

Lillian Roth (1910-1980)

Lillian Roth was an early film star who graced popular films of the late 1920s and 1930s. Following the 1953 public disclosure of her recovery from alcoholism in the TV series *This Is Your Life*, she received tens of thousands of letters of praise and requests for advice. The following year, she elaborated on her recovery story in her *New York Times* best-selling autobiography *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1954) with an accompanying Hollywood biopic (1955) starring Susan Hayward. This was followed in 1958 by an expanded biography entitled *Beyond my Worth*. Lillian Roth returned to stage and screen in the 1960s, finishing a most illustrious career.

Lillian Roth was interviewed by Mike Wallace on April 5, 1958. Below is a transcript of that interview from the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas. Also of note:

Video available at http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/roth_lillian_t.html

Video interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sapf11iw-rY>

Transcript

THE MIKE WALLACE INTERVIEW

Guest: Lillian Roth

4/5/58

WALLACE: Good evening. Tonight we go after the latest chapter in the story of a woman who fought her way back from alcoholism and despair, to become again one of the most compelling figures in show business. She is Lillian Roth, a million dollar film star at eighteen, an alcoholic at thirty, a great torch singer only five years ago and today a woman with a new story to tell.

If you're curious to know why Lillian Roth says that the past five years have been among the most difficult in her life, if you want to hear her thoughts on her conversion to Catholicism, and if you want to know why Miss Roth says that despite her recent success, she is forever trying to fill what she calls an aching, a frightening void within herself, we'll go after those stories in just a moment. My name is Mike Wallace, the cigarette is Parliament.

(COMMERCIAL)

WALLACE: And now to our story. Several years ago, an all but forgotten entertainer by the name of Lillian Roth, wrote a brutally frank autobiography called "*I'll Cry Tomorrow*." It was made into a successful Hollywood film. Miss Roth herself was swamped with offers to appear in television, nightclubs. Since then Miss Roth has forged a new life, which she has written about in a new book, to be published later this month, called "*Beyond My Worth*."

Lillian, first of all, let me ask you this: After your remarkable comeback a few years ago I'd imagine that the general public's impression of you is that of a happy and successful woman, who has finally found her way. Yet, in your new book, "*Beyond My Worth*" you wrote this: you said: "I've had mornings recently when I woke up and my whole life seemed in chaos and I've said to myself, I've fallen back... I've fallen back again." Why have you felt that way?

ROTH: Well, Mike, I guess it's something that stems from my childhood. I've never quite felt up to of the many amazing things that happened to me. I've never felt at school that I was as pretty as the next child, or as clever as the next child, and anytime anything happens to me, I just thought it was luck. And that was mostly all through my life, and if I did a performance and the audience were wonderful to me, I thought it really wasn't good enough, it could have been better. I've never felt quite adequate, and because...

WALLACE: And so even now, in spite of the fact that you have overcome what obstacles you have overcome...

ROTH: Well, you see, when I say: "Beyond My Worth," I honestly feel I haven't done anything extraordinary. The public has been amazing. I've gotten mail from all over the world you'd think I was a miracle woman. And I'm not! It's through these people and with the help of God that I have been able to overcome so much, but the inadequacy and the guilt within me is still very strong and many times I feel I'm just not what they... I'm not what I seem to be.

WALLACE: I gather that you find a real responsibility, an awesome responsibility in the very fact of your comeback.

ROTH: I think that the battle of success is probably more difficult than the climb. People expect too much from you -- or rather, you want to be all that people expect from you, I shouldn't say that they expect too much of me because they're pretty good about it -- But it isn't only that you have to deliver the gift of your entertainment as the good Lord gifted you, but there are other things in your life and I've never professed to be a saint or a martyr. There are many people in the world overcoming greater problems which I tell of in Beyond My Worth. But comparatively speaking, mine seems simple, but this inner conflict, this inner thing that I have, I think too telling the truth about it makes people realize that they're not alone. You see people used to be able to say, "Lillian, let me help you up," after I took that first long step alone.

WALLACE: Yes.

ROTH: But now, through the mail I've started to feel that people were wondering if they could talk up there to me. And I'm not up there, I don't want to be up there where the people are concerned only as a performer. I want to be right alongside with them.

WALLACE: You get a tremendous number of letters, I gather, calls from people who are also in a kind of pain, and trying to find their way and figure you've done it, and perhaps you can help them to find it for themselves.

ROTH: Well, I.. it isn't just problem letters I get. After all I'm not the know-all, see-all, and I haven't the answer to everything, but the type mail I get comes from psychiatrists, doctors, writers, priests, ministers, and there are lonely ministers, nuns, and priests all over the world and I can read between their lines too, and they think that this certainly shows the grace of God being bestowed and my difference of course is that I don't think God graces one person and not the next. But I am very grateful for their affection.

WALLACE: Tell me this: Does the fear of sliding back, of hitting rock-bottom again, does that worry you, or do you feel you're over that hump?

ROTH: Well, they say that... I mean, even if you should slip back a little, it isn't really slipping back. If you fall slightly, that's just another step up. I mean to step down is to step up. Sometimes we're forced to be knocked down a little bit, and then we gather our forces together, and we're that much stronger when we go again. I don't think... I think once you've hit the bottom you're not afraid down there. You just feel you don't want to disappoint people.

WALLACE: Uh-hum. Of course one of the things that sparked your comeback was your book, "I'll Cry Tomorrow"... and I'm sure that your latest book, which is also quite revealing, will do your career no harm. Let me ask you this: Did you never think it undignified, Lillian, did you never think it in bad taste for a woman to write so candidly of her personal life and of the life of others?

ROTH: Truthfully, I wasn't happy about any of it... I think I told you when I spoke to you a year ago... there's no glory in being a glorified alcoholic. If these were the steps I had to take, and there seemed to be a force that worked it out... I know when I first worked on my book coming from Australia 10 years ago, and through the years -- speaking of "I'll Cry Tomorrow" -- I shelved it. I closed the book and said, "That woman!" But after "This Is Your Life," after Ralph had prevailed on me, and even there I didn't want to do it. I was hesitant. In this terrible panic when I first went to Australia. It... it just isn't a good feeling to know that you have other gifts, but I rated what was done. I mean, I rated the fact that I didn't deserve any better than to be called an alcoholic and I don't know why I should have expected extra... er...

WALLACE: But, why did you want to write about it? Why did you want to tell and, and not only about yourself, but you wrote fairly graphically about, for instance, about being beaten by one husband, about your wedding night with another husband, a fairly prominent man, about emotional scenes with your mother. Why have... why did you find it necessary to write about these things?

ROTH: Well I didn't feel that I was writing an expose, I felt I was disclosing rather than exposing. My husband felt from the inception that if I wrote everything out... I remember when I first went to a hospital for slightly mentally unbalanced, from 12, 13 years ago, I said even then I wanted to write a book... but then they told me everybody that comes in here has a book to write. So I kept it to myself for some time. But Bert told me it isn't a case of being a martyr. He said this, "In telling all and freeing yourself, and the world being a big jury, they're very fair. And in doing that, maybe somebody along too, that will be helped." I'm not going to tell you that my thought was I'm going to go out and be a martyr now and help the world. I didn't feel that way, I was frightened to death when this book came out.

WALLACE: Diana Barrymore, who wrote a somewhat similar book, told us that she did it as a catharsis to get the past out of her system. Was that...? You smile when I say that.

ROTH: Well, I really... I'm not living my past any more. I'm creating new thoughts and new habits. A priest once told me, this may answer it by a thought, that there are certain bad characteristics or formation of a bad character that is always there with bad habits, but you can create good habits and work on them so often that you form a new character and I feel that if... I'm not speaking, necessarily about Miss Barrymore, but anyone that continues to live as they lived in the past, isn't doing anything to send out a message or to help someone in distress. Not that they have to. But what is the sense of the book? If you're going to go to all this embarrassment, you might be helpful while doing it. And I... I think it has... well, I shouldn't speak about what is proven, but it has helped many people be able to overcome certain pain that they've had.

WALLACE: I'm certain of that. Have you ever wondered, though, why the American public seems to be so fascinated with this kind of story? Is it possibly just the desire to look... to look across the courtyard into somebody else's open window?

ROTH: Well, I think where my story is concerned, it goes back to an old philosophy that I read that said, "In each man's heart there's a secret sorrow that the world knows nothing about." And often we call a man 'cold' when he's really just sad. And I think that humanity feels that their sorrow is for you and their compassion is for you, but it has touched a part of their hearts that they will not open the door themselves. They won't even begin... and in the subconscious the tie is there...

WALLACE: They see a little of themselves in you and that is why they want to read and hear and...

ROTH: Yes, and... and even youngsters that write to me, they tell me they understand the problems at home more and I just think it's reached, that's all.

WALLACE: Let's look at some of the things that you write about. One of them, which helped you rehabilitate yourself has been religion. In your new book, you write with complete assurance... "God loves me." How do you know He does?

ROTH: Because I think God is all loving, just as a parent would be, that they love their children good, bad or indifferent. And it's often been said, I believe, sum and substance of the Bible is that little black sheep that strayed away, that worries him so very much, He hopes it will come back some day.

WALLACE: Lillian, who is God?

ROTH: God is everything that's quite wonderful and the... you know I always quote because I think that the authenticity of a thing... After all I'm a new writer, I don't even know if I have a great talent except of telling of myself and giving of myself. But a man like Emerson said that God made... almost everything He made had a crack in it... and I thought that was such a good thought. We have... we don't have this feeling of perfection, but to please Him we'd like to improve ourselves. And I think he's all loving and he's always there, we just don't always know it.

WALLACE: Let me pursue this a little more specifically. You were born into a Jewish family, yet several years ago you converted to Catholicism. Why was Judaism apparently unsatisfactory, unfulfilling for you?

ROTH: Oh, I don't think that Judaism was a case of unfulfillment, I think that Catholicism is a fulfillment of Judaism as far as the acceptance of the Messiah. It... My only difficulty has been in the last two years with all my respect to the Church because it doesn't make me right and the Church wrong, I can't go in and say now this is Lillian's way of doing it. I just felt that certain man made dogma little things simple as a child. They say "Come as little children." Well, some of the little flaws or that I felt were flaws, flaws within myself -- the question -- were child like things, and I have never denied my Judaism and as a matter of fact, I learned...

WALLACE: But how -- wait -- How can you convert from Judaism to Catholicism and yet not deny your Judaism?

ROTH: Well, of course, I have a different theory. I believe that an Irishman's an Irishman, a Jew is a Jew, an American Irishman, American Jew. I can't see saying that it is merely a religion, I don't go along with that. I think Christ on the Cross which I spoke to you last time was a Jew who never denied his Judaism and Christian came from the word "Follower of Christ" and so therefore that's an acceptance of the Jewish Messiah and he stated he came to fulfill the law, so I don't see where there's a denial of Judaism or... how can you deny what you are?

WALLACE: You didn't feel the least bit disloyal when you turned from Judaism as a religion to Catholicism as a religion?

ROTH: Well, in this way, the physical sense, the material sense, I do believe there is a time in the Bible that Christ says that "They will mock you in my name sake and that..." and it did come in the minority. People were very good about it, they didn't care how I found God as long as I had Him, but I don't think there was too much resentment. I did have feelings of guilt but I would have to rise above it and try to get into a spiritual way and to my own self be true. You know Mike, they wrote about you in the LaGorian which Father Clyber who is a Jew and a priest convert to Catholicism and he sends me the LaGorian and it's strange, a few weeks ago they had an article where you asked the Catholic Church some questions.

WALLACE: Yes.

ROTH: While I was reading it, I also read an article about the face... "Five Faces of a Hypocrite" and I thought to myself, one of the things were those that professed to be a Christian, you know, and wear the face of a hypocrite, and I thought that went along with my thinking, that if I were to take and to continue taking sacraments, at a time when I felt in the eyes of God, I didn't go along with it, I would be wearing that face of a hypocrite. And, although I'm lonely, not belonging at the moment...

WALLACE: You... Have you forsaken Catholicism now?

ROTH: Well I... I hope God hasn't forsaken me, that's the main point and I feel that in conscience I can look up at Him and that what is right to do, he will lead me to. One wonderful thing about the Catholics and the Catholic Church, and my own people too is that they don't desert you, you may desert them but they say you shall be back. But I think it's along the lines of wherever the good Lord wants you, that's where you'll be.

WALLACE: You were a member of Alcoholics Anonymous?

ROTH: Yes.

WALLACE: Did you regard that...? -- are you still a member of AA?

ROTH: Well I follow the principles. I believe with AA, of course I don't advise this for a newcomer, but I think just as you get well, after you come out of a hospital, I don't think that you have to sit in the hospital, come back every day; I think you use the medicines and in this case it's the suggestions and principles of AA.

WALLACE: Did you regard...? -- Do members of AA regard it themselves as kind of a religion?

ROTH: No, to the best of my knowledge, they believe that AA will direct people back to their own religions or give them some spiritual contact with God.

WALLACE: Back in 1955, one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous wrote a thought provoking pamphlet in which he warned former alcoholics against, resuming what he called, quote: "our old and disastrous pursuit of personal power and prestige, public honors and money." He suggested that these are egotistical, self-seeking ephemeral things and if the alcoholic or the former alcoholic were to lose them again, that could shatter a person all over again. Now you are a fairly ambitious woman. Do you ever feel that perhaps you're pushing... pursuing the dangerous course now in going after prestige, money, public honor once again?

ROTH: Well I'm pretty sure that when the good Lord put us on this earth, he knew that there were human footsteps to take and he certainly doesn't want us to be a ward of a state. Whatever our job is, whether we're a truck driver and go back to trucking, or a waitress go back to the waitress. Every job is important in life and mine was to go back to singing and as I said earlier, there's no glory in it. Now, these rules that you read; you see, when I joined AA there was no such thing as a rule. There were suggestions. I wasn't anonymous, I... when I was drinking, of course, and I didn't wish this type publicity but I have found the press to be fair. I've said it over and over again: it came out and they could just, as well, have gone to the morgue and dug up any story. I don't think that there is glory in saying: Look, I want a lot of gold stars, I want to be up in lights 'cause I'm a cured alcoholic. I mean, it's a little bit ridiculous, I feel that I'm now after 5 years or 12 years that I have had my sobriety, free from the bonds of sympathy. I don't feel if the public comes back three and four times or I'm asked to appear places that many times that they come back to see what an alcoholic that doesn't drink anymore looks like.

WALLACE: Lillian in a moment I'd like to ask you about something that you write of quite movingly in your new book. You write, "All people go through life with a void inside them."

You write that even love and marriage probably doesn't vanish entirely that feeling of aloneness, of lostness; you say, "The void seems to remain during life." I'd like to know why you say that. And we'll get Lillian Roth's answer in just 60 seconds.

(COMMERCIAL)

WALLACE: Lillian, in your book you write, "Within us, there seems to be an aching, a frightening void we are forever trying to fill but never quite do. We're always alone." What do you mean?

ROTH: You've never felt that feeling?

WALLACE: Uh-huh.

ROTH: Well, with the hundreds of people, the thousands of people I've met, it's a strange empathy I guess I get and maybe at times contrary to belief, I'm subject to a slight melancholia but I look across a room at a person and somehow the way the shoulder is, a certain look in his face, the age of the face, I know that the man has lived a life that hasn't had any great joy in it but he's worked very hard. I never saw *Death of a Salesman* but I imagine the expression that I've seen on the pictures of that man's face, I've seen in so many faces and you want to go over and say, "Oh, I want to do something, say something to you."

And also I feel that when two people love each other and are married, the ache of loneliness for someone that's gone that you wish could be part of this and they're not there anymore to see it, your parents or your loved ones can see all this, and also if you have your separate little problems and you don't want to put it on one another. You don't want to tell the fears. Lots of times, -- and Bert probably is watching tonight, he's in California, he hasn't been too well and it's our first time we've been apart in 12 years but you see we're not really apart -- but a lot of times does that void... he may have an ache or pain, he says, "I don't want to tell Lillian." I may have a certain worry, I think he almost made me come to New York so that I wouldn't be there to worry; but it's not just me or just Bert, it's... I don't know whether it's a longing to a return properly, Freud said: to the mother... the original birth state or to a humanity and those of the Church who are so longing to return to God but we are surely never complete here on this earth.

WALLACE: Are you going to...? -- Do you believe that you will find your completeness after life?

ROTH: Oh well, I certainly hope and I feel like I'm on the verge of some discovery and I don't like to delve too much because I don't want to go back to Bloomingdale's, they'll say this gal is odd, but I know that Lecomte du Noüy - you recall the book that fascinated me so, the physicist that wrote "Human Destiny," he said that the odd person of today is just the normal person, you know a century from now when you have these dreams and ideals. And I think all those wonderful stars and planets that we're trying to reach so hard, we're going to sit all around them one day in the hereafter and those will be the different stages until we'll reach our final place.

WALLACE: You mentioned Freud. Have you ever thought about analysis?

ROTH: Well I did have a doctor, A. A. Bill who passed away, er... sent me to the original place to rest my little mind when I was thirty-four years old and up there they didn't believe in my particular case that there should be deep analysis. They feel that it takes about a year and a half and if you can't discover what's wrong in a year and a half, that's bad. And if it takes any longer, it's real bad. If there's nothing wrong, there will be something wrong and I don't mean to interfere with the psychoanalysis but that was Doctor Bill's advice where I was concerned.

WALLACE: Lillian, when you add it all up, all of the tragic things that have happened to you, all of the unhappiness that rarely comes to one human being, and I ask this question perfectly seriously, have you ever or do you now ever regret the fact that you were born?

ROTH: No, no. Look I knew my mother and I knew my father and so many wonderful people, I think it's all been worth it. I think I have a greater appreciation for life than I ever had with all my little hesitations, a greater gratitude. I'm gradually learning more compassion and understanding and I just hope I can be. I don't intend to be or hope to be a saint but I hope I can, in some measure, repay the good that's come to me. And, I don't mean that as a Pollyanna or Little Orphan Annie glad all over, Annie Rooney, is that it? I just think that I... I think life has been very good to me and it takes those steps to give you that appreciation.

WALLACE: Lil, what makes you happiest?

ROTH: Well I don't think that there's any way to judge a complete happiness. I don't think there's such a thing as "happiness". I know my little dogs though, you know our two little dogs out on the coast, and I got very lonesome... Do you think I have time to...?

WALLACE: I'm sorry we only have about fifteen seconds.

ROTH: Oh... well I have the cutest little things about dogs. I think that we all get a great joy from the animals... one thing in the world that loves you without question.

WALLACE: Lillian, thank you for coming and spending this half hour and I know lots of people who want to read your new book *Beyond My Work*.

ROTH: Thank you, Mike.

WALLACE: Few come back stories have been as compelling as Lillian Roth's, perhaps because it seems to be a story that has no end, no artificial happy conclusion. Miss Roth's comeback has been in the truest sense the search for her self. It has also been an inspiration for other searchers. I'll be back in a moment with a rundown on next week's guest, one of the world's youngest and most embattled diplomats from one of the world's youngest and most embattled countries.

(COMMERCIAL)

WALLACE: Next week we go after the story of violence in the Middle East, the threat to world peace from hostility between the Arabs and Israel. Our guest will be the Israeli Ambassador to

the United States and the United Nations, Abba Eban. If you're curious to know Ambassador Eban's answer to the Arab charge that Israel endangers world peace through a policy of war like expansion, and his reply to the Arab statement that his country, Israel must eventually go bankrupt, we'll go after those stories on the eve of Israel's tenth anniversary as a nation next week. Till then for Parliament, Mike Wallace. Good night.

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