

# **The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts**

## **Episode 59: Alex Blumberg, Part 2**

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Tim Ferriss: This is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to the *Tim Ferriss Show*. What you are about to hear is Part 2 of a two-part conversation with Alex Blumberg, best known for his work with *This American Life* as co-host of *Planet Money* and also cofounder of Gimlet Media, which has produced two blockbuster podcasts at the time this particular episode namely *Startup* and *Reply All*. He is a true master of storytelling, crafting narrative, radio, interviewing and much more.

If you didn't catch the first part, you might wanna do that before venturing in, but you can certainly listen to this independently. This second part is an excerpt from a master class that he taught on [creativelive.com](http://creativelive.com). I think it costs about \$99.00, and it is phenomenal. Specifically, in this portion we are going to look at the art of the interview and how to craft and find the perfect question. So, I hope you enjoy it and without further ado, please enjoy Part 2 of the *Tim Ferriss Show* with Alex Blumberg.

Alex Blumberg: What we're gonna be talking about in this segment is the art of the interview. And what I'm gonna be covering today, what I'm gonna be covering in this section is first of all sort of the most basic question, which is what are you going for when you're interviewing somebody? What are you trying to get out of it? What does a good interview look like, right? What does it feel like when it's happening? And as part of that, I'm gonna go through what to ask, how do you come up with the questions to ask and I'm gonna be talking a little bit about the power of the right question and then I'm also gonna be talking about nuts and bolts.

So, that's coming up. So, what are you going for? So, the first thing that you're going for is what we talked about in the last section, which is authentic moments of authentic emotion, authentic realization, authentic moments of humor, something that feels like a real emotion. Those are goals of moments in an interview and that's one of the things that you absolutely wanna go for, and we talked a little bit about that before and I'm gonna talk about that a little bit later.

But the thing that I wanna focus on now is the other thing that we're talking about is stories. I have a very specific meaning when I say what an actual story is, but I think the first thing to do is to play you a little bit of what I'm talking about when I'm talking about a story. So, I'm gonna play you a little piece of tape.

So, this is a story about *This American Life* a while ago, and the set up is that it's this actor Tate Donovan. Tate Donovan was sort of a character actor, he'd been on a couple different shows, but he didn't get recognized very much. And then he had a stint on *Friends* and all of a sudden, he was starting to get recognized and it was really exciting for him to be recognized because he finally got to be the celebrity that he always wished that he could be, the celebrity that he would have wanted to meet before he was famous.

So, when he got recognized – and this story happens when one night he was at this Broadway show and a lot of people were coming up to him, being like hey, I saw you – and he was able to talk to people and be very magnanimous and say thank you so much, it really means a lot and he was posing for pictures for people and it was at the show. It was happening over and over and over again.

“I was exactly how I wanted to be. I was doing it. I was doing great, and then the kid with the camera came along. This nervous kid, I don't know, he must have been 16 years old. He was in a rented tuxedo, unbelievably shy and awkward and he's got acne and he's got a camera in his hand. And underneath the marquee is his date, who is in literally like a prom dress and she's got a corsage and she's really nervous and clutching her hands and he comes up to me and he mumbles something about a picture.

I just feel for him so I'm like absolutely, my gosh, sure, no problem, my God, you poor thing, and I go up to his girlfriend, I wrap my arms around her and I'm like, 'Hey, where are you from? Fantastic, you're going to see the play, that's great.' And the guy is not taking the photograph very quickly. He's just staring at me and he's got his camera in his hands and it's down by his chin and she's very stiff and awkward and I don't know what to do so I just lean across and I kiss her on the cheek. And I'm like all right, come on, take the picture, hurry up.”

You guys wanna find out what happens next? That's a story. So, that is the power of a good narrative. So, when I talk about it, I'm talking about those two basic things you're going for, emotion and narrative. We as humans are hardwired I believe to listen to

narrative, and it's a very simple – the mechanics of narrative are very simple. There's a sequence of actions and there's rising action and it's culminating in something, and you are in the middle of that sequence of actions and you are about to get to the culmination and I stopped it and it's frustrating and you really wanna know what happens next.

And you would never, if you were listening this, have turned off that podcast or that radio story at that moment. And that is a good story, and that's why you want to operate in stories. That's why when you're interviewing people you wanna get their stories out of them, and you want to get them talking in stories because stories are what we wanna hear. And so when you're working in an audio format, you need to operate in stories.

The other thing we wanna hear, as we heard before, is emotion. So, those are the two things you're going for in a good interview. So, moving on. Actually, do you wanna hear what happens next? All right, I'll rewind it again and then we'll have it play out.

“You know I don't know what to do so I just lean across and I kiss her on the cheek. And I'm like all right, come on, take the picture, hurry up. And finally, he snaps it. And I'm like okay, it was really wonderful to meet you and he just stammered over to me and was like, “Could you take a picture of us?” And the whole time, he just wanted me to take a picture of him and his girlfriend underneath the awning of the play. He didn't want a picture of me. He had no idea who I was. Oh, God.”

Got a little emotion in there, too. Yeah, so that is what I'm talking about when a story so very simply. We're gonna be talking a lot more about what story is in the next session, but very, very simply, it is that. He is a sequence of actions that culminates and some sort of revelation, some sort of punch line, some sort of joke, some sort of realization and more to the point, it's something that you don't wanna turn off, that you don't wanna stop listening to. And so that is the thing that it's in your mind when you're going out and doing an interview with anybody. You want to ask questions of the interview subject that are gonna elicit an honest emotional reaction or they're gonna elicit them telling you a story.

So, there're a lot of things that you can ask that will – so, let's talk about that. So, what to ask, right? So, first, if you're trying to ask questions that will elicit a story, first of all you don't want ask ever yes or no questions. I mean you gotta get some facts out of the way, but you don't wanna ask a yes or no question because that's

the end of a story, right? And so how you phrase the questions is very, very important. I often say tell me about the time when, right, something, you know, like you want them to tell you. You use words like tell me so they're automatically starting to talk to you in story language. Tell me about the time, tell me about the day when you blah, blah, blah.

Tell me about the moment when you realized that this was what was gonna happen. Tell me about the time in your life when you were going through this thing. Another question that works really well, tell me the story of, just ask them straight up, right, you know, tell me the story of this. How did this happen? Tell me the story, and sometimes that works. Another thing that when you're on the right track, you know when you're on the right track is when people are actually talking to you in dialogue.

If somebody is saying, "Well, first I said and then he said and then I said," you know you're on the right track here. So, often I will tell people, you know, describe the conversation where blah, blah, blah because if you get people telling you like he said then she said then he said then she said, that's great. You know you're on the right track, that somebody is telling you a story right then because they're quoting dialogue to you.

Often what you're going for is a moment of realization so a story has to culminate in something. Often the thing it's culminating in is a moment of realization. So, you wanna say tell me about the day that you realized whatever it is that we're talking about here. Another thing that really works well is if people can sort of talk through a process of, you know, there're often steps that led from one situation to the other situation. What were the steps that got you from one thing to another?

What were the steps that you got from your career in the army to your career as a celebrity florist? Or whatever, right, so – anybody here have that career trajectory by the way? So, you wanna ask what were the steps? If you can get people breaking it down into steps, and often each step is its own story, so often Step 1 will be well, I had my career in the army and this one thing happened when I was in the army or this day happened that made me wanna change, and so they'll tell you that and that's a story. Each step can be its own story, but that sequence of steps is also a story.

So, these are all questions that will elicit stories. You wanna have people back up; you wanna do all that stuff. All right, so that's one whole set of questions. And often when you're doing – so, that's a

whole set of questions. The other set of questions – so, what do you ask if – there’s a whole other set of questions that are built around eliciting honest reflection and emotion. So, that’s the other stock and trade, that’s the other thing that you’re going for, right? It’s pretty simple, two things.

So, what do you ask when you’re trying to get people to tell you how they feel? One question is how’d that make you feel? It’s pretty straightforward. I often joke that doing a good interview for audio and having a good sort of therapy session look very similar because what you are trying to do is get people to articulate their emotions in words. All you have in audio are words. That’s all you have. You have people’s words.

And so if they’re feeling something, it’s like if something happens and you’re not shooting it, it didn’t happen. If they’re feeling something and they don’t articulate it, it also didn’t happen. So, you need them to articulate the way they’re feeling, and so a lot of what you’re doing is you’re in the interview and you’re like I noticed the feeling in your voice or in your manner, and I want you to articulate that feeling. So, that’s one thing. And so that’s like how did that make you feel is a big one.

Often, you also want to encourage that kind of reflection. Some people just aren’t very naturally reflective, but they’ve gone through something momentous and you want them getting the emotion in there. So, one good trick I’ve known is like if the old you could see the new you, what would the old you say? Because often you’re interviewing about something that has happened to them, they’ve gone through some sort of transition and you want them to be able to articulate what that transition meant to them. And these are all tricks we’re gonna use by the way on one of our audience members coming up.

So, we’re gonna do a live interview coming up in another section so take notes because we’re gonna have to employ this, use this in action. So, a lot of what emotion is around is around internal conflict so a lot of – and this is one of the things that I love about audio, which audio can do uniquely well is that it can give voice to interior drama. You know on television, you can see people looking pensively or you can get across an internal life, but stuff has to happen on tape, you know, it has to be happening. And with audio, if you can get people to give voice to the internal conflict, it has the power of any kind of real drama.

So, what I often say to people is, I'll often say, like so conflict, you're going for conflict, but it can be conflict within a person. It can be a person feeling conflicted about something, and so a big question that I use a lot which is if you had to describe the debate in your head over this moment, over this act that you took, what was one side saying, what was the other side saying, you know, and it's just getting people to sort of voice the feelings that they're having. And often, our feelings our contradictory, right? And that's great.

If people have a conflicted feeling when you're interviewing them, that's a wonderful thing too. That's what you want because that's a way of breaking out of what you were talking about Anne, which is the canned thing. Part of what being canned is is just having a very, very straightforward feeling about it that you don't necessarily believe but you can't shake people out of. And so what you want is to get at, you know, what was the conflict. Was there ever a point where you didn't feel so confident about this? Was there ever a point where you felt differently?

You know sort of like, you know, and sometimes it can be just as simple as you seem very confident right now, was that always the case? And if they say no then just zero in on that, zero in on the weakness, the emotion, right, that's what your job is. Another question that often happens in an interview. I'll bet this will happen to you as you're doing your interviews. Somebody will say something and it feels very important to them. They've said something that you know is meaningful. Like you're talking to a rail yard worker and they'll be like well, you know, and then the boss gave us extra hours, and they say it like – and you're like wow, the boss gave you extra hours?

You're saying it like it's important and I have no idea what it means, but it means something to you. There's emotion in their voice, right, like what does that mean? And so often you – and I would always love this thing, I would know that there was something that they were getting at, but they weren't articulating it to me. And then I use this question all the time, and it's a really great question and it's super straightforward. It's just sort of like what do you make of that? And so I say it all the time now because I'm often, I just need them to tell me the reason that there's emotion in the thing that they just said. So, what do you make of that is a really important question.

The other thing that I think one of the most important things that, which is sort of part of the what do you make of that question,

again, you ask what do you make of that, and it's sort of a dumb question. You sort of feel like an idiot for asking it. It's sort of basic and weird and it's not a question that you actually ask that often in normal conversation, and this gets to the point of are you having a real conversation or are you having a staged conversation to elicit certain things, and you're doing a little bit of both, right? And the what do you make of that is very much like a staged sort of therapy conversation. You know what I mean?

And so but really important is to then shut up. I can't get across enough the importance of shutting up. Early on in my career, I would come back and I would just be talking so much and people would start to be telling me interesting things and I would be talking over them and it was all because I was nervous and I was worried about making them feel uncomfortable. And you sort of want them to feel uncomfortable a little bit, not totally uncomfortable so that they're not be talking to you. You want them to feel safe, but you want them to feel like they're saying something real, which is often uncomfortable.

So, you want it to be safe, you're not judgmental at all. You never wanna be judgmental, but you want to be asking real questions. You want them to be thinking really about it. So, another just good question that gets at this is the why is this story meaningful to you.

Coming up, the power of the right question and how to craft it to get honest responses, deep responses, including plenty of clips, but first, a short word from our sponsors.

Tim Ferriss:

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Alex Blumberg:

So, just to get across the power of asking the right question, I wanna play a couple clips of tape here. And this first one is a story that we did on – so, this first illustration of the power of asking the question and getting people to reflect honestly, it's a weird story. It was this really conceptual story that we did at *This American Life* a while ago, and it was this reporter named Davy Rothbart, and I was the producer on the story so I went out with him and asked all these questions. And the conceptual story was this. Davy lived on this block in Chicago. It was sort of a block in transition.

There were some yuppies moving in, but it had been like a poor – there were some gang problems there. It was a neighborhood in transition. And he lived on this block and there was all these problems the neighborhood was having with each other, like different neighbors were having different conflicts with each other. And there was a neighbor in his building who was complaining about his loud music and was constantly banging on the floor, and then there was another neighbor that had thought that somebody else stole her dog and then there was like, you know, so there's all these things.

The idea of the story was that Davy was gonna collect all these problems, interview all the people in his neighborhood and then take the problems that were happening in this neighborhood to an expert on neighbor relations. Whoops, I set up the wrong piece of tape, sorry. Crap, oh, there it is right there in my notes. I missed it. This is another piece of tape. This will be very quickly, sorry, keep all that in your mind for a second, and there're two stories I'm gonna play.

I'm gonna play the first one now in order. So, this is a different story. This is one that I did on the housing crisis. This is a story from 2008, and it was one of the more famous stories I did. It was called *The Giant Pool of Money*, and it was about the housing meltdown basically. And back in 2008, there was all this stuff happening with subprime mortgages and a lot of the coverage was about who's at fault. Is it deadbeats taking out loans that they



knew they couldn't pay back and then ripping off the banks or were poor people being victimized by evil banks that were now foreclosing on their homes?

And that was sort of the narrative, and neither narrative really ever made sense to me and I kept on thinking there's something else going on here, something bigger and more systemic that's going on than just either people ripping off banks or banks ripping off people. And I wanted to get at the heart of it and there was this question. So, we found this guy who was going through foreclosure and he was telling the story of how he got this loan, this enormous loan. And in the middle of this clip, you'll hear the question that I'm talking about, the question that I felt like turned the whole thing and set up the entire show as a matter of fact but got him talking in a very different way.

So, this guys' name is Clarence. He had taken out a huge loan, over half a million dollars. At the time of that loan, he had three not very reliable part-time jobs. He was making about \$45,000.00 a year and on the loan that he took out, they didn't ask him anything about his income.

"Call it 540 for round figures." You basically borrowed \$540,000.00 from the bank and they didn't check your income? "Right, it's a no-income verification loan. They don't call me up and say, you know, how much money – they don't do that. I mean it's almost like you pass a guy in the street and say you lend me \$540,000.00? He said well, what do you do? Hey, I got a job. Okay."

It seems as if it's that casual even though there are a lot of papers that get filled out and stuff flies all over with the faxes and the emails and all like that. Essentially, that's the process. Would you have loaned you the money? "I wouldn't have loaned me the money, and nobody that I know would have loaned me the money. I mean I know guys who are criminals that wouldn't lend me that money and they'd break your kneecaps so, you know, yeah, I mean I don't know why the bank did it. I'm serious, I mean \$540,000.00, a person with bad credit."

So, I love that piece of tape because it was the first time in my experience that anybody – first of all, Clarence is at the center of the problem, and I'm asking him how he feels about – like that question enabled me to size up the whole whose fault is it in a way, and it just got to a very honest reaction from him, which was sort of like – there're all sorts of other ways to phrase that question.

Did you deserve that money? Should the bank have given you that money? Blah, blah, blah.

And all that would have led to a defensive answer. It would have led to not the right answer, but then when I was in the middle of it, I remember thinking like oh, that's the question. And when I asked him would you have loaned you the money, it forced him to be honest. There was no way to not be honest about answering that question, and it got a really wonderful, honest response that then set up the entire hour basically. So, why were other people lending money to people that those people themselves would not have lent to them, right, so what was going on there? That question set up the entire thing.

All right, so I teased this next piece of tape mistakenly. So, going back, cast your minds back to when I set this up before. So, anyway, Davy Rothbart, getting all these questions from the people in his neighborhood and all the problems and he's running it by an expert in neighbor relations.

*"You are the only one like you. Like you, my friend, I like you."* Here's the bridge. *"In the daytime ..."* Anybody know who this is? Mr. Rogers, yes, Mr. Rogers, who's since passed away, Fred Rogers. So, I guess that it was a weird conceptual story. We're taking these problems from this rough block of West Augusta in Chicago and then bringing them in front of Mr. Rogers and asking him to sort of pronounce judgment on what these neighbors should do. It's weird, there's a back story that I won't even get into, but I bring it up all to talk about because this was one of those moments where the question really brought us to a different place.

So, one of the problems that Davy had identified – I'm gonna play one more piece of tape and then we'll get to the tape with the question. So, one of the problems that Davy had identified in his neighborhood was that there was this fear, right? That was one of the big things. So, there was the people banging on the floor and the music playing too loud, there was a guy whose neighbor thought he'd stole her dog, and then but mainly there was a lot of fear. There was the fear of the yuppies moving into the neighborhood. We're afraid of the kids who are in the gangs and so Davy talked about that. You'll hear Davy and then you'll hear a kid named The Mouth who he's interviewing.

"Who's that guy your afraid of I'd ask. They all answered the same way. The gangbangers. The kids in the baggy jeans and the basketball jerseys who cruise the neighborhood with their stereos

bumping. The gangbangers they said, those are the bad neighbors. I guess it's no surprise. The Mouth had his own idea about who the bad neighbors are, the ones who fear and distrust him. There was a neighbor in the neighborhood that he didn't agree with what we did so much so he'd stand in his house with a video camera and record what we were doing, try to bring it to the beat meetings, you know. They used to follow us around with cameras, literally follow us around the neighborhood with cameras, you know, and say I'm gonna call the cops on you and, you know, well, for what, we ain't bothering you, you know. That's what I think the worse neighbor is, you know? Yeah. They come in here fearing us, saying that, you know, maybe thinking that we're gonna do this and do that, but we'll talk to you. You know what I'm saying bro? We ain't, you know, we ain't animals, bro. We're normal people like you."

All right, so that's The Mouth and his friends who were sitting on the street drinking Heinekens, and so we bring that to Mr. Rogers. And so Mr. Rogers is a wonderful, lovely man. Meeting him was a thrill. He's got this strange sort of power when you meet him. It was crazy. When we went to meet him, we were trying to set up the interview and his assistant was like, "Well, Fred likes to be nearby a piano." So, we had to meet him in his studio so that he could play piano every once in a while.

He literally had the bag of puppets and he would bring them out sometimes to make a point and start talking in the puppet voices while we were talking to him. And yet somehow, it was moving and real, I don't know, he was an amazing person, amazing. But he was giving us a little bit of canned answers like when we were asking so what should this neighbor do? His answer was always sort of the same like, you know, well, I hope I would be brave enough to go and talk to them.

"I would hope that I would be brave enough to visit. It's so easy to condemn when we don't know. And if I would visit you and find out that you are a reasonable person, I could tell you about my sensitivities and see if it would make any difference to you." It's funny a lot of the things, like you know, you said if you were in Davy's neighbors' situation, you said that you hoped you would have enough courage to go down and visit. And a lot of what you were finding when you were talking to people had to do with that same sort of notion, and I'm wondering like what is it that we're afraid of do you think?

“Perhaps we think that we won’t find another human being inside that person. Perhaps we think that oh, there maybe are people in this world who I can’t ever communicate with and so I’ll just give up before I try. And how sad it is to think that we would give up on any other creature who’s just like us.” So, what are your thoughts about that? I’d love to hear what was going on in your mind, anybody? Yeah, Anne?

Anne: That was Mr. Rogers?

Alex Blumberg: Yeah.

Anne: That was so powerful, and you could hear the flutter in his voice which was his emotion rippling through his vocal cords and it was amazing. And it was such an interesting contrast to think of Mr. Rogers, and he sounded like the Buddha, wonderful.

Alex Blumberg: Right, exactly, he’s very Buddha-like in person, yeah. But that was the most honest moment in that interview, and it came out of like there was this question that was sort of hovering over it and he was giving slightly – I hear this and I wonder if you do too. Like in the beginning, he sounded more canned. And then after I asked the question, right, you can hear it. All of a sudden, he’s actually pausing and he’s actually thinking and he’s actually trying to figure out what is the emotion and he’s trying to voice that emotion. And all of a sudden, it becomes real and it becomes authentic and you connect to that moment. Yeah?

Female Speaker 1: I think the fact that he is Mr. Rogers carries particular weight. And we’re used to hearing him do those canned, simple solutions-oriented, just do this and it’ll all be great. For me, that moment of real darkness when he identifies the greatest fear is I will never be able to communicate with you. And as a listener, I can extrapolate that out to the neighborhood. It’s like I can see how that person would think that about that person, and he just took me somewhere so hopeless when he’s usually someone who’s all about hope and positivity and it’s gonna be great. So, that juxtaposition of what I expect to hear from him and what I hear from him is incredibly powerful.

Alex Blumberg: Right, but I think that’s a really great point because I think that’s what you’re trying to do with it. That’s what an honest moment will do with anybody, whether it’s Mr. Rogers or not. If you hear people talking, and the way we all talk, we’re all sort of like, you know, going through by putting up fronts and lying to ourselves in various ways as we go through our day and, you know, nobody’s

gonna notice that I actually screwed up the order of my tapes for example. But, you know, that when you break out of it even if you're not Mr. Rogers, that's what comes through. That's the thing that comes through. Yeah, go ahead.

Female Speaker 2: I was just gonna say that he really took something that maybe many of us could not relate to like living in a project, and when he answered that – when you asked that question about fear, it made it so personally that I immediately was thinking to myself, what am I fearing, and he took this kind of out there thing and brought it deep. And so because it was personal then it was more important to me like you said earlier in the day, right? And I engaged with that immediately.

Alex Blumberg: Right, and he was identifying something. I mean, again, that's also sort of like identifying, putting words to a feeling that we have that is sort of undiagnosed or unexplained. That is sort of the definition of profundity, a little bit, you know what I mean? When you can actually give voice to, but you know, put that in words, the feeling that we share and that's what he did like oh, that is our fear, that is the fear, right? We're afraid that we are going to encounter somebody who we can't connect with as humans. Yeah?

Female Speaker 3: I think it's also incredible because he uses his own language. He doesn't break out of being Mr. Rogers, you know, he actually manages to remain himself and still go to this really different place for him. And that's how, at least, I could tell it was really honest was that he – like you also get to know Mr. Rogers honestly in his language.

Alex Blumberg: Yeah, yeah, exactly, and you can see why Mr. Rogers of all people would find that an especially horrifying thing, you know, yeah, that there are bad people in the world. It's just like such a, you know, it's like it's more poignant for Mr. Rogers than any of us. Yeah, Morgan?

Morgan: Just going off of that, at the end, he uses the word creature instead of another human. It's like we're all just –

Female Speaker 3: Magical.

Morgan: – these beings and being connected with another being, it's not, you know, within our organism.

Tim Ferriss: We have a few more coming in from the chat room. Jennifer says of all people, coming from someone who's so genuinely and

innocently sees the beauty in people acknowledging that core fear is really powerful. And Claudia says, “You can feel how carefully he’s thinking about the question and that makes it very authentic.”

Alex Blumberg: Absolutely, absolutely. I think you can hear – for the first time, he didn’t have a ready answer, and that’s important too. And, again, I don’t think that moment would have happened, you know, I often feel like there’s in every interview, or in a lot of interviews, there’s the question that’s sort of hanging over the interview that if you can just figure out what that question is, what’s the one that’s gonna sort of like what are we talking around and can you figure out what that is and present to people. It breaks through often. Again, the therapy language. You have a breakthrough a little bit, you know, and that’s what you’re going for. Yeah, Jeff?

Jeff: I’m wondering if both of those clips ended up in the final cut and whether or not you like including that transition when you get the right question and that person changing from their canned response to the more personal honest one?

Alex Blumberg: Oh, yeah, yeah, absolutely. No, because you have to – no, those are both pulled from the actual final version so that’s why the music was there and everything. I just downloaded the clip off of iTunes and put it in. Yeah, that was – but was that your answer or was that –?

Jeff: Well, I was wondering if you had gotten the second answer first if that would have satisfied you or if you like capturing that moment when you kind of break someone?

Alex Blumberg: Oh, that’s interesting. Like did you need the drama of him giving a canned answer first and then to break through? There’s something nice, I mean there is something about that where it’s nice to – like it was the same thing that happened with the Dave Ramsey thing where somebody is not being totally honest and then there’s a question that sort of confronts them. I don’t know. That’s a good question. I think it helps I think because it also sort of tells a story.

I feel like it’s a chord resolving in music, when you’re just waiting for the chord and then finally the power chord comes and you’re like ah. That’s how it feels a little bit, you know, where somebody is wrestling with it, they’re not being honest, they’re not being honest and then there’s a question that breaks them out of it and then they acknowledge. There’s a nice feeling to that as well, but I think it could have worked either way like we all have, we often

will muse the answer without using the question and it often is just as powerful, you know, you don't need to include the whole thing. It's just how it works.

Tim Ferriss: Alex, we had a couple questions come in and I think tie in nicely to these clips that we just heard so I'd love to get your opinion on this. So, in that clip, you were talking about getting that location, that street in Chicago so this ties into a question that Braden had who says, "When you're reporting on a town or a location or with Mr. Rogers about a neighborhood, do you have a methodology for getting to know that town or that place?"

Alex Blumberg: God, that is tricky. Do I have a methodology? No, I don't. And I think my methodology is try to find somebody who knows it better than me. It's just sort of go and find, ID the person who is the exemplar of whatever it is, like if there's somebody, if it's a town and there's somebody who's in that town who represents sort of the mainstream view of the town and then identify the outsider, the Goth kid or whatever who can have a more anthropological view of the town.

And if you get both of those people, generally, you're sort of circling around some sort of authentic picture of it, but you're always – that's the biggest difficulty of being a journalist is sort of parachuting in someplace, trying to get as much as you can about the place but you never know. You never know as much as you wish you knew, and you never have time to figure it all out entirely. Generally, when I'm reporting on a topic, when I find that I'm getting the same answers from enough people then I feel like okay, well, I've done enough reporting now that I'm getting similar answers.

Coming up, a sample from my episode with Arnold Schwarzenegger, the one and only coming soon, but I'm gonna give you a preview, but first, just a short word from our sponsors.

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You can also get a free \$99.00 upgrade if you wanna give it a shot. That's [99designs.com/tim](http://99designs.com/tim). And now, back to the show.

Alex Blumberg:

“In those days, there was no money in bodybuilding. And so when we didn't have enough money, we literally had to go to work. And so Franco and I, since Franco's talent was to be a bricklayer and a very skilled bricklayer, had learned that in Italy and in Germany, we were able to go and start thinking about the idea of putting an ad in the *LA Times*, creating a company and calling it European Bricklayers and Masonry Experts, marble experts, building chimneys and fireplaces the European style.

And this was also a time where everything that was European was huge in America so we benefited from that, you know, Swedish massages and everything had to be kind of a foreign name. All the Japanese this and this and so Europe and Japan and all these places, the names were used because for some reason, the other people just thought that was better. And so we used that in the ad, and we put the ad in the paper and literally a week later, we had the big earthquake in Los Angeles. And I mean the chimneys fell off the apartment houses and all this and the cracked walls and all this.

And so Franco and I, as a matter of fact, one of the friend of ours wife who was very smart and she worked in a supermarket, she did the answering the phones and calling people back and all this just to make sure that our English doesn't get all screwed up talking over the phone and all this. And so she gave us then the addresses and then we got to do the estimates, and I was kind of like set up to be the math genius and then figures out the square footage and that Franco would play the bad guy and I played the good guy.

And so we would go to someone's house and then someone would say “Well, look at my patio. It's all cracked. Can you guys put a new patio in here?” And I would say yes and then I would run around with the tape measure, but it would be a tape measure with



centimeters. No one in those days could at all figure out anything with centimeters and we would be measuring up and I say well, this is, you know, 4 meters and 82 centimeters and they had no idea what we were talking about and this is so much. And then I would be writing up formulas and the dollars and amounts and square centimeters and square meters and all this stuff.

And then I would go to the guy and I said, “Well, it’s \$5,000.00.” And the guy will be in a state of shock. And he says, “It’s \$5,000.00?” He said, “This is outrageous.” And I say, “Well, what did you expect it to be?” He says, “Well, I thought maybe like \$2,000.00 or \$3,000.00, but \$5,000.00?” I said, “Let me talk to my guys because he’s really masonry expert,” I said, “But I can beat him down for you a little bit, let me soften the meat.”

And then so I would go over to Franco and we would start arguing in German, you know, [speaking German] and this would be going on and on and he was screaming back at me in Italian and some stuff and then all of a sudden he calm down and then I would go to the guy and say, “Woo, okay, here it is, I could get him as low as \$3,800.00.” I say, “Can you go with that?” And he says, “Thank you very much,” he says, “You know, I really think that you’re a great man,” blah, blah, blah and all this stuff. I say, “Okay, I say give us half down right now. We go right away and get the cement and get the bricks and everything that we need for here and we can start working as soon as Monday.”

And the guy was ecstatic. He gave us the money. We immediately ran to the bank, cashed the check to make sure that the money is in the bank account and then we went out and got the cement and the wheelbarrow and all the stuff that we needed and went to work. And so we worked like that for two years, I mean very successfully. As a matter of fact and we had various different jobs where we employed like 16 different bodybuilders, all the laziest bastards that you can ever hire but never good because they all were interested in working outdoor and getting a tan at the same time for their bodybuilding competitions.” Arnold Schwarzenegger

Tim Ferriss:

If you enjoyed this episode, you’re going to love what I have coming. All sorts of crazy experiments, incredible guests and you can very easily not miss any of it. Just subscribe on iTunes or you can check out all of my guests as well as my blog that has one to two million readers per month at [fourhourworkweek.com](http://fourhourworkweek.com), all spelled out, [fourhourworkweek.com](http://fourhourworkweek.com). That’s where I chronicle all of my insane self-experimentation and I would love to hear from you.

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