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Welcome to Media Masters, a series one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Decca Aitkenhead, the award-winning chief interviewer for the Sunday Times. Over a career spanning decades, she's interviewed everyone from Hillary Clinton and Russell Brand, to Debbie Harry and Nicola Sturgeon. Most recently, she entertained readers with a revelatory encounter with Tony Blair. Her brilliant writing and perceptive style was recognized as Interview of the Year the 2019 British Journalism Awards. Decca has also written with brutal honesty in All At Sea, her acclaimed memoir about devastating events in her personal life, including a cancer diagnosis and the death of a partner, Tony Wilkinson, who drowned after rescuing their son. Decca, thank you for joining me.

It's a pleasure to be here, Paul. Thank you.

So as an interviewer who thrives on direct access to your subjects, how difficult has lockdown been for you personally?

Well, the difficulty in the beginning was simply nobody wanted to give an interview for kind of obvious reasons really. Generally speaking, people give an interview and they have something to promote, and obviously nobody had a new film, a new show, a new anything coming out. And the few people who did, not unreasonably were paranoid about sounding tone deaf and looking narcissistic And self-involved at the time of a global pandemic, so they didn't want say anything either. And then, of course, you have a third category of people that had lots to say about the pandemic and wanted to, but at some point in the future, they would be having something that they would want to sell and promote and to give an interview about. And they calculated quite correctly that if they were to give an interview now, if in six months time they did have something coming out that they wanted to promote, we'd be saying, "Oh, we're awfully sorry. We had you in the magazine six months ago." So between those three categories of people, it didn't really leave very much left to do, so we had a quite difficult time. And I did slightly wonder when the world was going to start to turn again. But thankfully, it has done now and it feels more or less 80% back to normal, I would say.

Well, if you're ever short of someone really interesting and charismatic to interview, I've told you many times that I'm available.

I may well be taking you up on that, Paul.

Now, fortunately we did get you're in depth encounter with Tony Blair, one of my heroes. His reluctance to do his share of the housework though became a bit of national debate.

Isn't it fascinating with these things? Tony Blair was obviously a huge political Titan, not just on the British stage, but on the world stage for many, many years, and people have incredibly strong opinions about him. And I thought long and hard before I went to interview him about what to do because given free reign, he will generally want to kind of deliver political lectures and analysis of world events, which is quite interesting to people who are interested in that kind of thing, but not massively interesting into the general population, and particularly not in the midst of lockdown and a global pandemic. One of the interesting things about going to interview Tony Blair is he's one of the very, very few people who've sat in a room for a two hour print interview for a magazine more times than I have now. I do this day in day out, week in, week out. Most people do it once or twice a year, even if they're the top of their game. So I was very well aware that he has a huge box of tricks to kind of deflect questions and to appear to engage and to not look as if he's dodging questions, but without actually telling anybody anything that they want. So I did go home with a very specific plan to ask very precise questions. And I was, of course, being nosy, curious about how they'll coped during lockdown. But I knew that if I sort of said, "How's it been?" He have said, "It's been fine." If I said, "How have you coped without the staff?" He would say, precisely as he did, "Oh, well we just mucked in and did the housework ourselves." So I thought very hard about very specific questions, like, "Have you ever any point during lockdown push a load of laundry into the machine and press the button?" Because that's a very difficult question to fudge. You either have say yes or no.

You can't flabble that one.

You can't really. You can't kind of brush that sort of stuff. So I did spend quite a lot of time thinking about those very precise, specific questions. What I hadn't anticipated at all was, A, that he would have done literally nothing on the domestic front during lock down, and more importantly, or perhaps more revealingly, has done literally nothing on the domestic front since May the 1st 1997, when he entered Downing Street. And that does actually tell you something about the man. It's very interesting. And it also makes some sense of his strange post-Downing Street life, in which he's created this foundation in order to kind of carry on continuing to live as a statesman. So in that sense, that kind of very precise line of questioning paid off. I actually got far more than I was expecting. And of course, Tony Blair did not agree to give that interview in order to tell the world that he doesn't do any housework. He wanted to talk about all kinds of matters to do with COVID and the recovery, which we did cover. But I've done this job long enough to know now that actually the things that readers find interesting and the things that get people talking are almost never the reasons why I've gone to interview somebody or why they've agreed to let me come and interview them. It's almost always these very surprising, personal random

insights that actually capture people's attention, and Tony Blair certainly delivered on that front.

Yes, I call them eyebrow raisers. It's the unexpected thing that someone says in interview that normally catches the attention. And that brings me to my next question, which is that the psychology of these interviews, because they've got something to sell. It might be an idea or a film, and you've got to make them feel like they've had value for money in terms of their time investment. But you're serving your readers, aren't you? You're not serving them. So you've got to get something out of it as well. How do you sort of judge the psychology before an interview?

Oh, it's actually critically difficult balance to strike. As a general rule of thumb, I think if somebody is there to talk about their book or their play or their election or whatever it is, that's the thing you talk about with them first. I would very seldom start an interview without that in mind. I also go in knowing that the thing they want to talk about is almost certainly not the thing the readers want to read about. My absolute obligation is to the readers, not to the subject. But I do also think that you have a duty of care to the subject, not just obviously tell the truth and be respectful. I think you need to go in with a genuine spirit that you want to give a fair account of them and you want to give them a chance to give them a counter themselves. And I think however fascinating the unexpected stuff may be, it's not really fair to ignore the reason why they're there and you should do that some justice. But the most important thing, in my experience, is to do that first and to do it properly so that they do feel... What I've learned over the years is that if you don't do that first, quite often they start to panic. You can only be 10 minutes, 15 minutes in, and they start to worry that you're not going to cover that ground. And that then, what you sense setting in in the room is a level of distrust, which is never helpful. Different interviewers have different philosophies about this. I'm not somebody who thinks that the best way to reveal the truth about somebody is to provoke and antagonize and make it all very confrontational. I generally go in with the spirit that I'm trying to establish trust and some kind of comradery. And I think that the most important way you can do that is by showing that you know why they wanted you to be there and listening to what they wanted to say about it.

And how meta do you get in your own mind as the interview is taking place? Because obviously you're in the conversation, you're conversing with your interviewee, but do you have like a helicopter view in your own mind where you're sort of working on the interview as well, looking at the way it's going and whether you need to have any follow-up questions or whether they're being defensive? Or are you making mental notes in your own mind as its progressing as to how you feel? I'd be fascinated as to the psychology of it from your personal point of view.

Oh my God, Paul. Helicopter is beautiful. The image that I've sometimes had in my mind is the kind of old one of a duck swimming along. On the surface, you're trying to appear as if you're having this kind of very casual, casual kind of easygoing conversation, which has taken whichever course it chooses to take. Meanwhile, your brain is peddling furiously underneath the surface and you're trying to think of a million things. You're trying to judge the mood about when and how to tackle difficult

issues. You've always got one eye on the time. Increasingly, I think you can go into a room with an interviewee for 60 minutes and ask precisely the same questions in one order, and you will get incredible answers, and you can ask the same questions in a different order and get nothing. So it's so much about timing, and that's somehow about judging the mood. When you asked me earlier about how lockdown had been for my job, one of my biggest worries was about doing interviews over Zoom because you miss so many tiny little signals about the atmosphere in the room and the feeling of the person, and those are the cues that tell you when to back off, when to go in, when to change the subject. And I think it's impossible to do that unless you're in the room with them. So yeah, you are exhausted when you leave because your brain is spinning about all of these different considerations. Meanwhile, you have to listen incredibly closely to what they're saying, because if you're too busy strategizing in your mind and clock watching and planning and plotting, you can miss the most extraordinary things. And sometimes early on in my career, I would come back from an interview. Think it had gone rather well, sit down and play the tape, and to my horror halfway through, realize that they intimated with some extraordinary revelation that I had completely missed because I was too busy thinking, when am I going to get onto the next section? Or how am I going to get rid of the PR? Or how much time do we have left? So that's, I think, the hardest thing of all about the job is holding all of these things simultaneously because, and equally, you do have to conceal them because I think interviewees are just like everybody else. We're forthcoming when we feel that the person we're talking to is paying close, respectful attention to our words. And when we get the impression that their mind is on half a dozen other things, that's when we stopp feeling that we're going to tell them anything. So it's critically important that you do all that thinking, and it's equally important that you somehow try and conceal it obviously with greater or lesser success, depending from week to week.

Well, this is a master class for me because I've been doing this for four miserable years and was hoping for some tips.
I have to say, as you asked the question, I'm thinking, you know the answer to this as well as I do, this is what you do too. I don't think there's any magic formula to how you ever crack it. I really don't. You just need an immense amount of bandwidth in your head while it's all going on and probably a stiff drink and lie down afterwards.

I over-prepared at first, all those years ago and had sort of the list of questions in bullet points by rote. And like you say, I wasn't actually engaging properly in the moment because I was sort of working my way through the list of questions. Then I went too far the other way and said, "Oh, I'll just turn up cool as a cucumber, like the The Fonz, with nothing and sort of have a chat," and I'd worry about sort of drying up halfway through or forgetting to ask something. Now, for me, I have five bullet points on a sheet of A4 paper in front of me, the five things that I have to make sure I don't forget. And even then, I see it as a sort of safety net really so THAT I don't fear drying up, because the fear of drying up makes me dry up. And if I had that, but it means I can talk to you as a normal person, which actually thinks the best way to, for me personally, to do these things.

Well, that's the irony of this whole process because you're deploying various techniques, and you do endless research, and you plan your questions and you try.

And yet, when you're actually in the room, all of that is intended to create an atmosphere in which you have what appears to be a completely normal, free-flowing conversation. So there is a considerable amount of artifice involved. But ultimately, as you say, what you're trying to do is have a natural conversation. I have various hard and fast rules. I would never ever read a question. I prepare, I do an enormous amount preparation, and I do write out all the questions I intend to ask, and in the order that I'm intending to ask them, but somewhere in that process, somehow it all sort of percolates and it's inside my head. So I very, very seldom need the questions. But if I didn't have some sitting there in my lap, I think I'd have a nervous breakdown because, as you say, it's a safety net. And often at the very, very end I'll say, "Oh, actually we've only got a couple minutes left. Do you mind if I just checked to make sure I haven't forgotten anything?" And then I'll pick up my questions and do a quick scan. But up until that point, I think the moment you introduced, the moment you sound as if you're asking pre-prepared questions, that's off-putting in the same way as if you're in a bar and somebody comes up and tries to chat you up with a pre-prepared chat up line. These things are just fundamentally alienating. So you have to feel sort of spontaneous and authentic. And of course, as I think we said earlier, some of the best questions and the best conversational diversions go into subject matter that you'd never in a million years imagine the conversation would take you and you have to be open and available to that. But on the few occasions when I thought... Sometimes I think, oh god, I probably over-prepare. This is probably, at best, a waste of time, quite possibly counterproductive. I think the brilliant journalists probably do wing it. I have tried it once or twice. It has been a calamitous disaster, not out of drying up, funnily enough. I find that's an anxiety that doesn't actually materialize. It's more that we just don't cover enough ground and we can get bogged down in material that's never really going to make very interesting copy. And without your kind of roadmap in your head of the pre-prepared questions, it's very easy to go off-piste, into the rough. So that's the main function of my questions, I think, to kind of keep me on the straight and narrow.

Do you ever have like a flow chart of questions where you're going to ask them what their intention was about a certain thing they did or didn't do, or whether they're knew or something, and you genuinely don't know the answer to it, and sort of their line of questioning will depend on what they've said?

Ah, well, I have a general rule of thumb. Barrister always say, don't they, "You must never ask a question in court to which you do not know the answer." That's the golden rule of being a barrister. For me, my absolute golden rule is when I've spent all this time doing research, and I've got all my questions ready, I read them through. And if I think I know the answer to a single one of those questions, I strike it out immediately, partly because it's a waste of time. And also, I think, at the risk of sounding sort of slightly pseudo-mystical, I think people just have a sixth sense for whether your curiosity is authentic or not. And I think one of the things, obviously I've thought a lot over the years about what is it that makes people reveal themselves? What is it that makes people tell, reveal truths or disclose thoughts that they might not otherwise, or might not ordinarily? And I studied this, particularly whenever I find myself opening up to somebody, I'm always thinking afters, what was it? What was the quality about them that really made me do that? Why did I tell them... Why did I give them a forthcoming answer to a question that I've really barely answered from a million other people before? And one of the things that I think is key is that I think, it

sounds trite, but I think they communicated that they were genuinely interested in knowing my answer. And I think if you study people's conversations, you'd be amazed how much of the time it's perfectly apparent that questions are being asked without any genuine, authentic curiosity behind them whatsoever. People are just kind of making polite noises to each other. So I think it's really key to only ask questions that you genuinely don't know what they will say in response. So as a consequence of that, I don't have flow charts, but it does mean that the conversation can take unexpected turns and I have to sort of be prepared for that. I don't think I've ever gone in with a kind of... Remember those children's books where you choose the story?

Choose your own adventure? They were amazing.

Exactly. It's not that I map out where I've got 48,000 different permutations of where to go, but I generally am prepared for the conversations go in different directions, depending upon what they say.

And you obviously listen to the gladiatorial style interviews on the Today Program where it's just, it's sort of jousting festival and no side's going to give. But do you ever have it where an interviewee isn't quite being as forthcoming as you would like, and rather than sort of doing the John Humphreys thing and going in for the kill, is there a way that you can sort of tease it out to them? Or how do you deal with that?

Oh yeah. I'm completely hopeless at the John Humphreys sort of technique. Also I'm not even sure that it would really work in a kind of sit down hour, two hour long interview. I think it works in broadcasting because everybody understands that time is short, and it's sort of within the grammar of that exchange, that level of confrontational kind of inquisition. But if you could spend two hours with somebody, then to be kind of hectoring and aggressive in that kind of way is both unnecessary and counterproductive because actually what you're trying to generate, you're trying to generate some kind of a relationship during those two hours and some sense of trust. So I don't go for the kind of gladiatorial approach. There are various ways in which you can get somebody to answer a question, which they don't want to. And one of the easiest is just very humorously to name the elephant in the room. So if they're avoiding the question, you kind of have a sort of slightly affectionate amused charm, and you say, "You're quite clearly voiding the question and why is that?" And that can be disarming. Sometimes another way to get people to be more forthcoming when they're clearly doing their best, not to be, is to invoke a third party observer and say something along the lines of, "I completely understand why you're trying to sort of avoid this, but it's just I think in print, the reader's going to find you evasive. I think you're in danger of coming across as slippery. And when you put it like that, that can sometimes make people pause for thought. So I'm not accusing them of being slippery and I'm not seeming cross with them in a John Humphrey's way. I'm simply pointing out, that this is how they will come across in print to the reader. Most people don't want to come across like that. I mean, to be honest Paul, I find that quite an effective technique with anything. With any kind of an example of an issue where I start to think somebody is making themselves look like a fool or unpleasant. Quite often, and again, because I've got the time and the space in a long sit down interview, you can do it without it seeming too aggressive. Quite often, I will just say,

"Gosh, I wonder if, I don't know, but I've got a feeling when this is written down and put it on the page. Readers are going to find you and then whatever it could be." For example, I might say, "I've got a feeling you might come across, I think readers might sort of feel that you've come across as rather arrogant." And then you can simply say, "It's that something that people have said to you before, or is that something you've thought about?" It's very interesting. I just find if you can be polite and warm, but quite bold in naming what's happening in real time, sometimes that could take you to quite interesting places.

I've read in my research for this interview, that you said that you've learned from a young age, how to exploit the vanity of, and I quote, "Slightly narcissistic men in an interview, in situations." Do you think that... You've also said that men expect female interviewers to somehow be more deferential, is that echoes of sexism still there?

It's not so much deferential, as I just think successful men are very accustomed to people paying court, paying heed. They assume that they will have an avid audience for whatever comes out of their mouths. Women tend to not, in my experience, even very successful women tend not to operate like that. And I think that is partly, because as children, they didn't... Girls don't assume from the get go, that the world is hanging on their every word, in a way that perhaps... And maybe this is a generational thing, maybe this won't be true in 20 years time of people I'm interviewing. But broadly speaking, people I'm interviewing are between age 30 and 70 and I'm afraid it is still just the case that men seem very comfortable with having women ask them questions. And they're very comfortable in holding forth to women. Female interviewees aren't necessarily as familiar with that dynamic. As I say, not even the ones who are extremely successful in their lives, they just don't seem to think of it as completely natural.

And is it more of a battle these days, with PRs to get the time and access you need to get an in depth interview. Is there some kind of negotiation between you and their PRs or your lawyers and their lawyers, as to what you can and can't discuss and the format of it. I mean, how gladiatorial is it before? And if you don't do that, you don't get Tony. How does that work?

In terms of whether or not getting access is becoming harder or not, I'm afraid I'm not really qualified to answer that. I have an absolutely brilliant team on the desk who fix up the interviews. And if one of them was sitting next to me, they would be able to answer that question. Luckily, I don't get involved in that. Obviously, I mean, as a coder to that, we're all very aware that it's becoming increasingly difficult to get access to government ministers. But I mean, that's true across the board. As a general answer to the availability of interviewees, it's an interesting thing, because one might well have thought five or 10 years ago, I could imagine one could have predicted that by 2020, nobody in public life would submit to an interview, because they now have access to direct channels of communication by which they can talk to their fans or the public as much as they like. They don't meet me to mediate anymore. And so it's a rather astonishing and fantastic fact, that despite that, people still want to submit to the ritual of the big sit down print interview. And there are all kinds of reasons for that, there's a kind of credibility that comes with that, that you can't replicate on a Facebook page.

It's flattering. I aspire one day to be important enough to interview.

There is a kind of flattering kudos. There also is an element of ego involved, because I mean, obviously there are some interviewers who are always nice about everyone, and there are some interviewers who were always absolutely vile about everybody. And there's not much incentive in a way, for the ego to get involved with either. But I think this is a really important part of being an interviewer, if you could build a reputation as somebody who is in hackneyed clichés, tough but fair, then that does speak to the ego to some extent. And of course, like all of us, people in public life want to show that they've had the balls to sit down for really searching interview and that they've come out of it well. And I think they hope that they will, in the sense of the challenge is part of the motivation for it. In terms of, you asked about prearranged conditions, terms, PRs, et cetera, et cetera, subject matter you can or can't touch. I can't speak for other interviews and other publications, but I think again, people would probably be amazed at how little of that goes on. I'm trying to think if I can remember the last time a PR said to me in advance of an interview, there was a subject, I can't remember any occasion where I've been told you are categorically not allowed to ask about X or Y. I can't think of a time when that's ever happened.

Assumedly, that would be your first question, if you were told that.

Well, you see, the interesting thing is, is very, very occasionally a PR will say the interviewee really doesn't want to talk about, and it's usually some sort of historic scandal or unpleasantness. Their divorce or when their wife ran off with the milkman or when they were caught with their fingers in the till. There's that kind of stuff that they always say the interviewee doesn't want to talk about. And I take note of that. But the honest truth is, in my experience, almost without fail, once you get in the room with the interviewee, you discover that whatever it is the PR said, they categorically didn't want to talk about, it's actually pretty much all they want to talk about. They are almost invariably keen to set the record straight or to address it. One of the reasons for that, is that when you think about public figures involved in public scandals over the past 10, 20, 30 years, you'll remember the name and you'll remember the vague sense of the scandal, and you'll have a rough idea of what the public narrative of that scandal was. But once you sit down in a room with the person who was involved in the scandal, without exception, their version of events differs radically from the generally remembered public narrative. And of course it's only human nature. They want to correct that, what they perceive to be a false narrative. So I don't worry too much these days if I'm told that somebody doesn't want to talk about something, because as I say, generally, I think, "Oh, great, that's brilliant. That means they definitely do." Which is always lovely. The other important thing about an interview, is that I don't sit there with a gun to somebody's head. Any interviewee is absolutely at liberty to decline to answer, absolutely any question. So I always think, just crack on, ask the questions and my job is to establish an atmosphere in which it's possible for them to say, "Actually, I really don't want to talk about that." And for that to be okay, because of course nobody's under any obligation to say anything to me. So I do think it's important that you shouldn't make people feel pressured and that they should be able to always say, "I don't want to talk about that." I mean, in my experience the amazing thing, is how seldom that actually happens. One of the funny things about my job is that, and actually just about questions and answers in general,

is we have a kind of notion that people don't like to be asked intrusive questions, and you'll hear that at the pub or at the dinner table, or someone will ask something and someone else will say "Oof that was a bit intrusive. You shouldn't ask that." And actually the person on the receiving end of the question almost always wants to answer it. So in my experience, I don't think there are many things that people really don't want to talk about. What they don't want to do, is talk about it to somebody who feels intrusive or impertinent or disrespectful or crass. But if they feel that somebody is asking out of genuine, respectful interest, in my experience, people always want to spill the beans. That's the joy of my job.

There's another reason why you might want to decline to answer this question really, which you've not covered, which is that you might, I assume you're not susceptible to flattery. And this question isn't meant to be sycophantic, but why are you so good at your job? Is it the whole nature nurture thing? I mean, you've been on the same training courses as other journalists that do things differently. You seem to get the most incredible interviews. And is that more your temperament and how you were brought up and your personality? I don't want to reduce you to a series of skills as it were, like on CV, but what is it about how you go about the job that makes you so successful?

I mean, obviously I'd love to tell you all kinds of reasons why I'm completely brilliant, innately brilliant, Paul. Where shall I begin? Sadly, the more prosaic truth I think I should probably stick to, is I think 90% of it is just about doing it time and time and time again. It's really only a job that you can get good at by doing it. You can't really train and you can't really practice and you can't really rehearse. And I fell into interviewing completely by accident. I look back now and I thank my lucky stars I did, because by a stroke of luck, I seem to have found myself in one of the very, very few remaining bits of journalism, which is still to a large extent, a closed shop. If you want to be a film critic, go to the cinema and post on the internet your review. If you want to be a restaurant critic, go to the restaurant, post your review. If you want to be a columnist, write a blog. There are so many ways in which people can practice different forms of journalism without having a job. But you can't interview Madonna unless you've been in the room with Madonna. There's no citizen journalism version of that. And so that means that I've had an opportunity to do this, week in week out for, God, I don't know how many years it is now. Well over 10 years. And unless you've got the job of being an interviewer, it's very difficult to get good at interviewing. So, as I said, much as I'd love to put this down to my exceptional qualities. Most of it I think, is just about practice. I do also think that there is an element that I am just insatiably interested in human beings and what's going on in their lives and what's going on inside their heads. And I'm not faking that. And it's always easy to do well at something you're not faking, isn't it? And that's just a universal truth. You could lock me in a room with a bunch of IT and try and make me be an IT person. Or you could try and make me a transport correspondent and it will just be a complete waste of time. I'm just not interested. But human beings, I'm never, ever, ever going to get bored of asking human beings questions.

There's nowt so queer as folk.

Exactly. That's the joy of it, isn't it?

Now, I wouldn't expect you to be indiscreet enough to name names, although I desperately hope you would be, but assuming you weren't...

Oh, I am generally quite indiscrete.

Good. This bit will be good then. How often have you... Because the old phrase is never meet your heroes. And sometimes I've unfollowed former heroes on social media, because you can get a sense of... It's a bit like the Wizard of Oz, that you put them on this pedestal and the more you actually get to know them behind the scenes, you realize there's not much there. How often does that happen when you're going into an interview and they are a hero, someone you've admired and you leave the interview admiring them less? And obviously vice versa, you've gone in there, thinking this person's moderately interesting. And then you've come out thinking, "Wow, they're insanely interesting."
That's a really interesting question. I've never really thought about that. Instinctively, I'm inclined to say, that I think the latter is more common than the former. I think I've probably come away more impressed by people I wasn't expecting to be than less impressed than I'd hoped to be by a lifelong hero. This doesn't fully answer your question and so it may seem a bit unfair. I'm an enormous admirer of Sadiq Khan and I interviewed him during lockdown and felt that he was really not on his game at all. I was a bit taken aback by how unimpressive he was compared to normal. And I did say so in the piece. Where I've walked away thinking, "My God, I'll never ever buy one of your books or watch one of your shows again. You're an awful human being. And I'd always thought I loved you." Let me think about that, Paul, if I can come up with any names, I will happily spill the beans.

I mean, no subject has ever walked out on an interview, I know. But you and Gordon Ramsey kind of walked out on each other, didn't you?

Oh yeah, we did walk out on each other. Absolutely. Yeah. And to be honest, I couldn't be in the room with him a second longer. I really genuinely couldn't. I've never been so glad to have a room in my life. I wasn't a fan of his in advance and I wasn't a critic of his, I felt fairly neutral about him. And I'd done all my homework and he's written, I don't know, three, four, five, some stupid number of autobiographies, which I dutifully read as I always do. And it transpired quite quickly in the conversation, that not only had he not read them, he clearly hadn't written them. He clearly hadn't read them, because I would ask him stuff based upon what I had read in his autobiographies, at which point he'd get really angry and start saying, "That's not true. That never happened."

And you've read it in his own autobiography. Good point Gordon.

I literally had read it in your autobiography. Hmm, this isn't going well. No, actually, do you know what really offended me about him? He'd made a documentary series in a prison, in which he'd gone in and tried to get a dozen convicts to come and learn to cook for him. And what I found so odious about him, was he was so disgusted that they hadn't all been banging on his door begging to take part in his TV show. And he would put this down to laziness. And say that prisons are like holiday, all those stupid old cliches about holiday club.

All the cliches, yeah.

And I just thought, "My God, if you genuinely think the only reason why a convict wouldn't want to appear on national television being shouted at by you, in prison is because they're lazy. Then you haven't got a clue and you've got no right to even be making a television program about prisoners." He was just sour and vile and horrible and hostile and unwilling to engage with any of the questions that I'd done, which as I say, were based on research of his books. Silly me.

But other than that, it was all right?

It was literally, unredeemingly awful. And that really happens very, very seldom. People... The funny thing is, is that people of course, remember the interviews where you come to blows or you don't get on. And actually it happens amazingly seldom and I'm glad, because who would want to do the job, if you were continually encountering people that you found so odious that you had to leave the room before the time was up? It wouldn't be much of a job. But of course, people remember the tricky ones, because they make the most memorable copies. It's human nature.

I'm trying to think of some of the memorable interviews that I remember just as a reader, even before I researched for this interview. And I remember when Alistair Darling was chancellor, didn't you get to go up to Scottish Retreat and he gave you, I mean, boy, did you get an explosive interview then?

Oh my God Paul, did I ever? I mean, I wasn't an interviewer at that time. I was a features writer. I'd just done a couple of interviews and I guess, it was the summertime and there wasn't much going on. And my editor said, "Who could we get for party conference?" And I think it was my idea. And my idea was on the basis that, "Yes, we've got this chancellor, he's so boring and grey and drab and we don't really know anything about him. He's just this guy in a suit, doing the numbers. Should we try for him? See if we could get something." But I mean, I said it with a slightly heavy heart, because I didn't think it would be particularly interesting. And so much of this came down to the treasury press office. So him being on holiday, and his wife, the brilliant, amazing Maggie Darling was taking care of his diary and his press. And it was her idea to just have me come up to this remote little Croft on the Island of, I think it was Harris. And had I interviewed him over a desk in the treasury with the usual treasury press office assistant, we'd have got the usual boring, old nonsense, nothing. But something about... I mean, his wife had a lot to do with it. The setting had a lot to do with it. There's nothing like feeling like you're on the edge of civilization to change the mood, to change the atmosphere.

To make you more reflective.

And he just was... I mean, it's funny, that was 2008 and I don't think I've done a bigger interview since then in all, I've been doing it now for 12 years since then.

Wow. It was massive.

It was just magical. And I don't think I fully... I think I didn't know enough about interviewing to realize quite what gold I had in my Dictaphone. I mean, I knew it was

golden, but I didn't know it was 18 karat gold, until the morning that the interview published. I woke up and my phone had been off and something like 72 text messages came in, which always gives you a bit of a lurch in your stomach, doesn't it? And I went to the corner shop and I'll never forget walking into the corner shop and I looked down and of course, that bank of newspapers, a quote from Alister Darling was on the front of every single newspaper. And the quote was, "We're facing the worst recession we've seen in 60 years." And at this point my stomach was in knots, Paul, I absolutely froze in horror. And I went rushing back to the house and I should have been feeling jubilant, amazing.

Elated. Yeah.

Right?

Exactly, yeah.

Exactly. I felt physically sick. I remember breaking out in a cold sweat, because all that happened was, I thought, "If it's that newsworthy, Maybe I've made a mistake. Maybe he said 16 years. And it was just that absolute paranoia that sets in when you realize there's a very big story. And the problem was is that we'd done the interview in this croft, and a dehumidifier had been in the corner of the room and it had been ticking on and off throughout the interview. And on the short walk home to the news agent, in my mind I was thinking what if the dehumidifier had clicked into that moment, and when I was transcribing the interview, I thought he said 60 when he'd said 16. And in a cold sweat went back, broke my Dictaphone out, played the tape all the way through, got to the point, and I can't describe ... I mean I nearly wept with relief when I heard him say, clear as bell, 60 years, because I was just thinking how on earth am I going to put this right if this is a transcription error and in fact he'd said 16.

And then how does it work after then? Does the editor email you and say job well done, or do you get 30 bids from the TV programs to go on air and talk about it? And do you do those kinds of things or do you turn them down? Do you turn your phone off and just sit there with a cup of camomile tea and just feel very pleased with yourself? What's the process.

It's more the latter really. I mean there is something funny. This is going to make me sound very naive and silly, but it is the truth nonetheless. So there's something very surreal about when you go and interview somebody, obviously you've done the research, it's been set up by the desk, and there's going to be a photo shoot. You know you're going for work, but in the same way that I burn a lot of energy trying to make the interviewee feel like this is just a conversation between the two of us, just a normal conversation. Somewhere along the line, when it works and that's what it feels like, well of course it feels like that to me too, at some level. Obviously, as I said, you're thinking madly and you know it's for work, so I'm not suggesting that I genuinely mistake it for a chat in a pub with a mate, but at some level it's a really weird thing, Paul, you do think of it as a conversation that took place between the two of you in that living room, by that fireside, in that croft, whatever. There is something still, to this day, a bit weird about turning on the radio on a Saturday as you're cooking your kid's lunch and hearing the words that were spoken to you in that room,

which you've then transcribed, and then you've written in the article, and you sent it to the editor, and the editor's put it on the page, and it's been sent to the news agent, and now it's coming out of my kitchen radio, the same words. As I say, I know this makes me sound silly and naive, but I still get a weird shock that these words have gone on this strange, circuitous route, and here they are coming out of my kitchen radio. And then I turn on the television and there's the newsreader saying these words, but clearly by now I shouldn't be surprised when that happens. And of course, that's what you really want. You want every interview to end up making the news, of course, but when it does happen, it's always just slightly disconcerting.

Surreal.

Yeah, it's funny, isn't it? I mean I can't really account for why I find that disconcerting because clearly you go into the interview knowing it's an interview, intending, hoping that you might end up hearing the words on the radio, and yet when you do it always feels slightly surreal, as you said. Yeah, surreal.

How does it work in terms of the Hollywood and the political global elite A listers? Do they all get together and say, "Yeah, you should get Decca to interview you," or does a PR ring the Sunday Times and say, "We'll only do it if Decca can do it," or is it that they want the Sunday Times to do an interview, and then you're the person, obviously, that does it? How does it work in terms of your own personal, not necessarily celebrity, but noteworthiness and respect as an individual journalist?

No, it's a funny odd mixture. Sometimes you get people who will say, "We'll only do it if we can do it with Decca." And there are other times when people have said, "We desperately want to do it with the Sunday Times, and we definitely don't want to do it with Decca." And then in really crude market forces terms, it depends upon the size of the star. I mean in really crude market terms, you're balancing the size of the Sunday Times versus the size of the star, and sometimes the size of the star is bigger and they win, and somebody else can interview them. And other times the Sunday Times is bigger than the star, bigger than the interviewee, and we get to choose who the interviewee is, and they would rather have an interview in the Sunday Times, even with an interviewer that they don't want- than to lose their chance to be in Sunday Times. So in that sense it's a straightforward tussle, as I say, of the market forces of the respective weight of the interviewee and the newspaper, the publication. And that's true for all publications, not just The Sunday Times. Having said all of that, to be completely honest, Paul, and I know there are some excellent PRs out there who really understand the media landscape, who give really good advice to their clients, who choose very carefully, who've done their homework, those do exist, but I've got to be honest, in my experience that's not true of the vast majority of them, And I am continually surprised the interviewees pay not insignificant sums of money to PRs who organize interviews for them and the PRs just do a really bad job one way or another.

I'm one of them. Whether I do a bad job or not is for my clients to say, but I agree with you. I mean because of this podcast, I'm on those PR databases and I get about 50 press releases a day, and it's shocking just how low standards are. I said to my friend the other day, who was thinking of starting out in PR, I

said, "You can actually get ahead in PR nowadays just by not being shit. That's your key differentiator," because there's so much dross out there it's frightening.

Oh, the competitive advantage you will enjoy by not being shit is quite remarkable in that industry. And I don't really know why, because lots of people want to work in it, it's a buoyant industry, there's money. There's more money in PR than journalism. So I'm not clear at all about what goes wrong at their end of things. But I mean you talk about those spam emails that you receive from PRs, I have to be able to say sometimes I will receive so many ridiculous emails from a PR pitching an interview that could never appear in the Sunday Times, a four year old who'd read the Sunday Times would know that this person is never going to appear as an interviewee, it gets to the point where I actually have to stop myself from just sending an email back saying, "I'm going to email your client and tell them that you are wasting their money, because you're certainly wasting my time and you're wasting their money." I don't get it. It's a mystery to me. I really, really don't. As I say, there are brilliant PRs, but there's an awful lot of dross.

It's even worse than that as well, because they're not even wasting their time, they're just wasting yours, because what they do is they take a generic press release and it doesn't say Dear Decca, it says Dear (first name) and then they spam it to a database that they've bought in of 700 email addresses. So it takes them four seconds to do, and you're the one that bears the burden of having to read it, realize it's shite, and then decide whether to hit them over the head with a baseball bat or just move on with your life. Well, there you go. That's my rant over. So my new goal in life then, reflecting on what you've just said, is to be big enough to command any interviewer that I want to the Sunday Times and veto you, but actually not veto you because you're awesome. That seems to me like the ultimate AA list. But anyway, we digress. Are there any subjects that have been the most difficult to break down or get to the core of? It could be emotional, but it could also be technical. Like if they're in the croft with Alistair Darling, and what happens if he starts going on about the Libor rate and stuff like that? Because I've been at cocktail parties where people mention that, and I just nod and then change the subject to EastEnders, but are you expected to know stuff?

That's a really good question. Libor rate for you, for me, it's EBITDA. Whenever anyone starts talking about EBITDA-

Just nod.

... my head falls off. I think as a general rule, clearly I'm mentoring somebody different every week, I cannot possibly be a world expert on nuclear physics and Michelin star restaurants, and javelin throwing, that would be ridiculous, but I do think it's my job to do everything I can to get my head around the subject matter that the interviewee is going to be talking about. And obviously sometimes that's very easy, if it's a subject that's up my street, sometimes it's difficult. The thing I remember, the interview that stands out for me as striking absolute fear in my soul was when I went to interview, now, then he was the Nobel prize winning physicist who had been responsible for discovering the God particle. Is that correct? Do you remember?

Yeah, you mean Professor Peter Higgs of the Higgs boson.

Peter Higgs of the Higgs boson. That's exactly who I mean, and I sweated blood and tears because I knew that no matter how much work I did before I went to meet him, I just don't have the brain that can do that. And as a general policy, I think the key when you don't know what you're talking about is don't bluff. Never try and pretend it. So would that one, I had to just go in-

You can't kid a kidder or a particle physicist.

Or a particle physicist. I mean, interestingly, I tell you what, I'll tell you the thing that I do remember about the interview that made me laugh, for about two weeks in advance, as I'm desperately trying to get my head around this sodding God particle, just as a kind of exercise in curiosity I asked everybody that I met if they understood the God particle. Pretty straightforward question. Just say, "I'm interviewing Peter Higgs. Do you get it? Do you understand the Higgs boson particle?" And the funny thing is, without exception, every single man immediately told me that they understood it. Without hesitation.

They'll have been fibbing.

Of course, they were all lying. To a man, they were lying. And yet I thought it was such an interesting ... I can't even remember if a single woman said that she understood it. And of course, several did, transpired. And yet even the ones who did didn't say, "Oh yes, I understand it." And yet men who no more understood the bloody God particle, they no more understood that than I understand EBITDA, would confidently say they did. It's a weird world to live in in which you imagine that you understand Nobel prize level particle physics when in your day job, you're an actor. How weird. Anyway, that's what I remember mostly about that interview

I think you're observing Schrödinger on that males bar of science. One of them said anyone who claims to understand quantum physics clearly hasn't read enough into it.

Clearly hasn't, right? Exactly. There we have it.

I forget which one it was. It's all to do with the Higgs field and why particles have mass. And as long as you don't ask me any follow up questions, there you go, I can appear knowledgeable. I've read loads of books on quantum physics because I genuinely am fascinated by it, actually. I hated science lessons at school, and learning the periodic table by rote and things like that. And then I interviewed Professor Jim Al-Khalili for this podcast a few years ago, and he really got me into it because he said, "Aren't you interested, Paul, in how the world actually works in terms of what are elements, and what are forces?" And I absolutely thought to myself well, actually I am. But of course it had never been explained to me in a way that was intelligible, really. Well, there we go. We digress.

I mean he asked a brilliant question. The terrible truth is my answer is no, I'm

absolutely not. I'm not interested in how my iPhone works. I don't care how my bicycle works. I don't care how my car works. I couldn't be less interested in how the world works. I'm absolutely riveted by how human beings work, and systems operated by humans, and all the rest of it. But no, really how the world works, I have this peculiar lack of interest. I couldn't care less. So I think that's fine, if somebody asked me about that.

Admirable. Absolutely.

Not really.

In this age of tweets and social media, there's Sunday Times Magazine long read is amazing, but isn't your competition basically every other shiny app button on my phone, and Netflix, and the fact that I have the attention span now of a gnat. And is that the problem? Is the long form interview going out of fashion because no-one wants to read anything anymore?

That is an interesting question. I, funnily enough, don't particularly feel that, but that's because I'm in the very lucky position, in terms of competing with tweets, and Instagram, and all the rest of it, which is that by definition I interview people who the public are interested in. I never have to try and force my readers to take an interest in my interviewee. And generally speaking, there are people who don't give an enormous number of interviews, and if they're doing one interview with me in the Sunday Times Magazine, they certainly won't have done any recently because one of our rules is if somebody has just given a big interview in Tatler or Vogue then we're not going to follow up in the Sunday Times. So yeah, I don't feel particularly plagued by that sense of competition because although the magazine pieces are long, they tend to be about somebody who isn't widely available to readers all the time, and it's somebody they're very interested in. And, of course, the other simple thing is it's my job to make sure that they want to read to the end of 3,000 or so words. And I have a very old fashioned militant view about what a journalist's job is, and a journalist's job is to hold the reader's attention, whether it's over 200 words or 20,000 words. And if I can't do that, then I don't think I should be a journalist. It's as simple as that. Nothing maddens me more than self-involved self-indulgent journalism, where they assume that they're going to have your attention for the next 20 minutes, and they can meander, and take 20 words where two will do and they will still retain their readers. I operate on the assumption that my absolute first job is to hold their attention. And when you're writing a 3,000 word piece, what I'm about to say, I suddenly panic it's going to sound a bit pretentious, but I think the main way you do that is it's all about structure. And I think a piece of work that's more than 3,000 words long is not unlike a piece of music. See, I told you I was going to sound pretentious, didn't I? And in the same way that a piece of music is structured to carry you along, and it will begin, and it will flow, and it will take you up, and it will take you down, and it will change pace, you're not going to listen to three minutes of noise. You want to be taken on a journey, more clichés coming, with a piece of music, and I think the same holds with a piece of writing. And if you structure it well enough, and I am obsessed with structure, then you absolutely should to be able to hold readers attention to the end of 3 or 4,000 words, but if you don't structure it properly, it doesn't matter how interesting the contents of that piece is, you're not going to hold their attention any more than a beautiful song sounds good if you jumble up all of the

notes and the chords, and play them in a different order. So yeah, I think structure is the key to getting them through to the end.

Could you walk us through your early career? I mean you quickly went from a student journalist to writing for The Independent and The Guardian in the mid '90s. I mean that must have been an awesome time and a dream job. I was around in the mid '90s. Those times were awesome. The music was a bit dodgy, but I think everything else for me was a time of excitement.

I loved the music too. I'm a big fan of the '90s, Paul. I'm one of those awful people who thinks that everything went downhill since the '90s.

My wife won't let me play my Spotify playlist when we're driving on car journeys. She just literally vetoes it because she says I've never changed them in years, and I'm just stuck in the '90s.

Brilliant, I'll jump in your car. No problem. That sounds like a dream to me.

You're very welcome.

Yeah, it was an extraordinary time. It really was. I got to London in 1994, '95, and it was that time when we were coming out of recession, and it was obvious that we were going to have a labour government next, and there was going to be this big seismic change. And it did really feel as if the streets were paved with gold. I don't remember having a conversation with an editor in which the word money was mentioned as in we haven't got the money to do this, or we haven't got the money to send you there, or we haven't got the budget. I didn't have a conversation about money with an editor until the financial crash. I remember being so shocked when suddenly budget restraints came into play. So yeah, in the '90s there was a sense that there were jobs, there were money. I mean this gives you an idea of how much money there was around then, not only was The Independent, back in 1994, still a print newspaper, it was a print newspaper with enough money to pay not just me, but one other young woman as well, to pay for us, to pay our tuition fees to do an MA in journalism, and to pay a grant for us to live on while we were doing it, and to give us a job at the end of it. I mean it's literally unimaginable now, but that was the world in which I entered journalism. So it felt, I wouldn't say easy, it never felt easy, that would be overstating it, it's always been a competitive industry, but it certainly felt as if anything was possible. And I don't think that could conceivably be how a 20 something trying to enter Fleet Street would see the world now. And that's heartbreaking.

I don't want to get all meta now, but I'm interested in the change of gear of how I move the interview down a bit, because I wanted to ask you about how you've suffered a terrible personal tragedy and illness over the last decade, in your memoir, All at Sea, you publicly addressed your partner's death. Is that something that you're keen to talk about in interviews? Is that something that we should move away from? Because I don't want to ... I don't want to ... It feels quite personal. It feels almost slightly cheap to say, "And now turning to your tragedies." Do you know what I mean? I wouldn't normally get this anxiety with a normal interviewee, but you're 50 times better at this than I am. How do you

do that? Anyway, there you go.

How do you ask people about their tragedies?

Yes. How do you change gear in the way that I could do? It almost feels like...You know like the newsreaders were to say, now over to the weather, sort of-

Sure.

Do you just go directly to... I mean, I suppose that's a meta question and the actual question as well, because if you feel comfortable, I'd love to talk to you about it.

Oh, I'm very open about this. I have, as you say, I've written about it and I also, I'm just naturally quite a transparent person. Discretion is not my middle name. I tend to talk about everything, also, it's out there, it's in the public domain. My partner died very suddenly. He drowned and so it was in the newspapers, so it was always public. By the time we were in Jamaica when it happened and by the time we got home, we were living in a village at that time. When I got home from Jamaica and the next day, there was a big billboard on our local village streets, say local man drowns, saving son's life. It was never a private death in that-

I **remember it happening and I remember shedding a tear because like most people, it's the thing you dread most, isn't it?**

Isn't it just and I think also exactly the manner in which he died. We were on holiday with our two young sons who were just four and three and we were having a lovely beach holiday and our four year old got into trouble in the sea and his father swam out to try and save him, but they were caught in a riptide, which is this constrained... You can't see it. It's not like a rough sea, but it's got of channel of water that sucks you out to sea if you're caught in it and they were then both caught in it and he was unable to hold our son afloat because he wasn't a very good swimmer. He couldn't keep both of them afloat, so I swim out to them and took our son and I mean, it's just the luck of the draw isn't it? I was taught lifesaving at secondary school years, decades earlier and I could remember how to do it and had always been a strong swimmer. I was just by the skin of our teeth, able to get our son back to shore, but his father wasn't able to and we stood on the beach and watched him flailing in the water and we eventually managed to pull him ashore with the help of some fishermen in a rope, but he drowned. It's what's called dry drowning. He didn't go under, but he took on too much. He-

Secondary drowning.

Exactly. Yeah. Then he drowned while we were pulling him in. That was reported at the time and as I said, it never felt very private and I think one of the reasons why it was so resonant with people is, there is something about the idea of a happy family of four going on holiday and only three of you coming back. I think it just kind of evokes some really primitive folklore tale and I think that's partly why it struck a chord for so many people because we've all been on beach holidays with our family. We've

all watched our four year olds paddle in the water. It's this sort of proximity of absolutely horrific calamity, certainly very sweet and benign and recognizable like a family beach holiday. I think that gave it a kind of resonance with people which had he simply died of common garden cancers or been hit by a bus, it wouldn't have had that same kind of impact. I do feel comfortable talking about it and I also, if I didn't feel comfortable, then I might not. Maybe this is kind of post-hoc, sort of rationalization, but there's a bit of me that also thinks every day I sit in a room with somebody, for every week I sit in a room with somebody for an hour or two, in the course of which I'm going to try and probe and ask them to talk about all kinds of personal stuff in their lives. That would feel a bit rich of me not to be able to do the same about things that have happened in my life. As I say, I don't find it difficult. I'm not by nature particularly reticent and it was a very public death, so it's not difficult for me anyway, but I do think even if it were that I should probably try to because it's not really fair to ask other people to do what you're not willing to do yourself.

But you must see, in terms of the cancer treatment, the inspiration and the positivity that you give lots of other women in the same situation by writing about your cancer treatment. My mom, for example, had breast cancer last year. Had a mastectomy, had chemotherapy and I'm not breaking her confidence, she's public about it, but she was hugely inspired by your writing and others. In fact, she's in remission now.

That's brilliant.

Yeah, but it must be heartening for you personally to know that your writing has helped others in a similar situation.

Yeah, it is a funny thing. I mean, you go into journalism for all kinds of different reasons don't you and one of them is, of course you want to, in trite terms, make a difference. Actually, it's quite difficult as a journalist and there's certain forms of journalism which achieve that and I haven't really gone into any of those. I could only think of a few occasions in my working life where I've written a feature which I felt has really contributed to the greater good or done something to change the world. It's a rather disappointingly low hit count in that respect, I have to admit, but the funny thing is writing about cancer, I was diagnosed with cancer pretty much a year to the day after my partner had drowned and so it was a fairly hellish period. Writing just about very practical things about how I got through that, it barely felt like journalism. I mean, it felt more like really keeping a diary and popping it in the paper, but it turned out to have been such immense practical value to people in a way that very little I've written over the years, really, people might enjoy it, but it's not actually useful most of what I've written. I hadn't anticipated quite what a satisfying feeling that would be to think that you sat at your laptop and you wrote some words that actually really genuinely helped people. That was a lovely thing to discover quite late in my career. It was about five years ago when this was happening. I could see the appeal of consumer journalism. I thought Esther Rantzen must feel brilliant every day when she wakes up. She's been doing this her whole life. It was an unusual experience for me to write something that had a very practical application for readers. It felt good. I mean, there's not much that feels good about cancer, it has to be said. I'm not one of those Pollyannaish people who talks about how it brought them life lessons that felt nourishing. It was just bloody awful from beginning to end, but that was the one... If

there was a good thing to be said for it, the fact that I learned all kinds of things which I was able to share with people that were helpful. That mitigated the blow a little bit.

Journalist I've always admired the most hugely was Roger Cook because he'd start the program by saying, here's some mafia kingpin who's beaten up and killed 50 people and we're going to knock on his front door now and call him a twat to his face.

Brilliant wasn't he? He was so brilliant. Yes. I know exactly what you mean. That must've been a very satisfying form of journalism I expect.

Well, it is unless you're on the receiving end of a left hook. Again, I don't know whether this question is cliché or not, but obviously what's happened has changed you as a person. Has it changed you as a journalist? Is this question cliché, but have you become more empathetic with your interviewees as a result of what happened? Has it not affected your journalism and wasn't ever going to, if that makes sense?

On the empathy front, I certainly notice more now that the world divides between people where life has gone horrifyingly wrong and people whose lives haven't. Empathy deficit would be too strong, perhaps a slight imagination failure. If your life has always gone perfectly to plan, I think it's just inherently quite difficult to imagine yourself in the shoes of someone whose life has blown up all over the show. I don't think that I have massively more empathy because of what happened when my partner drowned and then I got cancer and everything sort of went haywire. I think if anything, if there's an upside, the thing is my mum died of cancer when I was very young. I was five when she got cancer and nine when she died. I was very familiar from an early age with life going horribly wrong. In that sense, I'm not sure that the more recent adversities really altered me profoundly in that respect, but the way in which I definitely can sense that it changed is that now it's not that I have more empathy or insight into an interviewee who's gone through terribly difficult stuff. I don't think that's changed, particularly. I think that what has changed is I think the interviewee is far more comfortable being forthcoming with somebody who has also seen their life go horribly wrong. In that sense, it's changed my journalism. I guess there's a kind of mutual recognition. I mean, it's the old alcoholics anonymous principle, isn't it? We're all more likely to unburden ourselves to people who we feel know what it's like to be in our shoes. I have definitely sensed that. Also you have insights which mean that you can ask questions that you wouldn't necessarily have thought of if you hadn't been through proper disaster. I think it definitely has affected me as a journalist. I think it has made me a better journalist. That sounds slightly weird and Pollyannaish in a slightly glib conjunction. My children's father's dead and I nearly died, but hey, guess what? I'm a better journalist. That sounds a slightly ridiculous formulation, but in answer to your question, I think the answer is yes. Yeah. It has changed me as a journalist for the better.

Do you have a shopping list of interviewees left of big names that you find interesting that you want to interview and haven't done so yet? Is it a hierarchy thing where you say, well, I won't go as low as Jesus, but I'll go God as it were or is it more about something about their circumstances where there might be

an unknown, something unbelievable has happened to them? Is there a shopping list, is the short of the question?

The shopping list is not really... I'd love to suggest that I have an exotic and surprising shopping list, but it's a pretty obvious one. I think if you were to try and guess the names on my shopping list, you wouldn't be far wrong. Obviously, I didn't do either of the Obamas. That's a great regret that I hope will be corrected at some point. Either of the Trumps would do me fine. In fact, Ivanka as well. Any of the Trumps would work for me at the moment. They're sort of fairly, fairly obvious ones. I've never done Rihanna. I love to do Rihanna. There are certain kind of huge global juggernaut superstars where, of course, if the desk would ring me in half an hour and say, we've got an interview with Beyonce, I wouldn't-

You'd say busy with me and turn it down obviously.

Exactly. I wouldn't say I'm washing my hair but I wouldn't be particularly excited to do... The shopping list isn't just a question of the size of the stars. That doesn't determine who gets on the list or not. Sometimes there have been slightly obscure people that I've been obsessed with. One of my all time favourite interviewees is somebody almost would have heard of. A guy called Michael Alig who had been a club kid in Manhattan in the '90s and rather come to grief with ketamine and ended up somewhat absentmindedly killing and dismembering his neighbourhood drug dealer, who was sort of a friend and then dissolving his body in the bath in acid. There's a film made about him starring Macaulay Culkin called, I think Party Monster. I was always fascinated and intrigued by him and ended up interviewing him in Attica prison and I found him completely and utterly compelling and riveting, much more than I think I would doing Beyonce, but I'll tell you the one who's not a huge star nor a weird club kid murderer, who I'm frustrated to have never got a chance to interview and I hold out hope. I've got quite trashy tastes. Simon Cowell. I'd love to do Simon Cowell, but for reasons unbeknown to me, it's not happening. It never has done, but I hope it will.

Last question then if I may and I don't ask this of any other interviewee, but obviously the tables have turned this time and you're in the hot seat this time. What's it been like? Also, if you don't mind me asking, how have I been? Could you give me some notes on how I can improve, given that you're... I'm Daniel's son in karate kid, but you're Mr. Miyagi.

I don't get either of those cultural references. I'm sorry.

Was I any good?

Was I any good, that I understand. Paul, you wouldn't ask the question if you didn't know that the answer was yes, clearly. You're an absolute natural at this. I'll tell you the thing that's frustrated me throughout this, I wish we were sitting in a room opposite each other.

You don't want to. I've got hideous facial features. Have you ever seen the elephant man? It might put you off. Trust me. The question was in two parts.

Obviously, my narcissism aside, given that I lead on, was it good? What's it like to be in the hot seat yourself? Has this giving you slightly more of an insight on what it's like or did you already know that?

I've been interviewed a few times. It definitely gets less odd the more you do it, for sure. I'm not joking about wishing we were in the room though, for the same reason that I feel that I miss an enormous amount of cues when I'm trying to interview somebody not sitting in the same room as them. I feel the same way really, when I'm talking to you. It's a disconcerting thing to speak into a void if you're not particularly used to being interviewed because it's just odd to have a conversation with somebody when you can't see them. I mean, obviously people talk on the phone all the time, but we don't know each other. It's different being interviewed. I've been struck how many times in the course of this conversation, I thought, God, I wish we were in the room. I hadn't anticipated that would happen and that's only reconfirmed to me in my impatience for time when all print interviews can be conducted in the same room again, because I do think something gets lost in translation down the line somewhere. I think the thing that I'm struck by about you is what you're trying to do all the time is make connections, make sparks, build jokes, just put those kind of little lattices of jokes back and forth, a sense of recognition or connection. That's what, as an interviewee, puts me at my ease. Absolutely 100%. I'm noticing you're doing that the whole time and trying to get tips on how you do it because I think it's the absolute key to this entire process. Otherwise you might as well just exchange written questions and answers, right? It's about those little incidental moments in a conversation that... It's interesting. When I transcribe an interview, I transcribe everything verbatim. Other interviewers don't do that and it's a very wasteful process because in the course of an hour's interview, the interviewee will say at least 12,000 words, of which many of them will actually appear with inverted commas around them on the page. I mean, 1000? Maybe 1500 and the others are all dead, but one of the reasons why I like to transcribe it all is because you notice the little tiny exchanges that are inconsequential, that you're never going to quote, but that were like the scaffolding that supported the conversation, that built up to the point where the interviewee then tells you something meaningful. What may sound like low grade inconsequential banter in the process of an interview, I think it's absolutely key to holding the whole thing up and you are absolutely brilliant at that. Yeah, we're taking tips at your little bits of scaffolding because that's what holds the whole thing up.

To be honest, I've just viewed this as free training. I'm a Yorkshire man. We're said to be like Scotsman, just not as generous and I thought, well, I'm not going to shell out 500 quid for a master class on how to [crosstalk 01:10:44], when I can get Decker off of the Sunday times until we've run out for an hour and it has been an absolute master class in interviewing and I'm hugely grateful. I mean, Decca, if I could compliment you, most of our interviews last between 50 minutes and 55 minutes and if I was any good at this, I would have brought this to a close about 20 minutes ago, but what you've been saying is so interesting and so engaging, that-

Well, that's a relief.

... I've indulged myself and hopefully our listeners in making this slightly longer than usual. Thank you ever so much for your time and I really, really do

appreciate it.

Well, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.