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Elaine Morgan Sept. 3, 2010

Ten Essential Questions If I Had to Interview Me

What was the thinking that led to your list of ten questions?

The main thing I wanted to do is cut out questions I didn't want to answer. And it's not that I've got anything to hide, but I hate being asked questions like "What is your favorite this, that, and the other thing." or "Tell me, what date was that?" because I'm hopeless at dates, and I never know. I can't answer that one. But the other motivation was, that I chose the kind of questions I keep asking myself, some of them. Well, I'm pushing ninety, and I think I've been very very lucky. I think one of the luckiest things is that I was born at a level where you don't expect too much. I feel sorry for the people that George Bernard Shaw called The Downstarts. If they start at the top and they become distressed gentlefolk, and all their lives they feel they've been deprived of things they had. Well I've had nothing like that, because it's been, on the whole, some bumps, but steadily uphill most of the way. So that's something to be thankful for.

Are you an optimist?

This is the biggest and toughest question, and it's one I keep asking myself. On the whole, yes. I read a quote the other day about somebody who said "The human race can always be relied upon to do the reasonable thing, once it has exhausted all the other possibilities." I think there is something like that about humans. They tend to go on being stupid. But I do think they are getting more and more reasonable. And people like Dawkins who wrote *The Selfish Gene*, if you read his book carefully, he says at one point that we're evolving to the time where the selfish gene will hand over to the intelligent part of us and say "Well, you decide. You can do what you think is best." And also Steve Jones says, "We've got to the point where we can tell our genes to go and jump in the lake if we don't like what they're advising us.» So I think we are improving that way. I think that generation by generation, more things that used to be tolerated have become intolerable. Like they used to have cannibalism, they used to have bear-baiting, and they used to have public hangings and draw-and-quarter people. None of that I think can happen again. I think a lot of the evil things people do to one another is because they're programmed to be afraid of strangers. And now with the internet and everything, people are getting less strange. We're getting more able to understand one another and be less afraid of one another. So optimist, yes.

What other career might you have had?

This is the kind of thing people ask you. If you hadn't been a poet manqué or something. There are some things ... I could never have been an athlete, I could never have been a model, I could never have been a musician. But I'd have had a go at most other things. I never planned to write about evolution. I had 30 years as a television dramatist and a lot of success. But then suddenly, that one dried up on me. The styles had changed, a new kind of audience. and the attention span got shorter, so I found I was no longer fitting the bill. And I didn't then think, "Oh, I must start writing about evolution." I just more or less accidentally got into that. And now I've spent at least as long doing that as I was doing television.

Feminism - are you anti-male?

I wrote the bestseller, my only bestseller, in 1972. Somebody called it a feminist tirade, going on about attitudes to women, because they were treating us as a kind of inferior type of man. Man, God made man, and that was the way people ought to be, but we were a bit wonky, and we were regarded as at most stupid or this that or the other. And it was a great success, and I was taken all around America, twice, coast-to-coast on all the television programs. And I remember one of these guys, had been talking to me about five minutes, and in amazement he said "You like men, don't you?" I said, "Well, you know, I like human beings, and you're one of those, aren't you?" So.. besides, I brought up three children, they were all boys. They're lovely. So I cannot say, you know, we are the best sex. But I was attacking, and would still attack, a lot of undesirable, sort of, thought-modes, and practices, and habits of thinking, that are still hanging around, saying not only are you different, but you are inferior. And I'll fight that to the death.

Why do you live in Mountain Ash?

I keep getting asked this, not in Mountain Ash, but when I'm in London or anywhere, "Why do you live out there? I mean, there's so much interesting going on in London —opera and the theatre and the exhibitions, and all of that." I meet such interesting people. Well, I find most people are interesting, wherever you live. I like it here. I understand the people here. I'm relaxed here. I think if you decide, I mean this social mobility, to decide I'm going to be upwardly mobile, and mix with a different lot of people. I think you waste an awful lot of psychic energy, trying to translate yourself into something different. It's much more comfortable and easier, I think, to stay where you were born. And I've found it a very healthy sort of community to grow up in. Because when I was growing up, for one thing it's classless. When Kingsley Amis came to Wales, he said that's one thing about it, it's classless. We were all in the same boat together, and people helped each other, and they knew that if they were going to make a better world, and this valley was full of people who were determined to make a better world, they knew they'd have to do it themselves. And above all, they had a lot of self-respect. "You're as good as anybody else, and don't let anybody tell you any different." So I've been grateful for that and you have to stay in this kind of community.

What are your politics?

Well, I've been voting Labor now for seventy years. But I think we're in a bit of a mess. I still believe in the same principles and the same aims, of greater equality, and all that. But something's gone wrong with the economics. We used to think that if we could get capitalism more or less out of the way, everything would come right. But they tried that in Russia. And the Berlin Wall came down. And we have to face it: you cannot do it that way. So then the capitalists thought: "Great. It's all open for us now." And they began to think "if only we could get rid of the state. And have absolute freedom to run the world ourselves, we'd do a better job of it." And now from the Wall Street crash, and their system isn't working either. And the other thing that's gone wrong, is these psephologists have got voting and opinion polls to a fine art, so they can tell them: "If you want to get into power, never mind about your heartlands, go in for the marginals, and find the policy that will convert just those few people in the middle. Those are the only ones you've got to worry about." I think that's, that's sort of death to democracy. But there's something missing in both sides. If I had another fifty years, I'd tell you what it was.

Do you have any regrets?

I asked this question, in order not to answer it. Because I think it's a very stupid question to ask. If you live your life thinking "If only I hadn't done that." ... "If only that happened then, everything would have been wonderful." James Thurber said «If you live like that, you're living in the pluperfect subjunctive.» You cannot change anything, and it's a bad way to live. You've got to take things the way they are. And a great thing to remember is that of all these paths you didn't take, for all you know, they might have led somewhere much worse than the place you're in already. They

never think that. They think "Oh, if only I hadn't married him ..." or something "...everything would have been wonderful." It's quite as likely it would have been worse.

Do you believe in God?

No, I don't believe in God. I've not got anything against him, I just don't think he's there. Up to a point I can see what Richard Dawkins is getting on about, because terrible things have been done, and are being done, in the name of God. Like him, I'm a bit worried about all the schools here being taken over by faith-schools. And that's going to mean we have groups of people not only believing in God but believing in different Gods, and look what that did in Northern Ireland. But I'm not militant about it, because although a lot of very bad things have been done in God's name, a lot of good things have been done in God's name too. I have known both around here. In the old days, and in Oxford and places, I've known a lot of people who believe in him, and have been better for believing in him, because they believe in a good God, and they find comfort in it. I don't really feel I should, be trying to stop them believing. I just, for myself, I think it's a mistake. I don't think it's evil, but I think it's a mistake. And the other thing that Dawkins leaves out, is that people have done just as horrible things, not in the name of God at all. They can do it in the name of patriotism. Or they can do it in the name of a political creed. Or they can do it out of simply greed, spreading your empire and turning people into slaves. So that what we have got to do, is whether there is a God or there isn't a God, try to work out the way we ought to be behaving.

Are you afraid of dying?

No, not a bit. I can't remember what it was like before I was born. I presume it was alright. I wasn't there. And after I'm dead, again I won't be there. There's nothing to be afraid of. I can see that there are nasty ways of dying, and I'm prepared to worry about that, same as anybody else. But, and I believe in euthanasia. I do, I would hate to think that I was going to be spending weeks and months stuck full of tubes and having nothing to live for and knowing I was going to be snuffed out at the end of it. I'm strongly in favor of people having the right to say "Well, I've had enough now. That was very nice, but I'd like to go." And to be enabled to do that. It shouldn't be beyond the wit of man, to find safeguards to put around that. And in the places where they have allowed it, they haven't had great numbers of people rushing to do it, and they haven't found that it makes people worse at all. Apart from that, I've had very good innings. If I went out now, I'd have nothing to complain of.

... Well, I heard a joke the other day. Someone said, and I feel it's so: "If God had wanted us to vote, he's have given us some decent candidates."