An Interview with Martin Sheen

INTERVIEW BY
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Put almost any question to Martin Sheen, who turns 68 in August—whether it’s about his deep spirituality; his intervention in son Charlie’s drug addiction; his beloved sister, “Charmin’ Carmen”; or his secret desire to throw all of his dry cleaning at a prying fan with a video camera—and he will respond with a tale that is simply outrageous.

“That’s my favorite word these days,” says the Emmy- and Golden Globe-winning actor, who has appeared in more than 70 feature films (among them, Apocalypse Now, Wall Street, The American President, and The Departed) but is perhaps best known for his Emmy-nominated role as President Josiah Bartlet on NBCs erstwhile series The West Wing “Outrageous!” Indeed, the word fits Sheen’s personality and his life, which began in Dayton, where he was raised along with nine siblings begotten of a Spanish father and an Irish mother. He went on to become one of the most accomplished actors of our time, while simultaneously making a name for himself as an impassioned activist: Sheen has been arrested 67 times for nonviolent peace activism. In May, Sheen, who recently filmed Traveling with Jennifer Aniston, was honored by the University of Notre Dame with its prestigious Laetare Medal, for his humanitarian work. Much of our conversation centered, however, on a more deeply personal issue: the role he played in his son’s recovery from drug addiction—a wrenching journey that got so bleak, Sheen actually started planning Charlie’s funeral. “You have to be relentless,” he says. “It has to cost you something.”

DEALING WITH RACISM

“I grew up in the 50s in a very racist atmosphere,” Sheen reveals. “I was acutely aware from the time I was nine until I left home at 18, and it was a very exclusive, all-white country club. They wouldn’t even allow black caddies. They were not permitted to be seen. So I grew up watching that sort of thing, and I made very early choices about where I would stand on that issue, particularly when the N word was used by everybody all the time.”

Q: “But you were half Hispanic, so how did that play out?”
A: “My dad never spoke in public because he was not made to feel proud of his accent. He had the most beautiful Belgian accent imaginable. I loved it. He was the greatest storyteller. I could listen to his voice—it was like listening to a musical instrument. But he was never made to feel proud speaking outside. There were a lot of Italians and other Latinos but no Hispanics.”

Q: “So did you grow up identifying more as being white than Hispanic? You did change your name so as not to be typecast?”
A: “I never changed it officially. I never will. It’s on my driver’s license and passport and everywhere: Ramon Gerard Estevez. I started using Sheen, I thought I’d give it a try, and before I knew it, I started making a living with it and then it was too late.” (Laugh.) “In fact, one of my great regrets is that I didn’t keep my name as it was given to me. I knew it bothered my dad.”

EMBRACING SPIRITUALITY

Q: “After you had a heart attack and a nervous breakdown at age 38, on the set of Apocalypse Now, you went to India and found spirituality. Is that when you embraced Catholicism?”
A: “I did. Yeah. I was raised Catholic, but it was a religion, not a way of life. [After the heart attack] I came back to a faith more than a church. I came back with joy and with freedom and thanksgiving rather than with fear or trembling or worrying about eternity.”

Q: “A lot of people would love to have the faith that you have, but they don’t have that real dramatic crisis that leads you to say, ‘Wait a minute—I’m really off the track here. I’m leading a kind of empty existence.’”
A: “If you have an awareness that your life is not full and that you are not yourself, that is the beginning. I think, of the journey toward spirituality. I don’t have a clue what God is, I really don’t. I would never, ever try and tell anyone what to look for. The only thing I would say is: the journey to spirituality is the journey to your own humanity. The more human you are, I think, the more godlike you are. And that is the genius of God.”

Q: “I can’t imagine that in your 20s and 30s you’d have been sitting with a journalist having this particular conversation.”
A: “Not often, not likely, no. I probably would have been drunk. I’m just so awed, truly awed. I’m realizing I’m 67 years old—how much longer do I get to have this magnificence?”

Q: “Speaking of the drinking—”
A: “Who was talking about drinking? Oh, speaking of the drinking, you wretched drunk, could we get back to your being an alcoholic? Oh, what a sneaky shot that was. Well done, though, I must say; I give you credit. Go ahead.”

JOINING ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

“I’m in the [Alcoholics Anonymous] program, you know,” Sheen says, “and one of the saddest things is the rise in alcoholism among retired people. A lot of them started drinking with the loss of their spouse: suddenly they’re alone. They spiral much quicker. It’s much more difficult if you are retired and you have a reputation, to get into a program or to get sober. The last thing you want to do is lose face with your community.”

“What revives so many people who have lost spouses is getting back in there. Go back and serve, teach, find people who need your help. You’ve got to find a place where you’re needed. When you become disconnected, you get farther and farther from the shore, and you don’t realize how far you’ve drifted, and then suddenly you’re in the deep water and you’re alone.”

Q: “Do you still go to the meetings?”
A: “Oh, I do; sure, yeah, I do. [But] I got sober through Catholicism, through my faith. I only got involved with AA when I was trying desperately to find a way to help [my son] Charlie, because I didn’t have any skills. A dear friend of mine was in the program. He said, ‘First of all, you want to get into Al-Anon and keep your mouth shut for at least a year—just
An Interview with Martin Sheen

listen to other people's stories. And that's what I did. As you can see what a windbag I am, it was a great discipline.

And then he suggested that I join AA, and I did. I was astonished when I got into AA, because I didn't know how spiritual the program was. I said, 'You guys use the word God.' 'Oh, we do. If you believe in it, you believe in it. If you don't, then it's a higher power.' I said, 'Wow, no wonder it transcends all that other stuff.' But at the same time, it is such a deeply personal journey, the road to addiction and the road out of it. There are really no two journeys alike, I don't think.

COPING WITH SON CHARLIE'S DRUG ADDICTION

Q: 'I had a nephew who died of a drug overdose. He'd overdosed once before, but the hospital never told my brother and his wife because of 'privacy' laws.'
A: 'The only way I got Charlie, frankly, was because he'd skipped out of the hospital. I had to pay the bill. In paying the bill, I got to see why he was in there. He'd consumed an illegal substance; he was on probation; he was not allowed to have these substances.'

Q: 'So you turned Charlie in to the authorities to help him?'
A: 'This is a criminal matter. And so that was the wedge; that was the leverage I had. That is what I took to the court; that's what I took to the sheriff. It was the only way I got him.'

Q: 'How did you break through his entourage of enablers?'
A: 'You're dealing with a life-and-death situation. And the critical part of the equation is: Are you willing to risk your child's wrath? They are not going to like you. Don't even think about them loving you. They're going to call you the most vicious, obscene names. You have to be prepared for that.'

Q: 'Does that also extend not just to them but their friends?'
A: 'Oh, yes, yes. Sometimes the only way you can communicate with them is through their friends. He had two in particular who risked his wrath to tell him the truth.

"People adored Charlie: he was adorable. So it was very difficult to get his attention. He had access to magic carpets—high-celebrity friends and a lot of money, power. He was hidden away in a tower you couldn't get to. The ones who were closest to him were his worst enemies. They depended on him for their living, and they would say anything and do anything."

Q: 'Yeah, it's the thing that can kill somebody.'
A: 'That does kill. That will kill you. And you have to know that these people are there. And you have to go through them like a tank.'

Q: 'How do you go through them like a tank?'
A: 'You expose them. You never allow them to give you an excuse. You face them and you say, 'You're a damn liar. Get out of my face. I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you.' You have to believe enough in life to risk your own reputation. After a while I was outrageous. Outrageous. They would scurry like cockroaches when they saw me in public places. I was just fearless, could care a damn about protocol. In a restaurant, in a public setting. It didn't matter a whit. They'd want to be nice. So what have I done? You want to know what you've done? Anybody else want to know what this scumbag has done? And they're gone. What is the alternative? It's never going to happen in a calm and civilized manner. And it was always the hardest core that we dealt with in the end, the one currency of the gun.'

Q: 'And do you take the gun away from that person?'
A: 'Take the gun away.'
Q: 'You took the gun away.'
A: 'Absolutely, yeah. When a life is at stake and it's your child, you become fearless in a lot of ways. I mean, you just become fanatic. Nothing ever gets done unless it's done by a fanatic.'
A: 'Yes, fanaticism makes miracles.'
A: 'Exactly. The night I made the decision to go to court with the papers I'd gotten from the hospital was the most difficult decision of my life. They put up a warrant, and Charlie got it like that. And he called me. He used some choice words I've never heard before. I was very, very impressed with the language. And you realize that you're talking to the drug. I said, 'Whoa, whoa,' (CONTINUED ON PAGE 73)

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wait just a minute. Are you coming in [to court] tomorrow? ‘Yes, I am. I’m coming in with an attorney.’ And he brought [O.J. Simpson attorney] Robert Shapiro as his lawyer. I said, ‘Fine. I’m delighted. I’m very impressed. Do you mind if I’m there? I’ll be at the court?’ And he suddenly got kind of calm, and he said, ‘Oh, sure. Why not?’ I said, ‘Well, you know, I don’t want to suddenly show up and you’re gonna lose it.’ He said, ‘No, you come. Okay.’

‘Then he went back in a rage. And I said, ‘Hey, wait a minute.’ ‘What?’ he said. ‘When I see you,’ I said, ‘can I give you a kiss?’ He got very quiet again. He said, ‘Well, sure, why not?’

‘Well, I just want to make sure if I go up to kiss you, you don’t punch me in the mouth.’

‘He said, ‘I wouldn’t do such a thing.’

‘I said, ‘I didn’t think you would.’ Then he went back to raging.’

(Laughs.)

‘He arrived that next morning with Mr. Shapiro, who was wonderful. [Charlie] walked right up, kissed me on the lips, went in to see the judge. Yeah, he knew it was over. And he was very relieved in a lot of ways that he couldn’t express.’

Q: "It sounds as if Charlie has very much forgiven you and thanks you.

A: "Well, that's his business. I did it for me. I wouldn't carry this with me all my life. I had to do everything humanly possibly. If I had come up short and lost him, I might as well be dead.

A year later, I'm driving down the highway and the news comes on the radio: Live from the Malibu Courthouse, our reporter is talking live with Charlie Sheen, and he's just left the courtroom.' Charlie was clean and sober. He's off probation. What a jubilant moment. 'Well,' he said, 'I want to thank my father for saving my life.'

'I pulled off the road and I wept uncontrollably. I wept and wept.

'And I sat there staring at the ocean.
An Interview with Martin Sheen

(Continued from Page 73)

now. There are six of us left. My mother actually had 12 pregnancies, but ten survived. So I was the seventh son of nine boys and one girl."

Q: "So you had only one sister?"
A: "One sister, yeah. She's a teacher, just retired. She lives in Madrid, Spain. I adore her. She's so outrageous. She's kind of rotund, you know, a little lady, and so funny and bright and loving and just hilarious. Everybody just falls in love with her. Her name is Carmen. We call her Charmin' Carmen. She's a delight."
Q: "So you think you'll see those people in the afterlife?"
A: "Oh, I'm not concerned about that. I'll see them in this life. I don't think we go to heaven. I think we become heaven, and I think that's the difference."
Q: "And what does that mean?"
A: "It means that we create heaven right here, right now. We project it. I don't have to wait until I'm dead."

Reinventing Himself
Q: "Speaking of your present life then, just to end on you-"
A: "My life is gonna end? Oh, God! I thought you knew something I didn't."
Q: "No! But I want to ask about your own reinvention. In 2006 you went back to college for a couple of months."
A: "See. I've never gone to college. But I had this romantic fantasy about going to school. So I was offered an honorary degree from the National University of Ireland, Galway, in spring 2006. [At the reception] the president said, 'What are you going to do now that The West Wing is out?' I said, 'Well, I have enough degrees. I need an education. Will you let me come?' And he said, 'If you're serious, yes, you'd be as welcome as the flowers.' And so that August I enrolled. I got an apartment, and I rented a car. And I registered under my real name. My student ID was in [the name of] Ramon Estevez."
Q: "Did you learn anything?"
A: "Oh, I'm not sure. I had 120-some books. I maybe finished 20. My first day on campus, a kid stops me and he says, 'Is it yourself?' I said, 'It is.' He says, 'And where is your minder?' I said, 'What's a minder?' He said, 'You know, your tug? Your bodyguard?' I said, 'I've none.' He said, 'More power to you.' And he left. That was my first day on campus. I thought, 'This is a wonderful place.'"

Finding Personal Enrichment
Q: "Once you said that you've never met a rich man who is satisfied."
A: (Laughs.) "I'm sorry I've said that. I think I've met a few since."
Q: "Are you satisfied?"
A: "Yeah, I'm very, very happy in the center of my being. Yes, I really do cherish being alive. It's a magnificent journey. I love every minute of it. I vacillate between various levels of joy. I couldn't imagine a happier life. I'm just so lucky."
Q: "And 45 years of marriage to your wife, Janet, right?"
A: "Forty-seven now, I think--'61."
Q: "Would you ever run for office?"
A: "I'm not qualified."
Q: "So it's never crossed your mind?"
A: "It's only crossed my ego. I feel like a public servant. But I couldn't do it professionally. I don't have the temperament. The only thing that I long for is to lead an honest life. Most of the time I just want to be left alone." (laughs.)
Q: "The older we get, I think we all feel that way."
A: "I was coming out of the dry cleaner the other day, and I had, like, five weeks' dry cleaning, and my fingers are going numb. I'm looking through the traffic, and a guy comes up to me with a video camera: 'Hello, hi, how we doing?' I said, 'We are not doing too well.' I mean, this character is following me and asking me all these questions, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, my, it's like, just one slip and you're going to be on all of those wretched shows.' And, so, I couldn't have been nicer. I wanted to throw the clothes at him. I wanted to take the camera and turn it on him and ask him how he could do this and have any dignity left. That's the culture we live in. You look for someone to lose it. It really is disgraceful."
Q: "Well, for as much as anybody has a secret to life, you seem to have found it with your passion and your faith."
A: "I'll tell you an interesting thing. If I may I was so afraid of dying in an airplane crash—I don't like to fly. So I would get on the plane and start the rosary and I would start to pray. 'Please, Lord, get us off the ground.' And the plane would roar down the runway, rrripppp. 'Please get us up safely—oh, you did—and please give us a smooth flight, and please land us safely. We're in there, okay.'

And one time, not too long ago, the plane was roaring down the runway, and I'd fallen asleep. And suddenly I wake up and we're in the air. And I can't reach the beads and I said, 'Oh, thank you. Dear Lord, if we don't make it here, it's been wonderful. I wouldn't have wanted it any different, and if I don't make it back, look after that crowd for me, be present to them, will you, but I couldn't have asked for or dreamed of anything more. Thank you, thank you, thank you.' And I went back to sleep."

Nancy Perry Graham is deputy editor of AARP THE MAGAZINE. Her interview with former secretary of state Colin Powell.