

Something Instead of Nothing

1 For the first twelve years of my adult life, I sustained a professional existence by asking questions to strangers and writing about what they said. "Why did you do it?" I would ask these strangers. It did not matter what it was. "What were you thinking while you did that? Did it satisfy you? What does it mean to be satisfied? Do you consider yourself to be famous? How does it feel to be famous? How did this experience change you? What elements didn't change? What will never change? What drives you? Are you lying to me right now? Why should I care about what you are saying? Is this all a construction? Are you constructed? Who constructed you? What was their purpose? Does God exist? Why or why not? Thank you very much. It was great meeting you in the lobby of this unnecessarily expensive hotel." This has been a tremendous way to earn a living. Who wouldn't enjoy getting paid for being curious? Journalism allows almost anyone to direct questions they would never ask of their own friends at random people; since the ensuing dialogue exists for commercial purposes, both parties accept an acceleration of intimacy. People give emotional responses, but those emotions are projections. The result (when things go well) is a dynamic, adversarial, semi-real conversation. I am at ease with this. If given a choice between interviewing someone or talking to them "for real," I prefer the former; I don't like having the social limitations of tact imposed upon my day-to-day interactions and I don't enjoy talking to most people more than once or twice in my lifetime.

2 For the past five years, I've spent more time being interviewed than conducting interviews with other people. I am not complaining about this, nor am I proud of it — it's just the way things worked out, mostly by chance. But the experience has been confusing. Though I always understand why people ask me the same collection of questions, I never know why I answer them. Frankly, I don't know why anyone answers anything. The obvious explanation is that the interviewee is hoping to promote a product or a concept (or the "concept of themselves," which is its own kind of product), but that's reductive and often untrue; once a media entity makes the decision to conduct and produce an interview with a particular somebody, the piece is going to exist regardless of how the subject responds to the queries. The interviewee can say anything, even if those sentiments contradict reality. They can deliver nothing but clichés, but the story will still run. On three occasions I've consciously (and blatantly) attempted to say boring things during an interview in the hope of killing the eventual article. It only worked once. But this type of behavior is rare. Most of the time, I pretend to be interesting. I try to frame my response in the context in which the question was asked, and I try to say things I haven't said before. But I have no clue as to why I do this (or why anyone else does, either). During the summer of 2008, I was interviewed by a Norwegian magazine writer named Erik Moller Solheim. He was good at his job. He knew a lot of

trivia about Finland's military history. We ate fried pork knees and drank Ur-Krostitzer beer. But in the middle of our playful conversation, I was suddenly paralyzed by an unspoken riddle I could not answer: Why was I responding to this man's questions? My books are not translated into Norwegian. If the journalist sent me a copy of his finished article, I could not read a word of it. I don't even know what the publication's name (*Dagens Naeringsliv*) is supposed to mean. I will likely never go to Norway, and even if I did, the fact that I was interviewed for this publication would have no impact on my time there. No one would care. The fjords would be underwhelmed.

As such, I considered the possible motives for my actions:

1. I felt I had something important to say. Except I did not. No element of our interaction felt important to me. If anything, I felt unqualified to talk about the things the reporter was asking me. I don't have that much of an opinion about why certain Black Metal bands burn down churches.

2. It's my job. Except that it wasn't. I wasn't promoting anything. In fact, the interaction could have been detrimental to my career, were I to have inadvertently said something insulting about the king of Norway. Technically, there was more downside than upside.

3. I have an unconscious, unresolved craving for attention. Except that this feels inaccurate. It was probably true twenty years ago, but those desires have waned. Besides, who gives a fuck about being famous in a country I'll never visit? Why would that feel good to anyone? How would I even know it was happening?

4. I had nothing better to do. This is accurate, but not satisfactory.

5. I'm a nice person. Unlikely.

6. When asked a direct question, it's human nature to respond. This, I suppose, is the most likely explanation. It's the crux of *Frost/Nixon*. But if this is true, why is it true? What is the psychological directive that makes an unanswered question discomfiting?

Why do people talk?

3 Why do people talk? Why do people answer the questions you ask them? Is there a unifying force that prompts people to respond?

Errol Morris: Probably not, except possibly that people feel this need to give an account of themselves. And not just to other people, but to themselves. Just yesterday, I was being interviewed by a reporter from the *New York Observer*, and we were talking about whether or not people have privileged access to their own minds.

Privileged access?

EM: My mind resides somewhere inside of myself. That being the case, one would assume I have privileged access to it. In theory, I should be able to ask myself questions and get different answers than I would from other people, such as you. But I'm not sure we truly have privileged access to our own minds. I don't think we have any idea who we are. I think we're engaged in a constant battle to figure out who we are. I sometimes think of

interviews as some oddball human relationship that's taking place in a laboratory setting. I often feel like a primatologist.

Do you feel like you know the people that you interview? Because I feel as though I never do. It seems like a totally fake relationship.

EM: I don't feel like I know myself, let alone the people I interview. I might actually know the people I interview *better* than I know myself. A friend of mine once said that you can never trust a person who doesn't talk much, because how else do you know what they're thinking? Just by the act of being willing to talk about oneself, the person is revealing something about who they are.

But what is the talker's motive? Why did you decide to talk to the *New York Observer*? Why are you talking to me right now?

EM: Well, okay. Let's use the example of Robert McNamara. Why does McNamara feel the need to talk to me — or to anyone — at this point in his life? Because there's a very strong human desire to do so. It might be to get approval from someone, even if that person is just me. It might even be to get a sense of condemnation from people. Maybe it's just programmed into us as people. McNamara also had this weird "approach-avoidance" thing: He agreed to do the interview because he assumed I was part of the promotion of his [then new] book. I called him around the same time his book was coming out, and he thought it was just part of that whole deal. When he realized it was not, he became apprehensive and said he didn't think he was going to do it. But then he did, and it went on for well over a year. In fact, I continued to interview him for a long time after that movie was finished, just because I found it very interesting.

But why did McNamara keep talking?

EM: He said he enjoyed talking to me. That was his explanation.

2A While working for newspapers during the 1990s, I imagined that being interviewed by other reporters would be fun. I assumed answering questions would be easier than asking them. This proved completely untrue. The process of being interviewed is much more stressful than the process of interrogating someone. If you make a mistake while you're interviewing someone else, there is no penalty (beyond the fact that it will be harder to write a complete story). But if you make a mistake while being interviewed — if you admit something you'd prefer to keep secret, or if you flippantly answer a legitimately serious question, or if you thoughtlessly disparage a peer you barely know, or if you answer the phone while on drugs — that mistake will inevitably become the focus of whatever is written. As a reporter, you live for those anecdotal mistakes. Mistakes are where you find hidden truths. But as a person, anecdotal mistakes define the experience of being misunderstood; anecdotal mistakes are used to make metaphors that explain the motives of a person who is sort of like you, but not really.

4 "The people who come on *This American Life* have often never heard of our show, or have never even heard of NPR, so they have no idea what the

conversation is going to be. It's very abstract. And we're on the frontier of doing journalism that's so personal, no normal journalist would even consider it. That's part of it. It's hard to resist whenever someone really wants to listen to you. That's a very rare thing in most of our lives. I'm a pretty talky person who deals with lots of sensitive people every single day, but if someone really listens to me and cares about what I say for ten minutes in the course of a day — that's a lot. Some days that doesn't happen at all."

[These are the words of Ira Glass, host of *This American Life*, the tent-pole program for most National Public Radio stations. It was later turned into a television show for Showtime. Glass has an immediately recognizable interviewing style: amicable, intellectual, nerdy, and sincere.]

"Sometimes I will be talking to journalism students and they will ask how I get people to open up to me, and the answer is that I'm legitimately curious about what those people are saying. I honestly care about the stories they are telling. That's a force that talks to the deepest part of us. There is something that happens during therapy when the therapy session is going well: If someone is talking to a therapist about something unresolved — something they don't understand — and they suddenly start talking about it, it just flows out in this highly narrative, highly detailed form. Most people are not articulate about everything in their life, but they are articulate about the things they're still figuring out."

[What makes Glass and *TAL* successful is the instantaneously emotive quality of the work — the stories told on the show are typically minor moments in people's lives, but they hinge on how those seemingly minor moments are transformative. The smallest human details are amplified to demonstrate realizations about what it means to feel profound things. I ask Glass why his interview subjects trust him, particularly since their stories will inevitably be used on a radio show, mostly for the entertainment of people they'll never meet.]

"They can tell by my questions that I'm really, really interested and really, really thinking about what they're saying, in a way that only happens in nature when you're falling in love with someone. When else does that experience happen? If you're falling in love with someone, you have conversations where you're truly revealing yourself...I think small intimacy that doesn't extend beyond a single conversation is still intimacy. Even if the basis behind that conversation is purely commercial, there can be moments of real connection with another person. In an interview, we have the apparatus of what generates intimacy — asking someone to bare himself or herself. And if you're the person being asked the questions, and if you're normal, it's hard not to have it work on your heart."

[Since Glass understands that interviewing is an inherently manipulative process, I ask what motivates him to talk whenever a reporter asks him a question.]

"I really try to do a good job for the interviewer. The first time I was ever interviewed was in the mid-nineties. It was for *Chicago* magazine, about the radio show. I had never been interviewed before. It was a woman reporter, and she was very experienced. But I had never been interviewed before, even though I had conducted and edited thousands of radio interviews over the previous seventeen years. I experienced the entire interview as her: She would ask me a question, and I would listen to myself giving the answer, and I would think, 'That's not going to work. That's not going to work. That's not the lead.' I was editing my interview as I produced it. I related more to her than I did to myself. That happened for a long time. But there is a vestige in that. I want to give a good quote. I so often demand a good quote from other people, so I want to do the same for other reporters. I want to be sincere and actually answer the question I've been asked, and I want to say it in a way that's sparkly and interesting. I want to get an A in the class. The whole thing is a projection."

[I ask Glass how much of his own self-identity is based around being good at interviewing other people. He says, "None at all," but that it was when he was younger. He offhandedly mentions that it's difficult to discuss his self-identity. He says his self-image is not very good. I ask him what his self-image is.]

"Well, this kind of takes us outside the realm of what you were originally asking about...I'm not sure if I want to talk about this, but...*[pause]*...People who really know me, there's probably not a huge gap between my own self-image and their perception. I mean, I don't think of myself as a bad person...I don't know how to answer this...*[very long pause]*...I'm coming out of a four-year period where I was so overwhelmed by what I had to do that I don't really feel like *anybody* anymore. I used to completely identify myself through the work I did. It completely absorbed me. But these last four years have been so frantic that I've barely been able to work on things that are my own. A lot of what is on the show is now completely done by other people, and it's great work — but then I have the added weird experience of getting credit for things I haven't done. Since the TV show started and I've really worked two jobs nonstop for four years, I've kind of forgotten what I used to be like. I feel like I'm doing hand-to-hand combat with editing and writing all day long, and I don't even feel *anything* about it. This is a huge problem, and I'm trying to deal with it."

[I ask him if the expansion of *This American Life* to television — and the growth of the *TAL* brand in the mainstream culture — has made him a less happy person.]

"Yes."

[I ask if he likes the idea of that information eventually appearing in a book. I ask if the public recognition of this realization will make him feel better.]
"No, I won't feel better about it. I'll feel bad about it. But I'm trying to do right by the person who's interviewing me."

4A I don't agree with Ira Glass. I used to, but I don't anymore. He makes a valid point, and I certainly understand why he would argue that it's hypocritical for a journalist to decline answering another reporter's question; the degree of empathy Glass feels toward rival interviewers indicates that he's a giving person. But I never feel this way. I don't feel it's my obligation to respond to anything, and as a reporter, I never felt anyone else owed me a response. And yet I still provide answers to every question I encounter, even if I don't know what I should say.

Sometimes I openly lie.

This morning, I was interviewed by a reporter from a magazine based in New York. He was asking me about a novel I'd written, specifically about one passage where a character says something negative about human nature. The reporter said to me, "This character sounds exactly like you speaking. That specific sentiment sounds like something you would say." And he was correct. In this specific instance, the interior thoughts of the character were an exact reflection of my personal thoughts about the world at large. The reporter was totally right. But I refuted his suggestion. "No, that's not true," I said. "I don't feel that way at all."

Now, why did I do this?

When I wrote those words on my computer, my goal was for every reader to come to the same conclusion that this reporter did. My intention was that people would read this sentence and instantly recognize that the character was a proxy for my own worldview and that this narrative device would allow me to directly write about the way I felt. But I didn't want to admit that. I didn't want to say, "Yes, this is how I feel." I just wanted people to *suspect* that this was true. So when I was asked if this sentence represented who I was, I said no. In other words, I gave an answer that completely undercut my own artistic intentions — and if asked this same question again, I would repeat the behavior. I feel no compulsion to do right by the people who interview me. In fact, I sometimes want to do wrong, even if the only person who suffers is myself.

3A How skeptical are you about the things people tell you during interviews?

Errol Morris: I'm skeptical about *everything* I hear. But I'm not in the business of deciding what is or isn't true, or in figuring out which accounts are accurate and which are inaccurate. I'm in the business of creating a story, and that is something different. When I did *The Thin Blue Line*, there were all these separate first-person interviews that I eventually stitched together into one story line. I found all these so-called eyewitnesses who had testified at the trial, and I interviewed them one by one by one. I was

principally interested in two questions. The first was: How reliable was their testimony in this capital murder case? The second was: Who in the hell is this person that I am talking to? If you have this presumption that every person sees the world in a different way, how do you capture that? What you're trying to do with any interview is abstract the way a person sees the world.

What's more interesting to you: someone who lies consciously, someone who lies unconsciously, or someone who tells a relatively mundane version of the truth?

EM: Conscious mendacity! Actually, that's a very difficult question. The whole idea of lying as it applies to personhood is an important problem. I'll give you an example: I read a piece about modern forms of lie detection — methods that go beyond the polygraph. The writer's idea was that we can actually record activity inside the brain that proves who is or who isn't lying. It suggests that the brain is some kind of 'reality recorder' and that we know when we are lying. But I think those kinds of lies represent a very small piece of the pie. I think the larger sect of liars are people who think they are telling the truth, but who really have no idea what the truth is. So the deeper question is, what's more important: narrative consistency or truth? I think we're always trying to create a consistent narrative for ourselves. I think truth always takes a backseat to narrative. Truth has to sit at the back of the bus.

That's interesting, but I disagree. I think truth tends to usurp narrative every single time. If it turned out that even one person in your nonfiction film *Vernon, Florida* had been a hired actor, your entire career would be called into question. Or look at someone like James Frey: Here was a guy who wrote a book that everyone seemed to appreciate as a narrative construction — but the moment they realized it was fake, his talent as a stylist no longer mattered. The perception of its value was dependent on the veracity of the story.

EM: When you talk about a James Frey-type of situation, you're talking about a person who has been outed. That was more like, "We caught you! We caught you! And we as a society are going to make you pay for deceiving us!" But that's an egregious example. Most lying is just an accepted part of the world...if you don't want to know something, can you not know it? Can you convince yourself that you *don't* know it? Can you actually not know it, in some real sense? Can you form a barrier to knowing things?

Probably. But doesn't that change when a conversation becomes "an interview"? Does the import of the truth change when the situation is specifically designed for the purposes of truth finding?

EM: That's a crazy idea. Why does an interview change anything? Have I sworn to tell the truth? Have I put my hand on a Bible?

No, but the difference is distribution. If you were to make a film about me, I'm not just talking to you. I'm talking to a public audience.

EM: But what if you have no idea what the truth is? What if you're convinced that your lies are what really happened?

I wouldn't classify that as lying. I'd classify that as being wrong.

EM: I'm a great believer in self-deception. If you asked me what makes the world go round, I would say self-deception. Self-deception allows us to create a consistent narrative for ourselves that we actually believe. I'm not saying that the truth doesn't matter. It does. But self-deception is how we survive. I remember this crazy-ass journalist from Dallas who once interviewed me, and he asked if I Mirandized my documentary subjects before putting them on film. I was like, "What?" I should read my interview subjects their Miranda rights because their words might be used in the court of public opinion?

Well, that *is* crazy. But tell me this — have you ever been in a situation where you were interviewing someone, and you knew the subject did not understand the consequences of what they were saying?

EM: All the time!

Is there an ethical problem with that?

EM: Is there an ethical problem with the possibility of people not knowing what they're saying? Or with *why* they're saying it?

No, a problem in the sense that a subject might not realize that this interview is going to galvanize how she's perceived. Or a problem in the sense that someone might be talking to you without realizing the consequence of what he's saying.

EM: Well, it's possible you're assigning too much importance to yourself. *[sarcastically]* "Do these people not realize that this interview is going to *transform* how they are seen by others? Do they not realize it will *transform* how they see themselves?" If people were entirely reasonable, they would avoid all interviews, all the time. But they don't.

And why don't they?

EM: Because perhaps something interesting will transpire. They think, "Maybe this person will present me in a way that will be interesting. Maybe this person will present me in a way that I would like to be seen."

4B During most of the 1980s and much of the '90s, Prince declined almost every interview request he received. On those rare occasions he granted an interview, he always made a curious demand: The reporter could not use a tape recorder or take written notes. The reporter just had to memorize whatever Prince happened to be saying that day. At the time, it was assumed that Prince did this because he was beavershit crazy and always wanted to be in a position to retract whatever was written about him.

However, his real motive was more reasonable and (kind of) brilliant: He

wanted to force the reporter to reflect only the *sense* of the conversation, as opposed to the specific phrases he elected to use. He was not concerned about being misquoted; he was concerned about being quoted accurately. Prince believed that he could represent himself better as an abstraction — his words could not be taken out of context *if there was no context*. He could only be presented as the sum total of whatever was said, devoid of specifics. Do I grant interviews because I want to be presented in a way that will be interesting? Maybe. Except that the things that would be most interesting to other people might be potentially humiliating to me. Do I want to be presented in a way that I would like to be seen? Of course, but "the way I would like to be seen" would almost certainly be an inaccurate, delusional depiction of who I actually am. It strikes me that the two objectives mentioned by Morris are inherently contradictory: Presenting a subject in an interesting way inevitably means said subject is unable to control how that perception will be received. The interviewee is not able to compose the way they want to be seen. Here again, it becomes easy to see the media savvy of Prince. By making it impossible to quote him directly, he was able to satisfy both of Morris's contradictory desires — he would always come across as interesting (in that the reporter would be forced to essentially fictionalize a narrative from a conversation that was almost impossible to reference), but he'd still be presented in the way he wanted to be seen (which is to say, enigmatically).

It was a good idea.

5 "If a question is interesting, it is very difficult to resist answering it, because you will usually find your own answer interesting to yourself. If you have any ego at all, or a desire to share your experience and thought processes, then you may also imagine your answer will be of interest to other people." This is Chris Heath talking (or, more accurately, this is Chris Heath writing — I posed my questions to him via e-mail). Heath has done hundreds of deep celebrity profiles for *GQ* and *Rolling Stone*, first emerging as a journalistic superstar during that brief, bizarre stretch of the middle nineties when *Details* was the most interesting magazine in America. "But that lure and appeal would quickly break down in a real conversation without a second factor: the person asking the question must be interested in hearing the answer. There's no single bigger reason why people answer questions. Here, of course, lies the biggest difference between a successful interviewer and an unsuccessful one: the successful one makes the interviewee feel as though he or she is interested in the answers. The unsuccessful interviewer — and I have sat in or listened to enough interviews to know, unfortunately, and disappointingly, how common they are — does not."

Taken at face value, Heath's analysis is obvious, undeniable, and Glass-like — it's hard to resist talking to someone who cares about what you are saying. It's a seductive experience, even if you're simply sitting next to

someone at a dinner party who happens to be an especially intriguing bozo. But there's a difference between being listened to by a stranger at a party and being listened to by Chris Heath, and everyone understands what that difference is: No matter how captivating Heath may seem, the conversation is happening for a practical, nonpersonal purpose. The banter may be pleasurable, but you're not bantering for pleasure.

Unless, of course, giving interviews to reporters is the closest you ever come to the kind of day-to-day dialogue normal people have all the time — and that's often the case for the superfamous. One of the underappreciated complexities to success is that it makes every interpersonal conversation unbalanced; I assume the only people Jennifer Aniston can comfortably talk with about her career problems are Courteney Cox and Lisa Kudrow (to anyone else, her problems would seem like bragging). In all likelihood, interviews are the only situations when a woman like Aniston can openly talk about the central issues occupying her mind.

"I detect that there's a prevalent notion in the media that it's next to impossible to interestingly interview a celebrity, because they do so many interviews that they're drained and leached dry of any interest or motivation," writes Heath. "I have a feeling that the opposite is more often true. Celebrities do so many short, pointless, bad interviews — weeks of talking in which it must be impossible to maintain the delusion that one is being understood or accurately depicted in any way — that when they find themselves in a conversation in which, maybe subconsciously, they feel the possibility of being somewhat understood, and that the reality of their life will be somewhat realistically portrayed, the interview may begin to feel less like wasted time and more like an antidote to all that other wasted time. And so when asked a good question, they'll answer."

But how does this apply to normal people? How does this affect people who didn't marry Brad Pitt or popularize a type of haircut?

"It's an uncomfortable leap, but this question led me to consider how different (or similar) that motivation is to people's desire to appear on *Jerry Springer*-type shows or in various reality TV situations," Heath continued.

"We are used to the idea of giving witness to one's life as an important and noble counterpoint to being unheard, especially when applied to people in certain disadvantaged, oppressed or unacceptable situations. But in a slightly more pathological way, I'm not sure that we aren't seeing the emergence of a society in which almost *everyone* who isn't famous considers themselves cruelly and unfairly unheard. As though being famous, and the subject of wide attention, is considered to be a fulfilled human being's natural state — and so, as a corollary, the cruelly unheard millions are perpetually primed and fired up to answer any and all questions in order to redress this awful imbalance."

There's a lot of truth in that last bit. I fear that most contemporary people are answering questions not because they're flattered by the attention;

they're answering questions because they feel as though they *deserve* to be asked. About everything. Their opinions are special, so they are entitled to a public forum. Their voice is supposed to be heard, lest their life become empty.

This, in one paragraph (minus technology), explains the rise of New Media.

4C Because this essay will appear in a book that I will have to promote through the media, reporters who interview me will ask questions about this essay. They will ask if I have come to understand why I (or anyone else) answer interview questions. I will initially say, "No." But I will still guess at the explanation, and my verbalized guess will go something like this: People answer questions because it feels stranger to do the opposite. And the next time I interview someone, I will try to remember this.

3B How different were your conversations with Robert McNamara when you weren't filming him? Is he a different person when he's not on camera? Are you a different person when you're not interviewing or being interviewed?

Errol Morris: That's a whole set of questions. One of the things that really interests me is that filming people for a movie has become very crazy. I usually have a crew of thirty people in the studio. That created a big question during the making of *The Thin Blue Line* — can you really investigate something with a camera? Are you able to hear something you would normally miss in a normal conversation? Are people going to disclose something to a camera with a bunch of strangers in the room? The self-serving answer for someone in my position is, of course, "Yes." I think that you can. I think something strange happens when you put a person in a formal interview setting and they realize they are expected to talk. *They do talk*. But why do people submit themselves to this? That's more complex. It's crazy. I mean, why am I talking to you right now?

That's precisely what I'm trying to figure out. With someone like McNamara, I can imagine a motive — he's a historic figure, and his identity is built around his life's work and the consequence of that work. But what about those people you interviewed in that *First Person* series for the Independent Film Channel? Those were nonfamous private citizens. Publicity got them nothing. There was a person you interviewed in an episode of *First Person* — Rick Rosner — whose personal story was that he purposely repeated his senior year in high school several times and then lost on the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. For him, what is the value of being interviewed?

EM: Well, Rick Rosner now tells other people that if they want to understand him, they should watch that one-hour program about his life that I made.

Why do you think he feels that way?

EM: I can't speak for Rick Rosner, but I can kind of imagine why he would like it. I imagine that he is a pretty complicated character who doesn't

understand himself that well. He's in the grip of all this *stuff* that he cannot control. So the interview allows him to scrutinize himself in a different way. There are two ways to look at this. There are two different models. The first model is that we all have this black box inside ourselves that is filled with our secrets, and we would never want to allow any interviewer to open that box. But the second model is that even we don't know what's inside that black box, and being interviewed allows us to open it and sort through the contents.

Do you enjoy being interviewed?

EM: I don't mind talking. I think talking has been very important to me. For a long time I had writer's block and all I could do was talk. Then I was able to make movies that involved other people talking. Recently I've started writing, and that's changed things. For a long time, I thought my constant talking was an impediment to my writing, but now I don't know if that was true or not. I'm envious of writers, because a writer leaves this trail of detritus. As a writer, you have this trail of writing that is an account of yourself and who you are. For years, I was deprived of that opportunity, because I couldn't write. So the talking was essential. It was a way to do something instead of nothing.