

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Beate's Gift: It took Beate Gordon one week to write the Civil Rights portion of the Japanese Constitution, and change the world forever. Also, a conversation with Kristopher and Betsy Smith of Croncast.

TONY KAHN:

Hi, everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. A long time ago, when I was sixteen, I met a remarkable woman. Her name was Beate Gordon. She had been born in the States but had grown up in Japan. And she was the head of something called The Asia Society, that helped people from both East and West understand each other better. But what was really impressive about her to me, at age sixteen, was that she was a terrific listener. She had just met me, but she sat me down and she wanted to hear what I had to say about world affairs and life in general. She had a great gift for listening. I didn't exactly reward it – I went on for the next hour, talking about – basically – myself. But she did teach me that to listen to somebody with respect is a great power.

Well, flash-forward about thirty-five years; I'm hosting a show called *The World* for PRI, and Beate gives me a phone call. Turns out that she'd written a book about her life; she was on a publicity tour. Would I like to interview her? I figured it was high time to return the favor and listen to her, so I had her come over, and she sat down and she told me an amazing story, and taught me my next big lesson.

A single individual who knows how to listen as well as Beate can also make world history. So, here's the story she told me, today's Morning Story, *Beate's Gift*.

[Music]

TONY KAHN:

When the war broke out, she'd been in the States finishing her schooling. As one of only sixty Caucasians in the country who spoke Japanese, she was assigned to translate Japanese broadcasts for the War Department. It wasn't until the American occupation that she'd come back as an American political officer to help her second home to its feet. With almost her first step, Beate Gordon walked right into history.

BEATE GORDON:

It was just a fluke! I was at the right place at the right time. I was twenty-two years old; I had lived in Japan from the age of five to fifteen. Otherwise, I really had no qualifications. Well, one day General Whitney came into our office at 10 o'clock in the morning and he said, "You're now a Constituent Assembly, and by order of General MacArthur you will write the new Japanese constitution. And it must be written in one week."

TONY KAHN:

Good heavens! What thoughts went through your mind?

BEATE GORDON:

We didn't have time to think about anything except how to get this done! Colonel Kades, who was his deputy, immediately divided us into groups and he told the three of us (two men and one woman) that we should write the civil rights chapter. We sat down and the two men looked at me and they said, "Well you're a woman, so why don't you write the women's rights?"

[Koto music]

I thought, "My god! What am I going to do? I'm not a lawyer. What do I know about constitutions? I had read the U.S. constitution in history class, but that was about it! So, I got a jeep and a Japanese driver and I said, "Take me to any libraries that are still standing in Tokyo." (Tokyo was devastated at that time.) So I would borrow constitutions from whatever countries I could – I could get. I wanted illegitimate children to have equal rights, in inheritance, property rights, rights to get help from the government when a woman is pregnant.... I incorporated all of those in my draft. I really wanted to make it as broad as possible because I had no faith in the people who would interpret the constitution. I thought, "They will never, never interpret the constitution in a liberal way."

[Koto music]

TONY KAHN:

A secret meeting to present the draft of the constitution to the Japanese began at 10 a.m. By 2 a.m. the following morning, after a fierce debate on the postwar status of the emperor, they all finally got to the provisions on women's rights. Despite their exhaustion, the Japanese were as upset about giving women rights as they were about withdrawing the emperor's power! Beate had been there from the start, working incognito as an interpreter, feeling her heart sink as the objections rose from the floor.

BEATE GORDON:

That's when something very interesting happened. To my great surprise, Colonel Kades, who was the head of the steering committee, had seen that the Japanese side was very favorably inclined towards me because I wasn't there as a drafter of the constitution; they didn't know that. I was there as an interpreter. And during that whole period, from 10 'til 2 a.m., I had helped both sides. So Colonel Kades having this in mind said, quote, (my name as that time was Sirota), "Miss Sirota has her heart set on the women's rights. Why don't we pass them?" I think the Japanese were just simply stunned. First of all, by knowing that I had something to do with it, and secondly that Colonel Kades should say such a thing in such a serious discussion. And they just passed it. They just passed the rights!

TONY KAHN:

Recently she shared a platform with a distinguished female Japanese attorney.

BEATE GORDON:

I said, Miss Doya, I feel embarrassed to be talking on the same platform with you because you are a constitutional lawyer and I was an amateur! And she said, “That’s what was so good about it. As an amateur, you wrote a draft from the heart.”

TONY KAHN:

If history is like a pyramid with a powerful few at the top and the huddled masses far below, then rare individuals like Beate, it seems to me, with a clear mind and good timing and a committed heart serve a very special role, opening, every once in a while, like windows, to let some light shine in.

[Music swells, and end]

That was today’s *Morning Story* from Beate Gordon, *Beate’s Gift*. I’m here with Gary Mott.

GARY MOTT:

These were not popular additions to the constitution, I don’t imagine –

TONY KAHN:

People are still fighting for those rights for Japanese women today. They’re in the constitution, but it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re in every living room. History isn’t made just by the generals and politicians; it’s made by the educated amateurs and the people with vision and a passion –

GARY MOTT:

– the citizen journalists, the bloggers, the podcasters –

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

All right. I’m at the grocery store, and I’m standing in line and there’s *Reader’s Digest* –

TONY KAHN:

One of my favorite podcasts is a podcast called Cronkast done by a most unusual couple, Kris and Betsy Smith. And they’re a couple who are workin’ their way up toward the middle class, just on the outskirts of Chicago. And the raw material – and sometimes it’s raw, but it’s always funny – is their lives.

BETSY SMITH:

Well, you’re gonna be thirty-one soon, so –

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

I know.

BETSY SMITH:

So things are gonna start happening.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:
God.

BETSY SMITH:
You're gonna come home and say, "Guess what I read in *Reader's Digest* today?"

KRISTOPHER SMITH:
[laughs]

BETSY SMITH:
When that's a conversation starter, it's time to check your bladder control.

TONY KAHN:
[Phone ringing in background] So I, I got in touch with them on the phone the other day and we talked a little bit, and they kind of let me know how things are going with them in podcasting.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:
It's like you're sitting around a kitchen table, having a conversation with friends.

BETSY SMITH:
I think there's a lot of people like us, that feel sort of like – you know, they could have more friends, but maybe they don't wanna put the effort out there? You know? It's an adult play date.

TONY KAHN:
What kind of mail do you get?

BETSY SMITH:
We had an episode where Elliot, for some reason, got up in the middle of the night (Elliot's our five-year-old), opened the cabinet underneath the sink, and just peed into it in his sleep.

TONY KAHN:
[Laughs] Isn't that sweet?

BETSY SMITH:
That's where we keep the garbage.

TONY KAHN:
You knew that he intended to put it in the right place. [Both of the Smiths laugh.]

BETSY SMITH:
But we got tons of mail, "You know, my son does the same thing. In fact, he peed on his brother's head." And so –

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Yeah. Nine out of ten times, it's a more horrible situation than our situation. I think for some people it's a release? I think it's things that they probably never discussed, you know –

BETSY SMITH:

Yeah –

TONY KAHN:

You're sort of like serving the role of social safety valve.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Yeah. I really feel a connection to our listeners. I think that they feel a connection to us!

BETSY SMITH:

Kris wanted to invite them to our house! Tony, I know that that's never occurred to you. You never thought, "Hey! I'm gonna go ahead and just release my name and address and see who shows up!" And much like the relationship between a therapist and a patient, I think there needs to be a line there. You don't go to their parties; they don't come to yours! [laughs]

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Podcasting has been the best thing to happen to me. 'Cause I mean, now when we talk to people in certain places, you know, they'll say, "You know, if you're ever in town, stop by. My wife and I are, y'know, doing this...." We get a lot of people who are saying, "You know, I'm getting ready – we're getting ready to have a kid." They share that stuff, that maybe they don't share with their family. I meet tons of dysfunctional people through the show.

BETSY SMITH:

Your people.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

My people!

BETSY SMITH:

We have a bare-bones outline now which we used to never do. I can read you the board -
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KRISTOPHER SMITH:

This is, this is from the last show.

TONY KAHN:

Take us behind the scenes, okay...

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Okay. You say it and I'll –

BETSY SMITH:

Okay. Number one: Plan.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

That was my saying that, “George Bush and the new Administration should step up and create a plan for evacuees from the last hurricane, much like the WPA. Start developing communities and businesses, and they could redeem themselves in my eyes.

[Child crying in background]

BETSY SMITH:

Right. Number two was How to control first birthday parties.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Right.

BETSY SMITH:

Which is a suburban phenomenon. You know, you feel like you have to throw, like – – spend \$3000 to hire a band?

TONY KAHN:

Oh, yes!

BETSY SMITH:

The only happy thought I think the child had all day was, “Look. Somebody set a cake in front of me and walked away. I'm gonna eat it before they notice!”

[Kris laughs heartily]

TONY KAHN:

Is your marriage doing as well as your podcast? Are they one and the same?

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Oh, boy!

BETSY SMITH:

Well, initially I think it was part of the marriage. It became Kris's obsession.

KRISTOPHER SMITH:

Yeah.

BETSY SMITH:

But that's the way that we function as a couple. Kris gets an idea. If it was Kris's way, he'd have a built-out space in a warehouse somewhere, with a recording studio, and we'd

be \$400,000 in debt. [Kris laughs]

And it's my job to, to rein him in. You know, and so that has come true with podcasting like it does with a lot of things! We were talking about a way that we could be more marketable. You know, my mother's like, "Oh, you know, you could, you could have Huggies! [a plastic baby diaper product] You know? Huggies could support you! Some parenting thing, you know?"

But, but it is difficult, because, you know, I don't really know what we're goin' to talk about next Tuesday. We don't really have a central focus other than, you know, what happened to us, to our front yard, that sort of thing. You know, our formula is our life, and how do you market that? This is, this is us!

TONY KAHN:

Gary, you listen to Croncast too, don't you?

GARY MOTT:

I wish the dialog in my own home was as witty, and the repartee as, as cutting as that was.

[Tony laughs]

TONY KAHN:

They do kind of model a healthy relationship, don't they? You know – it's – you never know what you're going to learn from things like this, but certainly having the example of people who kind of mix it up, and yet still love each other and can talk about it and laugh about it, I think is very healthy. Is anybody writing to us about the urinary tract of their children? [laughs]

GARY MOTT:

Not yet!

TONY KAHN:

Not yet –

GARY MOTT:

You know, our email is of a different flavor. We heard from Robert from Missouri. "I have been subscribed to your podcast for several weeks, now, and look forward to every update. The material you present is interesting, insightful. Thank you both. And! . . .

TONY KAHN:

Yeah?

GARY MOTT:

-- your sponsor for taking the time, effort and resources in making these available." That's Ipswitch –

TONY KAHN:

– a leader in file transfer software!

GARY MOTT:

That email, we love it! <morningstories@wgbh.org>.

TONY KAHN:

With or without email, be sure to check in next Friday for another episode of *Morning Stories*. We'll see you then!

[End of Recording]

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