

## Conversation With Malcolm transcription

Holly: Thank you for allowing me to come to your home today.

Malcolm: Well thank you for coming.

H: And let me just introduce myself. I'm Holly Craig, director of the University Center for the Development of Language and Literacy at the University of Michigan. I'm in beautiful Tucson, Arizona in the home of Malcolm Alexander, a lovely person who I've gotten to know over the last couple of months, and better known to the world-at-large as a monument-maker and sculptor.

I'm here today because Malcolm has shared with me that he is an individual with dyslexia, and yet has become an extremely accomplished and lived a life full of honor and beauty and knowledge and insight. So he has said that he will talk with me today and share a little of his story so that our clients back at Michigan and through our dyslexia networks can learn his story and benefit from the lessons he has had to learn in his life.

So thank you Malcolm, I'm honored to know you and to have this opportunity to talk with you.

M: It's very nice having you here Holly.

H: Thank you so much. Let me begin by just asking you if you would tell us a little about your story. How you started as a young child and the struggles that you had, and then what your course through life has been.

M: Well, I was born in a well-to-do family. My father was a very successful automotive engineer in Michigan and there were expectations laid upon me that I could not fulfill.

My first manifestation with any difficulties came when I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Ms. Hobrooke asked me to stand up and recite the poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade." I got up and started and started to stammer. She stopped me, turned to the class and said, "Malcolm stammers, sit down." I bought the act. I, at one point, Holly, in my teens and in my twenties, stammered so badly I couldn't answer a phone. It was all I could do to tell you my name.

It is said that the two things that people fear most, is death and speaking in public. I decided that I was going to speak in public someday. I was going to stand in an auditorium and speak. Well I went through a great deal, as that letter that you have read says. I went into high school doing poorly. In grade school, I took a comprehensive test. I was called into the headmaster's office and told that I had made the lowest mark in the school. Therefore, I was the dumbest.

H: Oh dear. And did you believe that?

M: I don't know. There's a certain numbness that comes to you. Anyway I went on, and WWII came along and I decided, "What a wonderful way to get out of school." So I volunteered for the

Marine Corps and had some difficult experiences there. Came out with a disability after three years. And now what?

Well, I got myself in college with the G.I. Bill. And I can't say that – I guess I went through college, but college didn't go through me. And I got out of college, and I married. Got a job in the business world and did very poorly. And woke up one morning very discouraged. And I said to myself, "Malcolm, what do you like to do? What do you want to do?" And I thought, "Well, what can I do?" And I thought, "Well, you know as a kid I was pretty good at art." I always played with clay when the other kids were making model airplanes. I made the pilot and put them in the planes that they made. So I decided, "Well, why not go to art school?" I had absolutely no background. I was living in Texas with my wife.

Well, I inquired about good art schools, and I was told that there were some very good ones in the East and a very good one on the West Coast called The Art Center, which is now The Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. So I got in my car and I drove there one sunny July afternoon and walked in and said, "I'd like to see the registrar" and I was ushered into a very lovely woman's office by the name of Carla Martell. We later became very good buddies.

And I sat down and I said, "Ms. Martell, I'm here to go to your school." Well she said, "How nice. May I see your portfolio?" I said, "I don't have one." She said, "Oh, I see you're already in the advertising business," and I said, "No, I'm not. I have no credentials." She sat back and looked at me and said, "Mr. Alexander, I don't understand." I said, "Ms. Martell, I'm 28-years-old and I need a chance. A last chance. And I think I can be an artist. Will you give me a chance?" She said, "Where do you come from?" I said, "Texas." She said, "Would you move all the way out here and gamble?" I said, "Yes, what else is there?" Well, once again she sat back and said, "Mr. Alexander, we'll gamble with you."

So I showed up that Fall. Went to the little store, got all the equipment- everything brand new in what looked like a fishing box. Went into the first day to a sketch class. The model came in, got up on the pedestal. The teacher came in and said, "Let's have some 30-second warm ups." I thought, "What?" Well I just sat there and watched the other students take a conte and start to sketch the model. Well, I took out a piece of conte and tried to do the same. Well I spent the first year just looking and trying to learn. I spent two-and-a-half years at the school. At night I went to the UCLA sketch class. And on weekends I went to another little art school. After two-and-a-half years, I was saturated.

Well, I'd been in Taos and I had heard that it was an art colony, so I thought, "Well, why don't we go there?" So we did, and I was very fortunate because I was one of the only younger artists there in those days and there were some very fine artists: Leon Gaspard and Ward Lockwood and Dole Reid, and a number of others, and they just became my mentors.

Well I started painting in the studio and I painted a year with showing nothing to anybody. And I was at a cocktail party one night and met the owner of an art gallery, Eric Gibert, an artist and owner. And he said, "I hear you're an artist. I'll come by tomorrow morning and see your work." So he did. And he said, "I like them. I'd like to take 10 of them and put them in the gallery." Okay. Within a month they'd sold. By the end of the year, I was a partner in the gallery.

H: Wonderful.

M: But Holly, I'm not a painter.

H: That's hard to believe looking at this beautiful likeness you have up on your wall.

M: Oh. Anyway, I decided at the advice of Leon Gaspard, a very famous Russian artist in Taos, encouraged me to go to Europe and study the Masters. Which I did. And it was then I realized that I was more interested in the sculpture. Well, at one point, Holly, I was living in London, and an art dealer came by to see my paintings and I don't think that he was very impressed. And as he was leaving, he glanced at a table, and it was a pair of hands that I'd done in clay. And he looked at those, turned to me and said, "Are you sure you're working in the right medium?"

So I came back to the United States and started to sculpt. And one weekend I was watching a football game. Texas playing Arkansas for the championship. And right at the last moments of the game, James Streit, the quarterback, threw a long pass, was caught for a touchdown, and it later became the bomb. Well I rushed to my studio and recreated that. Several weeks later, an art dealer from Austin and a friend of mine came and saw it. And that started the ballgame.

And I became a sports sculptor, one of the only ones at the time doing sports figures. I did a lot of very famous sports figures. I was asked to do one with the Dallas Cowboys, they asked me to do Bob Lilly, the Kansas City Chief. Their quarterback, Lenny Dawson. Poncho Sikora, Johnny Bench, etc. Well, I went through that era and then got into an era which I refer to as The Backbone of America.

H: And you're very well known for that work.

M: So anyway, I was interested in the American working person. And I had a motorcycle and I got on it and drove around the country talking to workers on oil rigs, lumber camps, coal mines, recording. And then I came back -- I was living in Santa Barbara -- came back to Santa Barbara and started producing these pieces. And they became successful. A lot of the corporations bought them for their board rooms.

And it was then that I was asked by Robert O. Anderson, the CEO of ARCO, if I would do a monument to commemorate the building of the Alaskan pipeline that 72,000 people had worked on. So I did that, and it was 18 feet, and it was very successful. And at the unveiling in Alaska, the mayor of Fairbanks came up to me and said, "Mr. Alexander, will you come to Fairbanks? We want a monument celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary." So I did that. And went on.

Along the way, I did a nine foot statue of the actor, little-known actor Jimmy Stewart for his hometown in Indiana, Pennsylvania. And we became very good buddies. And I just proceeded on. Holly, at one point I was doing three monuments at the same time.

And in 1988, I was pretty well burnt out. I thought to myself, "Malcolm, you're tired of telling stories. What about your feelings?" So I started, when I had time between monuments, when I

was waiting I would sketch in abstract. So I started to produce those, had them enlarged and cast, and put them in a gallery in Santa Fe, and they were very successful.

So that's what I have continued doing, and I feel very fulfilled. I feel very lucky. I know how many dyslexics fall through the cracks. I've played an important part in the world of dyslexia.

H: I know that. Would you tell us a little about that?

M: I served on the International Board for seven years. I used to go to all the conferences. Always paid my own way. And I did seminars at them. They were very successful. And I've probably spoken in almost every major city in the country. I was living in Fort Worth at the time, and they used to bus young kids into a local high school and I would talk to them. Most of them with learning difficulties. And I was just very, very happy with it.

Well, I got a call one day from the Director in Baltimore of the Dyslexia Society. They said, "Malcolm, we'd like you to be the keynote speaker in New Orleans at our Convention. It's going to be a big one." And I said, "Yes, under one condition. Can I bring a guest to speak with me?" And they said, "Sure."

So I went and I had with me a young black dyslexic orphan called Patrick Blackwell from Washington D.C. I had called the Julliard School at one point because I wanted to set up a program to get some young, probably dyslexic, talented student in Julliard. And this young Blackwell was recommended because he'd flunked out and he was waiting tables. I got a hold of him, got him back in, got him a tutor and he made it. He became a very fine baritone opera singer and has sung all over the world.

H: That's a wonderful story.

M: Well, I took him to New Orleans. And we were to speak in an auditorium of about 1,000 people. And I said, "Patrick, now this is easy for you. You do this all the time. You face an audience; I don't. But we're going in cold and we're going to get two stools and we're just going to talk." So we went in, it was a huge audience, and we sat on the stage and I told my little tale.

And then I turn to Patrick and I said, "Patrick what's your story?" Well, he told about being in Washington as an orphan. He was living with some people and he sang in the choir at a church. He went to the choir director, a woman, and said, "Well, I'm going to go to Julliard and audition." And the woman laughed, said, "What would they want with someone like you?"

He went, and with his raw talent he was accepted. And he came back and told the teacher, the choir director, and she said, "Yeah, but let's see if you make it." And he didn't. And that's when I found him and got him back.

Well after he'd kinda told his story, I said, "Patrick, do you have any song that's your favorite?" He said, "Yes." I said, "What is it?" He said, "The Impossible Dream." I had a piano on the stage and as he said that, this woman just barely started playing "The Impossible Dream." And I said, "Sing it."

Well, he brought the house down. Oh, that baritone voice. Anyway, he went on to be very successful. He married a concert violinist, and he had offspring, and I let him go his way.

I've just continued on doing what I can in the world of dyslexia trying to help people. I know I have helped a lot of people. I've had some interesting experiences. I met a young woman, I think in Cleveland, who came up after my talk and said, "Could I stay in touch with you? Could I call you?" Her name was Judy. I gave her my phone number.

A couple of months later she called. And she said, "Mr. Alexander, I'm sitting in my father's bed with his gun in my hand. They just left for vacation for two weeks and they said that when they come back they want me out. I'm no good." And I said, "Judy, if you've got the courage to pull the trigger, you got the courage to go on."

Well, she called me a year later at the University of Arizona. Another young man came up to me and said could he talk to me. Well, I was on my way to a board meeting after my talk and I said, "Let's walk to the elevator." And we got to the elevator, waited until it came. And as he was getting into the elevator, he turned and said, "Mr. Alexander, you're the only adult I've ever been able to talk to." And we became very good friends. He visited me, spent the summer with me in Montana. He wanted to be a screenwriter, and that is what he is today. So, it goes on and on, Holly.

H: Now tell me, you've shared with me that you think that you see and visualize differently because of your dyslexia. Could you talk a little about that?

M: Yeah. Well I like the expression, "When God closes a door, He opens a window." And there's so much I can't do, but I have the ability to make photographs. That's why when I was a sports artist, I could see a guy playing football and I could – what's the word? – I had a photographic memory. But little else. And I can't spell. I was complimented in boarding school on a 500 word thing for spelling the same word four different ways. Mathematics just baffles me. And I can't learn a language. It's very difficult for dyslexics to learn a language.

H: How do you visualize your art? You talked about the wonderful monument you did in Alaska, and yet you didn't use sketches.

M: I've never made a sketch. I am an accomplished draftsman and a classical draftsman.

H: How do you do it? What do you see?

M: I visualize it. For instance, when I was commissioned to do the Alaskan pipeline monument that was commemorating the 72,000 people that built it, to be unveiled in Valdez, I went to Valdez and Fairbanks. And I talked, the monument, the pipeline was done – I call it a monument, it was something I remember saying, "I've got to do a monument to a monument." But I went and I interviewed a lot of the people and I had to figure out how I was going to do it. And I realized and I learned that there were five different categories of workers. So that told me that I was going to have 5 people in the monument.

So I went and talked to these different people in the different fields. I went and bought equipment. I talked to and photographed a welder in his welding gear. Bought a welding outfit. Then I went back to Santa Barbara and I brought in models for each of the pieces and posed them. Came up with a little sketch. A maquette, we call it. It's about 18 inches tall. And from there it's enlarged to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> scale, and then up to 14 feet. And it's as if I got all of the information I could, posed all the models and then forgot about it. Put it away. Letting it gesticulate.

One morning I woke up having seen it in my dream. Never made a sketch. I just sat down and did it. It's not difficult for me. I just do it. And people say, "How do you do it?" And I say, "Well, if I was a classical violinist, you might ask me how do I do it. One thing is a lot of perspiration, learning." And I said, "It's not an accident, what I do, I spent years learning it, and now it just comes out and I can't really explain it. I don't see why anyone can't do it."

H: So what would be a piece of advice you would give, say, a 13- or 14-year old who has just been diagnosed with dyslexia and isn't sure what that means or what to do. Do you have some wisdom you could share?

M: Well if he's already been tested and he is dyslexic, I would talk to him, as I have with so many of them individually and in groups, and I'd say, "I have a slogan: Find the thing that you do best and forget about the rest." And I would say, "Young man, within you is a gift. It's never been given to anyone else. It's your gift. But it's up to you to find it. And if you search for it and find it, it's like that last paragraph in that letter. If you find it, God will test you to see if you're worthy of that gift. And if you are, he'll help you. And you will give to the world something wonderful that it's never had before and it'll be your gift."

So never get discouraged. Nobody's perfect. No one can do everything. But in some ways you're lucky, because most people are jack-of-all-trades. They do everything moderately. You have the opportunity to do something in a grandiose way because you'll focus on it."

H: So hard work is going to be very important.

M: Exactly. Exactly. But you know, I've often said that, "Talent is like an atomic bomb..."

H: In what way?

M: "But it can't go off without a warhead." Perseverance and talent are the warhead, and that's what sets off. And you are an atomic bomb, but you gotta get a warhead." And that's the perseverance. And don't expect it to come easy, nothing comes easy. But you've got a gift. Don't waste it. I say that on that DVD. Don't waste it, because it's your gift.

H: You know, also on the DVD, some of the other people who were being interviewed said, "I only wanted to be normal." And what you're saying is, "Don't settle for that. Be someone special."

M: Oh God no. Who wants to be just another grain of sand on the beach? No, I want to be something special.

H: Right. And at what point in your career did you realize that you had this really special gift, and that you had developed it in a remarkable way?

M: It's an interesting thing. When I was in art school, the Art Institute, I was taking an oil painting course. And that teacher, Paul Souza, who would later become a very good buddy. And I was painting, and he came up and stood there looking at it. And then I turned and I saw it in his eyes that he saw something.

H: So there have been some people in your journey that have been very important to you understanding who you are.

M: Yes. Right. It's been a – yeah. You know, one sentence can change a person's life. I used to go and sketch when I lived in Dallas every Wednesday with a very well-known national academician named Dole Reid. We'd go out and sketch with a luncheon and a bottle of wine, and it was so wonderful because Dole said, "You know, Malcolm, when I teach, when I look at a student's work, I always try to find something nice in it. And then go into the rest of it." And that's the way he was with me. He'd come up, never looked until I asked him. And then I'd ask him and he'd come up and say, "Well look at this up here, this is kinda nice." And that's the attitude I've had about life.

H: And that's good advice for those of us in the teaching fields. Find that strength.

M: Yeah. Right. You know, school is a – how to explain it? It's, you get bashed. You get bashed. You don't get much encouragement. You get a mark at the end of a term, but how wonderful just to get that one word, that one sentence, "Hey, this is kinda nice." That'll keep you going, yeah.

H: Thank you Malcolm, this has been wonderful.

M: Well thank you. As I say, Holly, "I'm available." I've never said no. And just around the corner, maybe in the next block, is someone I can help.

H: That's a wonderful attitude. Thank you Malcolm.