

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

***What's a Man?:*** Chris Cotton, a life coach in Keene, New Hampshire, remembers some of his own teachers on the way to becoming a man.

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, from WGBH in Boston. Today we are in Studio "P". "P" for "parking lot." It's the small parking lot right across the street from the main building of WGBH. Not too far from our enormous Studio "O", for "outside," that we like to use on beautiful days. But I don't know, for the last three weeks, Studio "O" seems to be the site of a massive construction project. It sounds kinda like they're digging a mass grave out there and I know there have been changes in the world of broadcasting, but I hope they, they haven't been happening that fast. [chuckles]

Anyway, while we still have the time, we'd like to bring you today's Morning Story and it's a, it's a story about family. Now we've certainly featured a lot of stories about families on *Morning Stories* before, but this is a story of how many families it really takes for a child to be able to grow up. Our storyteller from the New England area is a man named Chris Cotton and we're calling his story: "*What's a Man?*"

### **Chris Cotton:**

I had a stepfather who drank a lot. He'd come home from work and a six-pack of beer or a, a case, would hit the table. If it was a six-pack, it was a fun, easy night. If it was a case, then I was out the window. Literally out the window, yeah. I had a basement bedroom, so the window was well oiled.

God, I remember, we had gone out to some club that he belonged to and I won this awesome marble game. You had this little pedal and you controlled the marble where you wanted it to go, and a fight broke out when I got home. And I heard this game just being smashed on the kitchen floor. And I remember making a decision right then and there, that I wasn't gonna get upset about it. I wasn't gonna let anyone even know.

So, my Mom came in, "Chris, I've got somethin' really hard to tell you. Bruce smashed the game."

"That's okay Mom."

"Aren't you upset?"

"No, just wanna watch my TV show."

He would give a lot of presents for his misbehavior, his actions. I think that's when I got the .22. The age of ten,

[sound of rifle being loaded and cocked]

bought me a .22.

[sound of rifle being fired] [Sound of truck being started and driven away]

The day I turned sixteen, I got my license and I was out of there. There was just no way to contain me.

[Sound of truck, idling] My Dad and his new family lived about twenty minutes away. I wanted his

approval, but there was always a little source of contention. The oldest girl had my bedroom, in the house I used to live in. He didn't have the time to listen. [truck drives away] I think to love two fathers, and neither had the ability to really connect, emotionally . . . People can get pretty lost.

I got into trouble. Anybody would make fun of me, and that was it. I wouldn't stand for it. [sounds of crows cawing and echoing] The only skill I had was to be violent, or to intimidate, or try to use force. What's a man?

[Sounds of birds singing] I have an uncle who I admired for years. I didn't spend a lot of time with him, but he was a Game Warden in Maine and we would go snowmobiling; we would go out on the boat when he was at work. I wanted to be the hunter, the fisher, the, there was this solitude, there was this, the, the real Maine woods and so I was gonna go to conservation law, where I was gonna become a game warden.

The day before I went to school, I was in his house; I was lookin' up at this huge moose head, with his gun belt, black leather thing, and his uniform and his hat and I was sittin' there on the coach and I was lookin' through the course catalog for, for Unity College. As I opened it up, I was lookin' at, I think a picture in the catalog, it was someone teaching a group of people. And that picture triggered this sequence of memories: three times in my life, where I felt the most joy.

One was working with mentally challenged kids. The other was working at an old-age home down in Connecticut as a volunteer. And another was, I was a ski instructor at a, a ski mountain in Connecticut and I saw another guy working with, physically challenged adults [sounds of skis on snow]. And they were skiing. This woman, and she was in a wheelchair, had never, never been empowered. Ever! And this guy set up some skis on her chair and she would lean from side to side and we would make turns down the slope. [sounds of skis becoming louder] The first, the first time, [Chris' voice begins to break] she had ever moved herself, ever! I was the one behind the wheelchair and we finished the first successful run and she hugged me, and I remember just [softly laughs] breaking out in tears.

Sitting on that coach and I put the book down and picked up the phone and called the college and changed my major, from Conservation Law to, to Recreation, which has taken me from workin' with hard-core residential kids to wilderness twenty-day trips with at-risk youth. It's always been "at-risk," to drug and alcohol counselor. It just clicked that I realized that I was supposed to work with people. And it's never un-clicked.

I'm thirty-four now. Now I've married and I have two beautiful daughters and I haven't been out of the field, since.

[Music from radio in background]:

*He'd say "I'm gonna be like you, dad  
You know I'm gonna be like you.*

[Chris starts singing along]:

*When ya comin' home Dad?  
I don't know when, but we'll get together then, now.  
We'll get together then.*

I love this song. Failing is easy. Failing is what we are a lot of times, used to. Connection. Being connected and taking that risk. Wow! Now there's power. [laughs] Ahhh!

[Song continues:]

*And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon*

*Little boy blue and the man on the moon*

*When you comin' home Dad?*

*I don't know when, but we'll get together then, son*

*You know we'll have a good time then*

Lyrics by: **Harry Chapin**    Sung by: **Harry Chapin**

**Tony Kahn:**

That was today's *Morning Story* from Chris Cotton: "*What's a Man?*" And I'm here with Gary Mott, my right-hand man, in Studio "P" which is right next to Structure "A," which is an enormous public ashtray. Let me just tell you, it's, t's one of those experiences that makes me glad I gave up smoking, a long time ago. [laughs]

**Gary Mott:**

When was that Tony?

**Tony Kahn:**

Oh gosh, it was far too many years to count. I was one of the lucky ones, actually. I didn't find it hard to give up smoking. Smoking sorta gave up on me. I just was feeling, "Ah! who needs this?" And I stopped and expected that for the next two weeks, I'd be in an agony of withdrawal. I wasn't. Just a simple coma. [laughs] I didn't feel anything. I feel that I got off easy.

**Gary Mott:**

I've never been a smoker, um...

**Tony Kahn:**

You're not a smoker. Would you, would you like to come clean on any vices? It's a pretty understanding audience, as far as I can tell.

**Gary Mott:**

You know, I just don't know how to...

**Tony Kahn:**

They don't like to be lied to, Gary.

**Gary Mott:**

[Laughing] Okay! It's feet!

**Tony Kahn:**

[Laughing] That's more than enough, thank you. One other thing I wanted to tell you about Chris, we didn't have a chance to put it in the story, but he did tell me about another guy, who took him fishing and gave him the gift of listening. It came at a time when Chris really needed somebody like this, who could just let Chris talk and figure out what it was that was really on his mind. And he said that he owed that guy as much as he owed anybody else.

There's talking smart and there's listening smart. And you can help a person a lot more sometimes by

listening to what he isn't quite yet ready to say yet, so that he can say it. Part of what makes Chris so good, he's a smart listener, he's an inspiration.

**Gary Mott:**

Speaking, speaking of smart listeners...

**Tony Kahn:**

Mm, hmm!

**Gary Mott:**

You've got one right in front of you, Tony.

**Tony Kahn:**

I, I do, I do! But, you should lead off with a transition like that! The field is yours, my man.

**Gary Mott:**

[Laughing] We've been gettin' some great letters: "I just love the podcast from *Morning Stories*. You guys do a great job of editing and distilling the stories. I just listened to the one this morning about the African-American ballet dancer, with the Sicilian parentage and want to say "thank you" for that."

[Gary adds]: That was our story about Anthony Williams.

**Tony Kahn:**

Yeah, right. The fellow that you knew and brought into the studio, right?

**Gary Mott:**

Mm, hmm. "*Not a Mean Bone in His Soul*." Check that one out, if you haven't. [letter continues] "No matter how many times I've learned, "you can't tell a book by the cover," stories like this one teach it to me again."

**Tony Kahn:**

We also got a letter about another story that we did recently. It was the story called: "Over Here, Over There," about the woman named Fatima who lived with her family as illegal aliens in the United States before going back to Brazil after 9/11. The original story we had done on Fatima was called: "A Better Life." So we did "Over Here, Over There," a sequel to "A Better Life."

And the listener writes, "You made my month, my year, with Fatima's story. Ever since I first heard "*A Better Life*" I've wondered what happened to this amazing woman and her family. There's something about Fatima's experience, maybe the simple way that she tells her story that goes straight to my heart. I've heard it a few dozen times and each time, I find it strikes a chord, deep within. On the surface, it's a sad but hopeful story that shows the plight of the immigrant.

But a greater significance lies in its revelation of how tough life can be for those who want to better their lives. Mostly, though, he says, Fatima's story makes me feel blessed, that I have a healthy son and wife, a job, a home and opportunity." Well thank you very much for writing, John, and for making us appreciate some of the very same things that we've got.

Another thing that we've got is a, a lot of support from fellow podcasters, which I love. We, we were mentioned the other day on "*Croncast*" at <[Croncrast.com](http://Croncrast.com)> by the two hosts, Kris and Betsy. Kris said that we had last spoken, Kris and I, in the early days of podcasting [laughs]. Well, when was that?

Six months ago? Come on, Kris! That's amazing.

But in any event, I owe him a call. You should certainly listen to their show. It's one of many podcasts we try to listen to regularly and as the weeks go on, we're going to try to welcome more of those podcasters in. for a little visit with us, so that we can catch up on what they're doing and how we feel about this whole business. And of course, Gary Mott, we are grateful to, <ipswitch.com>.

**Gary Mott:**

We are grateful to *Ipswitch*, a leader in file transfer software. They have sponsored our podcast for low, these many months; we're very grateful to them. Check them out at <[ipswitch.com](http://ipswitch.com)> that's I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H. And our website, also a great place to go, when you have a few moments...

**Tony Kahn:**

Did you say a great place to "grow"? [laughs]

**Gary Mott:**

Stories that grow with you all day, [laughing] <[wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories)> and <[morningstories@wgbh.org](mailto:morningstories@wgbh.org)> is our talk-back mechanism. Please, we love getting the email.

**Tony Kahn:**

It helps us know what we should be doing next, so thanks for staying in touch and be sure to listen in next Friday when we'll be back with another podcast. So see you then.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea