

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*Death and Life*: From Maynard, Mass., Portland Helmich takes an unexpected journey to the frontier of life and death.

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and the director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. If you ever find yourself at a cocktail party wondering what to talk about next, you know – one of those horrible moments where you’re just smiling at somebody and they’re smiling at you and all you’re doing is counting each other’s teeth, well here’s a suggestion. Why don’t you ask that person something interesting about themselves. People love to talk about themselves and they usually end up saying something really interesting.

Not so long ago, I, I went to, to a cocktail party where I started to ask people what the turning points were in their lives. It was fascinating to hear what people thought were major turning points. I mean, some of them were pretty dramatic, announced with trumpets and everything and lightning bolts and they suddenly knew they were forever different, but some of them were a little bit quieter, like little moments that they maybe realized a week or two later made them look at things differently. They’d changed, and they liked the change.

Today’s *Morning Story* comes from Portland Helmich, a woman who lives near Boston, who had a very interesting private moment that may have been one of the most dramatic that I’ve ever heard, so why don’t we listen to that. It’s called *Death and Life*.

### **Portland Helmich:**

My whole life I felt more comfortable going solo. When I was a kid, the Girl Scouts gave me the creeps. As a teenager, I avoided clubs. For college I went to New York University, a school for non-conformists. I believe in God, but never joined a church. Over the years I’ve gone to therapists to help me understand my need for independence and the isolation it can bring. But talking about issues and sharing my feelings with professionals haven’t always helped. My frustration with talking things through led me to ask my therapist, who I knew did past-life regression therapy with some clients, if she’d be willing to try it with me. The worst that could happen, I thought, would be nothing.

[Takes a deep breath] She guided me into a deep state of relaxation. My eyelids fluttered. I heard her voice and felt my body lying on her couch, but I was also somewhere else. [sound of didgeridoo, drums and seed rattles] It was a sunny summer afternoon in New England. I was in my 20s, sitting on a hill sketching the countryside that surrounded the home I shared with my mother. Out of nowhere, someone put a hand over my mouth, a rope around my neck, and kidnapped me. He took me deep

into the woods. I didn't speak his language but I got the gist of his message. He would teach me the secrets of his tribe if I'd forsake my family and never return home. Because I resisted, I had to die.

[Drums intensify] With a gag in my mouth, I hung from the limb of a tree. Beneath me a pit they dug into the earth blazed with fire. They cut the branch, I fell into the pit and died in the flames.

[takes a deep breath]

"Tell me when you're out of the body," I heard the therapist say as I lay on the couch.

"OK. I'm out," I replied.

"What was the primary lesson of that lifetime?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Too much independence can get you killed?"

Back then, in my so-called "normal life" I was teaching English at a high school in Vermont. I couldn't bear the teachers' meetings and entering the high school felt like a voluntary commitment to a cage. Recently I quit another job, this one in television. I had plenty of good reasons but the real one was the same as always. I just can't follow someone else's lead. I'm beginning to realize I've got to work for myself.

More than three centuries have passed since that life and death of mine in colonial America and more than ten years since that particular past-life regression. What had my former lifetime taught me? Too much independence can get you killed, I'd said. Maybe not. Maybe the lesson is that the freedom to direct the course of my life here and now is a matter of life and death.

[Brief snippet of seed rattle and drum]

**Tony Kahn:**

That's today's Morning Story, *Death and Life* from Portland Helmich. Podcasts of WBGH's morning stories are made possible, in part, with support – thank *you* – from Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. Further information is available at <http://www.ipswitch.com>. That's Ipswitch: I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H dot com.

Gary. Gary Mott. dot M-O-T-T. You're looking at me in a funny kind of way. What's up?

**Gary Mott:**

Indeed! What is up? You know, I usually smile when I look at you. You make me happy? No, I, I'm just thinking about Portland's story.

**Tony Kahn:**

This story does not make you happy, Gary.

**Gary Mott:**

Well, it causes me to think, which is, which is good, because, you know, that's what these stories are for.

**Tony Kahn:**

I can see your ears spreading apart.

**Gary Mott:**

Is Portland -

**Tony Kahn:**

Yeah.

**Gary Mott:**

- at a crossroads? About to choose one path over the other? Is that what this story -

**Tony Kahn:**

You mean being a loner or joining with a crowd, you know, staying forever the eternal freelance or, or getting that TV job?

**Gary Mott:**

Yeah.

**Tony Kahn:**

I, I guess the answer is she doesn't know. but she's struggling with the question. And that struggling with that question of who you are and what you need, what kind of compromises you want to make; that's not necessarily a whole lot of fun. It sometimes can bring you into very dangerous territory.

You know, there was this psychologist, Karl Jung, who said that for the person who explores the inside landscape of who they are, there are the same kind of dangers as climbing Everest or trying to jump across the deepest chasm in the universe. And every once in a while you realize that that really can be true.

I find Portland inspirational! I think she's also very beautiful, but she's -

**Gary Mott:**

Inspirational!

**Tony Kahn:**

That you can't see on a podcast.

**Gary Mott:**

Sure, sure. I mean we all come to a point in our lives when we may be feeling a pull in one direction or another but that may conflict with who we really are.

**Tony Kahn:**

Mm-hmm. I mean, have you had a moment like that?

GARY MOTT:

You know, I think about moments in my life where I've made some definitive career decisions - leaving waste management, moving into...

**Tony Kahn:**

Podcasting! [laughs heartily]

**Gary Mott:**

...podcasting.

**Tony Kahn:**

Wondering what the difference is. [both laugh heartily] Well, I think perhaps you've found a moral of your own in, in Portland's story, you know. That you, you don't necessarily choose crises, but when crises come, the choice that you make - whatever it is - is probably going to be coming from a very deep part of you, you know. And that's how you learn about who you are. Sometimes by dodging arrows.

**Gary Mott:**

There's a lot to talk about here.

**Tony Kahn:**

Well, we're certainly hoping that we can give you useful and enjoyable ways of wasting time during your regular working hours. [both laugh] This, this is - what do they call it? - a boss-safe or an office-safe podcast. Use it moderately.

**Gary Mott:**

Reason to come in early, stay late, you know?

**Tony Kahn:**

Well, for those of us who have faced the difficult choice of whether we're going to stay in waste management or podcasting, all we can say is we turn to you, our listeners for support, so we'll keep on putting out these morning stories as long as you keep downloading them. So, till next Thursday or Friday, when we podcast again...

**Gary Mott:**

Don't forget our talk-back mechanism, that old-fashioned email:  
<[morningstories@wgbh.org](mailto:morningstories@wgbh.org)>. We've got a great web site as well:  
<<http://wgbh.org/morningstories>>. Tony? It's been real.

**Tony Kahn:**

Gary, it's also been delightfully imaginary with you, so thanks a lot.

**Gary Mott:**

All right. Bye-bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Bev Sykes