

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

KATIE COURIC INTERVIEW
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Katie Couric
Journalist
Interviewed by: Nancy Steiner
Date of Interview: Jun 12, 2022
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Story Features
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Katie Couric
Journalist

KATIE COURIC:
Do you want me to look at the camera? Look at you, Nancy. Okay.

Katie Couric
Journalist
00:00:17:00

NANCY STEINER:

Jay said that you were born on a sunny day, and he was right, of course. What does that say about you? How has your organic positivity helped get you through your life? Or were you just born this way?

KATIE COURIC:

My husband, Jay, used to say I was born on a sunny day. And I think what he meant is I am a very positive person. I'm very upbeat and outgoing. And I think that's made me someone who has been a full participant in life. I'm very aware of my surroundings. I get energy from other people, but I'm also an energy giver. And I think that when you're hardwired for happiness, and you're basically a positive person, that even when you face disappointment, failure, or even unspeakable loss, you're able to be resilient. You're able to absorb the blow, but then see not the positive in the situation, but you're able to come back and still somehow find joy because that is your default position.

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KATIE COURIC:

I think I'm someone who looks for joy in life most of the time. There are other times I get very down. But, in general, I think born of loss, in a way, I've tried to stay positive because I think loss, in a weird way, has made me realize my own mortality and the fact that we are all terminal. And so, while we have the opportunity to be alive and to exist, that we have to make the most of it. So in a way, my loss has absolutely affirmed my positive outlook, if that makes any sense.

NANCY STEINER:

It makes perfect sense. And I'm wondering when it's a stormy day, or the weather's bad, and it's not a sunny day, how do you get through?

KATIE COURIC:

I've had a few stormy days, I mean more than a few, actually, and some recently. I think that getting older, sometimes, makes me feel sad knowing that more of my life is in my rear view mirror than is in front of me. I think that the state of the world is very depressing when you hear about mass shootings and children dying, when you hear about atrocities being committed in Ukraine. When you hear about rights being taken away. When you hear all the partisan rancor, it is very depressing. I deal with it by trying to help people understand it. That actually is healing to me because I feel like I'm being proactive in explaining situations to people. And there are times when I just kind of feel really down. That happened to me the other day. And I just was sort of depressed for the whole day.

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KATIE COURIC:

I made the mistake of reading some comments on a social media post about me, written by people who don't know me, and it made me feel terrible. And, you know, it kind of ruined my day. And I thought, "I'm an idiot for even looking at that stuff." But I think, ultimately, I just get through it. And the next day, for whatever reason, I felt much better. But I remember my daughter,

Ellie, telling me James Corden gave one of the Kardashians, of all things, a pep talk, and said, "People say things about you, but they don't even know you." And Ellie said, "Mom, these people don't know you. They objectify you. And it says more about them than it does about you," which is, of course, something I've always known, but it was a helpful reminder. So I'm able to, I guess, ride through the storm and pick myself up. But sometimes it's hard, especially in this day and age.

NANCY STEINER:

What about when you get really mad? What really upsets you, and makes you sort of pissed off?

KATIE COURIC:

Let's see. There are a lot of things that make me mad and pissed off. I would say injustice. People who are just unfair; I have this strong sense of fairness, what's right, and what's wrong. I think I really dislike people who are ignorant, and biased, and all those "IST" things. Racist, sexist, antisemitic, although that's not an IST word, you know, people who make rash generalizations about people based on their own ignorance. That really makes me mad.

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KATIE COURIC:

I think other things that really make me mad are when I'm misrepresented, that really upsets me. When people either twist my words or make

assumptions about me that simply aren't true, that really is upsetting to me. Apathy makes me mad. When people don't care about other people or the world around them, that is infuriating to me. And cruelty, obviously. People who are cruel to people, insensitive, lack compassion and empathy. That really makes me mad and sad.

NANCY STEINER:

A lot of what you said speaks to your value system. And I'm wondering how much of that comes from your upbringing? You had a really wonderful childhood.

KATIE COURIC:

Mm-hmm.

NANCY STEINER:

Do you think that you draw on that daily or regularly, that it still informs who you are as a human being, and how so?

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KATIE COURIC:

I think everyone is informed by their upbringing, by the values taught to them, by example, by their parents and family members. I've thought about this a lot lately because I've been reading a lot about generational trauma. And not just when it comes to things like slavery or Holocaust survivors, but I think we're all products of our environments and of the values imparted by

our parents, and not all of us are lucky in that way. And I feel incredibly fortunate that I never, for one nanosecond, thought that I was not loved unconditionally, and I realized that that's a real gift that not everyone has.

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KATIE COURIC:

I think my parents taught me the importance of being honest; I think they taught me very early the difference between right and wrong. I think they taught me the importance of hard work. I mean, every quality I have, derived from my parents, and they didn't lecture me about these things. I think they lived their values, and they passed them on to me. And I feel incredibly lucky because they gave me such a strong foundation. A lot of people get really screwed up when it comes to success or fame, and it really tests your character and your values. And I think the fact that I had such a strong foundation allowed me to ride the highs and lows of my career and the highs and lows of my personal life as well. If I had one wish, I would wish that everybody had the kind of parents and the parenting that I had.

NANCY STEINER:

That's amazing. And how absolutely essential it is that you have the gratitude because I think that also grounds you. You don't take any of that for granted ever. I know that. And it answers my question, "How come you're not a spoiled brat?" really nicely.

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KATIE COURIC:

It's funny because I have made more money than I ever thought possible, which I'm proud of because it's been a mark of my hard work and success. On the other hand, I'm not very materialistic. I do like; I've enjoyed the fruits of my labor. I've enjoyed being able to afford a nice house. And if I like a dress, I can usually buy it without worrying too much; having said that, I'm still very frugal and very careful, and I want things of value. So I think, especially my mom's frugality, is still very much in me. And some people say, "Why aren't you; why didn't you buy a boat? Or this, or that?" And those kind of material possessions just don't mean that much to me. I live a very nice lifestyle, but it's not what's important to me. I think the fact that I've been successful and have— You know, I'm comfortable financially is it's one less thing to worry about. And I know that money can create a lot of stress and a lot of anxiety. I've been fortunate in that having money has made those things less present in my life. So I feel very lucky about that, too.

NANCY STEINER:

How tough are you on yourself? How do you hold yourself to the same rigorous standards to which you hold others?

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KATIE COURIC:

I try to do everything 110%. And I think I'm tough on myself and sometimes tough on other people because I'm demanding, but I never demand anything that I don't demand of myself. So— I mean, I think as I've gotten older, I've gotten more flexible, and I don't think I was ever cruel, or belittling, or made

people feel less than. I think that I just always would strive for excellence, and I would want people— my colleagues to take that as seriously as I did. And take as much pride in their work as I took in mine.

NANCY STEINER:

Do you ever hear your parents' voice in your head when things are going well? Or when something goes wrong, do you draw on any of their wisdom?

KATIE COURIC:

I sometimes think about my parents when I'm facing certain challenges and wondering what they would tell me. And I think that they would say, "Keep going. You're doing the best you can." I think they would be annoyed if I was complaining about something because I think my success has so exceeded anything they experienced and any expectation they had for me. So I have a feeling they would tell me not to sweat the small stuff and that I should be proud of what I've achieved. I'm never really satisfied, though. I always want to achieve more. And I wish I could rest on my laurels a little bit more than I'm able to do, but I think the drive that made me successful just doesn't go away. And so, I'm always looking for ways to either, you know, do something better or continue to do it.

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KATIE COURIC:

That is sometimes hard because, you know, I think that success is really interesting because I think you can have a level of success, but it's not going

to last forever. So, for me, dealing with this white, hot spotlight of success, and being kind of at the epicenter of media for a fairly long period of time, and then having that not evaporate, but the light lessen is really challenging. I wrote about that in my book, and handling the vagaries of fame and celebrity is sometimes difficult. I often think about that for certain people and how destabilizing it can be. And I'm just so grateful that I have a foundation from my parents, and a feeling of sort of solid grounding that I'm able to deal with sort of, you know, the highs and lows that I've had in my career.

NANCY STEINER:

So, you're also competitive. Do you think that you're more competitive with yourself or others?

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KATIE COURIC:

Both. I'm competitive with myself, and I'm competitive with others. You know, I've thought a lot about that because I think to achieve a certain level of success, you have to be competitive. And I've always been very competitive, whether it was being the fastest runner in my elementary school, I think I ran the 50-yard dash in 6.2, but who's counting? And I ran for office when I was in elementary school. I was president of Jamestown Elementary. I beat Steven Russell by 11 votes, but who's counting? So I think I've always had this very competitive drive. And I think to be successful, especially in media, you have to be competitive because you want to get the big story. You want to scoop everybody else. You want to nab the big get. So I am extremely competitive.

But I also am competitive with myself in that I want to excel in everything I do. So I think it's both. I have a lot of internal self-drive, but externally, I get motivated when I'm trying to beat other people.

NANCY STEINER:

What key incidents from your youth created the person you are today?
Incidents.

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KATIE COURIC:

There are many life lessons I learned growing up, but I guess a few do stand out. When I was in kindergarten or first grade, I thought I had to learn all the W words. What, when, where, why. And I was hysterically crying to my parents because I thought I had to know them the next day. They worked with me that night, and I told my teacher the next day, I knew all the words. And she said, "You didn't need to know all those words." But isn't that weird that I remember I did? And I was very proud of the fact that I could identify them, and read them. So I thought, "Wow, I'm pretty driven and slash neurotic." I broke my tooth when I was in first and in third grade, and I don't know. I was really upset. And so was my mom. But we made the most of it, and I still have my cap teeth. I ran for president of my elementary school and won. My dad helped me write my speech, and my mom helped me draw my posters. And it was always a family affair when we ran for office. So I think we were expected to be leaders.

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KATIE COURIC:

And I remember in eighth grade, the gym teacher picked captain of the cheerleaders, even though it was supposed to be a democratic process and the cheerleaders were supposed to elect the captain and the co-captain; instead, the gym teacher picked her favorites. And my sense of fairness was; that was such an affront. And I remember being so upset about that. And I think that was an early lesson that life isn't always fair, that things happen that, you know, aren't the way they should unfold. I also think that working at a camp for blind kids in Washington D.C. taught me the fact that there's so many different people in the world from different backgrounds and different socioeconomic situations. And I think it really exposed me to a microcosm of humanity that made me see the world in a much more inclusive way. And to recognize that not everything looked like it did on 40th street in Arlington, Virginia, where I grew up. But there were people from all kinds of backgrounds and experiences.

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KATIE COURIC:

So those are some of the things I think that shaped me as a kid. Also, the fact that I could not tolerate dishonesty in myself. I broke the banister of my parents' four-poster bed because I think I was having a pillow fight with my brother, or something happened, and I glued it. And I remember saying to my mom, when she was washing the dishes, "Mom, I have something to tell you," because I think she was blaming it on our housekeeper, Emma. And I said, "I broke your bed, not Emma." And I felt so much relief being honest. And I still

have nightmares about lying or covering up something that I've done that's bad and not being able to tolerate it. So I think I have this very strong moral compass about being honest.

NANCY STEINER:

How have you tried to impart these life lessons for your own children?

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KATIE COURIC:

People have asked me, I think because of my parents, and maybe they think I've done a halfway decent job of parenting myself, "How do you be a good parent?" And I always say, "By being a good person." I think kids watch what their parents do. They watch what they say. They watch how they behave and interact with other people. I've always tried to be someone who my kids could emulate in the best possible way. And that means being kind to people. Being courteous, being respectful of everyone around me, no matter their station in life. And I think because of that, my kids are exceedingly polite, and compassionate, and have a lot of empathy.

NANCY STEINER:

So moxie, it's a term your father used when you heard how you landed your first job in TV news, and it's a quality, that moxie of yours, that's such a key ingredient to your success. What did your father see in you as far as your moxie is concerned, and how has having moxie helped you professionally?

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KATIE COURIC:

My dad once said I had moxie. And I have forever taken it as a huge compliment. And I think he saw me as someone who was utterly uninhibited, who would have no compunction about saying something or approaching someone. I think, really, I don't have a shy bone in my body, and I'm completely and utterly without guile. And so, moxie, to me, is spirited determination. And I think it's just something I was born with; maybe it's because I'm the youngest of four kids, or, you know, I got a lot of positive attention for being outgoing, and smiling a lot, and being friendly. But I think that that kind of behavior for me was reinforced, and I think, as a result, it was my go-to personality.

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KATIE COURIC:

And I really think having moxie means you go for it. You just are determined, and you figure out how to get around obstacles that might be in your path, and you are just, you know, very directed. And I always loved that word. It's also the name of a soft drink manufactured in Maine. And I always liked the symmetry of the word because X is right in the middle. And I wanted to name my book moxie, but everyone thought it was too old-fashioned. I wish I had stood my ground because, to me, it's such a compliment. And I don't think it's conceited to say you have moxie. In my case, I think it's absolutely true.

NANCY STEINER:

Okay. The early days of your career really speak to how challenging it was to be a young woman coming up in journalism, which was largely, at the time, a man's world. Can you describe the hurdles you had to triumph as a woman?

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KATIE COURIC:

I think my early days in TV news were challenging because it was very male-dominated in the eighties; this was an era when cranky, old guys would want to get the broads out of broadcasting. And I always joke that when I entered television news, harass was two words instead of one, which always gets a big laugh. But, you know, I think it was hard because I think I also didn't necessarily fit the mold of what was a desirable broadcaster back in the day. You know, I was, you know, fine-looking, but I wasn't, you know, super glamorous. I looked extremely young for my age, and I think I didn't have sort of a tough exterior. You know, I looked kind of like a cheerleader or something. I was cute. And so, my packaging didn't necessarily lend a ton of credibility to my craft, if you will. So I think all those things, the sexism and, in some cases, misogyny that was pervasive in the media business when I entered it in 1979, the fact that I didn't necessarily fit the mold of what the male executives were attracted to at the time, and you can take what you want from that statement, made it challenging for me. I don't think anyone said, "Hey, you've got a real future." So I had to make my own future because I had a lot of naysayers basically discouraging me and telling me I was never going to make it in the business.

NANCY STEINER:

When you were working at WRC, in Washington, as a general assignment reporter, you covered a horrific human tragedy involving the accidental death of two teenage girls killed in a car accident. You had to meet up with one of the victim's mother, and you write, "I was struck by how two complete strangers would find a way to connect in a crisis," This is something that you would have to do over and over and over for the rest of your career. Does it ever get any easier?

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KATIE COURIC:

I think covering tragedies never gets easier. And I think if it does, perhaps you've been doing it for too long, and you've become jaded. I think every tragedy or sad story I have to cover affects me profoundly. And I've often wondered what would make someone talk about that, in a public way, when their suffering is almost indescribable. But I've come to understand that people want to commemorate the life lost. They want to feel like that person mattered, and sharing it in a more widespread way, I think, helps affirm that for the people left behind. And I do think recognizing that, validating that life, and even celebrating it in a way, posthumously, brings comfort to the people left behind.

NANCY STEINER:

You also describe still feeling anxious sometimes when you're invading a person's privacy; how do you manage that anxiety?

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KATIE COURIC:

That's a very tricky question because I remember when I got my job on the TODAY Show, and I told my parents, "If anyone ever comes to the door, please shut it in their face." And it's a— I was talking about a reporter like me. When Jay died, somebody from the National Enquirer called his parents, which is so disgusting. And they called before I had a chance to call them myself. So, I don't know. That's a hard question.

NANCY STEINER:

Returning, for a moment, to your beginnings. In 1986, there was a Newsweek article called "The Marriage Crunch." It had a big effect on you, how come?

KATIE COURIC:

I came of age during second-wave feminism, and I very much wanted to have a career. I did not want to depend on a man to support me. Now, not everyone feels that way, but that's something I knew I didn't want. I knew that I wanted to have financial independence, that I wanted to have a career, that I didn't want to rely on a man to support me. I don't know, I think perhaps because of the feminist movement and the fact that I think my mom never really had a career, and she was an incredible wife and mother. But I often wondered what she would've done if she had had more opportunities or if she hadn't been so restricted in the "What was expected of her."

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KATIE COURIC:

In the eighties, there was a lot of conversation about making choices as a woman, either you decided to be a stay-at-home mom or a working woman, but it was very hard to merge those two. And Newsweek had a cover story that said women over the age of 30 had a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than finding a husband. It might have been over the age of 35. And I remember thinking, "Whoa, I love my career. I think I want to work my entire life, but I don't want to wake up one day and say, "Oh my God, I forgot to have children, or I forgot to get married, or I ignored that part of my life." And coming from a really happy, healthy, and nuclear family, I also knew that was something I wanted. So I think that was a bit of a wake-up call for me to say, "Yes, focus on your career."

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KATIE COURIC:

"But also, if this is something that you would like in your life, a family, a husband," not necessarily in that order, "then you need to pay attention to that as well." So I think when I got to be 30 or so, I thought, "I need to really make sure that I'm focusing on this," because I think I was pragmatic, and I knew that I didn't want my childbearing years to necessarily pass me by.

NANCY STEINER:

When you became the first female anchor of a network evening newscast, how important was it to you to be first in that position?

KATIE COURIC:

I've always thought that it's very important to be aware of the images projected in media; whether you're talking about television news, or scripted shows, or billboards, or advertisements, that it really influences the way we see ourselves as a society. And I thought it was really important to take on the job as a solo news anchor because it was a first, and I didn't want people to think that was only the domain of men and that a woman could do that job with confidence and competence. And so, I thought it was high time we had someone in that role that wasn't wearing a blazer and tie.

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KATIE COURIC:

I think an important lesson I learned going to CBS was that the culture, both inside and outside that network, wasn't necessarily ready to have a female in that role. And perhaps a female like me, who they had seen in a very multidimensional way. They had seen me do serious interviews, but because I was on a morning show, they had seen many sides of me. So I might not have been the best person to be the first woman. It might have been better to have someone who had just covered the State Department or Capitol Hill, who had been really only perceived in a very serious way. And I think people probably unfairly rejected me, some, because they saw that I could also have a personality, and be funny, and kid around.

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KATIE COURIC:

And I think, as a result, it was hard for them to maybe take me seriously, as a serious news person, because I think the tendency is to put people in boxes. They're serious, they're funny... but the fact is we are, you know, multifaceted individuals with many sides. But I think, on a screen, it's very hard to take that into consideration. So I think I thought society was really ready, but in many ways it wasn't. And, particularly, I think for a woman like me, who had been vulnerable, open, and exposed sort of every aspect of my personality.

NANCY STEINER:

What overarching life lessons are learned from your professional mistakes?

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KATIE COURIC:

I think one of the biggest lessons I've learned is that it's laudable to take risks, but you should take calculated risks. And, at times, I don't think I was calculating enough. I think I threw caution to the wind, and said, "I'm going to go for it. I'm going to try it. And if it doesn't work, that's okay." And I think, in hindsight, I wish I had been more methodical about some of the choices I made, and really considered every aspect of it. And had someone who might have said, "Here are the pros and cons," or might have made sure that I was better prepared to appreciate where I was going to land and some of the specific challenges that would present themselves in those situations.

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KATIE COURIC:

I think I've learned that it's really important to do your due diligence, that you can take risks and try new things, and not necessarily be certain of the outcome. But to mitigate any kind of unforeseen obstacles or challenges, you really need to go in with your eyes wide open and make sure that you've reviewed every aspect of what you're doing. So you can be really prepared for whatever's going to happen and understand the risk-reward of any given situation.

NANCY STEINER:

This is a really abrupt shift, but the way you describe the death of Jay is as powerful and poignant as any such depiction I've ever read. It is brutally frank, it's beautiful, and it's very very brave. Why did you spare no details? Given what you know about the dynamics of privacy and family, how did you draw the line between what you wanted to share and what you didn't?

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KATIE COURIC:

You know, for many years, I did not talk about Jay's illness and death because I felt it had happened to him and not to me. But 20 years after he died, I wanted to share the experience because I know very well how many people go through similar experiences. And I wanted to make sure people who lost a loved one, or feel that they have regrets, or didn't really have anyone to talk to about the painful details of watching someone you love slowly die was really important. And I think that we need to be able to talk about illness and death in a much more transparent way. I think we don't have the vocabulary to talk

about things like this. To talk about choices we make. To talk about how we handle these really tough conversations.

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KATIE COURIC:

And I felt it was a service for other people who were in a similar situation, to be very honest about the things that I thought I did right and the things that I thought I did wrong. And I also want to convince people to make sure that they're screened. And I think by giving these details of what it's like to die from a highly preventable cancer may motivate them to take care of their health and spare their families from experiencing what mine did.

NANCY STEINER:

When Jay was sick, did you ever feel angry at cancer? Did you ever feel angry at not being able to control the situation? Angry at Jay for allowing this to happen?

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KATIE COURIC:

I was never angry at Jay ever; I was really angry at cancer. I was really angry at God. I was really angry at the unfairness of a young man who took care of himself at 41 being diagnosed with stage-four colon cancer. I think the note that resonated the most to me was from a mother of one of Ellie's classmates. And at the end of the note, she said, "Damn cancer." And that's how I felt. I was furious. And I would look at other people on the street, smoking cigarettes or morbidly obese, and I'd think, "Why are they walking around,

and my heretofore healthy husband is dying?" I think anger is a natural emotion. And I think anger is a lot easier to deal with than fear. So, I think I was both terribly afraid but also furious at the world.

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