



# Interview with Françoise

## Family and Childhood

**Tell me three things about your father, or someone else if you prefer**

It's a difficult choice: my husband, my children, my father.

If I can say three things about my father, I can say that I didn't know him much during my childhood because he worked long hours, left the house at 6am and came home late at night. I started to get to know him better when I left home at 18 and came home at weekends. My father was always there for me. When I had problems, I could talk to him about them, share my worries about accepting the Catholic religion. He was open to discussions, which on that level was already a good thing.

My father was always quite intrusive in my life, I found. One day he came over after I'd furnished my kitchen, and he changed the furniture around, and it bothered me. He thought he'd done the right thing because he thought it looked better, but I told him I'd rather choose my own furniture. So yes, I found him a bit intrusive at the start, but I made things clear by telling him "listen, it's my house. I'd like to be able to have some nice simple furniture. I don't like complicated stuff". He understood me and became less intrusive. He got used to it.

He is a very generous person. He looks after a charity in Braine-le-Comte. Their aim is to collect clothes, toys, things for people in difficulty. And I think that's nice. For a retired person, he's very busy. I like him for that.

**Who looked after you when you were a child?**

Ah. My grandfather. My grandfather, who is on that photo. My mother's father, who lived at home with us. My mother was paraplegic, and couldn't look after me when I was a child. I'm talking about the time when I went back to my parent's house at the age of 7 and a half. My grandfather was wonderful. He taught me a lot. He was a gardener by trade. He taught me the names of trees, flowers, birds. I went on walks with him, on bike rides, he taught me a lot. He used to read a great deal. So he was interested in a lot of things too. He read scientific books, history books... and yes, I learned a lot with my grandfather. He was very kind. I rarely saw him angry. He was very quiet, very calm and he had a lot of patience. I was not an unruly child. I was very calm and obedient. I spent a lot of time with him, and when he went to the retirement home when mum died, he left, and I visited him every weekend with David who was little. Then, he was amazing, because each week he would give us a pot of honey and a bunch of bananas. We got so many pots of honey from him. Anyway, that was my grandfather. I was really wonderful. He looked after me a lot. Like I said, my father would be gone in the morning when I got up, and would come home when I was already in bed, so I didn't spend much time with him. My mother looked after me, but more to test me on my times tables or things like that. It was more school stuff.

I spent two months in quarantine at the age of 7. I was very close to my mother; before then, I was with my aunt and my grandmother. I don't have good memories of my aunt. She was a very nervous person, and very strict in her education. Usually it was my little sister who played up, but she didn't distinguish between us. We both had to sit on the sofa and receive three slaps each. I didn't really like being punished for something I hadn't done. And also, unfortunately I had very long hair, and it was a real torture to brush it in the morning. She pulled on my hair. And even though I have always been very calm, I found it very difficult.

I had health problems, I got hepatitis and was already in pain at the time. She would tell my mother "I think she's just pulling faces". So I wasn't treated before I went back to my parent's house, which was a problem because my liver was already in a bad state by that time. I haven't got good memories of my childhood at my aunt's house. Thankfully, afterwards I was able to go home to my parents. However, there was a family council, the family disagreed with me going back to the family home because I wasn't capable of looking after myself and my mother couldn't care for me either. Thankfully, my father stood his ground. He insisted, saying "she's her daughter. She has the right to be with her". And I went back to my parent's house.

### **Do you remember a moment where you felt special in someone's eyes?**

As a child? One day, my grandfather was in the bathroom and he suffocated because of the gas boiler. I must have been 8. I heard a big crash. I thought there must have been a problem inside, and then I smelled gas. I called 112 and I said, my grandfather is in the bathroom and I can smell gas. Everyone came to help, ambulances, firemen. My grandfather was grateful because if I hadn't been there, he might be... I don't know... it could have ended badly. Especially seeing as the cleaning lady at the time wanted to throw a brick through the window! A brick to the head wasn't a good idea.

Apart from him, my mother has always taken care of me. Significantly. When I was at university, and I had exams, she was as stressed as me. When I was at school it was the same. When I had a test, she was stressed too. So she gave me a lot of attention during my studies.

## **Growing Up**

### **Who helped you to grow up?**

Well, I guess... my grandfather, my mother's father. My grandfather was not at all religious. So from the start, we talked about the Vatican, he thought it was scandalous that the Vatican should be one of the richest states in the world. I agreed with him on a lot of things on that level. My mother certainly helped me to grow up. She was very strict with me, but I think I'm grateful to her for having been so, because I learned to better manage my relationships and studies thanks to my upbringing. I used to complain a lot because one of my friends would come and get me to go out and play, but I had to stay and finish my homework, and then help my mother around the house because there were things she couldn't do that she asked me to do. Somehow, at the time, I was really... I complained, but now I tell myself she was right to be strict. At least, I've become who I am. A reliable, respectful person. My mother also had a great respect for nature that I also have. My grandfather was the same. I try to do the same with my children. It's important to me. I think it's sad. We won't have another planet, so if we don't take care of this one, it's a shame.

### **When did you become an adult? When do you wish you were still a child?**

Well, I guess I became an adult... There's a part of me which has remained a child. I always wish I were a child. When I used to buy toys for my children, I usually bought something small for me, too. My husband would say to me: "I have three children at home, I don't believe it". I like playing, too. I like playing hide and seek, I like telling stories and I like being silly. If there's a big puddle, I like jumping in it. That kind of thing. I know how to behave like an adult, but there's a part of me which is still a child.

*Do you not feel forced into an adult role?* Not really. The boys are not critical about that. My eldest maybe sometimes criticises me because he's a teenager. I remember one day we went to Brussels, and I ran out of the station down the hill with Nicolas. And then David said: "Mum, you're embarrassing me. Everyone's looking at us." I said to him "I couldn't care less. Everyone can look at us. I want to run and have fun". So he sometimes thinks my behaviour isn't appropriate for a mum. But Nicolas doesn't mind. One day I was doing the washing up, listening to the radio, and I started dancing around the kitchen. David and Nicolas were filming me on their phones through the window. They said: "Yeah, we're going to put this on Facebook. Mum dancing." So yes, I still behave like a teenager or a child.

*"You like being silly, but not in public."* I have no problems with that. Obviously, I'm not going to behave like that at work, but every now and then at home I go a bit silly and it does me good.

### **Between being independent and having someone look after you, what do you prefer?**

Being independent. Absolutely. I was independent very early in life in comparison to other children because my family situation forced me to be independent. I had to get up in the morning alone, get the bus, do my homework and everything. It's stayed with me, and when I can do something myself, I do it myself. When I can't do something I ask for help, but that rarely happens because I much prefer to manage on my own.

### **What makes you beautiful or why are you beautiful?**

I think I am a generous person. That's what people say about me. My husband too. My children too. I often give little gifts. When I see something that might interest one or the other... Yes, I think that's it.

Generosity is one of my qualities. I like being generous with my family, my friends, people I know, someone in the street who asks me for a cigarette or says they are hungry, anyone. I think that's what makes me a beautiful person.

## Friends

### **I asked you if you could think of three objects to represent yourself**

I had to do that on a course I went on, and I had to find three objects to represent myself. I chose a rope, because I've done a lot of rock-climbing. I love the mountains. I like ropes too because I always try to reach my goals. I'm perseverant. If I don't succeed right away, I try again. That's what I mean.

Things like jewellery are not very important to me. I have a box of stones though. Rocks that I've collected throughout the world on my travels. There are some very pretty ones. I like to look at them.

Perfume in general. The perfume I wear, incense. Scented candles. That represents me well too.

I'm not very attached to things like jewellery, smartphones... My husband bought me this (my phone). To start with I had a simple GSM.

I could have chosen a camera too, although now I don't take that many photos. I took a lot on my travels. It's a way for me to keep all these memories. To see them now and then. To send, to those people in India, the photos I took of them. It's an object I've used a lot in my life. When the children were little, I used to take a lot of photos too.

Also, with the children, I had a notebook in which I wrote all the funny things they told me. I made a notebook for each of them and one day I said "here, this is for you": It's all your silly things, all the silly things you told us, all the funny things you've said.

*A way to hold on to memories and to share them?* I have to say that when they read their little notebooks, they laughed quite a lot (because it was funny to read).

Another object I have, but which I haven't used for a long time, is my sketchbook. These are my drawings. I've done a few. I'm just starting but I'm trying to... I do animals, really. This one isn't finished. It's a dragon. I like fantasy things. Nicolas asked me to do this one. It's a game character. I try to draw. It helps me to relax. To do something new. I didn't know anything about drawing. I started when I had a burnout and didn't have enough energy to do anything else. I think I'll carry on. I'll carry on because I like it. I like drawing, I might like to paint. My father paints and has told me "if you ever want to, I can take you to my class".

## Life

### **What is difficult when you get up in the morning?**

The alarm going off. That's very hard. I usually sleep better in the morning. At night I have trouble getting to sleep. Apart from that, nothing. Once I'm up, it's alright. I have a coffee ; I'm better already and the rest is manageable. It's just waking up. The noise of the alarm is difficult.

### **What makes you smile during the day?**

The animals. At the moment I like my cats. Sometimes they get overexcited and go crazy around the house. My children. Every now and then they make me smile. The people I meet at work. On the journey, I like to look at the landscape. If I see a great blue sky, I stop and take a photo.

### **When is the last time you saved the world?**

Ouf! I don't think I've saved the world, but it's true that my husband and I were thinking that if we were 25 again, we'd go and start a revolution, or try to change things. But anyway...

*A moment where you really felt you were doing a good thing?*

Two years ago I did a survey on teaching spelling. I was outraged at how spelling at my children's school was simply... When they had a test, the spelling mistakes weren't even marked. As a mum, I found it quite unbelievable that I had to spend time checking for mistakes and asking my children to correct them.

So I did a survey at secondary schools and higher education, and I published an article in a magazine of the FAPEO. I got in touch with politicians. I sent my article to several of them. Some of them answered me, of which Charles Michels, Didier Reynders. I told myself, "I'm doing this for myself. If I don't do it, I'll have a bad conscience. I know it's a small contribution. It may not cause a political reaction. But I did it because as a mum, I thought it was important to do it, and I'm pleased.

I don't regret doing it. I spent a lot of time on it. Sending the surveys, collecting them, making a report, writing up the article. It meant a lot to me because I found there was a world of difference between the way we did... I don't know if you remember, but when we were studying humanities, if there were five mistakes in any area, it was "Insufficient". I'm not saying it has to be sanctioned, but they should at least pick up on the mistakes the child makes and make them correct them. But even that is not at all done.

Seeing as I work at the FOREM, I have a lot of contact with employers. The main skill of people working as administration employees, secretaries or in general administration, is spelling. So there is too much incoherence between teaching... they aren't prepared to be independent. They aren't prepared for the requirements of the working world.

I wonder if it isn't a political desire. We're making these children dependent. When they end up looking for a job, they can't write a CV. They make mistakes in their CV. We have a lot of work on that level. So those who don't come through us, are going to find it hard to get a job.

## Taking Care

### **Who takes care of you?**

My husband, definitely. I don't usually go to the doctor's when I'm ill. Last time, he said "no, you're not going to work, you're going to the doctor's".

The children too. Sometimes I'm a bit down, or I don't feel very well. Then I get kisses, cuddles. "Come on, mum, everything'll be alright. Don't worry." My family. My friends too. I have friends with whom I've sometimes talked about certain problems and who have been... who showed they cared about everything I told them. So yes, I think there are lots of people who take care of me.

### **Who do you take care of?**

I'd say my family. My husband, my children, the animals, the dog, the cats, the sheep, the chickens. My friends, no matter if I haven't seen them in a long time. A friend called me recently and said "Françoise, I'd like to talk to you". I said "Come over, I'm free tomorrow". This friend called me because she was having a burnout and she knew I'd had it too. She wanted to know how I'd coped. How it happened. I listened to her. I gave her advice and that was it.

My father, when he needs me. When he was in hospital, I went to see him. Same for my grandfather. I did his washing when he was at the retirement home. I take care of people

around me in general. I take care of nature too. When we go for a walk, we take a bag and pick up all the cans we find along the way. We try to take care of nature at our level. It may not be much, but I think if everyone does it...

### **What makes you happy when you do something for someone?**

It's a smile. It's someone who leaves my office saying "Thank you. Thank you for your advice." It's that. It's the gratitude I receive at work, it's people's smiles. It's people being positive. Someone who was discouraged and told me he was 53 and he'd never find work again. I tried to explain to him, to show him, to tell him about people who had found work at his age and that there was no reason why not. It's the people I can help. It's the children too. I don't know how many times Nico has forgotten his sports bag. I was a very caring mother. I would go and take him his bag to school, and get a huge hug and "thank you mum, that's great".

### **What makes you sad?**

Watching the news. Seeing this world which is... seeing all these wars, the attacks. Also thinking that my children are going to grow up in this world. It makes me sad because I was lucky enough to grow up carefree here in the countryside, in relative safety compared to now.

The other day I was stressed out because Nicolas had missed the bus when I was at work. I couldn't go back for him. I left my smartphone on my lap throughout my meetings. I told him "you stay with me". He walked the five kilometres by himself. But yes, I was stressed. I don't like knowing that he's alone on the country roads. There are still children who get kidnapped. So yes, it makes me sad to have to worry about that kind of thing.

It makes me sad to see how disrespectful people are of the nature around them. A while ago, we went for a walk in the countryside here. We picked up 73 cans of all kinds of drinks. I thought, "we're doing this, but in a week we can come back again". That really makes me sad.

It also makes me sad to see that here in Belgium we're not doing much in terms of ecology. I'm referring to food packaging. In Germany, there are mainly glass bottles. Here in Belgium, we have plastic bottles. Deodorants there don't have gas.

There used to be paper bags in shops that you could put your shopping in. You don't see them anymore. I buy brown sugar. Before, it was in a paper package, now it's in a plastic one. I think we're not making progress at all. We're not making any efforts at all in terms of packaging. There are a few shops that offer non-packaged products. You go and buy a litre of yoghurt with your Tupperware container. *But the people who are careful are largely a minority.* I for example, if I buy bread or fruit in a paper bag, I keep the bag to put apples in for example to give them to someone. We try to make efforts, but I think that at the manufacturers' level, there aren't any efforts being made.

What makes me sad too is that I've read a book called "Eating Animals". It's about the start of factory farming in the US and how all those huge animal farms developed. When you've read the book, you don't really want to eat animals. It makes me sad too that one of my cousins is a farmer and breeds Blanc-Bleu-Belge (*a breed of cow*). He puts calves in kinds of wooden cages. These calves spend eight months of their lives in cages. The only food they get is pellets. And at eight months, they're killed for their meat. That shocks me because I am very respectful of animals. When I was a child, animals were in fields.

I think the biggest problem is greed. The aim of that farmer is making money. As much money as he can in the least possible time. That calf is not let out because it would spend energy. It'll be fed on pellets which will provide everything it needs to make meat. And that makes me sad.

## The World

### **Is there someone who does good in this world?**

I'm sure there are lots of people who do good and who we don't hear about. We heard about Mother Theresa. I'm sure there are Mother Thesas all over the world.

There are maybe engineers who do things in African countries to irrigate crops, things like that. I think there must be lots of people who are anonymous, who we don't hear about and who do great things. I don't have anyone in particular. Mother Theresa?

I have to say that I thought for a long time that people such as Che Guevara or Gandhi did good, but no. I've read a lot. I read an autobiography of Gandhi which shocked me a lot and I thought that he wasn't really the person I'd been told about at all. It's the same for Che Guevara, he was a doctor, and a doctor who kills people... It's not right. There are lots of people who we admire but really... Nelson Mandela left bombs in cafés when he was a teenager. He received the Nobel Prize for peace, but...

### **If there was an event you could change?**

My mother's accident. Yes. My mother had her accident when she was 29. She was very young. She became dependant on everyone around her for a lot of things. It was really difficult. So yes, I would like to cancel that.

### **Is there someone who you help actively?**

I'm a member of an association called "Survival International" which helps to protect the "uncontacted tribes" in various areas of the world, in Africa, the Amazon. So I try to send letters, I get people to sign petitions, I hand out flyers... I've been an active member of this association based in London for three years now. I don't know if it helps, but I try to make sure the habitat of these people is preserved. That they get help to keep their living environment as it is now. Again, it's a question of greed or economy.

## The Future

### **In your dream life, where are you tomorrow and what are you doing?**

Tomorrow, I'm in Shanag, in a little village of the Himalaya, and I'm drinking tea with my friends. That's what I'd like. *Would you take your family with you?* Yes. But I don't know how long I'd stay there.

### **What will you do when you get old?**

I'll look after the house, my grandchildren. I might still help out in this association. I'll take over my dad's charity. I'll still be active. I hope to be like my grandfather who died at 94 and who was still fully independent and in good health. I want to be an active person.

## To Finish

### **Have you got a message for anyone who will read your interview?**

"You're the hero of your own story. So, write it well."

### **After reading your interview, what would you like people to remember from it?**

I'd say the respect of nature, and the respect of others in general. The respect of those tribes in the middle of Africa or the Amazon, the respect of their culture. I'd want people to remember those two things.

I'd also like people to be more aware of people around them because we have this (*computer or smartphone*) and sometimes I find my two boys here and I tell them we're going to chat instead. It's a wonderful tool, but sometimes it interferes with normal communication between two human beings and somehow it's annoying.

*Thank you.*