

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

My Friend is Still Not Well: The day Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, Professor Felton Earls was in a soundproof science lab, experimenting on a cat's brain. He tells how the assassination turned his pursuit of pure science into a search for healing and the truth.

Tony Kahn:

Hi, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director, of *Morning Stories*, on [WGBH-FM](#) in Boston. For all of us, I guess, there are moments of history that are really personal, depending upon our age, and where we happened to be at the time. How many of us, for instance, remember the assassination of J.F. Kennedy? Well, I do. How about the death of Princess Diana? Where were you that day? Or the murder of John Lennon? Well, we spoke to a guy recently named Felton Earls, who's a member of the faculty of the Harvard Medical School here in Boston. He came by, not long ago, to talk about what he did for a living. But the story he really told, crystallized around the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. died. And how in a sense, that became a whole new life for him.

[Playground sounds]

Felton Earls:

I grew up in New Orleans, to age fifteen, and then my family moved, much to my regret, to Memphis. New Orleans has wonderful food, and wonderful music and beautiful women ... and Memphis seemed backwards to me. And there was no Mardi Gras; there was no celebration. When I moved to Memphis, I realized how deeply segregated the South was, compared to New Orleans. In the third year of high school -- my second year in Memphis -- I took the Scholastic Aptitude Test. So, I made a grade that was sufficiently high for a National Merit Fellowship, which meant that I had to take another exam. To take the final exam, we had to go to a central high school. There was only one high school in Memphis that gave the final exam. That was a white high school.

[Sounds of train coming into train station]

Felton Earls:

I can't tell you all of the things that people did to try to keep me out of that high school.

[Police whistle, train sounds]

Felton Earls:

My principal called me in the office one day, and he said, "I have bad news for you. They made a mistake in scoring your exam. You really didn't make that grade." We finally go to the high school; we can't sit in the same room with the other finalists, because, well, we would distract them from a most important moment in their lives. I'd never doubted that I was smart, loved, admired...but I think it was race, you know -- the "you can't do this," "you can't go there." That that's, you know, separate fountains, separate bus, you know, places on the bus, separate seats in the room that got under my skin! What, what was it about me or people like me that generated that kind of response?

[Voice of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "To remind America of the fierce urgency of now! This is no time to engage...."]

Felton Earls:

I don't think it conquered me, but it was a part of reality, that was every day, all the time. And, you know, maybe the legacy of this is that I, I find myself, occasionally now, doubting myself, when there's no reason to doubt myself.

[Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Now is the time, to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation...."]

Felton Earls:

I never really thought of doing anything other than being a chemist, or a chemical engineer, or something like that. You know, pure scientist. As I got to college, I was doing work in a laboratory of neurophysiology at the University of Wisconsin on the brain of a cat, trying to understand in more detail, where in the cerebral cortex the cat heard different sounds. To do that, you had to work in a sound proof room, so that you could deliver, you know, these pure tones, with a great degree of accuracy. And, and in this case, it went on for thirty-six hours.

[Sounds of Martin Luther King, Jr. rally, after his assassination]

Felton Earls:

When I emerged from the soundproof lab, I could immediately look out the window and see people running and throwing things and yelling and placards, you know? What had happened over the past twenty-four hours, was King had been assassinated.

[Sounds of an angry mob]

Felton Earls:

But guess where? The Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee. Every day I went to high school, I had to walk by the Lorraine Motel. The image of his being on the balcony and being shot was all, you know, so vivid. It woke me up! And, that's the way I felt, you know. It was a disaster. It was a catastrophe.

[Sounds of angry mob]

Felton Earls:

I knew I could never go back into the lab again, or surgical suite. The problem was out there in neighborhoods and communities and streets and schools. So, I committed myself to complete my training as a doctor -- not as a scientist -- to train myself in pediatrics and psychiatry, for the purpose of addressing societal problems, not individual problems.

[Angry mob sounds tapers off, replaced with soft guitar music]

Felton Earls:

I, I'm interested in how children grow up and how they succeed in growing up. There is the odd kid who will succeed no matter what, but believe me, it's the odd kid. The elements of success vary in schools, what kind of teachers you have, what kind of extended family one has. I've become more and more convinced that the elements of success, in the kid, comes from the community. What kinds of adults are mentors and advisors and supporters of kids. Take away those people, the kids are gonna be much more lost.

[Sounds of train coming into train station]

Felton Earls:

There's one kid I know very well in Chicago, who came to Boston to go to school. He happened to be on a train one day that hit someone and killed them. He felt – he was overwhelmed by that event. And never fully recovered from some sense that he was connected to the person who had been killed, maybe responsible in some way. Now here's a kid who, two years earlier, I would've said was invulnerable. No sense that taking him out of his element and putting him in a new environment and having him face something like that, would have been a catastrophic event. But it was. That kid is a leader. That kid has the capacity to draw other kids into good activities, pro-social activities. But, my friend hasn't recovered.

[Clanging of train bell]

[Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Now is the time, to make real the promises of democracy..."]

Felton Earls:

The ill of society, the sickness of society, is something that really has to be, has to be worked on.

[Bell clanging]

[Martin Luther King, Jr.: "I say to you, today, my friends..."]

Felton Earls:

We can't just go like this.

[Bell clanging]

[Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Now is the time; now is the time..."]

[Police whistle; Sound of train going over train tracks]

Tony Kahn:

That was Professor Felton Earls, with today's podcast for *Morning Stories*, from WGBH-FM, in Boston. *Morning Stories*, our podcast every Friday is made possible in part with support from Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. If you want more information, it's available for you, at www.ipswitch.com>. That's Ipswitch – I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H. I can still spell, I can even remember. Gary, I'm not going to tell you how old I am, but I remember the death of Martin Luther King. Gary Mott, what about you? What, do you remember anything from that?

Gary Mott:

Given that I was born in 1969, I really don't have many memories from that time or even the Seventies. The Seventies were kind of a blur for me.

Tony Kahn:

As they were for people who are much older as well. [chuckle] What about your first historical memory, though?

Gary Mott:

Gee, you know, my first -- my earliest historical memory -- I remember waking up at four in the morning to watch Charles and Diana's wedding. I was at my great-grandmother's farm in Nebraska.

Tony Kahn:

It's probably a comfort to Charles to know, that someone, somewhere out there in Nebraska somebody was having a nice pork chop in celebration of his wedding. [laughs] One of my earliest memories of history was actually a very confused one. I had gone to California, to go backpacking in the high Sierras, at the time that we were supposed to be landing somebody on the moon. So the day that it happened, I was totally out of communication with everybody. Two days later, I came back to Yosemite Valley, EAGER, to find out what the newspapers had to say about it, to read all the headlines, to have all of my personal fantasies come true, and guess what all the headlines were about?

Gary Mott:

What, Tony?

Tony Kahn:

Ted Kennedy and Chappaquiddick. [chuckle] It had been blown completely off the papers and it was like, totally up to me to decide what I thought was historically important. Whether human beings had landed on the moon or that somebody had gotten just a little bit crazy on his way back home from a party. So sometimes history is what you decide it is too.

Gary Mott:

But, you know, what has lived on is the image of Neil Armstrong, on the moon, with that golf club. I think for many younger people, like myself, that has more of a -- way more -- historical significance than whatever happened, you know. Where is Chappaquiddick?

[Laughter]

Tony Kahn:

I'm sure Chappaquiddick isn't interested in having people know if that's the reason they want to go there. [chuckles] Actually, it's a nice place to play golf, I think, but, but not to go swimming, in the gulf Yeah, I think, what the papers tell you and what's in the headlines, isn't necessarily what you have to decide history is and frankly, thanks to you, I'm also now going to include as one of my important historical images, the marriage of Princess Diana, with you sitting there in Nebraska, waving a pork chop.

Gary Mott:

[Laughing] Given that it was four o'clock in the morning, the pork chops were still thawing, in the barn. But, uh . . .

Tony Kahn:

[Laughing] Thanks a lot, Gary. Anything else, you'd like to say?

Gary Mott:

[laughing]

Absolutely nothing, except, of course, go to our website. It's updated weekly, and we have all our stories available for streaming, at <wgbh.org/morningstories>, and we podcast every Friday, so let's keep the, keep the conversation happenin'. Send us an email at morningstories@wgbh.org.

Tony Kahn:

Catch you next Friday. Bye, bye.

Gary Mott:

Bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by:

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