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The aerobic art of interviewing

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Abstract

Michelangelo believed that a piece of marble already contained a work of art – his role was to liberate what was inherent. But the majesty, grace and beauty he saw in the stone that became David remained invisible to sculptors who had previously tackled it. In a similar way, the interview can be all or nothing to writers, journalists and oral historians. A person sits across a table, with stories to tell, ideas to impart, facts to confirm or deny, perhaps a lifetime of emotions to convey – but our ability to perceive who is before us, and to engage with what we are hearing, will critically affect what ensues

The aerobic art of interviewing

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Michelangelo believed that a piece of marble already contained a work of art – his role was to liberate what was inherent. But the majesty, grace and beauty he saw in the stone that became David remained invisible to sculptors who had previously tackled it. In a similar way, the interview can be all or nothing to writers, journalists and oral historians. A person sits across a table, with stories to tell, ideas to impart, facts to confirm or deny, perhaps a lifetime of emotions to convey – but our ability to perceive who is before us, and to engage with what we are hearing, will critically affect what ensues.

I once interviewed a man who worked down a coalmine outside Sydney, shovelling shit – the human alternative to a Portaloo. A beefy bloke in regulation singlet and stubbies, he spoke matter-of-factly about hanging around deep underground, waiting for his mates to have a crap. I asked him what he did to pass the time. He pulled a delicate piece of white crochet out of a pocket, pointing out the intricate patterns with the enthusiasm of a mother expounding the charms of her children. I was astonished, having subconsciously written him off as Macho Man. Instead he showed me that you can transcend your circumstances. Surrounded by shit, he created beauty.

Although I have preached the need for interviewers to maintain an open mind, my own preconceptions continue to ambush me. Happily, my subliminal labelling is often subverted by the messy contradictions that are real people. The genial farmer is also an implacable racist, the bloodless lawyer reveals a passion for light opera, the ruthless media mogul retains the sadness of a wounded child. To ‘profile’ people, you have to be able to see their frailties as well as their more public strengths.

The acclaimed Italian oral historian, Alessandro Portelli (1997), describes an interview as ‘an exchange of gazes’. You, as interviewer, may be the one asking the questions, but you are also being observed, and your demeanour, tone and line of questioning will feed back into the responses. Other factors come into play – for example the setting (in the interviewee’s home or an impersonal venue, in private or before an audience) and the purpose (how was it instigated and how will it be used) – but the personalities and backgrounds of both parties shape the chemistry that can create a profound intimacy between strangers during formal interviews.

I have felt that intimacy with people far removed from me in terms of age, life experience and social and cultural background. Analysing it now, I think it comes down to simple empathy. The pain of a Cambodian woman recounting how her sons starved to death before her eyes is no different from the pain of an Aboriginal woman describing being taken from her family, or a Vietnam veteran describing the victim of a mine explosion – all incidents related to me. Likewise joy, anger, regret, pride – the feelings are universal, however different their context.

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Empathy obviates the need to like or dislike someone. You can clinically record a distasteful action by your informant, without abhorring him – judgement is withheld. Instead you seek to understand his point of view. This does not mean you let him off the hook. You still ask the hard questions, but because the informant feels you can truly hear him, you're more likely to get a real answer.

A few years ago, I stumbled across what became a documentary on Aboriginal Stolen Children in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.¹ I was introduced to several women who had been forcibly removed from their families and reared by Catholic nuns, as part of the assimilation policy of the day. Their stories of separation and loss were heart breaking, but to my surprise and even irritation, they had nothing but praise for the nuns. Didn't they realise, I thought, that they were victims of cultural appropriation, at the hands of church and state?? Confused, but still clutching my righteous anger at the religious women who inculcated indigenous girls with their white Christian beliefs, I interviewed one of the nuns. Having read of grim contemporary children's homes run by sadistic overseers, I was unprepared for her description of how the nuns and their Aboriginal charges shared limited food and resources and jointly battled isolation, poverty and the sexism and rigidity of the church hierarchy. Instead of religious doctrine, Sister Pat spoke of how she loved the girls and tried to give them education - in spite of the authorities' injunction to avoid creating 'smart blacks'.

But the elephant was still on the lawn and this is how the question came out, spoken slowly and evenly, for I was trying to avoid an accusatory tone: 'did it ever occur to you to wonder why these children were being taken from their parents?' Sister Pat paused, then said with a deep sigh. 'No. I don't think it did. Religious life didn't allow for that. We didn't have access to newspapers or the wireless. We were told they were there for education. How they got there, we didn't question.' Later, she expressed deep regret for having been part of what she described as 'a terribly wrong' policy.

The program illuminated the complexity of the situation – the indigenous women lamented the loss of their families and their culture but insisted the nuns had loved them and given them a great start in life; Sister Pat, at nineteen not much older than her charges, knew in hindsight the grave implications of what had been done, but also felt the sisters had provided a stable and nurturing environment. Had I been blinded by moral outrage and dismissed Sister Pat as an Enemy of the People, how much less would I have learned about the paradoxical reality.

Asking the Hard Question is never easy (unless you're a bully at heart, as some media interviewers seem to be), but it's particularly hard when your interviewee is scary, or famous. Harry Seidler was both. Scary not just because of his international reputation as an architect, but because of his renowned insufferance of fools and philistines – and when it came to architecture, I had zero cred. But three weeks of intense research acquainted me with the basics of the Bauhaus and, having absorbed the colourful details of his journey from Austrian refugee to Australian aesthete, I began a marathon filmed interview, commissioned by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. Curators and other staff watched as I engaged with the testy artist,

¹ *Beagle Bay – Irish Nuns and Stolen Children*, finalist, Walkley Excellence in Journalism awards, 2000. Broadcast ABC Radio National, May 2000.

his intellect still formidable at eighty-three. I had prepared thirty pages of questions and quotes, committed to memory for the day as once I crammed for exams.

The technical crew was late setting up and the great man was distinctly tetchy to start. Instinct told me to jettison chronological order. Instead I plucked a quote from Walter Gropius, his mentor, that good architecture incorporated ‘firmness, commodity and delight’ and asked him to nominate examples. He frowned. Gropius, he said, was merely rehashing the words of Vitruvius, from ancient Rome. My first question and I was two thousand years out! But I had honed in, however clumsily, on one of his passions and he was off, expounding on the solidity, minimalism and aesthetics of his favourite buildings.

Although we could not have been more ill matched, my research enabled me to bat the ball back and forth. More importantly, my curiosity and interest were real, and they fed his passion. By the time we broke to change tapes at the end of an hour, we were bonded, oblivious to the audience, locked in the exchange of gazes. Desperate to avoid a return to everyday banality while the crew moved about, I offered to tell him a real Irish joke (I come from Dublin). He winced, but I took the risk. This was no ordinary joke.

A Dublin university student goes to London to work on the building sites during the holidays. The foreman looks at his weedy frame and suspiciously pale skin. ‘You done this before?’ he asks. ‘Sure’, lies the student. ‘Okay then – what’s the difference between a girder and a joist?’ The student smiles. ‘That’s easy. Goethe wrote Faust and Joyce wrote Ulysses.’

Seidler exploded in what a watching curator said was the biggest laugh he’d ever seen him give. We resumed the interview on the warmest terms. The trouble was I now had to ask him about his *bete noire*, the infamous Blues Point Tower adjacent to the Sydney Harbour Bridge, whose plain modernist appearance had attracted much criticism and even been satirised as a brutal totalitarian condominium. Basking in our newfound connection, Seidler warbled happily to me about its proportions, its economy, and how much those who lived there loved it. That was my in. ‘But don’t you think that’s a little Marie-Antoinetteish?’ I heard myself say. ‘What about the rest of us, who are looking at it from the outside?’ (Somehow I refrained from saying what had first come into my head, who *have to* look at it from the outside – for I was no fan of BPT.) He bristled. ‘They are entitled to their opinion’, he said icily. ‘I *still* say it’s one of my finest buildings.’

Before his hauteur could escalate into hostility, I interpolated a question about *Neue Donau*, the massive social housing project he was currently building in Vienna. As I hoped, he became animated again, enthusiastically unfolding his vision for his native city. By the fourth hour, so solid was the ground beneath us that I felt able to ask him about the delicate topic of a reputed family feud. In an emotional tribute to his late brother, he explained that the ‘feud’ had never happened. When we finished, I felt as if I had seen into his soul – a humbling experience that I have had more than once during an interview.

Most of the people I’ve interviewed of course are ‘ordinary’ folk, not tall poppies. The American writer Janet Malcolm marvels at ‘the careless talk’ (1990:32) that

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interviewees let slip to journalists, their ‘childish trust and impetuosity’(1990:45). She has obviously never met a laconic Australian bushie. The most taciturn man I ever met was a retired depth sounder, whose forty years in the Public Works department had been spent swinging a lead line, the method by which river depths were gauged in the pre-digital age. His former employer was documenting the work and flew me to Jim’s home up the coast to interview him.

Jim met me at the airport – with his wife Wendy. All the way home, Wendy talked non-stop at breakneck speed, while Jim drove, steadfast and silent. I knew I had to get rid of her – but how? ‘As soon as your little interview is over’, she prattled, ‘we’ll have a barbecue.’ A strategy formed. ‘Barbecue?’ I interrupted. ‘That’s very kind, but I’m a vegetarian.’ A pause. She was shocked, but not defeated. ‘What do THEY eat?’ she asked, suspiciously. I cast about wildly for something she would not have. ‘Tofu’, I said solemnly. ‘I only eat silken tofu.’

As soon as the door shut, I sprang into action. I had maybe half an hour, I reckoned, while she trawled the hippie co-ops.

So Jim – can you tell me about your lead lining days. Firstly, what is lead lining?’

It’s uh you know, the line goes in the water and you count how long.

How long what?

How long the line is.

The whole line or part of it?

Part.

Which part?

The part in the water.

Why do you that?

What?

Count how long the part in the water is?

That’s lead lining.

But what does it tell you?

How deep the water is.

How?

How what?

How does the length of a line in the water tell you something about the depth – I need you to explain this for people who don’t know.

There’s a lot that don’t know all right.

On and on and on, fragment by tortuous fragment, it went. I focused on easier themes – daily routine (*the usual*), eating and sleeping arrangements (*camp, you know*) accidents (*had a few*) and mates (*Paddy was a character*).

Tell me about Paddy.

Oh a right character.

What did you talk about round the campfire at night?

Jeez he could talk!

Can you remember any yarns?

The things he'd say!

I moved on, without much hope, to the rivers. She'd be back any minute.

What's your favourite river of all the ones you've navigated?

Done a lot, yeh.

You mentioned the Clarence – what's that like?

King tide is good.

What would you do waiting for the king tide?

Full moon too sometimes.

We were like motorists on different sections of the freeway, passing over and under each other but never intersecting. Forty years of living with the garrulous Wendy on weekends and the enigmatic Paddy during the week seemed to have numbed Jim's instincts for communication. I would have given up, but my plane didn't leave for hours, and having so duplicitously got Wendy out of the house, I felt honour bound to continue till her return.

As always in an interview, I had been listening super-intently to every word he said. Someone once termed it 'aerobic listening'. It's certainly exhausting in the way that listening in a conversation never is. The reason you do it is because your undivided attention is part of what causes the subject to open up. Few of us are ever really listened to in daily life. People are distracted, daydreaming, or bored, and the words are only half heard. When someone REALLY listens to you, it's like a force field. With enormous effort, I searched my mind for every crumb Jim had dropped, and rolled them all into one long desperate question.

When you were out on the Clarence river, on a king tide, under a full moon, with Paddy there beside you, swinging the lead line... did you ever think about what it was all for, the people who'd been to these places before you, and the ones who would come after...

I was struggling to make a word picture that would somehow kick-start long-dormant emotions. Before I got any further, Jim sat bolt upright in his chair, hugely agitated.

Yerr, there was this little girl, she was only eight and she died of a snakebite I read it in her father's diary, he was a surveyor and he come out this way in the 1860s and he camped right where we done Paddy always knew the best spots,

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he'd been in the army see, had to get out 'cause his nerves went after the Japs got him, but he could tell how much she'd rise in a flood just by looking at the banks further down...

On and on it went, a stream-of-consciousness soliloquy about Jim and Paddy's adventures on land and water, in bushfire, drought and floods, crossing the bar at a harbour mouth or rowing up a river tributary, diligently gathering figures for the faceless men at head office.

These days, they get it to within two decimal points and they think they're bloody great – but we gave it forty years and we done a bloody good job.

He sat back, exhausted. I felt drained too, by his passion. We heard a key in the door – and into the scene waltzed Wendy, bearing a dripping packet of tofu. She stopped and almost sniffed. The current between Jim and me was still crackling. Eating near-mouldy tofu while they tucked into steaks seemed a small price to pay. As I left, Jim gave me a sweet childlike smile that made my heart sing.

When I told that story to my students, one, a psychologist, ventured an explanation. 'When you fed him back that word-picture, it was confirmation that you had heard him – obviously a rare thing – and it enabled him to access those buried memories. He felt validated enough to allow them out.'

I don't know if that's what happened. It sounds as plausible as anything else. But ever since then I have believed that there is passion in every one of us. It might seem unlikely on the surface, and it might take a lot of time and effort to tap into – but it's there.

Sometimes the problem is not getting the person to talk, but understanding what you're hearing. Dissemblers will feed you misinformation, in an attempt to distract or confuse you. When I was researching the Australian cotton industry, (McHugh1996) one of my final interviews was with a spokesperson for the cotton growers' body, the Australian Cotton Foundation. For two years, I had been accumulating evidence about the use of toxic chemicals in the industry. I had heard from residents in cotton country how impenetrably scientific the spokesman's answers were. I had in another life obtained a B.Sc, so I wasn't afraid of the lingo. But the volume of data was huge, and I knew I had to retain it mentally in order to pick up instantly on any telling admissions.

I asked him first about a well-documented incident near Moree, in north-west New South Wales, in 1991. A team of chippers was hoeing weeds when a plane started spraying in an adjacent field. Soon a chipper smelt 'something like fly spray', and her eyes began to sting. The chemical from the plane was evidently being blown onto them by the wind. The foreman radioed the news to the pilot and asked him to stop, but he did not. By the next morning, most of the chippers had experienced headaches, sore eyes and throats, and coughs – symptoms consistent with having been exposed to endosulfan, the active ingredient in the spray. A government Agricultural Health Unit fortuitously in the area examined sixteen workers and filed a report. The case went to court – and despite the fact that the magistrate observed that there was no doubt that he 'deliberately sprayed pesticide' onto fields where he was

aware the chippers were working, the pilot walked away scot-free. This was because the woefully inept legislation required the workers to prove that he had not only deliberately sprayed them, but also 'wilfully' caused a risk of injury by a pesticide.

Nonetheless the case was embarrassing for the industry. The spokesman opposite me now played it down, stating that 'none of those people, until the symptoms were described to them, exhibited any symptoms.' In fact, as I knew from reading the report, the Aghealth doctor took pains to point out that the chippers were interviewed in such a way as to eliminate any form of autosuggestion.

When he added that the pesticide used was 'a cholinesterase inhibitor', my antennae moved up a notch. (Cholinesterase is an enzyme whose blood level can indicate exposure to certain chemicals.) 'When they tested the people', he said, 'there was no depression of cholinesterase... now that is a direct link of exposure. That is one of the reasons the case was dismissed.'

From my reading, I knew two things. First, the chemical in question, endosulfan, was an organochlorine – a type that did not respond to cholinesterase. So to imply that the lack of depression of cholinesterase meant there had been no exposure to endosulfan was nonsense. Cholinesterase worked on totally different pesticides, like organophosphates.

Secondly, the case had not been dismissed on those grounds, but on the interpretation of the word 'wilfully'.

When I pointed out these discrepancies, he blanched. My mild manner and heavily pregnant state had perhaps led him to underestimate my understanding of the issues – on which I grilled him for the next ninety minutes, in what was one of the most satisfying interviews of my life.. After the book came out, the laws on aerial spraying changed for the better.

Misinformation is not always deliberate. Sometimes people will, in good faith, tell you something you know to be untrue. Critics of oral history often cite these factual aberrations as proof of the unreliability of personal testimony – but in fact, these 'errors', which Alessandro Portelli (1991) has termed 'wrong narrative', can be instructive. For example, when Portelli interviewed workers in the Italian town of Terni about the killing of a factory worker called Luigi Trastulli, the informants sometimes transposed the date and manner of the killing. But these 'mistakes' were significant. The date given related to another, key, battle in the ongoing fight between the workers and the Fascists, and the manner of Trastulli's death, often described as shot against a wall, arms extended, was permeated with strong cultural motifs, from the Crucifixion to the execution of partisans in the area a few years before. Analysing the changed 'facts', Portelli (1991:45-8) surmised much about the political environment of the day, and how it had changed in the interim, causing the informants to subconsciously alter their view of what had happened.

I had a similar experience of 'wrong narrative' when gathering interviews from workers who built the tunnels of the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme (McHugh 1995). Person after person mentioned that men had died while concrete lining the tunnels and their bodies had been entombed in the rock. No one could offer me the full names of the supposed victims and the locality and time of the supposed entombings varied. Yet the story persisted so strongly I felt it had to mean something.

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Through the picture I built up of the dangerous nature of the concreting, the hegemony of the crew, and the key role played by migrants who were often desperate and vulnerable, I surmised that what was real was the *fear* the miners had of being told to go behind the forms and do the dangerous task of concrete lining, which could indeed be life-threatening; and that the migrants at the bottom of the pecking order were most likely to do such work – Australians I interviewed had quit the job rather than comply.

I examined 112 inquests into men who died in the construction. None described someone dying while concrete lining a tunnel - but in one horrific accident concrete lining a dam shaft, three men, all migrants, were pinned under collapsed formwork. Their workmates had only two hours in which to get them out before the concrete set. The three men could not be freed and died at the bottom of the shaft – effectively buried alive in concrete, as the ‘myth’ had held.

It was mostly Italians who undertook the concreting – an image that brings me back to Michelangelo. In the Accademia Gallery in Florence, where his magnificent David stands, several of his unfinished sculptures are also exhibited. These striking, semi-sculpted figures are entitled ‘Prisoners’ – still captive in the stone, powerful with potential. Of the act of liberation that was his sculpting, Michelangelo wrote:

The great artist has no concept
what a marble may have confined
within its depths; that can be divined
only by the hand subject to the intellect (Falletti 2002:54)

Perhaps it is not too fanciful to imagine the best interviewing as an art, whose purpose is to reveal the full humanity and depth of the person before us – depths that can be divined only by the heart subject to the intellect.

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