

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Alternate Universe: Writer and scientific researcher Ethan Herberman talks about his "other worldly" dinners with physicist Stephen Hawking.

TONY KAHN:

Hi. I'm Tony Kahn, producer and director of Morning Stories on WGBH, public radio's first podcast. Today's story is from a science researcher and writer who lives right here in Boston named Ethan Herberman. It's called The Alternate Universe or subtitled My Dinner with Stephen Hawking.

ETHAN HERBERMAN:

You've heard of Stephen Hawking, haven't you? One of the great theoretical physicists. Almost totally paralyzed by Lou Gehrig's Disease, yet free to explore the limits of time and space with his mind. I saw him once at a press conference in Boston. It was unforgettable. Each time he was asked a question, long minutes would go by as he squeezed a box, choosing letters that passed before him on a computer screen. The computer would then speak his words in a mechanical and strangely Swedish accent. After everyone had left, I was dawdling in a corridor when suddenly an elevator opened and out rolled Hawking in his electric wheelchair, accompanied by nurses, colleagues, hosts. One of the nurses called to me to help carry the wheelchair and the next thing I knew I was right beside the renowned scientist. He rolled his eyes and looked at me. The voice machine came to life.

[Mechanical voice] "Would. . . you. . . like. . . to . . . join. . . us. . . for. . . di-. . . ner?"

I was dumbfounded. We hadn't been introduced, but there was no time to reply because the nurse was already lifting him, like a sack of feathers, into her arms. In a flash we had the chair down the outside steps and in a nanoflash, Hocking was back in it, zipping away.

"But wait!" I cried inwardly. "What about . . . di-. . . ner?" On the one hand he must have started typing that invitation before he even saw me, so it was probably meant for someone else, on the other hand, he was looking at me. Gosh. What should I do?

Too late. Waiting cars had scooped up the party. The moment of decision had passed, but not the moment of regret, which I could now see extending infinitely. I could have had dinner with Stephen Hawking. And now how could I excuse my behavior? The world's greatest physicist invites you to dinner and you don't even have the decency to respond? I don't know how long I stood there, mortified, till a realization struck me and changed everything. You see, I had been reading about Hawking's work and so I knew he subscribed, more or less, to the "many worlds theory of cosmology." According to this theory, every time you have choices to make, you make all of them --

at once. Choosing causes the universe literally to split [echo: "split"] and you make one choice in one universe [comes from right-hand speaker] the other in another [comes from left-hand speaker], and so on.

[Music]

Meaning, I was having dinner with him. Only in another universe! And if I had snubbed him, it was only in this one and hell, I was probably spilling soup on him in a third.

[Music]

Truth is, despite the theory, I still chased him down the next day, found the nurses, sagged with relief as they assured me he'd been inviting a Russian physicist, not me. Still, I think I was on to something with that "many worlds" idea. Believe it, and you can be consoled for every one of your missed opportunities, not to mention gauche remarks, ruined recipes, whatever. Of course, the trick is believing it. But I think there is a way. For as physicists always remind us, to truly embrace their ideas, we have to understand the math. In future, then, maybe individuals who've made really, really bad decisions will hole up with stacks of books on differential equations and vector calculus, only to emerge years later, cheerfully confident it all worked out for the best.

[Music]

TONY KAHN:

Morning Stories is produced by WGBH-FM in Boston. For more Morning Stories, why not check out our web site at <wgbh.org/morningstories>, all one word. I'm Tony Kahn.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Bev Sykes