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Week 5 Reading

APA referencing

Terkel, S., & Parker, T. (2016). Interviewing an interviewer. In R. Perks & A. Thomson (Eds.), *The oral history reader* (3rd ed., pp. 147–152). Routledge.

Referencing for family history

Studs Terkel & Tony Parker, 'Interviewing an interviewer', in Robert Perks & Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The oral history reader*, 3rd edition, Routledge, Oxon, 2016, pp. 147–152.

Studs Terkel with Tony Parker

INTERVIEWING AN INTERVIEWER

Louis 'Studs' Terkel (1912–2008), iconic US oral historian and broadcaster, the author of many best-selling books, is here interviewed by Tony Parker, often described as Britain's own 'Studs', in an extract from Parker's oral biography, *Studs Terkel: A Life in Words* (1997, pp. 163–70), published after Parker's death in 1996. With a century of experience between them, two veterans of the tape-recorded interview reflect on good technique: asking questions, establishing rapport, and the importance of silences. The style is discursive and vibrates with the shared enthusiasm of unobtrusive and respectful listening. The Studs Terkel Radio Archive – some 5,000 interviews recorded for his daily Chicago WFMT radio show between 1952 and 1997 – is online at <http://studsterkel.org>. Copyright © 1997 HarperCollins. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

YOU'RE COLUMBUS, YOU'RE SETTING out onto the unknown sea. There are no maps, because no one's been there before. You're an explorer, a discoverer. It's exciting – and it's scary, it frightens you. It frightens the person you're going to interview too. Remember that. Where in the radio interview you start level in confidence, in knowing where you're going, in the one-to-one interview you start level in the unconfidence, in not knowing where you're going.

There aren't any rules. You do it your own way. You experiment. You try this, you try that. With one person one way's the best, with another person another. Stay loose, stay flexible. Think about your lead-in, about whether it's going to be into the person or into the subject. One I sometimes use is 'Tell me where I am, and who I'm talking to.' That's quite a good one, because it lets me follow up. When they've said where we are 'and you're talking to John Doe,' I say 'And who's John Doe?' And if they start telling you, well then you're on your way.

I don't know how a tape recorder works. Not even the simplest one that's ever been invented. And I don't mean the machinery inside it either, I mean all of it. I don't know how to open it, I don't know how to put in the cassette, which way up it goes, how to close the lid when it's in, which is the button to press to get it to start recording, which is the button to press to make it stop. None of it, I don't know any of it. Some people say to me 'Why don't you learn?'

Asking me why I don't learn is missing the point, I don't learn because I'm nervous of the machine. If I press the button and the wheels are going round and I can see the tape's moving, that doesn't make any difference, I'm still nervous because I don't know whether it's recording what's being said, or whether I'm recording over something else that's already there and losing that, or what.

Are you with me? What am I describing? I'm describing one of my biggest assets. Its name is ineptitude. Why's it an asset? Well, would you be frightened of a little old guy who wants to tape-record a conversation with you – *and he can't even work his tape recorder?* We won't go into what you might feel about him, but the one thing you wouldn't for sure feel is scared.

So it's a bonus. I'm not up there on Mount Olympus, I'm not the Messiah with the microphone, I'm just another human being. I don't want anyone to be in awe of me. I don't mind what they feel so long as it's not scared.

Sometimes that way I can get more out of it too. I don't overplay it, but I'll often accompany the fumbling around with a question. 'Heh, can you tell me if I've got this OK now, is this thing working OK?' That helps to ease the tension. It might even bring a smile or a laugh. So what's being done by that is this: you're asking for help, making it into you-and-them-together on the same side against the machine. You can't pretend though, it's got to be genuine: no tricks, no deceptions. You've really not got to know what you're doing. That's why I'm always going to stay that way. Blessed be the ignorant: they'll often get the breaks.

So now we come around to the questioning. The first thing I'd say to any interviewer is . . . 'Listen.' It's the second thing I'd say too, and the third, and the fourth. 'Listen . . . listen . . . listen . . . listen.' And if you do, people will talk. They'll *always* talk. Why? Because no one has ever listened to them before in all their lives. Perhaps they've not even listened to themselves. You don't have to agree with them or disagree with them, all of that's irrelevant. Don't push them, don't rush them, don't chase them or harass them with getting on to the next question. Take your time. Or no, let's put it the right way: let them take *their* time.

And I'll tell you something else you should always have in your mind, and remind yourself constantly about it – they're doing you a favor. This person you're talking to is entrusting you with their memories and their hopes, their realities and their dreams. So remember that, handle them carefully, they're holding out to you fragile things.

I'm thinking of two quotations. One of them's from James Joyce, the other one's from Thomas Hardy. James Joyce's is from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I think. 'Tell me about Anna Livia. . . .' How does it go? 'Tell me about Anna Livia, I want to hear all about Anna Livia. We all know Anna Livia, tell me all, tell me now.' Anna Livia – the River Liffey running through Dublin, the river of life. Tell me about the river of life. The Thomas Hardy one, I'm not sure which of his books it's in. 'This man's silence is wonderful to listen to.'

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So there we have our two basic texts for interviewers, don't we? Tell me about the river of life, and listen to the silence. I'd say listen and wait are the two essentials, with watch and be aware a close third. A laugh can be a cry of pain, and a silence can be a shout. And God knows how many different meanings there are to a smile. It's what a person says and how they say it, and where they're saying it to – to you, to themselves, to the past, the future, the outside world. Those are the basics.

If you've lost touch, or you're unsure of where you're at and how things stand, I think a 'How?' or a 'Why?' question can be very harmful and destructive: and hurtful too, too much of a jolt. I said when we talked about radio, this isn't an inquisition. It's an exploration, usually an exploration into the past. So I think the gentlest question is the best one. And the gentlest is 'And what happened then?' Maybe you'll get an answer, maybe you'll get a shrug. And boy, what an answer that is! A shrug means I don't know – or I don't care – or I don't care to know – or what the hell does it matter anyway? But it's a signal, isn't it? And what does the signal say? It says 'Shut up and keep still.'

Interviewing? Easy? Ask me another one? Exciting? Ah, you're right on the button with that one. Is it exciting? I'll say it is, yes!

– Why me? That's what they say, isn't it, Why me, why'd you want to talk to me, I'm not important? I like that, I like to hear it, it's a good start. The uncelebrated person – oh boy, how many of those have we missed! There weren't any guys around with tape recorders when they were building the pyramids, when they sailed the Spanish Armada, when they fought the battle of Waterloo. We've spoken of this before haven't we, yeah, about how much we've lost? Bertolt Brecht said it, in *Mother Courage* was it, 'Who built Thebes?' What we've lost. We'll do the best we can, right, to make up for the epiphanic moments, the things that really mattered, that are gone forever. What was it like to be a certain person then? What's it like to be a certain person now? That's what I'm trying to capture. I'm looking for the uniqueness in each person. And I'm not looking for some such abstraction as *the* truth, because it doesn't exist. What I'm looking for is what is the truth for *them*.

The word I'm looking for is 'curious.' I don't have to stay curious, I *am* curious, about all of it, all the time, 'Curiosity never killed this cat' – that's what I'd like as my epitaph. It won't kill me, no sir. I breathed it, it's what gave me life, the older I got the more curious I became. What's happening, what's going on, what's it like, what does it mean? They're big questions for everyone.

'Do you work to a framework?' they sometimes ask me. And sometimes I answer yes and sometimes I answer no. What I'm trying to put over is that there aren't any rules, each tune's a new beginning, right? That's what's exciting about it. Isn't it, isn't that what's exciting about it? If it wasn't, then you'd be better working for a market research company so that at the end you could say 'I asked a hundred people the same questions, and these are the results.' It's the uncertainty, the not knowing where you're going that's the best part of it. People aren't boring. Interviewing people is discovering people, and one of the biggest thrills you can get is discovering that somebody who sounds boring isn't boring at all.

One thing I'll never do is write my questions **down**. I'll not do it because it's false and it's unnatural and it's not what you do **when** you're having a conversation and it'll make them feel – here's that word again – interrogated. I want them to talk about what they want to talk about in the way they want to talk about it, or not

talk about it, in the way they want to stay silent about it. I'll keep them to the theme — age or the Depression or work or whatever — but that's all.

How do you get someone started? I suppose that's the one people ask me most often. Where do you begin? Well, childhood's a good place sometimes, that'll often open the sluice gates. But you've got to think out the wording first if you're going to use it, it's got to be something that requires a bit of thought from them to answer it. 'How was it when you were a kid?' I think that's quite a good one. I think it's better than something more simple like 'Did you have a happy childhood?' which they can answer yes or no. I try not to use questions which can be answered that way, you know, with a yes or no. I try to use ones that'll lead to a follow-up. An example? OK, off the top of my head. 'Do you like Chinese food?' 'Yes,' 'Do you like Indian food?' 'No.' So where's that got you? Nowhere. What's better is 'Which do you like better, Chinese food or Indian food?' Because whatever the answer is, even if it's 'I don't like either of them' you're straight in then with your follow-up — 'Why?'

And people's answers aren't always direct. So don't be admonishing about it. Accept it, and think about it afterwards. We've talked another time, haven't we, about silences and nods and shrugs and things of that kind? Well sometimes the indirect answer that the person *thinks* is the answer is more informative than the straight answer. I said to a guy once, he was a retired meat boner in a factory, and he was telling me how he started work there when he was thirteen, and he said something like 'And I tell you, when I was eighteen, I was in charge of a whole production line.' And the way he said it made me say 'You sound like it surprised you, why was that?' And he said 'Well, me!' So I let it go. Then he said it again about something else — 'Well, me!' And a third time. 'Well, me!' I was young in those days, and I didn't realize what he was telling me — until he added two more words to it, and then I knew what it was. 'Well, me — a darkie!'

People's questions too, they can be signals to you. If you can answer them, do. Demystify the experience in advance for them, if they ask you what you want to talk to them about. But they might be saying there's something *they'd* like to talk about, something they *hope* you're going to ask about, so ask them if there is. And the best part's the detail that comes out, that you couldn't imagine because you never knew it was there. Perhaps the person didn't know it was there either.

The questioning's important — but what's the most important is that it shouldn't *sound* like questioning. What time did you get up yesterday morning, what time did you go to bed, what did you do in between — none of that. So tell me, how was yesterday, that's the right way of doing it. Making it sound like you're having a conversation, not carrying on an inquisition, right? There's that word 'inquisition' again. I'd say that to everyone and go on saying it — keep away from it, don't be the examiner, be the interested enquirer.

There was this black woman one time, I saw her standing in the street, with two or three of her kids round her and she was looking in a shop window. And as I'm walking by, I look to see what it is she's looking at — and you know what? There's nothing in the window, she's looking in an empty shopwindow — looking at nothing. So naturally I'm curious — *naturally* I'm curious — so I say 'Excuse me ma'am — but what are you looking at?' She doesn't seem to mind being spoken to by a stranger, and she doesn't turn her head around to see who's asking her or anything, and after a moment or so she says 'Oh' she says, 'Oh, dreams, I'm just looking at dreams.'

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So I've got my tape recorder and I switch it on and I say 'Good dreams, bad dreams . . .?' And she starts to talk. Then she talks a little bit more, and a little bit more. And her kids are playing around her, and they can see I'm tape-recording what their mom is saying, and when she stops talking after eight, maybe ten minutes or so, one of them says 'Heh mom, can we listen to what you said?' And I ask her if it's OK with her and she says yes, so I play it back and she listens to it too. And when it's over, she gives a little shake of her head and she looks at me, and she says 'Well until I heard that, I never knew I felt that way.' 'I never knew I felt that way!' Isn't that incredible? The way I look at it, it's like being a gold prospector. You find this precious metal in people when you least expect it.

And the contrasts and the rewards, well those come in all different shapes and sizes. I remember one week I was in Pittsburgh, I'd gone there to get material for a series of interviews I was doing on how working people spent their days. I'd two introductions – one to a college lecturer and the other to a guy who worked in an auto plant and lived in a mobile home with his wife on the outskirts of a small town nearby.

I met him in a cheap diner, we had something to eat, and then we sat outside on a bench under some trees because it was summer and warm. All I said to him was something like 'Tell me about a typical working day for you, how it would begin.' I don't remember now why I used those particular words: they felt right, I guess.

'OK sir' he said, 'well I'll tell you. I have one of those little electric radio alarm clocks, and when it goes off and I hear the music playing, my wife's lying beside me and she's still asleep so I give her a kiss. That's routine you understand. Then I get out of bed and I go to the bathroom, and I wash and I comb my one hair and I clean my teeth and I shave. Routine **again** you understand. When I step out of the bathroom by **this** time the radio's woken my wife up, and she has a cup of coffee waiting for me. Some days I drink it, and some days I drink only a half of it. All depends on my mood you see. Then I get myself dressed and my wife makes me two pieces of toast. So I eat the two pieces of toast, but some days I only eat the one. All depends on my mood again you see. Then I kiss my wife again, that's more routine you understand. My wife gives me my lunch bucket, I get into my car and I set out to drive to the plant. And I've got to get there on time, because you see sir, if you get one minute late, they dock you for one whole hour. And well sir, between my home and the plant there's nine railroad tracks I have to cross – and at that time of morning there's a lot of freight trains go by. So if get to any one of those tracks at just a half a minute off the wrong time, I have to wait maybe fifteen twenty minutes or so while a hundred cars go by. And that means I am late for my work.' Well the way he told that me, by the time he'd finished I'm sitting on the edge of the bench! So I thought boy, that's some way of getting a guy started, I'm going to use exactly those same words again tomorrow with the college professor.

Which I did. I said to him 'Tell me about a typical working day for you, how it would begin?' You know what he said? He said 'Well, a typical day would be I'd get up, have my breakfast, go to my class, and since it's Aristotle's *Poetics* we're studying, I'd talk about it.' I said 'You'd talk about it? What would you say?' He said 'Oh this and that.' And that was all I got out of him! That was it! Nothing!

I guess the guy who lived in the mobile home had spoiled me. You can't be too prepared for an interview, because you don't know what the person you're talking to's going to say. But you've got to be ready for anything – and I wasn't ready for

the unloquacious professor. In a way it's like jazz, you've got to improvise. Have a skeletal framework, but be ready to improvise within that.

The third, and it's *the* most important part of the work, is the editing of the transcripts of the recorded material, the cutting and shaping of it, into a readable result. The way I look at it is I suppose something like the way a sculptor looks at a block of stone: inside it there's a shape which he'll find and he'll reveal it by chipping away with a mallet and chisel. I've got a mountain of tapes, and somewhere inside them there's a book. But how do you cut without distorting the meaning? Well, you've got to be skillful and respectful and you can reorder and rearrange to highlight, and you can juxtapose: but the one thing you can't do is invent, make up, have people say what they didn't say.

I work from transcripts, but all the way through I keep on playing back sections of each interview so I'll have a constant reminder in my head of how they sounded when they said what they said. The most painful choice to make always is not who you're going to have in the book, but who you're going to cut out. Sometimes it feels like casting a play – you've got four equally good people for one character – only in the case of a book its four people representing one point of view. It's a tough decision to make.

Some things are easy to remove, like 'ums' and 'ers,' or you think they're going to be until you listen to them and you realize that that's how that person talks, and if you take all of them out, you lose the reality of the speech pattern of that person. Or someone else'll have a habit of repeating phrases – 'Yes, that's how it was, that's how it was,' say – and you've got to watch out that you keep those.

And length too of course, that's another crucial thing. You might think what the person's saying is very interesting. It might be to you. But it's got to be interesting to the reader, so keep an eye on that. I want a reader to feel they'd like to hear more, so the principle I try and hold on to is when in doubt, cut.

From sixty pages of transcript I reduce to eight. I talk while I'm writing: I talk *what* I'm writing. That way I try and get the sound and the tempo and the rhythm. I take out nearly all my questions because I don't want to stand in the way between the reader and the person who's talking. People aren't boring. When you talk to them, they may have a monotonous voice and you think they sound boring. But when you see their words transcribed, they read great. Other times it's the other way round – they're lively when they talk, but it doesn't come out that way on the printed page. So you have to exercise care. Oh boy – interviewing – isn't it great?

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