

# THE HUMBLE ART OF THE AWESOME INTERVIEW

By Paul Glader

John McCandlish Phillips was an award-winning journalist for The New York Times for 21 years (1952-1973) whose most famous story exposed the hidden background of an American Nazi and Ku Klux Klan leader, a story which inspired the 2001 film "The Believer." Phillips passed away in April of 2013, but his journalistic legacy lives on through the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute at The King's College in New York City and the NYC Semester in Journalism program, which welcomes college students to spend a semester learning and interning in New York.

In addition to being a crack newsman on deadline, Phillips was known for the lyrical quality in his writing, an eye for offbeat feature stories and his keen observations in writing profiles about people. His journalistic abilities and his appreciation for humanity led some of the top writers and editors at The Times such as Arthur Gelb, A.M. Rosenthal and Gay Talese to tout Phillips as the best writer at the Times. The fact that Phillips was a Pentecostal Christian, who kept a Bible on his desk seemed to only make him a more valued eccentric and member of the family-run newspaper.

Phillips quit the Times after 21 years and focused on planting churches and encouraging people in New York City. He remained passionate about good journalism and encouraged young people from faith backgrounds to pursue journalism as an important calling. He also encouraged them to follow the highest standards of journalistic ethics and practice. In a wide-ranging speech he gave to students at the World Journalism Institute in the mid-2000s, Phillips explained some of his secrets on successful journalistic interviews. He argued that good interviews start with the right humility and perspective from the journalist. Here are seven tips in his words:

## 1. Interviewing is an art.

The reporter's job is not to show off their skills as a reporter or to challenge their source. The reporter's job is to get as much information as possible. "If your

subject feels that he or she is with a friend, rather than an enemy, or at least with someone who is unthreatening, she or he will more likely open up and let it come tumbling out."

## 2. A key focus for journalists is attitude.

He suggested reporters resist the arrogance that comes from thinking they have an elevated access from their access to important people. "You've got a role but the subject has the goods." Better than assuming omniscience is adopting humility. Keep in mind that the subject, "may have gems that you can't mine, but she can yield -- if you give room for that to happen."

## 3. Reporters have a function but that doesn't give them importance

In some cases, some interviewers tend to "treat the subject roughly -- because doing so fits the sense of the interviewer's self-importance."

## 4. Use a conversational tone as a default.

Questions that are hostile in tone are rarely effective. It's better to assume a conversational tone. "I aimed in every situation to make the subject just as comfortable as possible, to get her or him talking freely and unguardedly." Phillips suggests journalists ask tough questions in a "quiet, ordinary manner."

## 5. Plan. But leave room for randomness and improvisation.

Phillips suggested leaving half the time of an interview for unplanned questions. Reporters who insist on sticking to a rigid list of questions and answers are assuming omniscience. They're assuming they know everything worth asking about. Instead, they should realize there's more

to the story discoverable by giving the subject room to move. "Some kind of material is just not going to come out by your line of questions, but if you get the subject to talk freely, you may be quite surprised and delighted at what comes out." He adds that, "the best anecdotes come out this way."

## 6. Achieve absolute accuracy in your note-taking.

Reporters should create a system for accurately recording the interview. Specifically, Phillips suggested creating a shorthand system for note-taking. Words in quotes must be words they actually spoke. Indirect quotations are paraphrases of what the source said, but not direct quotes. Don't hesitate to stop a source and have them repeat a line or statement so you can write it down word for word. A reporter's job, correctly focused -- is first of all to inform the reader accurately and do so interestingly. "The feeling of breadth and depth in any story comes from gathering more than you need and having more than you tell." He tells young reporters: "Gather massively and write selectively."

## 7. Don't grant "off-the-record" status flippantly.

Phillips advised reporters to avoid the "off the record," trap by only allowing the information after a source says "this is off the record," to be so. "What people state is off the record is very often self-serving, designed to instill a certain attitude or outlook or even bias in a reporter."

One more time: Follow the directions. Remember that the highest compliment a newsroom intern can earn is this: "I only had to tell her something once." It's crucial to follow directions. Everyone makes mistakes, but don't make mistakes over and over. This is linked to tip No. 1 -- take good notes about your mistakes and insights. Mark them up. Use them.