

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Let Me Go: Hospital chaplain Nancy Cahnners has a life-changing conversation with her children.

Tony Kahn:

Hi Everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. I'm outside here with Gary Mott, in Studio ... well, I wouldn't call it "O" for "outside." I'd say "H" for "hypothermia." I'm beginning to get a little cold.

Today's morning story is about family. We try to teach our kids, of course, to take good care of themselves. OK, that's 50% of the battle, but how do we teach our kids to take good care of us? Especially if that means on some not so sunny day, pulling the plug on us.

Well, our story this morning comes from Nancy Cahnners, a lady of great intelligence, very big heart and a divinity degree, no less, who is very much interested in simple questions with very complicated answers like, "What is the meaning of life and death?" The question she raises today and tries to answer is, "What does it mean for a mother to say to her children, 'Listen kids, when the time comes, let me go.' "

(Background voice "...ham and cheese on rye," sound of conversations and noise in a restaurant)

Nancy Cahnners:

My children and I were having lunch all together, a remarkable event. So I decided that it was time for "the talk" about life ... and death and Alzheimer's, the disease that continues to swallow up my mother. The talk my divinity degree and training as a hospital chaplain taught me should happen, the talk I wish my mother had had with me.

(Sound of restaurant noises in background, including announcement, " ...large fries...4068 at the pick-up window, thank you.")

"Kids, I just want you to know that if, or maybe I should say when I become like my mother, I hope that you will... let me go."

My oldest, a hefty twenty-one year old, put down his sandwich and said, "This is some kind of experiment, a mind-game, right?"

I still feel sad that I didn't end my mother's suffering when I could have.

Looking in my son's eyes, I also remembered how wrong it felt to let her die.

(sound of restaurant food orders continue in the background)

"I tried to make the most out of every single day, so . . . shortening my life will be OK . . ." Oh, brother.

Then my nineteen year-old chimed in, "No," he said simply.

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean no. I won't do it."

"Sweetheart, I'm not asking you. I'm telling you what I want. If you won't go along with this, I'll just have to appoint someone else who will."

"You can't do that!" this from my angry sixteen-year-old. "We're your family."

I made a feeble attempt to yank the conversation back on track, "It's my life, I get to make these decisions."

My nineteen year-old parked a mouthful in his cheek so he could answer,

"You've always sacrificed for us before. Why stop now?"

I understood. I didn't want MY mother to die, either. But that was before I saw her suffer.

(Background music begins softly)

The conversation moved on, to school, weekend plans, who needs the car most.

("... garden salad with Italian dressing," restaurant sounds weave into background music)

Who knows, maybe I won't end up like my mother. Maybe those daily crossword puzzles will keep my synapses firing. At that moment, anyway, I felt very much alive and crazy about my kids and thrilled that they were still crazy about me. (sighs) Still, I hope they'll remember this talk if and when the time comes, that I can't remember them – at all.

(Background music crescendos and washes out restaurant sounds and then fades out)

Tony Kahn:

That was today's Morning Story from Nancy Cahnners, *Let Me Go*. Gary, I know that for you, Alzheimer's is not just an abstraction; it's also been a family experience.

Gary Mott:

Yeah, my grandfather passed away in 1984, I believe it was.

Tony Kahn:

So you would've been a teenager –

Gary Mott:

Yeah, I was just a teenager. He lived, you know, in Minnesota, I in Texas. But I think it was very hard on my mother and her siblings, you know. My mother, much like, like Nancy, has had this flavor of conversation with me.

Tony Kahn:

She lives with that anxiety, eh?

Gary Mott:

I reacted in much the same way as the, as Nancy's kids did. It's like, "Mom, you know, I've got ... I can't worry about this." I just don't know if I have the maturity to have that conversation with my mother, yet.

Tony Kahn:

That's very honest of you, Gar. You know, I guess in a way you are saying at thyou haven't reached the age yet or your parents also haven't reached the age where they are asking you to be their parents. And when that day comes, then you'll respond, I'm sure, in a, in a way that will feel right and necessary, but all of this reminds me that each of our -- each of the stories that we tell each other, that come from tough times are a request: try to understand how I feel. And the more you can try to understand how somebody feels, probably the clearer what right and wrong is, will be for you -- certainly in, in your relationship with them.

And I think Nancy is wrestling with that as well, that she never really had that conversation with her mother that she's trying to have with her kids. She doesn't have a memory of her mother saying to her, "Listen, Nancy, when the time comes, let me go." So she's . . . that's an awfully tough decision to make if you haven't had the conversation, if you haven't exchanged a story.

So maybe this is an invitation, hard as it is, to try to have those conversations as much as you can with somebody. Not just about death, but about anything that matters to you -- so that someone will really know who you are. And we're always very grateful to, to Nancy for, for bringing to us the stuff of her life, with such honesty. She's, she's a gem.

Morning Stories from WGBH -- and we'll keep on producing it as long as you keep on listening and especially as long as we keep on getting the support of Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software and a leader in funding podcasts in public broadcasting. So, thank you guys very much. If you want to check them

out, their website is ipswitch dot com <<http://www.ipswitch.com>>. That's I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H.

Gary Mott:

And our website wgbh dot org slash morningstories
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Tony Kahn:

See you next week.

[End of recording]

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