



MARTIN SHEEN INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Martin Sheen, Actor
June 7, 2023
Interviewed by David Bender
Total Running Time: 30 minutes and 18 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

MARTIN SHEEN:

My real name is Ramon Estevez. Uh, Martin Sheen is a stage name that I. I never changed the. Officially. I'm still Ramon. It's on my driver's license, passport, all my official papers. Uh, Shane is making up, and, uh, if this gig doesn't work out, I'll go back to Ramon, you know?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories

Martin Sheen

Actor

Lights, Camera, Activism

00:00:28:00

DAVID BENDER:

You. I've heard you say the difference between acting for a living and what you can do for life. So please tell me. Tell me that philosophy of your life. Well.

00:00:48:00

MARTIN SHEEN:

I've often said that acting is what I do for a living. But activism is what I do to stay alive.

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DAVID BENDER:

At what point in your life? Because you've been an actor since a very early age. At what point? Did that become true for you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Well, I you know, frankly, I don't have any conscious memory of ever not being an actor. I didn't know that. That's what you called it when I was a child, till I started going to the movies around age 5 or 6. And gradually it dawned on me that I was like those people up on the screen. And it was a a mighty firm, uh, possession, you know, it possessed me and it gave me a possession of myself. I knew, uh, that I was going to do that thing that I couldn't identify, but I, I knew it, and the depths of my being, uh, and that I knew that if I didn't do it, I would never be happy and I would never be free. It was instinctual. And it was necessary for my survival.

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DAVID BENDER:

Was the activist tradition part of your family growing up, or are you on your own?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Uh, you know, I, uh, I wouldn't have called myself an activist when I was a child or a teenager, but I. I was schooled and nourished, uh, by these two, uh, immigrants, you know? My father was Spanish, but, uh, my my father and mother both, uh, struggled, you know. Uh, in fact, my mother was sent from Ireland to live with a cousin in Ohio at the start of the Civil War in 1921. And meanwhile she met my dad, whom she called the handsome Spaniard. And so they started raising a family. Nine boys and one girl. I was just seven, son. Uh, but it was a natural progression to, uh, we, you know, we were Democrats and poor where, you know, uh, Roosevelt, uh, Truman Democrats and eventually, of course, Kennedy Democrats. But there was just this it was taken for granted. You you were you were union if you could be. I founded the union when I started the union when I was a boy at the local country club, you know.

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DAVID BENDER:

You were a caddy.

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I was a caddy, yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:

And you started caddies Union.

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I started a caddy union in 1954. Yeah. And it didn't last. I mean, it lasted about 72 hours, I got fired. It was the first time I heard the phrase, you're on private property, hit the road. But the lessons I learned in, in that, uh, situation were lifelong, you know, that you've got to you you've got to choose sides. You cannot not choose sides. And and be honest with yourself. It it never mind what anyone else thinks about you. It's how you think about yourself. So yeah, I was an activist. Without calling myself an activist, I was just I was living in times that I was very aware of, and I had an opinion about them, and I showed it with the way I lived and the way I act, or at least I tried to. Didn't always succeed. But, um, yeah, those were, uh, very formative years. And I carried from, uh, 1949 until I left home in 1958.

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DAVID BENDER:

So the caddy thing didn't work out.

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MARTIN SHEEN:

It didn't work out, but I still know how to do it. Yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:

I love the fact that Martin Sheen has never been arrested, because it's always-

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MARTIN SHEEN:

That's true, yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:

Ramón has been arrested many number of times-

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Oh, yeah. Yes.

00:04:31:00

DAVID BENDER:

-For his activism. How many? Have you lost count?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I was keeping... It's silly. But it was- There were so many issues that were so vital uh, through the particularly the 80s and the 90s, uh, whether it was nuclear racism, war, particularly the Gulf War, I was very involved in protesting against the first Gulf War as well as the second one. But, uh, whether I was protesting homelessness or injustice of racism or whatever it



was, whatever issue I was involved in, uh, I never anticipated changing anybody. The only one that changed was me. And I think that that's as it should be. The idea of being associated with a movement or a cause and be counted on to promulgate that publicly, and to engage in that, to influence others is not my concern. I think that the best way to describe it for me is when I went through a demonstration, I never looked over my shoulder. I didn't know if anybody was following me, and frankly, I didn't care. I was there for me to get me. There was greatest work because I'm such a coward. I would look to the cameras or the women and the children. I'm serious because that was the safest place to be in a demonstration. They were the least likely to be victimized.

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DAVID BENDER:

And yet you've been arrested a multitude of times, so apparently you haven't been very good at finding safe haven. Well, you've been arrested and you've been jailed and you've had to do community service. Can you talk about that? And, and and, you know, a place like Saint Joseph Center where you did you choose where you would do your community service?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

No, I was, I had I was protesting the death of the the Jesuits in El Salvador, uh, and all of the, uh, military American military involvement in Central and South America. And I'd gone there with witnesses for peace and other, uh, nonviolent peace organizations and, uh, saw firsthand what was going on in



Nicaragua, in El Salvador. And, uh, so I came back and began to voice, uh. And urge people to become aware of what was going on down there. And we would meet downtown at the Laplace Ito and march to the courthouse and shut it down. And so I accumulated 13 arrests and had to appear in court before a very distinguished federal judge who was hearing these cases. And she said, Ramon, because I'm arrested under Ramon. Uh, it doesn't appear to make any difference if I put you in jail for all these arrests and and all your behavior on the line. I said, not likely. Said you're probably going to do it again, aren't you? I said, I hope so. She said, very well. Would you do community service? I will, I said. She sent me to Saint Joseph Center, and I became the dishwasher at the Bread and Roses Cafe just down the street. It's a homeless kitchen. Uh, and so I spent ten years there as a volunteer, and, uh, yeah, it was the longest job I had until I got the West Wing. No, it was longer than the West Wing, actually. But, uh. Yeah, I only left it because of the West Wing. Yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:

I want to come back to something you said because it it just tipped it in my mind. You're a boy and you were watching up on the screen and you knew you wanted to be this. Do you remember what you watched? Do you remember what films, when you were small, that touched you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:



Oh, no. I can't remember a lot of the films I saw as a child, but I do remember, uh, preteen and teenager Humphrey Bogart and all the tough guys, you know, at Warner Brothers. Yeah, they were they were my hero. Spencer Tracy did, like, I love Spencer Tracy. Uh, James Cagney was, uh, he was my chief, uh, idol. And then one night, somebody told me that I had to see this guy. Uh, in a film that, uh, was playing in the local theater and was only going to play another night, I think it was, and it was East of Eden. And, uh, that was the life changer. I couldn't leave the theater in those days. They would run two features, and, uh, they'd run them twice in the evening, along with newsreels and cartoons. And I sat through, uh, the other movie and cartoons and newsreels, everything to see it again. I couldn't leave the theater. I was done, and I was just stopped in my tracks. It's something happened that I'd never seen before, and. And it was James Dean. And it was like he transcended the acting into behavior. He wasn't acting. It was like when he walked out of a scene, you wanted to. Where do you go? You know, you kind of look as if you could see outside the frame to see where he was, what he was doing, because he wasn't acting. It was behavior. And that made all the difference.

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DAVID BENDER:

For the other person. A lot of people describe in those terms from that time was Marlon Brando. Yeah. Who you would come to know much later in a very different context.

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MARTIN SHEEN:



Yeah. Uh, yeah. Marlon Brando was, of course, a hero of James Dean. And, uh, so, yeah, I was, I long before I worked with Marlon, I adored him, I mean, his work, you know, uh, and then when I get a chance to work with him, it was, uh, it was gratifying because he was, uh. He was extremely disarming. He was very funny and, uh, and he was very caring and sweet and, uh, I just, uh, I just adored him. You know, I worked with him on Apocalypse Now, and, um, you know, he was only on the film for 4 or 5 weeks, but he lived nearby, so I saw a lot of him. Uh, um, when we weren't working, he'd come down and join us for dinner.

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DAVID BENDER:

Yes. He was someone who, in the 1963, there was a march on Washington, Doctor King. And he was one of the group from Hollywood who came out. Yeah. You talk about any of that. And do you remember that March? Do you remember that?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I remember the march on Washington very, uh. Well, in 1963, we were still living in New York at that time. And so there were a lot of people coming down to Washington from New York. I didn't go, uh, personally, but I was you're aware of it, and I knew Marlon was a part of it. Uh.

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DAVID BENDER:



Did you come to know Doctor King at all?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I, I did not know Doctor King. Uh, I saw him once. And it was a very auspicious meeting. In 1965, I was on Broadway. And it show. And Selma happened in March of 1965. And I talked to my colleagues in this play. We thought, we've got to do something. So we went to the manager and said, we'd like to do a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Reverend King and to the widow of Reverend James Reeb, a young, uh, minister who went down from, I believe, I believe from Michigan. And he was killed in, in Selma. And the manager said, well, all right. Uh, you can do the benefit. But, you know, our theater has only 600 seats. You won't make a nickel. And he said, why don't you go? And Jack Albertson said, let's go talk to Sammy Davis. He was around the corner. And Golden Boy, a big hit musical. Showbiz Asari matinee. Uh, and we went over to see him between shows and and we told him what we wanted to do. We wanted to answer, uh, Selma. And Sammy said, uh, the only thing I don't like about that idea is that I didn't think of it. He said, let's organize it. And it became known as Broadway Answer, Selma. And gosh, everybody on Broadway at the time was part of the show. Barbra Streisand was doing Funny Girl, she came, Marty Chevalier was doing a one man show. He came, Alan Arkin was in, and her laughing, he came and was just enormous. And the show was going beautifully and Sammy was out on stage at this one point, he said, ladies and gentlemen, Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. And there Reverend King was in a box. It was like if he if he fell forward, he would have fallen on the stage. That's how close you were. And



we were all looking. We didn't know he was there. And it was like. And the audience went crazy and they stood up and and they shouted and screamed and applauded and went on and on. Reverend King got up and and he took a little bow and he sat down and they weren't having it. They screaming, and he got up again. He's an old and, you know, pretty sit down on. And then he sat down again. They ain't having it. And they're screaming. And he got up a third time. He was. And he, and he just, you know, and he just pleaded with them to sit down and look, okay. Since Sammy was out, uh, singing at the start of the second act and he was on stage singing, and I stood in the light because I had to cue, uh, Mr. Chevalier to go out. And the light from the stage was shining on me. You know, I felt this light and, and and, uh, and I looked over kind of like that, and I looked again. And Reverend King was standing about ten feet away, and he was by himself. And I couldn't see any guards or anybody with him. And my heart stopped pounding, and I thought the first thought I had was I didn't realize how. Small he was, and I wanted to shrink because I was looking over the top of his head and at that know he's ten feet tall. And I said, oh my God, there he is. And it seemed like a full 2 or 3 minutes past. It was probably no more than 30s. Sammy came off and just walked right over to him and escorted him out the back stage door. And I never met him. So, uh, let that be a lesson to you.

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DAVID BENDER:

There you were, using your artistry to help raise some money and raise awareness. And is that the first group activity you remember that you're 25 at this point, that you were doing something like that? Was that?



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MARTIN SHEEN:

No, I we were, uh, I was very aware in the early 60s in New York, uh, of the civil rights movement. I mean, it was and by 65 it was international news. So I was aware of it. And, uh, I had grown up in a culture of racism. Uh, you know, there were very few. Uh, I went to an all boys, uh, Catholic high school. Uh, and there were just a few lads. One of them was my closest friend who, uh, John Crane, who's dead now, God rest him. But he was our best man. And and, uh, you know, I, I knew what racism was, and I had difficulty with, with my name because there was a lot of prejudice against Hispanics, but it was the Puerto Rican community, you know, they they were the blame for everything. So they were the new immigrants. They were Americans, you know, but people thought of them as being, you know, from somewhere else, you know, from Mars, who knows where. But Puerto Ricans were responsible for all the problems. Uh, that was a racist attitude in New York at the time. And so, uh, I was considered with my name, uh, Puerto Rican, but. So if I be on the phone or in any other context without seeing my mug, uh, I was considered, uh, Puerto Rican. So I thought, oh, God, I got enough trouble trying to get a job as an actor. So that's why I chose Sheen.

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DAVID BENDER:

And the whole world wants to know. How did you come up with, uh, Martin Sheen?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Uh, I was fascinated with Bishop Fulton Sheen. In the 1950s, there was no one on television more popular. And he was really the first tele evangelist. He was the best public speaker imaginable. I didn't think of him as a preacher as much as an actor. I thought, wow, look at that guy, you know? So I do as much to honor his, uh, his presence. Uh, I yeah, I just started using Sheen. The Martin came from Robert Dale Martin, who was the casting director at and at CBS in New York. When I first came there in 1958, I met him, and he was very, very encouraging to me.

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DAVID BENDER:

So much of your choice of work, you've chosen things including the way that reflect your values. Is that a conscious thing? Is that?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I would say, yeah. When I had a choice, uh, to, um, infuse some of my, um. Uh, talent into a work that spoke to social justice. Uh, to civil rights or to women's rights or to gay rights or, uh, and, uh, dealing with with with illuminating, uh, an unpopular, uh, reality. Yeah, I always chose that, but I didn't always have a choice if I wanted to make a living in this business. There are very few things that I actually did that were, uh, from the heart and the pocketbook that spoke to how I felt about an issue. Uh, you mentioned the way. Yeah, that was a family affair that was written for me by my son Amelia. And frankly, it is the



most satisfying thing I've ever done in my professional life. And to this day, uh, if I could get in another film, like, the way, I would gladly do it. But, you know, we don't always get these choices. Very often we we're giving given, uh, material that we did doesn't really speak to our hearts or anyone else's, that it's just entertainment or fluff or nonsense, and so that we do it in order to not have to, uh, go back to the car wash or the golf course to. Okay.

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DAVID BENDER:

So you still got the other Social Security card, so you could. But but, Martin, let's be clear. There is a part for which you will always be associated. And that is when you were our president. Okay. Uh, and as I understand it. It wasn't supposed to include you. Most of the time it was to be about the people in the West Wing, but not the president. So can you can you talk a little bit about that moment in time when this all happened?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Yeah. Well, the West Wing, uh, came at me, uh, like a west wind. Uh, I wasn't prepared for it. I had, uh, a relationship with Aaron Sorkin, the brilliant writer from, uh, film a few years earlier, the American president. So, uh, I was aware of his talent and his presence. Certainly. And then, uh, it was the spring of 1999. They came with an offer to play the president in the West Wing. But there was only one scene in the, uh, pilot, and they asked me, uh, would I be, uh, comfortable playing the president in just a few episodes? Maybe four tops. Five in, in a season of 22 episodes. So that would be like one quarter of



the time. Would you do that? And I said, of course I'd do that. So I signed on. And then the pilot was made, and I had a feeling that once the network, uh, saw that set, they're going to want to know who works in that office. And I was right. And so I came back and signed on, just like all the other, uh, folks in the, in the show did. And I had a seven year run in the Oval Office, and it was one of the best times in my life. We went from the Clinton administration into the first Bush in a second Bush administration of Bush Jr. And we became like a, uh, uh, a parallel universe, if you will. Uh, because here was a rather conservative Republican, very brash young president. And here was the old, you know, liberal Democrat, Bartlett, on the other side. So every Wednesday night, we got the equivalent of a, uh, either a fireside chat or a, uh, address from the Oval Office from Mr. Bartlett. So, yeah, it was the most gratifying, uh, thing to to have done that for all that time with all those wonderful people. Yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:

The fact is that. And you you laid it out right during that time, that second year we had Bush v Gore. We we saw the country as the century turned, we saw the country turn. And a lot of people felt like, uh, fairness had gone out the window, uh, and was lost to us. Did you have that sense of having an effect and then it being reflected back to you from how people were responding to you playing that part?

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MARTIN SHEEN:



Yes. I think all of us on the West Wing for those seven seasons had a sense that we were doing something that was much more than our, you know, a job in our career and much more than even a story about a president that we were we were contributing ideas and possibilities, and we were we became and we were very aware of it at the time. And it gradually even became more and more, uh, clear to us of what an inspiration we were, particularly the young people and especially young women and, uh, you know, uh, the, uh, the, the women in the show, the regulars, particularly, uh, Allison Janney, was a great source of inspiration to a lot of women. And we were getting letters from kids in college, in high school who were changing their, uh, uh, choices for, uh, you know, career. And they were going into public life or law or social justice. They were becoming involved, and they were being fulfilled and inspired by a lot of the, uh, the, uh, energy that we were, uh, sharing on the West Wing. So that was the most gratifying part. Even today, I still get letters from people who had never seen it before they were born after, uh uh, we were on the air, and so they wouldn't have seen it as small children. And they became aware of it when they were locked down during the pandemic. And it became, uh, a whole new world for them. And, and some of them, in fact, a great many of them shot twice. They ran because, you remember, the dialog is very much like I'm talking right now. It was very fast. It was hard to hear. What do you say? What do you say? And you couldn't rerun it. And those days, you know.

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DAVID BENDER:

There's an episode that I waited a long time to ask you about. Two cathedrals.



00:24:05:00

MARTIN SHEEN:

Oh, yeah. One of the most, uh, talked about episodes of the entire series was the one called Two Cathedrals, which took place in the National Cathedral in, um, Washington, DC, where the president's. A secretary had been killed in a car accident and he attended the funeral. But he was going through a very, uh, difficult period of loss. You know, I think it's the most, uh, um, I would say the most vulnerable he was in the whole series. And it it it was climaxed in that scene in two cathedrals, and he asked, uh, Secret Service to clear the, uh, church. He he was going to have it out with God. That's the only way I can describe it. But he was going to do it in Latin. I asked Aaron once, why did you choose Latin? And he said, because that seemed to be the language of God for a Catholic. And as I grew up, you know, I was an altar boy. And so I, I knew the church Latin for the mass. And so I got that. Okay. And so it was not unfamiliar to me, but it was an outrageous scene somewhere in the middle of the National Cathedral alone, yelling at God and decided to have a cigaret to go to really, uh, get his goat and, um, and and I did it and, uh. And I stamped on the cigaret, which was the worst thing to do inside a church. Um. And I remember after we finished the scene, Aaron was very pleased and very moved by because you never know if something's going to work or not until you actually do it and you see it, you know. And he said, yeah. He said, I think it works. And let's go with that.

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DAVID BENDER:



And, you know, from the response that it did resonate, uh, with so many people because it was about loss. It was about how is it. Questions. Faith. Mhm. Yeah. And as I said, you're I know you to be a man of deep faith. Uh, but I've always thought of you as Catholic with a small C. Yeah. And in the Dorothy Day tradition of your faith, can you explain what that is?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Well, I, you know, I, I remember one of my heroes was Phil Berrigan. Dan Berrigan. Brother Dan was also, uh, one of my heroes. But the brothers together had a very profound effect on all of us from the 60s. And these were two Catholic priests that opposed, uh, uh, the Vietnam War and, uh, burned draft cards. And they went to prison, federal penitentiary for a couple of years. So they made the ultimate sacrifice, and they were a great inspiration to all of us that knew that if what you believe is not costly, then you're left to question its value. And so that that was really, uh, um, uh, what I tried to, um, live as much as I could. Whenever I protested or spoke out against, uh, some injustice. I never expected that it was going to influence anyone. I never believed that I was going to change anyone's mind. I only did it because I could not not do it and be myself. Or at least the image I had of myself. So it was a deeply personal commitment. And I've always believed that if something is not personal, it's impersonal, richer, impersonal. Who cares? So if I was to care about something, it had to cost me something. You've got to find a place, a way to unite the will of the spirit with the work of the flesh. You got to put them together and show that you're not unbalanced. You're not too much in one and not enough in the other. But if you can do that, then you



your spirit has a, has a, has an opportunity to breathe on its own. It's not forced. It's not, it's not it's not religion per se. It's a transcendence of religion because it's spirituality. I'm a practicing Catholic. I'll get it right, I hope, someday. But I love the faith. I have a lot of problems with the church. It's male dominated. It's made a horrible bunch of mistakes over the centuries. But the faith in itself is very, very nourishing and very important. It's where I go to, um, to kind of, uh, to kind of claim the chamber in my heart. That's the best way I know to describe it. It's. I know myself in this faith. I, I believe in the basic tenets of Catholicism, and they make absolute perfect sense to me that, as I say, if what you believe is not costly, then you're left to question its value. And that's what I face every day of my life, so I can't separate that from my family life. My, uh, political, if you will, uh, life. My public life, my, uh, uh, artistic life in the movies or whatever I do artistically, it's it's when I found a way to unite the will of the spirit to the work of the flesh. Then I went everywhere as the same guy and and experienced the sense of joy that I never had before. Before I was Catholic, uh, I, I reconverted in 81. So the last half of my life has been by far the most difficult because I was so involved in so many issues. But it's equally the happiest because I know myself in that sphere, and I don't anticipate changing anyone's life but mine.

END TC: 00:30:18:00