

The Interview
*Anthony Hopkins on Quitting
Drinking and Finding God*

By David Marchese

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In so many of Anthony Hopkins’s greatest performances, he’s able to suggest captivating hidden depths to his characters. The spaces between what they know, what the audience knows and what those characters are willing to express are where the magic of his art lies. That holds true whether he’s playing a manipulative monster, as in his trio of Hannibal Lecter movies, or an emotionally timid butler, as in the heartbreaking “The Remains of the Day,” my favorite of his films. These men are thinking and feeling things that, for manifold reasons, they’re keeping to themselves.

The same can no longer be said for Hopkins. In his new memoir, “We Did OK, Kid,” which will be published on Nov. 4, the 87-year-old shares the details of his rough school days in Wales, his seemingly miraculous victory over his drinking problem, his painful estrangement from his only child and his slow and steady rise to Hollywood success.

The book also reveals a somewhat reticent and solitary man, but one who isn’t content to merely recount the events of his years, the what happened and when. He has given great thought to the big questions — the why of it all, and what it all means. And yet, even at this late stage, Hopkins remains beautifully mystified by the sheer luck and improbability of the dream he calls life.

The Day Anthony Hopkins Quit Drinking | The Interview



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We all have turning points in our lives, but you have such a specific one — a moment that changed everything for you. Can you tell me about what happened on Dec. 29, 1975, at 11 o'clock? I'm always slightly reluctant to talk about it because I don't want to sound preachy. But I was drunk and driving my car here in California in a blackout, no clue where I was going, when I realized that I could have killed somebody — or myself, which I didn't care about — and I realized that I was an alcoholic. I came to my senses and said to an ex-agent of mine at this party in Beverly Hills, "I need help." It was 11 o'clock precisely — I looked at my watch — and this is the spooky part: Some deep powerful thought or voice spoke to me from inside and said: "It's all over. Now you can start living. And it has all been for a purpose, so don't forget one moment of it."

It was just a voice from the blue? From deep inside me. But it was vocal, male, reasonable, like a radio voice. The craving to drink was taken from me, or left. Now I don't have any theories except divinity or that power that we all possess inside us that creates us from birth, life force, whatever it is. It's a consciousness, I believe. That's all I know. Shall I give you another epiphany?



Anthony Hopkins around age 8. Archivio GBB/Alamy

Yeah. Nineteen fifty-five, Easter. My school report had arrived — the dreaded school report. I was 17 and I was dreading this day because my parents would read these terrible reports because I was a dummy. I was known as Dennis the Dunce, couldn't understand anything that was going on. Resentful, lonely, all that. I remember my father opening the report about 5 o'clock in the evening. We were going to go off to see a film. Beautiful spring day. He opened the report, and it said, "Anthony is way below the standard of the school." Which is a death knell, really. My father said, "I don't know what's going to happen to you." He was

worried, and quite reasonably, because he'd spent a bit of money to give me an education, and I wasn't capable of meeting that standard. But I remember taking a slight move away and I said, "One day I'll show you." And my father looked at me and said, "Well, I hope you do." At that moment I decided to stop playing the game of being stupid. We step into circles of energy which are negative and we play a role because it's easy to say, well, it's not meant for me. There's a truth in it, but at the same time you have to say: "Wake up and live! Act as if it is impossible to fail." And that's what I did.

You grew up working-class in Wales, the son of a baker. I can't imagine you knew many artists or actors. Was the idea of becoming an actor something that you or your family had ambivalence about? No. As a 17-year-old boy who didn't know anything, something sparked me, and I got a scholarship to an acting school in South Wales. I'd never acted in my life. But I did an audition and they gave me a scholarship. I remember going to see a play with the great Peter O'Toole at the Bristol Old Vic. He was playing Jimmy Porter in "Look Back in Anger," and onto the stage came this lightning bolt: Peter O'Toole. A very dangerous actor. I thought, God, if he stepped off the stage, he'd come and kill us all. Ten years later, I was in the National Theater playing Andrei in Laurence Olivier's production of "Three Sisters" by Chekhov. Knock on the door at the end of the evening, who should be there? Peter O'Toole. Now that's weird. He said: "I want you to do a film test for me. It's a film with Katharine Hepburn called 'The Lion in Winter.'"

Your first film. Exactly. So I showed up and did the test. He said, "You've got the part." When I look at that film, which I do occasionally, I think, How on earth did that happen? Why me? I don't know to this day. It's all in the game, the wonderful game called Life. No sweat, no big deal. There *are* no big deals.



Hopkins and Katharine Hepburn in "The Lion in Winter" (1968). Everett Collection

The idea that life is a game and that there are no big deals is a recurring theme in your book. But what *should* we take seriously? What *does* matter? I don't mean to be irresponsibly indifferent to everything. There are monstrous difficulties in life and you take notice of them. But finally, approaching 88 years of age, I wake up in the morning going: "I'm still here. How?" I don't know. But whatever's keeping me here, thank you very much! Much obliged! Beyond my finite self, there's not much I can do. I had a gift when I was a boy. I could learn lots of Shakespeare, poems, and all that. Now at this age, I look at those poems and they bring back clear memories of my childhood, and I get very moved by it. I get tearful, not through sadness, but through the wonder of having lived those years. My clear memories of Wales, my clear memories of my parents, their struggles. I look back with tremendous gratitude and I get kind of weepy, because I remember the glory of being a child. I had a good childhood. I was bullied a lot. I was slapped around. But I look back and think, Well, that's part of

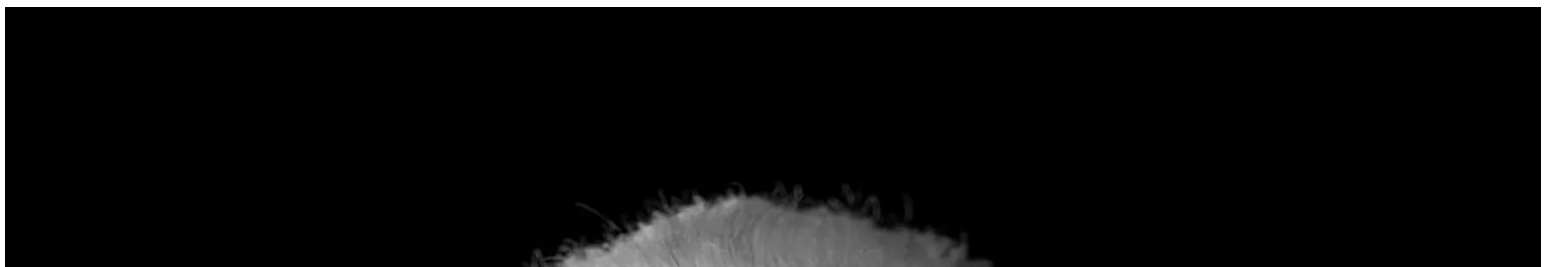
growing up. In those days teachers could knock you about. I remember being slapped across the head by a teacher several times because I didn't know something. And what I would do is what would be called in the army "dumb insolence." I wouldn't respond. I would just withdraw into myself, stare at them blankly, and it drove them nuts. And they're all dead now. *[Laughs]*

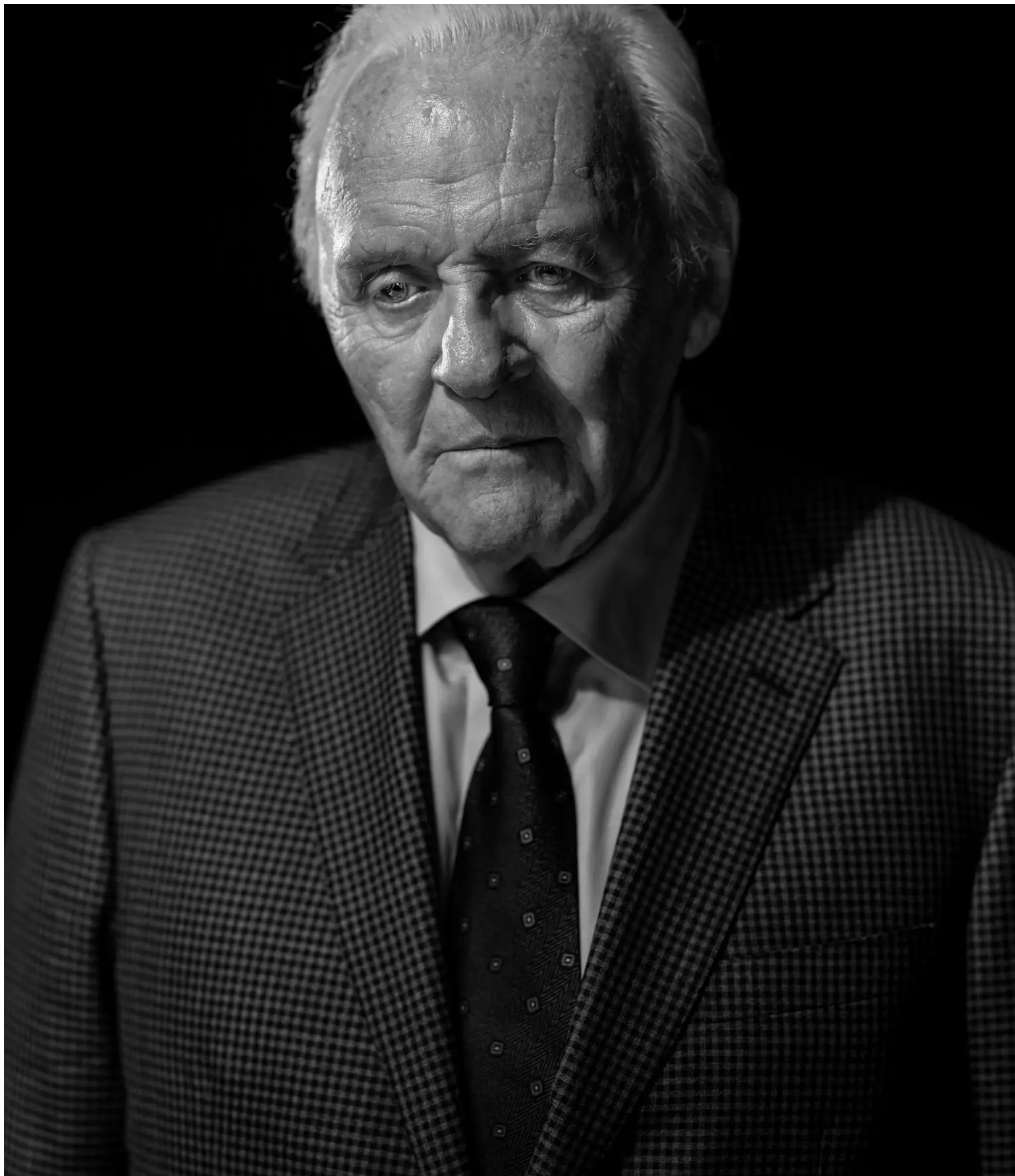
You won! I won.

When you were a kid and would hear your father or teachers say you were a dummy, I'm sure that then the voice in your own head said, "I'm a dummy." That's right.

I think a lot of people do battle with the voice in our head that tells us we can't do things or we're stupid or whatever it may be. How did you quiet that voice? Well, it's still there in me from childhood. But now it whispers. I say, "Shut up." So yeah, we all have problems. We've all got limitations. But I do believe that if you say, "Wake up and live. Act as if it is impossible to fail," we actually tap into a power that's in ourselves which helps us to do, well, not everything, but *some* things. I discovered that I could compose music! I discovered that I could write! I discovered through my lovely wife, Stella, that I could paint!

Often when I've talked with actors, they've suggested that something about acting fulfills something inside them. Do you find acting fulfills some inner need? A "need" would sound rather sad. I just enjoy it. I enjoy the scientific fun of learning a script and I'm very good at that. I learn everything there is about the text that I'm studying, because that reforms something in me. And I suppose on a deep psychological level I'm trying to escape from what I was.





Devin Oktar Yalkin for The New York Times

What were you trying to escape from? Well, that lonely kid. I survived my loneliness. I survived those bullies. Not that I blame them, God bless them all, even the teachers who beat me about. I'm not a victim. If people choose to wallow, OK, go ahead, but you're going to die. And that's why I drank. To nullify that discomfort or whatever it was in me, because it made me feel big. You know, booze is terrific because it makes you instantly feel in a different space. Actors in those days — Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton, all of them — I remember those drinking sessions, thinking: This is the life. We're rebels, we're outsiders, we can celebrate. And at the back of the mind is: *It'll kill you as well*. Those guys I worked with have all gone.

You write about how you were influenced by older actors like Laurence Olivier or Katharine Hepburn, but I was curious about whether any of the younger actors that you've worked with over the years, people like Nicole Kidman or Brad Pitt or Ryan Gosling, taught you anything about acting? I mean, Brad and everyone you've just mentioned, nothing but praise for them. I was working with a young actor a few years ago, a young Canadian actor who looked a bit like James Dean. I think he thought he *was* James Dean. We were doing a scene together and I said: "I can't hear a word you're saying. Why are you mumbling?" I didn't want to spoil his day, but I said: "If you do that, they will go to the pub next door, because you're supposed to tell us the story. Speak up. Be clear. Wandering on like a backstreet Marlon Brando is not going to help you at all in your career." Never heard of him since.

In the book and in older interviews with you, there's a consistent sense that acting shouldn't be taken that seriously. Does acting have any greater claim on the "truth"? No. It's entertainment.

Would you call any of the films you've made important? No.

Not one? No.

"The Elephant Man"? Give me "The Elephant Man"! Yeah, it's a good film.

“The Remains of the Day”? **“The Silence of the Lambs”?** Yeah, they were good, but people asked me, “How did you play the butler in ‘Remains of the Day’?” I said, “Well, I was very quiet, very still, and walked about quietly.”

That’s it? “How did you play Hannibal Lecter?” Well, I played the opposite of what they promised. Oh, he’s a monster? [*Hopkins does his Hannibal Lecter voice*] “Good morning. You’re not real F.B.I., are you?” You play the opposite. It’s easy.

I’d like to return to the material from the book, and the specific material I’d like to focus on — I know it’s sensitive for you. I know what you’re going to talk about: my domestic life.

Yes. No.

Even though it’s in the book? No. It’s done.

Can I ask a general question? Part of the reason I found the material in the book about your estranged relationship with your daughter so painful is that it resonated with me for personal reasons. I've seen my father, I think, twice in 20 years. I've spoken to him once in those 20 years. And I'm curious about other people's experience of that kind of estrangement. I wonder if you have thoughts about where reconciliation might lie between estranged parents and children. My wife, Stella, sent an invitation to come and see us. Not a word of response. So I think, OK, fine. I wish her well, but I'm not going to waste blood over that. If you want to waste your life being in resentment, fine, go ahead. It's not in my ken. I could carry resentment over the past, but that's death. You're not living. You have to acknowledge one thing: that we are imperfect. We're not saints. We're all sinners and saints or whatever we are. We do the best we can. Life is painful. Sometimes people get hurt. Sometimes we get hurt. But you can't live like that. You have to say, Get over it. And if you can't get over it, fine, good luck to you. I have no judgment. But I did what I could. So that's it. That's all I want to say.

Do you hope your daughter reads the book? I'm not going to answer that. No. I don't care.

I'll move on. Please. I want you to. Because I don't want to hurt her.

Toward the end of the book, you talk about a couple of labels that might apply to you. You say that your wife suspects that you may have Asperger's [a diagnosis that is no longer in use]. Have you ever been diagnosed? No. I'm told I have all the symptoms. I don't know what any of it means. If I have it, then I'm happy.

The other label that you say might apply is "cold fish." And you say that you prefer the cold fish label to the Asperger's label. Why? Well, "cold fish" is only a turn of phrase. I'm not a cold fish. I have lots of feelings. They're deep inside me.

But I don't get attached to sentimentality. In this business with actors who I admire and I've worked with, I form no attachment. I am remote. I am a loner. I've never been able to shake that. I have acquaintances — friends, if you want to call it that. I don't have any *close* friends. I'm a little distant. A little suspicious, I suppose. But I'm not a recluse. I don't live in a tower. I live in a house here and I'm traveling a lot. I have my immediate family and they boss me about, they tell me what to do, and I'm happy with that.

When I think of some of my favorite performances that you've given — “Remains of the Day,” “84 Charing Cross Road,” “The Father,” “Silence of the Lambs” or “Shadowlands” — there is an emotional remoteness to those characters. Is that an intentional performing strategy? I think it's partially intentional. Many years ago there were two teachers at the Royal Academy, teachers of the Stanislavski system. I remember this one teacher called Yat Malmgren. He was a dance teacher, Swedish. I used to go to these painful classes of movement. I hated them. I'm built like a Welsh rugby scrum — a bit beefy. Yat said, “Anthony, you have too much extroverted motoric energy, and you will become insensitive.” I didn't know what he was talking about, but I gathered instinctively to develop the other side, which was to pull back, be in the darkness, be in the shade. It's the remote that paid off for me, because I had to change my whole psychology to not be that rambunctious rugby player coming on the stage, bumping into people, being ferocious. Gradually I learned *pull back*.

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There's another epiphany in the book that I'd like to go back to. You were driving in Los Angeles in the late '70s, and you felt a pull to go over to a Catholic church. You went inside and told a young priest there that you had found God. What is

God to you? What happened that morning — when that voice said: “It’s over. Now you can start living and it has all been for a purpose” — I knew that was a power way beyond my understanding. Not up there in the clouds but in here. I chose to call it God. I didn’t know what else to call it. Short word, “God.” Easy to spell. I recently wrote a piece of music that was conducted in Riyadh, a goodbye on piano and orchestra. [The piece was called “Farewell, My Love.”] And as I was composing, it came to me that *that’s it*. We come full circle and we dip down to that’s all, folks, it was all a dream anyway.

Devin Oktar Yalkin for The New York Times

If you're getting nearer to the big goodbye, do you take any pride or draw any meaning or solace from what you leave behind? You mean a heritage?

A legacy. I never think about it. When they cover the earth over you, that's it. I remember I was asked by the widow of Laurence Olivier, Joan Plowright, if I would read the last lines of "King Lear" at the casket in this little church in Sussex. I was astounded that I was asked to do it. There was Olivier's casket, full of the wreaths and flowers. And after that we got into our cars and went to the crematorium. I was sitting next to the great actress Maggie Smith, and there was the casket, and finally, as you could hear the rollers taking him into the crematorium, into the flames, Maggie Smith said, "What a final curtain." And you think, God almighty, what is it all about? The wonder of all that energy that had gone into his life or *anyone's* life. The energy that goes into survival. Seeing my own father dying, going to the hospital the night he died and standing at the foot of his bed, my mother smoothing his hair. I felt his feet at the foot of the bed. They were dead cold. He'd gone. And as I stood there that silent night in that empty-sounding hospital in South Wales, a voice again came to me: "You're not so hot either. This is what will happen to you."

That's a fairly brusque voice. Yeah, but what it is, it's an awakening. We think, *Yeah, that's right.*

Sir Anthony, I realize I'm dancing around a question that I'd like your answer to. Do you think your life has had meaning? The only meaning I can put to it is that everything I sought and yearned for found me. I didn't *find* it. It came to me.

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David Marchese is a writer and co-host of The Interview, a regular series featuring influential people across culture, politics, business, sports and beyond.