

Speaking with the Dead

[Transcript]

Text on screen: Stuart Hall was a world-renowned cultural and political theorist. When Hall died in February 2014, he left behind an unfinished 300,000-word manuscript of his memoir. His friend and colleague, Bill Schwarz of Queen Mary University of London, was tasked with turning it into a publishable form. The final book *Familiar Stranger* was published in April 2017.

Sut Jhally of the University of Massachusetts interviewed Bill Schwarz in July 2017.

Title Screen

Speaking with the Dead: Bill Schwarz on Preparing Stuart Hall's Posthumous Memoir

Question #1: What were the origins of the project?

Schwarz: Well, the story has got a long, long history. Maybe 20 years ago, a little under 20 years ago, I went into work at Goldsmiths College in London, and there was a letter from a publisher, saying that they want to publish a 50,000-word discussion, a conversation with Stuart Hall about his life and ideas, and would I be interested in doing this with him. Which, of course, I was.

And so, Stuart and I met, and we arranged that we'd have four interviews, maybe of an hour and a half each, or something like that. So, a year or two later, when we had the time, we did the interviews. I spent a summer transcribing them. And they came out to more or less 45,000 words. So, we had the book kind of there. And I said to Stuart, well, there are still half dozen questions which we need to address, otherwise the book isn't complete.

And I wrote down the questions and I said, we can either meet for another half hour or hour and have the discussion, have the conversation, or you can type away and do it yourself. He said, yeah, let me think about it.

And then what happened, he got involved in the founding of Rivington Place and raising huge amounts of money for this arts center. So that was a big, big, time-consuming project, which really took a lot of his energy over many years. And all the time, he was involved in a million other things, in politics and black arts and so on.

So, he didn't-- he wasn't able to give this project a lot of concentration, but periodically, he'd get back to it. And then towards the end of his life, maybe three or four years before he died, he became more housebound. He wasn't able to go on the political stump and go and speak to classes or to political meetings. And he began to concentrate and work very hard on this manuscript. And his body was fighting, and he was in pain, and he couldn't sleep, and he was taking lots of drugs, but he pressed on. He really pressed on.

And his eyesight was going bad. So, he could barely see the screen. He had to have a massive, great computer screen. And he'd do everything in 24 or 36 font. What that meant was that he could never really read what he had written the day before or the day before that. All he could see was this bit of screen, which he's working on at the time. But he persevered, and then whenever I went around, he would talk about this or about that. He would ask me questions. And sometimes, parts of the manuscript would pass back and forth, and we'd both work on it and so forth.

And then, when he died, there was this colossal manuscript of 300,000 words, which is a huge, huge thing. Stuart was very keen indeed that this book should be a single volume, because he wanted the memoir and the memoir dimension of it, which is kind of the first half, and the kind of politics and the theory all to be as an integrated text. And it was also kept in dialogic form. It was a conversation, and that's how he imagined this book to be, that he was determined that it should remain a conversation.

And I think that's how, when he was writing himself, he was imagining it, as a conversation. So, he was asking questions, and then he would sometimes put a gap. Bill, ask a question here, or something like that. But it's how he thought, he just thought dialogically. So that was the origins of this book, of the published memoir, which just came out.

Question #2: Given Hall's commitment to dialogue and conversation, how did the book end up being written in the first-person singular?

I'm afraid that Stuart had died before we made contact with a new publisher. We were very keen indeed that the book shouldn't be published as an academic book in the United Kingdom, but as a more popular trade book. So, we approached Penguin, and it became very clear early on, we just heard through the grapevine, that no trade publisher would publish a conversation. And I don't understand that, because if you think of TV interviews and so on, they are part of popular life, the interview. But it became clear that no publisher was going to contemplate the idea of publishing a book based on a conversation or an interview.

So, we met with Penguin, with Tom Penn, the very, very committed publisher, politically committed, very enthusiastic that he was publishing Stuart Hall's work, and a very smart man and a very good man. And he just said, it has to be turned into the first-person singular. This has to be a first-person narrative, in Stuart Hall's voice. Well, maybe that's so in the abstract, but that does involve, or it did involve, a new process of mediation, because Stuart Hall wasn't there to talk in the first-person singular.

So, requiring me to turn everything into first-person singular kind of took the story away from the immediacy of Stuart Hall's voice, when it was meant to be doing exactly the opposite. But in the end, I became reconciled to this, and I think Catherine Hall became reconciled to it. And it's partly because I talked for so many years with Stuart Hall about this book, and his voice was so much inside me that I got to the point where I couldn't quite remember what was his voice and what was my voice. There was just such a kind of intermingling in this.

And it was possible at some point to reconstruct Stuart Hall's voice in a way in which I think wasn't damaging to him. I say a little bit about this in the introduction, just to warn readers that this cannot be the pure voice of Stuart Hall. What the pure voice of Stuart Hall would ever be and how we could access that, I don't know. But it's there just to warn people that this is a kind of-- it is a construction of Stuart Hall's voice. But I'm happy with it ethically, and I think it has a certain degree of accuracy. I'm even tempted to say a certain degree of authenticity. But it's close enough. It's close enough to Stuart Hall's voice. So that's how it came to be.

Question #3: What do you think Stuart would have said about the process?

Catherine and I became reconciled very quickly indeed to the idea that we had to go against Stuart's wishes and not publish the entire manuscript, where the theory and the politics and the memoir was all there in 300,000 words. No publisher would have ever dreamt of being able to publish such a volume. So, on the grounds that we wanted this book to have as wide a distribution as possible, we went against his wishes and thought we'd publish the memoir separately from the work, which is really-- the analytic work, which is really, in this manuscript, is really about the relationship between culture. It's how you think of the relationship between culture and politics.

So that was one of the big decisions we had to make. In practical terms, the only way this could be a book which was widely distributed was to separate the memoir from the more philosophical questions. How would Stuart have imagined this book being produced not as a conversation?

I think he would have felt edgy about it, as Catherine Hall and myself felt edgy about it at first. And I can imagine him smiling, shaking his head a little bit, and saying, no, no, it shouldn't really be like that. It's a compromise we made in order to ensure that the book could be distributed, and I did lose sleep about it at some points early on. And then I thought, this is a decision we made, let's go with it. And I don't feel too bad at all.

Yeah. You do ask an interesting question. How would Stuart have thought about this script if he'd read it? Well, I don't know. Yet, the one thing I do know is that Stuart could not and would not agree with everything which is actually down there on the page, even though a ton of it, most of it, 98% of it, is Stuart. It comes directly from Stuart. But he was a thinker who was absolutely committed to find distinctions in thinking about politics, thinking about culture, thinking about lives, and so on.

Whether it's been possible to get those fine distinctions exactly as he'd wished, I think we probably-- it wouldn't have been so. There would be times when he'd say to us-- oh, no, no, no, Bill. No, no, no. But on the whole, I think we've got as close as we possibly could, and I'm very pleased with the script, actually, in the end. I think it works.

Question #4: Given Hall's commitment to the dialogic form where everything is in progress, never final, did the completion of the book require that he be absent for it to be finished?

This book could have never been finished as long as Stuart Hall was alive. He could never have put the last full stop, because he couldn't have imagined his life being finished like that, that he could finally write the last sentence where everything would be tied up and complete and organized, and that would be it. And he couldn't do that because he kept on changing his mind every day about things he'd been writing about 50 years ago. He changed his mind. Things he was writing about last week, he changed his mind. The unfinished nature was integral to the way he thought, both politically and conceptually.

The unfinishedness was absolutely crucial to the making of the manuscript. And it was not in him to have put the final full stop, press the buttons, sent it off, and then gone, made a cup of tea, and think, well, that's good. He couldn't do it. He couldn't do it. So, we had to finish what Stuart Hall, psychically and intellectually, himself, refused to finish.

Question #5: How much of the final ordering of chapters and the overall structure of the book was there in the unfinished manuscript that Stuart left?

Organizing the book was difficult. As I've indicated, Stuart wanted this entire manuscript to be published in one piece, whole. It was divided up into maybe five chapters, which were of many. Each chapter was about 60,000 words. So, each chapter would be a small book. Well, it wasn't a very reader-friendly way of organizing a book. It became very difficult, but where Stuart in his final years was at his most luminous and his most insightful was actually in the detailed formulations. And he, even when he was in great pain and not sleeping and so on, he could still craft these fabulous, fabulous sentences and paragraphs.

What he was less capable of doing towards the end was seeing the entire manuscript as an integrated whole, or even each chapter as an integrated whole. So, what didn't really exist was the details of the conceptual organization, which made the book, all of the books, readable. Though Stuart clearly, in his own mind, he could see the shape, the broad shape, the grand shape of what this manuscript was going to look like. But that intermediate level between knowing what the grand narrative was going to be, and then connecting that to the luminous particular insight, which kept on arriving more and more on every page, there was a mismatch between the overall structure and what he was doing on the page at that time.

And that's really where the bulk of the editing had to take place, was making clear what was unspoken in Stuart Hall's text about the conceptual progression of each passage and so on. That's what took the time, really. And it was necessary at every point for me to pass to Catherine Hall, his widow, near the draft so Catherine could see what was happening. Because I should say that although I was-- whenever I met Stuart Hall in the last years, we would talk incessantly about the manuscript, but that was only part of the conversation he was having. Every day, he and Catherine talked about this script. So, she was able to know very closely, indeed, the kind of directions, the trajectories of Stuart Hall's thoughts, page by page. She kind of had that idea. So, in conversations, she and I were able to assemble what we thought they should be.

Question #6: What was the experience like of working with the unfinished manuscript, of dealing with the thoughts of someone who was not there to answer back? What was it like to talk to the dead?

It has been a very taxing experience, both in terms of time and labor, preparing the manuscript. But it's also been taxing emotionally, because essentially, through the two years of off and on it was, which I was involved in preparing the manuscript, the first part of the manuscript for publication, I was in daily conversation with Stuart. And I was-- for a year at this time, I was at a wonderful, wonderful research center in North Carolina, the National Humanities Center.

And there were 30 fellows there, this little building on the edge of a forest. Very, very beautiful, and we'd all arrive at breakfast time, had breakfast, and then go off to our respective studies to do whatever research we're doing. And some people were working on fragments of Assyrian manuscripts, others on the concept of the individual and the ego in Cartesian philosophy. And all of us were talking to these historic figures, whether it's Descartes or Hegel, or however we were, we were all in conversation. The difference I had was I was in conversation-- it was necessarily a more intimate conversation, because I could hear the voice. I knew the living soul of Stuart Hall.

There were times it just got too much. But that is, I've always believed, that is kind of what historians do, and I regard myself at least half and half as a historian, is we talk with the dead. We find some way of talking with the dead. We endeavor to continue that conversation. We endeavor to keep that dialogue alive. The difficulty is that when we're having that conversation, we ask the questions, and we have to provide the answers. So, there are no Stuart Hall answers. He can't hear the questions. He doesn't know what we're asking.

So, it is the fact of death, that it is up to us to somehow craft the answers which we might have expected or that we would wish, that they may come back to us as the voice of Stuart Hall. But that is a kind of ventriloquism. They are our projections, and we have to take responsibility for our own projections. Even when we realize that they are indeed projections, that is part of the deal. That's interesting. It is a continuing, kind of impossible, conversation.

Question #7: Stuart Hall was buried at Highgate Cemetery in North London, a short distance, perhaps 50 yards, from the grave of Karl Marx, as well as many other progressive thinkers and activists. What kind of conversations do you think are taking place there at night, once the living have left?

I mean, I do have this fantasy of Stuart buried in Highgate Cemetery, with Karl Marx around the corner, many of his old comrades buried within hailing distance, comrades going back for his entire political life from the 1950s to the 21st century, every one of whom Stuart has argued with, and with whom Stuart continued to argue with. So, I have this fantasy that when the gates close on the cemetery, all the old Marxist comrades engage in this kind of huge, unruly Marxist sleepover. And they start discussing when the living leave the cemetery. They start discussing the nature of the falling rate of profit, or the state of-- what kind of state is China in, what is the fate of socialism in the 21st century.

And Stuart, unlike many other comrades who are buried there in the cemetery, Stuart is at some remove from the shadow of Karl Marx. He didn't want to be that approximate, but nor did he want to be entirely separate. So, it sums up for me Stuart's own relationship to Marxism. He was always absolutely in conversation with Marxism. He could never let it go. Towards the end of his life, the energies which Marxism had released in him I think accumulated, so that he was moving back onto that train, especially after 2008, the great financial collapse, and so those Marxist issues kept pressing in on him and became more and more important.

But at the same time, Stuart treasured his obliqueness, his distance from Marxism, his need to construct his own reading, and his own contemporary reading, of what Marx was about, and how we should think about Marx, and how it could possibly be used for the present. And in that respect, he was always very keen indeed to hear younger voices who wouldn't regard themselves as Marxists at all, rather clear in their own way, inhabiting a different sort of new generation of radicalism, which wasn't Stuart's. But he was alert to that and intrigued by that, and wanted to know more and to revise his own Marxism-- if that's what it was, or Marxist thinking, I don't know-- in the light of current preoccupations.

So, although I rather like this image-- this fantasy, it is my fantasy-- this fantasy of this great Marxist sleepover with the old comrades, there would have also been a time when Stuart tired of it. He would have tired of hearing the same old voices rehearsing the same old arguments. Others would have got tired of hearing Stuart, because they knew exactly where Stuart was coming from. He knew exactly where they were coming from. And so, I like to think of him maybe just turning over, turning over, and just looking at the stars, looking at the night sky, and thinking, well, what will the future behold?

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