

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*Goodbye, Spalding:* Writer Harriet Reisen tells of her friendship with the late Spalding Gray, and of his failure to escape his family's curse of suicide.

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi, Everybody. It's Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* with our, our latest morning story for you about the late Spalding Gray, who died last year. I don't know if you ever saw him perform, but one of the sad things about his not being with us now is that he would have been able to see podcasting come and I think he would have been the perfect podcaster. What he would do would be to sit at a little table in front of a microphone and just talk about himself and be himself. He would tell you the story of the latest chapter in his life, but there was a lot of art to what he did.

Spalding was dyslexic and rather than write out his stories he would just tell them to a tape recorder and he'd listen to himself and he'd refine his story until he had something specific, detailed, unforgettable, human and upbeat too. His biggest problem was how much of the truth he really could tell about what was going on for him at that moment because as he got older his story was that he was the child of a, of a mother who had committed suicide and at an age he was getting closer to every year. How to balance the dark and the light. That was what Spalding's art was all about.

Now Harriet Reisen, who is a storyteller here in Boston, got to know Spalding well because, like him, she was haunted by a figure in her past who had also committed suicide. An aunt, beloved aunt named Rita. And Harriet, in today's podcast, tells us what it was like to get Spalding's help trying to tell her story of surviving the suicide in her family, an act of healing by storytelling that, well, Spalding, unfortunately, himself never managed to do.

[[Oboe music begins and continues under the narrative]

### **[Muted, somewhat hissy narrative by Harriet Reisen begins, as heard from off a small tape-record]:**

At seventeen I knew what I wanted to be. I wanted to be my Aunt Rita. Rita had tremendous style and she was also very warm to me and very attentive. She didn't have children; she wasn't married...

[Recorded narrative continues under the live narrative, gradually fading out, while Harriett Reisen's voice continues "in the present"]

Suicide is the worst thing you can do to anybody. You die, but to your survivors your death is never over. My aunt tried to soften the blow for her mother and sisters, saying in her last note that she'd been fighting against suicide for a quarter century and "I guess I've just run out of fight," she wrote. "Please know that at last it comes as a relief to me."

When I was seventeen. I found my aunt's three-page suicide note and some pictures she enclosed in a wastebasket.

[Muted recording]

...and ever since I retrieved this note, I've attempted to understand this story and what it means to me. And as a person who, at that point in her life wanted to be my Aunt Rita...

[Music]

Years later, I went to a five-day workshop to sort out my unexpressed feelings by telling her story. The workshop, called "True Stories," was held at the Esalen Institute in a house on a narrow perch between California's tallest redwoods and steepest cliffs on the San Andreas fault. The workshop was as thrilling and pent up as the setting.

[In background, sounds of Spalding Gray talking, from a recording from the workshop]

...so was the leader, Spalding Gray, a performer and writer, who spun enthralling monologues from the materials of his life, dressed as himself in plaid flannel shirt and chinos, he sat at a plain table and laid himself as bare as the stage.

**Spalding Gray [recorded]:**

...and that's always been my ambition in my monologue, to imitate life in the sense of....

**Harriet Reisen:**

The tape recorder was Spalding's primary tool. He taught us to use it by reworking our story, telling and listening, again and again.

**Spalding Gray [recorded]:** [continues on in the background]: I agree with, about Rita, and it needs to be really about her, and your reaction to her.

**Harriet Reisen:**

After the Esalen workshop, whenever Spalding came to town, I'd catch up on his recent past in his monologue. After the show we'd have a beer. What he told me would always take shape a few years later as the next perfected tale.

One night his on-stage monologue had the classic happy ending, his wedding, but offstage he told me he'd had a baby with another woman. He'd never seen the child. On the visit after that, while his wife and a theater producer held a separate conversation across a small table, Spalding told me he'd seen his son and fallen in love with him.

As I prepared my own monologue at Esalen, I puzzled over how to end it. Spalding had helped me understand why what I feared most about the story of my Aunt Rita's suicide, that I was Rita and at risk of killing myself, was not true. Exchanging her story with other people, I changed my own story. I closed by telling how I discovered, when I reached my 40s, my aunt's age when she ran out of fight, that I knew I wasn't Rita and I wouldn't kill myself.

Spalding said my ending was exactly right. "You want to leave them on an up note. You've got to balance the darkness with the light."

**Spalding Gray [recorded]:** My mother killed herself at 52, so I... [recording continues under Reisen's narrative]

**Harriet Reisen:**

Spalding began talking about his obsession with his mother's suicide when she was fifty-two.

**Spalding Gray [recorded]:** ....her confidante. Me being the one that she confessed to. Me being the one that she asked how she should kill herself, and had been terrified of reaching – this what I call the Bermuda Triangle.... [recording continues under Reisen's narrative]

**Harriet Reisen:**

He couldn't tell the story on stage. "I struggle every day to keep from killing myself," he said.

**Spalding Gray [recorded]:** ...I feel this terrific necessity to kill myself and that I will make a situation in my life that will create that and I have to keep reminding myself that I am not my mother, you know? It's in you. It's in you. It's a part of yourself. She killed herself....

**Harriet Reisen:**

This January, Spalding Gray disappeared. Last year he jumped off a bridge and was rescued. He tried again but a passerby talked him down from the railing. This fall, he said, he wanted to slip over the side of the Staten Island Ferry. His last phone call, to tell his son he loved him, was traced to the dock there.

He was sixty-two. Unlike Rita, Spalding didn't leave a note.

The last time I saw Spalding, around four years ago, he played to a sold-out house at the Emerson Majestic Theater. His new monologue sang the pitfalls and praises of parenthood, closing with a lovely, intimate story about taking a leak with his little son.

From funny anecdote, Spalding imperceptibly lifted his listeners with him to the piercing recognition of a cocooned moment of life's sweetest pleasure. The laughter of the audience subsided and the warm silence gradually gave way to a standing ovation.

That scene is the up note I need to end my version of your story with, Spalding. With that, and with thanks for teaching me so much about telling mine.

**Harriet Reisen [recorded]:** "I'm sorry for the trouble my troubles have caused, and hope that now though this will be distressing, it may be some relief to know that it is at last a relief for me. Oh thanks so much for everything, and all my love, Rita."

**Tony Kahn:**

That was Harriet Reisen with today's *Morning Story* podcast, *Goodbye, Spalding Gray*.

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Just want to end with one little memory that I had of Spalding Gray. I, I got to see Spalding and maybe one of the most amazing things that I saw him do one evening was a show, not about himself, but about everybody else. It was called "Interviewing the Audience" and he just brought people up from the audience, sat them down on a couch next to him and started to get them to tell a story, so he was not only a great storyteller; he was a great, great listener, which I think was probably a large part of his gift as a storyteller and the powerful presence of that silence of his listening is going to be missed an awful lot too.

So. See you next Friday. Take care. Bye.

[End of Recording]

Transcribed by Bev Sykes