



CHAPTER 5
SAFE AND WARM

04/21/01

INT. ROOM 627, RITZ-CARLTON HOTEL, SAN FRANCISCO - DAY

KIRK: Outside of this room there's a million distractions flying at you. Being in this room is kinda like being in a womb. You know, it's all nice and warm-

LARS: It's really safe in here.

KIRK: -and cozy, and we have, like, perfect communication. Then you go out there, and you have all these things coming at you, and it just really hurts it.

JAMES: "Womb service."

KIRK: Yeah, womb service! (laughter)

PHIL: I like that. Could be the new album title.

Before we go any further, I want to make it very clear that I think Phil Towle is an enormously empathetic individual, a quality that makes him a fantastic therapist. He is a warm and caring human being who wears his emotions on the sleeves of his colorful sweaters. That's his blessing as well as his Achilles heel, especially regarding his involvement with Metallica. Some reviewers have described Phil as *Monster's* "fall guy"—one writer even called him the film's "villain." I strongly disagree with these characterizations and can honestly say that was not our intention. This 65-year-old Kansan, who bears an uncanny resemblance to a younger, laid-back version of the farmer in Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic* and who does not possess one hard-rocking bone in his body, is responsible for keeping the biggest hard-rock band of all time from splintering apart.

That said, Phil's relationship with all of us was complicated. When Q Prime first learned of the worsening Jason situation, they suggested bringing in Phil as a mediator. Phil was a former gang counselor and had more recently shifted to "performance-enhancement coaching" and made a name for himself working with the St. Louis Rams the year they won the Super Bowl. Q Prime knew him because he'd worked with Rage Against the Machine, another Q Prime band that had experienced a crisis of interpersonal dynamics. Phil hadn't been able to prevent Rage from breaking up, but the managers hoped he'd have better luck with Metallica and assumed his tenure with the band would be brief. They figured he'd stick around for a month, maybe six weeks, just enough time to get the band through the Jason crisis, whether that meant figuring out a way for Jason to stay or making sure his departure was as amicable as possible. They didn't count on Jason's vehement opposition to Phil, that he would see Phil's arrival as part of the bigger problem, not a means to solve it. Conversely, they never dreamed that the rest of Metallica—especially Lars—would gravitate toward Phil. It didn't take long for Q Prime to become alarmed at how much time Phil was spending with them. Before James left for rehab, Phil would fly to San Francisco every other week for two or three days at a time to conduct sessions that would last from two to four hours. His time with the band increased dramatically after James returned. The managers, who were in New

Previous page: In a moment of weakness, I sat down for my own therapy session with Phil, compromising my own journalistic standards. (Courtesy of Bob Richman)

York, became very concerned that Phil was usurping some of their influence. Bluntly put, Phil had the potential to become, for Q Prime, a “monster.”

Phil took the Metallica job thinking he would encounter a bad situation that could be remedied. It couldn’t—at least not as far as Jason was concerned. Phil was like a marriage counselor who discovers during a couple’s first session that one of them is deadset on a divorce. The question quickly became *how* Metallica would deal with Jason leaving, not whether or not they’d ultimately have to. Phil felt that the situation called for him to establish an atmosphere of trust immediately, and adopted what he calls an “interactive” stance, meaning he would conduct himself not as an impassive, neutral counselor but rather as a participant who discusses his own biases and baggage. In other words, he would become something like a friend and confidant.

This approach was not new to Phil, though many therapists would consider it odd or even borderline unprofessional. But Phil draws a distinction between therapy and performance-enhancement coaching, which he feels is a much more accurate description of what he does. He helps people who regularly put themselves or their work on display—such as artists, musicians, ac-

Courtesy of Annamaria DiSanto



tors, and athletes—perform up to their potential. As a performance enhancement coach, Phil doesn't adhere to a therapist's typical protocol. He believes that it is perfectly acceptable, within reason, to form emotional attachments to the people he counsels—to, in essence, become equal collaborators with them as they struggle to overcome whatever is holding them back.

Phil's willingness—even eagerness—to get close to Metallica would ultimately complicate his departure from the band's orbit. But that was still two years in the future, although nobody, Phil included, ever thought at the outset that he'd be with Metallica for that long. Nor did Phil ever imagine that these hard rockers would be the clients he worked most closely with and got closest to during his entire professional career. For now, he was faced with a band in crisis. He witnessed Metallica rallying together as a somewhat illusory way of dealing with Jason's departure. They were pissed off at Jason, which allowed them all to say how much they loved one another now that he was gone. Slowly, the underlying conflict between James and Lars, the years of things left unsaid and defensive mechanisms perfected, began to reveal itself. We showed up on the scene just when this second stage was starting to happen.

It was an odd feeling to sit in on those "room 627 chats," as they were called. One of Phil's favorite sayings is "The universe speaks"—basically a variation on the idea that things happen for a reason, and that we need to be attuned to what's happening in our lives if we want to make sense of them. Although it's the type of new-agey pronouncement that some may find easy to dismiss, during those early days I decided there might be something to it. As recently as a few weeks earlier, I had been moping in New York, thinking I might never work again. Now, for whatever reason, I was thousands of miles from home, thrown into a room with a group of highly successful, highly creative people confronting the very same professional and existential questions that I was. Maybe the universe was telling me something.

Bruce and I were, to some extent, behaving like the previous year had never happened. Falling into our normal pattern of avoiding confrontations, we just rolled up our sleeves and got to work. I also had the problem of not really knowing what to say to Bruce. I wasn't sure exactly how to structure our roles to avoid repeating the work imbalance that had plagued our previous project. For that matter, I wasn't even sure how much Bruce wanted to work with me, on this project or any other. Did he consider it an insult for me to ask him to come back into the fold after spending the last several years trying to put some distance between us, without explicitly acknowledging that I had done so?

As dangerous as it was to let these issues fester any longer, dealing with them in any detail would have to wait. The important thing was that we were a filmmaking team again. Listening to Metallica talk about how they'd never learned to function as a band, I was reminded how much I valued my partnership with Bruce and how close I'd come to throwing it away. There's something about the two of us together that makes the film gods smile upon us. In fourteen years together, Bruce and I have voluntarily pulled the plug on only one project we started, and that was because we decided we didn't like our subjects. Making a documentary is always a crapshoot, but there was something about our collaboration that consistently produced good results. I don't mean this in a superstitious sense. Part of it was the chemistry we had between us, but it was more than that. We knew how to insert ourselves into a situation and somehow tease a film out of it. This was especially evident when we made *Paradise Lost*. The atmosphere surrounding the West Memphis 3 was so sensitive we were actually receiving death threats. Yet we emerged with a compelling film about a miscarriage of justice. It was almost as though the two of us working together had a certain chemistry with the world.

Somehow I'd forgotten about that ineffable quality of our collaborative relationship. At the time we started filming Metallica, I was angry, confused, and regretful—just generally in a fragile emotional state. Phil picked up on it, which led to me to commit my first mistake while making *Some Kind of Monster*.

At the end of each session during the first week, Phil brought the filmmaking crew together to ask what we thought of the sessions and how we felt sitting in on them. It threw everyone off. Basically, he was turning the camera on us. I'm not sure to what extent Phil was being calculating or strategic, but he was brilliantly intuitive. He was, at this early stage of filming, already subtly blurring the line between filmmakers and subjects. Against my better judgment, I crossed it. At the end of the week, when Phil asked my opinion of that day's session, I told him that it was incredibly inspiring to watch everyone deal with these issues since I was wrestling with similar ones. "I feel very privileged," I said.

A few minutes later, as I was hunched over, packing up the gear, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see Phil looming over me.

"Hey, Joe, can I talk to you a minute?"

"Sure, Phil, what's up?"

"I thought what you said today was very powerful. You know, I consider us all part of the process." He gestured across the room. "All of us, including you

and the crew. I was wondering if maybe you'd be interested in doing a one-on-one session of your own."

And of course I did.

The next day I went alone to room 627 and just unloaded on Phil. It felt good to let him know what had been going on with me. I told him about how awful and out of control I felt after the *Blair Witch 2* debacle, how I had found myself feeling the sort of inexplicable rage I'd never before experienced, and how scared I was that it made me want to lash out at those around me, including my family. Phil's a great listener. I left our one-hour session feeling psychologically great . . . but journalistically horrible.

Here's why:

If you're going to make a film about real people's lives as they unfold before the cameras, the most important task—even more important than camera-work and editing—is the skillful management of the filmmaker-subject relationship. It may sound basic, but it's a really complicated and misunderstood skill. Many young documentarians, and certainly most news organizations, think that covering a story is about immediately jumping into a situation with guns blazing and cameras rolling. I couldn't disagree more. The establishment of a rapport with your subject is absolutely essential. Much of the work Bruce and I do happens long before and long after the camera rolls. We want to establish an atmosphere of trust that remains after we've packed up and left.

I can understand why some viewers have been suspicious of Phil's tendency to become emotionally connected to his patients, but I also sympathize with him. Bruce and I have been accused of something similar. We've gotten a lot of flack from documentary purists who believe that building a relationship with our subjects creates a lack of objectivity—and, therefore, truthfulness—in our films. (To me, it's common sense that any documentary—in fact, anything that purports to be journalistic—is inherently subjective, since it's the product of the many choices made by its creator.) While making *Brother's Keeper*, Bruce and I hung out with the Ward brothers for weeks before we turned on a camera. We wanted to get to know them and we wanted them to get to know us. We did chores with them and even bought them food and chewing tobacco, since they were so impoverished. For *Paradise Lost*, we juggled relationships with the families of the three victims and the three defendants—not to mention three legal teams and the prosecution and judge. For obvious reasons, this was a fragile process that required an inordinate amount of care.

Getting to know your subjects helps make them more comfortable with

the fact that you're intruding on their lives. Of course, by allowing them to let down their guard more than they might if you kept your distance, it also makes it easier to take advantage of them. You're convincing people to let you enter their lives at a moment of extreme vulnerability. It's a big responsibility, but I believe Bruce and I have been very careful with the intimacy bestowed upon us. I think we've been good stewards of people's stories.

Being behind a camera is a powerful position. Rather than pretend otherwise, I think it's important to recognize and maintain that power and use it wisely. The alternative is to maintain a total distance from your subject, in the (I think misguided) belief that by doing so you allow your subject's story to unfold "naturally." The challenge is to navigate these interpersonal relationships without making the subject feel as if a power dynamic exists. You never want to make your subjects feel like they're not in control of their lives or that they're dependent on you. It's just as important not to allow yourself to cede control of the filmmaking process to your subjects. While making *Paradise Lost*, for example, we became close to the victims' mothers, who believed that the West Memphis 3 were guilty. In suggesting that the killer was still at large, we added to these women's pain by preventing them from achieving closure and getting on with their lives. However, we felt a responsibility as journalists to tell the story as we saw it.

With *Brother's Keeper* and *Paradise Lost*, we were dealing with subjects who were, by their circumstances, in weak positions: the Ward brothers were barely connected to the modern world, and the West Memphis 3 were juveniles in jail. Phil, on the other hand, was worldly and highly educated. With our previous films, we had to be aware of our power so that we didn't abuse it. With *Some Kind of Monster*, we had to guard against relinquishing too much of it. By opening myself up to Phil, I was breaking one of our cardinal rules. I was ceding a certain amount of power to a person I was making a film about, without really understanding what the eventual ramifications would be. If I continued the therapy and became dependent on Phil, would it compromise choices I'd have to make in the future? How could I be sure that Phil wouldn't use the very personal information I was revealing about myself against me? In hindsight, I couldn't imagine someone with as much integrity as Phil ever taking advantage of our relationship, but at the time I felt it was inappropriate to have let down my guard. By putting myself in a potentially vulnerable position, I was threatening the integrity of the film. I was quite possibly handing Phil the tools that he could use against me.

To make matters even more complicated, the members of Metallica would eventually make the decision to bankroll *Monster* themselves. We normally don't show unfinished films to our subjects, but we made an exception with Metallica, since the band was funding the film. That made Phil feel like he deserved to see it, too, which created a very awkward situation when we were editing the film.

It's important for me to point out that Phil welcomed us into his world as enthusiastically as any subject we've ever documented. Although Lars had specifically invited us out to San Francisco to film the sessions, I had assumed that this therapist, whoever he was, would need some convincing before letting us in the door. We had prepared ourselves for an initial rejection, figuring we would have to jump through several hoops before he allowed something so unusual as someone filming his patients' therapy sessions. But Phil was immediately receptive to us. He had filmed some of his sessions in the past (although not for public consumption), and he firmly believed that cameras could have beneficial effects, either as a "truth serum" that kept people honest with themselves and one another, or simply as a motivator, since some people feel a compunction to talk if they know a camera is on them. Phil's hospitality with us may have given him a sense of *quid pro quo*: *we're all in this together*. By getting too close to Metallica, he eventually complicated his relationship with them. And there were times when he encouraged a closeness in us that complicated our relationship with him. By submitting to therapy, I was partly to blame.

Of course, any of the eventual awkwardness between Phil and us might still have happened if I hadn't unburdened myself on his couch. But it was an early example of how roles could get tricky with this film. Was Phil a coauthor of *Some Kind of Monster*? For that matter, was he a *de facto* member of Metallica? Were the cameras enabling the therapy or vice versa? The filmmakers, the band, and Phil: who was authoring whom? As the filmmaking process went on, these questions became increasingly thorny. The moment I said yes to Phil may have marked the first growing pains of the three-headed monster.