron Gula: [00:54:43] that's right. I was gonna ask you where the secret alien Kennedy tapes where Elvis's brain and, the clone Hitler and all that kinda stuff is at, but Richard let's just close out with how can people find you if they want you to come and speak? Are you speaking yet? Let's just close out with, how people can find you.

Richard Thieme: [00:54:59] Yeah. I was supposed to be in Vegas today, but my prerecorded talk for Def Con is being streamed on Friday on UFOs, which they requested. I'm supposed to go to CornCon and speak and a North Carolina conference on teaching cyber education. Those are supposed to be in September, but life today means you wait and see if those things really happen or you can do 'em on zoom. Done a lotta speaking on zoom. The best place to find me is my website. Thiemeworks, T-H-I-E-M-E-W-O-R-K-S dot com. Got 50 speeches or so up there. Everything new goes up there. The books are up there. I believe it's a well-done... we just revamped the whole damn thing. It took months, of course, but I hadn't done it for 20 years. It was a little out of date.

Ron Gula: [00:55:45] There's a lotta gems on there. Like you interviewed the astronaut Edgar Mitchell about UFOs and goin' to the moon. And I'll just give that as a thing people can go find on your website to get 'em over there.

Richard Thieme: [00:55:56] that and Joe McMoneagle, the remote viewer. those are two of my very favorite interviews. McMoneagle and remote viewing and what it taught him about the universe. Even if you don't believe it it's mind-stretching in the right directions. It's good. stuff.

Ron Gula: [00:56:10] That's awesome. Richard all our best to you. Congratulations on Mobius. We're looking forward to Mobius Two And the movie that's gonna be coming out. On HBO.

Richard Thieme: [00:56:18] Talk to your friends in Hollywood. tell them, I mean.

Cyndi Gula: [00:56:21] laughs

Richard Thieme: [00:56:21] ... they're the comic book makers, tell them.

Cyndi Gula: [00:56:23] I know. Graphic novels. I mean,

Ron Gula: [00:56:28] That's awesome.

Richard Thieme: [00:56:28] ...It's a privilege to talk to you guys, to have a privileged hour with the two of you who are luminaries in the field. And to so remove yourselves from the foreground in order to draw out other people on this podcast is a gift and a kind of humility that is not always in evidence and you're doing wonderful work with your foundation. People don't know where to begin to say thank you for all the people you're helping. So this is a privilege and thank you so much.

Cyndi Gula: [00:56:55] It's our privilege. We're blessed to know people like you, and we really do want people to share their stories because it is just amazing background work. And just always blows my mind with how we got where we are.

Cyndi Gula: [00:57:09] ...and where we're going. We're looking forward to what's goin' on in the future.

Richard Thieme: [00:57:13] Me too. And I guess your next podcast will start any minute,

[Cyndi Gula: [00:57:16] laughs]

Ron Gula: [00:57:16] that's right. All righty. Thank you, Richard. This is Ron and Cyndi Gula signing off with another episode of the Gula tech cyber fiction show.