

Charlie Mechem:

Welcome to 15 Minutes with Charlie. I'm your host, Charlie Mechem. This a series of podcasts that I've been doing in connection with my recently published book, Total Anecdotal, in which I sit down with guests to discuss anecdotes from the book. My guest today is Nick Clooney. Mickey is a well-known, loved American television personality. He is brother to singer and actress Rosemary Clooney, and father to actor and philanthropist George Clooney. Nick is not only a dear friend of many years, but he's one of the best known and most talented and charismatic people that I have ever known. Nick, welcome.

Nick Clooney:

My goodness. Thank you very much, Charlie.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, if you look in the dictionary under multi talented, it says simply Nick Clooney.

Nick Clooney:

How nice of you.

Charlie Mechem:

Because he has been an award-winning anchorman, variety show host, PBS stalwart, and on and on. Nick and I first met as colleagues at Taft Broadcasting Company in Cincinnati in the 1970s when Nick was the award-winning number one anchor man on our news and the head of our news department. One more thing that you probably heard before, years ago I ran into Nick in the Cincinnati airport. I hadn't seen him in a while. I said, "Nick, good to see you. How you doing?" He said, "I'm doing fine." But he said, "You know, I've spent the first half of my life as Rosie's brother and I'm spending the last half as George's father." I'm sure he said that before, but that's in no way diminishes the luster of this guy. Nick, welcome.

Nick Clooney:

I am delighted to be with you. I've enjoyed your book. I love the anecdotal. It is and isn't it true that we could not have done anything in our lives, and I suggest all of those in your audience who are thinking in terms of a successful life would also say communication was dead center of that success.

Charlie Mechem:

There's absolutely no question about it. One of the sad things to me about, and there are a lot of great things about social media and the internet and so on, but one of the sad things is I think really effective communication is suffering. I hate to see that, and I'm not sure it's reversible, but we will deal with it.

Nick Clooney:

We always had and always will. I've always had my difficulties mastering technology and I still feel a lot better with pen in my hand and a blank paper in front of me.

Charlie Mechem:

Me too. The old yellow legal pad is never far from my reach.

Nick Clooney:

Looking at one at this very moment.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, the way we do this, as you know, Nick is I'll quote several anecdotes from the book and then I ask you to tell me how that particular anecdote might have impacted or had some relevance in your life and career.

Nick Clooney:

Sure.

Charlie Mechem:

The first one is on page 26 of the book under the heading of Adaptability and Flexibility. It's a quote from Tom Watson, the founder of IBM, who once said, "We," meaning IBM, "can and will change everything except our values." I've always thought that that really was appropriate in any conversation with you because you've sort of exemplified that. But I'd like your thoughts on that.

Nick Clooney:

The dead center of all of our communication certainly has to be our value. If it does not show that, then it shows nothing. I also think that it would be interesting for us to add in here, the addendum that the agreement of my attitude toward your book incidentally, which I enjoyed very much-

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you.

Nick Clooney:

... and that is a sense of humor is the single most important element to that communication of any kind, because it gives a sense of proportion as just Mr. Watson's quote pointed out. If we do not have a centerpiece to whatever the thought process is, then I think we have missed much of what life has to offer.

Charlie Mechem:

I couldn't agree more. I always felt when I was making speeches that if you could get your audience to smile or laugh a little bit right at the beginning, it was always helpful because they'd sort of think, "Well, I may, I may like this guy or maybe this guy was going to be fun to listen to." And so anecdotes play a wonderful role in that. By the way, I ran across, Nick, a word the other day that I had never seen before A-G-E-L-I-S-T. It means lacking a sense of humor.

Nick Clooney:

I have never heard that and I certainly have never heard it in reference to anybody who is on this telephone.

Charlie Mechem:

We don't have that. How cliché.

Nick Clooney:

I tell you, the very first time I came to believe very early on in my life that the real fear that most of us have is not necessarily the fear of death. It is, instead, the fear of making a jackass out of ourselves in front of an audience. Big audience or of any size.

Charlie Mechem:

I think you're absolutely right.

Nick Clooney:

Scares us to that.

Charlie Mechem:

I've had a recurring bad dream, happily it's never actually happened, but where I get up before a large group to speak and I reach in my pocket to pull out my notes. I open them up and my notes say, "A loaf of bread, two quarts of milk".

Nick Clooney:

Exactly. The first awful moment I had, I guess I was about 20 and I was down in Lexington, Kentucky. Somehow I was working in radio already. Somehow, I was asked to introduce the Kingston Trio at the very height of their power. There were 10,000 people on the court in Memorial Coliseum in Lexington. It was huge. But there's where the UK played at that time. 10,000 people and I was to introduce them and guess what? The Kingston Trio was caught in Tennessee in a storm. They could not get in. 10,000 people and I was elected to give them the bad news. Unfortunately, as does very seldom but occasionally, it occurs to you as you're standing up there to tell them the truth. I said, "Look, I don't know how to tell you this but the fact of the matter is the Kingston Trio is not going to be here today. They are stuck in Tennessee." I got this one little flash that came to my head and I said, "I guess we could say that they left us hanging." People all fell on the ground and I was saved.

Charlie Mechem:

You were saved. Sense of humor. Oh, God, I remember the Kingston Trio. They did that great song about the MTA, the underground in Boston.

Nick Clooney:

It's wonderful. Of course, Tom Dooley was the one.

Charlie Mechem:

Oh yeah, that was the big one.

Nick Clooney:

It was a biggie.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, the next anecdote Nick is on page 28 of the book under the heading of Age. As you and I are pushing it a little bit, I think this is especially apt anecdote. It goes like this. An 85 year old lady was

visiting her doctor because she'd been feeling tired and listless. After examining her, the doctor calls her into his office, said, "Madam, I have unbelievable news. You're pregnant." She, of course, was horrified. She said, "But that's impossible. I'm 85. My husband's 93." Dr. Nani said, "I know that you're shocked, but I have run all the tests. It's very clear. You're going to have a baby." Well, the distraught lady rushed to the phone and called her husband. When he answered, she practically yelled at him. "Henry, you got me pregnant." After a brief pause, her husband replied, "Who's that calling?"

Nick Clooney:

Love it. [inaudible 00:08:53]

Charlie Mechem:

Your thoughts on age and aging.

Nick Clooney:

On aging, well, I have taken as my own the quote from George Burns who is asked, when he was about a hundred years old, and he was asked about how his health was and how are things going? He said, "I'm fine. I can't die. I'm booked."

Charlie Mechem:

I'd never heard that. That's a great one. That's a great one. By the way, I'll tell you what I think is one of the greatest lines I ever heard. My sister is 99 years old.

Nick Clooney:

God bless her. She's my hero.

Charlie Mechem:

Her mind is still very sharp. Her body's not quite as sharp, but she's okay. But the other day we're talking on the phone. I said, "Alice, how are you doing?" She said, "Well, I can't see and I can't hear. I can't walk, but I'm doing fine." Then, she said, "Charlie, I could do things if I had anything to do." I thought what a wonderful thought about aging, because there's so many older people who could do things if they had anything to do. I think it's a good thing to remember when you're dealing with older people.

Nick Clooney:

Absolutely. I incidentally have an anecdote. What do you think?

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah, good.

Nick Clooney:

Ready for one?

Charlie Mechem:

Do it.

Nick Clooney:

My sister Rosemary and my wife and I were having dinner and fortunately it was with a very famous person in Rosemary's house. His name was Leo McCarty. He was a famous director and he had had hit huge hits like Going My Way and Love Story, dozens of others. I was eagerly asking questions about him and what was his favorite movie that he made. He said, "It's a movie you've never heard of. It's a movie nobody ever saw." He said, "It's the best movie I ever made and it made a difference in the world. It was called Make Way for Tomorrow and it started nobody that you ever heard of, Beulah Bondi, and the second is the second great stars. It was about an old couple getting up to way of an age. All of their children had forsaken them. They were about to go off into the twilight in two different old folks homes from those days."

He said, "They made a wonderful movie out of this. I took that movie to the Congress of the United States and showed it to them and it was instrumental in the signing of Social Security." When I took that and I was about to write a book about movies, that was going to be one of my major chapters. I wrote it. I started to write it and then unfortunately I did my research. The movie was a wonderful movie. It came out in 1937. The Social Security Law was signed in 1935.

Charlie Mechem:

A little license here and there.

Nick Clooney:

A couple of years, yeah. A couple of years behind.

Charlie Mechem:

Oh, that's funny. The anecdote I'd like to throw out is on page 38 of the book under the category of Brevity. I know with all the people that you've heard speak and talk, but I love this quote from Churchill. Of course, there's no quote from Churchill, I guess, you wouldn't love. But this one I have not heard. He once said about an overly long government report, "By its very length, it defends itself against the risk of being read."

Nick Clooney:

I loved that one. I had not heard that one either when I read it in your book. That is great.

Charlie Mechem:

Your thoughts on you brevity.

Nick Clooney:

You bet. Again, we'll have to go far back when I was just learning to begin to speak publicly. I went to a graduation in Millersburg, Kentucky at the Millersburg Military Institute. It was a hot day in June and we were sitting in little metal chairs out on the lawn and the speaker did not show up. The head of the cadets said our doctor in town, our famous doctor, who we've all loved all these years, he has decided to come in and he will take over the commencement address. He got up there and apparently he had been waiting for this moment all of his life. He got up there and talked, Charlie, for 45 minutes. 45 minutes in the heat and he was right and he spoke about the value of roughage in the diet. I've never forgotten that speech.

Charlie Mechem:

I would think not. That's a riot.

Nick Clooney:

Oh, that was one of the worst moments of my life, but it taught me a great lesson.

Charlie Mechem:

Of course.

Nick Clooney:

Keep it brief.

Charlie Mechem:

Nick, this is not on our specific agenda, but I think it's appropriate. One of the funniest lines I have ever heard came is a story of the guy who was the last speaker at a dinner which went on endlessly. By the time it was his turn to speak, he was pretty well, the old phrase, a number of sheets to the wind. He got up and started for the podium and fell flat on his back. Instead of trying to get up, he said in a loud voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, considering the situation, I think I'll refrain from my usual speech and just take questions from the floor." I've never forgotten that.

Nick Clooney:

That's great. That's so good. I must say that one that caught me, and I don't know if you've ever heard this one from Buzz Aldrin, whom you remember of course.

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah, sure.

Nick Clooney:

Second man on the moon. We were the farewell for Walter Cronkite who was a friend of all of us.

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah, sure.

Nick Clooney:

I was to speak and Buzz spoke just before me. He really never did get over the fact that he was not the first man. He genuinely did not think that Neil should have been there. He told the story. He said, "I was not the first man to walk on the moon. That is true." He said, "But I was the second and when I was up there, I was getting ready like everybody else, the folks on the ground and all those up on the moon." He said, "I got to the point, there was a little delay and I got there and I was supposed to do some very athletic things and I made a terrible mistake. I drank too much.

" He said, "I was going to get out of there and they had me jumping up in the air, jumping all over the moonscape." He said, "And I start to be uncomfortable. As you know, we have those relief tubes and [inaudible 00:16:15] I was there and I finally got back to the craft and I had one foot up and unfortunately I could not hold it any longer. The relief tube came into use." He said, "While Neil

Armstrong will always be known as the first man to walk on the moon. I, on the other hand ..." And Buzz never said anything else. He got off the stage. He did not deliver the punchline.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, he didn't have to, did he? Oh, that's funny. Well, the next set of anecdotes is under the category of the Fragility of Language. You've been such a student of the English language and the spoken word. My brother was a lay minister late in his life. One day, he sent me extra from church bulletins. Now, these may have been apocryphal, but they're still funny. But just as an example, this one says, "This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar" Then, my all time favorite. "The low self-esteem group will meet Thursday at 7:00 PM in the social hall. Please use the back door."

Nick Clooney:

That's good.

Charlie Mechem:

If anything, talk about how fragile language is and how careful you have to be.

Nick Clooney:

Yes, I think that is absolutely correct and fragile in many ways. It, of course, changes so often and words, they mean one thing to one generation, mean something else to someone else. I remember there was a time, I'm not sure that this is on point, but I was reminded just a moment ago by my reference to Neil Armstrong, a good friend of yours. I was interviewing Neil Armstrong and John Raught, our friend, the great natural artist. I was interviewing them on stage at Union Terminal.

I remember saying to, I was interviewing John, and John, I said, "Tell me how you don't shoot the birds anymore. You shoot them with photography, right?" "That is right," he says. I said, "What's the most difficult one?" He said, "For me?" And this might surprise you, he says, "The most difficult shot to get was one of a wild turkey in flight. They are so clumsy and to try to find something that would make it worth what they would." Neil interrupted both of us and said, "Well, I don't know. I had a shot of wild turkey about an hour ago and it wasn't hard at all." Shot us through that.

Charlie Mechem:

Oh gosh, I've always remembered he came out to my golf course years ago and he and I played and a member guest. It was a three day event, nine holes each day for three days. I was really concerned that some of the members might get going a little overboard and ask for autographs and that's all. But they were very great until the last day and the guy that we were playing with was a guest of somebody, we got on this one tee and there were a lot of rocks around us. My worst fears were realized. He said, "Neil, Neil, it looks just like the moon. What was it like on the moon?" Oh, God. Neil paused a moment and he said, "Great view, lousy surface." That ended that.

Nick Clooney:

That is great.

Charlie Mechem:

The last anecdote that we'll talk about is on page 102 under the category of Rigidity. It goes like this. Someone remarked that if Thomas Edison had gone to the Harvard Business School, we'd all be reading by larger candles. The point, excuse me, the point is obvious. Sometimes we make life far more complicated than it needs to be. We also frequently become rigid in what we regard as the way to accomplish something. This observation about Edison suggests that flexibility and adaptability are great qualities and I would suspect you agree.

Nick Clooney:

You know, I really do and it leads me in a fairly secure way to something I wanted to ask you. Perhaps if you have another book percolating in your mind now, let me just offer a suggestion for at least a part of it. This is something I have come to believe here now that I am 86 years old. You've been around the world a couple of times. It strikes me that of all the people that I have had a chance to interview and meet most of them, [inaudible 00:21:23] most, some are not, few are not and they are memorable for all the wrong reasons. The one thing that I found the quality and rigidity is very much a part of it, that all of the bullies, all of the tyrants, and all of the dictators, two of one, a hundred of another, and that's I think about 75 of the other, have had no sense of humor. They cannot make fun of themselves. They cannot stand anybody else making fun of them. Have you found anything similar in your experience?

Charlie Mechem:

Absolutely. Absolutely. It would be interesting to go back and kind of go through history. I think it would absolutely prove the point. They can't stand to make a joke about themselves because that would be in their mind inexcusable.

Nick Clooney:

No self-deprecation.

Charlie Mechem:

Right, no self-deprecation at all. To make a joke about someone else means sharing something about someone else and they never do that.

Nick Clooney:

[inaudible 00:22:33].

Charlie Mechem:

No, that's a very good thought. I'll give it more thought. By the way, remember my word back, A-G-E-L-I-S-T.

Nick Clooney:

Exactly. That could be the type.

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you for joining me for today's conversation. If you'd like to listen to more episodes, please visit charliemechem.com or search for 15 Minutes with Charlie in your podcasting app. If you're enjoying the show, you should check out my book Total Anecdotal, A Fun Guide to Help You Become a Better Speaker

This transcript was exported on Feb 14, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

and Writer. Learn more [@charliemechem.com/book](mailto:charliemechem.com/book). That's charliemechem.com/book. Or you could acquire the book either through Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Thank you.