

Stewart Hill (SH) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro So thank you very much, Stewart, for taking the time to have a chat to me about your work and your experience. Could you just begin by saying a bit about your own military background and experience?

Stewart Hill I joined the army in 1994 so I think I was--what?--22, 23, and I went to officer training at Sandhurst, Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. And then was in the army, in the infantry, joined the Royal Regiment at Wales which was my local regiment and stayed in the army and would have still been in the army now if I hadn't been injured in 2009. So that was after sixteen years of service. It was a particularly... it was a very bad day, a couple of soldiers killed, a couple of others very seriously injured. And from one of the explosions from an improvised explosive device, I got spiked in the back of the head from the metal from that, from the shrapnel, went through my brain. I was very lucky to survive. I did. But that was the end of my army career. And so I was medically discharged in 2012 so after about eighteen years of service. And as I said before if I hadn't been injured, I wouldn't have left. I saw no reason to leave. I was really enjoying it and I was loving my job. But the experiences since that because I've had to deal with the neurological challenge of my brain damage and the psychological challenge of the perception, the perceived rubbish life that I had, I've done a lot of, I suppose, soul searching. I've done a lot of working out who I am, trying to identify what I am and that was a key part of it. It's actually that I felt that loss of my identity. And that actually led me into using the arts, or trying to see if the arts, in no particular order, would help me. And they have, massively. Hugely. And so I've been involved in painting, in poetry, in dance, in acting, in singing. And it's enhanced my life incredibly and I am a much, much better person for it.

NM What do you think it is, setting aside the poetry for a minute, what have the other arts done for you?

SH The main one is painting, is the art. So it was at a time I was introduced to it by an artist that I met on holiday to Mallorca in--it was the end of, towards the end of 2010. I was really struggling with the impact on my life and on my brain and he just reminded me with his enthusiasm that I used to enjoy art at school. I used to enjoy painting and drawing at school. So I did O-level art back in the day when they were O-levels. They were so much harder than GCSEs. I've got to get that in. And so I asked if I could borrow a paintbrush. No in fact, just a pencil and a sketchpad and I started to try to draw the scene in front of me and tried to remember what perspective was with the swimming pool and tried to draw the purple mountains in the background. And it was just really engaging. And from that experience, I was lost for three hours, which was the longest time since my injury that I hadn't once thought about myself or thought about the situation I was in. And that gave me a little bit of hope at that stage thinking actually maybe there are some good things in my life or maybe I can create some. And from that led the mindset of perception and looking at things differently in a diffuse, different prism. So I think that was the most valuable lesson for me from painting was actually not looking at something in a tangible way, and thinking, OK, so the computer in front of me, that is a computer. Well actually, it is a computer but I can also choose it to be a shape and angles and shadows and shine. And if I wanted that could be the most beautiful thing in the world. And that allowed me then to start thinking about,

philosophise a lot more, about life and who we are and who I am. And so that's been the most important lesson for me.

NM And in terms of your writing, what kind of writing have you been doing?

SH So I attempted to start writing a book about my experiences. That was a while ago.

NM So that was nonfiction?

SH Memoir sort of. Yeah and so I put a synopsis together. It was hard work but actually I'm glad... I had an agent at the time. The publishers didn't accept it. They felt it was too angry and it was actually looking back at it. And I'm glad it wasn't accepted by anyone because I can see the anger in it because it was for a particularly angry period of my time. But poetry. I've written only maybe about less than ten poems. Maybe seven or eight. But I've written them at a time when I needed to write them to try and express how I was feeling to myself, not for anyone else, but trying to work out who I am. So I found it a really interesting self analysis tool to express and try to work out who I am, how I was feeling, why I was angry. And so that's what I love the aspect about poetry is if I... the challenge. OK, well, you're going to write an aspect about yourself that's going to be on display forever. How do you want people to see you? How do you want to describe? So you've got to search for words that actually really are important to you and find out what their meaning and there are subtleties in it. So I could choose a word that actually doesn't reflect exactly how I feel. And it's educational then because actually it's forcing me because I don't have a big word...

NM Vocabulary.

SH Word vocabulary. As if by cue, I can't remember what I wanted to say. And so actually it's challenging me. It's saying, OK, well if that's not the word, get a thesaurus out, have a look, explore other words. You know and it's just helping... It just helps. It's improving my brain. It's neural pathways, they're igniting, they're going, because I'm not resting my brain. Although it's a challenge, it's a really really good challenge.

NM I was really struck actually. I think you were talking, yesterday or the day before yesterday, about precision. About finding exactly the right word. So is that sometimes a kind of frustrating thing if you can't necessarily find exactly the right word and you would go to the dictionary or thesaurus? Or is it actually a kind of enabling thing that you suddenly find the word and you think I've got it, that is capturing exactly what I want to say?

SH Within poetry, it's enabling. It's an enabler. It's lovely and I love it. Yes, I've found the word. And then I love trying to play with words. I'm not poetry-trained if that's the word, how to describe it. I haven't gone... I've had this workshop and this is the first sort of experience I've had of poetry workshops. But I just love playing around with words and seeing how they can bounce off each other and seeing if those consonants (if that the right word?) harmony with it and that's what I enjoy doing. Where it's not an enabler, is this pedantry, and this exactness, is where I'm trying to write prose. For example, a few years ago I was starting doing an Open University degree in psychology but actually had to give that up because of trying to find... I was using up so much time and energy of trying to make the essays be exact that actually it was just, it was counter productive. And I had to give it up. And my wife

recognised that. She said “Look, you’re exhausting yourself. Your grades are fine. You’re getting the good grades. You don’t have to worry about...” Well, no. For me, it was important. And so I’m also doing stress management, I suppose, level four [...] education, on stress management, corporate stress management. Because all of it just fascinates me. And again, I find I’m spending a lot of time on trying to explain what I want, you know. Yeah.

NM It’s also very interesting you were saying just thinking of choosing the words and choosing the kind of images of poetry. You were thinking about the visual art, and you were saying it shifts your perspective. And obviously a lot of poetry relies on metaphor and changing one image to another or comparing things that ordinarily wouldn’t compare. So that in itself suggests that poetry might be a good vehicle for shifting people’s views or shifting people’s perspectives, or maybe allowing you to change your perspective on your own life?

SH So today, when we did, so we’ve been going through dialogue and how to use dialogue and speech in a poem. And you know just being aware of that method actually I did enjoy it. So there was an example of so an individual says “Where are the sardines?” and he was referring to a painting. But actually just using those three words created an image in my head of where this individual could be and what the painting looked like and how large or how small it was. And so in that way it worked. Actually there’s no need to try and describe it. There are other ways to help someone visualise what they’re doing. And I also accept that it worked for me and it may not work for someone else. So I do like poetry. I do like poems that don’t follow stringently a particular way of writing. I like free poetry where they just drop in--does that make sense?--all these different techniques.

NM Yeah, absolutely. And juxtaposition of different things that wouldn’t normally...

SH Yeah, I love that. I love the juxtaposition of words and of scenes and forcing, not forcing, encouraging oneself to think about what’s been written and judge and maybe why, work out why that individual’s chosen that word over that word or... so that’s what I like. Yeah, that’s a very enjoyable part of writing poetry.

NM Do you think that if you’re writing about your own military experience. Is poetry a way to bridge that military civilian divide? Are there things you can do in poetry to express your experience that then civilians can access?

SH Part of the poetry I like... I really enjoy spoken poetry, so it goes back to the words and playing with words. I like the sound of words and playing with those sounds which can support and enhance the meaning behind it. So an example was, a few years ago, I was asked to give a short talk in support of this charity fundraising event about my army career, about my injury, the impact it had on me my injury, and how this particular charity helped me. They said “Could you give a speech on that? However it’s got to be done in four minutes”. OK, well how can I explain twenty, thirty years of my life in four minutes? And with that challenge... what that made me do is I thought actually, well I’ve written some poems about my life since my injury. And so I amalgamated and put together, took out bits of bits, and I created this four minute poem which summarises exactly all of that: my army career, what happened on the day of my injury, the impact it had on me, the change in my life, change in my attitude. And it is an incredibly strong four minute speech.

NM And what was the response to that?

SH For that particular occasion, it was a standing ovation. And I use it now as a very easy way to summarise. I've said this particular poem a number of times. There's another particular charity that likes to bring me out. I say that in an amusing way. But it just works really well and is very very powerful. And this is what I love about particular parts, types of poems, that can summarise life events, life changing events, or monumental things that are happening in let's say ten lines.

NM It's the kind of distillation of the experience or the economy of the language?

SH I love what you said the other day which was the condensation of words and that's what I love about poetry.

NM Yes.

SH Condensation of huge ideas, of huge events, and reducing them into something which is, because it's small, it's more powerful, I think. And it's almost a... if this would be the right word? Juxtaposition? It's not a juxtaposition. It's something so small but actually has so much power. Does that make sense?

NM Yeah, absolutely.

SH It's almost the more you reduce it down, the more powerful it becomes.

NM It concentrates it. And then people actually do concentrate when they're listening because they know it's different to other types of language, other types of speech.

SH Yeah.

NM I think that's a fantastic example. Brilliant, thank you very much, Stewart. I really appreciate it.